
FINDING MY RELIGION

Neo-pagan witch on celebrating the dead and casting spells

[David Ian Miller, Special to SF Gate](#)

Monday, October 31, 2005

This being Halloween, M. Macha NightMare will dress up with a pointy hat, black clothing and a broomstick. It's mostly for fun, but it's also what people expect from the 62-year-old educator, author and priestess, who also happens to be a witch.

NightMare -- not her given name -- considers herself a [Neo-Pagan](#), an eclectic term describing a diverse cluster of religious movements in the last 100 years or so seeking to resurrect pre-Christian spiritual beliefs, like a reverence for nature and Goddess worship. Some Neo-Pagans are witches, others are [Wiccans](#) and still others are both and neither.

NightMare, who lives in San Rafael, spends much of her time traveling and teaching about Paganism. She is the author of several books, including "The Pagan Book of Living and Dying" (Harper San Francisco, 1997), which she co-authored with well-known Pagan activist Starhawk, and "Pagan Pride: Honoring the Craft and Culture of Earth and Goddess" (Citadel Press, 2004).

So what are your plans for Halloween?

I'll be with a group of friends, communing with our ancestors. It's our time to celebrate the dead, to honor them.

How do you do that?

Usually with a lot of dancing and feasting. Sometimes people will give them supper -- they'll set out a meal with all their favorite foods on it and they will sit in silence. Most people make altars with candles and marigolds, which are the flowers of the dead. My late husband, he used to drink a lot of Henry Weinhard's and he smoked Kents, so I usually put them on an altar by his picture.

Is communing with the dead something you do in a graveyard? That would seem appropriate, not to mention spooky.

Some witches do that, but this year I'll be with a small group of folks in a remote part of the Marin Headlands.

Are you dressing up for the occasion?

I'm probably going to be dressed like a priestess -- you know, in some kind of robes. We don't normally dress up as somebody else like other people on Halloween, although we might do that. A lot of people may be dressed as different nature spirits.

Remembering those who have died can be a sad occasion, but the way you describe it sounds fairly celebratory. Is that how other witches feel about it?

It depends. Different people respond differently. When we say aloud the names of people who have died, which is something we do at this time of year, that's an important part of the grieving process for many people. And for others, they are relieved, they are happy!

You're a member of a coven, a group of witches that meets on a regular basis. Who is in the group?

We've got four people. One woman has a master of divinity from the [Pacific School of Religion](#). Another person is a building contractor. There's also a [Dianic](#) witch, someone who worships Goddesses. Then there's me.

What do you do in the coven?

We meet about once a month around the time of the full moon for various rituals, and then we have eight Sabbaths. This is the main one of the whole year.

Halloween, you mean?

We call it Samhain.

When you get together for these rituals, are you also doing spells?

The ritual format draws upon a lot of witchcraft techniques and what we call sacred technology -- chants, fasting, dance. We may or may not do spells within the context of a ritual. Sometimes we do them individually, privately.

What was the last spell you did?

Oh my! I have to think about that. One of them I did that stands out was basically a curse designed to eradicate corporate greed. I did it a few years ago on the Russian River near the [Bohemian Grove](#) during an anti-globalization protest. The spell is called the Curse of the Morrigan.

Tell me about it.

Morrigan is the Great Queen of Ireland, the phantom queen. She is a dark goddess -- very scary, actually - - who incites the men into a frenzy when they go into battle, among other things. And she often takes the form of a raven.

I have a friend who made this incredible Morrigan mask, which I wore, and I got some stage blood that I put on a suit and white shirt that a friend donated from when he was in the corporate world.

What form did the spell take?

One of the ways that the Morrigan has revealed herself to people has been as a character called the Washer at the Board. The Washer at the Board is seen washing the garments of people who will be slain in battle that day. So she is sort of a precursor of death to come.

As the people were marching from the rally site across the bridge up to the gates of the Bohemian Grove -- that's when I did the spell. I kissed the water and began washing the suit and white shirt in the river. It's kind of funny, but shortly after I did that Enron blew up.

And you think you might have had something to do with that?

I don't know. You just put these things out there, and you have to let them go.

What do most people cast spells about?

The No. 1 thing that most people are interested in is love, finding a partner. They also might want to find an apartment or get a job. Health concerns are another big one.

That sounds like the same things that many people pray for.

Exactly. Casting a spell is very similar to prayer, and it may include prayers. It may also include some kind of offering to a particular deity. For instance, if you are doing a love spell, you would employ some of things that are traditionally sacred to Aphrodite, like copper, roses and doves.

Do you think a spell really works, or is it more of a symbolic gesture?

It's both. At the very least, I think it shifts your consciousness into a more receptive state for whatever it is you are seeking. You are being conscious about that desire by gathering the things you are going to use in the spell, taking the time to prepare them, chanting and burning candles and speaking to whatever the deity is.

What is your concept of God? Aren't Pagans polytheistic?

We're definitely not monotheistic, that's for sure. I have various divinities that I identify with. One of them is Kali Ma, the Hindu goddess of creation known as the Dark Mother.

You grew up Christian. Was your family very religious?

I come from a line of Methodist ministers on my mother's side. So they were very pious, and they went to church pretty much every day. My father was a very devout Catholic -- he never missed Mass. When I was around his family, I participated in the Catholic-oriented activities, but my mother's background had a bigger influence on me. I had more exposure to the Methodist side of the family.

At what point did you encounter Paganism?

I was in San Francisco in my late 20s. I think I first went looking in the late '60s or early '70s, and I found some witches -- of course, we were all in the broom closet in those days [laughs]. We aren't so much now, which is really wonderful, because I would like us to walk proud like anybody else.

What drew you to Paganism?

There were two primary things. One of them was feminism, and particularly my awakening consciousness as a woman who never really fit in. I tried really hard to be a good girl, but it just wasn't how it was. I mean, I'm not a bad person, but you were supposed to be subservient in those days. You couldn't even have a bank account in your own name if you were married.

So when I found a religion devoted to the Goddess, a feminine image of the divine, it was so incredibly liberating and empowering for me. And I know I am among thousands of others who found it that way.

What was the other thing that attracted you to Paganism?

It had to do with my concern for the environment. Paganism embraces nature worship, and the whole concept of us being part of a very complex, interrelated web of life is very important to me. Discovering Paganism was like a spiritual confirmation or affirmation of that.

How does being a Pagan affect your relationship to nature?

It makes me want to tread lightly, to be mindful of the Earth and not be such a greedy consumer of natural resources as we are in this country. It's a very rich and wonderful world, and there is enough for everybody. It's appalling to me that anybody should be starving or homeless.

I believe life is cyclical. What goes around comes around. The Earth spins, the tides come and go and the seasons change. And when our bodies go, they go to feed other life forms. Life feeds on life.

What do you think happens when you die?

I believe in reincarnation. That's my personal view.

How does that belief affect how you live your life?

I take joy in being alive, in the life I have now and the body I'm in right now. It certainly helps me not to despair at the suffering I see around me, particularly at the loss of people that I love. That doesn't mean you don't grieve, that you are not really sad when someone dies.

There's a song that Sweet Honey in the Rock does called "We Are," and the whole idea is that the breath we feel on our skin or blowing our hair is the ancestors' breath. I like that metaphor. It keeps me aware of the fact that we are all connected in some way, across species and life forms.

Finding My Religion wants to hear from you. Send comments on stories and suggestions for interview subjects to miller@sfgate.com.

During his far-flung career in journalism, Bay Area writer and editor [David Ian Miller](#) has worked as a city hall reporter, personal finance writer, cable television executive and managing editor of a technology news site. His writing credits include Salon.com, Wired News and The New York Observer.