



Interviewer MICHAEL NIGHT SKY is a Witch and student of Magick, currently Red Priest with the Circle of the Heartbeat's Drum. He has been a longtime contributor to Witches & Pagans. He lives in San Diego county and can be reached by email at mysticism13@aol.com

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a Witch at large

The broomstick adventures of M. Macha NightMare

M. Macha NightMare is an author, teacher, and ritualist. She is among the founders of Reclaiming Tradition Witchcraft, and an initiate of both Reclaiming and (Anderson) Faery/Feri. As a Witch-at-Large, she teaches on what she calls “the broomstick circuit,” and has circled with Witches of myriad traditions as well as with people of other Pagan paths throughout the U.S., Canada, and Brazil. The author of Witchcraft and the Web: Weaving Pagan Traditions Online (ECW Press, 2001) and Pagan Pride: Honoring the Craft and Culture of Earth and Goddess (Citadel, 2004), Macha is best known as a author for co-writing (with Starhawk) the pre-eminent Pagan resource on end of life issues, The Pagan Book of Living and Dying (Harper San Francisco, 1997). Macha has also contributed to a vast array of anthologies, periodicals, textbooks, and encyclopedias.

But Macha is even better known for her tireless organizational work. A member of the American Academy of Religion, the Marin Interfaith Council, and the Nature Religion Scholars Network, Macha also serves as a national interfaith representative for the Covenant of the Goddess and is on the Advisory Board of the Sacred Dying Foundation. Last, but certainly not least, Macha has spent much of the past decade helping develop the public ministry training program at Cherry Hill Seminary, and serves on its Board of Directors.

You know that I have to ask about your name. Where did it come from? Is it your magickal or mundane name? Is it difficult to live with?

Yes, it is my magical name, or my “Craft name,” as I’m more likely to call it. I took that name at a time when we practitioners of alternative Pagan religions kept separate magickal and mundane identities, but I’ve been publicly known by that name for so long that many don’t recognize me when I use the name (Aline O’Brien) on my driver’s license. Macha is an Irish goddess, one of the triad called the Morrigan, or “phantom queen.” NightMare, with a capital “M” in the middle is the mare who rides through your dreams. I’m well aware of how outrageous it is; believe me, it’s not easy to wear, but there you are.

There’s another reason behind my name: I came to Craft during Second Wave Feminism in the 1970s. My generation grew up under the thumb of a patriarchal society that limited women’s rights when it didn’t downright oppress them. So for me, and many of my contemporaries, finding a religion with female images of the divine, one that honored the feminine, was refreshing, appealing and empowering.

But Pagans in those days commonly practiced in secret. One of our conventions back then, and for many still today, was to use a Craft name. The concept was that if a time of persecution came, no one in a coven could betray the identities of other members under questioning or even torture.

Your Craft name references a specific goddess. Is this common in your tradition?

There's no requirement in my traditions that one must use a Craft name, but it is quite common. Naming is a significant part of initiation, and not to be taken lightly. Sometimes a name is given to the initiate during ritual, and in other cases, the person chooses her or his own magical name.

Many Witches include a connection to deity in their magical names. In some cases, a deity can reveal Him/Herself directly, or the person may feel an affinity for a particular deity or wish to emulate or take on the deity's qualities and/or characteristics. Many of us choose, or are given, the name of a particular goddess as our magical name.

Why Macha? What does She mean to you?

Macha is a Irish dark goddess, and I am of Irish descent. She reveals Herself in the form of a crow or a raven, and is associated with horses. There's a wonderful story in the Ulster Saga about Macha, heavily pregnant, is challenged to run a race against King Conchobar's fastest horses. She pleaded to be excused from racing due to her gravid state, but receives no mercy. So she runs, wins, and gives birth to twins right there on Armagh, "the field of Macha." Then she proceeds to curse the men of Ulster who had forced this race upon her, that in the hour of their land's greatest need they would stricken in pain as a woman in labor, and thus incapacitated. This curse later manifests in the tales.

I feel a close kinship with crows and ravens; especially with crows because they live around people, fly from perch to perch observing the same scenes and activities from different perspectives, and then gossip and talk with one another about what they've seen. I have all these characteristics.



My connection with horses goes back a long way. I remember as a child galloping down hills and across meadows, my hair flying behind me like a mane, my ankles and legs feeling like those of a horse.

I have always been drawn to shadow, a quality associated with dark goddesses. The goddess who has affected me most strongly and who has called me as Her priestess is Kali Ma, She Who wears a necklace of skulls. In Irish lore, victorious champions took the heads of their slain enemies and brought them back from the battlefield to hang on the ridgepoles of their lodges. They believed the soul resided in the head,

so to take the head honored the slain as well as the slayer. The heads were called "Macha's acorn crop."

One of our Holy Terrors coven members, Bone Blossom, wove a beautiful rainbow-hued mat that we called the magic carpet. We used it for healings, placing the person who was being healed upon it when we worked for her recovery. One night I arrived in a cranky state. I had just had a fight with my husband and the others told me to sit on the magic carpet, so I did. The conversation turned to magical names — at that point only a few of us used them — and when I was asked, I responded, "I feel like Macha tonight!" From that moment, I was Macha. (I didn't figure out all this other stuff about crows and horses and acorn crops until afterwards.)

I never took this name with any idea that it would be used publicly; in fact I think it's a bit over the top and would probably look askance at someone who introduced herself as Macha NightMare. Nonetheless, that is name under which I became known in the Pagan community, and the one used when publishing my writing, so there you are.

How did your interest in Witchcraft begin?

Like most Pagans of my vintage, I was brought up in a Christian home, but not a typical one. My parents had what was then known as a “mixed marriage,” the mixture being between the Protestant (Methodism) faith of my mother and the Catholicism of my Irish American father. They were not permitted to be married in the Catholic church because my mother refused to agree to bring up their children as Catholics. So they were married by the parish priest in the parish house, my mother wearing a beige suit with a lace collar instead of a bridal gown. Most of their family members on both sides opposed the marriage and boycotted the ceremony, so there were no relatives present.

As a child, I was immersed in the world of Christianity – quite literally. As soon as I was born, my father arranged with my Catholic godparents to take me to the church for baptism. But my mother snuck her local Methodist minister into our house and had him baptize me in the Methodist faith first. My father never knew what she had done, but my mother told me about it much later. I’m fond of saying that neither one of these duelling Christian baptisms “took.”

My mother took us to Sunday School every week, followed by the morning service. We sang in the choir, attended choir rehearsals, went to youth fellowship, vacation Bible school and church summer camps. I could also go to morning Mass with my dad, and when my sister and I stayed with my paternal cousins, we trooped to Mass along with them.

How did you come from that childhood to the Craft?

The seeds of my love of the Craft were planted through connection with the Earth. When I was about seven my father, a seedsman in the agriculture business, gave me an entire acre to plant, which I filled with zinnias and marigolds. Their glorious colors – plus the fact that I had planted them from little packets of seeds – thrilled me immensely. When I was a little older, I learned to drive a tractor and helped my father in the fields. We’d come in from working as burnt and as grimy as can be. I remember the sublime taste when I bit into one of those fat Jersey tomatoes warmed by the sun and dripping juice down your chin.

I searched for years for a spirituality that made sense, and encountered Witchcraft at the meeting point of three paths in my life, at the sacred *Trivium* of the goddess Hekate. The first path was Second Wave Feminism; the second was my concerns for the environment; and the third was my desire to explore intuitive ways of knowing.

How did Second Wave Feminism influence you?

I discovered Second Wave Feminism around 1969 or 1970, when I became a part of a woman-only “consciousness raising groups.” Women were making all sorts of wonderful art and music; scholarship about women’s history and women’s issues was spreading; and many women like me were finding our identities. The confluence of this explosion of feminism – together with my discovery of feminine images of the divine, goddesses who had been worshipped in one way or another by peoples around the globe – was the single most compelling draw towards a Neo-Pagan spiritual path. I explored astrology and Tarot, mythology and folklore, and as I learned about egalitarian, matrifocal, matrilineal, and matriarchal cultures, I began to put it all together.

Where did ecology come in?

It was intuitive for a person like me to be drawn to Paganism. Nearly all kinds of Neo-Paganism respect Nature’s laws and cycles. We see ourselves as part of Nature, part of the interwoven, interdependent Web of Life, and we commit ourselves to care for this common trust and treasure. In my personal spiritual practice, I seek to remain attuned to Nature’s forces, the ebbing and flowing of the tides, the waning and waxing of the Moon and Sun, the migrations of birds, the seasons of birth and death.

My Catholic father had me baptised by the parish priest, but my mother snuck her local Methodist minister into the house to baptize me first. I like to say that neither one of these Christian baptisms “took.”

Did the practical aspects of Witchcraft – like spellcasting and divination – attract you?

Oh yes. I’ve always had respect for what I call intuitive ways of knowing. Rationality and logic are wonderful things, but they’re only part of the picture. We also apprehend and learn through our bodies, get messages from dreams, and can learn from other species, from weather phenomena, from music, dance, poetry, and hunches. Intuition is not fantasy, imagination, wishful thinking, or even desire. In the process of learning our Craft, we learn to discern the difference between true intuition and wishful thinking.

Another attraction was the stories. We have such a wonderful array of stories, from all times and cultures, that we can draw upon. Tales about how the seasons came about, like the story of Demeter and the kidnapping of her daughter Persephone. Tales about animals – dogs, monkeys, ravens, elephants, mosquitoes. Tales about hubris: Icarus flying too close to the sun and melting the wax that held his wings. Tales of creation and birth, of changes, of loss and death.

How did you come to find the Pagan community?

In 1971, I took a class about Witchcraft I found through *Heliotrope, the Free University*, a street sheet of sorts listing classes in all manner of things from pottery to poetry. The class was taught by priest and priestess of the NROOGD (New Reformed Orthodox Order of the Golden Dawn) – a West Coast Pagan tradition. I did not pursue the path formally after the class ended, but continued to read about topics we had covered: women’s history, mythology and folklore, ceremonial magic, astrology, and so forth. Then I started attending open sabbats, called Witches’ Balls, in Berkeley.

In 1975, my late friend Anne Turner (Anna Mystic from Music from the Hearts of Space) and I went to a talk at a local metaphysical book store about goddess spirituality. The teacher was a young woman named Starhawk who’d recently relocated from Los Angeles. Starhawk and I became friends, and she invited me to several private sabbats over the next couple of years.

What was that early Witchcraft scene like?

Back then, we all considered ourselves just “Witches” more than we identified with specific traditions. By the time I took my vows, CoG (Covenant of the Goddess) had been functioning for a while, and my coven, Holy Terrors, joined CoG as soon as we were eligible. We functioned as a group priestesshood, an uncommon arrangement in covens of the day.

I participated in CoG actively from the time our coven first joined, meeting all kinds of wonderful Witches – and few who were not so wonderful. As CoG expanded, so did my understanding that the members came from very different traditions. I felt strange about these distinctions, although I could see and appreciate them. I was an initiate of the Craft, completely sure of my identity as Priestess and Witch, and I had been presented to the guardians and the gods that way, and they had acknowledged me. Yet I knew that the tradition I was practicing wasn’t strictly Faery, that we were changing and growing.

Soon it became obvious to me as well as others, that Reclaiming Collective, and the people who’d worked with it over the years, had created a distinctive and identifiable Craft tradition. I first identified Reclaiming as a tradition when I sat on a multi-tradition panel at CoG Grand Council. Later I said it at a meeting of Reclaiming Collective (which dissolved as a collective in 1997). Today, Reclaiming is a strong, diverse tradition with communities throughout the U.S. and Canada and in several other countries.

How do you feel now about lineage and tradition?

As I mentioned earlier, my first training in the Craft was with NROOGD, and I have continued to circle with NROOGD covens ever since. I’ve also taken every opportunity to circle with Witches of any tradition. I love ritual of all kinds – Wiccan, Druid, generic NeoPagan, Hindu, Buddhist, Santeria, and others. I recommend doing this, because it keeps us fresh and on our spiritual toes. Tradition and lineage seems less important these days, because there are more bootstrap and “eclectic” traditions. Such groups cannot trace a clear initiatory lineage back beyond themselves. Which is fine, although I do get upset when such trads try to pass themselves off as something ancient, occult, and continuous in spite of clearly being recently created.

What institutions do you see as most important for the Craft today?

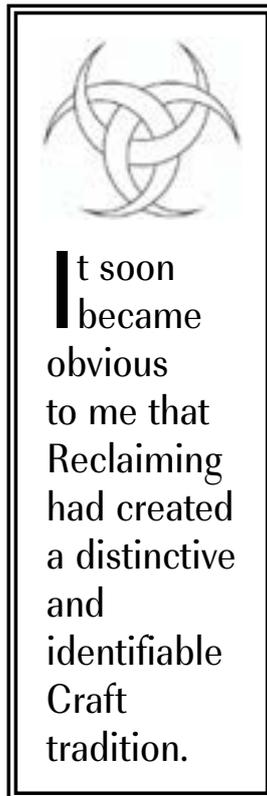
Much of our movement arose out of the counter-culture of the 1960s and ’70s, with all of that period’s disillusionment with the status quo. As a result, we tend to distrust institutional structures. However, now that Paganism has moved so far in the direction of acceptability, I’m coming to see the value of institutions which endure past our individual lifetimes.

An example of the type of institution I believe is very important for our community is that of training for leadership, which is why I’ve worked so hard to help grow Cherry Hill Seminary.

CHS was the inspiration of Kirk White, arising from discussions among folks in COSE (Church of the Sacred Earth) in New England. It was Kirk’s dream to have a seminary that would give Pagan ministers† training of equal quality as that received by religious leaders and spiritual advisors of other spiritual traditions. Our leaders tend to be good at one skill – for example, leading ritual or writing books – but due to our increased visibility, Pagans in leadership are now called upon to perform

roles which the overculture (my word for “mainstream society”) assigned to be performed by clergypeople, and for which we, as sacred priest/esses may not have traditionally been prepared.

†I would like to make it clear that I am uncomfortable using the word “clergy” to describe what we do because I think it comes burdened with heavy connotations that we may not necessarily wish to cultivate. I prefer the word “minister” for what we do when we set out to be of service to our communities.



How did you become involved with Cherry Hill Seminary?

In 2001, I took a Boundaries & Ethics course designed by Cat Chapin-Bishop, and I found it to be one of the most valuable courses I've ever taken. Among other assignments, we read many statements of ethics produced by psychological, spiritual, counseling, and healing arts professional organizations. At the end of the class we each wrote our own personal code of ethics, which I thought was an extremely valuable experience for all of us.

After the class finished, Cat invited me to design a course on death and dying, related to the work Starhawk and I did in co-writing *The Pagan Book of Living and Dying*. The course was very well received, and I've been asked to offer it again almost every year.

Over time, I have served CHS as Public Information Officer, faculty, Board member, Department Chair, and as President of the Board of Directors. I would say that my primary role at Cherry Hill has been as a recruiter — of volunteers, faculty, students, and support.

Reclaiming has become known in the wider Pagan community as an explicitly political tradition. Do you think this perception reflects the vision of Reclaiming accurately, and if so, why is Reclaiming this way? How do you believe our faith as Pagans should influence our politics, and vice-versa?"

Yes, direct involvement in creating constructive change in the mundane world is part and parcel of being a Reclaiming Witch. We don't separate the spiritual from the political because we see that everything we do has political implications. It's not enough to do a spell to elect a particular individual; you also have to go out and vote, not to mention doing other work to foster that election, like campaigning. Many see Reclaiming as comprised of people who do a lot of street action and other direct protests, no doubt because that's [Reclaiming co-founder] Starhawk's personal form of activism, and that kind of action gets a lot of press, as well it should. Seekers already deep into the tradition often ask if they can be a Reclaiming Witch if they don't want to (or can't) participate in street activism.

However, street action is hardly the only form of political involvement recognized by the Reclaiming tradition. I am a living proof of the fact that activism has many faces. I personally tend to do work to create change within existing institutions. For example, my political action has included:

- creating a Reclaiming donor account at the local blood bank;
- working with the homeless chaplaincy here in Marin County;
- participating in helping to create a Pagan Studies area in the American Academy of Religion;
- contributing to interfaith celebrations and campaigns
- educating hospital and hospice staff about Pagan approaches to dying and death, as well as speaking to funeral directors about Pagan needs; and
- fostering alliances with other Pagan organizations.

We all have our gifts and interests; one Reclaiming Witch I know works exclusively on anti-smoking efforts while another works with abused women and rape victims. Still others do AIDS education and activism; in fact, the San Francisco needle exchange program was originally initiated by Reclaiming Witches (among others) back when this life-saving practice was still illegal and done covertly. Others do habitat restoration, permaculture training, or create community gardens with inner city youth. There's a lot to be done!



Why Interfaith?

by M. Macha NightMare, 2011

When I first became aware of the interfaith movement, I didn't have much interest. Paganism (specifically the style of feminist Witchcraft in which I am involved) arose from the counter-culture in opposition to mainstream religions. We Pagans remained quietly in the shadows; we felt safer there, and as counter-culture folks, that seemed to be our place.

By 1981, I had become active in the Covenant of the Goddess and one of the venues in which CoG sought to have a presence was in interfaith relations, and we were active in the Berkeley Area Interfaith Council. I soon learned that interfaith activities relied on "appreciative inquiry," a technique wherein individuals talk one-on-one about their own experiences. This didn't seem like a promising approach to me: like most Pagans of my generation, I grew up in a Christian family and I was already well versed in Christian history, viewpoints, and practice. So I didn't feel that listening to Abrahamic monotheists had much to offer me.

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(Interfaith, cont. from p. 37)

In 1997, there was a bill in the California legislature to allow physician-assisted suicide, an issue of great interest to me. I learned that the Marin Interfaith Council was sponsoring a panel discussion featuring this very topic. My friend Megory Anderson (founder of the Sacred Dying Foundation) and I decided to attend.

All was well at first, we sat at round tables and discussed some pre-selected questions. Megory and I both experienced these conversations as thoughtful and genuinely useful. Then came the panel, which was a whole different matter. It was comprised of a Presbyterian minister, a Catholic priest, a rabbi, an imam, and a Jewish medical doctor, all privileged white males representing the dominant patriarchal structure. Every one of them came out strongly against the proposed legislation, and the lack of any differences between their perspectives seemed to belie the entire concept of interfaith dialogue. I was mightily annoyed, and did not attend any more interfaith events for a long time.

Time passed, and eventually I agreed to join MIC on behalf of CoG. At first I attended monthly clergy luncheons. I'm not exactly "clergy" as the term might be generally understood, but I went to each meeting, listening and watching and occasionally putting forth a question or comment. Soon I was asked to join a smaller sub-group, the Justice Advocacy Team (JAT), and I found that this smaller group was much more to my liking.

In the decade-plus since, I have participated in many, probably most, of Marin Interfaith Council's

activities, all to my benefit. These activities include such things as:

- sacred music concerts;
- actions in support of immigrants, the homeless, and worker justice;
- actions in opposition to war and capital punishment; and
- the annual Interfaith Prayer Day Breakfast.

I have also participated regularly with Marin Interfaith Street Chaplaincy and with the annual celebration of International Day of Peace presented by the Dominican Sisters of San Rafael, as well as in other events. The invitations from outside the Pagan community keep coming; one I particularly enjoyed was leading a chant and spiral dance at the conclusion of the wedding ceremony of Carol Hovis and Chris Highland at Green Gulch Zen Center.

These are just a few of my personal experiences. From my participation in these multi-faith forums, I have learned a great deal about how congregations are organized, how they may be dysfunctional or healthy, and how they may regain equilibrium after internal disruptions. In addition, social and personal issues (teen suicide, LGBT acceptance, drugs, illness, death) know no sectarian boundaries, and thus the forums, workshops, and discussions of these topics have also been extremely helpful.

I have approached my involvement in interfaith work carefully and with respect towards my colleagues, gradually making friends and strengthening my distinctly Pagan presence. In return, I have been treated with respect and affection. I believe that participating in such activities builds useful connections among people of goodwill, and I highly recommend it. ♦

Street activism is what it is, and it's true that the popular image of a Reclaiming Witch is of one who demonstrates in the streets. Some would argue that it's not necessarily the most effective action in a given situation. I would argue that it's not necessarily the best use of each person's unique talents. Certainly not mine. I'm an older woman with a severely arthritic lumbar spine, a condition invisible to anyone looking at me. I can't stand on concrete pavement for long periods of time, as my older body lacks the resilience of a younger body were I to be roughly cuffed and carried off in a police van. Yet I'm a Reclaiming Witch by vow, temperament, and practice.

Having said all this, I want to emphasize that we all have different talents, and for some, organizing or participating in street activism is their forte. Another person will have a different gift; one who deals with the money needs a different set of skills than the one who sings. The numbers need to be accurate, and the song needs to be sung on key. Loudly or quietly, in groups or alone, we need everyone to work, each in her own unique way, towards bringing about a just and peaceful world where everyone's needs are met, everyone is valued, and no one is expendable.

You've been involved in Paganism for several decades. What changes have you seen in that time?

The biggest change is that we're better understood by society at large. One example is the fact that the State of New Jersey Department of Education has recently added the eight Wiccan/Pagan sabbats to its list of religious holidays, indicating that they recognize that there are Pagans in their student bodies and among faculty and staff. This recognition is reflected in the interfaith activities I see Pagans involved in. (See sidebar for more on Macha's interest in interfaith work.) Another example is that Pagan Studies is now an official field, recognized by the American Academy of Religion.

However, I'm uncomfortable when Pagans, in pursuit of mainstream credibility, call themselves "reverend" and wear Roman collars. To mimic overculture ecclesiastical forms and structures is to risk compromising our uniqueness in favor of convention. We are better served simply by being open about who we are in our day-to-day relations. If and when the subject of religion comes up, we can say we're Pagans. If the people in our lives know us as good neighbors, coworkers, classmates, customers, clients, then they already know we're okay.

I would like to see more programs for children and youth; there are some flourishing Spiral Scout troops here and there. Reclaiming offers many multi-day, youth-friendly Witch camps, and many other festivals incorporate coming-of-age rites of passages. These practices, to me, point to a culture that is growing and consciously looking to the future.

I also believe that we need to look intensely into the question of caring for our elders. Whether we establish retirement communities and senior services of our own or work with established secular organizations that provide services to elders, we do need to consider how we care for our aging population because it is expanding and will continue to do so.

What are you really excited about right now?

In collaboration, I've been working to make Cherry Hill Seminary a respected institution for both academic studies of Paganism and the learning of ministerial skills. I do not believe we can survive beyond our first few generations unless we establish some institutions. This work is what I've put heart and soul into for the last thirteen years.

We Pagans often speak of ourselves as belonging to a tribe, and in the broadest sense I feel that way, too. But Pagan groupings are not like the clans of the Celts or the tribes along the Rhine; not like the villagers in Tuscany or Malta. We lack a common familial ethnicity, mores, lore, culture, foods, songs. We contemporary Pagans do, of course, share lore, music, customs, and a language, but not nearly to the degree that indigenous tribes did and do.

We were seeking connection in a rapidly modernizing, culturally diverse, and frequently socially fragmented world. In essence, we sought a tribal identity and we found it — only the state in which our tribes find themselves is inchoate, rudimentary, immature, not fully formed. We lack the cohesion of a tribe.

So we need to look at the roles played by elders in tribal societies. We also need to have a way to hold each other accountable to our communities for our behavior, and for our teaching, if we teach. I see this as another place where having elders and knowing who they are can be helpful

What would you like to be remembered for?

Wow, this is not something I've thought about. I'd like to see our descendants continue to live by the values of life we espouse, in whatever way they may manifest that life. I'd like

to see more people of every religion sharing values of love of this world and all beings and a "green" awareness of our interconnection with all life on this planet. It doesn't matter to me if our religion gains more practitioners. Rather, it matters that people of all religious persuasions can recognize and respect our collective responsibility for the impact of human activity on this Earth. They can pray, sing, dance, meditate, study, express their spirituality in whatever ways give them comfort and satisfaction, as long as those practices don't impinge on others who don't share their perspectives

Any words of inspiration in these challenging times?

It is clear to me that our Earth is changing in ways that make life as we know it precarious. I think the deep recognition of our reliance upon the health of the entire planet is something we Pagans can bring to the fore in the conduct of our lives, our spiritual practices, and our plans for the future.

Where can we go to find out about you and your work?

My personal website at www.machanightmare.com and that of Cherry Hill Seminary at www.cherryhillseminary.org.



Image ©2012 www.directaction.org

Macha resigns from Reclaiming

(August 7, 2012) Macha posted a public notice to her website at www.machanightmare.com today, formally resigning from the Reclaiming tradition. Her statement read, in part, "I withdraw from the organization known as Reclaiming Tradition Witchcraft and hereby dissociate myself from further involvement with the tradition ... I have long felt alienated, estranged, and out of sync with how I've seen the tradition devolving." We have arranged to conduct a follow-up interview with Macha about this shocking turn of events to appear in *Witches&Pagans* #26 "Element of Fire" in spring 2013.