



Religion and Healing in America

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Healing in Feminist Wicca

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The contemporary religion of Witchcraft features a lively and dynamic ritual repertoire centered on nature. Participants in Witchcraft rituals acknowledge the turning wheel of the seasons of the year and the seasons of their own lives. Contemporary Witchcraft encompasses numerous formal and informal groups. One of the best known, the Reclaiming Tradition, is a U.S.-based international tradition focusing on the Goddess in Her multiple forms. This tradition includes both women and men, connects spirituality and politics, and focuses on healing the culture and the earth. Reclaiming holds annual camps across the country where Witches come together for training and for collective ritual.¹ Witches have often had to be secretive, and gatherings such as these camps have provided an important way of coming together openly. Healing is often a focus of the camp's large rituals, as well as being the focus of much ritual activity outside of the camp setting.

Healing in feminist Witchcraft takes many forms and occurs in many settings. Gatherings range in size from small covens to large groups of many hundreds. Techniques may include bodywork such as massage, spells such as herbal charms, chanting, dancing, trance work, and energetic healing through connecting to others and to the earth's forces.

Healing rituals and techniques may be applied to varied ills, ranging from physical conditions such as cancer or arthritis to heartache, childhood trauma, sexual abuse, and low self-esteem. Healing is associated with becoming whole, healthy, and in balance. The role of the healer is "to reconnect the individual with her own spiritual

forces, to restore balance" (Jade 1991: 153). Healing can be applied to the immediate community, to larger political contexts, and to the land. Healing through Witchcraft addresses emotional pain and psychic repair, as well as specific bodily illnesses. Healing often addresses wounds incurred from the dominant patriarchal culture. In feminist Witchcraft, "Ritual is a way of becoming 'unpossessed' from patriarchy" (Greenwood 2000: 145). Susan Sered (2000) argues that patriarchy literally makes women (and men) sick. Additionally, she suggests that "the might of patriarchy is that it embeds its conceptualizations in the very bodies of the men and women whose lives it governs." (157). Releasing these embedded conceptualizations requires healing practices beyond those generally offered by Western medicine.

Connection

Many Witches see healing as creating connections (Crowley 2000: 160) and connections as healing. Healing connections can occur between people, with trees, and in relationship with the earth. Sarah Pike's research highlights the importance for Witches of healing through relationships.² Healing requires intimate connection with one's community, with the natural world, and with the sacred. According to Pike, "Religious belief and practice in the late twentieth century must focus on healing ourselves, our communities, and the planet. And this healing . . . must take place through relationships—with deities, the land, and each other. What 'relationship' means in this case is not simply a conversation between self and other, but an intimate connection with the natural world, with a goddess or god, and with one's community" (2001: xxi–xxii). These new or renewed connections can be seen as the beginning of new social formations representing a healing and potential reshaping of patriarchy into less isolated and individualistic social forms. The theme of connection as healing runs through two settings to be explored, a large annual Reclaiming Witch Camp and a smaller, private circle, which is a common and frequent type of gathering for Reclaiming Witches.

Healing Ritual at Witch Camp

At sunset, more than a hundred people form a large circle on the hillside meadow overlooking a lake and surrounded by mountains. Drummers move close to a large fire in the center, and those who wish to receive healing cluster around the drummers and the fire. This Reclaiming Witch Camp community will dance and chant to generate energy for healing: for those in the center, for those dancing, for loved ones at a distance, and for the earth. Some participants

think the ritual follows an ancient pattern, others believe that current community leaders created the form, and some see that both may be true.

Around the outskirts of the circle, participants prepare healing stations as alternatives to the central space. In the Reclaiming Tradition, the four directions and the center are associated with elements that are held sacred. The East corresponds to the element of Air; at this station incense is often used for purification, bells or rattles may be used to cleanse with sound vibrations, and aura cleansing may be offered to clear and smooth the energy field that surrounds the body. In the South, the Fire station is a place to get warm, with blankets available. In the West, the element of Water is honored, and offerings include water to drink and comforts related to emotional healing. In the North, the Earth station may have food, such as apples and nuts, as well as a quiet place to rest.

A simple circle dance is performed either in one large ring or two smaller concentric rings around a central fire and healing space. People find partners so that they will have assistance in receiving and using the focused attention and force that is available in the center. This partnership is especially important for those who are physically ill, with limited resources to manage the intensity of the energy unaided.

I have researched, participated in, and observed Witchcraft in the United States since 1993 in a variety of settings, including many in the Greater Boston area, and mostly focusing on Reclaiming and feminist Goddess spirituality. Research methods include a survey, participant observation, and interviews. In 1998, I sent out a survey about healing and community to all the participants of the prior summer's camp. I wanted to know what people experienced and thought about that year's large healing ritual, as well as information about the Witches' community inside and outside of the camp setting. I asked open-ended questions about the experience and meaning of healing and of community. To get quantitative data on the same topics, I offered statements for disagreement or agreement.³ I received 63 responses to the 110 surveys I sent out. Respondents were predominantly white women, ranging in age from twenty-seven to eighty-one, mostly middle-aged, and mostly college educated. In this chapter I offer preliminary excerpts from the qualitative results, as well as selected quantitative findings.⁴ I also offer information from participant observation at subsequent healing rituals at this camp.

Healing and Connection

Ritual participants reported feeling that healing energy was available in all areas of the ceremonial circle, including the outer rings of dancers, as well as the center of the circle. Within the context of this Reclaiming healing ritual,

healing was offered for a wide range of healing needs, from serious physical illness to emotional heartache. Some of the gay men at camp have used the opportunity to heal from relationship difficulties, as have many of the lesbians and heterosexuals. In 2002, at least one woman did extensive psychic and emotional healing of wounds incurred from being raped.

In Witchcraft, healing is not an individual's isolated private task; it is assisted by and typically requires connection with others. The survey results reported that some of the kinds of healing from the ritual in August 1997 were temporary cancer remission, clarity about where one fits in and what one stands for, and renewed energy. Participants also reported emotional opening, opening to feel the good earth and life force, healing from disconnection, and the experience of being held through intense crying release.⁵

Connection was mentioned multiple times, including connection to all parts of self and to others. One respondent wrote that "connecting with others is a way of healing the separateness our society calls for." Connection may take many forms. It can happen through communal dancing or chanting, through shared ritual experience, or through profound experience of self in relation to nature. It may involve reconnecting with others from earlier parts of one's life. For example, a Witch Camper who is a veteran of the Vietnam War was moved to return to Vietnam as part of his healing path to reconnect peacefully with the people against whom he had previously waged war. The welcome he received was deeply healing for him.

Connection also can be crucial for healing even when there is no prior history among the people involved. In Jone Salomenson's study of the Reclaiming community in California, she cites a healer who was able to heal a stranger from great pain and breathing difficulty: "The skills we are talking about are real. It is not a metaphor; we can heal. . . . it was the knowledge of the elements, the knowledge of the way to work psychically, which is connecting instead of separating" (2002: 258–60). Within the Reclaiming community, healing depends on connection.

For some, the healing offered by this circle was inseparable from that of the entire week retreat. Close to half reported personal healing during or after the ritual. Some did not perceive healing for themselves, but most perceived others as receiving healing and the community as receiving healing. Witch campers agree that doing healing ritual together is a way to build their community. Healing both requires and enhances community. This connectedness is enhanced by shared experiences in group ritual such as chanting.

Chanting in Witch Camp

Chants can carry powerful healing messages. Chanting is one means of challenging and changing damaging internalized cultural messages and mov-

ing toward wholeness and balance. For example, this chant has been used at the Witch Camp:

My body is a living temple of love.
 My body is a living temple of love.
 My body is the body of the Goddess.
 My body is the body of the Goddess.
 Oh oh oh I am what I am.
 Oh oh oh I am what I am.⁶

When sung in large group ritual, this chant affirms celebration of the profound respect for the human body and sexual expression. The chant avows the sacredness of the body, the necessity for self-acceptance, and the variety of individual physical expressions of divinity. The process of singing it and hearing it sung encourages exploration and release of internal obstacles to this fully embodied sacred humanity and this positive vision of sacred sexuality. Sexuality is fully integrated with love and sacredness, without other prohibitions. Intentional repetition, particularly within a ritual setting, allows the song to penetrate deeply and provides a new framework for viewing the body.

Those who chant together can share a sense of affirmation and participation in community that honors the female, as well as the male, body. Individuals can mirror and affirm each other in this process of chanting and benefit from the collective singing that is more tonally complex than that of a solitary voice. Chanting can also be used by a solitary practitioner to continue to release internal constructs and affirm an alternative reality. The transformative powers of chanting may be subtle; however, they may also be powerful.

Earth Healing

Chanting is one means of directing healing energy toward the environment. In a spiritual practice that sees human life as participating in and sustained by the larger ecological system, the focus of healing may well be some specific location or aspect of the earth. As part of the annual camp ritual, a direct connection is made between the personal healing of individuals and healing the earth. The following chant is frequently used:

Every step I take is a healing step.
 Every step I take is a sacred step.
 Healing, healing, healing my body.
 Healing, healing, healing the land.⁷

The chant constructs parallels between healing the body and healing the land. Healing is seen as relational, as taking place through connectedness with the land. The earth both needs and offers healing (Crowley 2000: 161).

Political Healing

The Reclaiming Tradition, in service to the stated goal of unifying spirit and politics, includes political aspects of healing rituals, particularly concerning the environment.⁸ In 1997, ritual participants were invited to cut a lock of their hair for a magical spell to protect the threatened redwood forests in California. The hair was woven into a collective braid that was brought to the trees, carrying the intention of protection. This ritual linked the opportunity for personal healing with the opportunity to care for the earth. In 2002, an additional Earth healing station where people could make commitments to take action in their local communities was part of the healing ritual. This activist component is typical of Reclaiming rituals and can be seen as efforts toward healing the larger society.

Healing in a Women's Circle

Although Witch Camp meets just for a short time every summer, throughout the year camp participants may gather in smaller groups on a more regular basis. Most of the campers do healing rituals at other times, and many are part of ongoing small circles that meet frequently.⁹ These circles are an important site of healing.

At a typical small circle in Massachusetts, eight women gathered together, bringing sacred objects for the altar, wearing festive ritual clothes and other adornment, and offering foods to share. We met in a living room, and each time two different women led the ceremony. For three years in the 1980s this particular circle met twice a month, at every full moon and on most new moons, as well as on the eight annual solar holidays. At the time, the participants were in our middle to late twenties, mostly lesbian and bisexual, living in the liberal environment of Cambridge and looking for spiritual help. We first met one another at a weekend retreat led by the feminist Witch Starhawk, a cofounder of Reclaiming, and were encouraged by her to continue meeting on our own. Another women's circle nurtured us for a while, until we established our own. Guests were occasionally invited, most notably the male partner of one of the women.

This women's circle provided a regular time and place for creative rituals, which were initiated, designed, and led by members of the group. In this small egalitarian circle, the setting itself offered healing to participants through connection with others as well as through specific healing work. Healing was a major focus of the circle; we were working to reclaim our lives. This healing spiritual community supported members who were recovering from addictions to drugs and alcohol.¹⁰ Members of the group had suffered many forms of



Flower altar representing the navel of the Earth. Used with permission from Sharon Bauer.

sexual violence, including incest, harassment, sexual attacks, and homophobia. Low self-esteem had serious repercussions for circle members. One woman was directly repudiating her religious upbringing; incest perpetrated by her parents, who were stalwart members of their Protestant church, led her to see the church as complicit in the abuse. In the company of another circle member, she burned her baptismal certificate as part of her healing process. For her, the circle functioned as an alternative spiritual community that could witness, support, and participate in her healing from horrible abuse. Another woman used the circle context to support her in recovering from cancer of the throat that she intuited was directly related to childhood abuse and the ensuing enforced silences she had suffered.

At one gathering, the circle worked together to produce healing charms. Inspired by years of witnessing the psychic pain of lesbian friends in the aftermath of holiday visits to families that did not accept their sexuality, the small herb-filled cloth bundles were designed to provide protection from homophobia. The intention was to offer safety for lesbians from external homophobic family settings and also from their own internalized homophobia. The healing charms were intended to act as a preventative, to assist women in retaining their sense of self-respect. They were distributed to friends and graduate school classmates before the winter break.

Naming homophobia as a problem and taking action against it with herbal

charms proclaims that fear will no longer be accepted as a form of social control. When a survivor of abuse no longer has to keep silent or blame herself, her energy is freed up. For the circle's members, breaking the silence around abuse served to demystify the abuse; learning that the abuses happened to virtually every woman in the group furthered that demystification. Delegitimizing former beliefs of worthlessness was part of the process of healing and reestablishing self-esteem.

The acts of reaching out and establishing this small women's moon circle for ourselves indicated that the positive deconstruction had already begun. When women come together and affirm values that go against the dominant culture, they are affirming an alternative discourse. Women gathering in exclusive settings are making a statement about their needs and where they get them met. We supported each other through the deconstructive work that was essential to healing from damage done by patriarchal society. Lesley Northup (1997: 91) goes further to suggest that the act of women gathering to worship together is inherently, although possibly only subliminally, a disruptive political statement that is critical of religious institutions and social structures. Connecting with like-minded women in this circle offered companions on a healing journey.

Celebration as Healing

Some of the power of healing in Goddess spirituality ritual lies in experiencing transcendence of the prevalent dualistic constructs of mind-body, spiritual-physical, and work-play. Sometimes healing toward wholeness can be exquisitely celebratory and playful. Celebration, creativity, play, encouragement, taking on leadership, and direct contact with the divine through numerous senses are all part of this healing path. The safety and creativity of the ritual form offer healing. Being "between the worlds" in a spiritual circle offers a container and a spiritual contact that can be profoundly comforting and allow room for connecting with a childlike inner self in playful exploration.

At one of the Cambridge circles, I recall a ritual where the text called for round bread, which we translated into bagels for our ritual purposes. Upon arriving at the home where we would hold the ritual, we found that we could string up the bagels and use pushpins to dangle them from the ceiling. Later in the ritual, we spontaneously stood and started eating the bagels without the use of our hands. The effect was similar to bobbing for apples, but with a vertical stance and air rather than water as the medium. The freedom to re-interpret and re-create in ritual can lead to awareness of a world full of new possibilities. This joyous engagement can spill over beyond the ritual time and space; it can begin as easily and playfully as bobbing for bagels or chanting a new tune.

Chanting in the Small Women's Circle

Most circle meetings included chanting. One ritual included immersion in herbal baths to the accompaniment of chanting, naming many parts of the body with the repeated refrain: "It's great to have a body; I have a great body." This simple chant was spontaneously created by the participants. Like the chant from the camp setting, this chant affirms the body. It speaks to a childlike aspect of the self and celebrates the body. With playful intentional repetition in a sacred circle, it functions to repattern "embedded conceptualizations" by affirming all parts of the female body. Chanting is used to disrupt a dominant cultural teaching that the body is less than sacred, less than spiritual. The chant offers a new discourse that honors and heals the body.

A final Reclaiming chant reiterates the theme of connection in healing; it affirms the connections among the group and with the earth and challenges participants to take up the fullness of their role as healers:

We are alive, as the earth is alive.
We have the power to create our freedom.
If we have courage we can be healers;
Like the sun we shall rise.
If we have courage we can be healers;
Like the moon we shall rise.¹¹

NOTES

1. In 1997, campers self-identified as Witches, Pagans, Wiccans, Goddess worshippers, ecofeminists, Neo-Pagans, Unitarian Universalists, Buddhists, Jews, Quakers, and a Catholic and Protestant. For this chapter I subsume these internal diversities into the term "Witch."

2. Technically her research is on Neopagans, which is a related tradition that includes Witches. Her research settings were more loosely organized festivals rather than a Reclaiming Witch Camp.

3. I used a Likert scale variant. The survey questionnaire was constructed in consultation with members of the group under study. Face validity was provided by outside review, and content validity was further assessed by consultation. A pilot group of nine responded to the questionnaire and/or offered critical comments.

4. In further analysis my intention is to compile a full record of the variety of healing experiences and to use Strauss's grounded theory and let the data generate qualities of community.

5. Some participants reported no healing from the ritual.

6. Written by Michael Stillwater.

7. Written by Donald Engstrom.

8. See <http://www.reclaiming.org>.

9. These circles may be called covens if all the members are Witches. A circle may include members who simply consider themselves spiritual seekers. Survey data showed that among Witch Campers, the average coven size was eight to nine members, with an average duration of 4.6 years.

10. Many of the members were also in twelve-step programs, and that recovery was enhanced by participation in this circle. In her article entitled "Thriving, Not Simply Surviving: Goddess Spirituality and Women's Recovery from Alcoholism," Tanice Foltz answers the question "What does Goddess spirituality provide for recovering alcoholic women that is missing from AA?" Three overlapping themes emerged from the data: a holistic approach, a healing spiritual community, and women's celebration" (2000: 127).

11. Written by Rose May Dance and Starhawk; adapted by Shawna Carol.

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