



“What a long, strange trip it's been...”

TRAVELING FOR three months is different from traveling for a week or two. Anything over a month, and traveling itself becomes your reality. Home seems far away and somewhat unreal. That may account for my failure to write a column for the last issue of the “Reclaiming Quarterly”—but actually, there was more to it than that. I often find traveling very conducive to writing—sitting alone in cafes over a cappuccino, filling up a notebook just like Hemingway or Anais Nin. However, the entire time I was gone I wrote exactly one entry in my journal. I had many wonderful and magical experiences in England, Germany, Malta and Israel, but when I tried to sit down at my friend's house in Jerusalem and write, it all started to feel dreary and hollow and I began to wish I'd studied marine biology or gotten an honest day job.

It took me several months to put a name to that uneasy feeling—depression—and to figure out what was causing it. Was it the shafting of the Middle East peace process, which had seemed so much more hopeful two years before when I last went to Israel? Was it seeing “The Titanic” on my first free day there that colored the whole country with that sinking-ship kind of feeling? Was it the young man at the university who responded to my talk about Earth religion with the question, “But why is the Earth important?”

Israel, the cradle of three of the so-called “great religions,” is a marvelous place to see religion at its worst, its most dogmatic, rigid and fanatic. In particular, for me it's a place to see my own birth religion of Judaism at its worst—in fact to be exposed to a kind of fundamentalist Judaism which in my upbringing and extensive Jewish education I had never encountered. The Orthodox rabbis and scholars who taught me in Hebrew School and during the year of coursework I did at the Uni-

versity of Judaism always stressed that Judaism was not about belief, but about intellectual freedom. We have a fine old tradition of arguing with God—even telling God to butt out of discussions of the Talmud and let us figure it out with our God-created human minds. So where did this religion come from that justifies shooting the prime minister to forestall peace?

That's the question that is disturbing to me as a Jew—but I finally realized what was depressing me was the question posed to me as a Pagan: If this can happen to Judaism, what's to prevent it happening to the Goddess tradition? Could we, too, fall into a rigid, Pagan-flavored fundamentalism? Of course we pride ourselves on our anarchism, our independence of thought, our unwillingness to accept authority—but so did the Jewish teachers I grew up with. What are the warning signs of Pagan Fundamentalism—and do we see any of them in our community? Here are a few:

BELIEF

It's not so much what you believe, it's about how much investment you have in controlling what other people believe. If you are convinced Elvis is the avatar of Buddha and the Horned God combined, well and good—you're certainly no stranger than a lot of people in our community. The danger signs arise when you start insisting other people believe too, when you start making judgments about their level of magical development or ritual proficiency because they see Elvis as a metaphor instead of a Great Power; and when those judgments interfere with your relationships.

The strength of our tradition lies in our ability to hold multiple versions of

reality. As Willow said about one ritual at this last California Witchcamp, “The beauty was in the spectrum of experiences in that circle, from profound erotic ecstasy to boredom and irritation.” We need to be able to honor that spectrum, to acknowledge that the Goddess can be a literal power; an independent personality; a symbol of the processes of birth, growth, death and regeneration; a metaphor; a doorway into other states of consciousness; and a whole lot of other things. If we demand a narrow sort of belief, we cut off the richness of experience that allows us to truly connect with the mysteries—“mystery” acknowledging that we can never wholly know or define the universe. For myself, on some days mystical beings are talking directly to me, in my ear, in words—and on other days all I know is that those leaves outside will drop and rot and feed that persimmon tree, and That's All There Is—and that's enough. The Goddess is not about believing in the unseen so much as changing our attitude and acknowledging the sacred dimension of what we do see and know, the processes of life, death and regeneration going on around us. That's why in Reclaiming we wrote Principles of Unity, not a Statement of Belief or a Pagan Creed. In fact, one of those principles affirms that we are each our own spiritual authority, and we carefully did not use “belief” once in that document.

FEAR

When fear starts coloring your magical practice and your every encounter with the Otherworld, when you start dwelling on the dangers of magic or the terrors of the Underworld or the treacherous realms in Faery, something is



wrong. Certainly, there are dangers in the practice of magic, and our rituals often evoke powerful emotions and energies. And of course, we need to be careful and responsible in whatever we do. But we are not ceremonial magicians, attempting to evoke and control demons and dangerous entities. We are working with the Goddess and God in their many aspects—the powers that Carol Christ calls “intelligent, embodied love.” Fixating on danger is often a warning sign of self-inflation. It makes us feel really important to think that we’re directing dangerous and powerful forces. Sometimes fear is a warning that we should heed. Other times it indicates some aspect of ourselves, or of our own power, we need to face and integrate. But if we can’t trust the powers we’re working with—well, that’s why we’re polytheists. We can go find some other powers, Gods, Goddesses, etc. that will deepen our joy, humor and compassion.

BLAMING THE SHOES

My ex-husband Eddie always used to say, “That’s man (sic) all over again, blaming on his shoes the faults of his feet.” It’s easy enough to blame the ritual, the Aspect, the magic, when we don’t want to take personal responsibility for something. If a relationship breaks up, if we hurt someone emotionally, if our group dynamics break down in a circle, how easy it is to say, “The Faery Queen got hold of me,” instead of “How did I contribute to this conflict? What could I have done differently?” Magic can amplify and intensify dynam-

ics, but it doesn’t create them. Practicing magic and ritual should make us more responsible, not less—because we know that whatever flaws exist in our character or relationships are going to be revealed in a clear and sometimes glaring light.

Having said that, it is also true that bad shoes can hurt your feet. Badly constructed ritual can have unpleasant and even harmful consequences—especially



when repeated over time. That’s why we pay attention to structure, why we ground, cast a circle, call in the elements and the Goddess for help and protection. We are all experimenting and learning, and we will make mistakes. We need to be willing to look honestly and carefully at the impact of the work we do. But I know for myself that as soon as I start feeling self-righteous, martyred, victimized, or revved up with righteous indignation, I’ve left the path of self-examination and gone down the sweet, seductive road of projection and blame.

AUTHORITY

It seems unlikely that in a group of

people so anti-authoritarian as our community anyone would ever abdicate their own spiritual authority. But history shows that human beings are more likely than not to do just that. Is there any one of us who has never said, “Well, this doesn’t feel quite right to me but so-and-so says it is” or even “It’s in ‘The Spiral Dance,’ so it must be right?”

Authority is a tricky question, because some people do have more

experience, more training or sometimes simply more common sense than others. I was very moved by a statement Keith Hennessy made in a workshop he led at this year’s California Witchcamp on invoking the elements. He was making suggestions for ways to incorporate dance and movement, a field in which he has years of professional training and experience, and he said, “I’m not the authority on this, but I am an au-

thority, and that’s earned. So I do have something to teach you about this. But if what I suggest doesn’t feel right for you or your body, do what’s right for you.”

We can honor and respect our teachers and writers for what they offer while remembering all of us are only human. We can take what fits with gratitude, and leave the rest.

And now I’m home, after a vacation, an amazing California Witchcamp, and Israel seems to be on the verge of deposing Netanyahu and calling new elections. And our community still feels vibrant, alive, contentious, and bent on freedom—the way I like it. So I guess I won’t go hunt up that honest job just yet...