



When nature is our sacred text, one of the lessons she preaches is “Value diversity!” In a natural system, diversity equals resilience. A prairie, which may contain hundreds of different plants in a square yard, is far more diverse than a field of genetically identical hybrid corn. In a prairie, a new disease, a migrating insect or a climate change might conceivably decimate one species of plant, but there will be hundreds to continue growing, flowering, holding and building soil. In the cornfield, however, a new pest that attacked the crop would denude the field of life.

Our human communities, too, will be more resilient, more ultimately intelligent, if they represent a diversity of age, gender, class background, ancestry, sexual orientation, physical abilities and many other qualities. When an issue arises, a diverse community will view it through a variety of lenses, and develop a broader spectrum of approaches. Our rituals, our spiritual practice, our ways of being together will be broadened and deepened, and we will be less likely to ossify into dogma and rigidity.

The broad Reclaiming community represents many sorts of diversity. We include a wide spectrum of ages, class backgrounds, genders and sexual orientations. We include many more women than men, but that is true also of the mainstream religions if we look not at their leadership but their overall membership, and of most groups that work for healing and transformation. In some areas—for example, cooperative spiritual work among people of different sexual orientations, we embody both a healthy diversity and the dialogue and change diversity sparks. One example—over many years of challenges from our lesbian, gay, queer and transgender sisters and brothers, we’ve moved away from the celebration of Beltane as the ultimate heterosexual love feast and into a much more complex understanding of the holiday as the time of year when we embrace our connection with all life,

and invoke creativity, community and sustainability along with a multiplicity of visions of sexuality.

Our diversity is the fruit of long years of work and struggle. I remember many agonizing conversations throughout the 1970s about whether lesbians and straight women could ever really

# Diversity &

meetings, classes and ritual plannings where women and men have come together with equally strong voices. Of course, we occasionally fall back into old patterns, but we have a structure and consciousness that allow us to challenge them when they arise.

But when it comes to diversity of ancestry, the Reclaiming community remains fairly pale. We are primarily made up of people of European heritage, with a sprinkling of people of color—far fewer than in the larger populations of the areas where we work. It’s not that we haven’t noticed or attempted to do something about this condition. Discussion of this problem has been going on for at least twenty years in feminist spirituality circles, as well as in the women’s movement, the peace, justice and environmental movements, and all the activist circles I’ve been involved with.

We’ve tried many different approaches. But we haven’t succeeded in doing anything about it that has made a significant difference.

Why? In part, we are working against some larger social and demographic forces. A third of all African American men between the ages of 18 and 29 are in prison or on probation or parole, to name just one factor. Their incarceration has reverberations on the women in their lives, the mothers of their children, their own mothers and grandmothers. Small wonder we don’t



work together. Now that’s not even a question. It’s not that we don’t sometimes have differences or conflicts that fall out around those lines. We certainly had many agonizing Beltane planning meetings over the years. But we do work together, and have learned to value the challenges that diverse viewpoints bring.

I remember similar discussions regarding men and women—could we ever be in the same group without men dominating? Again, that’s not an issue today. The Reclaiming community has been through thousands of discussions,



# Community

find them dancing around the Maypole. No change we make in our rituals, no sliding scale we offer for our classes, will address this reality—only long, hard, political work on the larger social issues can change this condition.

Aside from the few of us who were raised Pagan, most of us come to the Goddess tradition out of some dissatisfaction with the churches and synagogues of our families. But in African American and Latino communities, the church is often seen as a source of strength, solidarity

and liberation, not a repressive institution.

Many people of color have their own Earth-based traditions and their own groups.

Native American, Yoruba, Latino Pagans may choose to put their energy into their own communities. And groups that have historically been marginalized may be less eager to join yet another marginalized group.

These factors exist, but they don't tell the whole story. There is a growing sense among some of us in the Bay Area Reclaiming community that it is time to reopen discussion of this issue and perhaps look at it with fresh eyes. It is our responsibility to be open and welcoming to all who share our values, to assure that all people have equal opportunity to assume roles of responsibility and leadership and reap such rewards as there are, and to scrutinize ourselves rigorously for the remnants of prejudice or for practices that might create discomfort or hurt.

For several years, Bay Area Reclaiming included a Multicultural Ritual Group, which put on a ritual to celebrate the ancestors of many cultures

each Samhain. Those were the days when the Bay Area community sponsored four or five major rituals

in the course of the same weekend and then collapsed, twitching and gasping. Eventually, age and sheer exhaustion wore us down.

The Multicultural Ritual Group was a great cauldron of learning that was sometimes painful, often exhilarating, and never boring. One of the primary lessons we learned is that we cannot consider diversity without considering identity. A prairie is diverse—but it is also a prairie, not a desert or a redwood forest.

*Each one of these words I use to describe myself carries with it a load of history. If I let them define me, I feel diminished because I am much, much more complex than any of those terms can describe.*

Yet part of the reason discussions of diversity are often so painful is that identity is a complex and uncomfortable question for most of us. Who am I? I was born a woman, a Jew, a white-skinned person whose ancestors obviously dallied in Northern latitudes for a long time. I have chosen to be a Witch, a writer, a political activist, a gardener and a lot of other things. Each one of these words I use to describe myself carries with it a load of history, of everything from assumptions to entitlements to economic ramifications. They ground me, and yet also constrict me. They describe me, but only partially. If I let them *define* me, I feel diminished because I am much, much more complex than any of those terms can describe. Moreover, I know these identities both afford me privileges I didn't ask for and make me vulnerable. They can be used against me, but if I ignore them or deny them I collude in diminishing myself.

Confronting our identity means

coming to terms with our family—and all the pain and discomfort that may be present in our family history. Oh how much more comfortable it is to deal with the ancestors than with our living relatives! Yet even the ancestors, safely dead as they may be, can be problematic. A lot of us have no real idea who our ancestors were. We may know or suspect that some of them were Not Nice People. In general, we're more comfortable identifying with victims than victimizers—but what if our ancestors were slaveholders? Colonizers? Indian fighters? Nazis? Rapists? Or just the uptight, repressed, dull sort of people we disdain? What if our bloodline includes both rapist and raped? Or if the most oppressed

of our ancestors victimized their own families in turn?

In one of the multicultural rituals, we led people in a drum trance back

across a bridge to the land of the ancestors. As people stepped out on the bridge, a chorus of voices cried out "Stop!" We had to listen to the voices of the Unquiet Dead, those who told us, "I sold my sisters and brothers into slavery." "I loaded the Jews onto the cattle cars." "I raped." "Hear us, face us, embrace us," they cried. "We exist in every heritage, every bloodline. We are your ancestors, too."

As we proceeded, we were stopped by another group of voices. "I led my sisters and brothers into freedom." "I hid a family in my attic, at the risk of my life." "I taught my children our language." "Hear us, face us, embrace us," they cried. "We exist in every heritage, every bloodline. We are your ancestors, too."

In fact, there is no one alive whose ancestry includes only Pure Victims or Noble Hera/os of Resistance. Nor is

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## Starhawk

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there any group of Purely Evil Oppressors. Every one of us is born of both oppressors and

oppressed. Facing those contradictions within ourselves, our families, our heritages, is some of the beginning work we need to do to open up to more diversity in our communities. It is also

the work we need to do to heal our own wounds and become whole human beings.

In the Multi-cultural Ritual Group, we found that the most powerful tool we had for holding our own contradictions and bridging our differences was to simply sit and tell our personal stories. As a group, telling our stories helped us bond and know each other. Over the years we developed rituals that incorporated time for storytelling in small groups.

In keeping with that tradition, I want to end with a personal story. Many years ago, a group of us from the Bay Area taught the first Witchcamp in Germany, an all-women's camp. I was the only Jew among us. I had worked in Germany before, and knew that it was a deeply uncomfortable

place for me, but I managed to put that unease aside until the day we were planning an ancestor ritual as the evening's work. Somehow we couldn't plan and couldn't plan and couldn't plan the ritual. Time wore on, until finally, ten minutes before the evening session was due to start we sat down to meditate together and ask why the work was so difficult. Suddenly the answer was clear to me: I didn't want to be there. My ancestors didn't want to be anywhere near the German women's ancestors or parents and grandparents, many of whom had undoubtedly been Nazis and Nazi supporters. I felt guilty, as if I were betraying them by consorting with the enemy, and I was in a state of frozen terror. Our group never discussed the Holocaust: I had no idea if the women we were teaching ever thought about it or cared about it.

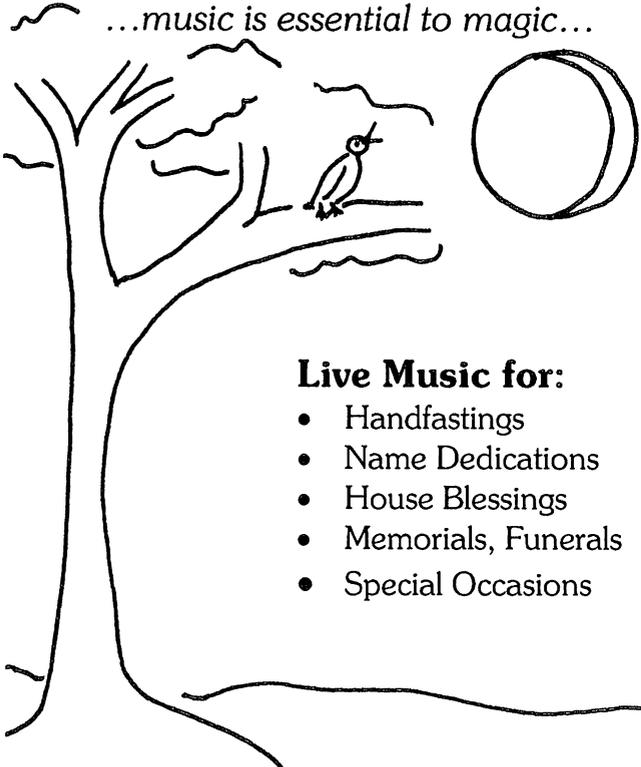
Once I acknowledged what was going on, we were able to do the ritual. But the real opening came the next day, during a camp discussion. One woman spoke about her difficulty reconciling her Christian heritage with Witchcraft. Suddenly, for me the circle was ringed with ghosts—the spirits of all the Jewish women who might have been there but had never been born because their mothers and grandmothers were killed in the Holocaust. I began to cry, and we began openly talking about the Holocaust for the first time.

Remembering that discussion, I can identify that what helped me was hearing the German women acknowledge their own pain, the shame and guilt they felt for events they did not cause, hearing that yes, indeed, they struggled with these issues all the time, that some of them were involved in Jewish/German dialogues, that there was one other Jew in that group of ninety. Then I could move from fear and victimization to compassion for loss the German people suffer in being cut off from what is good in their heritage. I didn't need answers, comfort, solutions, from the women—indeed there are no answers to the pain of genocide. But I needed to know that the pain of my people was not forgotten or denied, and that the women were struggling with the questions.

I imagine a person of color coming into a Reclaiming ritual or Witchcamp might feel something of the same spectrum of emotions. Who are these people? Are they descendants of slave-owners, landgrabbers, exploiters? Have they dealt with it? Are they safe to be around? Is there anyone like me here? Am I consorting with the enemy, betraying my own community? And can I make a difference here? Will I be listened to, will my viewpoint and experience be respected?

In fact, these are some of the very questions that may be brewing inside any newcomer in some form. We all come into a new group wondering: Who are these people? How do I know that I can trust them? Will they accept and understand my differences? Will I be welcome

*...music is essential to magic...*



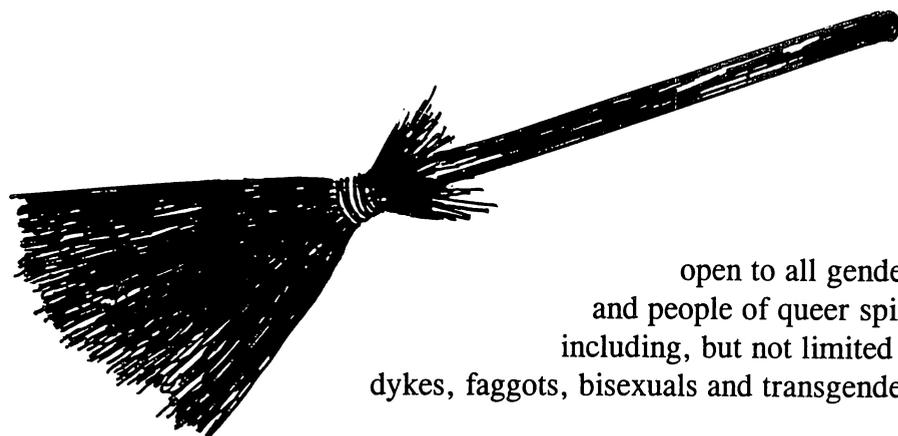
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here? Will I be able to make a contribution?

There are many things we can do to make our events more diversity friendly. We can open spaces for people to share their heritages, skills and approaches to ritual. We might include other languages in invocations: when I chant or sing in Hebrew, a power comes through that just doesn't happen in English. We can educate ourselves about a wide variety of traditions and about the history and real-life struggles people face today. In my next column, I hope to explore some of these ideas more fully. But the most important thing we can do is to really be a community willing to consider and struggle with these issues. We don't have to have answers, or achieve perfect political correctness. We've certainly made mistakes and we will undoubtedly make more. But we can clearly and visibly be asking the questions.

Embracing diversity can be challenging—but it can also be enormously healing. And it will make our community more intelligent, more resilient, more vibrant, more truly representative of the culture we hope to create.

*Starhawk is the author of many published books on Goddess religion, from "The Spiral Dance" to "Circle Round, Raising Children in Goddess Tradition." She is a feminist, activist, teacher, Witch, gardener, drummer and one of Reclaiming's founders.*

## Que Esté Bendicido

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ness has empowered me, generated huge growth, and generally rocked my world. As Pagans, we understand that, while the Sacred is a mystery that goes far beyond form, different divine images can hold different potency, resonance and power for us that influence our magic.

If we truly welcome all races and wish to embrace diversity, it does not make sense to expect people of color to assimilate to working primarily with White Celtic deities. Assimilation to a White mainstream is, after all, a perpetual imposition that people of color in our world know all too well. I am by no means suggesting that we stop working with such deities; they have enormous amounts to offer to each of us, and I honor their power and the power of reclaiming them. I just also notice that, as a Latina, or for whatever reason, I do not find the God Lugh personally compelling, and in the last Wheel of the Year,

as his presence has been central to half of the San Francisco public sabbat rituals, I've wondered what it all has to do with me.

How might such perspectives, once heard and acknowledged, affect the way we do community magic? What might be in store for us, years down the line? What are the possibilities? The four directions called in four languages? A blending of traditions and deities from different cultures into one ritual? Perhaps a summer solstice rite with Amateratsu, Japanese sun Goddess, as she sets into the belly of Yemaya, African Goddess of the seas?

I can't say precisely what will work and what might make a magical fiasco. I have no

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