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The Witches of New York

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THE WITCHES OF NEW YORK

Forget black hats and broomsticks, women who belong to covens in the tri-state area are more likely to be wearing Tahari and traveling in taxis. As writer Linda Drogin discovers, witches and Wiccans of the '90s are coming out of the closet to dispel stereotypes about hideous hags and talk about the beautiful face of the goddess they worship.

When the hostess leads me to an attractive blonde dressed in chic, gray cashmere, I find it hard to believe that the woman sitting at the table is a witch. Not that I necessarily expect a black hat or wart-covered face, but the Prada bag and cell phone throw me a bit. In fact, she looks like every other patron in Isabella's on Columbus Avenue. And I almost forgot this assignment might involve more than run-of-the-mill research until I turn on my tape recorder and it doesn't start. "Oh, that happens from time-to-time," she laughs. "My electrical energy gets in the way."

While Phyllis Currott, 45, a witch for the past 20 years, may not stand out from the crowd visually, she most assuredly lives an unconventional lifestyle. For one thing, this graduate of Brown University and NYU Law School is not only a real estate lawyer, but also a high priestess in the Circle of Ara coven. There, she and a group of women—and sometimes men—meet weekly in a SoHo loft to perform such rituals as healing circles and ceremonies to banish bad karma.

A healing circle, which is only assembled during a full or waxing moon, is usually performed in the nude to make it more powerful. Candles, preferably blue (the color of healing), are placed in the northern, southern, eastern and western points of the room. Additional candles, bowls of incense and goddess statues sit on the altar itself. Everyone in the circle clasps hands and a high priestess such as Currott begins the invocation of sacred space: "Hand to hand, I cast the circle."

The members visualize the person to be healed and everyone moves counter-clockwise, going faster and faster, singing—and in some cases, chanting—the name of Hygeia, the Greek goddess of health. With this ritual, the witches hope to infuse the ill person with their energy and nurturing spirit. Currott tells the story of her teacher, suffering from lymphoma, who was deemed cured three months after a series of these healing circles.



PHOTO: DAVE KRIEGER

She and the coven's members, which include an MTV producer and a marketing director, are among the 150,000 witches practicing in the United States who call themselves "Wiccans," from the Old English word for witch. They believe in a polytheistic, nature-based religion that centers on an earth goddess.

Although Currott claims Wicca is the fastest-growing religion in this country, especially among professional women who feel empowered by images of female deities and who harbor a sense of urgency about the earth's future, there's really no way to document these numbers. According to both J. Gordon Melton of the Institute for the Study of American Religion and Helen Berger, associate professor of sociology at West Chester University in Pennsylvania and the author of *A Community of Witches* (University of South Carolina Press, 1999), estimates, which range from 40,000 to 400,000 believers, are hard to verify.

What we do know about Wiccans is that they don't worship Satan. According to Berger, the myth that witches are part of a Satanic cult is the primary reason practicing Wiccans keep quiet about their religion, which, in turn, makes it so hard to find out how many there actually are. But what makes Wicca such an appealing alternative religion for its core group of feminists, environmentalists, free thinkers and New Age seekers is its lack of a central hierarchy and rigid rules.

Wiccans can practice alone or in a coven. They do wear black but, as Currott points out, so does everyone else in New York. They don't like to be called good or bad witches and nearly 35 percent are male (there's no such thing as a warlock despite what the writers of *Bewitched* tried to pull off). They may perform sacred circles, sometimes in the nude or "skyclad" as they call it, to commune with the divine or celebrate *sabbats* to mark the changing seasons. One of the biggest holidays is Halloween—or *Samhain*—the Wiccan New Year's Eve. They may chant, dance and meditate, and they do use cauldrons and altars to cast spells, but the incantations are never evil. Black magic is not on the menu.

This may all sound a little strange, but Berger, who studied a variety of pagan religions for her book, insists it's pretty innocuous stuff. "Most of the witches I know are gentle, decent human beings who have an earth-based spirituality," she says. "Because they have chosen to become witches, they tend to be religious, moral and concerned people. Of course, some are nicer than others, and some are more serious than others. But that's hardly unique to this religion."

Last year, in an effort to dispel many of the negative stereotypes and prejudices about witches, Currott authored *The Book of Shadows* (Broadway Books, 1998) in which she explains her path to spiritual enlightenment—including psychic dreams, chance encounters with other witches and the initiation process itself. "I feel we're at a critical moment in our history," she says when asked why she wrote the book, which offers an historical perspective on witchcraft and a how-to section on casting spells and making potions to find love and success. "I really believe people may change their attitudes by reading about an educated professional who is a witch."

She met her husband, photographer Bruce Fields, by casting one of these spells. "Seven and a half years ago, it was my birthday; I was divorced and I really wanted love in my life. I asked for a successful artist with a sense of humor," she explains. "Then I meditated and asked for a sign. Several months later, I had a prophetic dream. There was smoke and a spotlight shining on a man on a motorcycle. When I woke up, a friend called to tell me he had a friend he wanted me to meet who was a photographer and rode a motorcycle." The couple was married in a Wiccan ceremony within the year and their wedding was featured in the "Vows" column in *The New York Times* Sunday Style section as well as on *48 Hours*.

Despite the questionable statistics tracking the actual growth of Wicca, there does seem to be, at the very least, a witch boom in popular culture. Many celebrities, from Cybill Shepherd to singer Tori Amos to actress Olympia Dukakis, have openly discussed their involvement with the goddess. Hollywood appears to be under a spell to project witches in a positive, yet provocative light. Television series starring sexy young women—think *Charmed* and *Sabrina, the Teenage Witch*—as well as a proliferation of movies including last year's *Practical Magic*, starring Nicole Kidman and Sandra Bullock, show that witches can pull off size-4 designer jeans and halter tops (even if the majority of practicing Christians and Jews can't). Two as yet unreleased remakes of *Bell, Book and Candle* and *I Married a Witch* indicate that the Tinseltown trend isn't losing steam.

Yet, remnants of the Wicked Witch remain. One of the biggest films of the summer, *The Blair Witch Project*, has Currott, ever the crusader, up in arms. "They are exploiting and reinforcing the negative stereotyping and bigoted fears people have toward witches. Although a witch is never shown in the film, her presence is frightening and terrorizing. And fear can often lead to violence." She has debated with the film's creators on talk shows and is trying to get a disclaimer placed in the movie's credits stating that it does not accurately reflect the religion of witchcraft.



PHOTO: VIVIAN BABIUS

"I think it's really cool that little kids are being raised as witches. Many of my friends bring their kids to the circles and festivals."

—Lexa Roséan

In any event, the blitz of TV, movies and books, including *21st Century Wicca: A Young Witch's Guide to Living the Magical Life* (Citadel Press, 1997), seems to have made an impression on teenagers. And colleges such as Brown now include courses on witchcraft and the goddess in their religion and feminist studies programs. Indeed, Melton says that another reason it's so difficult to determine how many witches exist in the United States is because older teens comprise a number of covens that they form on a whim and then quit within a year.

Nevertheless, Enchantment, a goddess resource store in the East Village, has seen a marked rise in the number of teens—both male and female—perusing the store's shelves. Its owner, Lexa Roséan, is author of a series of *Supermarket Sorceress* books and the recently released *Easy Enchantments* (St. Martin's Press/Griffin Trade Paperback Original, 1999), which updates old spell recipes with readily available ingredients from the supermarket. (To summon success, for instance, mix nutmeg, bay leaves, allspice, basil, cloves and cinnamon with water and simmer.) A witch since 1982 and a member of a coven, Roséan is a Yeshiva University graduate who was distanced from Orthodox Judaism for studying kabbalah (Jewish mysticism) before the age of 40.

"Some think we have some kind of power to fix and hurt people. I tell them we have a particular knowledge and wisdom that can only work with the person's own spirit and energy," explains Roséan, who cautions that some of the newcomers to Wicca should be aware of the misconceptions about witches. For example, a 16-year-old girl sent her some hair clippings and a vial of her tears after a difficult breakup with her boyfriend so that she might pick the correct spells to get over her heartbreak. Roséan was quick to tell her that she couldn't do that: Recovery would have to come from within.

Still, Roséan is thrilled that there are so many of what she calls "hereditary witches" coming into the fold. "It's definitely a new phenomenon. I think it's really cool that little kids are being raised as witches," she says. "Many of my friends bring their kids to the circles and festivals." But liberal New York is more tolerant toward alternative lifestyles. Wiccan festivals are held in Massachusetts, Wisconsin and even Mississippi and so many witches, fearing intolerance and prejudice, choose to keep quiet about their religious beliefs for fear of losing their children or jobs or just being harassed. "Witches with children tend to be more conservative," says Berger. "While it was fun to be outsiders in their 20s, now they are in their 40s and they just want acceptance for their children."

Threats against Wiccan rights even forced the U.S. Army into the fray. Last July, a local newspaper published a photo of 50 colonels, captains and privates performing a Wiccan ritual at Fort Hood, Texas, the largest military base in the United States. The local Baptist Church and Christian groups, who were previously unaware of the army's sanctioning of the religion, called for an end to Wiccan practices at the base. In addition, Senator Strom Thurmond of South Carolina threatened to introduce legislation to stop the armed forces from condoning witchcraft. Despite the protests, the army says Wiccans are protected under the First Amendment and has no plans to shut down minority religions.

According to Margot Adler, the New York correspondent for National Public Radio and a practicing witch for more than 25 years, some of the problems witches encounter stem from the word "witch" itself. "There are huge arguments among various groups whether to reclaim the word 'witch' and show her to be the wise, persecuted woman she was," says Adler. Or, would it be better to reject the title, which in most cultures is associated with negative magic? "Either way, this won't be resolved easily."

Adler prides herself on living a balanced life: a fulfilling career, a happy marriage to a quantum physicist and an 8 1/2-year-old son. She no longer belongs to a coven, offering the same excuse as many who back away from "organized" religion. "It's a real commitment," she explains. "There are meetings and rituals. It takes up a lot of time." She does, however, run Wicca workshops and lectures around the country and spends eight to nine weekends a year at festivals and retreats. Perhaps her take on why there seems to be now, at the turn of the century, such an interest in witchcraft and all forms of spirituality (from Madonna's interest in the kabbalah to Deepak Chopra's best-selling books) makes the most sense.

"Look at us as Americans. First, the blacks had their traditions taken away from them by slavery. Then, the Native Americans had their traditions taken away by colonization. And, finally the rest of us—immigrants—threw away our old traditions as soon as we could," she says. "I think that deep-down there's a search for all this vibrant, juicy culture we lost. I think it's all part of the same desperate search." *



PHOTO: BRUCE FIELDS

"I meditated and asked for a sign. Several months later, I had a prophetic dream. There was smoke and a spotlight shining on a man on a motorcycle. When I woke up, a friend called to tell me he had a friend he wanted me to meet who was a photographer and rode a motorcycle."

—Phyllis Currott

A freelance writer living in Manhattan, Linda Drogin wrote "The Dog-Eat-Dog World of Westminster" for the February 1999 issue of Spotlight.