

Voices from the sixties: twenty-two views of a revolutionary decade

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Lois
Pearson
A WITCH
IN SUBURBIA

"I can assure you
it's nothing like
the Women's Institute."

Something very strange has been happening recently in Great Britain. A pantheistic mystical religion, which predates Christianity and is called "witchcraft," seems to be on the rise. It may be significant that as Christianity—at least in its newer manifestations—becomes more and more a religion of intellectual belief, witchcraft, a religion of direct personal emotional experience, becomes more and more intriguing, even to non-witches.

During a trip to England in November 1965 my producer asked one of our London researchers to find a witch who would be willing to appear on the program. Thus was I introduced to Mrs. Lois Pearson, a comely, dark-haired English housewife who lives in the suburb of St. Alban's with her husband and two children.

On meeting Mrs. Pearson, a stranger would never know that she was a witch. She is a soft-spoken, highly intelligent woman who expresses herself extremely well. Though middle-aged and inclined to plumpness, she has retained her good looks and could

be described, I think, as sexy. More, she has the quality of making you believe the most outlandish stories. Of all the far-out people I have talked to on television—mind readers, astrologers, mediums, flat-earth believers, and Christian fundamentalists—she, and she alone, is the only one I've come anywhere near believing. She didn't quite convince me that there is such a thing as witchcraft, save in the minds of the would-be witches, but she did convince me that she is herself convinced. Whatever Mrs. Pearson may be, she is in no sense a phony.

PIERRE: I'm interested to know how you *know* you're a witch. Did somebody tell you? Did you just decide to become one? Or did you just find out? Are witches born or made or what?

MRS. PEARSON: Witches are born. You can't be made into one. It's something which you're born with, and it's something you have to make the best of just like a birthmark.

PIERRE: How did you know you were a witch?

MRS. PEARSON: Because I've been recognized by other witches. This is one of the proofs.

PIERRE: What do you mean "recognized"? On the street?

MRS. PEARSON: No, not necessarily on the street. What it really means is that I was born with certain hereditary powers—the power to foretell the future, and to look at a person and in a very few moments be able to assess practically everything about him: what sort of a life he's led, what sort of a person he is, and what sort of things are going to happen to him in the future. Also I have the power to hold an object for a few minutes—this is called psychometry—and deduce from this object the sort of people who have owned it, the sort of people they were, and the sort of things that happened to them during their lives. Also to be able to enter into at will a transcendental experience. Now these are things which happened to me as a very small child. I was aware of small children who were not obvious to my parents or to other people, and I used to talk to them and play with them and gradually, as I grew older, I was able to do other things. I was able to sort of foretell what was going to happen in my family. If someone was going to die, I knew about it, and during the course of time I became acquainted with other people who had these gifts, and I was recognized by them as being one of them.

- PIERRE: If you met a stranger who's a witch would you know?
- MRS. PEARSON: Yes.
- PIERRE: Instinctively?
- MRS. PEARSON: Instinctively I would know.
- PIERRE: Would the stranger know about you?
- MRS. PEARSON: Yes, probably.
- PIERRE: Tell me about your family, Mrs. Pearson. You said this is hereditary. Does this mean there are witches in your past?
- MRS. PEARSON: Usually it runs in families. My grandmother was Spanish and she had the reputation of being a witch. Unfortunately I never knew her because she died when my mother was eleven. But I often heard of her from the family, and when I was very small I was told that if I didn't behave myself I would grow up to be a witch like my grandmother, and I did.
- PIERRE: What's the male equivalent of witch . . . wizard, is it?
- MRS. PEARSON: No, we just call them witches.
- PIERRE: I've heard the word "warlock."
- MRS. PEARSON: Yes, but we don't really use this term.
- PIERRE: Has either of your two sons inherited this tendency?
- MRS. PEARSON: I think my eldest son is inheriting it. The signs are there. But I don't talk to him about it.
- PIERRE: Does he know you're a witch?
- MRS. PEARSON: Oh yes, they both know. They just accept it.
- PIERRE: Is witchcraft tied up with black magic?
- MRS. PEARSON: No, it isn't. This is a popular misconception. Witchcraft really is a pantheistic mystical religion which embodies the worship of life, and life is personified by the Mother Goddess. She is the female principle of life, and the male God—the Horned God—is the male principle. And these two together represent life, which witches worship. We know that we are alive. We don't know really what happens to us when we die. But we know that at this present moment we are alive. Consequently we worship life—the life around us, the beauty of the countryside, the sun, the birds, the trees. We talk about the Goddess, but the Goddess is a symbol, and we can as easily worship the Deity in a beautiful flower or a blade of grass. Just as Roman Catholics in the Church have figures of the Virgin Mary or Christ on a crucifix; they don't worship the plaster images, they worship the idea behind them, and in witchcraft we worship the life force, the idea behind the Goddess.

PIERRE: Are you also a Christian?

MRS. PEARSON: I'm not a Christian. I'm pagan. I can't be a Christian and a witch.

PIERRE: How about your two sons? Do they go to church?

MRS. PEARSON: They go to church occasionally, but they're being brought up virtually as Christians because I think there's a great deal of good in the Christian religion. I'm not anti-Christian, not by any means. I think that Christianity provides a yardstick for living, and this is essential to children. My youngest son is not going to be a witch, I can see that. But my eldest son, I think, will be. He has a tremendous power over animals, and sometimes he tells me that he's able to influence the masters at school, if there's a question been asked and he knows the answer. He concentrates on the master and persuades the master through the power of his own will to ask him for the answer. I said to him: "I wish you'd influence the master to give you better marks in maths, then."

PIERRE: Can you read his mind? Is this possible for witches?

MRS. PEARSON: Yes, we do read people's minds, but we don't make a habit of doing this because this is prying.

PIERRE: Is it hard to do? I mean, is it tiring?

MRS. PEARSON: It is very tiring. It's something you have to settle down to and you have to have terrific concentration. The majority of people can't concentrate on one simple subject for more than a minute. But when witches are trying to do something, they have to concentrate on a thing for up to two or three hours and force their will into it.

PIERRE: In witchcraft, the females seem to be more important than the males.

MRS. PEARSON: Well, it's a matriarchal religion, you see, and the women always take the chief part. I have a coven of witches—a coven of thirteen—and I'm known as the high priestess, but I usually don't use this term. I'm usually regarded just as the leader of the coven. And the women take the chief part. The women raise the power, and the men act as an earth for it. There are many ways of working magic. If you belong to a coven, it doesn't give you any particular privileges except that you are able to work with other witches. But many witches don't bother to join covens or to mix with their own kind. They're quite content to work on their own.

PIERRE: This is a priesthood without a congregation, isn't it?

MRS. PEARSON: It is a priesthood without a congregation.

PIERRE: Every witch is a priest?

MRS. PEARSON: It used not to be like that. I believe that in the Stone Age—it goes back to the Stone Age—and in this country before the advent of Christianity, witchcraft was *the* religion.

PIERRE: Was this tied up with the Druids?

MRS. PEARSON: No, the Druids are different. But we believe witchcraft was the religion of the country and that the witches were the priests and the priestesses. Now we're a priesthood without a congregation. We're content to be so.

PIERRE: Is there any common denominator for witches? Are they the same kind of person?

MRS. PEARSON: Well, no, you could sit next to a person on a bus and not know that he or she was a witch. In an average coven you would find quite a mixed selection of people. In my own particular coven, for instance, I have a doctor and a nurse and a university professor and two housewives and someone who is in television. They're quite a mixed bag.

PIERRE: You know, you make this coven sound like the Women's Institute.

MRS. PEARSON: Oh, I can assure you it's nothing like the Women's Institute.

PIERRE: But you sit there and talk about it, looking like a normal, ordinary, everyday woman . . .

MRS. PEARSON: I am.

PIERRE: But you don't look like the conception of a witch that my three-year-old daughter has: somebody in a pointed hat with long hair, a beaked nose, a broomstick, and full moon behind.

MRS. PEARSON: This is another popular misconception. Witches are quite normal people. They're very well balanced, and they're not mental in any way. They have to be well balanced to do what they have to do.

PIERRE: How many witches are there in the world, do you know? How many in Britain? Do you have any idea?

MRS. PEARSON: I have no idea. I couldn't even guess at it. You see, witches are very insular. They don't normally associate with other people, and they don't go around saying that they are witches. Probably just their relations and very close friends

know. Very few people know that I'm a witch. I have friends that haven't the slightest notion that I'm a witch.

PIERRE: They'd probably be pretty upset if they knew that you were.

MRS. PEARSON: I don't know that they'd be upset, because the sort of people that I take for friends are usually the sort who would accept the fact that I was a witch. They would probably be rather surprised, let's say that.

PIERRE: To put it mildly. I'd be surprised if any of the young ladies or middle-aged ladies that I know turned out to be witches, but maybe they are. But this seems to be very peculiar to Britain. I don't think we have many witches in Canada.

MRS. PEARSON: Oh yes, you have. Oh yes, there are witches in Canada. I've been in communication with some of them.

PIERRE: How do they find you, and how do you find them?

MRS. PEARSON: Well, this is very strange, you see. There isn't really any explanation for this. You just do meet each other. As if it's preordained, you meet each other under the strangest circumstances. I came across a group of witches when I was on holiday in Cornwall. I hadn't the slightest idea that they were there.

PIERRE: How did you find them?

MRS. PEARSON: Well, I used to frequent a little beach which was very private, and on my way down there, there was an old mill, and one day I saw a notice outside inviting visitors to the mill, so I thought I'd like to go this particular day. I went in there, and I was met by a very charming lady. She took me around, and I noticed to my great surprise there were many relics there, and swords and witchcraft tools which I recognized. And I didn't admit to her that I was a witch, and she didn't admit to me that she was, and we fenced with each other for quite a long time. We talked generally about it, and she said that I obviously knew quite a lot about it, and she thought that her husband would like to meet me, so she left a notice on the car one day: would we go up for dinner one evening? When I went up to the house, I was very, very surprised to see a gentleman whom I had passed quite frequently on the path down to the beach. When I'd passed him I'd taken particular note of him, but he was always alone, and I was usually alone, and I didn't like to sort of speak of him. But I had a very strange sensation

each time I had passed him, and when I met him, of course, I realized why. He was a witch.

PIERRE: Suppose I find out that I'm a witch and I want to find a coven. How do I do that? Or does the coven find me?

MRS. PEARSON: I don't know, quite frankly.

PIERRE: How did your members find you?

MRS. PEARSON: Well, some of them were introduced to me by other people, and some of them just wrote to me out of the blue. It's very strange, you see, I can't explain this. It just happens as if it's meant to be. People just contact each other over a period of time, and then they become roped into coven activities.

PIERRE: Now what does a coven do? Is it true that it meets at the time of the full moon?

MRS. PEARSON: Yes, witches always meet at the time of the full moon.

PIERRE: Outside?

MRS. PEARSON: In the summer we meet outside, but in the winter of course, when it's rather inclement, we meet indoors.

PIERRE: Whereabouts outside? In a forest?

MRS. PEARSON: In a forest, or in some sort of special glade. We have lots of open spaces in this country.

PIERRE: In a circle?

MRS. PEARSON: Well, we work within a nine-foot circle, and witches work within a circle to conserve the power, unlike cabalistic magicians who work inside a circle to protect themselves from the things which materialize outside. As high priestess, I start in the east and with a sword I draw a circle. In the center of the circle there's an altar, and on the altar there's usually water and salt and several tools, and at each quarter of the circle there will be a candle. When we work indoors, the candles at the quarters of the circle are to represent the fires which we would normally have if we were working outside. After I've drawn the circle I consecrate and bless the salt and water, and I go round the circle sprinkling water. This is to purify it, and then I purify myself. At this stage I take a sword or a witch's knife—a black-handled knife—and I draw down the power, after having drawn a pentacle at each corner—I call them corners, but they're points of the circle. And then I bring the other witches into the circle, and the business of the

evening begins. Each one of them is purified in turn, and then we start whatever we have to do.

PIERRE: What do you have to do?

MRS. PEARSON: Well, the main preoccupation of witches is and always has been the pursuit of mysticism. There are certain breathing rituals which we have which induce a trance state. Now this sounds probably absolutely fantastic to you, and if anyone was sitting here talking to me about this, I just wouldn't believe them, but by a certain method of underoxygenation or overbreathing, and knowing what to do at a certain stage, we can go into a trance.

PIERRE: I've gotten dizzy from breathing too hard.

MRS. PEARSON: That's right, yes. It's the same sort of thing, but it goes on in excess of what you have experienced. We enter into a trancelike state, and we have the power to leave our bodies and to overlook people. Now if you read books about the old witch trials, you hear about cat familiars—animal familiars. In the old days of witches, this is where the significance of the animal familiars comes in. The animals were trained; they weren't just household pets, they were specially trained to watch over the witch's body while she was out of it.

PIERRE: That's why a witch is always shown with a cat in Halloween pictures?

MRS. PEARSON: That's right, yes. But in this day and age, you see, we have our friends around us. If we work in a circle, we have friends, and they watch over us so we don't need the animals to see that we're all right.

PIERRE: Where are you when your body's lying in a trance state in the circle?

MRS. PEARSON: Not necessarily lying.

PIERRE: Standing, you mean?

MRS. PEARSON: No, we work under comfortable conditions. To get into this trancelike state, and to get out of your body, you have to be in a comfortable position so that you can dissociate yourself from your body and forget about it. If you're uncomfortable or cold, you couldn't do this. You asked me where I am. Well, it depends on what I want to do. If I want to see what is going on in a different town or what is happening to a certain person, then I will myself to be in the presence of this person, and I can watch them and see what they're doing.

PIERRE: Do they know you're there?

MRS. PEARSON: It's interesting you should say that. It depends on how receptive people are. I have been present in a room with somebody, and I've seen them look round, you know, as if they're conscious of something. And when I've said to them on a later occasion, "I saw you at such and such a time on such and such an evening and you were doing so and so," they're absolutely amazed.

PIERRE: You realize that everything you're telling me is very hard to swallow.

MRS. PEARSON: Well, I don't mind. You can believe it or not.

PIERRE: Well, the interesting thing is that you have no ax to grind as some of our guests have. You just came to the program because we asked you. Witches normally don't even seek publicity. I think you only came on this program because it's not being shown in England, only in Canada, isn't it?

MRS. PEARSON: That's right.

PIERRE: What do you think of Sybil Leek, for instance? She's on television a lot.

MRS. PEARSON: Well, I don't know Mrs. Leek, quite frankly. I don't know whether she's a genuine witch or not.

PIERRE: Ah. Some skepticism there. Here's a question I must ask you: How do you know what to do as high priestess? Who teaches you? Where do you get these rituals?

MRS. PEARSON: Ah, this is interesting. Now, we have a book. I have this book, which was handed down to me from my grandmother. It was kept in the family amongst various odd papers, and it contains several rituals.

PIERRE: What's it called?

MRS. PEARSON: It's called *The Book of Shadows*. And it's a beautiful book. It's got poetry and lore and the history of witchcraft and how to make various tools and the use of various herbs and things. Our rituals are taken from these books. But the thing is this, that, when you reach a certain stage in witchcraft—when you're sufficiently developed—you don't need all the impedimenta of witchcraft; you can work. I'm quite capable of just sitting down in a quiet room and inflicting or projecting my will onto somebody without the use of tools or drawing a circle. I can work alone, because I'm pretty well advanced, but I'm not so advanced as some people. I work under a guru or a

teacher. She is a woman who lives in East Anglia, and she's a much more developed witch than I am. She doesn't teach me anything; she helps me to remember. You see, witchcraft isn't a question of learning anything; it's a question of learning how to remember. This may seem very strange to you, but witches believe in reincarnation, and we believe that if we were witches in a past life we'll be witches in this life. To learn how to work witchcraft again and to work our spells, we have to remember. And no one can teach us; we must learn for ourselves.

PIERRE: Tell me more about this book. Who publishes it? Is it available?

MRS. PEARSON: Oh no, it isn't published. It's written. My book is written in the handwriting of my grandmother.

PIERRE: Are there many copies of this book around? Do all the witches have one?

MRS. PEARSON: Every witch . . . every witch is entitled to have a copy.

PIERRE: How does she get it?

MRS. PEARSON: She copies it from the ones belonging to other people. You see, when someone discovers that they think they are a witch, strange things happen to them, and they're not quite sure what they are. Then, eventually, they contact people who can explain to them that they're probably hereditary witches, and they're asked if they'd like to join in a coven and we have an initiation ceremony. Now the initiation ceremony is very strange in that it really doesn't consist of anything very much. What happens is that they're taken to some sacred place, with which this country abounds, at a certain time of night, and they're left there completely alone, and after about two hours they're collected. Now if they're genuine witches, they're full of happiness, and they know that they want to join the coven. If they're not genuine, they'll usually say, "Well, thank you very much, it's been nice knowing you, I'll see you again."

PIERRE: Did this happen to you? Were you taken to a sacred place?

MRS. PEARSON: Yes, I was.

PIERRE: Was it spooky?

MRS. PEARSON: Well, I'm afraid I can't go into exactly what

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happens. I know what happens, and I know that people have identical experiences, but I can't go into what happens.

PIERRE: It's a secret?

MRS. PEARSON: It's a secret, yes.

PIERRE: Do you believe in the spirit world?

MRS. PEARSON: Yes, I do. If you mean by the spirit world, do I believe in the life hereafter, yes, I do.

PIERRE: Do you believe in ghosts?

MRS. PEARSON: Yes, I do believe in ghosts.

PIERRE: Have you ever seen one?

MRS. PEARSON: Yes, I have.

PIERRE: Who?

MRS. PEARSON: I've seen my mother. I've seen lots of the members of my family who have died.

PIERRE: Have you seen your grandmother who was a witch?

MRS. PEARSON: Yes, I have.

PIERRE: Have you talked to her?

MRS. PEARSON: No.

PIERRE: Have you ever talked to a ghost?

MRS. PEARSON: You don't talk to ghosts by word of mouth—you communicate mentally. Telepathically.

PIERRE: Do you communicate with other witches telepathically?

MRS. PEARSON: Yes.

PIERRE: Over great distances?

MRS. PEARSON: Over great distances, yes.

PIERRE: How often?

MRS. PEARSON: Whenever I have the need to.

PIERRE: What are the big festivals? Witches in my scheme of things are tied up with Halloween.

MRS. PEARSON: Halloween is one of the great festivals. There are actually four. Candlemas, May Eve, Lammas, and Halloween.

PIERRE: What's Lammas? I never heard of that.

MRS. PEARSON: Lammas is August Eve. It's really a harvest festival. The Christians have taken it over as a harvest festival.

PIERRE: What do you do on these big festival occasions?

MRS. PEARSON: Well, we have a ritual for this particular occasion, and then we usually have a party. A general get-together, and we have drinks, and we just enjoy ourselves. Sit around and talk, play records, dance.

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PIERRE: Sounds awfully suburban for witches to be bobbing for apples and that sort of thing.

MRS. PEARSON: Well, what do you expect us to do?

PIERRE: Well, I expect you to do what witches have traditionally done, I suppose, all through history. What you're really telling me is that witch trials of the past were genuine. That there *were* witches. We've always thought that the evidence was faked evidence, and that they were just strange, unfortunate women.

MRS. PEARSON: Quite frankly, I don't know whether they were genuine or not. It's impossible to tell from all the literature that's been written. Much of it is contradictory. I think some of them were obviously genuine; others were not. There was a lot of hysteria at that time. And for reasons of its own, the Church wanted to get rid of the witches because witchcraft was a rival religion.

PIERRE: From what you say, it was. Is it true that witches sometimes work naked? Without clothes?

MRS. PEARSON: Well, some covens do work naked. I don't. My coven doesn't work naked because we don't find it necessary to do it. We work more on a mental level; but you see different covens are at different stages of development, and if they work on a physical level, they raise power. The witches who do work naked say that they raise power from their own bodies, and that the wearing of clothes would impede the production of this power.

PIERRE: How do you feel after you come out of a trance? Are you tired? Elated? How?

MRS. PEARSON: I feel very tired, as a rule. Before a general meeting, or before some sort of work that I'm very anxious to do on behalf of other people, I fast for three days. I'm allowed to drink, but I have to be well past the first stages of hunger, and usually I'm very, very tired. I'm all right after a night's sleep, you know, but I'm normally very, very tired after a session.

PIERRE: You say you're here to help people, but I understand that they have to ask before you can help them.

MRS. PEARSON: That's so, yes. I'm not allowed to offer my services. I have to be asked to help.

PIERRE: Have you helped many people?

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MRS. PEARSON: Yes, many, many people.

PIERRE: In what way?

MRS. PEARSON: Oh, there are so many cases. The one which comes to mind is a particular friend of mine who had an unfortunate love affair with a man. He went to America. But before he went—well, he was quite a stinker—he relieved her of several hundred pounds. When he got to America, she wrote polite letters to him asking him if he would mind returning this money. It didn't have any effect. She asked me if I would help her, so she gave me a sample of his handwriting and I concentrated on this for a matter of hours. I got through to him very quickly, and within about a week, I'm happy to say, a check arrived for her of several hundred pounds.