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My Quest for Witchcraft in the 1960's

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Back in the mid-1960s I lived with my husband Henry in the busy American Midwest city of Chicago. An area more associated with prohibition era gangsters than witchcraft and the occult, although there had always been a hidden outpost of occultism in the city including the Choronzon Club derived from Aleister Crowley. Later in the 1970s, the local Ripley's Believe It Or Not museum located in the old hippy neighborhood of Oldtown contained many relics on display from Gerald Gardner's Museum of Magic and Witchcraft on the Isle of Man, which they had bought out, but that still lay in the future for me. At this time the web of fate was soon to bring Henry and I to the Cauldron of the Lady and the ancient ways of night's wisdom. For we were on a spiritual search, as were many in our day, and we were young and our minds were open to all possibilities.

Henry was astrology editor for Fate magazine around 1965-66 and he was allowed to purchase many books at discount, or obtain review copies. One day he brought home some books written by Gerald Gardner. When we read these, we immediately knew that our search was over, this was the path we were to follow, and it then became a case of connecting. Now at that time Wicca and Witchcraft were not the public fads that they are now and there was hardly any truthful information available on the 'positive' practice of witchcraft or paganism, as religion or as craft. Most of the books in the early 60s were about the witchcraft trials, both abroad and in America, or on devil worship in a sensationalistic vein. There were no published Books of Shadows available. Good teaching materials, as well as the positive sorts of books on the Craft one finds today were scarce, virtually non-existent (I am referring to those which can enrich one's Craft practice, not the trite trash written to make a fast buck or profit off teenage angst). And remember, there was no Internet, no public festivals and no reliable or steady Craft newspapers or magazines at that

time, this was effectively the Old Testament of Wicca. All was very hidden and underground and the search for the Old Ways was truly both a spiritual and sometimes a physical Quest.

Making do with what we had, Henry and I created and worked some rituals based on the Gardner material that we had read. Soon thereafter, in the traditional teaching that 'when the pupil is ready, the guru will appear', a form of contact was made. Henry was also a High School English teacher and one day in 1966 he gave a lecture to his students containing material on witchcraft and the occult. Between classes a male student approached him and told him that he was a witch. He invited us to a meeting in the basement of the house of another member of the coven. The coven evidently had been based on the British book *Witch* written by Charles Cardell in 1964 as an expose of Gardner's version of witchcraft. The book contained the first publication of much of the Gardnerian Book of Shadows. It was a youthful group of self-initiates who had pieced together a good Gardnerian working practice based on the information they had. The first meeting that I attended resulted in a dramatic healing of a woman with a bleeding ulcer, who was to be operated on the following day. We worked our magic for over an hour for her healing using a wax image representing the woman and with much dancing and power raising. Checking later, at the exact time that we sent the healing power she felt something in her stomach. She was discharged from hospital the next day as cured, without the operation. Needless to say, I was hooked!

Then in 1968 Henry and I took a trip to England, which was to last for over a year. Once in the UK my husband quite easily (perhaps the Gods helped with this) made contact with the Craft community and not soon after we met Madge and Arthur, the High Priest and Priestess of a Gardnerian coven in the Whitecroft line. We started working with this group and we seemed to take to the Craft like a fish to water. We were initiated and worked regularly with this coven for the next year and were elevated to the second degree of the priesthood. I remember that in our initiation that the measure was taken and wiped with blood from our pricked fingers. I still recall the Battenberg cake that served as a sacrament during the 'cakes and ale'. One of Gardner's early high priestesses* also sometimes worked with this coven and we became fast friends and that friendship endures to this day. We also shared in rituals with another Gardnerian coven that we had befriended during this time, and one day they drove us to meet the late Eleanor 'Rae' Bone, the

originating high priestess of the Whitecroft line at a nursing home she ran in South London.

Through the contacts we had made, we eventually met the late Ruth Wynn Owen, who was leader of a group called Y Plant Bran (or the family of the god Bran), a family tradition which in her family's legends went back to the god Bran and the faeries, and had roots allegedly to 400 CE. We participated in rituals with Ruth, who was an actress and drama teacher and learned of her ways also. For herself and her family she did not use the word 'witch', but rather she taught that this was her family's 'religion'. Her tradition was very sacred to her and secretive, and much therefore cannot be shared. One thing that I feel I can share is her teaching that one did not need to 'grind out the power' through dancing, as in the Gardnerian practice, but rather that power was freely available through invocation, sometimes done while raising one's arms upwards during the ceremony. We stayed in a flat upstairs from her house in Ealing, West London for a month or so. I remember vividly a wonderful book of coloured drawings that she had created as a form of amulet to keep mice away from her country house in Yorkshire and I believed that it truly worked. From what I have heard, Ruth was later instrumental in much of the ritual work of the Craft group known as The Regency.

As I said, there was not much published ritual material available, and since there were not yet photocopy machines or computers, information took much longer to share with fellow Crafters. Copying of ritual material was usually by hand or typewriter. I recall one wonderful Sunday afternoon when about five fellow witches came to the house we were renting to share ritual material. We all gathered around the large dining room table and various rituals were laid out for us to copy, either by hand or by my husband's furious strokes on the typewriter. The material was as precious as gold to us. A far cry from today's world where you find scores of books in your local superstore or information at the touch of a button on the Internet. Perhaps too much information leads to a loss of value placed on the information?

In Madge's coven we often worked magically for animal rights causes. We once 'worked' to prevent a seal hunt wherein the seals were at that time cruelly clubbed to death and sometimes skinned alive. We performed a really intense ritual to create blizzard conditions for the seal hunt. On day one of the proposed hunt a great storm did arise and prevented any seal hunting for a week.

The press at that time sometimes did horrific and sensationalistic articles on the Craft, lumping it together with negative practices and with no regard to the truth. I remember an incident where an undercover reporter from *The News of the World* was trying to gain access to Madge for information on his article by posing as a farmer who was interested in joining a coven. Unfortunately for him, when he said that he was a chicken farmer with a battery farm, she would not even meet him to talk. We also met those who moved on the fringe of the occult. I remember a Russian visitor named Theo who was asked to leave the ritual, as he was not an initiated witch. He claimed that he knew from personal experience that Dion Fortune had really been a black magician and had done some very negative things magically. It hardly seems likely from her published books, was this a case of sour grapes or occultist's jealousy?

After our thirteen months in England we spent two months camping throughout Europe. We bought a Volkswagen automobile in Germany and while standing on the dock in Bremerhaven to ship the car home, I had a profound vision of future events. I perceived that a member of my earlier American coven would be coming to live with my husband and I, and would somehow contribute to the break-up of our marriage. Also, that my father would have a heart attack. These events unfortunately soon unfolded into reality.

In 1969, back in the States, we started a coven in Chicago with a couple of interested friends. We later initiated another couple. As my vision portended, my husband soon departed, but I kept the coven going and located others interested in the Craft through a local occult bookstore. At the same time I put out a strong thought-form for a new high priest who would meet my requirements. My new high priest-to-be, Herman, soon appeared at my door and met all the requirements that I had specified. We worked together and the coven became stable as a group. Our coven, which we named 'The Temple of the Sacred Stones', was kept private, but the time was right for more openness and sharing with others.

The 1970s culture had begun. The Process Church of the Final Judgment had a public coffeehouse in Chicago and the Hare Krishna devotees drummed and danced through the downtown streets. We formed the Chicago Temple of the Pagan Way, a large open group that offered classes and public pagan festivals. At some of these festivals we had sixty to eighty people attending and a photograph taken at one of our gatherings was used in an article in *Time* magazine on the occult explosion. The pagan movement had started to spread in the US and

various similar groups were forming throughout the country. Some of the material that I wrote for the Pagan Way was later published in *A Book of Pagan Rituals* by Herman Slater. At this time, in addition to 'grandmother was a witch' stories, there developed another tendency – to relate with suspicion, hostility and competitiveness towards other groups (or sometimes to others within one's own group), assuming that each one's way was the 'right way'. Were the days I had known of working in harmony with fellow Crafters to be lost?

The Old Gods seemed to work in mysterious ways for our development, bringing us into contact with many fellow Crafters who were also doing 'the Gods' work' at this time. Many of them just seemed to mysteriously show up with the answers to our questions regarding the Craft and the Art of Magick. One Crafter from Pennsylvania, who we befriended, could perform magical workings just using a tin cough-drop box and small birthday candles as part of his traveling altar. He showed me how power could be raised and focused without all the other props of the Art.

I also thought-formed and worked for a new love in my life, someone who would become my husband. I put out specifications for my perfect partner, down to his physical appearance and interests. I soon after met my husband Robert, we were handfasted and are still together thirty years later. Robert is a better spontaneous ritualist than I am and leads incredible meditations. He is a very sweet and loyal companion, and likes garlic and cats, important requirements for someone to share my life.

I had refused to be elevated to the third degree of the Gardnerian Craft when I was in England for personal reasons. I was offered it there, but did not feel ready at the time. Now I did feel ready for the third degree elevation. One of the witches, who had come through another line of Gardnerian Craft, gave me my third degree. He became an author and published books on the Craft and was very instrumental in the pagan movement, developing what was called the Outer Court Book of Shadows.

The line of Gardnerian Craft that had come to the Eastern coast of the US in the 1960s, although stemming from Ray Buckland and his initiation by Monique Wilson (one of the last priestesses Gardner had initiated), was being administered by a high priestess and priest couple known as Theos and Phoenix, who lived in New York State. They approached me through others with the offer of having me take a trip to meet them and take a third degree elevation directly from their hands also. This was to create one solid Gardnerian lineage for the United States. They even offered to

pay for my plane trip. I accepted the offer to meet with them, but declined them paying for the trip as I wanted to visit some friends in New York anyway. We met and found that we truly liked each other. We became friends and I kept in touch with them by correspondence for a few years after our meeting and my second third degree elevation. I can say that they truly loved the Craft and put much concerted effort into securing it's future in the United States.

I recall one interesting incident connected with our association. At that time this couple owned an altar in the shape of an upside down man or dwarf that once belonged to Aleister Crowley. Allegedly, if you rubbed the posterior of this figure while making a wish it would be granted. I applied my hands to the task and made my wish for someone I knew who badly needed help in a particular area of their life. The wish was granted for them, but it seemed like a load of negative karma was dumped immediately into my own life at the same time to pay for the wish. Anything connected with Crowley always seemed to wield a double-edged sword of blessing and curse, and this artifact continued that tradition long after he had departed this world.

During the 1970s I also studied with the Voudon Gnostic magician Michael Bertiaux, who ran a magical organization out of Chicago, and he gave me three initiations as a priestess of the Cult of the Black Serpent. Robert and I also took the Necklaces and Warriors initiations into Santeria, as part of our interest in other pagan cultures and their magical ways, and we also worked with others who were into Voodoo as a religion. We worked with the ceremonial magic system of Franz Bardon and invoked and received information from some of the spirits discussed in his book on magical evocation. Later in the 1970s we were part of the first American mutli-coven organization known as the Midwest Pagan Council, and in 1979 and 1980 we were involved in the Pan Pagan Festival. This was the first large public festival in the States in which various Craft and pagan groups and individuals shared magic, music and ritual in a spirit of mutual support and celebration.

My other occult and pagan interests aside, the Craft has always been the heart and soul of my life. I never liked the monotheistic idea of 'God', who in the mainstream religions is often described with only 'male' characteristics and as someone to be feared. I also don't believe that the so-called Ultimate God, as such, cares about any of us. He, She and It is an amoral force that we invoke in ritual as the 'Ultimate', but who is far removed from us. I see the God and Goddess of the Craft as Divine

Parents, more approachable and closer to us, as are the various specific Gods and Goddesses of the pagan pantheons. As to Magick – I believe that it works to the extent that we WANT it to work, through a combination of our emotions, belief, desire and visualization. However, I also believe that it works when we have used the appropriate ‘keys’ to the Gods, spirits, Orishas, Loas, etc.

Over the years I have seen the Craft go through many changes. The positive change is that it is more popular and thereby more accessible, the negative aspect is that it can and has become trivialized, which is sometimes described as ‘fluffy bunny Craft’. To me, the future of the Craft is that it will probably spread, but may be weakened and watered down. There are many more solitaires and self-initiates around who may not have the good fortune of having the training that some of us were exposed to. I feel extremely lucky about the way the Gods intervened in my gaining access to the Craft. I was given the experiences that I needed through my teachers, colleagues and Craft friends over the last thirty-three years. My current Craft pursuits help to continue their work, blending the continuation of the Whitecroft line of Gardnerian Craft in the US with other significant esoteric practices that I have found worthwhile and worth passing on. And like meeting previously unknown relatives, I still sometimes come upon witches and pagans through chance meetings who are somehow descended from our original Chicago coven or the Temple of the Pagan Way. Hopefully, the Craft, like a river will flow on, perhaps taking turns and creating new streams, but still providing contact with the Old Gods and the power of nature’s magick to all those who dare to drink from its clear cool waters.

* Lois Bourne {MBW}