

Avianca's Spiritual Journey

I'll take Deborah's lead on this and start with the "official" version of my journey . . .

Avianca Hansen Bouchédid is a regional vice president for the American Cancer Society. She provides vision, leadership, and strategic direction to advance the organization's mission to reduce cancer incidence and mortality, and improve the quality of life for cancer patients, survivors, and their families. Specifically, she oversees 4 business units: corporate relations, cancer control, income development, and patient & family services.

Prior to joining the American Cancer Society, Ms. Bouchédid served as senior director for Safe Horizon's Families of Homicide Victims program in New York City. There, she led a staff tasked with providing practical assistance, court advocacy, and emotional assistance to surviving family members of homicide victims in the 5 boroughs of New York City.

Ms. Bouchédid started her career in the for-profit sector. She served as a Legal Assistant at Colgate-Palmolive, a leading \$10 billion consumer products company. In that capacity, she was involved in several corporate citizenship initiatives, such as employee volunteerism and stakeholder relations.

In addition to Ms. Bouchédid's work at the American Cancer Society, she continues to serve at several non-profit agencies. She heads the New Jersey Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice where she works to ensure every New Jersey citizen is free to make decisions about when and if to have children based on their own conscience and religious beliefs. She also sits on the Board of Directors for the Women's Fund of New Jersey and the Strategic Planning Committee of the Girl Scout Council of Greater Essex and Hudson Counties.

Ms. Bouchédid received a master's degree in psychology in education from Columbia University, and graduated cum laude with a bachelor's degree in literature and speech from St. John's University.

Now, here's the story behind the story . . .

My parents raised my 3 brothers and me in a 2-bedroom apartment in a Brooklyn neighborhood ravaged by substance abuse, low literacy, and the generational cycles of poverty and welfare dependency. Being a single mom of 3 kids by the time you were 21 was not uncommon. College was a stupid and wasteful "white" or a "rich" thing to do. Everyone grew up knowing terms like "face-to-face meetings" and how to fill out a welfare application.

My father emotionally, financially, sexually, and physically abused my mother and emotionally and physically abused us. He was also a raging alcoholic but we liked that back then. He was nice and giggly when he was wasted. My mom did the best she could with the limited internal and external resources she had.

My parents sent us to a bible-thumping, electric-guitar-playing, tongues-speaking, pamphlet-distributing, brimstone and hellfire church. That's right. They SENT us to church but they never attended church. I didn't understand why I didn't "feel the spirit" or speak in tongues or why I simply could not "accept Jesus Christ as my personal savior." None of it felt right but I preferred going to church (sometimes as much as 5 times a week) than staying home. The songs were cool and I liked reading the Song of Solomon, the "sexy" chapter of the bible! ;-)

I also escaped by reading voraciously. I never wanted to put my books down. I read walking to the bathroom and eating! If I didn't have a book, I read milk cartoons and cereal boxes. Judy Blume's books were constant companions and I all but worshipped my well-worn library card. When Reading is Fundamental (RIF) came to our neighborhood, I thought I had died and gone to heaven. RIF, a children's literacy organization, encouraged children to read by giving them books. Basically, RIF "paid" me to do what I absolutely loved to do. Unbelievable!

I knew I had to get out of the puke-hole I was raised in and intuitively knew the only way out was to get an education. And so, I went on an unheard-of journey (well, for both sides of my family and the folks in Sunset Park, Brooklyn): college, moving a million miles away to Manhattan, grad school, a career, an actual wedding, waiting to have children, owning a home, etc.

I became an atheist in college. I was a big fan of saying "I got here alone, I'll die alone." However, every now and again my best friend, Moe, and I would go to St. Pat's and light a candle for one reason or another. We went to Paris one year and I was awed by the "sacredness" of Notre Dame but still didn't "feel" the Christianity. I attributed this disconnect to something lacking in me.

Atheism suited me just fine for 8 or 9 years. When I started dating my husband in the summer of 1998, he jokingly called me a Witch because of the "spell I had him under." Some time in late 1998, Moe mused "I wish there was a religion that honored women and nature." I happened to read an article on Wicca in Self Magazine a few weeks before that. Coincidence? Who knows? I told her about it and left it at that.

Well, so I thought.

A few weeks after that (February 1999), I purchased my first book on Wicca, Laurie Cabot's *The Power of the Witch*. I was on my way home (a shoebox I absolutely loved in Tudor City with a Murphy-bed) on the 1st Avenue bus when a woman sat next to me. I felt like I was walking around with contraband so I tried to hide what I was reading. She read over my shoulder and told me her name was Amethyst and that she was a "practitioner of the Old Religion." Not knowing anything about magickal names at the time, I thought "Oh god, who is this weirdo?" Coincidence? Doubtful.

That wonderful book was the start of a very, very, very long list of books I've read over the years. I read every thing I could get my hands on. Books on Wicca, Paganism, Tarot, astrology, women's spirituality, feminist theology, Native American spirituality, ecology, feng shui,

shamanism, you name it. I attended herb magick classes, Tarot workshops, astrology seminars, just about everything Manhattan had to offer in metaphysics. Like Deborah, I, too, feel like I have a Ph.D. in esoteric psychology. “Metaphysical grad school” was Deborah’s SisterCircle Weavers program. The Weavers (taken in my early 30s) was an amazing, life-altering experience that I highly recommend everyone participate in. It taught me so-o-o-o much – the most important lesson was to trust my intuition.

So much of who and what I am today I can honestly say is a result of dogged determination and my connection to the Universe -- how else would I *intuitively* know what decisions to make? At times, my choices were difficult and not fun (honestly, I was in my early 20s and would have loved to go to the Bear Bar or the Ski Bar or the China Club or any of the 6,000 bars in Manhattan but I was too busy studying). Ritual, circles, prayer, invocation, journaling, meditation, yoga, and certainly 6 years of therapy, 15 months of coaching with Deborah, and Al-Anon have contributed to my sense of peace, awe, and serenity today.

Goddess has been really good to me. Let’s look at the evidence, shall we?

- ☾ Having started life with patriarchal monotheism shoved down my throat, I regularly commune with nature, develop and renew my spiritual commitments to Goddess, and live by the principles of eco-feminism and rainbow medicine.
- ☾ Having no model of healthy living or a healthy relationship, I am happily married to a warm, wonderful, and loving man who knows we are equals, and treats me as such.
- ☾ Having no mentor or role model, I hold a masters degree from an Ivy League school and have a high-powered career.
- ☾ Having grown up in a roach-infested apartment in a gang-run neighborhood where 6 people had to share 1 bathroom, I now own a 2-bedroom townhouse in 1 of the top 5 wealthiest counties in the country.
- ☾ Having been dependent on social service programs such as Reading is Fundamental and the Summer Youth Employment Program when I was a kid, I now generously and regularly donate my time and money to several Pagan and social justice organizations.

I do not gloat when I mention these things. I am in awe of all that I have achieved and been given. Yeah, I’d say the Big Chick Upstairs has been looking out for me!! 😊 I give thanks to Her every day for showing me the interdependent web of life of which we are all a part, guiding my sacred journey, and illuminating the divinity in all of us.

If anyone is interested in my book list or other resources, please feel free to email me at amh2101@tcalumni.columbia.edu.