

## Cynthia's Story

These days I consider myself a child of the God and the Goddess. For me, the world is the living manifestation of a sacred spirit that embraces every living creature on earth.

That's such a long way from the Baptized, church-going kid I was in the early fifties that sometimes I wonder how I got from there to here.

I grew up in a black working class neighborhood in Queens. Back in those days, church, like piano lessons and Friday night Bible study, was something our parents believed we had to have. I, my brother and the two cousins our age who lived in the downstairs apartment would show up for Sunday School at 9:30 a.m., and get a break at 10:30 to visit the candy store and go home for a minute, and then we'd go back at 11:00 for church services. The preacher usually wound down from his 30- to 40-minute sermon around 1:30. We'd go home and have an enormous Sunday dinner around 2:30, and then we were free to read, visit, or play quiet games. If there was another church program at 4:00 p.m., we were expected to show up, at least some of the time. Entertainments like dancing and playing cards were not allowed on Sundays.

In between, we played outside until dark on weekdays and weekends—unsupervised!—came home when we were expected to, and treated our parents' love with the same matter-of-fact attitude as punishments for wrongdoing – it was simply the life we knew.

But being forced to take a dose of polite hellfire and damnation every Sunday until I was 18 years old did something to me. Unfortunately, it wasn't what my mother intended. I say "polite" because this was—and still is—a conservative Baptist church: No jumping up and down and speaking in tongues allowed here, although an Amen! or Thank-you, Jesus! from the congregation is expected and even encouraged when the preacher really gets going. Hellfire, nevertheless, was a real punishment to be meted out by a vengeful deity upon your formal damnation.

I never quite believed it all.

As the years went by, I left the obedient, somewhat silent and very shy child I had been behind and gained a very active dislike of church. I'd wince when the preacher started raising his voice and repeating himself—Baptist preachers do that a lot. Sometimes I'd daydream to pass the time. Sometimes I'd play hangman or connect the dots with my brother. Listening was no longer an option.

At the age of 18 I went to France as part of Queens College's junior year abroad program. (Yes, I know that's young, but I had skipped a year in junior high as part of an enrichment program. Boy am I glad they don't do that anymore.) By the time I returned, I had been on my own for an entire year—a first for me—with no one to tell me what to do or where to go—well, except for the professors who accompanied us. The thought of returning to church regularly was unbearable. It was then I found the courage to tell my mother I no longer intended to go to church. She was so angry when she heard my news that she came very close to telling me to leave her house. I think

that as far as she was concerned, a child of hers, living under her roof, had no right to defy her in that way, especially with something as important as Church.

Somehow, though, she and I worked our way past that crisis. I never went to Sunday school again. I remained in her house until I was married a year after graduating from college, and if things were never quite the same between us, she managed to pretend I was still her little girl who'd come to her senses one day.

After that, church was a duty I performed once a year on Mother's Day.

Around 1996, a friend introduced me to the Fourth Universalist Society in Manhattan. By that time I had seen the younger of my two sons off to college, and had left the house I raised my children in and my 20-year marriage behind. I was beginning to feel free, for the first time ever, to explore who I was.

I began to see myself as a person with a spirit that needed nourishing. I had already begun to explore earth-based religions through books. But it wasn't until I visited Fourth U that I realized that I could actually enjoy a church service. It was a revelation to hear someone speak in a reasonable tone of voice about things that actually mattered to me. My eyes were opened even further when I heard the minister say that God had many names.

What a concept. Religion could be a way of looking at the world that was tolerant and inclusive. It could encourage spiritual growth through everyday living. Best of all, the impulse to want to be a better person began with me, not with some all-seeing, vengeful deity I wanted to avoid angering. It confirmed what I had been feeling for some years, and I began to explore earth-based, feminist spirituality in a much more systematic way. Two books that helped me greatly on my journey of self-discovery at that time were Starhawk's *Spiral Dance* and Clarissa Pinkola Estes' *Women Who Run With the Wolves*. I also began to practice Tai Chi, which for me is another way of training my spirit and body to move in harmonious ways with the Great Spirit.

And I attended WomenCircles, a wonderful all-woman's camp in western Massachusetts. During the years I attended, the highlight of the week was the all-camp ritual, which was always based on one particular goddess. One year, as the priestess came around the circle we had formed, she looked at each one of us for a moment as she gathered our energies. She moved her hands in a motion that looked exactly like she was taking up the threads of our individual energies, weaving them into a cohesive form she could use to help do the work of the ritual. When she came to me, and reached toward my heart chakra with those expressive hands of hers, I could feel her pull some of my energy with her as she stepped back and moved on.

That night she showed me, on the most basic level possible, that we are one. We live in a breathing, interconnected world where plants, animals, people, stones, trees, all!—are part of the Web of life. Those who have trained their wills and spirits can touch us, as we can touch them, through this sacred Web.

That is why I believe that a ritual is a powerful prayer we can use to make a connection to our own sacred spirits, and through them, to the great, connected spirit that ties us all to life. As long

as our prayers are life-affirming and harm no one, the work we do during a ritual has the potential to create positive change in the world.

Seeing this sacred connectedness at Rowe, witnessing it at the Fourth U's Full Moon Circles, feeling it when I meditate, or practice Tai Chi, or even look deeply into a candle's flame, I cannot help but feel wonder and joy, knowing that a divine spirit infuses every aspect of our existence.

Of course, I am at the same time an ordinary human being. I laugh, I cry, I make mistakes, and do all those ordinary things most of us do as we each make our unique way through this life.

Yet I'm comforted, knowing that the extraordinary is also there, waiting just beyond the veil of ordinary days, to be awoken by the special touch of our spirits.

I'd like to share a poem I wrote one year after the meditation portion of a ritual at a Full Moon Circle.

#### Vision of Artemis

A black panther ate me tonight.  
He was standing beside me,  
And he took my hand.

He was lying softly on the green ground,  
Standing on all of his legs,  
And he opened his mouth.

My left hand was in him  
I was in him  
I was the panther.

I am that powerful beast.  
I rest upon the crest of the hill,  
Comfortable in my strength.

Valleys of hazy gold unfold below me,  
The soft air flows around me.  
I am content.

Blessed be,

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