

## **My Spiritual Journey By Deidre**

My mother was raised a good Irish-Italian Catholic girl. Her family's churches always seemed like a private club that I was just visiting. I loved the gorgeous cathedrals, the stained glass, the incense, and the music from the organ and the choirs, but I was, frankly, an outsider.

My father's family, by contrast, was Baptist. Everyone is welcome there, but these people never have any fun. They don't drink, dance, listen to any kind of music but hymns, they don't go to movies, or hang out in shopping malls – too much possibility of being exposed to Rock and Roll there. Those family gatherings were often interminable dull. Then I found out they don't even date! Oh forget it. How could these people stand it?!

At church, their preachers were very loud and confrontational, and they scared the hell out of me as a child. They didn't think much of Catholics, who they felt violated the commandment against worshipping other Gods before Me. Catholics, you see, pray to the Virgin Mary, who was, according to the Baptists, "nobody special." That was the phrase they used. I was flabbergasted! You give birth to the son of God and you're not special? Out of all the women in the world, God chooses you and you're not special? Would God just haphazardly choose some random woman? Even at the age of 10 I recognized that this was just unfair. I liked Mary, she wore pretty clothes and always looked like she was about to give me a hug. Who the hell did these people think they were, deciding how special she was?

So far, the popular faiths had nothing to offer me except rules – which I had plenty of already, thank you – and exclusive membership to a private club filled with people with big hair and fake nails who gossiped a lot. There was very little actual spirituality for me to grasp. Then they dissed Mary – and in doing so – dismissed what might have been a role model for me.

'Bye.

Growing up in a mid-sized Midwestern town, you could be a Catholic or a Protestant. As far as I could tell, there wasn't much difference between Baptists and Methodists and Presbyterians or any other type of Protestants. Since my mother had never baptized me in the Catholic Church, I could never be one of them unless I converted. All my friends went to church. They saw each other there and at school. The fact that nobody ever saw me anywhere BUT school made me different. Their parents began to gossip about my family. Around the time I began to transition from child to young woman, I became sick of the peer pressure. All the kids went to bible study, made friends, found boyfriends and girlfriends, they went to camps and learned cool songs. I didn't. I became more and more alienated.

Then came the trip to the bookstore.

When I was about 11 or 12, my mother and I were shopping in an artsy bookstore on the north end of town. I found a book on Celtic Magic. I wanted my mother to buy it for me. She literally slapped my hand away from it. "That's not good for you," she said. She took my by the wrist and firmly walked me out of the store. I don't remember the details of the conversation, but I do remember her telling me not to invite bad spirits in. "You shouldn't mess with that stuff. You don't

know what you're doing. You never know what you're going to let in."

This stunned me. I always thought my mother didn't believe in anything. But... what if I met someone good? Something powerful and beautiful? My mother was too afraid to go there. Underneath it all, I figured she believed in demons more than fairies.

I didn't.

I began flipping through books on Celtic pre-Christian spirituality on my own. The ones I found in the library talked about goddess, warrior-queens, fairy queens, and other extraordinary women with exotic names like Bronwyn, Brigit, and Mab. These female deities were not just the loving, motherly, peaceful beings that Mary, mother of Jesus had always personified.

I remembered the stories my Grandpa Barney and my Aunt Mary Kate had told me about our family coming from Ireland, how magical it was, filled with fairies and Leprechauns and ghosts of kings who had lived thousands of years ago. I am more than just the shortest kid in my class, I realized. I am more than my cousin's hand-me-downs. More than she-who-belongs-nowhere. More than not-Baptist or not-Catholic. I am Irish, I thought to myself with pride. I am of the blood of these Goddesses. I belong with them.

I am special.

They were warriors, poets, and Queens. I was entranced. I began to read about goddesses from other cultures named Bast, Isis, Venus, Hera, and the muses Terpsichore of dance and Euterpe of song – who I felt personally connected to.

However, everyone else seems to think this is silly.

By the time I made it to high school that I realized that Christianity and Judaism were not silly, they were religions deserving of respect, but the goddesses and their worshipping I was fascinated with was very silly. So, my social situation only got worse. In order to be accepted into a Christian church, you needed to believe – not just be open to the idea, but be wholly convinced that Jesus was the Christ, that all other religions are wrong, and that being a Christian is the only way to heaven.

I wasn't convinced. I had no idea. And I hated the fact that if the Christians were right, then everything I was reading about was false. Silly. That, I refused to accept.

I realized with some sadness, and a degree of shock, that I didn't really believe in Heaven either, or Angels, or saints, or anything else that was commonly accepted by the patriarchal religions surrounding me. I had no idea if those stories were true. And since I couldn't say yes, I could only say no.

I didn't know what to believe. Therefore, I believed nothing. But I did keep searching, and hoping.

It was at this time I developed a macabre interest in Witchcraft. I started reading about the Salem Witch Trials, I read

books on witches and witchcraft which generally painted them out to be practitioners of "black arts." I noticed that the things these witches were said to have done were never proven by any scientific method – nobody could prove that these women had flown on broomsticks or made babies come stillborn by chanting and sacrificing animals. Nobody had seen them dancing in the woods with the devil. The things that they confessed to, and that were generally provable, had to do with making potions out of plants and pieces of animals, and creating charms to wear that had medicinal purposes, or which protected them from harm others would try to do them. Isn't that why Catholics wore crosses, I thought to myself? I never saw anything in the books I read to support the commonly-held theory that witches were dangerous, out to hurt people, seduce men, have devil's babies, etc. People were just, for no real reason I could see, scared of them.

Man did I love this. By this definition, I was a witch. So was my Mom. Hell, she made soup out of plants and pieces of animals all the time. So did my Grandmother, Catholic Ladies' Society Extraordinaire, who also had a hunchback and a beaky nose. Wow, now *that's* a witch, I giggled.

I could scare people by wearing black, making soup, and knowing stuff about plants. I'll bet I wouldn't get pushed around at lunchtime anymore. You guessed it. I started wearing black – ALL black – that year. I was fifteen. I accentuated the look with black eyeliner and mascara. I even played with Ouija boards, hoping that something out there, good or evil, would somehow reveal itself to me. Thank heavens my mother took it in stride. I was an artsy kid, into music, theatre and dance, so nobody seemed fazed. The biggest effect it had was that the popular kids began to ignore me, rather than actively make fun of me. This in itself was a victory. By developing an interest - and an image, I had the beginnings of individuality.

Wow. Dress the part. Be a witch. Screw you guys. POWER. The power to defend myself through imagery. The power of symbolism. I began to like what I saw in the mirror. I began to identify with those women in those books, who knew things the common folk didn't know, who were persecuted by frightened, ignorant people. I felt that amazing feeling called "Not Alone." At 15, I became a witch wanna-be.

That year, I also developed an interest in Astrology and Numerology. One of my favorite morning rituals – and one of the few things my mother and I were able to share without screaming at each other – was reading the horoscopes in the daily newspaper. I also found that girls my age suddenly wanted to talk to me when they learned that I read horoscopes and could parrot back articles and books I had read on what personality types were attributes to the different signs. I started making friends.

As far as Numerology went, I barely passed most of my math classes. I hated nothing more than wasting time trying to make random, meaningless numbers look this way instead of that way, doing calculations for no purpose other than to prove I can. What a waste of effort. In Numerology however, the product of numbers being added wasn't nearly as important as the *meanings* of those numbers. Lots of witchery involved numbers too – count how many drops of blood to add to the potion, how many times to repeat the incantation (why 3 times? Why not 4?), how many points on a pentacle as opposed to points on the Star of David, etc. I noticed some numbers were far more commonly used than others – multiples of 2 especially. Numerology, oddly, mystified numbers for me. Numerology took a system of squiggles which served no purpose but to give my teachers something to torture me with, and giving those symbols

personalities and power, both as individual values and in communities.

Incredibly, I began to see myself as a number. Specifically, the number 7.

According to Sun Angel.com's Numberquest Numerology site, the number 7 represents

*Philosopher, sage, wisdom seeker, reserved, inventor, stoic, contemplative, aloof, deep-thinker, introspective, spiritual, faith, esoteric, exotic, unusual, hidden, seeking perfection, ethereal, other worldly, enigma.*

Oh yeah.

I was reinventing myself.

At 16, I stopped wearing black.

Sometime during all this, my mother discovered the Unitarian Universalist Church. She started going there, and brought me along a few times. It was an ugly, warehouse-looking building. The minister, however, was female, and very nice. I had never seen a woman at a pulpit before. I was not a morning person, and was too preoccupied with my internal teenaged angst to really pay attention, but I did notice how calm my mother seemed. She really listened. She liked these people – and my mother never had a lot of friends. She was never really calm either. This was a place where she seemed to find some sort of peace. I was just grateful she was focusing on something other than me and my wardrobe.

Three years later, in college, one of my best friends who was a devout Catholic eventually left her faith – and her boyfriend of 4 years – to join the Apostolic Christian Church, commonly referred to in central Illinois as the AC's. This was devastating to me. She was a mathematically brilliant young woman, strong, pretty in a healthy, solid way, not a waifish, trend-following dingbat trying to impress everyone with clothes and pop-music savvy. This woman gave up wearing funky clothes, makeup, jewelry, drinking, rock-and-roll, and basically everything that constituted freedom and a normal college lifestyle to wear her hair in a bun, dress in sweatshirts and long shapeless skirts, and spend all her time listening to hymns and reading the bible. Her church was a place where women sat in the back and were not allowed to speak. In a desperate effort to understand her choice, I attended a worship service with her. The church "elders" were old men in out-of-date suits condemning the modern world, homosexuality, unrepentant Jews, and women who chose careers over motherhood. I was sickened. This was a girl who had dressed up as Madonna on Halloween! She was going to be a mathematician! I admired her. I looked up to her. She was ... disappearing, bit by bit.

I cried on my Baptist grandmother's shoulder about this. Surely she would understand. "These people don't accept anything! They're like the Amish, except they drive cars! I love this girl and I'm afraid I'll never see her again!" Grandma sighed. "Some churches focus more on rules for living than they do on the Word of God," she said. "I'm sorry this happened to your friend. Pray for her."

So, in my 21<sup>st</sup> year, I began to pray.

The God I prayed to was male. I didn't know any other way to go about it. "Oh father, don't let my friend give up her

entire life. Let her attend graduate school. Let her at least teach calculus in public high schools. Don't let her disappear into an AC town where she'll never do anything except wash dirty diapers and dishes and never hear any music other than hymns. How could You give someone such gifts and then send them to a lifestyle where they will never use them? She could cure cancer! She could invent an affordable electric car! She should be an engineer or a researcher! Don't let her gifts go unused! The world needs her!"

I need her, I selfishly thought. Please, God, don't take my friend from me.

Not only did she fully convert to AC, she married an uneducated truck driver almost twice her age, and has 2 kids. She works as a receptionist. She is currently paying for her husband's baccalaureate pursuits. She is, if I believe her letters, happy.

She will never be a physicist or a researcher for the WHO.

My rage knew no bounds.

I graduated college, went through a few bad relationships, and left my hometown for New York City on scholarship to a Performing Arts Academy.

My best friends at the Academy, even in New York, were Christian.

At 24 years of age, I firmly knew I wasn't.

I had wanted so badly to be a Christian. I had read the bible. I wanted to believe that because Jesus died for me, I was a beloved child of God, and when I died, I would see my grandparents again. I believed Jesus' teachings of forgiveness, tolerance and love were good, healthy, comforting lessons. But no Christian I knew, outside my grandmothers, were forgiving, tolerant, or loving toward anyone outside their church. I was outside their church. I had to conclude that they were hypocrites. I also could never truly be sure of their love for me. Not even most of my own family.

That was the year I began to avoid family gatherings. I also ate less and less. My spiritual starvation was reflected in physical habits. I ate every other day, sometimes every third day. The next year, at 25, I was 5'4 and 110 pounds. I began chain-smoking.

In my final semester at the academy, feeling broken, lost and sick, I flipped through the phone book looking for a Unitarian Universalist Church. I remembered how at peace my mother had seemed, and wondered... I knew from some basic internet research that they were supposed to be an open-minded, inter-faith spiritual group. My fingers found the Fourth Universalist Society on Central Park West, just 20 blocks south of where I was living at the time. So, that Sunday, I visited. Again, a woman was in the pulpit, delivering a sermon called "Hanging by my Toes." She told the story of a squirrel, (a squirrel?) hanging upside down on a telephone wire high above the ground, attempting to reach the birdseed hanging from a feeder. This squirrel had to risk its very life just for a simple meal of questionable nutritional value. After 2 years of subsisting on vending machine food and McDonalds, busting my ass to get through the grueling work of Academy Schooling, I knew just what she was talking about. I sat, rapt, through that sermon. My God, someone

at a pulpit who's making sense! Speaking English (not Latin), not yelling at people, not talking about what you're doing wrong, not giving instructions on how God insists you must live ... simply relating. Saying to us "It's hard out there. Keep going. Have faith. Remember who is here for you. Who are your friends? Where is your faith? It will get better. Even if it doesn't get easier. We can do it. Just keep hanging on."

I joined the 4<sup>th</sup> U that year, and have been a member ever since.

I quit smoking, and I started eating. I started reading, and at church, I really listened. None of these people thought Goddesses and witches and fairies and wanting to lie in the grass instead of read the bible was silly. There were actually women there who referred to themselves as witches! No black dresses – but still! Real witches! And some women who prayed to Mother, not Father. I wanted to cartwheel. I didn't even really know why this made me so happy – but I did know I felt accepted instead of rejected. This was a whole new world.

I started reading again – serious internet research. I picked up a copy of "Our Chosen Faith." I read everything I could get my hands on about Irish legends, Goddesses, magic, celtic pagan spirituality, everything I had been curious about all my life but steered away from either directly or indirectly. It didn't take me long to realize that my overwhelmingly positive response to a female minister seemed to fit in with my fascination with Goddesses, and the focus on quality of and respect for life rather than rules for living was in line with pagan, earth centered faiths, some of which I had studied in High School. I read countless websites on Wicca, Druidry, bards and bardic lore, and how Christianity supplanted all of these things which I had taken solace in since I was a child.

When I found Deborah Roth's Moon Circles... I initially backed off. The first one I went to was intimidating. For some reason, I felt silly. I had never seen people doing this sort of thing. Chanting cheesy things about circles and blood and mothers. Goodness knows my own mother and I had issues. I was still more comfortable with a male, fatherly God. But... I was intoxicated by the magic in that first circle. I could feel the power crackling through me and all the women there, a shared energy that we could, if we chose to, direct. Power! Not just from symbols, but from intention! It thrilled me, and it scared the crap out of me.

For a few years I turned my focus to work, money, relationships, marriage eventually, and as a result of marriage, Judaism. More rules. More "this is what you have to do if you want this, and if you don't there's the door." I attended the 4<sup>th</sup> U sporadically during this time. I made girlfriends there. I met amazingly well educated, successful, happy women there. There was such a sense of freedom, born of respect for the individual. Nobody telling me I don't need to worry about being successful if I can just marry a rich man. People asking what I liked to do, what was important to me, how am I doing with auditions, when will you sing again, etc.

It didn't take me long to seek out another moon circle. The intuitiveness of lunar energy, the respect for emotionality, the respect for female ambition, and the excitement for each woman's achievements as unrelated to men opened doors inside me that had been sealed shut for years, doors which I never knew existed.

In 2003, I left the crumbs of my marriage for an apartment between two parks. I had an Irish roommate, a cat, and freedom. I began to buy flowers once a week. I burned incense, choosing scents based on meanings I had looked up on

websites or in books. I indulged all of my pagan curiosities and attended Moon Circles regularly. I participated in a year-long women's spirituality program with 4 other women, learning about Goddesses from religions around the world, their symbols, and our relationship with the earth, the elements, and the stars. Everything I had been curious about from the age of ten was at my fingertips. I began spending hours on the internet, researching goddesses, pagan religions, Celtic rituals, the Celtic calendar, seasons and cycles of the year. I learned what the elements meant and how people's personalities reflect different elemental energies.

At 30, I finally had the opportunity to explore fully, without my mother's fear or my boyfriend's derision or my girlfriend's impatience, the things which I had been poking around with most of my life. I realized that on a few very rare occasions in my life, when I had had experiences one might term religious, it had been an invisible pair of woman's arms wrapped around me, cloaking me in warmth, comfort and love. She had been there for years... I had simply been unable to recognize Her.

For me, God is sexless. But when I feel the power moving through me, it is largely a female essence. At times, in deep meditation, a Fatherly love surrounds me. But it is the Mother who was missing from Pastor Brown's Baptist Church, and who was rendered passive and powerless by the Catholics. It was the Amazon I dreamed of being when I read stories of Queen Maeve of Connaught, and Queen Bronwyn of the Fairy Realm. It was the right of expression I envied when reading stories of the Ban Shee, and the freedom and independence to learn and create that I yearned for after getting to know Brigit of the Hearth.

Now, at 32, I see the crone in my grandmothers, who are both still living, and whose eyes sparkle with secrets and wisdom, even though my Catholic Grandmother is in advanced stage Alzheimer's and can no longer speak. I see that she is passing into the next life, and know that I will never know all her magic; I must grow and learn for myself. My mother is moving from Mother to Crone, while I myself am still the maiden. I see all stages of the cycle embodied in us, the generations of women who were raised around patriarchal religions, who in our own ways manage to retain the feminine power of the divine which courses through our blood.

I hope someday that my daughter writes an essay like this one. I can't wait to read it.

*Shortly after this essay was written, Deidre's beloved Grandma Keighron - the Italian sophisticated black-wearing crone mentioned above - passed away after a 5-year long bout with Alzheimer's. Along with countless generations of mystery and magic, Deidre inherited her recipe book and plenty of black clothes.*