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March 9, 2017
Feature Writing/Babcock
Words: 1,792

21st-Century Magic: Wicca in the Modern Age How Paganism Pushes Forward in An Age of Nonbelief

Arkie Ring uses magic to find work.

“I’m an illustrator,” he says, his voice light and almost shy beneath his vibrant mop of strawberry hair. “Suppose I do a spell or something to get someone to come to me for work, that’s just what happens. It’s great. I don’t even have to go out looking for jobs.”

Ring says he is a witch. We first met at a Wiccan ritual in Chicago, in the backroom of Alchemy Arts, an occult bookstore in Edgewater that greets customers with, among other things, a fake human skull and cauldron in the front window. Ring’s claim is not bizarre for a practitioner of Wicca, a pagan religion officially founded in the 1930s and grounded in the ritual observance of seasonal cycles and spellwork. Many practitioners have willingly adopted the witch label once used to denounce them, even referring to the religion’s founder, Gerald Gardner, as the “founder of modern witchcraft,” according to Sabina Magliocco, a professor of anthropology and folklore at California State University, Northridge.

The ritual where I met Ring was hosted by the Center of the Elemental Spirit, also known as Congregational Wicca, a public group founded by local Chicagoan Marty Couch in 2009. The group meets every other Sunday for an hour-long discussion on a chosen Wiccan topic, followed by a group ritual. Attendance is only limited by the size of the space: the ritual room is small and cramped, barely larger than the bookstore’s bathroom, shaded in pale green paint and dimly lit by three separate lamps. The nine attendees, including Couch and Ring, squeeze in on folding chairs around a small center table, on which sits an unopened bottle of Pure Leaf Brewed Tea and a gold offering plate. The plate, Couch informs me later, was bought from a Christian church off eBay, and is now lined with Birthday Cake Oreos, a 21st-century substitute for the traditional homemade cakes usually consumed near the end of Wiccan rituals.

The fact that there are still practicing Wiccans in the age of Birthday Cake Oreos and bottled iced tea might seem like an anachronism. Yet while traditional Gardnerian Wicca is less popular than it was 20 years ago, Magliocco says, she believes that interest in paganism and spellwork are rising. Ring himself, who has attended nearly every ritual since June, refrains from calling himself a Wiccan in the traditional sense, given that he “do[es] the witch stuff, but not the religious side of it.”

The explanation behind this seeming paradox is simple, according to Magliocco, The witch has historically been a metaphor for a powerful yet misunderstood or even reviled figure, she says, an image that may be especially strong in today’s “historical and political juncture.” To her, the non-religious aspects of Wicca, the “witch” parts, are a strong lure for “many young people who feel like they don’t quite fit in or feel different because of, [for example], their gender or sexual orientation. [They] still find the metaphor of the witch as a powerful social outsider a big draw.”

It was this outsider draw that first attracted ritual attendee Jeff, a soft-spoken man with receding mousey brown hair and round cheeks punctuated by a soft goatee. Like Ring, Jeff doesn't believe in a god or goddess. But unlike Ring, he's not sure if he believes in the magic, either.

Jeff grew up in North Carolina. When he was in middle school, he was "saved" and converted from his family's religion of Methodist to Southern Baptist. "I actually went to a Southern Baptist seminary for my first year of college," he says. "It was during that time I met my best friend. He got kicked out of school for smoking. During that time I realized there were so many rules, so many unspoken rules about what it meant to be Christian, and in particular a Southern Baptist. So I started experimenting."

He started going to Anglican church, and because he had stepped out of school on a Sunday, he, too, was kicked out of school.

When Jeff enrolled at the University of North Carolina two years later, he signed up for a philosophy of religions class. "It was at that point, given what we were learning about science and philosophy, that I realized I no longer believed in a God," he says.

He never told his family about his newly-discovered atheism, and doesn't see himself telling them about his experimentation with Wicca anytime soon, either. He asked to go by his first name only for this story, so his employer wouldn't find out about his Wiccan ritual attendance.

"The only people who know are my wife and my therapist." He says, blinking slowly. "I expressed to my wife, a little secretly at first, that I was just going to a meditation ceremony. And eventually I came out to her that it was a full-blown pagan ritual, and she was okay with that. I think there's too much stigma surrounding non-Judeo Christian belief systems."

Jeff discovered Couch's Center of the Elemental Spirit Wiccan group through an app called Meetup. He began researching Wicca after struggling with depression and anxiety, when psychotherapy helped him realize that he was missing spirituality in his life. He read books and was attracted to the "science-y" nature of the religion, and the focus on self-work and meditation-like rituals. He doesn't believe in love spells, but has performed spells in the past: and, if he does believe in magic, he believes it's something "you do to yourself, not to others," and that spellwork is just "a way to tap into the unconscious mind."

"I don't necessarily think believing in a god or goddess is a tenant of Wicca," he says. "I was looking for some kind of meditative spirituality, and this just spoke to me. The way they format the group as a lecture, along with ritual, along with meditation."

Jeff, like Magliocco, doesn't think Wicca's religious element will grow throughout the 21st century. He believes the general trend in Western society is one towards non-belief and atheism. Still, he continues to experiment, and is currently signed up for the next three rituals hosted by Center of the Elemental Spirit. "I think that it's an important step to take now, to actually be in a part of a group of people, and to discuss these things," he says. "Previously it was very personal to me, I didn't really want to discuss it with anyone. But now I believe that it's important to be social in small groups about belief systems."

Marty Couch is the type of man children would mistake for an off-duty Santa Claus. His glasses rest snugly on the round bulb of his nose and as he talks he interlaces his fingers in cheerful, contemplative thought on the ample curve of his belly. His voice booms and calms and cracks witty, frequent jokes, even when he's lecturing on more serious topics, such as the ethics of magic.

“I developed a model that was open to people who would honor their solitary work, let them keep their belief system in place, and support it,” he says, balancing on a small barstool at a Starbucks down the street from Alchemy Arts. “So it’s not based on a particular pantheon, it’s not based on a particular dogma...it’s an interesting welding.”

Couch discusses Wicca openly and honestly, either not noticing or caring when other customers glance at him out of the corner of their eye or openly stare at him when he talks about spells. He seems surprised when I ask him if he’s open about his religion.

“I don’t really make an announcement about it, but if somebody asks about it I let them know. For Christmas I give out Yule gifts on the winter solstice with Yule cards. So, yeah, there’s nobody who doesn’t really know at this point,” he says, smiling slightly.

Couch’s journey to witchcraft also started through a search for spirituality. “I grew up in a non-spiritual house, but I was always a very spiritual person,” he says. “When I was 19, a friend called me one day and he said, ‘I think I found what we’re looking for: this group is having an open, invite-only ritual for the summer solstice.’ And I went, and it just blew me away. By the end of the night, everything was energy. You could feel the energy of the the trees and the plants and everything like that. It just took.”

Couch devoted his life to Wicca, first joining a Gardnerian coven, then moving to an Alexandrian (“the Episcopalian of Wicca,” he quipped), and finally to an Elemental coven focused on the five classic Greek elements: earth, air, water, fire, and spirit. He understands that many of his ritual attendees aren’t as focused on the religious aspect as he is, but that’s okay. To him, the religion is organic, and discussion and participation are the most important aspects.

“We’re all trying to figure out that ‘it’ that is undefinable, in whatever way we can.” He shrugs. “I’ve always felt that to believe there’s a higher power that created the entire universe, all the planets, all the living things on the earth, all the creatures, all the people, but just one religion, ‘By the way it’s mine!’”—he laughs—“it’s a very limiting belief on what that creative force is.”

In the ritual room, Couch is leading a discussion on spirituality and religion, and where magic plays a role. Ring brings up using spells to find jobs, and Couch nods, before adding:

“The easiest way to do work is to do it on yourself,” he says, looking around the room, the light piercing his lenses as he does. “Now, I’m not saying a spell won’t work if cast against another person, but there’s the ethical part. Now, how do you know, by doing a spell to get that job, you didn’t take it away from someone else? Someone who needed it more?”

There’s a long silence, nods. Ring nods too, after a pause, almost begrudgingly but acceptingly. Then one attendee pipes up: “God, Marty, you’re such a buzzkill.” The room erupts in laughs.

I ask Ring after if he’ll stop doing spells to find work following Couch’s words. He says he’s not sure, but that either way, the materialistic and professional gain he gets from witchcraft isn’t what drew him to Wicca in the first place.

“It’s just a huge anxiety lifter,” he says. “Doing spells, you know that nothing’s permanent. So—I dunno.” He pauses, searching for the right words. “It’s just all amazing and fantastic.”