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Article abstract

Healing holds a central place in the tradition of Reclaiming Witchcraft, a branch of contemporary Paganism that unites magic and political activism. Rituals are opportunities to bring about healing and are commonly structured around a three-fold model: healing the self, healing each other and the community, and healing the earth. Through this model, practitioners engage with self-empowerment, community-building and political activism, but conflicts arise over the projection of personal healing techniques onto the larger scale of earth healing. Drawing on empirical research and personal involvement, this paper explores the interconnected web of healing, magic, and activism in the Reclaiming tradition.

“HEALING MY BODY, HEALING THE LAND”

Healing as Sociopolitical Activism in Reclaiming Witchcraft

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This article is based on fieldwork conducted with contemporary Pagan communities in Montreal, QC, and in the northeastern region of the United States, much of which was carried out as part of the project “Religious diversity in Quebec” for the *Groupe de recherche diversité urbaine*.¹ While healing in the Reclaiming Witchcraft tradition was not the primary focus of this project, the centralized place that healing practices hold in this movement made for readily available data, through participant-observation as well as through interviews. In this article, I start with an overview of contemporary Paganism, followed by a brief look at Reclaiming Witchcraft, in order to situate the reader in the tradition. Next, I examine different ways that practitioners conceive of and value healing, through a three-point model of personal, communal, and planetary/environmental healing. Finally, I discuss some of the ways in which this model can lead to conflicts among participants.

Contemporary Paganism

Contemporary Paganism, a relatively new religio-spiritual movement, has been on the rise in Western culture since the mid-1900s. Often seen as an umbrella term, Paganism encompasses diverse practices such as witchcraft, goddess worship, ceremonial magic, Neo-druidism and Neo-shamanism, as well as a number of movements based on the mythologies and magical traditions of ancient cultures, such as Norse, Greek, Egyptian and Celtic cultures, among others.² Some practitioners

1. The *Groupe de recherche diversité urbaine* (GRDU) is a multidisciplinary research group spanning several Quebec universities and encompassing a variety of projects on ethnicity and pluralism, including religion.

2. For more on Contemporary Paganism, see Adler (1979), Berger (1999), Greenwood (2000), Harvey (1997) and Pike (2001), all excellent

consider it to be primarily an attempted reconstruction of pre-Christian beliefs and practices, while others focus on creating new spiritual systems that address a range of contemporary issues and draw upon a variety of diverse religious and cultural elements. The primary venue that practitioners use to express their beliefs and practices is ritual, which, in the words of anthropologist Susan Greenwood, presents “a way of becoming ‘unpossessed’ from patriarchy” (2000: 145), and according to anthropologist Sabina Magliocco, is used to “heal the rift between humans, nature and the divine” (1998: 8). In addition to a feminist perspective held by many, but not all, contemporary Paganism is often considered, by practitioners and observers alike, to be an earth-based spirituality, meaning that many beliefs and practices associated with it are inspired by natural cycles (such as the yearly cycle of the sun and the monthly cycle of the moon, both reflected in birth, growth, death and rebirth) and that practitioners are often sensitive to, or deeply involved in, environmental concerns. While this perspective is not necessarily shared among all those who identify as Pagans, it figures importantly in many branches of contemporary Paganism, and is especially strong in Reclaiming Witchcraft.

Reclaiming Witchcraft

Reclaiming Witchcraft is a “tradition”³ of contemporary Paganism that was born out of a Bay Area, California, teaching collective in the 1970s, a hotbed of feminist and anti-war activism at the time. Its founders, which include Pagan author and activist Starhawk, brought together influences from various sources, most notably British Traditional Wicca, the spiritual system brought from Great Britain to the United States in the mid-1900s, inspired by the experiences and teachings of Gerald Gardner; Dianic Wicca, a feminist, separatist (women-only) branch of Traditional Wicca developed in California by Zsuzsanna Budapest; and the Anderson Feri tradition, a syncretism of various indigenous European and American shamanisms and original philosophies and theosophies of Cora and Victor Anderson

ethnographies that have been especially formative to my research. The 1998 (20-1) issue of *Ethnologies*, edited by Sabina Magliocco, focuses on Wicca and contemporary witchcraft, and includes many useful resources.

3. Within the greater contemporary Pagan movement, the term “tradition” is usually used to replace “denomination” or “sect” as used in other religious systems.

(Salomonsen 2002b). These three, integrated with anarchist and ecofeminist analyses, formed the basis for what would become a widespread international spiritual activist movement (Reclaiming 2006).

The name “Reclaiming” signifies the reclaiming of personal power as creators and as healers, political and social power to fight against oppressive societal institutions, and the power of community to transcend social boundaries, such as gender, class and race (Salomonsen 2002a). As such, there is a significant emphasis within the movement on personal empowerment and self-help resources, and also on communities as forums through which individuals help and support each other. There is also a significant emphasis on various forms of healing, seen as conducive to personal empowerment and mutual support among Pagans, and generally linked with environmental activism. In fact, it is these three points that make up the Reclaiming approach to healing, which comes into play again and again in rituals and other gatherings, in workshops, in songs and in writings: healing the self, healing each other, and healing the earth.

I use this three-point model as a framework through which to explore healing practices in Reclaiming Witchcraft, drawing upon my experiences as a researcher in this tradition, and also as a participant in the Reclaiming community of Montreal from 2006 to 2009. Much of the information herein comes from rituals, classes, workshops and other gatherings in which I took part, whether as a leader or teacher, as an anthropologist, or as a participant. Though I had studied anthropology before becoming interested in contemporary Paganism, my participation in the Reclaiming movement preceded my involvement as a researcher. Because of this, I was already familiar with many of the themes that emerged in my research, as well as with some of the participants who became informants in this work. I was able to pinpoint certain areas that might hold rich data, and, as in the case of the healing practices described here, I was able to develop themes that I knew well from personal experience but that had not figured prominently in my previous research.

Conducting anthropology in one’s own community is becoming increasingly common in the study of religious and spiritual groups, as anthropologists take an ever more participatory role, emphasizing the importance of the insider perspective in the study of religion and

spirituality, and as practitioners themselves become more and more interested in studying their own communities, belief systems and practices through an academic lens. Magliocco, in her introduction to the *Ethnologies* issue on Wicca, remarks that

Witchcraft and Neo-Paganism are characterized by a high presence of native ethnographers and critical practitioners who cross the boundaries between categories easily and repeatedly. These insider-scholars may study their own traditions at the same time they are engaged in actively constructing them, remaining both involved and critical at the same time (Magliocco 1998: 14-15).

She goes on to state that “reflexive scholarship in the ethnography of religion is not only possible, but highly effective” (1998: 15). Indeed, I have found this to be true in my own research, as my intimate understanding of the beliefs and practices in question has encouraged informants to share details that they may not have otherwise disclosed. Furthermore, I bring an insider perspective and personal experiences into my fieldwork, which complement traditional anthropological methods and deepen data analysis.

Healing practices in Reclaiming Witchcraft

“In Witchcraft, healing is not an individual’s isolated private task; it is assisted by and typically requires connection with others,” writes author and practitioner Grove Harris (2005: 256) in an article about healing in Feminist Witchcraft traditions, including the Reclaiming movement. Indeed, connection is an integral and inseparable part of healing in Reclaiming Witchcraft, and not only interpersonal connection: deep connection and communication with the self, with others, with animals, plants, communities and ecosystems, and with the earth as a whole may all be facilitated through healing rituals and techniques.

As mentioned above, in the Reclaiming tradition healing is seen as having three interrelated parts: healing the self, healing others and the community, and healing the earth. This is demonstrated in the Reclaiming Principles of Unity, a document written collectively at a Reclaiming visioning retreat⁴ in 1997, which has become, for all intents

4. This is essentially an extended planning meeting where participants use various meditation and discussion techniques to achieve clarity on an issue, to make

and purposes, the mission statement of this spiritual tradition. Healing is mentioned three times in the document:

Our practice arises from a deep, spiritual commitment to the earth, to healing and to the linking of magic with political action. ...

Our community rituals are participatory and ecstatic, celebrating the cycles of the seasons and our lives, and raising energy for personal, collective and earth healing. ...

We work to create and sustain communities and cultures that embody our values, that can help to heal the wounds of the earth and her peoples, and that can sustain us and nurture future generations. (Reclaiming 1997)

These three points are interrelated, and indeed, they are often seen by practitioners as inextricably linked, in the sense that healing the self may be seen as the first step toward healing others, that healing a community is part of the work of earth-healing, and that working to heal the earth in turn may heal the self and communities. For many practitioners, emphasis is put on self-healing as a means of healing the earth (i.e. through healing one's personal traumas, one is having a positive effect on the world). However, others take the position that personal changes do very little to help the state of the planet, and that one should not neglect outward-focused, earth-centred activism in favour of inward-focused self-help work, which is, as one informant put it, "A convenient way to give an ethical dimension to a path of personal well-being" (personal communication, July 2010). I will further explore this conflict in a later section, but first I will describe in greater detail what these three levels of healing mean and how they are approached and practiced in Reclaiming communities.

Healing the self

One of the major motivations behind the founding of Reclaiming was to help people reclaim their personal power as healers and creators of their own reality (Salomonsen 2002a). It is thus not surprising that great importance is placed on personal empowerment, something evident in many aspects of the tradition. Rituals often have a self-healing focus; this could be specific and directed at a particular kind of healing,

decisions, or to plan something for the future. "Visioning" refers to the visions people share and create together regarding a decision or future event.

such as raising energy to support a community member dealing with cancer, or sexual assault survivors working through their healing processes together, or it could be more general and self-directed, such as a guided meditation in which participants are asked to find a place in them that needs to be healed, and to bring healing energy into that place. Going beyond such notions of physical and mental trauma, many Reclaiming practitioners (as well as other contemporary Pagans) believe that a fundamental trauma has occurred as a result of the separation of humans from the natural world. Rituals may therefore also be geared toward healing through reconnection to the earth, to natural cycles, and to a sense of wildness.

Through workshops, classes and books, practitioners learn to work with spiritual “tools” that are designed to bring about healing. One such tool is the Iron Pentacle, which was developed in the Anderson Feri tradition and brought into Reclaiming, where it is very popular. The Iron Pentacle uses the image of a pentacle, a five-pointed star, as a metaphor for the body; the four lower points represent an outstretched limb, with the top point on the head. Each point/limb embodies a different aspect: sex=head, pride=right foot, self=left hand, power=right hand and passion=left foot.⁵ The Iron Pentacle workshop I attended in Massachusetts in 2008 began with exploring each of these one at a time, focusing, for example, on how it felt to invoke the concept of sex into our heads, or power into our right hands. Gradually the tempo accelerated, moving fluidly from one point to the next, but keeping this same order so that a pentacle was drawn over our bodies by the lines connecting each point. The facilitator had everyone enumerate out loud the different points as we got to them: “Sex to pride... pride to self... self to power... power to passion... passion to sex... sex to pride...” and so on, so that the energetic pentacle was drawn again and again, moving faster each time. This is known as “running” the pentacle.

These five terms are meant to represent concepts that Westerners struggle with, aspects of our lives that are out of balance, distorted by the social norms that we are faced with every day. Focusing on the way that one feels when embodying these concepts is meant to help individuals identify where their greatest challenges lie. Moving from

5. Each of these terms is potentially ambiguous, and this is part of the point; participants are encouraged to find their own meanings, significations or attachments to the concepts.

one point to the next is meant to open channels of communication and energy flow between different parts of the body, healing the practitioner's relationship to these concepts and the way that they are approached in daily life. For many practitioners, the Iron Pentacle is a valuable healing tool that they incorporate into their daily life by "running" on a regular basis.

Working with the "Shadow Self" is another common self-healing tool used by many practitioners of Reclaiming.⁶ The Shadow Self refers to the part (or parts) of an individual that the person does not like or approve of, or is afraid of. It is often seen as having originated in childhood and being connected with one's parents or guardians. For example, a woman who grew up with a strict disciplinarian mother and who possesses a great deal of self-hatred may see herself becoming what she most loathed as a child. Working with this Shadow Self, her goal is to confront the memories of her mother, heal the places in her that were wounded, and be able to live her life without repeating the same negative patterns with her own children, or other people in her life. Proponents of this approach take the position that mental and emotional wounds have an origin that can be identified, and that they can be confronted, worked out and eventually healed, just as a physical injury can be diagnosed and treated appropriately. They also suggest that mental and emotional hurt is just as serious as a physical wound, just as worthy of healing. But perhaps most importantly, this approach posits that individuals possess the power to heal themselves from such hurt, and that through learning to master specific tools to facilitate healing, they become stronger and more capable of bringing about greater healing.

Healing each other, healing the community

Community is central to much of the work of Reclaiming Witchcraft. While certain individuals have a more solitary practice within the Reclaiming tradition, overall, Reclaiming is one of the more community-oriented branches of contemporary Paganism. Reclaiming communities (groups of geographically-linked practitioners) have sprung up in many different countries, with the majority found in the United States and

6. It bears noting that Starhawk, a trained psychotherapist, was very interested in and influenced by Jungian psychology, and many of the tools and techniques that she developed or brought into Reclaiming Witchcraft retain a Jungian flavour. Much of her relevant work can be found in Starhawk (1982, 1987).

Canada, but also throughout Europe and Australia. Witch Camps are annual intensive retreats at which participants learn a variety of tools such as those described above, experience co-creative rituals, share and teach others. They have grown in number over the past two decades and are currently held at nineteen different locations throughout North America and Europe (Witch Camp Council 2010). Witch Camps are often a focal point around which smaller communities gather. This is certainly the case with the Reclaiming community in Montreal, which has ties with Reclaiming communities throughout the northeast given the existence of a Witch Camp in New England in which several Montreal Reclaiming members, myself included, have taken part.

Many rituals at Witch Camp are oriented to fostering a sense of community among all participants, and more often than not, this comes with a healing message of some kind. One such ritual that I was part of, in 2007, featured an exercise called a “circle of allies,” through which participants come to experience the support of a compassionate community. In this case, the theme of the ritual was sexuality, and thus the experiences shared came from within a framework of sexuality and gender issues. Participants stood in a circle, and one at a time moved into the centre, stating something that they had experienced or that they identified with, such as “I am gay,” at which point any others who also identified as gay would move into the centre of the circle, and they would all take one another’s hands. The woman who was facilitating the exercise would then say, “See who your allies are” as they acknowledged each other as sharing in the experience of being gay. She would then say, “Now see who supports you in this experience,” at which point they would turn to face the outer circle.

It is left open to whoever feels moved to enter the middle, and though the very beginning is, as usual, slow due to the fact that no one wants to be first, it gets off to a good start. A whole variety of aspects are called upon, and everyone present is drawn to the centre at some point or another, some several times. The mood changes from joyous to contemplative to grief-stricken and back again several times, as different experiences and identifications are called upon. Sometimes the centre circle is large, such as when one woman enters, saying “I am bisexual,” drawing over half of the outer circle to the centre, or when another says “I was sexually abused as a child by someone who said they loved me,” which calls in almost half of the participants. Other times the inner circle is small, such as when the transsexual woman of

the group enters, saying “I live in a gender different from the one I was born into.” (Field Notes, August 27, 2007)

This ritual was longer than most I have observed, with the circle of allies exercise itself taking more than an hour. This is perhaps due to the fact that there are few venues for talking openly about experiences around sexuality and gender without fear of negative judgments from others. Though rituals like this one may seem to be geared to healing individual trauma, they go beyond personal healing when they are carried out in a group context where the participants come from a variety of backgrounds with different identities and experiences. This is what is meant by “healing the community”: learning how to listen compassionately and support others in their diverse experiences is seen as a step toward learning how to create and maintain community, which is in turn a step toward healing from cultural norms focused on individualism and competition.

Healing the Earth

Most practitioners of Reclaiming witchcraft, and indeed most practitioners of earth-based spiritualities, hold the belief that many aspects of industrial capitalist society are damaging the earth, that it has been and is being deeply wounded, and that it is in need of healing. Though opinions diverge as to the most effective tactics following this common starting point, individuals come together around a spectrum of magical practices and rituals aimed at healing the earth.

As an example, some practitioners collect water from different sources throughout the world and bring it in vials to rituals or events that have an earth-healing focus (this practice is known as “Waters of the World”). These vials may be placed on an altar set up in the western area (traditionally associated with the element of water) of the ritual space. Waters of the World represent a connection to the oceans, lakes and rivers, the water table and rainfall, and to the water that is in all living things, including the human body. To some this evokes a sympathetic connection, rousing compassion and protective sentiments toward the waters represented in the vials: some pristine, some polluted; some full of microbial life, some sterile. To others the connection feels direct and tangible, allowing magical change upon, or communication with, all waters through this representation, or archetype, of water. In any case, the parallel between the human body, with its capillaries

leading to veins, leading to arteries, and the waters of the earth, with tributaries leading to streams, leading to rivers, is paramount.

Meditations focused on bringing healing energy to the earth, in general, or more commonly in specific areas (geographical or elemental), are used in many contexts. Such meditations are often done by many individuals and small groups separated by geography, with the meditations organized so as to coincide temporally with each other. In these cases, participants “connect psychically,” “in the ether,” or “astral plane,” to quote phrases practitioners often use to identify and describe long-distance collective magical work.⁷

A recent example of these meditations started a few days after the beginning of the BP oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico in late April 2010. An email appeared on a Reclaiming email list encouraging healing magic for the waterways and life affected by the spill. In response, one person wrote, “I welcome a chance to do something positive and I know the power of magic. I would love to take part in shifting the course of destruction we are on,” while another asserted, “May we never doubt the power of magic to help our beloved planet and ourselves.” Some suggested vivid imagery to work with in meditation: “Let us coat the wings and feathers and scales and legs and bodies and hearts and leaves of all living things near the spill... with a light of protection that they will repel the danger effortlessly.” The following day, after many had met “in the ether” the night before, brought a chorus of shared experiences from various points in the Eastern US, with many reporting that they had seen visions of light moving in spiral formation, drawing the oil back down to the sea floor. Several expressed feeling lighter and more hopeful; many pledged to continue to keep vigil and raise healing energy for the Gulf and all the ecosystems affected by the spill.

Let us now turn to the issue of the varying importance that individuals and groups place on the different types of healing, and the conflicts that may arise in this regard. Such conflicts primarily take form in the context of personal healing versus earth healing, and usually involve, as one person put it, “liberals versus radicals” (personal communication, February 2009). Another way to voice this conflict might be between those for whom personal healing is either the goal or the means to earth healing, and those who see the earth as needing direct healing, and

7. These terms refer to a sort of other-worldly place to which a practitioner's mind or spirit may travel and meet with others' spirits, not confined by physical laws.

who believe that it is through healing the earth first that our selves and our communities will also be able to heal.

The Healing Ritual

While it could be argued that all Reclaiming rituals incorporate healing methods or intentions (particularly as healing is such an important concept in the Reclaiming movement), one particular ritual that takes place at many Witch Camps every year has a direct healing focus not present in other rituals. As of the time of this writing, I have attended one camp at which the healing ritual has been a regular occurrence five times, from 2006 to 2010. I have therefore experienced this ritual in five different incarnations, for it varies depending on which organizers, facilitators and participants are involved in planning it each year. This is typically the longest of the rituals at Witch Camp, with reports of it having lasted up to four hours in certain years.⁸

In this ritual, the four cardinal directions are utilized to a greater extent than in most other Reclaiming rituals. Four stations are set up, each with its own healing focus: tools for sound and vibrational healing are provided in the east, associated with the element of air; the south station, with the element of fire, focuses on interpersonal and sexual healing; participants go to the west of the ritual space for the healing powers of water (there is usually a Waters of the World station set up here); and they go north for quiet meditation, as well as for body-care in the form of snacks. Mattresses are laid out in the centre of the circle, and healers await anyone who needs healing, be it through massage, *reiki* (a healing method from Eastern traditions that is now very popular in the West) or other forms of hands-on and energy-based healing. Those in need also may go to the centre in search of someone who can listen to them or hold them as they release tears, which many find to be very healing. In between the centre and the outer elemental stations, the other participants walk slowly in a clock-wise circle, holding hands, and singing a chant that was written for this purpose by Reclaiming Witch Donald Engstrom-Reese (and that inspired the title of this article):

8. Most likely as a result of the conflicts I describe here, the Healing Ritual saw a major overhaul two years ago, and is now carried out somewhat differently. This particular formula was last used in 2008.

Every step I take is a healing step
Every step I take is a sacred step
Healing, healing, healing my body
Healing, healing, healing the land

The purpose of this ritual is to create a container around those receiving and giving healing in the centre, and to keep energy moving and building in the space. People can move into and out of the circle as they please, and most do not spend the entire ritual in this way, especially when it lasts for two hours or more. Participants are generally encouraged to spend some time walking and chanting in the circle, some time at any of the elemental stations, and, if they are healers or in need of healing, some time in the centre.

For many Witch Camp attendees, this ritual is a very important part of their camp experience. Some have a great need for healing, whether they are dealing with cancer or HIV/AIDS, the death of someone close to them, sexual assault, a recent car accident, a painful breakup, or any other physical, emotional or mental trauma; others are healers with something to offer those in need. However, for many, the importance of this ritual is as a forum for earth healing, rather than personal healing. The incorporation of Waters of the World creates a physical site where participants can meditate over a collection of waters from around the globe, release deep sadness at the daily pollution of waterways, and send energetic healing and protection to certain bodies of water. Some years have seen the incorporation of a globe or another representation of the earth, which created a similar site for expression and release of grief concerning the state of the environment, and for sending healing energy to the earth. One participant described it thusly:

What goes on for me in the Healing Ritual isn't so much that I feel that I'm healing the world, but rather that I have this place where I can let out this sadness about the way the world is...which maybe is the first step to healing, in the sense that the first step to doing something about it is to recognize that pain. (Personal communication, July 2010)

Conflict arises when organizers have omitted these earth-healing aspects and have chosen to focus primarily on personal healing, which happened at two of the five healing rituals that I attended. This same participant expressed frustration at rituals focused on personal healing:

I have found that it is difficult to connect to these rituals when there is no mention made explicitly about this healing going to something global... I feel frustrated too because I don't feel like my life has a lot to be healed of compared to most people in most places in the world. (Personal Communication, June 2010)

The decision concerning whether or not to include explicit earth healing aspects in the healing ritual depends on several variables. The healing ritual is organized by different participants every year; moreover, there is ongoing debate regarding radical activism and its place in Reclaiming Witchcraft. Within the first few days of Witch Camp in 2006, the first year I attended, I had already heard from both sides: on one hand, those who complain about the activist focus in Reclaiming, which they see as a distraction from their personal magical work, or as doomsday-driven and overly negative; on the other, those who feel that the Reclaiming movement has been straying too far from its radical anarchist roots, that participants are becoming too "liberal" (i.e., not intent on challenging the social and political system), or too "New Age," to use a term that has come to be an insult in many Pagan circles, due in part to its association with the self-help movement.

Another facet of this conflict centres on the projection of personal healing onto earth healing, the notion that an individual can bring about global change by making personal changes. "Individual lifestyle changes [i.e. driving a car less, not buying bottled water, etc.] have an insignificant impact," a regular attendee of Witch Camp told me (Personal Communication, July 2010). While such changes may cause individuals to feel better about their own lives, he continued, that's all they can achieve unless *everyone else* is acting in the same way: "Some people think that it'll add up, but it won't. The number of people doing these things right now is insignificant, and it will always be marginal."

This conflict was represented in another ritual at the same Witch Camp in 2009. A young woman stepped out into the centre of the great circle of a hundred or so participants and began to converse about the impact that our rituals have on the "real world" with a man who was slowly beating a drum. Spoken in a slow, meditative, yet animated voice, such performative "sacred conversations," as they are called, often figure in Reclaiming rituals. In this case, the woman expressed her frustration at the "feel good" aspects of so many rituals, i.e. how participants sing and dance and raise energy toward the healing of communities and of the planet, and then go away feeling happy and

satisfied that they did something right. But what has really been accomplished? She ended the dialogue by posing the questions, “What can we do?” and “What are we going to do?” Slowly at first, people around the circle began to answer, calling out their promises, some mentioning sociopolitical or environmental work they were already doing, some stating challenges they wished to overcome. However, at one point the climate of answers began to shift to much smaller-scale personal declarations: “I will drive my car less,” “I will spend more time in my garden,” and “I’ll be more honest.” After the ritual, a small group of people, including the woman who had initiated the conversation, expressed dismay at this turn of events, frustrated by how the ritual ended up with the very same “feel good” reactions that she had hoped to move beyond.

While these conflicts are very present at Witch Camps and in other Reclaiming contexts, equally present is the fact that not everyone fits neatly into one side or another, that these are multi-faceted issues that have apparently existed for a while and probably will not be resolved any time soon. Still, for many participants, part of the draw toward Reclaiming Witchcraft is that it can encompass a wide range of beliefs, positions and experiences and still remain a cohesive movement.

Conclusion

In her article about healing practices in contemporary Paganism, psychologist and practitioner Vivianne Crowley points out the necessity of the same three levels of healing that I have presented here for the growth of Paganism itself. If participants’ own personal healing is their primary interest, or if healing others and the earth are seen merely as “by-products of and metaphors for a need for self-healing” (2000: 162), then, she says, it is to be expected that participants would identify with Paganism only for as long as it takes them to achieve their own healing goals; in other words, it would be treated as any other therapeutic process. Instead, she argues, healing in such contexts goes beyond the achievement of “normality,” reaching “self-actualization... a realization of individuals’ full potential” (2000: 163). This analysis brings up a very interesting point that I have not found elsewhere, and could help to explain why some practitioners move through contemporary Paganism as an explorer might move through one new geographical area on the way to another, always searching for something new, while others find a

permanent home in this spirituality, never fully exhausting all that it has to offer them. These patterns characterize not only contemporary Paganism, but also many other religio-spiritual movements around the world.

Still, for many contemporary Pagans and Witches, community- and earth-healing are not mere metaphors, nor are they simply by-products of individual healing and self-actualization. A sense of shared purpose is evoked through the implementation of collective healing practices; the very act of ritual can, by itself, promote healing in a culture of interpersonal and interspecies disconnection. Focusing on healing more than just the self facilitates a re-connection to others and to the natural world, and can also evoke the feelings of belonging that are central to religious adherence and expression.

Air moves us, fire transforms us
 Water shapes us, earth heals us
 And the balance of the wheel goes round and round,
 And the balance of the wheel goes round.⁹

When individuals come together to join hands and chant phrases such as these, calling upon the healing powers of the elements, they cease to act as individuals and begin to move as a community of healers. Whether their sense of belonging and shared purpose is ephemeral or enduring depends on the practitioner, their own efforts and their ritual interactions with others. Presuming that Crowley is correct as regards the importance of community and earth healing for the long-term growth of Paganism, the growing number of individuals involved in contemporary Pagan communities¹⁰ would indicate that participants are indeed going beyond personal healing, that they are developing spiritual connection with each other, and striving to develop a foundation for healing the earth.

What will the future bring for the Reclaiming witchcraft tradition? Whether participants continue to divide themselves between those for whom personal healing is the goal or a means toward earth healing, and

9. A commonly-heard song at Reclaiming gatherings, credited to song-writers Cathleen Shell, Cybele, Moonsea and Prune. Date unknown.

10 Several studies, conducted from within as well as outside the movement, consider contemporary Paganism to be the fastest-growing religion in Canada and the United States. See, for example, Kelly (1992), Kosmic et al (2001), Clifton (2004), Reid (2006).

those for whom direct earth healing is the path toward healing all, or whether they continue to find new, creative ways of incorporating divergent perspectives into a cohesive movement remains to be seen. In this living, co-created religio-spiritual system, dynamics shift significantly among geographically-oriented communities and over time. New challenges arise, and new solutions are found, as long as participants remain committed to working together and discovering what community can mean.

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