

Wise Circe's Cult of Nature

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Volume 20, Number 1-2, 1998

Wicca

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1087735ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1087735ar>

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Publisher(s)

Association Canadienne d'Ethnologie et de Folklore

ISSN

1481-5974 (print)

1708-0401 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Orion, L. (1998). Wise Circe's Cult of Nature. *Ethnologies*, 20(1-2), 107–127.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1087735ar>

Article abstract

During the Renaissance, the philosopher, Giordano Bruno promoted “a religion of love” and a “cult of nature” to replace the authoritarian Christian religions. The Inquisition had him burned at the stake for his heresy. Lori Bruno, who believes the martyred Bruno is her ancestor, is a priestess of stregheria, an Italian family tradition of nature worship and witchcraft. Relatives who taught her this religion also conveyed the belief that their ancestor Bruno was a witch. Lori had transformed this historical figure into a culture-hero by enhancing family lore with historical research and personal visions of Bruno. In this paper we learn how family lore becomes coven lore and how historical figures inspire religious practice when they acquire sacred status.

WISE CIRCE'S CULT OF NATURE

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The mythical sorceress, Circe, is infamous for turning men into swine. The Renaissance philosopher Giordano Bruno approved of Circe's magic because wicked men who behave like swine are unworthy of the power and dignity of human form. They would be less of a liability to society in the more limited form of the beast that corresponds to their essential natures (Yates 1964: 202). Given the influence of such contemptible and ignorant men upon the social order, Bruno believed it required drastic reform. Writing allegorically, Bruno declared that nothing less than the potent magic of "some wise Circe," was required to restore virtue. He was hoping for a more peaceful alternative to the contending religious reformations. In one of Bruno's many literary allegories featuring Circe, she invokes the inscrutable powers of the soul of the universe to communicate to earth, via the vehicle of the sun, in order to empower her magic. She performs other magical operations with arrangements of plants, stones, and so forth; as well she holds out "writings of the sacred gods" on a plate, and draws characters in the air. Her assistant, Moeris, consults a parchment on which the potent mysteries that are hidden from mortals are written. Circe invokes the moon and commands the rulers of all the planets to help her restore virtue (Yates 1964: 199-200). The causes of the disorder are the warring Christian sects that have made a mess of things by "breaking the laws of love" and setting men against each other (Yates 1964: 315).

In Bruno's Circe, we find early precedent for the present-day Wiccan witches' religious beliefs, ritual practices and tools, and for their view of themselves as midwives to a new age of restoration after what they see as disastrous centuries of Christian culture (Orion 1995: 89-101). Like the Renaissance philosopher, they believe social reform begins by refining and

transforming human nature, with the power of the mind and magic. However, few Neo-Pagans are aware of Bruno's writings. One exception is Lori Bruno.

A postcard picture of Bruno is displayed prominently on Lori Bruno's refrigerator. The image on the postcard portrays a statue of Giordano Bruno that was erected in 1889 on the *Piazza Campo de' Fiori* in Rome, the very place where Bruno was burned at the stake for heresy in 1600. Although Bruno was excommunicated from the Dominican Order, the face of his statue is shaded by the shade of a friar's hood. The postcard is enshrined on Lori's refrigerator among photographs of her friends and relatives because she believes Bruno is family. She also believes this eminent historical figure was — as Lori is presently — a practitioner of *stregheria*, an Italian tradition of witchcraft that is part of the religion called *La Vecchia Religione* (The Old [pagan] Religion). *La Vecchia Religione* is one of the many idiosyncratic versions of pagan spirituality within the composite Neo-Pagan "Old [pagan] Religion."

On August 3, 1997, I met Lori Bruno, when I was invited to join other guests to celebrate Cornucopia, a ritual of thanksgiving for the first fruits of the harvest. The high priestess, Lori Bruno, and her coven members were our hosts. Giordano Bruno's allegorical "wise Circe" seemed to come to life in the flesh of the priestess who believes his blood runs in her veins. Forty-four celebrants gathered in a large circle in Lori's yard. Lori opened her arms to the sky. In one hand she held a copper plate inscribed with "writings of the sacred gods", such as Bruno put into his Circe's hand. Like Bruno's Circe, she made magical gestures in the air and called out to pagan gods to help her bring the world into better harmony with nature. On this particular day, that involved three specific requests: a blessing on loaves of bread that symbolized nature's bounty, peace within the larger Neo-Pagan community, and rain to quench the fires that were burning the forests nearby. The sky suddenly curdled into a grey rumble that obscured the sun. One long cord of lightning streaked down the sky. Lori laughed at this celestial "response" to her invocation. The sun glided back into view. Lori and her priest proceeded with the ritual. Then she made a circuit around the circle to convey personalized blessings to each of the celebrants. She returned to the altar to bless the loaves of bread arranged there. As we approached to receive them, gentle rain sprinkled us. After the last loaf was distributed — as if on cue — a downpour brought the ritual to an end.

The weekend of the Cornucopia, Lori and I talked about the important place of Giordano Bruno in her family's tradition of witchcraft. All quoted passages, unless otherwise indicated, are Lori's words. The unique feature of

Lori's family tradition that we will explore here is Lori's transformation of a historical figure into an effective symbol as a personal ancestor, culture-hero and object of religious veneration. This is an example of a kind of magic which shares the methods and purposes of artistic creation. I hope to clarify how the creation of symbols proceeded and how they achieve the power to change feelings, beliefs and behaviors. Bruno's valorization is an example of the way Neo-Pagans create, modify, and transmit tradition.

When Lori and other Neo-Pagans speak of witchcraft, they mean pagan religion. The "craft" of witchcraft is creativity or magic. Whereas ethnographers characterize witchcraft as an *inherent* ability to cause *harm* by supernatural means, Neo-Pagans claim that their magic is uniformly benevolent. More often their magic involves sorcery, a magical technology that involves rites and spells. Although enhanced inherent capacities such as intuition or "second sight" are cultivated, they are not essential. This unusual juxtaposition of religion, magic and creativity is crucial to our understanding of how Neo-Pagans, including Lori, approach the sacred and attempt to effect change by magic. Following the sociologist Émile Durkheim, it is useful to suppose a bipartite division of the whole universe into two classes which radically exclude each other: the sacred and the mundane. There are mutually exclusive ways of thinking, feeling and acting which are appropriate for each. Mundane or ordinary experience is approached in ordinary consciousness, which is a society's shared correct way of thinking. The sacred, or supernatural, covers a full range of phenomena including the numinous and mysterious that surpass the limits of our knowledge and ordinary rational comprehension. Encounters with the sacred, which wide-awake reason censors, require a surrender to non-ordinary consciousness within which feelings are more important than thought. Meaning is imparted through symbols rather than discursive logic. Religion consists of beliefs and behaviors that address this full range of sacred phenomena (Durkheim 1979: 29).

Departing from Durkheim, I include magic as a type of religious behavior within religion. Magic uses symbols to engage sacred forces and entities for the purpose of bringing about change. My definition of magic includes any such effort, including witchcraft, prayer and sorcery. It is useful to consider value judgements about the malevolent or benevolent aims of magic as a separate — though, of course, important — issue.

Neo-Pagans merge the sacred with the mundane in their belief that all species of things in the natural world — including humans — are infused with a divine life force and are therefore sacred. According to this way of

thinking, sacredness is an inherent quality in all mundane things. Therefore, the separation of the profane from the sacred for Neo-Pagans amounts to a separation of ways of thinking, feeling and behaving toward things. A more important distinction for our purposes, then, is to divide not phenomena, but two distinctive modes of engaging them.

In order to perceive the sacred in the ordinary, Neo-Pagans cultivate shifts into non-ordinary consciousness in which imagination and emotion are allowed greater freedom and inventiveness. As in other religions, the aim is to allow the feelings and attitudes learned in experiences of the sacred to influence ordinary consciousness. One important way of preserving the influence of the feelings, moods and motivations derived from sacred experiences is to give them symbolic form. This brings religion, magic and the creative process together as types of experiences that are comprehended emotionally rather than rationally and are expressed symbolically rather than discursively.

During my ethnographic research among Neo-Pagans (1983-1995), I discovered in the responses of 189 informants who answered in my questionnaire that 93 percent of them practice some form of magic. In free-form definitions of magic, informants said magic involves the directing, focusing and channeling of energy or light and/or "changing consciousness" with such faculties as one's own power or will, imagination, psychic powers or skills, and creativity (Orion 1995: 106, 113). Except for psychic skills, all of these elements of magic apply equally to the creative process.

The creative process begins with a rational search for a solution to an aesthetic problem: how to give form to feelings. Generally in a non-ordinary state of consciousness one receives an inspiration or profound insight very much like those of mystics. The alteration of consciousness can be as subtle as a daydream or as bizarre as a dream. It feels like a burst of *energy* and a profound *change of consciousness*. The creative person *imagines* how the feeling of the inspiration might be realized in form. Then one focuses *will*, technical *skill* and conceptual power (imagination) and exerts *energy* to produce a non-discursive symbol. Artists are often content to achieve the symbol in such forms as paintings, or musical scores. Magicians use the final product, a symbol of a specific feeling, to reproduce the experience of the feeling symbolized in the self or others he or she wishes to influence with magic. If the achievement of the creative process is an effective symbol, something that is more than the sum of its parts emerges and one feels the exhilaration of a direct aesthetic experience. Such feelings can change conscious attitudes, which will in turn

modify behavior. This is the way Lori experiences the essence of Bruno and captures the emotional impact of those experiences in symbols.

Before I introduce Lori's treatment of Bruno, I offer the following example of the way Lori is able to address the sacred qualities of mundane things. Caterpillars were eating her oak trees. A rational response to this mundane problem might have entailed consulting a tree specialist. However, Lori took a radically different approach. "I took that little caterpillar in my hand and said 'you will not eat my oak trees anymore' and I pet him. 'I am not going to hurt you. Other people would squash you; I won't. I'm going to tell you how to eat the weeds. Eat the weeds, then you become one with the weeds and make pretty little moths together.' I'm getting to know him so he won't eat the trees anymore. I put him in the weeds. The next year every one of them never came back here. It wasn't me that did it; it was something that comes through me to talk to the caterpillar."

The "something" was able to "come through her" because she was processing information with a non-ordinary mode of cognition in which emotion and imagination have greater than usual influence. It is easier to grasp patterns, such as the interconnectedness of all species, holistically. From this perspective, the sacredness of the oak tree, the caterpillar and the human are equal. According to this way of perceiving, it is possible for one sacred creature to communicate with the sacredness in another. Feelings play a stronger than usual role in motivating behavior. From this perspective it seems reasonable — if not rational — to attempt to modify a caterpillar's behavior by enchanting it rather than squashing it.

When Lori speaks of herself as a *strega* (a female witch), she means that she possesses the requisite knowledge and skills to bring about changes with magic. She attributes this ability to the following things. She was able to grasp the sacredness of the natural world and gain an understanding of the ways transformations occur in nature by contemplating and respecting it. She calls this "walking in the footsteps of nature." She uses this knowledge to intervene magically in the natural and social worlds. She is helped in these efforts by pagan gods who lend her their powers. They do so because she learned the correct way to communicate with them from the relatives who taught her *stregheria*.

From very early childhood Lori remembers subtle lessons about the ways of the *streghe* (witches). Her father taught her to respect and respond to nature. "In little things," Lori explained, "even when the leaves would turn a certain

way, you knew the storm is coming. You get so attuned it's like second nature. You hear; you know. And you wonder why other people can't see like you see." We have already seen the influence of this "second nature" in Lori's approach to the caterpillar. When she was about ten years old, her "initiation" was a simple "*benedizione*," (blessing). "My mother and father were both there. You can stand out there with your arms open with your family and the blessing is there." She learned that the proper way to approach the deities is with "heart":

I raise my hands to the heavens. No, I don't get on my knees to them. They don't want me on my knees or groveling in the dust. They didn't make me in their form to grovel in the dust. I'd be making them grovel in the dust. I say, "Hey, I'm here, I'm your child. I raise my hands unto you. Please, if I'm worth your time and effort, since you made me, please..." It's very simple. You don't have to yell out "Great Uga Booga!" It's from the heart. The gods see the heart of all mankind. You want to put a show on for other human beings, feel free to do it. Put feathers all up on top of your head, jump up and down. But by the gods, they see you; you're naked, kid, in their eyes. You cannot fool them. You were in circle yesterday. You saw Lori Bruno give a blessing on every one of you from my heart and soul. It has to be from the heart. That's how the streghe do it. You have to mean it.

Most people come to Wicca, or one of the many varieties of pagan religion within Neo-Paganism as seekers; a few of them come to it as teachers after growing up within a vital heritage as Lori did. Because of this early childhood training it was "second-nature" for Lori to perceive the sacredness of a caterpillar. Ordinary states of consciousness are a combination of emotion, perception and cognition that are conditioned in early life (Izard 1977: 155). For first generation Neo-Pagans, a profound, respectful attitude toward nature represents a modification of ingrained cultural paradigms that deny the sacredness of nature. This new perspective is, therefore, more easily grasped in altered states of consciousness as part of religious experiences. Eventually it influences ordinary, mundane consciousness. Neo-Pagan children are now being raised, as Lori was, to incorporate this attitude into their ordinary way of understanding themselves and the world and of providing meaning to their existence.

The strongest strain of Lori's family witch lore is Sicilian. Lori's family believes their tradition of stregheria originated with the indigenous inhabitants of Sicily, the *Sikels*, [*Sikuli*] who "possess the power to fight the dark." For that reason Lori named her coven "Our Lord and Lady of the Trinacrian Rose." "Trinacria" is an ancient name for Sicily, signifying the three capes on the triangular island. According to legend, the mythic events celebrated in the

Rites of Eleusis occurred at the center of that island. Persephone descended to the underworld at Enna, where there are caves near Lake Pergusa. Hecate set fire to Mount Etna (at Catania) with her torch to light Demeter's way to Hades to retrieve her daughter, Persephone. Lori believes her ancestors, including Bruno and his relatives, were initiated into the mysteries. Lori, who is an initiate, incorporates the rites into her coven practices.

Lori allows that her family lore contains potentially dangerous materials. The magic can be used for beneficial or harmful ends. Lori expresses this conundrum in terms of light and dark. She claims that her family has always been committed exclusively to the righteousness magic of "the light." Ultimately, the gods keep the streghe on the path of "light." Lori explained that "The gods do see you and they will twist you and finally you'll lose your hair. You'll look like somebody has run you over. The gods'll run you over. And they have big feet."

Family lore about Giordano Bruno is woven together with Lori's stregheria. Lori's relatives told her that she is related to Bruno through descendants of his father, Giovanni Bruno. Like his relatives, Bruno was an adept *stregone* (a male witch). He loved weather magic, was able to call lightning to him at will and could travel in time and space with his mind.

Lori enhanced this family lore with research. Let us begin with the historians' version of Bruno's life and thought. For the following summary I relied on Dorothea Singer's biography, *Giordano Bruno: His Life and Thought* (1968); Antoinette Mann Paterson, *The Infinite Worlds of Giordano Bruno*, (1970); and two works by Frances A. Yates: *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition*, (1964), and *The Art of Memory*, (1966). Lori is acquainted with all of these works except Singer's biography of Bruno.

Giordano Bruno was born in 1548 near Naples, a year after the Spanish Inquisition was instituted there. At the age of fourteen he studied literature and philosophy in Naples (Singer 1968). At an early age Bruno became acquainted with Copernicus' theory that the earth moves around the sun. He grasped the religious implications in what must have been a sublime and disorienting epiphany. It was no longer possible for him to imagine that humans occupied the privileged center of a world created by an external God just for them. Such a world could have no privileged center or boundary; there could be neither a God nor any other thing outside it, Bruno reasoned; divinity must be immanent in the varied substances of the natural world (Paterson 1970).

Bruno discovered an alternative cosmology and conception of divinity in the “ancient Egyptian Religion” described in Hermetic literature. Hermetic treatises were originally attributed to the Greco-Egyptian patron god of magic, Hermes Trismegistus. The manuscripts were acquired by Cosimo de’ Medici in 1460. Other Renaissance scholars interpreted them as prophecies of the incarnation of Christ (Yates 1964: 12-13). In 1614 Isaac Casaubon shattered that myth by showing that the Hermetic documents were composed *after* Christ’s death (Yates 1964: 170).

Bruno died fourteen years before Casaubon’s discovery, which probably would not have changed his conviction that the Egyptian religion was the only true religion, a faith which both Judaism and Christianity had obscured and corrupted (Yates 1964: 11). He learned that the Hermetic authors regarded the universe as alive, divine and interconnected. All of creation has its source in the divine universe and partakes of its divinity. All humans have within them the power to communicate with divinity via the common cosmic substance with the mind (Yates 1964).

After three years of study in Naples, Bruno entered the Dominican monastery of San Domenico in Naples, despite his radical religious beliefs. It was not long before the combination of his unorthodox beliefs and his rebellious nature attracted accusations of insubordination from the authorities of the monastery and charges of heresy from the Neapolitan Inquisition. At the age of twenty-eight, Bruno learned that a formidable indictment was being prepared against him in Naples. He shed his friar’s habit and began a nomadic exile that lasted sixteen years. Bruno traveled to France, Germany, England and other countries where he was welcomed — as least initially — by learned academies, and potentates. During these travels Bruno composed his considerable opus, taught, and promoted his version of social reform as an alternative to those of the Catholic and Protestant reformers (Singer 1968).

Bruno proposed a “religion of love” designed to replace the “man versus man” ethics that he saw in the warring religious sects of his time. People should be converted to religion by good works motivated by love, rather than brought into the fold by force (Yates 1964: 231). In Bruno’s “cult of nature,” he claimed, “... we raise our heads toward the lovely splendour of light, listening to nature who is crying aloud to be heard and following wisdom in simplicity of spirit and with an honest affection of the heart” (Yates 1964: 315).

Because many people would cling to the comforts of the closed universe with its good father watching over them, they would need to undergo a weaning process. Bruno believed that ethical leaders — the religious authorities,

potentates and scholars whom he tried to convert — were obliged to teach this new truth and rewrite the ethical systems and dogma to accommodate it (Yates 1964).

First they must become qualified to bring about these changes by developing the personality of the *magus* (magician), as Bruno had done. By refining and enlarging the imagination and will, one might reflect the whole universe of nature in the mind and partake of its powers to bring about changes with magic by activating the natural bonds of attraction and antipathy existing among species of things (Yates 1964).

For this purpose, Bruno devised the art of memory as a means of literally incorporating the powers inherent in the divine world into the self (Yates 1966). Bruno was inspired by Hermetic literature, in which he learned that the Egyptian priests performed ceremonies to attract the souls of their deities to animate the statues of the gods. According to these documents, the statues would move and speak. Bruno did not propose to attract divine celestial forces into statuary or other external material objects; instead he believed it was possible to internalize “mental” talismans of these celestial forces in one’s memory (Yates 1964).

Magicians before Bruno thought of a talisman as a material object, such as the Egyptian statues of the gods, through which the spirit of stars, planets, gods or other forces of nature could be introduced and in which they could be stored. It was thought possible to attract these influences by manipulating bonds of natural attraction or “sympathy.” The plate Circe holds in Bruno’s allegory mentioned above is her talisman. The “writings of the gods” on the plate attract the soul of the universe to earth through the vehicle of the sun (Yates 1964).

Bruno devised a system for internalizing “mental” talismans by resorting to a mnemonic technique used by orators for memorizing speeches (Carruthers 1990: 71-72). Ancient orators would arrange the parts of their speech in an orderly fashion within an imagined architectural space. The speaker would mentally move through the imaginary architecture to “find” the parts of the speech. Bruno would have learned the Dominican version of this art used to memorize scripture and to convey vivid images of virtues, vices, Paradise and Hell to the memories of parishioners (Yates 1966: 83-85, 94).

In Bruno’s art of memory one would contemplate visual emblems of allegorical figures, representing celestial virtues and powers, and imprint them on the memory in orderly patterns. Bruno crystallized many of his literary

descriptions of mythological figures, including Circe, through such memory emblems. Internalized memory talismans would attract the forces that they represented into the magician in the same way talismans were formerly employed by magicians to attract desired forces into material objects. Circe, for instance, would attract the solar power to effect magical transformations. Bruno devised literally hundreds of these allegorical emblems and arranged them in such devices as concentric wheels to arrive at a kind of calculus for organizing the psyche according to the order he perceived in the universe (Yates 1964; 1966).

This combination of a “religion of love,” a “cult of nature,” and the art of memory comprised Bruno’s plan for an alternative religious reformation. Qualified by the sacredness of their own humanity, motivated by the religion of love, and empowered by magic, enlightened leaders and an educated populace would have a natural and rational desire to conform to the universal virtues of liberty, toleration, philanthropy and peace. They could reproduce on earth the unity and harmony of the universe (Yates 1964). Bruno naively hoped that the Catholic Church, in harmonious collaboration with a republic, like that of Rome, would be the organ of his desired reform. These ideas appealed to many of Bruno’s acquaintances, and appalled others. In the end it seems to have been his bombastic personality, more than his unorthodox views, that made of his life a restless, nomadic exile (Singer 1968; Yates 1964).

Bruno was ultimately turned over to the Venetian Inquisition by Zuan Mocenego who had originally invited Bruno to come to teach him his art of memory. Another witness at Bruno’s trial aroused the Inquisitors’ paranoia about Satanic conspiracies against the Church by testifying that Bruno had actually founded his cult of nature and called it the “Giordanisti” (Yates 1964: 312). There is some evidence that, at least in England, “learned gentlemen” gathered in private conferences to discuss Bruno’s ideas.¹ After eight years in the Inquisition’s prisons in Venice and Rome and numerous opportunities to recant, Giordano Bruno was burned at the stake for heresy with his mouth bound to silence him.²

1. Antoinette Mann Paterson reproduces a letter from a book publisher, John Toland, in which he discusses a “learned Club of Courtiers” who gathered in “private conferences” to discuss Bruno’s work. A certain number among them privately copied and circulated Bruno’s works among themselves in secret. *The Infinite Worlds of Giordano Bruno*, 1971: 166-171.
2. “His mouth was imprisoned on account of his wicked words.” Angelo Mercati (ed.), transcript in the Vatican MS. Urbane 1068 (*Sommario del processo Di Giordano Bruno*,

Although we find not a trace of evidence here that Bruno was a stregone, he was clearly an audacious magician. His life has much in common with the lives of victims of witch persecutions. The Neo-Pagans' culture-heroine, the witch-healer, was also burned at the stake, or hanged for her virtuous magic and for believing, as Bruno did, in the divinity of the natural world and the power of humans to intervene magically in the world. Bruno's statue in *Il Campo de' Fiore* is a testament to this view of Bruno as a martyr to free thought. Lori's vision of him includes the more obscure feature of his work: his magic.

It is obvious to Lori that he would have learned about magic and acquired his exceptional memory from his experiences with stregheria. The streghe had to memorize their secret knowledge. "If the priests discovered a book, they would get in trouble." She thinks of his complex system of magic as an elaboration of stregheria, which engages the powers of the natural world through mastery of the mind. In answer to the puzzling question about why a young man with a world view so antithetical to the Catholic church would enter a monastery, Lori offered the following explanation: having a family member in a religious order was one of the many ways the streghe preserved the image of religious conformity and acquired allies in the church. "That's the way the streghe do it: you hide it under their noses."

According to Lori, Bruno's critics misunderstood him because he was a typical stregone, a "respectable mischief-maker with heart." We have already learned what Lori means by "heart." She looks for the quality of "heart" he exemplifies in potential students. Those who are impulsive, "loose cannons," are immediately disqualified. Bruno's fatal flaw was that "he always spoke the truth and people didn't always like it." Although "when he spoke, he carried diamonds in his mouth," his unrestrained enthusiasm ultimately cost him his life at the hands of the same wicked men who misunderstood and executed witches. Bruno's life is an object lesson. The magicians' passion of "heart" is a dangerous "cannon" in the hands of those who lack the cunning of the streghe, who know how to hide their power under the noses of ignorant and wicked men such as those whom Bruno would have Circe turn to swine.

King Philip III [sic]³ of Spain, whom Lori believes played a crucial role in the ultimate decision to execute Bruno, hated him, she believes, because of

Docc. Rom. .XXXI and XXXII, in *Studii e testi*, No. 101 (Citta del Vaticano, 1940.)

3. King Philip III was alive when Bruno was condemned to death in 1600. His father, King Philip II, who died in 1598, would have initiated opposition to Bruno's campaign. Lori merges the two men in her description of the Spanish opposition to Bruno.

his efforts to enlist support from other countries to prevent Philip III [sic] and the Catholic League from taking over all of Europe. She thinks Philip was probably correct when he accused Bruno of helping John Dee and Edward Kelley to raise the storm that sank the Armada. I am not aware of any historical evidence which supports King Philip's accusation, Dee and Kelley's alleged weather magic, or other magical efforts to sink the Spanish Armada. However, according to reliable sources, John Dee was a magician. He performed alchemical operations and conjured angels with his assistant, Edward Kelley (Casaubon 1659). Lori is aware that according to records of Bruno's testimony before the Inquisition, he was in Prague or Germany when the Armada was defeated.⁴ However, distance is no impediment to weather magic, she explained, and "he would have wanted to help the English Queen Elizabeth whom he loved."

Lori believes Mocenigo betrayed Bruno because her ancestor refused to teach him to work harmful magic. She thinks it is likely that Bruno established the Giordanisti, and that the goals of that society were the same as her own: "to learn to walk in the footsteps of nature, respect and behave with compassion toward all life, and do good works to help people." Like Bruno's Giordanisti, Lori thinks of her coven as "a covenant of learning." She summarized her understanding of Giordano Bruno's perspective in this way: "If man and womankind could obtain the knowledge [of the infinite, divine universe], all could be in peace and build a better world from the knowledge that is within each and every one of us in the light of the Celestial. And if we could but understand, mankind would flourish." One way Lori's coven helps "people to flourish" is by producing a fund-raising ball each year. The profits are given to a hospice or to children who are infected with the AIDS virus. Lori was awarded a Paul Revere citation for "bettering the lives of the children of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts."

Lori believes that the decision to execute Bruno was the product of a deal struck between Pope Clement VIII and King Philip III (Philip II's son). The king agreed to execute some enemies of the pope in exchange for the execution of Bruno. Lori discovered this theory in Antoinette Mann Paterson's *The Infinite Worlds of Giordano Bruno* (1970: 196-199).⁵

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4. Venetian documents relating to Bruno's trial in Venice, in Domenico Berti, *Vita Di Giordano Bruno da Nola: Sua Vita e Sua Dottrina*. Nuova edizione riveduta e notabilmente accresciuta. Torino: Ditta G. B. Paravia, 1889. See SF 590. In Antoinette Mann Paterson, *The Infinite Worlds*, 1970.
 5. The theory is based on documents discovered by Ugucione Ranieri. He published

Lori explained that Bruno was literally silenced by a stake driven through his tongue before he was taken to the *Campo de' Fiori* to be burned. After he died, there was a thunder and lightning storm because Bruno, the weather magician, loved lightning and could call it to him at will.

Lori offered the following reflection on his martyrdom:

It took them eight years to gather the courage to execute him because he was an innocent man, and they [Pope Clement VIII, and Kings Philip II and III of Spain] knew they would have mud on their face. Where is their gain now? Who remembers them for anything good? No one! That's why Giordano Bruno could walk to that flame and say to his accusers, "You pronounce a sentence on me with greater fear than I do receive it." Anyone who goes to the Eleusinian mysteries⁶ [which Lori believes Bruno experienced], and understands it [sic.], has no fear. They were more afraid of death than Bruno because their ideas about death were formulated in the dark. Don't you see the paintings [of Christian hell] with the skulls, and the dark? Where's the flowers and love in the Summerland [the place where she and many Neo-Pagans believe the dead go after death]? He was not afraid to die because there is no death. It goes on. He's out there. I hear him inside me.

Because "he is still out there," Lori believes she can make contact with the essence of Bruno. She does so in subjective experiences like the following:

I always see him in England. I see a wall that has an opening in it. It looks like an old Roman wall; it's like stone, and it looks like it's in a poorer section in old London. The stones in the streets are like cobble stones. On the corner is a book shop. It has little black criss-crossed panes of windows in it. I always see him in there. He's sitting in there talking to the man that's in the shop, a book store. There's a light like they would have on the corner, a lamp post. The shop is painted like dark colored wood and had little square windows in it. And I just see him always from the opposite side of the street. He looks toward the window with a smile. And I go like this [waves her hand]. And then he turns around and looks at the man. But it's always been, "I know him." I've seen this in dreams since I was a child, sometimes even in the daytime when I sit down here [in the kitchen]. He looks very much like the portrait of him, but he's got a big smile, and his eyes twinkle.

his interpretations of the documents in 1965 in *La Bella in Mano al Boia, una storia inedita di Perugia nel Seicento*, Milano; Rizzoli. Paterson presents Ranieri's evidence in *The Infinite Worlds*, appendix C.

6. The Elusinian mysteries (see above, p. 113) reputedly removed the fear of death.

In those moments when Lori's ordinary consciousness is altered, in dreams and reveries, she is able to produce this vivid image of Bruno at his best. He is surrounded by books in the country where many of his own works were published and appreciated. The soothing effect of this image was audible in the softness and lingering cadence of Lori's speech. She described the sensations this way: "I feel his whole self enveloping me. I feel warm and comfortable, like being back in the mother's safety." She wants to go inside and talk to him. "I want to know what he knows." Lori's narration of the image evoked similar feelings in me. I, too, wanted to approach this larger-than-life genius whom Lori made accessible and inviting by animating his face with a smile. I felt pleasure and pride in Bruno's achievements rather than the usual sadness for the torments of his martyrdom. Across the abyss of time and space that makes Bruno opaque in ordinary consciousness we can "see" him. For me, he was as close as the other side of a street.

Where does this effective symbol come from? Lori thinks the street corner scene may be an actual location that Bruno frequented. She explained, "We [the streghe] travel in time and space. I travel there and see him."

Bruno, who was working within the Neo-Platonic tradition, believed magicians could move and internalize external forces. Another Renaissance philosopher/magician, Marsilio Ficino, explained the phenomena by resorting to the metaphor of a lute. "Just as one lute resounds by itself when the strings of another are plucked, the likeness between the heavenly bodies and the image on the amulet [talisman] may make the image absorb the rays from the stars to which it is thus attuned."⁷ Neo-Pagans base their magical actions on the same premise. One can make contact with external forces, move and change them. Neo-Pagans think of such material objects as statues of the gods, talismans, and so on, as vehicles or repositories of divine force. However, these objects are also symbols. If such an external sacred force or being were brought into the presence of the magician, how would he or she know it but by the quality of his or her feelings? Symbols orient the consciousness — specifically, the imagination — toward the feelings they symbolize. Whatever else such magical operations accomplish, they also involve a dynamic internal event mediated by the interaction of an effective symbol with the imagination to produce the *feeling* that one has made contact with the sacred. Lori's experience involved contacting the essence of a person who has been dead for hundreds of years.

7. Marsilio Ficino, *Opera Omnia* (Basle, 1576) in E. H. Gombrich, *Symbolic Images: Studies in the Art of the Renaissance*, Chicago; University of Chicago press, 1972: 173.

Lori's narration of the vision achieved the purpose Suzanne Langer attributes to artistic creation. That is, the artist brings together arrangements of colors, sounds, images and so forth to produce an effective symbol of sentience. If the symbol is effective, it communicates a comprehension of the sentience symbolized in the exhilaration of a direct aesthetic experience (1953). Lori has been gathering the elements of this vision over a lifetime. Once crystallized into a single image, this creative product assumed the nature of a magical product. It has the power to make a subjective impression of Bruno accessible in feelings when Lori orients her own or others' attention to it. This is an example of the Neo-Pagans' "craft" of witchcraft.

Like artists, creators of magical symbols attempt to capture the force of direct *experience* in a formula or symbol that will excite the same experience in themselves or others. They resort to the principles of aesthetics to convey an otherwise inaccessible truth through fabulous fictions. In Lori's case the arrangements of the elements of the symbol was not deliberate; it was more like the spontaneous inspirations of artists. In any case, she achieved the objective of making the inscrutable accessible to sense.

Neo-Pagans call this kind of magic "changing consciousness at will." It is possible to change consciousness by such mundane means as a gun or a persuasive, logical argument. However, when the change is produced by resort to the sacred, defined as that which surpasses ordinary (rational) understanding, it is magic. Bruno and the Neo-Pagans believe these natural and often involuntary functions of the imagination, and the creative skill of crafting and using effective symbols, can be refined and organized to gain some control over the feelings and motivations they orchestrate.

Lori experienced another spontaneous vision of Bruno in the year of her mother's death. It was Halloween, when witches welcome the returning dead.

I came home after doing a ritual and fell asleep on the sofa. I woke in the middle of the night. I could see him walking toward me. I said, "I gotta draw this." Out of the flames he walked holding the head. That was Halloween night, 1992, the year my mother died... the year my mother died. I kept seeing him in front of me like that. It was dark and he was walking through the flames. Out of the flames he walked holding the head. He is holding it [the skull] because there is no death. His heart is still out there. Life is constant. It never ends. We become a part of something else. A little bit of dust is us. Something that comes back from fifteen hundred years ago is in you. I feel him in my blood. I hear him sometimes.

What is it that “comes back” to make itself “heard” or “felt in the blood” if not feelings? The feeling of sad defiance this image produced was apparent to me in the somber tone of Lori’s voice when she described it to me. The vision seemed to “come to” Lori; she was not aware of deliberately fashioning it. Like the previous vision, it was a spontaneous synthesis of information, beliefs and feelings. One element of this composition may have been the ritual celebration of death and rebirth. The picture on the refrigerator may have been incorporated also, because Lori’s image of Bruno resembles the hooded friar of the statue in Rome in every respect except that he holds his own skull and strides through flames.

The vision appeared when Lori’s ordinary consciousness was suspended at the border of sleep and waking following a ritual in which she had deliberately altered her consciousness to engage the sacred. Like an artist’s inspiration, the vision was a spontaneous crystallization of a quest for an effective symbol that would make diffuse feelings comprehensible. This vision was the answer to her search for a reconciliation with death. The force of the insight compelled her to produce a drawing as an artifact of the experience.

On another occasion in the year when Lori was experiencing despair related to her mother’s death, she oriented herself to this inner image of Bruno by analogy. “It felt like it was 1592 when Bruno was in prison.” Then, she said, “He came to me.” The comforting feelings of the original experience returned. She was reminded of Bruno’s vision of a world in which things change but nothing dies. “His heart is still out there... I feel him in my blood. I hear him...” Again, she felt compelled to contain the force of the feeling as if in a talisman. This time she wrote a poem.

What are the aesthetic qualities that give a symbol the power to transform feeling? Bruno believed a magician required the skill of an artist to fashion symbols that engage the imagination and move the affects. Emblems for the art of memory should be striking, vivid and unusual; they should also be in motion. For that reason Bruno often placed the characters of his emblems in chariots (Yates 1966: 248, 299). Bruno recommended mythological figures like Circe for this purpose. Neo-Pagans also find mythological figures — restored to their original status as gods — to be vividly engaging and potent according to these criteria. Ironically, Bruno has become, himself, in Lori’s creations, the very kind of potent symbol he recommended.

When magicians are moved to create narratives or material artifacts of these experiences in such things as a ritual, or Lori's drawing and poem, their creations, in turn, become emblems or talismans that carry the power to reproduce the feelings they represent. Their abilities to produce feelings are enhanced when they are presented in rituals that induce cognitive vulnerability to sacred symbols. The artifacts of Lori's visions of Bruno find an audience in her coven.

Some of Lori's coven members keep copies of her drawing on their altars. These can serve as talismans to awaken feelings associated with Bruno. Several coven members made pilgrimages to the *Piazza Campo de' Fiori* and returned with photographs of Bruno's statue which are also placed on altars. Evidence that these symbols can produce the desired feelings comes from coven members who reported that "the monk shows up" occasionally when they feel the need of his comfort, inspiration or vindication.

Each February the coven commemorates Bruno's death on the three days surrounding the date of his martyrdom. They light candles for Bruno in their separate homes as part of a three-day vigil. During that time they come together to commemorate Bruno's death with a ceremony. On All Hallows Eve they also call on Giordano Bruno to protect the coven.

Lori and coven members perform ceremonies to draw divine forces into statues of the gods in the way Bruno discovered the Egyptian priests did in the Hermetic documents. They also use them as mental talismans for achieving Bruno's goal of incorporating divine influences. "They [the gods] are focal points or statues to bring the forces into yourself. You become one with them. We walk with them. They are in us." A photograph of Bruno's statue serves as his "statue" on her altar. This "statue" of Bruno is "animated" and internalized along with the statues of the gods.

Bruno is also called on to help cause justice. He would be committed to justice, Lori reasons, because, "Look what happened to him!" On occasions when Lori has had to go to court, she carried the drawing of him in her left-hand pocket. Others in the coven use copies of Lori's drawing or photographs of his statue for the same purpose. In fact, Lori believes others outside the coven can ask for Bruno's help, that is, if they possess the crucial qualification of "heart."

We may summarize the qualities associated with Bruno as "heart," the magicians' heroic path, righteous magic, transcendence of death, genius, and

Lori's proud family heritage. He represents their common hope for a just and compassionate society in which humans are free to think as they choose and to use inherent human capabilities to bring about changes through magic without fear of persecution. He also represents the courage to die for those convictions. Bruno is, like the witch, a tragic hero who warns of what we fear may happen again.

As stories and material artifacts of "Bruno the stregone" circulate, the feelings associated with them spread. Others can "see", "hear" and "feel" him. Sometimes these artifacts of religious experience inspire others to capture the feelings in other artifacts. One coven member painted a portrait of Bruno. Reflections on experiences of Bruno enhance the tangible influence of ancestors in general. As stories accumulate, the Bruno "talismán" becomes more vivid, unusual and striking. It evolve, mutate and enter into combinations with other symbols.

Because Neo-Paganism encourages development of intuition, imagination and innovation on the part of all members, symbols do not remain static. Sabina Magliocco discovered that "Neo-Pagan ritual artists are adept at combining and adapting materials from widely divergent sources, cultures, historical periods, and media into harmonious wholes; they are by nature *bricoleurs*. They increase the power of these symbols to move the affects by elaborating, modifying and rearranging them in combination in anachronistic and idiosyncratic relationships" (1996: 104-105).

A surprising number of Bruno's ideas and aspirations are reproduced in the Neo-Pagan movement by people who know very little about him. These similarities include the ideas that Christian religion in its politics — if not its spiritual message — has separated humans from the divine; magic is a useful technology for reconnecting humans to a living and responsive universe; improvement of human nature involves refining the imagination and will; signs and symbols such as Bruno devised facilitate this refinement of human nature. The Neo-Pagan idea of the witch resembles Bruno's Circe in her methods and goals. Common to both is the belief that humans are worthy and capable of magic, and that any such intervention should be preceded by the refinement and perfection of that nature, lest they behave like swine.

A path of diffusion between this Renaissance philosopher/magician and the Neo-Pagan movement has not been established, although one has been suggested by Frances Yates. It seems likely that Bruno's work influenced the Rosicrucian movement and the Masonic Order (1964). Bruno's ideas might

have come to Gerald Gardner, the originator of Neo-Pagan Wicca, through Masonic colleagues and companions in the Rosicrucian theater company where he encountered the Wiccans. However, I suggest, instead, that the similarities are the product of common sentiment: a desire to experience the sacred differently from the way established religions demand. Some humans are able to fashion symbols; all can respond to them emotionally, some more easily than others. When symbols grow stale or the feelings they produce no longer ring true, humans resort to the imagination to invent new ones. They discriminate among symbols on the basis of their power to inspire powerful moods and motivations. The combination of art with magic established in the Renaissance may have survived, or it could easily be reinvented when the need arose again to redefine the sacred.

There is one significant difference between Bruno's perspective and that of Lori Bruno and the Neo-Pagans. There is the shared belief that an apocalypse is not necessary if humans can peacefully come to a new consensus through education motivated by desire rather than force. However, Bruno underestimated the common people in his belief that social reform must begin with enlightened ethical leaders who would teach it to the populace. Neo-Pagans believe the transformation must originate at the bottom rather than the top of the social hierarchy, in the epiphanies and creations of "wise Circes" like Lori Bruno. If a critical number of individuals desire a different social order, then perhaps leaders (ethical or not) will be converted, but probably not without a struggle. Meanwhile, the more immediate the goal is to experience the sacred in ways that feel right without fear of persecution.

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