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WILD WOMEN WITCHES OF GREATER VANCOUVER: GYN/ECOLOGY?

by

Janet E. Dahr

B.A., University of Alberta, 1970

THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF
THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
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of

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Abstract

Witchcraft is a spiritual practice for many women. This essay examines why women choose to identify themselves as Witches, how they come in contact with witchcraft, what the practice of witchcraft entails, and the ways that witchcraft works to accomplish social change.

Seventeen women who identify as Witches and practice witchcraft activities on a regular basis were interviewed. All of the women reside in the Lower Mainland of British Columbia. The interviews featured open-ended questions that focused on how and why women become Witches and what that involvement means to them. The results emerged as ten themes that were organized into three categories: becoming a witch (conversion, identity, covens, and ethics); the magic of witchcraft (rituals, immanence, trance and meditation, and psychological growth); and outside the master's house (political activities). This essay is structured in a way that allows the actual voices of the women to come forth.

The women who were interviewed constructed witchcraft as a process in which they learn to understand, accept, and actualize themselves, by making strong psychic connections with each other, the earth, and all of life. These connections are recognized by Witches as experiences of immanent divinity which overcome separation, alienation, and individualism, by empowering the individual and the group at the same time. This shared power is understood as responsibility and cooperation, not domination and competition.

The themes that emerged from these interviews with women Witches were discussed in relation to ecofeminist literature. Strong similarities were noted between ecofeminist calls to overcome dualistic ways of thinking and relating that have supported the oppression of women and all of nature, and the transformation of consciousness that Witches identify as immanence. The ecofeminist's desire to overcome the logic of domination and establish acceptance of diversity, corresponds to the Witch's practice of accessing power-from-within and exercising power-with.

This work is dedicated to my mother

Astrid Karen Bjur-Donald

1913-1989

“What is remembered lives.”

Gyn/ecology . . . is about dis-covering, de-veloping the complex web of living/loving relationships *of our own kind*. It is about women living, loving, creating our Selves, our cosmos. It is dis-possessing our Selves, enspiriting our Selves, hearing the call of the wild, naming our wisdom, spinning and weaving world tapestries out of genesis and demise. In contrast to gynecology, which depends upon fixation and dismemberment, Gyn/ecology affirms that everything is connected.

Mary Daly (1978)

Gyn/ecology: The metaethics of radical feminism. pp. 11-12

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I deeply appreciate the women Witches of Greater Vancouver who so willingly shared their thoughts and experiences with me. I have developed profound feelings of respect, admiration and affection for each participant in this study. These are truly amazing people.

I especially appreciate one participant, who I cannot name without breaching confidentiality, who read my work in progress and gave me valuable insights and suggestions.

I also appreciate Meredith Kimball, my supervisor who, from the beginning of this process, encouraged me to think for myself and pursue the issues that were relevant for me. I especially appreciate the time, energy, positive criticism, and advice that helped me through the task of writing this thesis.

I extend many thanks to my good friend and colleague, Ali McIlwaine for many inspiring and entertaining conversations in which she freely shared her ideas and references, and constantly challenged the boundaries of my thoughts.

And last, but not least, I appreciate the loving support I received throughout this journey from my family: my husband Don, for steadfast companionship and expert assistance with the computer; my daughters Diana and Colleen for believing in me, and for interrupting my bouts of self-deprecation with warmth and humor; and, from a distance, my son Brad, his wife Randa, and my two grandchildren, Christopher and Bethany, for creating hope for the future.

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CHAPTER ONE

Why Witches?

Why witches? Because witches dance. They dance in the moonlight. . . .

Wildwomen, uncivilized, as the white man says of other races; . . .

The witches dance, wild and unjustifiable, like desire. . . .

Why witches? Because witches sing. . . . they croon lullabies,

they howl, they gasp, they babble, they shout, they sigh.

They are silent and even their silences can be heard. . . .

Why witches? Because witches are alive.

Because they are in direct contact with the life of their own bodies

and the bodies of others, with the life force itself. . . .

Why witches? Because witches are rapturous. . . .

We are inflamed with desire, with struggle, with work, with life.

Witches. . . an immense political revolt from the past, probably,

but also and especially turned toward the future.

I have taken some liberties with Xaviere Gauthier's words (1976, pp. 199-203), changing what was a powerful prose statement about why a specific feminist journal should be named "Witches" to a piece of poetry that expresses why I think it is important to pay attention to contemporary women Witches¹. It paints a picture of Witches as I have come to know them, and makes important connections between the domestication and silencing of women that resulted from

medieval Witch persecutions, and the consciousness of immanence and redefinition of power that create hope for the future.

In this essay, academic discourses will be interwoven with the voices of eighteen contemporary women Witches as they explain why and how they decided to become Witches, why and how they practice magic, and why and how they see witchcraft as a vehicle for social change. My own voice and voices from academic discourses will appear in standard type, and the voices of the women I interviewed will appear in italics. The women's names, that most often appear in brackets following these quotations, are code names which I selected to assure the anonymity of the speakers.

My interest in witchcraft began in the spring of 1988, when my doctor informed me that I had a breast cancer. Of course, he referred me to a surgeon, but before I saw her, I visited two other healers that I knew about. One used therapeutic touch which altered the energy patterns in my body toward wellness, and the other used guided meditations in which I imagined healing energy entering my body and being focused on my breast. The work we did together was very beneficial in that it gave me confidence in my ability to have a positive impact on the course of my illness. I believe that the good health I have recovered can be partially credited to these two women. Both of these healers identified themselves as Witches. They said their healing work was part of their craft - witchcraft.

I was openly curious to know more about witchcraft, and soon one of the women invited me to join a ritual group that met about once a month, usually on or close to the full moon. The thing that stands out for me about those meetings is that through the activities that we did there, I gained a sense of connection - connection with every other woman in the group and connection to the earth. The activity that seemed most significant to me in creating this sense of connection was the music we made - chanting accompanied by drums and rattles. Somehow, through blending our

voices and rhythm, we created an experience of deep primordial bonding with each other and the earth, which was deeply healing - physically and psychologically.

As I recovered from my illness, became a student, and began reading feminist theory, I noticed a cluster of ideas including connection, intersubjectivity, care and reciprocity that resonated with my experiences with witchcraft. Whether or not these qualities are properly labeled as “women’s” or not has sparked great debates within feminist literature in recent years (Benhabib, 1987; Cole & McQuin, 1992; Friedman, 1987; Gilligan, 1982; Moody-Adams, 1991; Tronto, 1987), but for me, seeing them as “feminine” qualities triggered my hope that through the study of feminist theory and women’s lives, some insight or direction might emerge that would be useful as a strategy of resistance to the destructive power of Western patriarchal capitalism.

Which is Witch?

Among people I meet and associate with who are not familiar with Witches, the word “Witch” nearly always elicits a constellation of fearful associations, the center of which is evil personified, that is, Satan or the Devil. Around him (interestingly, he is always male) are images of bloody sacrifices, hexes, curses, poisonous brews, sex orgies, and ugly old women. This constellation of images is the stereotype of the Witch that has pervaded Western European discourse since the Middle Ages. This constellation of images is shattered, and the social forces that created it are called into question when modern women, like those in this study, identify themselves as Witches. The resulting confusion needs to be addressed before I can begin to analyze and discuss the experiences of the eighteen contemporary women Witches in this study.

The word “Witch” carries so many negative connotations that many people wonder why we use the word at all. Yet to reclaim the word “Witch” is to reclaim our right, as women, to be

powerful; as men, to know the feminine within as divine. To be a Witch is to identify with nine million² victims of bigotry and hatred and to take responsibility for shaping a world in which prejudice claims no more victims. A Witch is a “shaper”, a creator who bends the unseen into form, and so becomes one of the Wise, one whose life is infused with magic (Starhawk, 1989a, p. 22).

This passage by Starhawk contains five issues that need to be elaborated in order to clarify just what contemporary women Witches mean when they use the words “Witch” and “witchcraft”, and the closely related words “Pagan” and “Paganism”, or “Wiccan” and “Wicca”. The five issues are: (a) that Western European discourse has attached negative connotations to Witches and witchcraft; (b) that being a Witch is about being a powerful woman; (c) that there is a connection between modern Witches and Medieval European Witches; (d) that witchcraft is about recognizing the divine within; and (e) that witchcraft is magical.

Negative connotations. *Like most North Americans, I was raised to think of a Witch as an ugly old hag with a warty nose and scraggly hair who rode on her broomstick and terrorized people on Halloween night - that or the evil witch of Walt Disney movies and fairy tales. When I first met the Witches who became my friends and coven mates, I wondered why they would call themselves that. It seemed to be something like reclaiming a negative term like “black” by African Americans, or “queer” by gay people. But I think it’s more than an identity - it’s a symbol (Betty MacLeod).*

Although Starhawk’s definition of “Witch” would most likely be accepted by the women I interviewed, it is far from the stereotype that has been accepted by mainstream society for the past several centuries at least. In an effort to understand why contemporary women would choose to

identify with the much maligned and stereotyped symbol of the Witch, I initially sought out traditional sources for meanings and definitions. I looked in the Concise Oxford Dictionary (Sykes, 1979, p. 1339) under “witch” and found: “woman practicing sorcery; fascinating or bewitching woman; ugly old woman, hag.” In the glossary of Magic, Witchcraft, and Religion: An Anthropological Study of the Supernatural I found, “Witchcraft: an evil power inherent in certain individuals that permits them, without the use of magical charms or other paraphernalia, to do harm or cause misfortune to others”(Lehmann & Meyers, 1989, p. 289). In the articles contained in Lehmann’s and Meyers’ book, I found that witches and witchcraft were consistently equated with voodoo, sorcery, demon possession, the evil eye, Satanism, cults, black magic, spells, curses, and hexes.

Jeffrey Burton Russell (1989) tried to make sense of this proliferation of different phenomena by dividing them into three different categories: “The first is simple sorcery, which is found worldwide in almost every period and every culture. The second is the alleged diabolical witchcraft of late Medieval and early modern Europe. The third is the pagan revival of the twentieth century” (p. 203). He states that the first of these, sorcery, was well known and tolerated throughout Europe in the early Middle ages but was merged with diabolism by the Inquisition in order to produce the second category - Medieval formulations of witchcraft. He discounts his third category, modern Neo-pagan witchcraft, as “a naive, genial, nature religion” (p. 212) which bears little resemblance to the other two types of witchcraft. He says we need to distinguish sharply between these three phenomena, but he contradicts his own edict as all three types seem to blend into the Medieval formulation when he concludes that, in general, a Witch is a personification of the power of evil: “The witch, melding the two archetypes of human hag and evil demon, is a powerful metaphor whose power may be diminished from time to time but is unlikely to disappear” (p. 212). This powerful metaphor provides the glue that binds Russell’s three categories of

witchcraft together. It is derived from a stereotype which was created by ecclesiastical and judicial authorities in Medieval Europe to rationalize the persecution of (mostly female) human beings for impossible crimes. This same stereotype has colored all subsequent perceptions of magical occurrences in both European and non-European societies (Hallen & Sodipo, 1986, p. 96).

Powerful women. Interestingly enough, Jeffrey Burton Russell's (1989) formulation provides an insight into the way that modern women define the word "Witch". From the point of view of Mr. Russell and mainstream society generally, the two archetypes of human hag and evil demon are both negative. But, modern feminists such as Mary Daly (1978) have reclaimed the image of the hag as a powerful, independent older woman. They have also elucidated how Medieval women in general and powerful, assertive women in particular were denigrated and made the repository of evil (Ehrenreich and English, 1973; Merchant, 1980). Thus, from the point of view of many feminists, the hag is a wise woman - often a healer, while the evil demon is a wild woman - one not controlled by men. By identifying with Medieval Witches, the two archetypes have indeed come together as a powerful metaphor - one that women use to empower themselves and revalue characteristics that have been devalued in this culture.

Links to Medieval Witches. It is quite common among women Witches in the Lower Mainland of British Columbia to identify their own practices with Medieval witchcraft and see both as a continuation of an Old Religion that flourished in Europe before the advent of Christianity. This theory was advanced by Margaret Murray in her books, The Witch-cult in Western Europe (1921/1970) and The God of the Witches (1931/1970). It was accepted and popularized by Gerald Gardner in his book, Witchcraft Today (1954/1991), and also by Starhawk in The Spiral Dance (1989a). According to these sources, the Old Religion was "Paganism", which originally meant "country dweller". These country folk celebrated their earth-centered religion side by side with Christianity for several centuries, but they were labeled as heretics as the

Medieval Christian Church sought to eradicate alternative and oppositional beliefs. Pagans, along with Jews, Druids, and other non-Christian groups were persecuted as “Witches” by the Inquisition, and Pagan seasonal celebrations and fertility rites were called Devil worship. Thus, there is a very strong connection between Pagans and Witches, and many of the women Witches I interviewed think of themselves as “Pagans” or “Neo-pagans”.

Also, the term Neo-pagan is used by many authors (Adler, 1986; Eller, 1993; Ellwood, 1973; Higgins, 1994; Sandilands, 1988) to describe the somewhat cohesive, although very diverse, magical community, that Wicca (usually synonymous with Witchcraft) is part of. There are a variety of “traditions” within Wicca, and each one has similarities with and differences from all of the others. Diversity and creativity are highly valued among modern Neo-pagan Witches, and these values are reflected in the proliferation of traditions that have emerged in recent years (Adler, 1986). The following is a very brief description of some of the most well-known Traditions of Neo-pagan witchcraft.

The Gardnerian Tradition originated in England with Gerald Gardner (1954/1991), who learned about witchcraft from a group of women who could trace their knowledge of the craft back through several generations. He persuaded them to allow him to lift the veil of secrecy that kept witchcraft hidden from the public. In 1953 Gardner initiated Doreen Valiente (1989), who helped him with much of his work. Raymond Buckland (1986) popularized Gardnerian witchcraft in North America, and then created his own tradition known as Saxon or Seax-Wica. Gardner is credited with beginning the modern revival of Neo-pagan witchcraft.

The Alexandrian Tradition also originated in England with Alexander Sanders (Farrar, 1983), a flamboyant, theatrical man who learned about witchcraft from Gardner, but modified and revised Gardner’s material, created some of his own, and borrowed from other sources such as the Theosophists. Judging from descriptions of Gardnerian, Alexandrian, and Saxon Traditions by

authors who have discussed them (Buckland, 1986; Farrar, 1983; Maple, 1973; Valiente, 1989), it seems that their main focus is magic, their rituals are highly structured, they stress the necessity of having equal numbers of men and women in any group, and each group is led by a High Priest and High Priestess. People join these traditions by invitation after careful screening. They study the craft for a year and a day and then become Witches through elaborate initiation rituals. They continue to study through various “degrees” of training, and when the highest degree is achieved, a man becomes a High Priest and a woman becomes a High Priestess. They may then create and lead a new group of men and women.

The above three Traditions are similar to each other, and somewhat different from other traditions, such as the Faery Tradition which was developed in the United States by Victor Anderson, who learned magic from Witches in Oregon who called themselves faeries. Anderson initiated Gwydion Pendderwen into his coven, and the latter visited Alexander Sanders in England and brought back some Alexandrian material that was incorporated into their work (Guiley, 1989). In addition to magical work, this type of witchcraft places more emphasis on harmony with nature, seasonal celebrations, music and dancing. They are less rigid in their rituals, men and women participate, but equal numbers are not required. Leadership still resides in the High Priest and High Priestess, and initiation follows a year and a day of witchcraft study.

The Reclaiming Tradition originates with the Reclaiming Collective of San Francisco, and Starhawk (1987, 1988, 1989a, 1989b), who learned witchcraft from Victor Anderson and the Faery Tradition, is Reclaiming’s major spokesperson. Besides the emphasis on harmony with nature, seasonal celebrations, and music that they share with the Faery Tradition, the Reclaiming Tradition’s style of witchcraft also emphasizes feminism, personal growth, self awareness, empowerment, and involvement in world changing activities. Leadership is dispersed and non-

hierarchical organization is fostered. Although both sexes are welcomed, more women than men participate in Reclaiming witchcraft, and women-only groups are common.

Finally, there are the Eclectic Traditions, which are the many smaller groups that use material from all of the above traditions as well as other sources. The Dianic Tradition, a feminist tradition which originates with Zsuzsanna Budapest (1980/1989, 1989) is an Eclectic Tradition that shares the Reclaiming Tradition's feminist orientation, featuring non-hierarchical groups that focus on personal growth and world change. Dianic Witches practice their craft in women-only groups.

Sixteen of the eighteen women Witches in this study learned about Witchcraft through contact with either the Dianic or the Reclaiming Tradition, both of which are clearly part of the larger Neo-pagan community. They consider themselves to be Pagans or Neo-pagans. The other two women began their practice of witchcraft with other Eclectic groups - one obviously Neo-pagan, the other strongly influenced by North American First Nations traditions. Both women are now more involved in North American First Nations spirituality than they are in Neo-pagan traditions. However, when they are involved in Wiccan activities, they also think of these activities as Paganism or Neo-paganism. I will, therefore, use the terms Witch and Pagan interchangeably³.

Immanent divinity. Paganism, according to Margo Adler (1986), is polytheistic, pantheistic, and animistic. Polytheism means that the Divinity has many faces and is revealed in archetypal energies personified in many gods and goddesses. Pantheism means that Divinity is immanent in nature such that the earth is a living, sentient being - Gaia (Lovelock, 1979) or Gaea, the Greek name for Mother Earth, oldest of divinities (Walker, 1983). Animism is the attribution of the sacred life force or a living soul to all things - even inanimate things such as rocks. These three aspects of paganism have been incorporated into modern witchcraft such that the Witches I interviewed envisioned themselves as interdependent with nature and the cosmos - part of a greater

whole and participating in the Divine Force. By being aware of this interconnection, Witches can learn to work with cosmic energy in magical ways.

Witchcraft as Magic. A working definition of magic can be gleaned from the vast discourse of those who have studied this fascinating topic (Butler, 1948; Easlea, 1980; Frazer, 1922/1993; Mauss, 1950; Melton, 1982; Thomas, 1971; Thorndike, 1967; Weinstein, 1981). It seems that magic can be defined as the ancient and universal art of creating change by supernatural or supernormal means. To engage in magic requires an animistic world-view which recognizes a sacred force that is present in all things. This sacred, unseen force, called energy or mana, is an underlying vital energy that infuses, creates, and sustains the physical world (Starhawk, 1988, p. 52). Mana is an idea of the same order as the idea of the sacred. "The quality of mana and of the sacred appertains to things outside the normal world and normal practices" (Mauss, 1950, p. 119). Mana can be perceived, molded, directed, and changed. This activity is called magic (Weinstein, 1981, p. 31). Historically, magic has been equated with superstition, folklore, sorcery, and divination, and since Medieval times, it has been maligned along with Witches and witchcraft.

According to Marion Weinstein (1981) magic, paganism, and witchcraft were all discredited by the Medieval Christian Church when it invented the character of Satan:

The character of Satan was "invented" in the fourteenth century to answer a cultural need: If God were all good and all pure, then another force had to be all bad and all debased. . . . And so Satan emerged as the embodiment of all evil. . . . Satan and Lucifer appear in the Bible as unpleasant minor characters, fallen from a higher state and trying to tempt righteous men (sic).

There is no Lord of Hell, no Arch-Fiend, no embodiment of evil, no all-encompassing Devil. . . . The worship of Satan became

officially recognized early in the fourteenth century when the governmental arm of the Church officially defined Satanism and labeled all dissenters from Christianity as members of this new religion. . . . Satanism included everything from fortune-telling to folk medicine, from pagan prayers to fertility magic (pp. 42-44).

Weinstein's notion that Satan was a minor character in the Old Testament who was raised to the status of God's grand antagonist by later Christianity, is supported by several other scholars (Guiley, 1989, p. 97; Quaipe, 1987, p. 14; Seligmann, 1948, p. 151; Thomas, 1971, p. 469). These authors explain that the concept of Satan or the Devil developed over a long period of time, but it was in the late thirteenth century that the Devil appeared as a tangible individual, the antithesis of good, who could assume various shapes and command a large army of demons (Seligmann, 1948, p. 152). Medieval theologians elaborated on the Devil at length until he became a reality in the minds of the populace, one who needed human collaborators to perform his harmful effects on the world (Thomas, 1971, p. 270). The Catholic church accused many different groups of being accomplices of the Devil, including Jews, Albigenses, Waldenses, Muslims and Cathars (Guiley, 1989, p. 97). But when Pope Innocent VIII issued his Papal Bull in 1484, he authorized Inquisitors Heinrich Kramer and Jacob Sprenger to root out a particularly virulent form of devil worship that was afflicting some provinces in Germany (Guiley, 1989, p. 170-171). Their book, the Malleus Malificarum (1486) associated this particularly virulent form of devil worship with "Witches" who were most often women. This "misogynist's textbook" (Easlea, 1980, p. 7), became the guidebook for subsequent arrests and trials for devil worship. It was reprinted fourteen times by 1520, and was a powerful force in constructing women as Witches, Witches as Devil worshippers, and witchcraft as Satanism.

Modern Witches are continually fighting this evilization of their Craft. Among the women I interviewed, there is no belief in the Devil and no worship of Satan⁴. Witches do work with magic but they are governed by the Wiccan Rede (Adler, 1986, p. 101) which states: “An’ it harm none, do what ye will”, and a three fold law which states that everything you do comes back to you three times. The exact origin of the Wiccan Rede and the three fold law is unknown (Adler, 1986; Guiley, 1989), but all contemporary Neo-pagan Witches deeply respect the free will of all (Weinstein, 1981), and it is considered unethical to use magic to harm or influence someone else. Even healing spells should not be done without the consent of the person they are intended to help, and love spells that attempt to influence another person can create difficulties.

I can give you a bad example of how not to do a spell. One time before I knew very much about witchcraft, I really liked this woman that I knew and so I did a candle spell - a love spell using a candle - and let it burn down and so on. And I didn't realize that this was probably not a wise thing to do, to focus on a particular person in a love spell. Because, as they say, the thing that I didn't know then, that I do know now, is that whenever you do a spell, you have to think it through, because whatever you have put out will come back to you - some say three times over, some say ten times over. So, I think, in this case, it came back on me ten times over! And what happened was that, she didn't fall in love with me, but I got totally obsessed with her, and it took me about a year and a half to get over it! . . . Now if you want to do a love spell, do a spell on yourself that makes your heart open to love or something of that sort, so that you're not putting it out on anybody else. Because it's very likely not to work the way that you intended and could, in fact, cause you lots of pain and anguish (Kim Hume).

Witchcraft as Wicca. There is one more issue around the use of the word “Witch” that needs clarification. In many of the interviews, “Witch” and “witchcraft” are used interchangeably with “Wiccan” and “Wicca”, although a few of the women I interviewed resisted this correlation.

Starhawk (1989a) who is recognized as an authority figure by most of the women I interviewed, says, "The covens, who preserved the knowledge of the subtle forces, were called Wicca or Wicce, from the Anglo-Saxon root word meaning 'to bend or shape'. They were those who could shape the unseen to their will. Healers, teachers, poets, and midwives, they were central figures in every community" (p. 19). This interpretation is somewhat different from that of Margo Adler (1986), who uses the words "Wicca" and "Witchcraft" as synonyms: "Participants in the Witchcraft revival generally use Witch to mean simply an initiate of the religion of Wicca, also known as the Craft (p. 10). Adler points out that "the word Witchcraft comes from the Old English wicce or wicca, referring to female and male practitioners, respectively" (p.11). She fails to mention that when the word "Witch" is derived from the old English word wicce, it means "a female magician supposed to have dealings with the devil or evil spirits and be able by their cooperation to perform supernatural acts", while when it is derived from the old English word wicca, it means "a man who practices magic, a sorcerer or wizard" (Little, Fowler & Coulson, 1979, p. 2437).

It seems to me that many Witches use the term Wicca when they want to differentiate between witchcraft as a craft, an art, or a set of practices, and Wicca as a set of beliefs, or a religion. Then they use Witch and Wiccan interchangeably to mean persons who practice the art of witchcraft or the religion of Wicca. In any case, the differences between Wicca and witchcraft are not substantial, so for the purposes of this essay, and especially in the words of many of the women I interviewed, the two terms will be used as synonyms.

So Witches, Wiccans, and Pagans are all represented by the voices in this essay. They are polytheistic, pantheistic, and animistic people who feel that they participate in Divine nature. They commemorate the passing of seasons by celebrating the eight Sabbats that turn the wheel of the year, and they honor life passages in meaningful ways. They are governed by the Wiccan Rede, "An it harm none, do what ye will", and the three fold law of return. They have nothing to do with

Satan or the Devil. For some modern women Witches, witchcraft (or Wicca, or paganism) is a religion or spiritual practice, for others it is an epistemology - a way of knowing about and being in the world, and for others it is a source of psychological support, personal awareness, and empowerment. For all of the contemporary women Witches that I interviewed, it is a way of life that they are deeply committed to.

I think at this time, in this culture, witchcraft is important for women because it gives different images of women. . . it gives different images of what women can be, than what has been out there in society. So that's real important for women. And I think that sense of how I'm working right now, of women directly working with and supporting each other, is really important. And there are other ways to do that, but this is one that accentuates women's power, rather than staying in women's powerlessness. We all have access to energy that can be used. By experiencing that together, as women, I think it supports us to go out and be our own authorities (Paula James).

Witch Goddesses?

Merlin Stone's book When God Was a Woman (1976) tells a story, gleaned from recent archeological and anthropological discoveries of images and figurines of female forms, about ancient cultures that worshipped Goddesses. She chronicles how these ancient societies were overcome by patriarchal religions that denigrated women, bodies, sexuality, and procreation, and established their male transcendent God as the only deity. Contemporary women Witches have linked Stone's theory with Gerald Gardner's (1954/1991) exposition of witchcraft as the Old Religion that existed in Europe during the Middle Ages, so that, in the opinion of many of the women I interviewed, the ancient Goddess worshipping cultures were never totally overcome, but became Paganism, which was called devil worship by the Inquisition. They envision the roots of modern witchcraft going back through the Medieval construction of the Witch as a devil

worshipper, to ancient images of women priestesses honoring the sacred feminine in the form of the Goddess.

The Goddess is an extremely important part of contemporary witchcraft, but there is almost as much confusion around what women Witches mean by “The Goddess” as there is around the word “Witch”. Cynthia Eller (1993) who included women Witches in her study of spiritual feminists, found the following:

Do spiritual feminists believe in one goddess or in many goddesses? Both, they answer, both at the same time. Is their goddess within them, a part of them, or is she completely outside of them, looking in? Both, they answer, both at the same time. Does this goddess exist independently of human beings or did spiritual feminists invent her? Both, they answer, both at the same time (pp. 130-131).

This willingness to accept ambiguity and both/and answers in the face of either/or questions is typical of the way the women I interviewed thought about the Goddess as well. Witches speak of the Great Goddess as if there is only one, and that one is the Earth Mother - the life force. But the Great Goddess has many names, and each Great Goddess has three aspects, the Maiden, the Mother, and the Crone (also known as the Creator, the Sustainer, and the Destroyer), which correspond to three phases of the moon - the waxing moon, the full moon, and the waning moon - and also have many names and characteristics.

The complexity of the Goddess concept can be illustrated by considering one chant which is commonly sung at Witch gatherings, expressing some names of the Goddess: “Isis, Astarte, Diana, Hecate, Demeter, Kali, Inanna” (Deena Metzger & Will Shepardson, 1980). Barbara Walker, in her book The Woman’s Encyclopedia of Myths and Secrets (1983), offers explanations

of the cultural origins of these, and many other faces of the Goddess, and provides some insight into the meanings contemporary women attach to them. An examination of Walker's definitions of the Goddess names in the above chant reveals that Isis was an Egyptian goddess, from whom all becoming arose. She was the Egyptian throne, her arms or wings protected the Pharaohs. She came to Rome in 80 BC and was known to the Romans as the one who is all (pp. 453 - 455). Astarte originated in ancient Babylon, where she was a triple Goddess who symbolized nature, but she was also known as Ashtoreth in Egypt, where she was the celestial Virgin (Maiden) who gave birth to the sun god on Winter Solstice (pp. 69-70). Diana was a Roman name for a triple Goddess that the Greeks called Artemis, who had her shrine at Ephesus and was worshipped throughout Europe as late as the fifth century AD (pp. 233-234). Hecate is a Greek name for an ancient Egyptian triple goddess whose special province was midwifery, but the Greeks emphasized her Crone or Destroyer aspect, and the Inquisition named her queen of the Witches (p. 378). Demeter was the Mother aspect of the triple Goddess portrayed in the Eleusinian myth, in which the Maiden Kore was kidnapped by Hades, and the Crone Persephone withheld fertility from the earth until Kore was freed (p. 786). Kali was a Hindu triple Goddess who symbolized the whole of existence, especially the inexorable reality of death, and her mantras originated the doctrine of logos - the sacred word (pp. 488-494). Finally, Inanna was a Sumerian fertility goddess, the queen of the universe (p. 429). Clearly, when a group of Witches chants all of these names one after the other, they are expressing and affirming the complexity and divinity of the feminine life force.

For me, what mostly happens is that I see that there is some energy external to myself. I think of it more as masses of energy - life energy, life force - and that there's definitely something out there, some sort of order in the universe, some sort of consciousness external to my own, that I can kind of tap into occasionally. That's when I think in terms of the Goddess.

And sometimes, I imagine it as a woman, sometimes as a kind of sexless nameless energy field, sometimes it's the earth - I feel it as the energy of the earth itself (Clara Singer).

There are many other aspects of the Goddess that Witches choose to focus on in their celebrations. Each Goddess is an archetype, representing certain qualities that a woman might want to manifest in her life, or learn from. For example, Aphrodite who originated in Cyprus where she ruled birth, life, death and fate, reconciling humans to all of them through sensual and sexual mysticism, represents passionate love (Walker, 1983, pp. 44-45). Kuan Yin, the enormous Great Mother of China represents boundless compassion (pp. 518- 519), and Brigid who was a Celtic triple Goddess and a great healer whose sacred wells healed the sick, gave sight to the blind, and gave inspiration to poets and writers, represents the stirring of new life, generation, and creativity (Budapest, 1989, p. 30).

I'm interested in the ways that people, over time, have given names and characteristics to beings that may or may not have existed before as entities out there, but which, through the naming and the energy directing have become entities - specific goddesses. When I'm thinking in terms of creativity, and I think of Brigid, I know that I'm tapping into - it's like a pathway towards an energy that has been traveled by others besides me, before me. So, I feel like I'm tapping into a real energy source that has a specific guiding wisdom. . . . Sometimes I focus on the Goddess as a sort of monotheistic thing and sometimes I think of these other, more specific goddess energies. I'm open to exploring whatever entities have worked for people in the past and what we can create, too. Like, if I don't know a particular name, I just describe characteristics, although names are very powerful (Clara Singer).

It seems that the Goddess expresses the polytheism, pantheism, and animism that Adler (1986) says is characteristic of Paganism and Neo-paganism. But for women Witches, the Goddess

is also a way of expressing the divine feminine (Starhawk, 1982) and of overcoming the internalized oppression suffered by women after centuries of sexist oppression (Goldenberg, 1982).

I know in the end the One, the Supreme is nothing. It's like light, and light doesn't have to be male or female. But, for me, in order to claim my power, it feels easier if I can identify with the power of the earth as a female power. And it makes sense to me, because women are the birthgivers, and the earth does continually give birth. With every season there is birth. Even with dying, there is birth that is waiting to happen. And there's a lot of power in that, and I want to be in touch with that power because it helps me to be stronger when I go out into the world and be me (Wendy Halvorson).

The Goddess in her many guises also helps a woman to accept the cycles and stages of one's life. A woman's body is honored as part of the sacred earth, and even one's emotions are accepted.

There was a time when I was so pissed off at the Goddess because my life was so horrible and I just took a few months and said, 'I'm really pissed off at you and I'm out of here for awhile.' So I took a few months off and then got back to it. . . . Everything that you do, you can usually find a goddess who does the same thing, and there's lots of goddesses who've gotten pissed off and taken off for while (Sara Brannigan).

Contemporary women Witches use the concept of the Goddess as a way to express the divine as immanent, to see themselves as part of a greater whole, and to talk about different levels of consciousness.

I have relationships with individual Goddesses, where I deal with them and know them - like in trance. But at this point I would say that Goddess has a lot to do with physical plane energy. And when I say "Goddess" I don't have an image of some large woman with no clothes on, sitting on a rock, smiling (chuckle). Although I have a sense of a whole thing, I also have a

sense of what I would call Goddess energy, which is different from Universe energy, that's sort of out there, off this planet. . . . I think I deal with it the best way I can handle it intellectually and emotionally, and sometimes that's in the form of individual goddesses, and sometimes Goddess energy is - everything.

I believe I'm Goddess, as you are - even as men are. Isn't that nice of me? (chuckle). I mean as patriarchy is. So Goddess is of me, it's not something external to me. And I need to fragment it sometimes to handle it, so then I'll use particular Goddess energy like Demeter - although I have particular energy associated with Demeter, that's her, when she's called into the circle. There are different personalities or energy to the different goddesses for sure, but that may be because we all made it that way, or we understand it that way (Jean Davis).

The Goddess is a symbol of birth, life, and death - the turning of the seasons, the circularity, complexity and diversity of life. The Goddess is also a symbol of feminine divinity that modern Western women have articulated in a great variety of ways. Within mainstream religions such as Christianity and Judaism, feminist theologians have used their understanding of the Goddess to criticize and revise traditional patriarchal teachings about women, in order to challenge the male hegemony in these institutions, and advance women in leadership positions (McFague, 1989; Plaskow, 1989; Ruether, 1989). These works will undoubtedly have far reaching consequences for traditional religions.

Although the women Witches I interviewed generally recognize the positive aspects of integrating the concept of the Goddess into mainstream religious institutions, about half of the women I interviewed thought that some spiritual feminists merely substituted Goddess for God, and ritual for liturgy, such that they worship the Goddess and pray to her in a way that is acceptable and understandable within the structures of traditional religions. For Witches, the immanent

divinity of the Goddess necessarily leads to increased social awareness, empathy with others, and the desire for radical social change (Goldenberg, 1979).

I know there are women who are feminists who use the Goddess as a way to promote women within mainstream religions without changing the system very much. If a woman takes on witchcraft as her spiritual practice and belief, I think it does fairly quickly become apparent that the whole system needs to be changed. . . . I can't imagine going on a regular basis and feeling the immanence of divinity and that kind of connection with the earth and all creatures and condoning the way that we live in this society or the way our society functions in the world (Betty MacLeod).

There seems to be a way that "Goddess worshippers" do not recognize the political nature of witchcraft which modern women Witches stress. Most of the witches I interviewed saw what they were doing as different from Goddess worship which they saw as "nice".

To practice witchcraft is to be aware of the world, and to be aware of the oppressions in the world - not only the goodness, but also the oppressions - and to use that to change things - to speak out and react against things that are destroying the earth, whether that's got to do with pollution or violence. So that's where I see it as a political statement. There are people who practice rituals, but they don't want to be involved or admit that there's anything political about it. I would just call them ritualists (Kate Schulman).

Women Witches and Ecofeminism

Because Witches are pantheists and animists, they are also environmentalists⁵. That does not mean that they are necessarily working in organizations that are part of what is commonly known as the environmental movement. It means that they feel deeply concerned about the welfare of all life forms and promote caring and connection between human and non-human beings.

Witchcraft is an earth based religion. It is earth based - the seasons, the turning of the moon - it is based in the physicalness of our bodies and the earth. So I personally can't separate witchcraft and environmentalism. And the need to counteract what our society has done to the earth, which makes environmentalism necessary at all, comes from that separation of the earth and human needs - physical needs. And I think, not having those connections, has meant that we need to have an environmental movement, as opposed to it being a part of our lives (Paula James).

Because witchcraft is about making connections with and caring for the environment, there is much common ground between the Witches I interviewed, who are mostly non-academic women, and ecofeminists, who provide the theoretical links between feminism and environmentalism⁶. When I trace my own path from feminism to feminist witchcraft, I invariably travel through the literature of ecofeminism, where the most powerful critiques of mainstream society's attitudes toward women and nature are elucidated. For me, the path begins with self-in-relation theory and the way that Carol Gilligan's (1982) work resonated with my personal experience and gave me hope that, by re-valuing caring and connection, this society might be able to address social and environmental problems that appear insurmountable when human beings are depicted as separate and competitive.

In self-in-relation theory, caring and connection were initially defined as women's attributes, but they have since been identified as symbolically feminine. Further examination of symbolic representations yielded the insight that, in modern Western discourse, women and nature are both feminine, and the ideology that authorizes the oppression of women also sanctions the oppression of nature (Keller, 1985; Merchant, 1980). Some feminist theorists began to apply their analysis and perspective not only to women's issues but to environmental problems as well. They concluded that the eradication of sexism requires a fundamental change, not only in society's

attitude toward women, but in our very basic attitudes toward all of life. They also pointed to feminism's potential to put an end to environmental destruction, a potential that Francoise d'Eaubonne (1974) recognized when she coined the word ecofeminism: "No other human group can bring about the ecological revolution, because non other is so directly concerned at all levels" (p. 236).

An important tenet of ecofeminist thought is that dualism, the tendency to separate aspects of reality into irreconcilable opposites such as human/nature, mind/body, male/female, good/evil, rational/emotional, is at the root of our ecological crisis. Dualistic thinking has led to a society in which humans experience themselves as separate from each other, and arranged in dichotomous pairs: better/worse, richer/poorer, higher/lower, superior/inferior. Competition is highly valued and all "others" (including human and non-human life forms) are constructed as objects to be dominated and controlled. Excessive material accumulation, derived from exploitation of natural and human resources, becomes the measure of human worth. To overcome the personal isolation and environmental damage wrought by dualistic thinking, ecofeminism emphasizes relationships rather than differences, which leads to acceptance of diversity, and encourages caring and reciprocity. Ecofeminism asserts the existence of fundamental interconnections between people, and places humans in an interdependent relationship within nature.

This desire of ecofeminist authors to move beyond dualism to a unifying wholeness which embraces diversity and envisions an interconnecting web of relationships with all living things, moves some of them away from philosophy and into spirituality (Adams, 1993). Indeed, so much of ecofeminist thought is forthrightly spiritual that Robin Eckersley (1992) states that ecofeminists are interested in cultivating spirituality, and Theodore Roszak (1992) discusses Neo-paganism, goddess worship, and ecofeminism in a way that equates one with the others. Although contemporary witchcraft is only one of many ways that ecofeminist spirituality is expressed

(Warren, 1993), I would argue that, insofar as ecofeminist theory emphasizes spiritual values and goals, it provides theoretical support for the activities of contemporary women Witches. More importantly, one of the ways that the ecofeminist call to heal separations and dichotomizations can be answered is by the practice of witchcraft.

In addition to the general spiritual tone that can be detected in ecofeminist literature, there are specific epistemological links between witchcraft and ecofeminism in two of the earliest and most influential ecofeminist texts: Carolyn Merchant's The Death of Nature (1980) and Susan Griffin's Woman and Nature: The Roaring Inside Her (1978). These two authors demonstrate that the Witch persecutions of the middle ages were significant in the development of the mechanistic world view and the modern scientific method, both of which are largely responsible for the present crisis in the environment. In particular, Merchant's identification of Medieval witchcraft persecutions with the defeat of animism and hermeticism by mechanism and scientific objectivity, creates the impression that the return of animism (which is the world-view of Witches) might be one way out of our current environmental crisis.

Among the women Witches who participated in this study, the best known authority on witchcraft is Starhawk, (or Miriam Simos which, she said at a public gathering in Vancouver in July 1993, is the name on her driver's license and on her criminal record) who, as a Witch and an ecofeminist, provides a powerful bridge between contemporary women Witches and ecofeminism. Starhawk has presented several lectures and workshops - including the very popular and powerful B.C. Witch Camps - in the Vancouver area over the past decade, either alone or in conjunction with her associates, the Reclaiming Collective. Starhawk teaches that Medieval witchcraft was an earth-centered religion that celebrated life, fertility, sexuality, and women as priestesses, healers, and midwives. Modern witchcraft is the resurgence of this Old Religion which sees women as powerful, divinity as immanent, and offers positive images for women in all stages of our lives.

Articles by Starhawk are included in two ecofeminist anthologies, Healing the Wounds (Plant, 1989) and Reweaving the World (Diamond & Orenstein, 1990), and she has published several books, including The Spiral Dance (1989a) which is a popular source of information and rituals, very widely read and often quoted by the women I interviewed.

While Carolyn Merchant (1980), Susan Griffin(1978), and Starhawk (1989a) are clearly recognized as ecofeminist authors who have made links with Medieval witchcraft, other feminist writers have highlighted the Witch persecutions of the middle ages to demonstrate that this was a significant force in the domestication of women (Daly, 1978), the establishment of patriarchal capitalism (Ruether, 1975) and the masculinization of science (Keller, 1985). Helen Barstow (1993) demonstrates that the persecutions were blatantly misogynist and so horrendous that the effects are still being felt by women today. Following Gerald Gardener (1954/1991) and Starhawk (1989a), the Witches I interviewed believe that the witchcraft that the Inquisitors called devil worship is the progenitor of contemporary witchcraft practices. They feel rage, sorrow, and a profound sense of loss with the realization that the witch craze destroyed, not only innocent women but animism, the consciousness of immanence that ensures respect for the earth and all of life.

The women in this study identify themselves as Witches as a gesture of defiance of, and rebellion against, patriarchal constructions of women, bodies and nature as evil and in need of domination. By re-claiming the identity of Witch and practicing their craft, these contemporary women are reclaiming their right to construct their own identity and their own way of seeing the world. One of the benefits of this practice is that it gives women the strength and confidence to heal themselves, other people, and the earth.

CHAPTER TWO

Method

Research from the Margins

Finding a Method

Women's Studies gives women a voice; an opportunity to share our own experiences, discover more about ourselves, and create our own visions of a new reality. Through these activities, we have developed a new sense of identity and self-esteem - not only on a personal level, but as a group; not only here in North America, but in many other parts of the world. One thing that has become apparent through Women's Studies is that women are amazingly diverse. Another thing that has become apparent is that women have the desire and the ability to embrace diversity, to do away with broad generalizations, and still create knowledge through shared experiences.

Feminist theorists call into question social and intellectual structures that form the foundation of mainstream society, and they do so from a position outside of the mainstream, on the margins, a position which women scholars have used to their advantage. One insight that has emerged out of these critiques of mainstream society from the margins, is that many women live their lives in similarly marginal places. From this insight came the realization that, in order to add to knowledge about women, it is necessary to listen to individual women and to attempt to understand and interpret their experiences, and integrate them into larger contexts.

I listened to contemporary women Witches and found some very interesting themes which I will integrate into feminist theory. Something that became apparent early in the research process was that women who identify as Witches not only question the social and intellectual structures of society, they also profoundly question the structures of consciousness from which people derive their basic perceptions and understanding of the meaning of life. Changing consciousness from separation to connection requires the liberation of the imagination from habitual thought patterns.

The Witch after all, is an extraordinary symbol - independent anti-establishment, strong and proud. She is political, yet spiritual and magical. The Witch is a woman as martyr; she is persecuted by the ignorant; she is the woman who lives outside of society and outside of society's definitions (Adler, 1986, p.183).

Since Witches live on the margins of society, and I wanted to learn more about them, I followed the qualitative research method set out by Sandra Kirby and Kate McKenna in their book, Experience, Research and Social Change: Methods from the Margins (1989). Their method appealed to me because they demonstrate that, even if a researcher is quite enthusiastic about her subjects (which I am about Witches), she does not need to pretend to be objective. They state that the researcher can be passionately committed to advancing knowledge about a particular group, and they offer suggestions for reducing the amount of influence and control exerted by the researcher in the research situation.

They suggest that interviewing is a method that offers the researcher access to women's memories, thoughts, and ideas in their own words, which counteracts centuries of silencing (p. 19). In their discussion of interviewing techniques, they advise the researcher to think of ways to develop trust, pay close attention to subtleties such as pauses and tone of voice, and be open to exploring things that come up unexpectedly (pp. 21-25). The researcher should define herself as a listener and learner, and must value the interviewees as individuals that need to be listened to and respected (pp. 26-29). I found that the suggestions made by Kirby and McKenna resonated with and affirmed my own tendencies, and I followed their advice where possible.

Procedure

I interviewed seventeen women who reside in the Lower Mainland of British Columbia, who identified themselves as Witches. I asked them to describe their involvement in contemporary

witchcraft. I chose to use interviews rather than written questionnaires because I thought this method would access the women's experiences in their own words and reveal what they thought was important about being a Witch. I contacted the women I interviewed through my own participation in witchcraft events and meetings. In many cases, an interview with one Witch resulted in referrals to others, which was helpful in expanding my sample beyond those who would normally participate in community events. After I had completed fourteen of the interviews, I was curious to know how I would answer the questions, so I asked a friend to interview me. I have included my own interview in this study, as one of a total of eighteen respondents, because although I sometimes think that I have neither the natural psychic abilities, nor the experience with witchcraft that the other women in this study have, I do identify myself as a Witch.

All of the interviews were done at the homes of the interviewees, except two, who I arranged to meet at Simon Fraser University. The shortest interview lasted two hours and the longest was just over three hours. In an effort to establish a more relaxed and informal atmosphere for the main part of the interview, I endeavored to get the more formal aspects of the interview out of the way as efficiently as possible. I asked each participant to complete an informed consent form (Appendix A) and a brief questionnaire (Appendix B) which gathered demographic information. Each woman was given a subject feedback form (Appendix D) with which to communicate her response to the interview process to Simon Fraser University, if she chose to do so. Then she completed a self-addressed envelope in which the results of this study will be mailed to her.

While all of this was going on, I set up and tested my recording equipment. When all the forms were completed, I endeavored to put the interviewee at ease by engaging in congenial conversation while I started the recording device and turned to the main interview schedule (Appendix C). I read aloud the first part of the interview schedule, which instructs the participant

to think about her involvement in witchcraft and tell her story. About half of the interviewees felt comfortable talking about what was important to them about being a Witch without reading the questions. In these cases, I noted whether or not specific questions had been addressed and when the interviewee indicated that she had told her story, I asked specific questions if I felt they were not covered. Two of the women took the questionnaire, read it, and responded to each question in turn. The remainder indicated that they wanted to be asked specific questions to guide their answers.

The questions, which were designed to be open-ended, functioned as a guide for the interviews and participants were encouraged to elaborate or add details at any time. I listened attentively in order to encourage the women I interviewed to express their own thoughts with as little influence from me as possible. The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Although many of the women I interviewed were not concerned about anonymity, in the transcripts I have assigned code names and altered any identifying information, such as specific locations. The original tape recordings of these interviews have been destroyed.

Demographic Information

When I began the process of interviewing women Witches, I was interested in talking with women of a variety of ages, religious backgrounds, socio-economic classes, racial or ethnic groups and types of involvement in witchcraft. I did not attempt to gather a sample that would reflect statistically relevant information about who women Witches are, such as what races, classes or religious backgrounds are predominately represented in the Witch population, or how many Witches there are in the Lower Mainland of British Columbia. My study and my analysis are more philosophical, focusing on how and why women become involved in witchcraft and what relevance it has for liberation theory in general and ecofeminism in particular.

Although I had intended to include a cross section of racial backgrounds, I found that feminist Witches in the Lower Mainland of British Columbia are nearly all white, and my sample reflects this preponderance of European backgrounds⁷. Only one woman of color was included. This participant stated that her mother is a North American First Nations woman and her father's ancestors came to North America from Holland. She was raised in a very ethnically and racially diverse neighborhood, and while she was growing up, she thought of herself as white. Her spiritual journey through the practice of witchcraft led her to North American First Nations spirituality.

My main spiritual focus now leans more toward Native American things than toward Wicca. I find that Native American spirituality is Wicca to the next power (Liz Clawson).

All but two of the women in this study were raised in Christian homes, and about half identified the socio-economic status of their family of origin as either poor, working class, or working class and poor. One woman was from a lower middle class home, and the remainder said their family of origin was middle class.

The education levels of the parents of the women in this study were quite varied. Both parents of five of the women in this study had less than high school education. Three women had mothers who had completed high school and fathers who had not done so. Six women had at least one parent with a technical or trade certificate, or some post-secondary education. Four women had one parent (all fathers) who had University degrees. Two women had no siblings, six were first born, four were middle children, and six were youngest. Six women grew up with five or more siblings.

Fifteen of the women in this sample were living in Vancouver at the time of their interview. Two lived in Surrey and one lived in North Vancouver. Only three of the women I interviewed were originally from British Columbia. Two came from the US, and the rest came to the Lower Mainland of British Columbia from various parts of Canada.

The contemporary women Witches that consented to be interviewed for this study are quite varied in ages, with the oldest woman being 56 and the youngest 21. Eight of the women were between the ages of 39 and 45, five women were older than this group and five were younger. The mean age was 42.5 years. I included a question about marital status, which over half of the women chose not to answer. One woman indicated that she thought there were patriarchal connotations surrounding this question. I did not include any questions about sexual orientation, but eight women identified themselves as lesbians, one made no reference to her sexual orientation, and the remainder either identified themselves as heterosexual, or were currently living with men.

The level of education of this group of women is quite high, with seventeen of eighteen having some post-secondary education. Six hold undergraduate degrees and three have earned post-graduate degrees. On the other hand, income levels seem quite low: seven women have personal incomes of less than ten thousand dollars annually, and for two of them, that figure represents their total household income.

It seemed to me that many of the women found the question that dealt with work history frustrating and difficult to answer due to their extremely varied work histories. Only six women had fairly straightforward career paths while the majority had gaps in employment, short term jobs, and a wide variety of work experiences. It was interesting to note that, at the time of their interview, exactly half of the women were working in what could be called healing professions - social work, counseling, massage, and body work.

The significant events that women chose to mention pertained almost entirely to their fathers'. One woman's father died before she was born, and one woman's father was absent for most of her life. However, both of these women deeply felt their fathers' influence. Three women had alcoholic fathers, two women's fathers were chronically ill for many years, and one woman's father attempted suicide when she was in her teens. One woman's father died when she was

thirteen, and three more women witnessed their parents' divorces in their teen years and subsequently were raised by single parent mothers. One woman lost both parents to death in her early adult years. Six of the women in this study are survivors of childhood sexual assault, and two specifically named their fathers as the perpetrators.

The salient demographic characteristics of the sample are illustrated in Appendix E. I have chosen not to include some information on the chart in the interests of preserving confidentiality of particularly sensitive material.

Analysis of the Interviews

After the interviews were transcribed, I read through them and color coded themes that emerged from the interviews. Again, I was strongly influenced by Sandra Kirby and Kate McKenna (1989). I initially identified ten themes: conversion, rituals, covens, politics, immanence, magic, identity, psychological growth, trance and meditation, and ethics. I condensed these ten themes into three main categories: (a) identity, which included conversion, identity, covens, and ethics; (b) magic, which included rituals, immanence, psychological growth, and trance and meditation; and (c) politics, which remained a separate category. Information that I received from the women I interviewed was integrated with information from books and articles written by contemporary witches and scholars, and this analysis forms the results of this essay.

The identity category will be discussed under the heading, "Becoming a Witch". There, I will be examining why and how women choose to identify as Witches, and what benefits that choice brings to their lives. Magic will be the focus of another heading entitled, "The Magic of Witchcraft", where I will be discussing the structure of rituals, the content of rituals, changes in consciousness, working with energy, the development of psychic skills, and a new way of knowing and being in the world. The political category will be discussed in a third section named, "Outside the Master's House", where I will be discussing empowerment, the ways that witchcraft supports

actions for social change and environmental preservation, and the visions that women witches have for a better world.

As I began writing, one of the participants in this study agreed to read the work in progress, and offered valuable insights in response to the first and third drafts, which were incorporated into the final draft. Specifically, her feedback about the structure of the essay, her advice about the authorship of the chants, her comments on the Charge of the Goddess and on the politics of witchcraft, and her pinpointing of several typographical and grammatical errors were greatly appreciated. In addition, our conversations deepened my understanding of witchcraft, and allowed valuable insights to emerge.

The voices I will present in this paper express a hopeful vision which links spirituality, psychology, philosophy, social and political concerns, and environmental or ecological survival. The overall goal of this paper and of feminist witchcraft in general is to create strong women, a caring and cooperative society, and a healthy environment.

CHAPTER THREE

Results

Becoming a Witch

Why Women Want to be Witches

The Witch as a symbol of rebellion. In 1968 a group of feminists named themselves WITCH, an acronym for “Women’s International Terrorist Conspiracy from Hell”, and distributed a pamphlet called “The WITCH Manifesto” that connected Medieval European Witches with modern North American feminists and blurred the boundaries between feminist politics and spirituality. Robin Morgan published the pamphlet in her book Sisterhood is Powerful (1970) and excerpts from the original appear in several, more recent texts (Adler, 1986; Daly, 1978; Eller, 1993; Stein, 1990).

WITCH is . . . an awareness that witches and gypsies were the original guerrillas and resistance fighters against oppression. . . women who dared to be courageous, aggressive, intelligent, . . . the living remnants of the oldest culture of all. . . . You are a Witch by saying aloud, “I am a witch” three times, and thinking about that. You are a witch by being female, untamed, angry, joyous, and immortal (Quoted in Eller, 1993, pp. 53-54).

One of the women I interviewed shared her memory of those early days of the second wave of the feminist movement.

As I became involved in the feminist movement, I remember reading things from the radical feminists of New York that would say things like, “All you have to do to be a Witch is say, ‘I’m a Witch! I’m a Witch! I’m a Witch!’, and then you’re a Witch.” And it was reclaiming that, because it had been used as a derogatory term, and because of solidarity with the women

who had been killed in the Witch burnings. Most of the women involved with that were not into Wicca in any real serious way, and I certainly wasn't at the time, but there was an appeal to that identification. It was like being a rebel, and woman identified in a way (Clara Singer).

The Witch as an expression of feminist spirituality. As the feminist movement gained in strength, the feelings of defiant rebellion against patriarchy grew, but identifying as a Witch started to include some spiritual overtones.

When I told a Witch I knew that I hesitated to call myself a Witch because I felt that I didn't know enough about it, she encouraged me to say, "I'm a Witch" three times. When I did, I felt a sense of commitment to a set of values that I held very deeply. My mind instantly traveled back over 35 years, to when I was 15 years old and wanting to become a member of the United Church. The minister told me that, in order to become a member, I needed to feel a sense of commitment to the Church. I told him that I did feel committed but, after I said, "I'm a Witch", I realized in amazement that this is what he meant by commitment (Betty MacLeod).

For many women, the quest for spiritual involvement grew along with their involvement in feminism. Two authors who have studied feminist spirituality (Eller, 1993) and feminist Neo-pagan Witches (Adler, 1986) both conclude that consciousness raising groups that were popular in the late 1960s were the site of the rise in popularity of spiritual concerns among feminists (Adler, p. 182; Eller, p. 44). It is well known that, in consciousness raising groups, personal concerns were recognized as having social causes and political solutions, as the slogan, "the personal is political", indicates. It is less well known that awareness of oppressions and the search for solutions to the problems created by patriarchal domination and control led many women to seek spiritual solutions. Ursula King (1993) indicates why feminist consciousness often creates an awareness of deeper, more pervasive problems in our society, and an accompanying awareness that the solutions to those problems require deep, radical changes in human consciousness.

At its strongest, deepest and largest the feminist vision is a spiritual one linked to the strength of faith and the dedication of spirit. . . . The protest and promise of the women's movement opens up a new horizon for human development which touches the horizon of transcendence (p. 218).

The central feminist theme of making connections and weaving a new pattern of non-hierarchical relationships brought one of the women I interviewed to witchcraft.

I think witchcraft is one of the few spiritual outlets that acknowledges women in their true power. . . . It feels right for me in my feminism, because my feminism isn't just about equal rights for women, it's about equal rights for all things, and honoring and respecting all things, which is really big for me around the earth and the environment (Anita Varden).

Consciousness raising groups, as they were structured in the 1960s, have disappeared. However, women still meet together in groups; in Churches and Synagogues, at conferences and women's centers. Although none of these groups are specifically called consciousness raising groups, sometimes they do raise feminist consciousness, and sometimes they become stepping stones to involvement in witchcraft. Two of the women I interviewed were introduced to feminism and Goddess worship through women's groups offered by the Unitarian Church. Kim Hume was an active Unitarian when:

I became a feminist and along with that I started reading some of the early literature about the Goddess. So I gradually got more and more drawn to that, which didn't feel like any kind of separation from the Unitarian Church because the Unitarians encourage you to do that kind of thing (Kim Hume).

Paula James had a similar experience:

The Unitarian church is one of the places that gave women, twenty years ago, a place where they could be powerful and spiritual, so I found that I was exposed to some very interesting and very strong women, so it brought feminism and spirituality together. And, at one point, there was a particular group that was doing some Goddess work and that was the first time I was introduced to the realm of Goddess worship (Paula James).

In addition to Church groups, more secular group experiences can lead to spiritual awareness. The following two examples of psychological work becoming spiritual are provided by Terry Whitmore and Margaret Becker:

I was doing psychological work, and I was in a group. We were doing a visualization that had nothing to do with spirituality. And suddenly, I took my own journey and got in contact with an energy that was a woman with beautiful, long, flowing hair. And she spoke to me and said it was time to reclaim the feminine, and that it was for me to play a part in that - to bring her to life. I identified this woman as the Goddess, and I felt something heal inside me (Terry Whitmore).

It started about four years ago when I saw a workshop advertised at Hollyhock center over on Cortes Island. It was called "the divine feminine", but it was sub-titled - something to do with mother-daughter relationships, which I felt that I needed to work on vis-à-vis my mother and my daughter. And I went to this and really felt I'd stumbled into something that I'd been looking for for a long time. Because the workshop was for five days, in this beautiful rural setting, and used a lot of ritual, drumming, myth, story and was very much geared to earth spirituality (Margaret Becker).

I have always been a Witch. In my case, finding witchcraft was part of a process of intense personal growth and awareness that began several years ago. Looking back, it seems to me that as I got to know and like myself at deeper and deeper levels, there was an acceptance of a way

that I was different from people around me. Where I had once felt ashamed of crying over injured animals and raging about trees that were cut down to make way for a new road, I realized that this affinity for non-human nature was something to be valued. As my therapy progressed, the day came when I opened to the experience of immanent divinity - that awesome connection between myself and the world. When I went to my first witchcraft meeting, I found others who understood that experience, valued it, and knew how to create it. I felt like I had come home.

More than half of the women that I interviewed echoed this experience of very early feelings of appreciation of and connection with nature, and the sense of coming home to witchcraft. These feelings were expressed in many different ways but Sylvia Owens' words capture a theme common to many witches. She told me that when she was a child she sought solace in nature: *There was a way that I rested deeply in nature and found a lot of inspiration and comfort and connection with myself.* As young people, the women I interviewed kept these feelings secret because they were discounted by parents and teachers who shamed or belittled them. When they were introduced to witchcraft, these feelings became acceptable, sometimes for the first time in their lives. For example, Anna Dvorak told me that when her friend invited her to join a witchcraft circle, *It was like something I'd been into my whole life, or had known my whole life.* Likewise, soon after coming into contact with witchcraft, Mary Jane Brooks realized, *I've always been a Witch, but I never had the terms for it.*

Moving away from mainstream religion. Besides feeling this sense of having values that were different from people around them and not being able to accept or feel accepted by mainstream society, eleven of the women I interviewed mentioned feeling a sense of spiritual emptiness in their lives which contradicted their sense of social accomplishment. Their quest for spiritual connection could not be filled by religions that were available to them, and because they

were raised in Christian homes in North America, the first move toward witchcraft was a move away from the Church.

I was raised Seventh Day Adventist and my - at some point, I don't even know exactly what happened, but I couldn't believe those stories anymore. It was wrong, and I couldn't believe a religion, or a God, or a philosophy that was based on guilt. And I also didn't believe that I was inherently evil. And it hit me at some point that people were always looking externally for God - for divinity - and waiting to get blessed from outside. And I always felt the God was inside, and that it was there already, and that we were divine and good (Liz Clawson).

Another aspect of Christianity that women found troublesome is that the God as father image is a dominant, hierarchical model which keeps human beings in a state of dependence as children of god. This is unacceptable to contemporary women who are struggling to define themselves and find their place in the world.

When I was a teenager, I thought that religion - Christianity, was for people who still needed mother looking over them shaking her finger at them. And because you can't have that, you have God. And God's looking over you and sees what you're doing, and He shakes his finger when you do something wrong. And I thought that was very weak - only weak people needed that. And that what you really need is to recognize what's inside of you, and to do it for the goodness in yourself rather than, you know, someone's going to be unhappy with you (Mary Jane Brooks)

Many modern women feel profoundly alienated from the traditional Christian religion which still dominates North American culture, because God is usually referred to as "He" and described as "Father". Carol Christ (1979) explains that when divinity is always male, a woman is left with feelings of inferiority. "Her mood is one of trust in male power as salvific and distrust of female power in herself and other women as inferior or dangerous" (p. 275). Also, the father

God has profound implications for women in that the worship of a male God legitimates the social and political authority of men. Clara Singer told me that, in spite of maintaining some positive regard for the Church she attended as a young person, she felt *totally alienated, in terms of political policies of the Catholic church as an organization that oppresses women.*

In addition to the focus on masculine divinity, the Christian creation story of Adam and Eve further maligns women and contributes to feelings of low self-esteem. For example, Terry Whitmore *felt weighted down by the Eve story - original sin and how women were responsible for men.* But, even if a woman has never been exposed to the Biblical idea that women are evil, when a young woman seeks positive role models within Christianity, she is likely to find, like Kim Hume, that *women have either been left out of the picture or they have been downtrodden, the underling - in some instances the scapegoat, and certainly the least valued.*

In addition to male images of God, the Eve story, and the lack of positive images of women in Christianity, other issues also encouraged women to leave the Church.

When I was growing up I felt, with the exposure I did get to Christianity, that it was hypocritical. I couldn't understand it. I didn't like the role models I was seeing. You know, on one hand they say, "Thou shalt not kill.", and on the other hand you see all the Christian wars, you know, and, "Unless it's in my name. . .", being God's name, "then go out and slaughter all those people!" (Mary Jane Brooks)

Similarly, when Liz Clawson noticed that her parents' Christian religion was based on guilt and shame, it contradicted her own sense that people were born good.

We're born divine. And then things happen and we start to lose heart. And in our society heart is not encouraged, conformity is encouraged. You lose your humanity. You lose touch with what's divine in you (Liz Clawson).

Although many women witches are quick to point out that Christianity is not all bad and to cite positive aspects of their early religious training, most of the women in my sample left the Christian church in their teenaged years. However, in spite of the oppression women felt in Christian communities, some continued to work for change inside the Church. This happened to Sara Brannigan who, after many years of being devoted to and working within a Christian community, finally found the behavior of a power hungry patriarch too much to deal with. In her struggle for change, renewal, and affirmation, Sara was willing to risk isolation from a Church community that she cared very deeply about in order to seek a different spiritual practice. But leaving the Church was also very unsatisfying:

At some point after I left the Church, I went through a real spiritual crisis, and it was more like around insecurity, 'cause I thought, "If God doesn't exist like I always thought He did, then really I'm just - Like if God doesn't exist, then I'm totally alone in the world." And I was freaked out - like literally terrified for weeks because of this, and feeling despairing. I guess I hadn't realized how much I had depended on that. After returning to the Church for a particularly powerful Easter service, I went home, and it was around two in the morning, and I took a bath, and I lit some incense and a candle, and I had this vision in the bath that God came to me. And He really was that old man with white hair and a white beard up in the sky. Like I finally admitted that, as much as I tried to make Him into female, or genderless, or whatever, He always would just be that to me, because I struggled so hard with that when I was Catholic. And I had a little chat with Him, and He was very gentle, and I was really angry at that time, and hated anything male, so it was surprising to have this image of God as this really gentle and accepting person, soul, whatever, who basically just said to me, "I'm not the be-all and the end-all, and there's another path for you. If you ever need me, I'll be here, you can just call me. But

go on your way, 'cause this isn't where you're supposed to be." After that, I felt like - it just resolved it for me (Sara Brannigan).

Three women said that they resolved their conflicts with Christianity by turning to atheism, which they found very unsatisfying.

I used to say to my friends, "Well, I think God is just mis-spelled. I think it was spelled 'good' and somebody left an 'o' out. And I think 'good' is what we have to be, and we have to rely on each other, because there ain't nothin' more - you know, you're dead, you're buried, you rot!" And that's really, I think, a sad and empty way to be - that there's nothing more out there - that there is no more connection than the hard, cold, physical, what we see with our eyes (Mary Jane Brooks).

This search for deeper meaning and purpose in life led many of the women I interviewed to embark on a spiritual quest that led them to witchcraft.

I couldn't understand why the women always played such submissive, weak roles in religion. And I started to explore, and on my own, I went to different churches. . . . I did a lot of reading. . . . I went to the Michigan Women's Music Festival and there were a lot of Witches there, and I got involved in a circle. Actually, it was a psychic circle, which is really more of a focus for me. And in that circle, there were a lot of Witches that brought a great deal of spirituality to the circle, rather than a religious concept. And spirituality is what draws me the most. I have really strong spirituality (Grace Fletcher)

Witch power? When Cynthia Eller (1993) considers why women become involved in feminist spirituality (which from her perspective includes contemporary women Witches), she argues that spiritual feminists are women who have felt stymied in their more direct attempts to gain political power.

This thwarted political desire is plowed under to fertilize a different kind of feminism: one that uses religious vehicles to carry its dreams of social power. . . . Spiritual feminists find a realm where they can exercise power, feel powerful, and compensate for the lack of power they experience in their daily lives (pp. 211-212).

While I agree that personal power is important for Witches, I found that the reasons why women are attracted to witchcraft are as varied as the women themselves. The one generalization I would feel comfortable making is that choosing to become a Witch has very little to do with social power - at least in the way that social power is normally defined. Starhawk (1987) explains that there are three types of power: power-over, which is domination and control; power-from-within, which is the actualization of our deepest abilities and potential; and power-with (also known as power-to), which is the influence we wield among equals (p. 9). When witches speak of empowerment, they are talking about empowerment that advances their own development without limiting or controlling others (Miller, 1986, p. 117). The experience of power-from-within is the sense of connection with all of life that is integral to the practice of witchcraft. The awareness that everything is alive, and that we are participants in the sacred life force, creates the potential for the experience of power-with, such as feeling the energy of plants, being able to communicate with non-human animals, or forming mutually empowering relationships with other people (Starhawk, 1988, p. 35). This is empowering, but it is not power-over, which is the way social power is normally defined.

Finding witchcraft has really allowed me to be who I am and to believe the things that I believe about power, and connection, and life forces. And it's given me a sense of having power in my own life in the sense of having power to change things in my life (Sara Brannigan).

When I feel empowered in this sense, I forget to compare myself with others who are more “successful” than I am, and I respect and value my life and the choices I have made. This allows me to proceed with confidence rather than falling into hopelessness and despair. This is power - to act with integrity, to care, to work for social justice, to work against environmental destruction, to trust one’s own thoughts, feelings, and intuition.

How to Become a Witch

While increasing one’s consciousness of oppression and feelings of dissatisfaction with mainstream religions provide impetus for a woman’s spiritual search, in order to become a Witch, one has to make contact with witchcraft. The ways that women first learn about the Craft are extremely varied. One woman who is an artist noticed a change in her creative work.

My art started changing. I started making what I would identify today as Goddess figures. I had never done that before and I didn’t know what that was about. And it was deeply emotional to me, so I knew I was onto something and I just kept letting that come out. And as I was letting that come out, I came upon different people that had information around Goddesses and stuff, and I started becoming familiar with what was coming out of me. And I relate this to recovering memory from incest, because I was going through the same process with this - like I was remembering. It was out of a place of shock because for some reason, I had denied this part of me right up until it started happening, so when it came out, when I realized I’m a Witch, I was really shocked (Jean Davis).

Several of the women I interviewed were invited to ritual celebrations which they liked and wanted to find out more about. For Kate Schulman, Sylvia Owens, and Clara Singer, the celebrations were under the full moon and the leaders were other women who, in Kate’s words, “just sort of traveled around and got women together under the full moon and did ritual.” For

Anna Dvorak, her friends invited her to her first pagan ritual when she was living in a cabin in the mountains.

It was February second, Brigid Fire, and we went around behind the cabin, and there was still about four feet of snow on the ground. And we were all making beeswax candles at the time, so we took all our candles up there and placed them in a circle around a tree, and then we packed down a path around it in a circle, and we brought altar objects with us and placed them around, and then we just danced and sang around the circle (Anna Dvorak).

And for Mary Jane Brooks, an uncommon wedding shower was enhanced by the inclusion of some interesting things which intrigued her.

A friend of mine gave what would be equivalent to a wedding shower for a friend, but we called it wedding circle. She invited only women - the mother of the bride, the mother of the groom, a few relatives and her close friends. She didn't cast a circle or anything but she talked about being in protected space. And we went around and wished for this new bride, things in her life. Things like, that money would never be an issue, that her partner would always be her best friend, and just lovely things. And some of us who were quilters asked everyone to bring a piece of material that reminded us of the woman who was getting married, and we went around and said why we felt that it was representative of her. And then the quilters took it and we cut our dancing women and made a circle and a wall hanging for her (Mary Jane Brooks).

Three of the women I interviewed, had their first taste of witchcraft at spiritual rituals that happened at the Michigan Women's Music Festival - a gathering of women that has been held annually for the past twenty years, that includes spiritual events within their overall musical and cultural theme. Wendy Halvorson tells what that was like for her.

I went to the Michigan Women's Festival, and there I went to a workshop led by Z. Budapest, and she is quite a spectacular figure. At this workshop, they estimated that there were

four hundred women, and it was amazing. We did a spiral dance, and with that many women chanting - I mean the energy was just incredible! The moon was really, really full - it was just beaming down on us. It was quite magical and just really hard to describe. It was almost an out of body experience. By the time I went back to my campsite, even though I was walking alone, I was about a hundred and fifty women - like I felt BIG! So that was a pretty good indication, and I really wanted to seek more of the same (Wendy Halvorson).

For several other women, their first contact with witchcraft was through books that were recommended to them by friends or acquaintances. Starhawk's book, The Spiral Dance (1989a) which was first published in 1979, was mentioned by eight women as a particularly significant initial contact with witchcraft. Often spontaneous groups were formed using The Spiral Dance and two other very popular books, Diane Mariechild's Motherwit (1981/1988) and Zsuzsanna Budapest's The Holy Book of Women's Mysteries (1980/1989) as guides. Participants in these groups followed suggestions that were offered in these books and developed their own rituals.

I settled in a house with some women and some of them had started to be interested in this stuff too. So, sometimes we would have impromptu circles out on the back porch and just chant and wail away. But we didn't cast a circle or call in the four directions. It was very informal. And then, occasionally, we would get together in a larger group if it was a full moon or a Sabbat or something (Clara Singer).

But these groups were still not thought of as Wiccan or witchcraft groups. As Sara Brannigan explains; *I started meeting with a group of women that was more a women's spirituality group. It wasn't a Wiccan group. We were all exploring things. Similarly, Meg Wallace joined a women's group to learn more about goddesses, where one of the participants knew about witchcraft and shared her knowledge with the rest of the group. So that's when I started getting more involved in it. I started my own group - just a general Goddess group - and*

then I decided a couple of months into it that I wanted it to be more of a Wicca group (Meg Wallace).

And Camp! There was a lecture - Starhawk was in town. And I went to her lecture and there were these underground mutterings about, "And camp, and camp." And I was asking, "What's this camp about?" "How do you get to this camp?" (Mary Jane Brooks)

For nine of the women I interviewed, the change from participating in general women's spirituality groups to practicing witchcraft happened when they went to B.C. Witch Camp. "Witch Camp is a week-long summer camp taught by Starhawk and the Reclaiming Collective from San Francisco. The B.C. Witch Camp has been held for the last eight years at a secluded camp beside a magical lake in a 200 year old forest east of Vancouver" (Fitzgerald, 1995, p. 64). Each camp has a theme and that theme is woven through the workshops and rituals to create an exciting learning experience.

There's usually an elements class which is for people who don't have much knowledge about witchcraft and want to learn the basics. And then there are two advanced classes - one to do with inner work and one to do with outer work, because one of the things that the Reclaiming tradition believes strongly is that it's important to connect the craft and your spiritual practice with action in the world to make the world a better place. All teaching is done within sacred space so it's all in the form of a ritual of some sort - there's not much didactic teaching, it's very experiential. . . . It's also a lot of fun because laughter and play are very much valued. . . . You can go deeper and deeper into it and you can learn more about it and learn more about yourself at the same time, and make connections that you haven't made before (Kim Hume).

The women who have attended Witch Camp describe their experiences there as "intense", as the following examples indicate:

It was quite an experience. I have nothing to compare it to. It was intense - it opened up possibilities I had never thought of (Mary Jane Brooks).

It was tremendous. So much deep work, everyday, for hours and hours, and a heavy two or three hour ritual each night. To say it was magical is an understatement. It was incredible - like doing twenty-four hour intense therapy work for seven days (Jean Davis).

The Witch Camps that happen with Starhawk are incredibly intense and they do both bring that knowledge of the craft and open you to your own personal process. There have been a couple of years when I've gone to Camp, and it's basically given me my homework for the next year (Paula James).

I went to Witch Camp here in Vancouver and that was a really great experience for me. I was scared. I was scared shitless. But I felt something really strong sort of settle inside me, something that I could really trust (Elaine Krentz).

Through the B.C. Witch Camp, Starhawk has had an amazing impact on women Witches in the Lower Mainland of British Columbia. Although male Witches attend Camp, there are usually fewer than ten men among one hundred registrants. Of the eleven women I interviewed who have attended the Camp, six have attended several times. And, in addition to the eleven who have been there, three more want to go. But getting there is a challenge in itself: "Every year the Camp grows more popular. In 1994 over 300 applications were received for 100 spaces" (Fitzgerald, 1995, p. 64).

When women return from Witch Camp, they often form covens, or join existing groups to continue to enhance their growth as Witches. Some women get involved in teaching classes about witchcraft to get more women involved. Five of the women I interviewed were introduced to witchcraft by attending "Elements of Witchcraft" classes that were taught by Camp alumni. Also, women who have gained experience at Witch Camp plan and organize large community rituals for

the celebration of seasonal festivals, known as Sabbats. There are eight of these in a year: (1) February first or Imbolc; (2) Spring Equinox; (3) May first or Beltane; (4) Summer Solstice; (5) August first or Lammas; (6) Fall Equinox; (7) November first or Samhain (usually celebrated on October 31); and (8) Winter Solstice. These larger celebrations allow women who are interested in witchcraft to attend rituals somewhat anonymously and informally, to learn more about witchcraft and related activities in the community, and to make contact with other women Witches.

I went to a couple of rituals that the Witch community puts on and I really liked it and was very interested in the whole business of celebrating the seasonal cycles. It really felt to me like there was some real spirit there and it had some real meaning, rather than sitting in these rows in a church and having somebody talk to you. I really liked that participatory thing (Wendy Halvorson).

Witch Covens: Maintaining Involvement

So, women become Witches for many reasons and in a great variety of ways. But once a woman decides to become a Witch, belonging to a small group, or coven, is an important part of maintaining this self-definition, and developing a Witch's skills. The women I interviewed used the words "circle", or "ritual group", interchangeably with the word "coven", when they are talking about these small groups, but it is apparent that the name "coven" is associated with and emphasizes a woman's identification as a Witch.

What is a Coven? According to Starhawk (1989a), covens and Witches have always been linked. The teachers and leaders of the old Pagan religion formed councils that were specifically targeted for persecution by the Inquisition. These councils were the original 'covens', where wise men and women practiced their Craft and organized gatherings and festivals (p. 50). Jeffrey Russell's (1980) investigation of the etymology of the word coven supports this claim.

In Scotland, the term coven, a variant of convent, from Latin

conventus, 'assembly'. was introduced about 1500 AD as a name for the witches' meeting and then, by extension, as a name for the local group of practicing witches (p. 76).

When a modern woman becomes a Witch, the small group where she will learn and practice her craft will be a 'coven', accenting her identity as a Witch.

Coven composition. Traditional sources indicate that there should be thirteen Witches in a coven (Murray, 1931/1970), but among the contemporary women Witches I interviewed, the number of members in most covens varies between five and ten. The covens function primarily as a small, but consistent community where Witches are able to practice various aspects of their Craft. At the time I interviewed them, eleven of the interviewees were currently part of at least one coven, three women had never been part of any coven, and four had been involved in a coven but were choosing not to be at the time of their interview. Of the seven women who were not currently part of a coven, six regularly attended community rituals for the Sabbats, and practiced alone the rest of the time. A chart showing the configuration of participation in covens for the women in this study is attached as Appendix F.

Of the three women who had no coven experience, one woman prefers to work alone because she enjoys the flexibility and spontaneity of solitary rituals.

On the full and the new moon, when I do ritual, sometimes it's just standing really quietly and projecting forward whatever I feel like projecting. Sometimes, I like the smell of sage, and I like how it cleans the room. And I'll light a candle, or get out one of the crystal goblets and include water, and air, and fire, and earth. I'll do that 'cause that's what feels OK (Grace Fletcher).

The other two women who had never worked in a coven said they might be interested in joining a coven sometime in the future, but they are not interested in being involved in a small group at this time.

I was asked to join a coven but I never did. I think that's another step - it's a real commitment. . . I still had a lot of my own personal work to do (Elaine Krentz).

I'm not part of a coven, and I'm choosing not to be. Like when the opportunity came up for me to do that I chose not to because I want to feel really strong in my own way before I enter into a group (Wendy Halvorson).

Four of the women had been in covens previously, but were choosing not to be at the time of their interview. One left her original coven because she moved, and the covens that she found locally did not work out for her.

I just don't want to be in the presence of that energy anymore. So, I practice alone, I do ritual for the big Sabbats, and I do full moon rituals, and I do ritual if there's something that needs to be worked on, like if someone ill. . . . Practicing alone now seems to be the nurturing I need (Liz Clawson).

The other three of the women who had worked in covens previously indicated that, while they were interested in joining a new coven, they were unwilling to rush into a new group.

I'm not in a coven right now. I would like to be, but I figure it will come to me in its time (Kim Hume).

Six of the fifteen women who had experience with covens had worked only with women. Nine had attended at least one coven meeting where both men and women were participants. Four of these said they preferred to work in mixed sex groups, because they felt the need to have a balance of masculine and feminine energy.

It was very important to me to really concentrate on the feminine to heal myself, but it's not at the expense of the other half - the masculine principle. So there's always been some male energy in my own coven - not in the public rituals, but certainly in my own coven. Because that's what Wicca is all about- it's the dance of masculine and feminine. . . and you need two equal partners before you can dance (Terry Whitmore).

It is interesting to note that three of the four women who preferred to work in groups where both men and women were present, were strongly influenced by North American First Nations spiritual traditions. Two of them have ongoing involvement with First Nations people, and the other acknowledges and appreciates the First Nations influence in her magical practice but does not see herself as following a First Nations spiritual path. All three of these women indicated that, in North American First Nations' spiritual traditions, the earth and earth energy are conceptualized as feminine, and the sky is light oriented, masculine energy. Both masculine and feminine energy are valued and necessary, as this description of a Beltane celebration indicates.

And when we gathered as men and women, we broke into councils of women and men and we would do the traditional women preparing the hole, while the men go off and get the pole, and then bring the pole. And there is no deeper or more exquisite way to experience the difference than when a group of women have been preparing a hole in the ground together and decorating it with flowers and you hear this sort of deep chant coming in the forest - ugh, ugh, low sounds, and you just get prickles all over your body, because you're experiencing the energy of men bringing a pole to put into the hole. And it's so primal, that I wouldn't want to exclude myself from that wonderful experience of how the women meet the men, and making contact, and how they help the pole enter the earth (Sylvia Owens).

While four women found much that was positive about working with men, the other five women who had worked in groups where both men and women were present, emphatically stated

their preference for working only with women, citing the hierarchical, and much more scripted nature of coven work in the Gardnerian and Alexandrian traditions (which none of the four women who liked working with men were involved in), and the fact that men often had not done enough work on sexual issues or letting go of authority.

I went to a mixed group and there was a man there who was known as the high priest and a woman who was known as the high priestess of the event. And the energy was really male, and this high priest guy was coming on to a young woman and it was really disgusting. I hated it. And everybody just accepted it. And because with witches and in witchcraft we value sexuality and try to be a lot more free with it, and honor it, I think there is a lot of permission to be sexually open in our rituals, but I just felt that it was inappropriate, what he was doing with this young woman. And this young woman, I mean, she wasn't that young, I mean she was old enough to be responsible for herself, but my sense of her was that she was probably pretty wounded and I just felt like the sexual energy that was going on was not equal in terms of power relations. He had a lot of power. And when I've heard of more traditional groups having gatherings and the room for sex and sexuality, I have just been really uncomfortable there, because I don't believe that those men have done their work around feminism, around women's issues, and so I'm very cautious about it (Sara Brannigan).

Sara Brannigan's observation of the interplay between power and sexuality was also illustrated by the following account, told by the youngest woman that I interviewed, about a personal encounter with a male Witch.

He was in a coven and I did one ritual with him but I didn't feel comfortable with him because I'd always done rituals with women. And we did a full moon ritual, like basically out of the book - it was all outlined, so I could see how it went, and I said everything after he said it, and it was really neat that way, but I felt that he was not doing it for the right reasons. I felt like

he was attracted to me and wanting more from me - that was my underlying feeling there. So I wasn't all that comfortable with it (Anna Dvorak).

Although the women who spoke about their reluctance to work with men in witchcraft were unwilling to make broad generalizations about all men, most felt that there were gender issues that needed to be resolved.

I wouldn't get into going to mixed rituals because I think it's very hard for men to let go of their power and it's very hard for women to trust men that they're going to do that. And I don't think that I would find it all that satisfying on a deep level to be there with those kinds of guards up (Clara Singer).

Of the eleven women who were currently working in covens, only one was involved in a group that included men. The information about covens that follows reflects the experiences of contemporary women Witches who work in women-only covens, but to the best of my knowledge, the dynamics of covens that will be discussed do not vary substantially between women-only covens and mixed-sex groups that are within the Reclaiming or Eclectic traditions⁹.

Joining a coven. For a woman who wants to be part of a coven, the first task is to find one to join. But because it is so vital that the personalities of coven members are at least somewhat compatible, it is not always easy to find one to fit into. Some women were able to find existing covens that welcomed them into the fold, but for many, joining a coven presented some difficulties.

Here in Vancouver circles tend to be closed. You get into them when they are forming or there are particular times when a circle might decide to be open. Generally, the circles tend to be closed, and I think that's really right for this city. I think it does counteract the impersonal - like you don't know anybody. Having a consistent grouping feels like it's really important in this environment. And my experience is that the magic does deepen in a group that you have experience and trust with, and that the ability to move into sacred and powerful work becomes

much easier with a consistent group. There is a kind of power that can happen in a place where you don't know anybody. But that ongoing grouping is really where you get to do a much more powerful work (Paula James).

Rather than wait for an existing coven to create a space for them, eight of the women I spoke to had taken the initiative to develop their own group in order to enhance their learning about witchcraft and magic. Each of these eight women had connected with the process of witchcraft briefly - some at Witch Camp, some at "Elements" classes, others at various types of gatherings, and they determined to bring the practice of witchcraft into their lives on a regular basis. One woman went to a circle organized by her friend and liked what happened. She wanted to know more.

So she told me the book that she had been reading was Diane Stein's Casting the Circle: A Women's Book Of Ritual. And that's such a great how-to book for someone who doesn't know anything. So I went and read it and just called all my friends and said; "Hey you want to do this?" (laughter) And that's how my first group started. None of us knew anything - we basically followed the book (Mary Jane Brooks).

Forming or joining a coven is not something to be taken lightly. A deep commitment to personal and spiritual growth are necessary prerequisites.

Group work, coven work, circle work, is really important to my experience of the craft. . . I find that the connection and the energy raised in groups does very much sustain me. And most of the ritual groups that I have been part of have, to a large extent, also been support groups. So that, there is very much a sense of creating check-in time, changing rituals to accommodate particular needs, doing some special rituals for people who are in some kind of crisis or a particular celebration they want to have the group come together around. For me, that is also an important part of the work. It's not simply magical work but it is very much bringing

ourselves into the magical work, after we've created sacred space, establishing of a safe framework and then bringing ourselves into that space (Paula James).

Important learning happens in covens, and much of it is focused on psychological insights and self acceptance. Women Witches feel supported emotionally and psychologically as the coven members deepen in their knowledge and trust of each other. However, Mary Jane Brooks described additional expectations for an newly formed coven that she was part of.

We really want to do some serious work. We want to do some trance work, and more research on goddesses. . . . And when we've gotten satiated with goddesses we might move on to crystals or something we don't know anything about and we'd like to. And we thought we'd dedicate a season to learn more about the Tarot (because one of the women knows lots about it and the rest of us don't). That way we can share knowledge and improve our practice and really do some in-depth work. . . . I don't want to just socialize and I don't want to be a therapy group - I want to get on to do spiritual stuff (Mary Jane Brooks).

This requirement that a coven be a meaningful learning experience and different from a counseling or personal growth group is echoed by Kate Schulman who has taught classes to novice Witches on the basics of coven work.

If you're going to be in a group that does ritual, and you're going to call yourselves Witches, you're going to be confronting all of your own stuff. I mean, are you willing to talk about racism and sexism and that kind of stuff, and classism? Are you just going to get together to do ritual, or are you going to try to get to a place where there's a deepening and a trust? To do that you have to be pretty honest with yourself. A coven is a place to do ritual. It isn't a place to do peer counseling. It's not an emotional support group, it's not a therapy group, it's a coven. All those things may happen, and do happen. You do get support, and you do get emotional release, but if you go in with that idea it won't work (Kate Schulman).

Covens offer support, self-awareness, a place to develop psychic skills, a chance to practice magic, and an opportunity to have fun. One coven I heard about offered a group of five women an opportunity to address special issues.

I'm in a coven with all lesbians. It gives me a place to do specifically stuff that's in common with lesbians. Which is back to invisibility - there are always issues of visibility for us - to ourselves, too. And esteem, few parents ever look at us and say, "Oh good! Another queer baby in the family." (chuckle) So we carry a lot of that shit. So there's not just the important issues of that type of camaraderie and sharing - like being a mirror to each other, there's the stuff around the fact that we see differently in the world because we have to deal with different things. And it's not that we see better than or worse than, we see differently. And in my opinion, it's about making our own culture with each other, because we don't have role models in society, we don't have a culture, we don't have heroes. So we have to make that for ourselves. For me, it's a way to be strong in my identity and not keep it all in my head - to share what I am (Jean Davis).

Changing covens. Sometimes a particular coven will work well for a long period of time (the longest I heard about was approximately seven years). However, every woman I interviewed who had been part of a coven, had experienced the discomfort of leaving at least one coven, or having it disintegrate. This happens for a variety of reasons. Sometimes, although everyone has excellent intentions, a new group just does not congeal.

The one circle group, although we met for probably about a year, it never really formed a tight group. The energy that we raised was pretty sporadic, so it disbanded. And in fact, in some ways the closing ceremony that we did with it was as powerful as any. But, I think that was because it was truer, because we were releasing it. It was time to do that, and it was powerful (Paula James).

In other cases, a group works well for a time and then the participants begin to feel dissatisfied.

I was in that first coven for about three years. And then I left because the coven - it seemed like it wasn't going anywhere. And we all acknowledged that there was no energy there, so we went through this whole process of evaluation for about 6 months, and we cleared everything that we could possibly think, that we had with each other, and still the energy wouldn't go anywhere. So I took a leave of absence and said that I wasn't being fed, I wasn't bringing energy to it and I felt like I just needed to go (Sara Brannigan).

Although Starhawk (1989a) states that covens should not be leaderless groups, and that persons who are more adept at working with energy should be acknowledged and supported, the covens that I heard about, that are formed by women Witches who have been trained by Starhawk in the Reclaiming tradition, stress consensus decision making, rotating leadership tasks and responsibilities, and non-hierarchical organization. (This is in contrast to the Gardnerian, Alexandrian, and Saxon traditions where two persons are designated as the High Priest and High Priestess.) One woman experienced the non-hierarchical nature of her coven as leaderless, which turned out to be problematic.

The one coven group that I belonged to continued for a couple of years changed form a couple of times - one person was asked to leave, a couple of people left on their own, a couple of new people joined - so it was like there was some shifting in form. At one point it was down to three, and then we opened it a lot, built it up to about eight or ten, and then I was asked to leave, which was a point at which feminist circles break down. So the other side of working in a non-hierarchical feminist kind of way, was that there was not enough clear leadership to deal with some conflict that came up, and the only solution that could be envisioned was, 'see you later' (Paula James).

And lack of clearly designated and appreciated leadership can create another kind of problem as well. Three of the women I interviewed took a strong leadership role when they organized their covens but then grew to resent the fact that others were not sharing the responsibility.

The coven I was a part of before, now I realize that I was just much more into it and dedicated and had more time to do it. And it turned out that if I didn't organize it and write it and call everybody to tell them where to be and when to be there, it didn't happen. And I wanted something much more equal (Mary Jane Brooks).

But sometimes covens end, not due to conflicts but because women's lives and needs change - they move away, change their professions, or have babies.

The group I was in for about three years, had dwindled the last year and a half to only four of us, which was pretty small, but we worked hard to keep it going and keep the energy going. Then, when two of those people were going to be away for prolonged periods the last year, the group folded (Margaret Becker).

Through all the change, growth, and conflict women Witches experience in covens, these small groups remain the mainstay of their practice of witchcraft. Although the women I interviewed who were working primarily as solitary practitioners, were finding their solitary work effective and satisfying, witchcraft is a social activity. As Marcel Mauss (1950) points out, "magic was always the work of fraternities (sic). Our earliest texts mention witch covens, magical corporations recruited through heredity or voluntary membership" (p. 43). Magic works best in a group where the connections between people can be experienced: "Each body shares the same passion, each face wears the same mask, each voice utters the same cry . . . one body, one soul, believing in the success of their ritual" (p. 133). Because deep connections are made among the women Witches working together, what happens in a coven is magical indeed.

The Magic of Witchcraft

The popular view of magic in our society is the use of illusion and sleight of hand that a magician does as part of a stage performance. Magic has also been called “mysticism” or “the occult”, which is at best irrational and needs to be overcome, or at worst, evil and needs to be avoided entirely. But, according to modern Witch Marion Weinstein (1981), all people have magical powers but many have deliberately suppressed them in response to fears about magic and witchcraft being the work of the Devil. In fact, magic is a way of uncovering the occult, which literally means hidden, not revealed, secret (p. xxv). The occult is about the great mysteries of life - the cycle of birth, growth, death, and re-birth, and the nature of humanity’s relationship with the sacred (Starhawk, 1988, p. 26). To be open to and trust our intuition, to work with unseen forces, and to recognize a life force in the universe that humans are connected with and able to interact with is to uncover the occult. This is the work of magic. This is the work of Witches.

Between the Worlds

When the Witches in this study do magical work, whether alone, in a coven, or at larger community gatherings, the work they do is called a ritual. And, even though individuals, covens, and community gatherings are extremely diverse, and a witchcraft ritual can focus on any number of issues, a certain ritual structure has always been followed in any group that I have been part of that came together specifically to do witchcraft.

The Altar. *We always have an altar up, something that marks the four directions and the center and then people often bring their own objects or something they want to put into that energy or have charged with that energy (Margaret Becker).*

The rituals that I have been part of invariably feature wonderfully decorated altars, which are either placed in the north of the circle or in the center. There is usually only one altar but at some of the larger community gatherings, one altar is created in each of the four directions. There are no rules about what people can place on the altar, but objects usually correspond to the reason for the gathering (or the direction, if there is more than one altar). For example, if the gathering is for Spring equinox, spring flowers and new buds or leaves or grasses might be present. Pastel candles would mark the four directions and the center, and other objects that signify new growth or beginnings would be included. Statues and replicas of the goddess in her maiden aspect would be prominent, and people would add whatever else they wanted to.

The altar is also the place where magical tools are placed. This would include a Witch's athame - a ritual knife, or her wand, and whatever other tools she (or they) will use at this meeting. Often food and drink are placed on the altar as well. When the altar is complete the ritual can begin.

Purifying. When contemporary women Witches begin a ritual, they follow a specific pattern for creating sacred space which they have learned from Starhawk and the Reclaiming tradition.

We always cleanse ourselves of things that are clinging onto us from the outside world when we go into ritual. We always cleanse using one of the four elements - water, or air, or earth, or fire, or sometimes a mix of them. Sometimes we do it in a very brief kind of way, but always there's a cleansing, so that we can begin to focus on what we're there to do (Kim Hume).

Smudging with sage or sweetgrass is a popular way to cleanse or purify. To do this, the women form a circle and one member of the group takes a burning bundle of sage or sweetgrass and passes the smoke over the body of the coven mate on her left. When that person is thoroughly smudged, the bundle is passed to her and she smudges the person on her left. The process

continues in this way until everyone in the group has been smudged. While the smudging is happening, the women stand quietly and imagine their cares and worries leaving them so that they can be fully present during the ritual to come.

Grounding. *Then we ground ourselves, and it's really important to do this in any kind of magic that you do, because you need to be connected to the earth. We are the daughters of the earth and the sons of the earth and we don't do ourselves any good by getting out of contact with the earth. So we usually do a grounding which often takes the form of the tree of life grounding (Kim Hume).*

The outline for the “tree of life” grounding exercise appears in Starhawk’s book, The Spiral Dance (1989a). It is the beginning of any meditation, and one of the basic and most important parts of every witchcraft activity. Women Witches ground themselves often - anytime they want to feel more confident, or when they want to be more connected to other people or the earth, or when they begin to meditate, and especially when they begin to work as Witches, whether alone, or in a coven, or at a community ritual. The following is Starhawk’s (1989a) outline of the tree of life grounding exercise. It is never followed exactly by the Witches I have worked with because they are firmly committed to creativity and individual expression, but it contains all of the important elements.

Begin by sitting or standing erect and breathing deeply and rhythmically.

And as we breathe, remember to sit erect, and as your spine straightens, feel the energy rising. . . (pause). Now imagine that your spine is the trunk of a tree. . . and from its base, roots extend deep into the earth . . . into the center of the earth Herself. . .

(pause). And you can draw up power from the earth, with each

breath. . . feel the energy rising. . . like sap rising through a tree trunk. . . And feel the power rise up your spine . . . feel yourself becoming more alive . . . with each breath. . . And from the crown of your head, you have branches that sweep up and back down to touch the earth. . . and feel the power burst from the crown of your head. . . and feel it sweep through the branches until it touches the earth again. . . making a circle. . . making a circuit. . . returning to its source. . . (In a group:) And breathing deeply, feel how all our branches intertwine. . . and the power weaves through them. . . and dances among them, like wind. . . feel it moving. . . Now take a deep breath, and suck in the power, as if you were sucking through a straw. Feel it travel down your spine, and flow into the earth (pp. 57-58).

One important thing about grounding is that it requires a woman to focus on herself, to find her center - the place in her body where she is most herself, and to experience a deep sense of connection to the earth and to everyone in the circle. An equally important thing is that the circle of energy that each Witch visualizes surrounding herself, is a circle of protection which provides safety from intrusion of negative psychic energy as she opens herself to the unseen world.

The imaginary roots that reach into the earth can extend from the soles of the feet as well as from one's spine, and in many grounding meditations, the center of the earth is visualized as a place of pure unconditional love and acceptance where worries, self deprecation, despair, and mental fatigue can be transformed into healing and revitalizing energy that is then drawn up into the body. After participating in this type of grounding exercise several times, Witches can do it almost instantaneously.

It's very much a part of my practice. If I say to myself, "OK run energy", I can do that, like right now. I can just extend this sense of being connected to the earth and connected to the sky and I feel more grounded right away. It's not a mysterious thing. It's just a skill, and it's essential to my Wicca practice to be able to do that kind of grounding and centering and meditation (Clara Singer).

Witches ground to connect with their deeper selves, the earth and other people. They also ground in order to tap into the energy of the universe, rather than using their own energy for the magical work that is to be done, and becoming depleted.

We become this conduit for energy running between the earth and the rest of the universe. This allows us to power the magic so that we don't have to use our own energy up, and we come away from ritual feeling better than we went to it if we're well grounded (Kim Hume).

Casting the Circle. After the grounding exercise, a circle is cast to create sacred space. The circle is cast by one member of the group, who walks to each of the four directions in turn, beginning with the north. As she walks to each direction, the rest of the group turns to face that direction with her. Tracing the shape of a pentacle in the air with her athame or wand, she says:

To north, "By the earth that is her body,"

To east, "By the air that is her breath,"

To south, "By the fire of her bright spirit,"

To west, "By the waters of her living womb,"

After completing the circle, to above the center, "By all that is above,"

And to below the center, "And all that is below,

The circle is cast, we are between the worlds."

Casting a circle creates sacred space. The sacred space is between the worlds - the everyday world and another reality known to the intuition and imagination of those who are present. It protects the

group and provides a container for the energy that the Witches will raise. Starhawk (1989a) says “Casting the circle is an enacted meditation” (p. 72). It is a group visualization that takes on the energy of the participants and becomes a boundary within which to work. This allows Witches to work in a large variety of places, both indoors and outdoors.

One outdoor ritual that I attended was held near the shore of Trout Lake in East Vancouver. It was Summer Solstice, 1993, a lovely warm evening and many people were enjoying the park. Prior to that night, I had been to many rituals and experienced the casting of the circle many times, but I had always thought it was purely imaginary. That night, as our group of about forty women danced and sang and celebrated the height of summer, people passing by or playing games nearby stopped and watched, but no one attempted to cross the invisible line where the circle had been drawn. It was as if they, too, could sense the boundary we had created.

Invocations. The next thing we do is we ask for the guardians of the directions to be with us to help protect us and keep us safe and to bring their special powers into the circle for us. And we also invite whatever goddesses and gods we want to have - that seem to be particularly focused on whatever it is that we're planning to do (Kim Hume).

The invocations to the directions are usually very interesting and creative. There are certain correspondences that go with each of the four directions and the center, and these are either called out verbally by one person, or included in a chant sung by the group, or enacted by sound and movement. The correspondences include the elements (air for East, fire for South, water for West, earth for North, spirit for Center) and other symbolic or psychological characteristics that go with the elements. For example, the correspondences for East would include; air, wind, movement, beginnings, intuition, and insight. The time of day associated with East is dawn, the time of year is spring. Often birds, animals, and colors that signify the particular direction that is being invoked are also named (Starhawk, 1989a, p. 251-254). Usually, all Witches present turn to face each of

the directions, just as they did for the casting of the circle, while the spirits of the directions are being called in.

The meditation that began with purification, grounding, and casting the circle will sometimes deepen so that invoking the directions fosters a feeling of deep spiritual connection.

I was able to get a group together, and asked an experienced leader to come and do an introductory ritual. And that was an amazing moment for me. The form that we were using was the very basic one from Starhawk which, of course, includes the calling in of the directions. And at that point, I didn't have the basic coordinates that Starhawk works from. And the woman who was leading the ritual, very briefly, just listed off a number of the elements that are related to particular directions and asked me if I would call in West. And it was one of those times when I believe I more channeled the invocation than anything else. It came out in pure poetry, and in a voice I wasn't familiar with . . . And that was the first time that it was obvious to me that I was able to bring together this little list of things into this incredibly strong invocation to the direction (Paula James).

The goddesses, and sometimes the gods, are invoked after the directions, in accordance with the purpose of the ritual. Again, this can be done by singing a chant, or calling out names and characteristics of particular goddesses or gods. There are goddesses that correspond to seasons of the year, cycles in women's lives, issues that women face, and projects that women are involved in. The gods are the consorts of the goddesses. "The Goddess is the Encircler, the Ground of Being; the God is That-Which-Is-Brought-Forth, her mirror image, her other pole. She is the earth, he is the grain. She is the wheel, he is the traveler" (Starhawk, 1989a, p. 109). The following is a popular chant that invokes the goddess Kore at a spring equinox:

Her name cannot be spoken, Her face was not forgotten,

Her power is to open, Her promise can never be broken.

(Chorus) She changes everything She touches , and
Everything she touches, changes (repeat last 2 lines).
Change is, touch is; Touch is, change is.
Change us, touch us; Touch us, change us!
All sleeping seeds she wakens; The rainbow is her token,
Now winter's power is taken; In love, all chains are broken.
(Repeat chorus.) (Lauren Liebling & Starhawk, In Starhawk,
1989a, pp. 102-103).

As a chant such as this one is sung over and over, women break into spontaneous improvisations on the basic tune and rhythm as they honor their own conception of the goddess. The harmonies that are created are amazing - a fine tribute to the goddess and a further deepening of the meditative consciousness.

The Body of a Ritual

Everyone present has done a purification. They have grounded, and created a sacred space between the worlds, where they are surrounded by spirits of the directions, and in the presence of divinity. Within this sacred space, the body of the ritual is created.

All acts of love and pleasure. *And then we do whatever we're going to do, which could be almost anything (Kim Hume).*

Aside from this basic structure of a witchcraft meeting, there are no conventions or specific scripts that need to be followed. For the larger community rituals, which are held every six weeks on the Sabbats - the eight holidays which turn the wheel of the year, a planning committee forms and decides what the body of the ritual will contain. Ideas are taken from books, prior experiences, and much creative interaction. The procedures for creating smaller coven rituals

vary with the particular group, and the groups are independent and very diverse. As far as the actual content of the body of any ritual is concerned, Witches do an astounding variety of things.

You can do personal or interpersonal work, you can do teaching, learning, planning. You can do tasks, make spells, do trance and explore other times and other places. You can make music and dance - anything that you want. One of my favorite Wiccan writings is "The Charge of the Goddess" which reminds us that the goddess says, "all acts of love and pleasure are my rituals". So whatever we're doing it's sacred to the goddess (Kim Hume).

The "Charge of the Goddess" that Kim Hume is referring to here is a poem that first appeared in English in Charles Leland's Aradia: Or the Gospel of the Witches (1990), which was first published in 1890. Leland was an American folklorist whose study of European Gypsies led him to an Italian Witch who could trace her ancestry back to the Etruscans (Guiley, 1989). When the modern witchcraft revival began, Leland's work was thought to be part of the history, poetry, and magical lore of the Old Religion that was persecuted by the Inquisition. The "Charge" was taken up and revised by Gerald Gardner and Doreen Valiente (1989), and further revised by Starhawk (1989a). Although it is quite lengthy, I have decided to include the entire poem because it expresses so much of the spirit that contemporary women Witches bring to their coven meetings and community rituals.

Listen to the words of the Great Mother, who of old was called
Artemis, Astarte, Dione, Melusine, Aphrodite, Ceridwen, Diana,
Arionrhod, Brigid, and by many other names: "Whenever you have
need of anything, once in the month, and better it be when the moon is
full, you shall assemble in some secret place and adore the spirit of
Me who is queen of the Wise. You shall be free from slavery, and as
a sign that you be free you shall be naked in your rites. Sing, feast,

dance, and make music and love, all in My presence, for Mine is the ecstasy of the spirit, and Mine also is joy on earth. For my law is love unto all beings. Mine is the secret that opens upon the door of youth, and Mine is the cup of wine of life that is the Cauldron of Ceridwen, that is the holy grail of immortality. I give the knowledge of the spirit eternal and beyond death I give peace and freedom and reunion with those that have gone before. Nor do I demand aught of sacrifice, for behold, I am the mother of all things and My love is poured upon the earth.”

Hear the words of the Star Goddess, the dust of whose feet are the hosts of heaven, whose body encircles the universe: “I who am the beauty of the green earth and the white moon among the stars and the mysteries of the waters, I call upon your soul to arise and come unto me. For I am the soul of nature that gives life to the universe. From Me all things proceed and unto Me they must return. Let My worship be in the heart that rejoices, for behold - all acts of love and pleasure are My rituals [emphasis added]. Let there be beauty and strength, power and compassion, honor and humility, mirth and reverence within you. And you who seek to know Me, know that your seeking and yearning will avail you not, unless you know the Mystery: for if that which you seek, you find not within yourself, you will never find it without. For behold, I have been with you from the beginning, and I am that which is attained at the end of desire” (Starhawk, 1989a, pp. 90-91).

The “Charge” summarizes what witchcraft is all about. It speaks about the love and joy and reverence for life that is an integral part of the practice of witchcraft as I have come to know it. The reference to being naked in the “Charge” has to do with being open and vulnerable, clear of mind and willing to experience the rite without prejudice. Bodily nudity is not followed in any of the coven meetings or community rituals that I have been part of, but if the rapport and trust developed among coveners to the point where they felt comfortable meeting in the nude, that would be totally acceptable.

The naked body represents truth, the truth that goes deeper than social custom. Witches worship naked for several reasons: as a way of establishing closeness and dropping social masks, because power is most easily raised that way, and because the human body is itself sacred (Starhawk, 1989a, p. 97).

The “Charge” indicates that any sort of life affirming activity can form the body of a ritual. In small groups or covens, the overall focus of the group will dictate to some extent, the body of that coven’s rituals. For example, a coven might concentrate on taking part in political actions such as AIDs awareness, the “Take Back the Night” march, or letter writing campaigns to further feminist or social causes. Another coven, or even the same one at another time, might focus on life passages, personal projects, or using magic to manifest or banish certain things in their lives. Others might focus on doing trance work and developing self awareness and interpersonal skills. No matter what the overall focus, all of the women who worked in covens mentioned healing work as an important part of their coven activities.

A woman was going to have ovarian cysts removed. She was going to have surgery and we planned a whole ritual around that. And the energy we worked with was corn woman. So we

used that theme, and someone made up a song to corn woman and we shared corn bread and used cornmeal and made it to rub on her belly (Sylvia Owens).

While healing rituals like this one are very popular among Witches, rituals to mark specific life passages are also popular.

Ritual is very important. There has to be something that helps you as a human being, mark the time that's gone by. And in our society, it just doesn't exist. There are religious holidays like Easter and stuff like that, but people don't really know who they are. In old days, and in Native American beliefs even to this day, when you were a child, you were allowed to be a child, but as soon as you started menstruating, there was a ritual that went with that. And when you became pregnant with your first child, there was a ritual for that. You always knew where you were. The markers went along. When you reached a certain age, there was another ritual to usher you into full adulthood. We don't have that, and I think people flounder. They don't know where they belong or what their function is in society, and that's a scary place to be in. And being a Witch is wonderful for that, because there are rituals to mark passing seasons and passing life events and to welcome things and to let things go. And there is just energy in sharing with other people who are like minded and working for a cause and realizing your potential (Liz Clawson).

The body of a ritual at a coven meeting might help women accept changes, such as the loss of a job, a relationship, or a loved one through death. I learned about a ritual for handfasting - a Pagan marriage celebration, and for house blessing when a woman moved to a new apartment. A ritual can highlight a specific social or environmental issue, both local - like stopping the clear-cut logging at Clayoquot Sound, and international - like finding ways to assist women victims of the war in Bosnia, or it can simply celebrate the different phases of the moon.

Most larger community rituals mark seasonal cycles, which become opportunities to focus on certain aspects of our lives.

If it's one of the Sabbats that we're celebrating, then there are particular things that have to do with the eight Sabbats in the year. And we usually have something that matches with that. For example, we wouldn't do a celebration of renewal and beginnings of growth at a ritual in the fall because that's a time when things are heading toward the death end of the cycle. So we keep in tune with what is happening on the earth at that time of year (Kim Hume).

The largest community rituals are held at Samhain (pronounced sow ane) which corresponds with Halloween. This is the Witches' New Year and the time of year when the veil between the worlds is the thinnest. The last two years, 1993 and 1994, over three hundred people attended the community ritual for Samhain in Vancouver. These two large rituals, a public ritual led by Starhawk in July, 1993, and another public ritual led by Zsuzsanna Budapest in November, 1993 are the only community gatherings I have attended where men have participated. In each instance, they were about ten percent of the total.

Trance and Meditation. Whatever the body of the ritual encompasses, every ritual that I have been part of includes an opportunity for self reflection. This is because the "Charge of the Goddess" indicates that an important part of witchcraft is learning about oneself: "If that which you seek you find not within yourself, you will never find it without" (Starhawk, 1989a, p. 91). Knowledge and affirmation of the self are important goals of witchcraft.

You are important. You are the Goddess. The greatest knowledge comes from within. To know yourself is to know - everything (Mary Jane Brooks).

The focus on self-knowledge is so vital that learning to be a Witch and practice witchcraft is equivalent to learning and practicing the art of self awareness. Nearly any activity done in sacred space can produce personal insights, but one important way that self awareness is

specifically fostered is through the trance or meditative journey, which is incorporated into the body of many rituals. As the group relaxes and turns inward, one person leads them on an imaginary journey.

One of the things I've heard said, and I say it all the time, is I never know if I'm making this up or if it's really happening. And it's just like doing visualization in therapy or hypnosis. And I've come to accept for myself that it doesn't really matter if I'm making it up because that's the magic - it's moving to another level of consciousness and to another world. That's one of the things we say, that we move between the worlds - between the physical world and the spiritual world or the etheric world, and somewhere in the middle there, we walk in both. And reality is different in that place (Sara Brannigan).

Marion Weinstein (1981) explains the difference between the physical world and the spiritual or etheric world. She says that the physical world that we perceive with our senses is the "World of Form" (p. 26), but we have evidence that there are things in the universe we cannot know through sense perception.

There are more realities out there than we can see or know. And I can relate it a bit to how we hear. Dogs hear more than we do and we know that. We can't hear what they hear, but we know it's reality. So maybe there's a lot more out there than we can sense or know (Mary Jane Brooks).

The area that we cannot readily perceive through our senses is the "Invisible Realm", the place where microscopic organisms, auras, spirits, and our own thoughts and ideas dwell (Weinstein, 1981, p. 27). The World of Form and the Invisible Realm are different planes or dimensions, neither is higher or lower, superior or inferior. But because people live in the World of Form, sometimes this seems to be all that there is, and we deny the existence of the Invisible Realm. "Even though our conscious minds may not be aware of these possibilities, even though

our culture may deny them, even though contemplating them may seem strange - our subconscious minds, our souls, know” (Weinstein, 1981, p. 104). In witchcraft rituals, the conscious mind has an opportunity to learn about the Invisible Realm through the trance journey.

We do trance to get to that other level or that other place, where we can truly look at some things about ourselves and our lives, and to get information from our ancestors and from spirit bodies that we can't get in the physical world because, on a physical plane our consciousness blocks a lot of things out, because we have to live in this world. So, when I go between the worlds, I believe that I'm more open to receiving information that I might not be able to receive when I'm fully conscious (Sara Brannigan).

In order to explain how individual persons experience the place between the World of Form and the Invisible Realm, Starhawk (1988) postulates that every person has three selves - “Deep Self, Talking Self, and Younger Self” (p. 54). Deep Self is the essence, or soul. Talking Self is like the ego of psychoanalytic theory, and Younger Self is the emotional self, our internal landscape, the patterns within which we live our lives (p. 55). Mary Jane Brooks explains how these three parts of the self interact.

Starhawk talks about different places of consciousness and her terms are: Talking Self, which is where we usually are everyday, it's our intellect, and what takes care of us; and Younger Self, which is more of a subconscious - not exactly the child within thing, it's a little different than that, but children are much more aware of that consciousness than adults are. And the way to Younger Self, or that consciousness is through tangible things - smells, symbols, visualization, much more hands-on, tangible, get up, move around stuff. It's through chanting, repetitive stuff (Mary Jane Brooks).

So, the structure of the ritual, the purifying, grounding, casting the circle, invoking directions and divinities, chanting and dancing are intended to activate Younger Self who is able to communicate with both Deep Self and Talking Self - from her position between the worlds.

And Younger Self knows our Deep Self much better than Talking Self does, so we need to get in touch with Younger Self, because she has a lot to teach us - a lot of messages for us. And Talking Self isn't directly connected to Deep Self, but Younger Self is. So to get to Deep Self, you go through Younger Self. And you go through trance, or you go through meditation (Mary Jane Brooks).

Without making a major foray into psychoanalytic theory, I think it is apparent that Younger Self and Deep Self could be thought of as the unconscious mind, with Younger Self representing the individual unconscious that is formed in childhood in response to personal and social experiences, and Deep Self representing what Carl Jung called the collective unconscious - that part of an individual that connects with the ground of being. Starhawk (1989a) says that Talking Self comes into existence with the acquisition of speech which, according to Rosalind Minsky (1990), corresponds to Sigmund Freud's oedipal stage, and Jacques Lacan's entry into the Symbolic. This is the time when the unconscious comes into existence, split off from consciousness, as a container for all that has to be repressed in order for an individual to function in society.

As Talking Self, or the conscious mind, becomes quiet through meditation, Younger Self, or the personal subconscious, emerges and embarks on the trance journey, following the instructions of the person who is leading the trance. But Talking Self retains awareness.

When you're in trance, you're not unconscious. You have consciousness about what is happening at the time, so you have choice about how far to go and what you're comfortable about doing and not doing (Sara Brannigan).

Through trance and meditation, Younger Self releases information that has been repressed in the process of growing up, and with that information, the emotional pain that made the repression necessary is also released. Although this is painful, it is also very healing, because maintaining repressed information requires expenditure of energy which is then not available to individuals to move forward in their lives, or to stand up for themselves, or get involved in world changing activities. The catharsis that happens when Younger Self reveals information in trance is welcomed by most Witches for the self-awareness and personal empowerment it brings with it.

It can bring a lot of emotional release, and I find that really valuable because I don't get to do that very much (Sara Brannigan).

During the trance journey, Younger Self reveals knowledge to Talking Self - usually in the form of images and symbols, the way dreams present information. Each person makes her own interpretation of the symbols that are presented.

At Winter Solstice I was taken through a visualization of going down through the earth - going through the forest and down into the earth, into a cave. When I was in the forest and approaching the cave I was really nervous and afraid. Then I saw a maiden and a mother down in the cave. The maiden was my mother as a young woman. And I was instructed to look in her trunk to see what she had for me. And it was a wedding dress, and I looked at it and it was kind of this '50s crinoline thing and I remember thinking it's not time for John and I to get married yet, and thinking I wouldn't have a dress like that, and then realizing that by trying to change the look of that, I was blocking what was coming to me. So I just let it come, and then the mother was my present mother.

We went to a well, and then I was instructed to look down in the well to see what was there for me, and there was a baby. It was my baby and it was a baby boy. And then the crone appeared, and it was my Gramma Varden, and I was instructed to look in her cauldron and see

what she had for me. And what was in her cauldron was tons of fear and tons of pain, and some anger, too. But she said, "These aren't yours to keep, but these are yours to understand. You'll have understanding by Summer Solstice."

And when I walked out of the cave and back through the forest, I had no fear, because Gramma was with me. Not in a coddling way, like my mother who always nurtured me very protectively and affectionately. Gramma wasn't there like that. She was just there - solid support. And then, in March, I got my abuse memories back (Anita Varden).

By using meditation and trance journey, Witches learn that their unconscious minds, or Younger Selves are able to contact their Deep Selves, which dwell in the Invisible Realm. Sometimes a trance journey links Talking Self to other parts of the Invisible Realm such as the spirits of ancestors. In addition to Anita Varden, three other women mentioned that they have received support and encouragement from Grandmothers. Sometimes a message comes from what could only be described as an entity.

I had one guided meditation that was very powerful for me because I'd never experienced anything like that before. I went into this room. It was very much like a dream would be. And I hadn't ever experienced that before either. Usually, I just do the walking thing. You know, I'm walking here, and I find this and I find that. But this one really had that dream aspect, you know how in dreams you never know what to expect and all of a sudden these things just appear before your face, right? Anyway, I was in this room and there was this person - not a person, it was kind of like an entity was sitting in this chair, and then I allowed this entity to speak to me.

And what were the words?

It was just very simple. I think it was something like, "Be still."

See a lot of what I have to do in my life is to just do that - be still, be centered. Because I've been a very passionate person - I've been living out there in the stars (chuckle) for quite

some years, and it's really been difficult for me many a time to just stay grounded and be in the present moment and not live in the past, and not live in the future. Like be here, be now, be happy (Wendy Halvorson).

The trance or meditative journey is a way to open the pathways of communication between the conscious and the unconscious mind. "When the barriers between the unconscious and the conscious are crossed, ideas, images, plans, and solutions to problems arise freely" (Starhawk, 1989a, p. 157). The trance journey also makes it possible for Talking Self to experience a deep sense of communion with the Divine, which comes with accessing Deep Self, the part of each human that is connected with the ground of being. Learning to do trance work is learning to "change consciousness at will", which is Starhawk's (1989a) definition of magic; "the art of awakening deeper levels of consciousness beyond the rational" (p. 27).

Group Trance. One particularly fascinating variety of trance journey that women have experienced at B.C. Witch Camp is the group trance, where several women create a trance journey and experience an alternative reality together.

The trance work started out with a guided visualization, and the next thing I think we did was, we found a place of power within so that we could feel safe anytime we needed to, within a trance. And then we started working in pairs, where one of us guided the other person into a trance journey. And then, the next session we would reverse. And then we went in together, where it was equal. We both talked each other into trance. We went somewhere together where we saw the same things. They call it consensus reality.

A lot of it is power of suggestion. You saying, "I'm seeing trees and a hill and a creek, do you see that?" And the other person would let that wash over them until they saw it and they might say, "Yes, but I also see..." And so, you would trade visions until you had created a place together.

And then we'd get into threes. And then we did it in a larger group of four, and because I'm quite a skeptic, I really do have to feel and see things for myself before I'll believe in them, so I started holding back and looking at my surroundings and not saying anything, and knowing what I saw and then someone beside me would say, "Well, this is what I see". And I would say "Yeah, I see that too". And somebody else would see something and I would say "Yeah, I can see that." And that so shocked me. That we obviously were in some place together seeing the same things!

At different points, someone would hold back and just look and then say, "Beyond that tree that we're all seeing prominently- beyond that, I see an abyss, I see things that are scary." And somebody else would have the courage to say, "Well you know, beyond that tree, I see darkness and I'm feeling really scared." And it was like; "Whoa! We are in the same place, and it is what we are building together." And that really surprised me. . . .

I know in one of the group trances we did, we were all in a place together and we all saw a chest together and we talked about; "Should we move on?" And one of us felt she needed to open that chest and look inside. And we could tell that she was feeling very emotional about it, and feeling a little frozen, and one of the other women said; "Can I help you open the chest? What if I stand behind it and help you get that lid open? I won't be able to see in, because I'll be holding the lid up." And they worked on that together, and I know what she found was very significant for her. And I know that she also felt that she didn't need to tell us what it was, it was for her personally. And the other woman helped her close the chest. It took awhile, and I know that, for that woman it was hard for her to take up that time in the group. And she had a lot of encouragement, saying; "No, it's OK. We don't mind waiting for you. We want you to take this time." And even that was a big step for her, to take the time away from other people in the group and use it for herself and know that that was OK (Mary Jane Brooks).

Clearly, the level of trust and bonding that would result from an experience like this would be quite profound. But there is another aspect of group trance journeying that is even more exciting.

Reclaiming talked about having a place where they go to, that they have gone to together so often that it's their coven's special place. They all know how to get there, and if one person misses a meeting, they can go there the next day in their mind, and find out what the others did (laughter). I thought, "No way!" She says, "Sometimes we leave messages. Like if somebody is in a different city, we can go to our special place in our coven meeting in trance and leave them a message. We have a box that we leave messages in, and they can go the next day, open that box and they will get the message we sent them". And I thought, "There are possibilities here that I'd never considered!" They still make me shake thinking; "Wow, they can do that?" (Mary Jane Brooks).

Another example of a group trance, this time with a larger group, demonstrates that trances are not always serious, hard work.

At Witch Camp, we went on a group trance - Starhawk took us to fairyland. And it was just outrageous. And, again, there's just a lack of words, but that was the best trip I ever had in all my life! We went in a pack, all of us, and it was wild. It was like a three hour trance, and it was just incredible (Jean Davis).

The grounding that begins each ritual, the circle that is cast to contain the energy, the invocation of directions and divinity, all require a change of consciousness, and together these processes bring Witches to a place between the World of Form and the Invisible Realm, where they can access both. Frequent visits to this place between the worlds brings a sense of inner knowing, trusting oneself, and bonding with others.

Wicca is the beginning - like the foundation of something, or the roots of self, and the recognition of that point where we begin to trust our intuition, ourselves. . . . If I don't have a good relationship with myself, my intuition, then it's possible that I can find myself with someone that I might not be willing to trust, or I might end up giving too much (Elaine Krentz).

Wicca celebrates ourselves, our intuition, our own intuitive powers, and our own knowledge. Knowledge that we can share, about healing ourselves, and healing and helping each other, and healing the earth (Margaret Becker).

Wicca is a haven for me. It's a necessary place for me. It's the only place on this earth where I can heal as a person. And not just heal, but grow, and have a place where I can gain a real perspective of what my life is, not a perspective that patriarchy has given me. It's a place for me to get away from that, to a degree, as much as I can, and start putting patriarchy outside of me and seeing what's there. And there's a tremendous amount there (Jean Davis).

Spells. Besides the trance or meditative journey, the body of a ritual often includes casting a spell - undoubtedly the most controversial aspect of witchcraft. In mainstream academic discourse, witchcraft is frequently conflated with magic, which is then consistently equated with spells, hexes, curses, and manipulations of various kinds (Eliade, 1991; Frazer, 1993; Lehmann & Meyers, 1989; Marwick, 1975; Thomas, 1971). As the Witches have shown, the magic of contemporary witchcraft is much more than spells, hexes, curses and manipulations. It is self-awareness, personal empowerment, and contacting the Divine within. And, while there is a place for casting a spell, especially when activities done in the body of a ritual are intended to manifest or banish something, Witches differentiate between a spell, which seeks to create a positive change, and a hex or curse, which is intended to do harm.

Starhawk's (1989a) definition of a spell is "a symbolic act done in an altered state of consciousness, in order to cause a desired change" (p. 124). Witches purify themselves and their

physical space, ground themselves and cast a circle, to create an altered state of consciousness. Then, the desired change is stated or chanted, and visualized. To bind the wish, some tangible activity, like burning candles, tying knots, creating charms, writing words or images, burning paper containing words or images, and repeating words or phrases, is done. These activities are tools that Witches use to focus their concentration.

I think they are catalysts - the spell, the chanting, the wishing and wanting it to happen. So it's actually psychic projection (Grace Fletcher).

Imagination, visualization, concentration, and projection are all important parts of any spell. This is because spells often work through suggestion. "For example, a woman casts a spell to get a job. Afterward she is filled with new self-confidence, approaches her interview with assurance, and creates such a good impression she is hired" (Starhawk, 1989a, p. 126). In order for the suggestion to have an effect, the result you want to achieve must be clearly visualized.

I feel like I have to go to a level where I can really create a real image, a visualization. You have to be in the image, and create it so it's real. Because in order to make something real, you have to make it real inside your mind (Clara Singer).

Starhawk (1989a) and Zsuzsanna Budapest (1980/1989) give examples of how a Witch can cast a spell to manifest health, love, luck, or money. They describe spells to help a Witch find the right house or the right job, or complete a project, or protect herself. There are spells for getting rid of anger, healing a broken heart, and overcoming loneliness. But casting the spell is not enough. To achieve the desired goal, a Witch must also do the actual work in the physical world, such as seeking competent medical attention, actively pursuing a home or a job, taking steps to complete a project, and locking doors.

Like you don't just get what you want by doing a ritual and then sitting around on your butt (chuckle). You know, you have to act in the world too. -And that's one of the things I like

about the craft too. It's not ascetic and it's not isolationist. It's very much a practice in the world. And you're not going to get a job if you just do a ritual and then stay home and never phone anybody or write a resume. But the fact that you do a ritual before you go to an interview, I think can very likely effect how that interview goes. So it depends on what you're asking for, but I think it works (Clara Singer).

Spells are fun to do, and they are also a way for Witches to focus attention on their own interests, dreams and desires, something women often have difficulty doing. Whether a spell actually works in the material world is less important than the psychological insights women gain from doing them.

Spells . . . allow us not only to listen to and interpret the unconscious, but also to speak to it, in the language it understands. Symbols, images, and objects used in spells communicate directly with Younger Self, who is the seat of our emotions and who is barely touched by the intellect. We often understand our feeling and behavior but find ourselves unable to change them. Through spells, we can attain the most important power - the power to change ourselves (Starhawk, 1989a, p. 125).

Because spell casting has this personal focus, and because Witches emphasize personal empowerment and free will, they are careful not to direct a spell at anyone except themselves.

I've done magic and spells around money and around love and letting go. I only do them for myself, and I don't do spells for or on other people unless I have their permission to do that (Sara Brannigan).

Even a healing spell or one intended to bring good fortune to another person should not be done without the other person's full informed consent. And, even when another person's consent is obtained, projecting a spell outward has consequences, as one Witch discovered.

I did a healing for a woman who had breast cancer. And it went over quite a long time and I felt pretty drained after awhile. And I wished that I had talked to someone about it first, before I started it, so I'd know maybe not to get into that situation, where it was quite depleting.

When you say, "a long time" , was that days, weeks...?

No, months.

Months?

Yes, because she was starting on a chemotherapy program that went on for a long time. She would do it for awhile and then go off and then on again for several months.

And you had to maintain your healing spell for all that time?

Yes. I made a puppet - a little doll. And I put it up on the mantle. And the actual spell is just burning candles and letting the wax melt completely but then I kept the puppet there and did a visualization, frequently - over months. But she's doing really well now (laughter). I think it might have helped a little bit (Meg Wallace).

While the Witches I interviewed stress that caution should be taken when projecting a spell outward, most are adamant that hexes and curses have no place in their practice. Because all of the Witches I contacted are bound by the Wiccan Rede, "An' it harm none, do what ye will", none of them have done any hexes or curses. However, four Witches told me that thoughts about hexing emerged for them when they knew that people were harming others.

I've been exploring a lot about hexes and curses because I feel that historically, witches have had the power to do that kind of magic for the good. Just as we see goddesses who are destroyers, and they're very important in the cycle of life and death. If things are diseased and

they're threatening life, then often the goddess will destroy them. And, as women and as feminists, because we've seen so much violence in the world, and so much violence has been done to us, I think we really try not to look at the destroyer aspects of ourselves. So I've been searching around, do I believe in hexing and cursing? And it is not something that I would do lightly without a lot of knowledge and conscience, but I do think that it could be important political work in terms of resistance.

An example is a rape - if I knew a rapist - because I think, some people and some things just need to be stopped. So, what I do feel more clear about is binding something, as opposed to hexing. I don't think I would ever do a spell to make somebody suffer for something they did, but (for instance, in the example of the rapist) to bind him somehow so he is not able to do that to another woman, or to reflect that aggression back on him (Sara Brannigan).

Starhawk's (1989a) advises her readers that a binding spell to prevent a person from doing harm is acceptable but should be undertaken only with consensus agreement from one's coven. In her opinion, hexing or cursing should be avoided entirely.

Spells that influence another person depend on a psychic link.

Power pours through you toward another - but in order for the connection to be made you must be at least partly identified with that other person. You become the other, as well as becoming the energy you send. For this reason, "What you send returns to you three times over" (p. 128).

This view, which is accepted by all of the women I interviewed, is contradicted by Zsuzsanna Budapest, in her book, The Holy Book of Women's Mysteries (1980/1989), where she demonstrates her conviction that it is acceptable to hex a rapist and offers a formula to follow.

At the waning moon, preferably just three days before a dark moon, take a black image or a black penis candle, and write on it what you want to happen to the rapist. Name it “rapist” on the front and the back. . . . As you light the candle say: “In the most holy name of Hecate, the goddess of life and death, She Who holds the key to the land of the underworld, let this rapist be caught by his own stupidity, by his own ego, by his own evil. So mote it be!”

Sit there awhile imagining his power diminishing as the candle burns lower. See him getting caught; see him lose at the trial. See him destroyed. Know that rape is the foundation of the patriarchy, and to attack the rapist is not black magic, because you are not attacking the innocent. . . . When the candle has burned down all the way, collect all remnants and take them to a living body of water and throw them into the waves. . . . do not look back lest you break the spell (p. 31).

When Zsuzsanna Budapest visited Saltspring Island in 1991, she publicly cast a variation of this spell on a rapist who was at large at the time, causing a great stir among local Witches, the vast majority of whom, disagreed with her action. Although Z. (as most women call her) is not nearly as popular with the women I interviewed as Starhawk is, her books are well known and her brashness appeals to many women. The following advice precedes another hex - this time for perpetrators of violence: “Perform this only when you *know*, not just think, that someone has harmed you. A witch who cannot hex cannot heal. Cupcakism, turning the other cheek is not for witches” (p. 43, *Italics in original*).

While there is an undeniable appeal in Zsuzsanna Budapest's approach to people who harm others, Marion Weinstein (1981) tells those who would be Witches that there are two kinds of magic - positive and negative. Both kinds of magic work with the Invisible Realm, and both look the same as far as the structure of the rituals is concerned. However, the energy and the work is directed to different purposes. If the magic is intended to harm someone or manipulate someone in a way that denies their free will, it is negative magic (p. 36). Like Starhawk, she stresses that negative magic should be avoided entirely, partly because what you put out comes back to you, and also because negative work seeks to convert the power of the Invisible Realm to power-over others, which misses the point of doing magic.

Positive magic works on a deeper level. Instead of tapping power from an outside source, positive magic works for an awareness and an affirmation of the true inner power of the self. It does not function specifically at the ego level. Positive magic goes beyond to the development of the deepest inner self: the soul, the part that is involved with - and part of - the God and the Goddess (p. 40).

During the Middle Ages, all magic was denounced as evil, and no differentiation was made between a magic spell done to heal and a curse done to harm (Ruether, 1975, p. 102). Mary Douglas (1992) argues that the fear of being harmed by invisible forces and from a distance, brought the forces of the Inquisition down on Medieval Witches without regard for whether they were good or evil, black or white, positive or negative. However, the fear of harm from a distance was not the only concern of the patriarchal rulers of the church and state who were firmly entrenched in wielding power-over the common people. "By aiding the weak, the white witch tended to undermine the established hierarchies of dominance - of priest over penitent, lord over peasant, man over woman. Herein lay the principle threat of the witch to the Church. And this is

one of the reasons why, in the fifteenth century, the Church set out to crush her” (Szasz, 1970, p. 86). They preyed on people’s fear of harm by invisible forces from a distance by focusing on the power-over aspects of magic, painting a picture of Witches being in league with the devil and inflicting harm on others indiscriminately. This picture was then used to justify the very severe penalties that were imposed on healers, counselors and midwives.

From then until now, most discussions of witchcraft and magic have been colored by the fear of hexes, curses, and associations with evil. Even among modern Witches, who do not believe in a personification of evil and therefore, totally discard the possibility of becoming involved in devil worship, discussions of hexes and curses often create discomfort because, “a world in which people can cause each other grievous harm through unseen forces is a scary place to be” (Eller, 1993, p. 125). While the Witches I interviewed believe that good and evil are parts of the whole of reality, as are light and dark, day and night, they also believe that magic has to be positively motivated in order to be effective.

Magic does not work against nature: rather it is a deep understanding of the highest workings of nature and a movement in accordance with it. . . . A Witch develops her powers of magic in order to develop herself. Magic requires that we begin to change the world by first changing ourselves (Mariechild, 1988, p. 149).

The Cone of Power. Because dancing and singing create connections among people and express a certain joy and love for life, Witches sing chants and songs as part of many rituals. The singers and dancers have already grounded, cast a circle, called in the directions, and invoked the goddess (and sometimes the god). People are already between the worlds, already open to their Deep Selves. Some sort of trance journey has been embarked on, and often a wish or spell has been made. As a culmination of the work they have done together, the Witches begin a chant.

The chants are usually very simple, repetitive, and easy to learn. An example that I am familiar with is: “We are the flow, We are the ebb, We are the weavers, We are the web” (Shekhinah Mountainwater, 1985). Another example, that is slightly more complicated is: “We can rise with the fire of freedom, Truth is the fire that burns our chains. And we can stop the fires of destruction, Healing is the fire running through our veins” (Starhawk, 1988, p. 223). As voices blend and harmonize together, women use rattles and drums to keep a steady rhythm. Chanting, rattling, and drumming brings energy up from the earth and soon everyone is singing with one voice and dancing with one body. And sometimes, as the energy builds and the connections among people intensify, the energy forms itself into a cone, and this is called raising a cone of power.

The cone of power should be kind of a culmination of the work, of the visions, or the creative imaginations, towards the end you have in mind. And it can be general too, it doesn't have to be specific, and it can be a variety of ends for different people in the circle too. But if you do a round of what people want to put into that cone and then you do it, I think it's much more effective (Clara Singer).

Usually, there is some intention or focus articulated for the cone of power before it is raised, such as healing for the environment, or assistance to people in need, or validating the psychological or spiritual work that has been done, which is focused on manifesting helpful things in people's lives like healing, protection, abundance, fertility, love, or other blessings.

The cone of power solidifies our purpose - the purpose of the ritual, making it stronger by that process, what we have decided to do, whether it's something to help save the earth or something for ourselves. We've made a commitment to let go of something or plan something new, or set a new goal, and what the energy in the cone of power seems to add is the feeling that it's done in community (Margaret Becker).

With practice, some Witches can sense the energy that is being raised in a cone and guide the group in a way that maximizes the intensity of the cone.

And cones of power aren't big, bright lights. Sometimes they are very subtle. It really depends on who's leading and if they can see where the energy is going and where they need to move things and change it. It takes knowing, it takes skill to do that (Kate Schulman).

A cone of power is often felt. Some women describe an increase in body temperature or internal pressure, others say it creates a tingling sensation, for others it's a "zap" or a "buzz". I always feel a sense of boundaries melting away - of being one body with one voice in a room with about fifty other women. A cone of power is an incredible contradiction to alienation, isolation, and separation, and an affirmation of interconnection and community.

Whenever energy is raised, it must be grounded. So after the cone of power has peaked and been sent off to seal its purpose, the Witches place their hands, and sometimes their heads, on the floor (or the ground if the meeting is held outside) to return the energy to the earth. This is very important. "Otherwise, the force we feel as vitalizing energy degenerates into nervous tension and irritability" (Starhawk, 1989a, p. 59).

After the energy has been properly grounded, food and drink are often brought into the circle, blessed by giving thanks to the Goddess, and circulated among the women, each one giving to another with the words, "May you never hunger", accompanying the offering of food, and, "May you never thirst", accompanying the gift of drink. This part of the ritual assists with the grounding, as the activity of eating and drinking brings Witches into contact with physical reality, and any ungrounded energy returns to the earth. When all have eaten and drank, the circle is opened and the ritual is over.

Closing the circle. *At the end, we thank all the entities we have invited and then we open the circle and that's the end of it (Kim Hume).*

Devoking the deities and the spirits of the directions entails thanking each goddess or god and each direction in turn, in the opposite order from which they were invited. The same attention is given to devoking as to invoking. A popular chant that is sometimes sung to devoke the directions is: "The earth, the water, the fire, the air, Returns, returns, returns, returns" (Author unknown). This is sung several times while participants visualize the spirits of the directions returning safely from whence they came. Each devoking ends with:

Stay if you will, go if you must,

Hail and farewell! Blessed be.

When all the entities have been devoked, the circle is opened. All members of the coven hold hands and say:

The circle is open, But unbroken,

May the peace of the Goddess go in our hearts;

Merry meet, merry part,

And merry meet again! Blessed be.

There is always time for socializing and sharing food and drink after the circle is opened. This part of the meeting gives Witches an added sense of being grounded, and acts as a transition time between the magical world and the return to everyday life.

Solitary Witches

One of the eighteen women in this study practices witchcraft entirely on her own. Three others do most of their witchcraft alone, joining the large community rituals when that is convenient for them. Sixteen women said they practice witchcraft alone, at least some of the time. Those who work in covens or regularly attend community gatherings, create their own rituals in between these meetings, whenever they feel the desire to connect with the earth and the Goddess, to achieve self-affirmation, to gain insight into a problem or situation, or just to honor the moon.

I do my own full moons, and I basically say thanks for what I've had in the past month and ask for things in the next month, like health, safety, protection (Mary Jane Brooks).

Because Witches are very individualistic, solitary rituals are extremely diverse. Some Witches follow the basic structure of a ritual fairly closely.

If I was by myself - it would depend on what I was doing, but I would always cast, and I would always ground, and I would always invoke the directions, even if it was just to invite them. I might invoke a specific direction to help me, if I really needed the water, for example, I might spend more time invoking West. And then I would invoke the Goddess and do my work, whatever that would be, and then I would devoke it. So basically I would follow the basic structure, although it's a lot less elaborate, I think, when you're by yourself (Sara Brannigan).

Some solitary Witches modify the basic ritual structure quite substantially. For example, Witches do not necessarily prepare an altar before they begin working alone, and if they do, it can be much less formalized than in group rituals.

I have a candle and some things on my mantelpiece that's kind of like my altar. I have a candle there that represents the Goddess and I do my Yoga with her in mind (Meg Wallace).

Similarly, purification is often done by burning a bit of incense or sage, or lighting a candle. It can be dispensed with altogether if someone is doing a short ritual before falling asleep.

And sometimes, if I'm having trouble sleeping, because something on the news has upset me, I'll cast a circle as I'm falling asleep - protection for my house (Mary Jane Brooks).

Even casting the circle and invoking directions and divinities can sometimes be by-passed, or done in a very brief way.

I don't always call in the four directions. I don't always open and close the circle. . . . It could be just laying in bed before I go to sleep. . . . I almost always visualize. I almost always come out of body. For me there's always psychic movement involved (Grace Fletcher).

It would be safe to say that no two Witches will do solitary rituals exactly the same way, and often any two solitary rituals done by the same Witch will vary considerably. The one component that is most consistently part of every ritual is grounding - the activity that contacts the Witch's center, connects her to the earth and the universe, protects her, and begins the flow of the energy.

Grounding, centering, and protecting? I just do that automatically - that's so basic, I do it every day (Grace Fletcher).

Solitary practice is necessary for some women due to personal circumstances such as location or availability of resources that would allow them to be part of a coven. It is desirable for others who simply prefer to work alone. In my own experience, a short grounding and meditation exercise has become part of my daily routine, and I sometimes do trance journeys by myself. However, I need the companionship of other women to really deepen in my magical work. When I am alone, the movement of energy and the awareness of immanence and connection that is exciting and exhilarating in a group, is slightly scary. As Starhawk (1989a) says, "Opening up the starlight vision is much more difficult without the support of a group. Those who travel the uncharted pathways of the mind alone run more risk of being caught in subjectivity. Also working with other people is much more fun" (p. 56).

Witchcraft rituals are a time to practice changing consciousness and being open to the Invisible Realm. The diversity and individuality that witchcraft fosters, the lack of dogma and hierarchy, the opportunities to gain self-knowledge, and the connection with the ground of being, open possibilities for creating an alternative reality. In the words of Diane Stein (1990), "Rituals are a training ground to end patriarchy" (p. 7).

My own experiences with witchcraft have all been positive and I think they have created and sustained a profound change in my consciousness. Because I am repeatedly experiencing a

sense of bonding and interconnectedness, I can no longer separate myself from the pain of other people and the earth. I know in a profound way that social injustice, environmental destruction and racist and sexist oppression are interrelated and that radical change in consciousness is necessary in order to change our society enough to ensure ecological survival.

Spiritual and Psychic Experiences

In addition to trance journeys and other magical experiences that women have had within witchcraft rituals, six of the eighteen women in this study described spontaneous encounters with the Invisible Realm that seem to me to be profoundly magical. Three of these women said that they have been aware of another plane of reality besides what Elaine Krentz called *the day to day, jump-up-never-to-come-down world that we live in*, since they were very young. Within patriarchal discourse, the experiences these six women shared would either be written off as madness, or categorized as mystical, which is understood as a private and inexpressible psychological occurrence that has no connection to issues in everyday reality (Jantzen, 1994, p. 191). The mystic, usually male, has been constructed as someone who is aloof from society, above it, uncerned with the mundane. But here are the psychic experiences of six women who claim the authority of their experiences against the grain of convention (p. 203), and provide insights into the political implications of working within the Invisible Realm.

Three of these six women had *the sight*. . . *I knew I could feel certain things and see certain things (Elaine Krentz)*. Two of them had learned how to move out of their bodies - astral travel. While one woman attributed this ability to childhood sexual abuse: *"There's a rip that happens when you are abused, where you enter the parallel world. When someone is wounded, they develop psychic powers at an early age (Terry Whitmore)*, the other reported: *I was never abused, I'm not a survivor in that way (Grace Fletcher)*. Their experiences were quite similar,

however, and both women had to learn how to control the spontaneous information that they received from the other dimension.

The rip that lets you into the parallel world gives you information. The problem I had as a child was that I had no teachers to help me, so I spent most of my childhood being very ill because I had no way to protect myself. I would be picking up what was going on around me indiscriminately. Wicca has helped me to learn various ways to protect myself, and a lot of my daily practice is putting protection around myself, so now I can be much more selective and I feel much healthier (Terry Whitmore).

The necessity of learning to protect oneself is reiterated by Grace Fletcher, as she relates one of her fascinating psychic experiences.

I just become really relaxed, and then I just don't feel my body anymore. My center is between my throat and heart chakras so I think a lot of my movement comes from there.

And then you travel?

Yes, there's traveling involved. . . . Astral travel is when you come out of body, when you move to another plane, another space. . . . I have seen a lot of pain traveling on the astral plane, because there's a lot of pain in the world. And when people are traveling out of body because they're in pain, they will often go there. But usually, I see a lot of joy and when I come back I feel a lot of peace.

Did you learn to do that, or did it happen spontaneously?

I've done that forever. I can't remember the first time. But it got out of hand for me for awhile. 'Cause part of what happens is that I receive people's deaths. And it's usually traumatic death that I receive 'cause I can hear the soul crying out in the death, because if it's a traumatic death, the soul will reach out. And what happened for me at this end, was that I used to catch that and then I'd experience the physical death, you know, like I'd feel like the steering wheel in my chest,

and I'd be choking away, and I'd have to push that away psychically so I couldn't feel it anymore. I couldn't determine what that was, and it got worse and worse for me, so that I was so distracted I was always out there instead of in here doing what I needed to do. And it got so that there would be times I'd be out walking and I'd have to stop because I couldn't function. And, of course, as always happens, someone came to me that could help me sort that out.

And it was a woman who had been working a long time and she said, "Well maybe why you receive those soul cries is that, in deaths that are really traumatic, the soul stays closer to this side than it does the other side, because this is all they really know." She said, "Maybe you're supposed to open the other side for them." And that made perfect sense to me so I started doing that, and that was easy. I would just move out of myself a little bit, open the other side, and then they would go. And I also learned through reading, if they were really having trouble going, how to mobilize help from the other side to help the soul. And she also said "You can refuse to be part of the physical sensations of the death." So I refuse. There are times when I get twinges of it, it depends if the death surprises me. But during the time I was learning, it was like I had poltergeist activity which was quite overwhelming for me. So that part of it worked out pretty well.

There was one that happened where I saw a man who was blond. Actually I saw through her, the woman who he was shooting, because he shot her through the head and I got her death. And as I got her death, and I began to open up the other side, he saw me, which was really unusual. He shouldn't have been able to do that. And it was night here. And it was very bright there. I know the house, what the house looks like, I know what she looks like and I know what he looks like. But I put up wards - psychic wards, and I protected and deflected this energy. But boy, I'd recognize him in a minute (Grace Fletcher).

The experience of parallel dimensions of reality and of being able to know and see things from a distance occurs in one woman's dream state. She related several very interesting dreams, one of which follows.

I had this dream that I was standing on a river bank - an embankment kind of thing, watching a group of witches - they were down in a valley and I was on this raised levy that was around it. These people had built a bonfire and they were all walking around it in a circle and they were chanting and I was watching them, just sort of fascinated at this and then I started walking around the perimeter, and all of a sudden, I got the urge to run. And so I started running as a person with two feet, and all of a sudden, I'm aware of this great speed that human beings just don't have, and my feet feel differently. And it's this wonderful free feeling. So I look down, and as my foot comes out in front of me, it's not a foot, it's a paw. And I'm aware of this incredible sensation, and I'm aware of how it feels when the feet strike on the ground, and I can feel my head now, I can feel my tongue hanging out of my mouth, as I run. I can feel the wind, I can feel my fur, I can move my ears, and I can hear things coming from different directions, and I can feel this body. I can feel the length and the strength and the running - the sensation of feet striking earth. This was wonderful! So I'm running and running, and I realize that I've changed into a wolf. And my fur's all black, and as I run all around the perimeter of this thing, I can feel the breathing and a feeling of physical fitness that's tight and wonderful.

When I woke up out of this dream, I immediately went to see a Musqueam elder I know, and he said, "It's shape shifting. You are a Medicine person and your totem animal is a wolf. Now you have exchanged souls with this animal, and you know what it feels like to be him, and he knows what it feels like to be you." Native American people still believe that dreams are a significant form of communication between the great spirit and yourself, or your inner self and

yourself. There are people who say dreams are nothing, they're like screen savers on computers, they just keep your mind occupied when you're sleeping (Liz Clawson).

Another woman who is also strongly influenced by the North American First Nations world view, experiences her dreams as times to do healing work.

I'm doing dream work, too. That's sort of the biggest focus of my attention right now, because I'm a dreamer and I look to my dreams to point direction. I use my dreams for healing work too. I'm doing healing work with my mother, because I was sexually assaulted by my uncle when I was very, very little and I felt for a long, long time that my mother had abandoned me, all through my early formative years. So she has come to me in dreams and we've sort of made an agreement to do this work. There's no other way that I can do that healing work. So in December, on her birthday, I held a feast for her - a sort of memorial feast because she would have been gone twenty-five years - to acknowledge publicly that this was a forgiveness, that I was going to work on our mutual healing in my dreams - in our dreams (Elaine Krentz).

Besides dreams and parallel realities, two women experienced the sentience of the earth, as natural phenomena seemed to communicate with them. The first was part of a group ritual.

We were gathering on Puget Sound, it was in September and it was night-time, outdoors. And we gathered in a circle - a half circle - there were seven of us and we couldn't fit around the fire. And the circle was open to Puget Sound. I was the leader, so I had spent quite a bit of time trying to figure out how to end. And I'd kind of go through my mind, what to say, and nothing was right. Finally, I heard, quite clearly that the other side of the circle - the empty side, would close the circle. Something would close the circle. And at that moment, we all looked up, and the northern lights started. There was just this huge display - and this was in September which was pretty early - of Aurora Borealis out over the Sound. We just stood there and watched it for five minutes, and then it went away. And it just felt like this incredible sign from nature that

what we were doing was good. It was quite a moving experience for all of us. I think of it as an affirmation (Sylvia Owens).

The second was a solitary experience.

We were visiting a beach house north of San Francisco, and I wanted to go out on the beach by myself. And the minute I opened the door, I felt the Goddess. I was running on the sand in my bare feet, running along the ocean, and yelling - you could shout because the waves covered it up - and I was singing really loud. I was singing, "Oh great spirit, Earth, Sun, Sky, and Sea, You're inside and all around me" - that song. And I was running through the waves and calling out the name, Ma Nu - she's the goddess of the deep, of the ocean. And I was carrying some stones with me in a little pouch, a quartz that I found in my yard up in the mountains. And I envisioned that as being the veins of mother earth - like her blood and her energy. So that one symbolized the energy - mother earth's energy. And I had this other stone, which was creativity - it had all these really wild colors in it. And, at that time, I really wanted my creativity to come forward.

So, I sat down in the sand, and the moon was right above the hill and above me, and the ocean was right beside me. I was sitting cross legged, and I drew a goddess in the sand - I drew Ma Nu in the sand. And I took the stones out and put them in the sand. Then, I picked up the one I brought from the mountains and I held it up under the moon and I said, "This is the energy of mother earth. Bless me, and bless my family and my friends, and everyone around me, and bless the mountains", because I had brought it from there, and that place is always in my heart. And to connect these two amazing energies - like the ocean and the mountains, that really meant a lot to me. And I held it up under the moon and it was really quiet - like the waves almost seemed to dull and there was no wind. So I put that one down and picked up the creativity and held that one under the moon, and I said "This symbolizes creativity, let that come flowing

forth." And at that moment, the wind came from behind me and just went, Whoosh! And the waves just crashed right beside me and the wind was blowing - it blew all my hair forward, and all these shivers just went up my spine and I was just like "Whoa!" I felt all this energy flowing through me. It was incredible - it was such a rush. It was so amazing (Anna Dvorak).

Clearly, these six women have gained strength, insight and personal affirmation from their magical, psychic experiences. These kinds of experiences are most likely available to everyone, but most people cut themselves off from magical occurrences because patriarchal society has either trivialized them as coincidences, ridiculed them as psychological aberrations or products of over-active imaginations, or elevated them to the realm of the mystical - far beyond ordinary experience and therefore, of little consequence in the real world (Jantzen, 1994).

Outside the Master's House

The future of our earth may depend upon the ability of all women to identify and develop new definitions of power and new patterns of relating across difference. The old definitions have not served us, nor the earth that supports us. The old patterns, no matter how cleverly rearranged to imitate progress, still condemn us to cosmetically altered repetitions of the same old exchanges.

For we have, built into all of us, old blueprints of expectation and response, old structures of oppression, and these must be altered at the same time as we alter the living conditions which are a result of those structures. For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house (Audre Lorde, 1984, p. 123).

Witch Politics: Power-with and responsibility

All of the eighteen women in this study identified themselves as feminists and saw no contradiction between their involvement in witchcraft and their feminist philosophy. In fact many were attracted to witchcraft because it matched their feminist viewpoint. However, at the time of the interviews, only five women mentioned being involved in what are usually defined as political activities: one spoke in a general way about being involved in feminist groups but did not specify what activities the groups were involved in; one was a volunteer for what would be identified as a specifically feminist organization; another was volunteering as an advocate for a social action group; and two were working with environmental groups.

Four women mentioned that they had been involved in feminist activism in the past, but at the time of the interview, they were not involved in political activity.

I used to be politically active as a feminist. I was very radical, very left wing. Now, I wouldn't say I'm politically active. I don't work in the political arena anymore. How I would work now is on a one-to-one level, much more effectively, than in a group. But I'm a great ranter and raver (chuckle). I do have specific opinions on many issues, and I have thoughts as a feminist - I have certain things that I have no tolerance for. But I'm not out there as part of a political group (Grace Fletcher).

Out of my consciousness raising group, I got involved in a number of other things, such as, we set up a women's center, and there were a number of things that were kind of spawned out of that, including an interval house for battered women which I helped to set up and served on the board for the first year. And, I had a little bit to do with the rape crisis center, I had something to do with women's career counseling for women going back into the labor market. I had a little to do with a women's recovery facility - from drug and alcohol abuse. I worked on

the needs assessment for that. So I sort of had my fingers in everything that was going on in the feminist community, in that city, at that time.

I'm not very much involved in feminist activities here. I kind of burned myself out in the 70s, and so, while I still consider myself to be a feminist, and that's still one of the main influences in my life, I haven't really done as much here as I did there. But I'm still sort of involved in the feminist community. More often than not, what I do now is give money rather than get directly involved. But most of my close friends are feminists, because that's the kind of people I'm most drawn to. The reason I'm a feminist Witch, is because of my feminist background. And feminism has impacted on Wicca, too (Kim Hume).

I've certainly called myself a feminist and I've been involved in the feminist movement - often around women's health issues, especially in the pro-choice area, and when there had to be a lot of work done to ensure that abortion didn't get re-criminalized again, and that abortion clinics were able to open in Vancouver and stay open. That hasn't been as big a problem lately, although I've learned from that whole cycle that you've never won the battle for sure, forever (Margaret Becker).

I was active before, although I was introduced to feminism and Wicca around the same time, I was much more into feminist activism than I was in Wicca. And one thing I really like about Wicca is that we have responsibility to each other because of our interconnectedness, and that really fit in with my politics, because I felt like there was some shit going down that wasn't all right, and we needed to work in solidarity to fight back. . . . I don't think it made me any less involved - I burnt out a few times, and it changed my political work. It was good to do magic around political issues and not just be out there in the street fighting back. I could be a lot more replenished doing magical resistance work, than physical resistance work (Sara Brannigan).

Involvement in witchcraft might not have been the only reason for the alteration in these four women's orientations toward feminist politics. However, it did seem to be a factor, and it also seemed that Witches felt some discomfort about these changes in their feminist political involvement. Although Sara Brannigan continues to be active around feminist causes, she has modified her activity in a way that has removed her from what she sees as the front line. She is aware that witchcraft has something of value to offer feminist political workers, but she seems to think she should be more involved.

I've started integrating witchcraft more into my performances. And that's been a real challenge and I really like it. I feel like I have a lot of work to do with that yet. When I was working as a political activist (I don't do a lot of front line activism right now, but when I did) we would do political action, like demonstrations or rallies, and I would try to integrate some kind of Wiccan content into it. Mostly around doing something with the energy, because I think a lot of political rallies and demonstrations have so much energy and so many people are out there, but it's like all the energy is there, but nothing gets really done with it psychically.

So, I did a wailing at one demonstration, and every year at the Montreal Massacre vigil I do a candle lighting ceremony. And International Lesbian's Day, and International Women's Day, we've done rituals and stuff. . . . And I would like to find a way to do that more, 'cause I am kind of itching to be on the front lines of something again, but also very cautious. I think that witchcraft has something very important to offer women in doing political work. I think that it could teach women to take care of ourselves better, so that we don't burn out and so that we can replenish ourselves. And a lot of women have come to witchcraft because they were burnt out, because they needed something, because they felt despair about never getting anywhere (Sara Brannigan).

There seems to be a value in traditional politics, especially feminist politics, that you give to the cause until you drop, and then you give some more. When active feminists finally burn out and withdraw from the political scene, witchcraft offers a refuge.

Many, many women who have entered into witchcraft are political burnouts - women who have been on the front lines for years, and rejecting patriarchal religions and needing something to recover from - someplace to recover in (Kate Schulman).

I think that Witches feel concerned and somewhat guilty about not being involved in feminist political activities, and one woman who works in a feminist organization found that some feminists are not totally accepting of Witches either.

I find it can be very difficult being both a feminist and a Witch. I find that there is a lot of resistance to spiritual ideas. I spend a lot of time in the Wiccan community and around people who are doing their own personal work, and they're highly spiritual, but there's another world out there, and even in the feminist movement, there is still fear around witchcraft (Terry Whitmore).

Aside from the stereotype of the evil Witch, that some of these women might be dealing with, for feminist activists who are busy organizing women's unions, establishing battered women's shelters, lobbying for legal abortions, or working to advance the position of women in society in a myriad of ways, the idea that some women are diverting their energy away from these very worthy political causes into discovering information about historical goddesses, meditating, or focusing on spiritual concerns is seen as escapism or self-indulgence. I think that, on some level, many Witches agree with this perception and feel like they should be more involved, and that by not participating in feminist activism, they are letting their more political sisters down.

One of the challenges our community faces is politics - feminism. There are a lot of women in our community who are kind of new agey in a way that is apolitical, I feel. And I think

that one thing that's really important is having a political understanding or some kind of analysis about why the world is the way it is right now and how we can change it. I think, for the most part, women who come to community rituals have some sense of politics, but I think we could integrate that more (Sara Brannigan).

I think one factor that has contributed to this situation is the way that politics and spirituality are defined in traditional discourses. Politics has to do with the state, laws, representation, factions, elections, campaigns, and governments. Political activities include organizing large groups, lobbying governments, educating the public, picketing and marching for various causes. Spirituality, on the other hand, is seen as having to do with a church or religion - a place set apart from the rest of the world, functioning as a haven or sanctuary (Daly, 1973). Spiritual practices usually seek individual enlightenment. Witchcraft is perceived as a spiritual practice, and therefore as apolitical. However, the practice of witchcraft broadens the definition of spiritual to include the political. Personal empowerment, the psychological and social changes a woman makes in herself and those around her, is both spiritual and political.

I think, when the lights went on for me - when I became a conscious feminist rather than an unconscious feminist - I was out there, I've done a lot of demonstrations and marches and my mother was terrified that she'd have to go and get me out of jail (that never happened). But I made a decision to make the changes at a very base level because I think that, for me, that's where the changes are most effective. So I brought my children up in as feminist, non-violent, non-sexist atmosphere as I could create for them. They grew up without television, I always encouraged free thought, and to question everything, including me (chuckle), which has created it's own problems (Grace Fletcher).

In order to appreciate the political implications of witchcraft, it is necessary to move outside of the master's house - away from mainstream definitions of politics which feature mass

movements, marches, and lobby groups, to a definition of politics as personal responsibility - the ability to respond. This definition of politics features power-with in place of power-over - a model that is familiar to Clara Singer, who has maintained her involvement in feminist political activities since the early 70s.

Wicca gives a sort of day to day feeling of hope and positivity. And in terms of my politics, I don't think I've gotten any more or less radical in my beliefs since becoming a Witch. What it feels to me is I have another tool to work with politically. And I have less patience with traditional political models and more need for working in ways that work with "power-with" and not "power-over", and ways that empower the group and individuals in the group. So, I think a lot of the stuff that feminists have worked with, right from the 60s and 70s, the collectivity model and all - for me, the work in the Craft reinforces my belief in the necessity for those kinds of alternate power structures, and their ability to create change (Clara Singer).

Starhawk (1988) describes this re-definition of power and politics from power-over and confrontation to power-with and responsibility as an integral part of moving away from the consciousness of estrangement, where we are strangers to ourselves, other human beings and our natural surroundings, to the consciousness of immanence, where everything is connected.

Even in the face of what seems like desperate times on the earth, being involved with the craft makes me operate more from a hopeful place. I can see the change in consciousness around, among people that I know, over the course of time. So that I think the craft has helped me a lot in dealing with the day to day sort of frustrations of being on the edge, and seeing that the world is totally fucked up and the only thing that can save it is a radical change. And you think, well how can that possibly happen? And I think that a lot of it has to do with this change in consciousness, just little by little. It's on the level of deep personal belief changes, and nothing less makes a difference (Clara Singer).

Among the Witches I interviewed, the change of consciousness from estrangement to immanence has largely been accomplished, and there is an understanding that power-with is a viable alternative to power-over. However, it is apparent that the re-definition of politics, from confrontation to responsibility, is lagging behind, and there is major confusion around what it means to be politically active. This can be partially attributed to the women's own perceptions about what political activity entails, but it can also be partially attributed to conflicting messages Witches have received from Starhawk. The following two examples will illustrate my point:

To be a Witch is to make a commitment to the Goddess, to the protection, preservation, nurturing, and fostering of the great powers of life as they emerge in every being. . . . As a shaper, as one who practices magic, my work is to find that power, to call it forth, to coax it out of hiding, tend it, and free it of constrictions. In a society based on power-over, that work inevitably must result in conflict [emphasis added] with the forces of domination, for we cannot bear our own true fruit when we are under another's control (Starhawk, 1987, p. 8).

Power is not only power-over - the ability to manipulate, control and punish - but also power-from-within, the inherent ability each of us has to become what we are meant to be. . . . The rituals of witchcraft help us discover and develop our personal power, the unique gift we each have to bring to the world. . . . Personal power increases when we take on responsibility, and develops through our personal integrity, living our beliefs, acting on our ideas, striving for balance. . . . When what is going on is

the poisoning and destruction of the earth, our own personal development requires that we grapple with that and do something [emphasis added] to stop it (Starhawk, 1989b, pp. 177-178).

In these two examples, Starhawk begins by saying that power-from-within, or women's deepest abilities and potential, are called forth by using power-with, or their nurturing, caring, influence in every instance where women take responsibility: in families, neighborhoods, and communities. To call these actions political, is consonant with her re-definition of politics from confrontation to responsibility. However, in both of the above examples, she also states that Witches must engage in conflict with the powers of domination, which is more in line with the usual definition of politics as confrontation.

The Witches I interviewed have heard both of these messages. They are comfortable with their ability to call forth power-from-within, and engage in activities where power-with is the norm. For example, one woman was very involved in her community.

I try to live in community. To me the place to start is within your home, in your building, your street, your neighborhood. I'm quite involved in our building, and I think if I use actions that are responsible, that has repercussions on the lives of everyone here, which has repercussions on the lives of everyone they interact with, and so on (Mary Jane Brooks).

One woman earns her living by organizing and promoting feminist cultural events which become entertaining opportunities to build feminist solidarity. Another woman works in a business as part of a feminist collective, and half of the women included in this study are, at least partially, earning their living doing healing work - massage therapy, body work, or counseling. These activities would not normally be called political, but for these Witches, they definitely have political implications.

Every person I work with, everyone I talk to, every interaction I have is a political statement (Grace Fletcher).

When I do massage work, I incorporate things like smudge and chakra oils. I think of it as an opportunity to honor the temple of the body and to come home for people to be in themselves (Sylvia Owens).

My body work has a very strong spiritual undertone. With the Craft understanding of the body being an extension of the earth, honored in the direction North, and the structure which we are given to work in on this planet, what I do with my body work is help my clients re-honor their body and reconnect with the information the body has. So it is very much a part of trying to heal the earth by beginning with individuals whose bodies are, from their own perspective, much more sacred and respected (Paula James).

This way of working with people is gentle, organic and unobtrusive. It is quite attractive to Witches, they understand it and they seem to be less willing to become involved in confrontational politics.

I remember the first year at Witch Camp, there was quite a focus on political action and kind of a push to sign up to be involved in things when you went back into the community. But I realized that, I will do that if I choose, but otherwise I will use my practice of Wicca for my own personal growth and issues and things (Margaret Becker).

I would stress that there is nothing wrong with engaging in traditional political activities, and the politics of confrontation is not necessarily in opposition to the politics of responsibility. I heard about some women Witches who have been able to successfully integrate traditional political involvement with Wiccan empowerment and responsibility.

Some of the people that are involved in witchcraft, or many that I know, spend their lives doing things - whether it's working in the women's movement, working on rape issues, or

working in the peace movement around confronting nuclear issues and such things, or working in gay and lesbian organizations to fight oppression and gay bashing. So I think that active Witches spend their lives and their working time doing things to fight these oppressions and to make changes, and I think they also use the power of ritual, not only for themselves, to empower themselves to do the work they do and to get rid of the anger and all the agony, but I think that those very situations are brought into rituals to make changes (Kate Schulman).

However, I would argue that the confrontational model of politics is part of the consciousness of estrangement - the alienated, masculinist world view of the dominant culture. As such, it is one of the master's tools, and in a Witch's universe, where change begins with the empowerment of the self-in-relation and radiates outward like a pebble thrown in a pond, it is at best, ineffective; at worst, damaging, as previous references to burn-out indicate. Power-with is potentially present in every interaction. There are many political opportunities in everyday life.

Witches have learned to use techniques of responsibility, power-with, and resistance in political situations that might otherwise become confrontational. Some examples of this have emerged from the Clayoquot Sound protests, where many Witches are involved. Rather than relying on confrontation and power-over, they empower themselves and their allies and then resist the oppressor's aggression. When Starhawk visited the site of the Clayoquot Sound protest in the summer of 1993, she created a wonderful example of using witchcraft to resist the clear-cut logging that is ravaging the area. She led a group of about two hundred protesters in a spiral dance one night on the shores of Kennedy Lake. She created a sacred space by casting a circle, calling in directions and grounding. Then she taught the group a song, which was sung throughout the dance, which began by everyone forming a chain by holding hands, and winding around in a wheel-within-a-wheel formation until everyone faced everyone else at least once. The cone of power that was raised was incredible, and people who had never done anything like that before were amazed.

It was very empowering, and people came away determined to resist the destruction of that beautiful land in whatever way they could. For some people, including Starhawk, that meant being arrested at the blockade the next morning, which is, although somewhat more confrontational, another example of resistance - peaceful civil disobedience (Emerson, 1993, p.27).

Witch Organizing

For seven of the women I interviewed the energy that might previously have gone into feminist organizing is now going toward building a Witch community. One woman saw her Wiccan organizing as an extension of her previous feminist activism.

I suppose you might say in some ways I've had a decrease in activism, except that I consider that some of what I do in teaching Wicca is feminist activity. It's just taking a different focus. Instead of setting up interval houses and things like that, I'm taking a different direction, but I still consider it part of my feminist involvement (Kim Hume).

It was interesting to find that the same women who seemed to be somewhat apologetic for not being politically involved in the larger feminist community, were quite involved in the Witch community. There, they were grappling with problems and conflicts, organizing, teaching, and leading. The re-definition of politics as responsibility and power-with is very much in evidence in every large community ritual, and every coven meeting requires organization, leadership, and cooperation.

At the present time, the local Witch community that has evolved out of Witch camp is very loosely organized with some of the members taking responsibility for offering courses, organizing the public rituals, updating the phone tree, and publishing a newsletter called Witch Words. Recently, a "Witch hot line" was established, which is a telephone number people can call to receive recorded messages about events of interest to Witches. While these things are appreciated,

there are issues around community building, attracting new people, and keeping people involved that need attention.

I have noticed in our community that we have this set of elders - that's not quite the right term but I don't know what to call them - people who have been doing it a lot of years, people have been active in the community, people who teach but still help organize things. And then I see a lot of new people, and I don't see any intermediates. It seems like there's the new ones and the old ones and nothing in between. And I'm quite concerned about that. What happens that they go away? Where have they gone? Are they doing solitary? Have they moved out of the city and are doing active work somewhere else? Or are they not getting their needs met? I don't know. And I want to know. Because I think it's important and I think it's important to work on building a community that has all levels (Mary Jane Brooks).

Active Witches are also very aware of difficulties around accessibility, communications, and networking.

A lot of women come to me and they say, well I really want to be in a coven, how do I do that? And none of us know because, I think in our community we don't have very good networking. Like we have community rituals and we have the phone tree, but for women who come from out of town and want to connect, it's really hard for them. It's different you know, when you go to church, you have a building and you can have community meetings and stuff. But because we don't have a building, and I'm not saying that I want us to have a building, but I wish there was more support in the community at large - like if people would donate their space to us for rituals or for meetings or for stuff like that. Just so there could be some more organization in a sense that would allow for women to find other Witches and to get together (Sara Brannigan).

Another issue that is often raised pertains to people's perceptions of safety and quality control during rituals, and the desire to make it easier for more people to attend.

And I know for myself when I started going to rituals, I needed assurance that where I was going and who I was working with were in some way qualified and could ensure that it would be a safe thing that I was getting into. Because I had very little knowledge, and I needed to be able to trust. And if I had thought that it was just anybody saying "Oh, I'll do this community ritual and I want to do this and this...", with no experience behind it, I wouldn't have come at all. There needs to be a balance, somehow, of new people being able to get experience doing things and older people, who have had experience, saying: "Yes, this will work. No, that isn't appropriate for this time and place." Things like that. 'Cause I don't want the new people to get turned off or turned away. I want it to be a safe place and I want it to progress. And I don't want the older people to burn out (Mary Jane Brooks) .

At the same time that some Witches desire a stronger organizational structure to help solve some of these problems, Witches generally value the personal freedom and variety that witchcraft now entails, and they fear that any move toward tighter organization would jeopardize that.

Witches tend to be very individualistic. We meet in people's houses to have our rituals, and we don't have a church that's visible, like in Christianity, or the Mosque like the Muslims do. It isn't organized and I don't think it could be. You couldn't have someone at the front preaching to you some doctrine (laughter). It wouldn't work. I mean that's what paganism is. That's what Wicca is. It's non-doctrine - I mean, there is no doctrine, and that's the appeal. That doesn't mean that you can't have public rituals, but within those public rituals, while we do agree on myths, and there are forms that we follow, each person's actual interpretation of them can be very, very different. And there's a lot of room for that. And I think if someone was to attempt to bring all the Witches together and say, "Here's our political line or our religious

beliefs” - I mean, if you tried to codify it, it wouldn't work. I think that's one of the reasons you have a lot of Witches, because of that freedom (Terry Whitmore).

In spite of this resistance to witchcraft being organized, a close examination of all of the transcripts I gathered, revealed that about half of the women I interviewed referred to witchcraft as a religion (which implies at least some formal organization) at least once. However, all of the women showed a preference for naming witchcraft a spiritual practice, and many carefully avoided using the term religion, because it carries connotations of dogma, structure, and lack of creativity which seem characteristic of established religions.

In all the religions that I studied over the years, including Buddhism and Muslim, and the different Christian religions as well, I found they were pretty regimented. I have trouble with organization - how you can only do it a certain way, how you can only express yourself in just one way. And of course I don't believe in the big guy in the sky concept either (Grace Fletcher).

But religions do not always involve dogma or rigid structure. According to Robert Ellwood (1973), religion can be defined as:

A group centrally concerned with the means of ultimate transformation which has simultaneous expression in three areas: *verbal* (myth and doctrine); *worship* (ritual, cultus, and other special behavior); and *social* (a structure of interpersonal action which enables continuing group life). . . No particular metaphysical idea, such as the existence of a heavenly god, is necessarily involved (p. 4-5).

Although more women Witches might be likely to call witchcraft a religion, defined in this way, some of the women I interviewed would still resist designating their practice as a religion, because that might imply a formalized hierarchical organization.

There are more formalized organizations in Ontario, but I wouldn't want to be a part of that - you know, in a church kind of a way, where there's a priestess and that kind of thing. Like it's hierarchical, so I wouldn't want to be part of an organization like that, that has any hierarchy in it. I mean, respect for the elders and that kind of thing, and elders leading, yes, that's fine. But not in the sense of, "I am the word of god. Like I sit next to god - or the goddess." You know? The ego stuff I can do without (Wendy Halvorson).

While Witches fear that dogma and hierarchy will enter their practice along with more formal organization, they also want witchcraft to be recognized as a valid religious practice.

And we can request, which is about as far as we can go, a broader sense of spirituality so that witchcraft is included as something of value, and that others deal with their stereotypes, either the absurd, as in Halloween, or the awful as in the Satanic - a whole different sense of tolerance that we require of mainstream society simply by recognizing the craft, that needs to, of course, go further (Paula James).

The request that Paula James is referring to here would be made to governmental bodies, mainstream religions and ecumenical councils, and the general public for social recognition of witchcraft as a legitimate religious practice.

In the States, they have certain organizations like R.C.G. - the Re-formed Congregation of the Goddess, and they're a recognized religion. There's a sense of solidness and presence and rightness - you know, "It's OK to be a Witch. Look, they even let us in!" (chuckle) And I want that here, personally, and I believe that can be a really serious and needed component in having a sense of identity as a Witch and as a community. And it's not a sense of getting approval from patriarchal systems, it's making ourselves visible (Jean Davis).

Visibility is, of course, a major issue for modern Witches. The social, religious and anthropological construction of a Witch as an evil, hex casting, Satanist makes it difficult for many Witches to say they are Witches, much less to organize openly.

I guess on a political note, the same people who oppose abortions, who oppose gays and lesbians, the right wing fundamentalists (that's a broad group and some of them are more violent than others) they are the same ones who condemn Witches and witchcraft - that it's evil and the work of Satan. I'm not paranoid about it but a lot of people are - a lot of people are afraid to say that they're Witches, or afraid to practice ritual any place public, because of all the weirdoes that are out there (Kate Schulman).

In the interviews, I heard of only one situation where a woman felt the brunt of prejudice against Witches.

I went through a really difficult time when we lived with my husband's parents. I was called a ghoul, and told that I was sick, there was something truly wrong with me, and that I'd carried the Witch stuff too far, because I had natural childbirth with my daughter - I had no intervention at all. I was in labor for 36 hours and they wanted to do a cesarean section but I said, "No, everything's going to be fine." And my husband's mother said that I was a very selfish person and just to prove a point and to provide my own needs, I was endangering my child. I was told that witchcraft and Wicca had to be evil things, because witness my beliefs and what I was doing with my child. And I breastfed my daughter, and they said that was another manifestation of this whole Wicca nonsense and that my child was not getting the proper nourishment, and I was a horrible mother, and that what I did amounted to abuse. It was just nuts (Liz Clawson).

All Witches have heard stories about women like Karina Singer, who had lived on a farm in North Dakota for twenty-one years. She and her husband built a guest house, two Native

American “medicine wheels” or rock configurations, and a fire pit, as part of a plan for a retreat center. Her husband died in April, 1990, and in August of that year, two male neighbors were arrested on her farm and charged with conspiring to murder her. It seems that, for several years, there had been rumors that the Singers were practicing witchcraft. At the time of the arrests, Karina Singer was a widowed, independent landowner, with different spiritual interests from those of her neighbors. She became a target for modern Witch hunters (Forfreedom, 1992, p.25).

Also, many newspaper and magazine articles use the terms witchcraft, occult and Satanism interchangeably. In 1985 two US members of Congress, Senator Jesse Helms¹⁰ and Representative Robert Walker introduced bills to deny tax-exempt status to Pagan churches, saying they were based on witchcraft, defined by Helms as “the use of powers derived from evil spirits, the use of sorcery, or the use of supernatural powers with malicious intent” (Forfreedom, 1992, p. 24). Walker’s legislative assistant told the press, “If a person is praying for horrible things and sticking pins into voodoo dolls, that is not the kind of religion that should be supported by a tax exemption” (Guiley, 1989, p. 156).

All of the women I interviewed were familiar with a local political scandal in January, 1994 that featured a male Witch named Sam Wagar. Sam had been duly elected by a Fraser Valley New Democratic Party constituency association as their candidate in a Provincial by-election, but was prohibited from running in the election because of public outcry against his religion. Besides this, many stories about people who have lost their jobs or had their homes or cars vandalized because someone has heard that they are Witches, circulate in the community. Most Witches pay heed to these stories and are simply “discreet” about their involvement with witchcraft, which is also problematic.

One of the challenges facing Witches is the stereotype of the Witch. And that’s why people can’t be out. So to me, it’s such an incongruence to be involved in your religion or

spirituality that honors everything, and not to be able to be open and honest yourself about who you are and what you practice. We just need more people to be out, so people can see, "You don't look like a Witch!" (laughter) "Well, that depends on what you think a Witch looks like, doesn't it?" But, yeah, just more people speaking out (Anita Varden).

Cella: The Inner Mysteries

Within the context of discussions about the organization, structure, and visibility of the local witchcraft community, I learned about a training program called "Cella", which is a self-directed study program intended to foster knowledge of witchcraft, spiritual development and personal growth. Six of the women I interviewed are currently enrolled in Cella and two more have the written course materials and are interested, but unable to make the commitment at this time.

In the States, there's a legalized, recognized Wiccan church, called the Re-formed Congregation of the Goddess. It's based in Madison, Wisconsin and there are branches all over the US. They have a correspondence course and there's a group of women in Vancouver that have all got together and registered at the same time to do this. Someone comes from Wisconsin and meets with them and helps them do their programs (Mary Jane Brooks).

The Cella program costs about three hundred dollars (US) per year to participate, and the fees can be paid in monthly, quarterly, semi-annual or yearly installments, which helps to make the program accessible to women with all income levels. The fees cover the cost of written materials and the travel costs of an advisor who comes to Vancouver from Wisconsin three times a year to assist local women in whatever way they need assistance with their study.

Cella is like doing a Master's in Wicca. It's a six year program, and there are three different cycles, and each cycle has different activities, and there are six different paths that you can follow. You're supposed to choose one that you're going to focus your studies on, like a specialty if you were doing graduate work. So you have the path activities - like in the

"goddesses" path , cycle one would be to become familiar with ten different goddesses, and familiarize yourself with some type of meditation practice and do it every day. And then cycle two is kind of the next step, it's more involved. And then cycle three is really involved and takes much more dedication. And each one requires more commitment and dedication. You have to do a lot of reading and you have to write every day, as well as coming up with your own rituals. It's amazing (Meg Wallace).

In order to demonstrate the level of involvement that participants in the Cella program are engaged in, I have summarized the outline of the program taken from the written material for the course (Reformed Congregation of the Goddess, 1993). As I understand it, the six paths of the Cella program represent six themes, each with a sort of mythical name, that women can choose from to celebrate and serve the goddess. The names and themes are: a) Creatrix, which focuses on music, art, performance art, craft, or writing; b) Earthwalker, which focuses on practical earth plane activities and a deeper understanding of the self; c) Scholar/teacher, which focuses on study and sharing knowledge with others; d) Ritualist, which focuses on creating rituals and sharing celebration with others; e) Healer; which focuses on achieving maximum personal wellness and assisting others to do the same; and f) Organizer, which focuses on creating activities and events for others to share.

Within the paths there are twenty-one different activities: goddesses, psychic skills, magic, leadership, feminism, environment, personal growth, creative activities, comparative religions, physical fitness, body and health, counseling, teaching, mythology, cosmology, divination, public speaking, ritual, performance, healing, and integrated activities. No one path requires all twenty-one activities, but all require between eight and fifteen. For the first year of the program, which is cycle one, these activities are done with a beginning intensity. For the next two years, cycle two, they are done with an increased intensity, and for the next three years, cycle three, they are honed,

practiced and shared with others. For example, if a woman chose the sixth path, Organizer, she would have to do the following activities: goddesses, psychic skills, magic, leadership, feminism, environment, personal growth, and integrated studies. In the first year, she would have to: learn all about ten different goddesses; become acquainted with psychic energy and its uses; become familiar with different types of magic and their uses; learn about different styles of leadership and practice one; join a feminist group and learn about feminism; become familiar with her environment and practice an ecological activity; set goals for personal growth; and conceptualize and carry out an activity that combines three of the other activities. For cycle two and three, she would expand, experiment with, and implement things she learned in cycle one, all the while reading, recording, diary writing, and explaining the process.

When you come through all of it, it's basically like getting a degree in theology in comparative religions. And you would be recognized in their church as a priestess, capable of marrying people or whatever it is, in the States, that a recognized church official can do (Mary Jane Brooks).

So that means, if it was a legal church, I could go into prisons and teach, or I could be in the community at large in a more constructive way - bringing something much more basic to people than what other religions do (Grace Fletcher).

Although any woman who is interested in Cella can begin her study at any time, and there is no requirement to be involved in a group, eleven women formed a Vancouver Cella coven in 1994 which acts as a support group specifically for Cella-related activities.

The Cella coven has a variety of women in it and our identification is as Cella members, but we do ritual. You don't have to belong to it to do Cella. It's just there as a way to get together and keep in touch and do work together (Jean Davis).

Right now, Cella is just a study group where women are learning about goddesses, psychic skills, magic, and so on. It is a way to organize and focus many of the things that women Witches are already familiar with, to fill in gaps in their knowledge, and to encourage sharing skills in the community.

Being involved in Cella, brings into focus so many of the elements in my life that I studied privately - the psychic phenomena, the feminism, the matriarchy, the cosmology, the divination, there's just a whole long list of what's involved in Cella. And I've been studying that for years in my desire to understand what women think about themselves in the world (Grace Fletcher).

The Cella program features power-from-within and power-with. It is possible that, as these women grow and study together, a strong, visible community will grow around them. It is apparent that the Re-formed Congregation of the Goddess is a model of Wiccan organizing that is attractive to some Witches and could be the foundation of an organization that would lobby for legal recognition here.

I would like to see it become a lot more prominent. I would love to see a temple. Even though I know there'd be lots of things we have to work out. But I still would love to see a temple, where you can train - training to be a priestess, training to use magic. It would be nice to have training in that kind of reality (Meg Wallace).

As I have studied witchcraft and magic, and glimpsed the wealth of material that is available and the breadth and depth of humanity's experiences with the Unseen Realm, I have come to share Meg Wallace's enthusiasm for learning more about this fascinating topic. I wondered about the possibility of doing further academic work with a concentration in this area, but according to Rosemary Guiley (1989) that may not be possible. She says that, in the United States, the last university degree in magic, a Bachelor of Arts earned at Berkeley, California in

1970, so embarrassed the University administrators at Berkeley, that magic and witchcraft were banned from the program (p. 34).

Witch Visions

To resist effectively, we must create, for resistance is not a mere withdrawal of energy, but a posing of a reality that challenges power-over. . . . Politics is a form of magic, and we work magic by directing energy through a vision. We need to envision the society we want to create (Starhawk, 1987, p. 314).

“Only those who see the invisible can do the impossible” (Mayor, 1991, p. 11)

Witches practice visualization and trance journeying on a regular basis. These forays into the Invisible Realm make it possible for them to envision new ways of relating, new societal structures, and new ways of interacting with the environment. Our society is in desperate need of such visioning, as social and environmental problems accumulate. The following examples of are some Witch visions that make connections between more equitable sharing of the world's resources and ending violence - especially violence toward women.

I would like to see the change from the hierarchical power-over system that is becoming more and more evident, to a kind of system where everyone and everything was valued for its own power-from-within, so that nobody needed to lord it over anybody else, and we could learn to use our power in a cooperative kind of way to live together and value each other (Kim Hume).

I would want to see an end to violence toward all women and children, and to all people. I would want to eradicate poverty, and the real vast differences among people's incomes - that capitalism and classism would be obliterated and the wealth would be shared - there wouldn't be

just a few sharing the wealth of the earth. And that the horrors that happen from all kinds of violence, whether it's rape or incest, or whether it's the violence of wars, that they were eradicated (Kate Schulman).

I'd want everybody to be fed. I think that food should be free. Like organic food should be given away on every corner in the whole world. Everyone should be fed and should know themselves on that level - they should be aware of harmony of the earth and their bodies, because it's all the same thing. Food's a big deal for me. Like I think you really are what you eat. And I think so much of society - especially on our continent, they eat so much that's just not doing anything for them. And that creates a big off-balance in their lives and the way they view the world and the universe too. So, if everybody could be fed and know what's healthy and what's not, we would become so much more peaceful too. It's all related. Every organ in our bodies is related to something else and the earth and the universe is all connected and that's something that I think would help (Anna Dvorak).

I'd like to live in a world where money didn't exist, but where everybody had everything they needed - including CD players (laughter). I'd love to live in a world where there's just respect - like real respect for life and for everything that exists. And that the forces that bring death - like violence and nuclear arms and all that - that they not exist, or that they be destroyed somehow or that they not be an option, period - that they not even be a thought. I'd like to live in a world where we all had clean air to breathe and we didn't have to live so close together - where there was a place to go - where we could go out in the woods and be safe, and not worry about - especially for women, not worry about getting murdered, or raped, or whatever (Sara Brannigan).

Everybody would have access to all the good things in life - like all the material wealth, and in ways that keeps it accessible, not in the way that somebody gives them something. But in

a way that they can have it because it's there for them and they can just walk into it, as they grow up. You know, they walk into decent, respectful education when they're of that age. They are born into a family that truly loves them and cherishes them and wants them to be in their life. As adults, we walk into an accepting society where, whether we are male or female, or whatever our sexual preferences are, or whatever, we are accepted as totally equal, on all levels - it doesn't matter what our physical forms are. And everybody has a great respect and a reverence for their life, so that each person knows that the air they breathe, the ground they walk on, the food they eat, all comes from a divine source, and that we are divine people, and that we respect that in ourselves, and in each other. And I think in that way, we will totally eliminate the devastation and the destruction, because when you have a reverence for something, you really want to take care of it. Those are the kinds of changes I would want (Wendy Halvorson).

Besides a world based on cooperation, shared resources and power-with, Witch visions also demonstrate their desire for tolerance, diversity, and places where people could heal.

And, I also see people free to practice whatever spirituality they want, and for me it would be witchcraft because right now, that's what fits. And just a place for healing for people. There's been so much destruction and violence. And Wicca would be a part of that, but it wouldn't have to be the governing part or anything. It would just be people free to practice whatever they want. Sort of that honoring of each other's systems and differences (Anita Varden).

I would like to think that there could be tolerance among people. I would love to see us work through issues of misogyny and racism and homophobia and classism, and able bodyism, and all that stuff. I wish the world was accessible to everybody and that everybody would have enough food to eat and had shelter, and that there were places to go when they needed healing - physically or spiritually, or mentally, or emotionally. I would like to live in an integrated world

where there really was integration of body and mind, and spirit and politics, and all those parts of our beings (Sara Brannigan).

I would like to see a world where women are honored for whatever stage they are in their life and for whatever they choose to do with their bodies and their selves and their knowledge and their intuition, but I certainly can get discouraged when it seems like kind of a backlash time against feminism and the way Wicca is described and put down and people seem afraid of it. But I feel it's generally a very bad time for many people in the world in many ways. It's a time of transition, that hopefully from this comes some re-learning and re-using some of the old ways that will work for people and the planet (Margaret Becker).

The dreams and visions of women Witches reflect their affinity for the earth and the need to acknowledge earth-based spiritualities.

The political aspects would be connected to ecology. It would be protecting areas of known beauty and power, you know, as well as the forest. To acknowledge sacred places and protect them, designate parts of parks for circle gatherings, and make that acceptable, and protect them, so that we could do it more easily, rather than searching all over the place for someplace that's private enough. So it would be acknowledging that governmentally as a need (laughter). And honoring sacred places through plaques, through explanations - particularly in our part of the world, native places, places of power and sacred places - to honor those and protect them as has been done in England and Scotland for some of the great places of gathering. We do need gathering places. We would allow gathering places and they would be for community gatherings, circles and things. We'd have to provide places for that (Sylvia Owens).

For some Witches, their visions are not new, but something that humanity knew once but lost when the forces of patriarchal domination gained supremacy.

I think the most important one would be that everybody would have access to their higher self and to the divine one, and then everything else would just fall into place. You know, there wouldn't be any ego stuff happening. And if there's no ego stuff happening, then there's no war, or anything like that. It is an actual heaven on earth. They say we have had access to that in the past, and we can have access to that in the future. Of course, we don't have any remembrance of it - just very tiny little glimmer of it. And, I think, each lifetime as we come, I think we have a little bit more remembrance (Wendy Halvorson).

I see a remembering. You know, we did a lot together, and we're starting to remember. It's all about remembering. It's not anything new really. And I see more remembering and more and more people who would typically be called middle class or traditional religions, or whatever, remembering in their own forms - different forms. And I mean remembering the power and beauty of very simple earthy kinds of things that have been forgotten, and I can see that being accepted more and more (Sylvia Owens).

The youngest woman I interviewed thought there was a way that people could be helped to remember.

I know that a lot of young people are scared and they're moving toward other things, like violence and unhealthy realities. I know that the media is really sending out the message that we're not going in a positive direction - it's all negative - it's all scary. I know that my sister is scared. But if everyone was taken out into the forest, you know, and really shown what the earth is, maybe it would be different for people. In the city, you don't see the stars and you don't see the trees, and you don't see a lot of important things (Anna Dvorak).

CHAPTER FOUR

Discussion

The Burning Times

Who were the Witches? Where did they come from?

Maybe your great, great grandmother was one.

Witches were wise, wise women they say,

And there's a little Witch in every woman today

(Bonnie Lockhart, 1982, p. 103).

You say there are no words to describe this time,

you say it does not exist. But remember.

Make an effort to remember. Or, failing that, invent.

(Monique Wittig, 1969)

As I have listened to contemporary Witches, learned about animism, witchcraft, and magic, and adopted a Witch's perspective with respect to the earth, other people, and non-human life forms, I have often wondered how I could ever have believed that the earth was just a big rock, that divinity was transcendent, and that other people and non-human life forms were merely resources to be exploited. The Witch's perspective seems so intelligent to me, I wonder how and why my Western European ancestors abandoned it, or if they ever consciously ascribed to it.

I am aware that the Witch's perspective shares some similarities with other groups, such as North American First Nations people and African-Americans, who have attempted to reclaim a social and spiritual history where harmony and interdependence were valued. Like these groups,

the contemporary women Witches in this study base their visions for a more peaceful and cooperative future on their mythology about their past. The ancestors modern women have been able to find information about are Medieval European Witches, and the chant that begins this chapter expresses the modern Witch's desire to understand why those historical Witches were persecuted during the Middle Ages: who *were* those Witches, and where *did* they come from?

Matilda Gage (1893/1980) was a first-wave feminist scholar and the first author to grapple with these two questions from a feminist perspective. In her book Woman, Church and State (1893/1980), she theorized that the Witches who were persecuted during the Middle Ages were the remnants of ancient, woman-centered, Goddess-worshipping societies, which she called "the Matriarchate". Gage's thorough study of numerous religious historians, as well as the well-known anthropologist, Johann Bachofen (1815-1887), and the equally well-known historian, Jules Michelet (1798-1874), led her to conclude that these peaceful, egalitarian cultures were overcome by warlike patriarchal societies several thousand years ago. "The Patriarchate, under which Biblical history and Judaism commenced, was a rule of men whose lives and religion were based upon passions of the grossest kind, showing but few indications of softness or refinement" (p. 21). Gage theorized that the Patriarchate established hierarchies, force, authority, wars, discord, prostitution, and female infanticide. Their goal was subjugation of the Matriarchate, which was not only all females, but everything construed as feminine, including the earth.

This story of the overthrow of the Matriarchate at the hands of the Patriarchate has become a "sacred history. . . the hallmark of the women's spirituality movement" (Eller, 1993, p. 155). It is very popular among contemporary women Witches because it includes a myth of origin for the alienated world-view of Western European patriarchy, a powerful critique of the status quo, and a utopian vision of an egalitarian society. It affirms the Witch's perspective, confirms that this

perspective was once an accepted world-view, and offers an explanation for how and why it was abandoned.

Riane Eisler (1987) and Merlin Stone (1976) are two more theorists that are well known and widely read by the women in this study. Citing recent archeological discoveries of female figurines as evidence of previously existing Goddess worshipping cultures, they have theorized that violent, war-like tribes invaded Catal Huyuk and Crete several thousand years ago, bringing warfare, slavery, and the disintegration of woman-centered culture. However, Janet Biehl (1991) has criticized their assumption that the discovery of female figurines indicates that the society was woman-centered, or that women were highly regarded, or even that Goddesses were the preeminent divinity. Biehl points out that the figurines could have been a type of fertility talisman that was held by a woman who wanted to become pregnant and discarded when that goal was achieved (p. 35). She also disputes the invasion theory, pointing out that it is more likely that the ascendance of patriarchy happened over a longer period of time and involved a number of diverse factors (p. 45).

These arguments are well-known among contemporary women Witches, but they refer to Merlin Stone's When God Was a Woman (1976) and Barbara Walker's Encyclopedia of Women's Myths and Secrets (1983), which contain mythologies from different cultures and widespread geographical locations that lend support to theories that large numbers of people once worshipped the Great Goddesses. These Goddesses with their three faces, Creator, Sustainer, and Destroyer, conveyed an acceptance of the wholeness of life - birth, growth, death, seasons and cycles, changes and processes. I think that the Witches in this study would agree that, in a society where the whole of life is honored, there would most likely be greater tolerance, and where the entire cycle of life is worshipped, people would live more harmoniously with the earth and each other. Whether the Goddesses indicate woman-centeredness or not, they do indicate earth-centeredness, and when people see the earth as divine and themselves as integral parts of the whole, rather than as separate

individuals, symbolically feminine values such as caring, cooperation, and sharing emerge. It is this set of values rather than higher social status for individual women that appeals to Witches.

How or why human beings came to see themselves as separate from the processes of life remains a subject of much debate, but it seems to me that, as men began to fear death, the Crone or Destroyer, they divorced themselves from the cycles and seasons of life, and tried to dominate, control, and possess the earth itself and all others, especially women. Some feminist psychoanalytic theorists (Chodorow, 1978; Dinnerstein, 1976) thought that the development of the male ego in opposition to the mother might explain the fear of women and the need for dominance that seem to be integral to patriarchal consciousness. The individualistic ego, separated from the natural world, would begin to fear its own death as a final extinction (Henderson, 1983, p. 206), which might have led to hatred of the Crone/Destroyer aspect of the Goddess. The desire to possess and control material things then becomes an effort to achieve immortality, and the control of women and children becomes necessary in order to preserve control over property after death.

As patriarchal hierarchies and domination became the norm, patriarchal mythology either relegated the Goddesses to minor roles as consorts of their male gods or, as in the case of Kali and Hecate, emphasized the Destroyer aspect until they became evil, devouring monsters (Walker, 1983). However, in spite of several centuries of patriarchal rule and the entrenchment of the male transcendent god, some remnants of Goddess worshipping cultures existed in parts of Europe until Christianity, which was fervently anti-female, anti-body, and anti-earth (Gage, 1893/1980), spread throughout the Roman Empire. Barbara Walker (1983) chronicles how the Great Triple Goddess, known as Diara to the Romans and Artemis to the Greeks, was worshipped at Ephesus in the fourth century AD. But the Christian gospels demanded total destruction of all of her temples, which were converted to Churches and dedicated to Mary. Diana became Queen of the Witches, Goddess of the heathen, and one Inquisitor declared that she was the devil (p. 233-234).

This campaign against the Goddess and the life processes she represented, drove Goddess worship into the countryside where Pagans retained their seasonal celebrations and certain wise women and healers maintained their connection to the earth, and their knowledge of natural remedies for common afflictions. These wise women were needed by society as midwives and nurses, and they represented the majority of medical practitioners when the Witch persecutions began early in the fifteenth century. "The famous works of Paracelsus were but compilations of the knowledge of these "wise women", as he himself stated" (Gage, 1893/1980, p. 104).

But the Inquisition targeted women midwives and healers for persecution as Witches because they were the possessors of knowledge. "Whatever the pretext made for witchcraft persecution, we have abundant proof that the so-called "witch" was among the most profoundly scientific persons of the age. . . having through her own wisdom, penetrated into some of the most deeply subtle secrets of nature" (p.100). This knowledge, which often seemed miraculous, had been passed down through generations of women. It was based on animistic cosmology and incorporated astrology, divination, herbalism, and magic.

Christian priests also knew about and employed some of these techniques (Gage, 1893/1980), but they were threatened by animistic-magical knowledge in the population at large because it offered lay people direct access to the divine and seriously jeopardized their control (Szasz, 1970). They were especially threatened by the practice of such magical-animistic healing by women who, according to long tradition, were associated with the supernatural (Bovenschen, 1978, p. 97). In order to maintain their power, they initiated a campaign of terror against women healers and the basis of their knowledge which was magic.

Ignorance and the anathemas of the church against knowledge to be gained through an investigation of the more abstruse laws of nature, have invested the word "magic" with terror. . . . What was

called witchcraft was, in most instances, the action of psychic laws not yet fully understood (Gage, 1893/1980, p. 101).

Many women who were accused of consorting with demons and brought before the Inquisition were natural psychics (Szasz, 1970), others were inquisitive scientific investigators that discovered natural healing properties in plants (Gage, 1893/1980), others were midwives who sought to relieve the pain of childbirth (Ehrenreich & English, 1973). Some were counselors and social activists that spoke out on behalf of the poor (Easlea, 1980), and others were simply old women, living in poverty themselves (Thomas, 1971).

Of course, any historical event has many causes, and the persecution of Witches is no exception. This was a time of religious, economic, and political unrest which was compounded by the Bubonic Plague and other mysterious diseases. Montague Summers (1973) thought that evil demons and devil worshippers did abound at that time and that the Church was justified in using harsh measures to eradicate them. Keith Thomas (1971), on the other hand, theorized that social unrest and the vulnerability of certain persons (mostly women) led to accusations of witchcraft as a way of settling disputes. Geoffrey Parrinder (1970), who also focuses on the generally unsettled social situation, postulates that witchcraft persecutions were an example of scapegoating. Thomas Szasz (1970) supports Matilda Gage's (1893/1980) theory that the Inquisition feared knowledge in the hands of the peasants and sought to eradicate, not only the possessors of that knowledge, but their way of knowing, in order to consolidate their dominance and control. Modern Witches, I think, would give assent to the theory advanced by Gage and Szasz because they have experienced the liberating change in consciousness that comes with practicing their craft.

In all of the above theories, the persecution of Witches was clearly the persecution of women. Women were always at least eighty-five percent of the victims and Matilda Gage (1893/1980) points out that at the time of Louis the fifteenth, one writer estimated that there would

be one wizard for every ten thousand witches (p. 97). The Church had depicted women as the embodiment of evil for centuries, and priests, who were celibate due to church dogma, projected their own frustrated sexual fantasies outward onto women (Ruether, 1975). The Malleus Maleficarum, which was written by two Dominican priests and first published in 1486, depicted women as sexually depraved and especially inclined toward evil because of their carnal lust, the satisfaction of which necessitated their interaction with demons (Easlea, 1980; Ehrenreich & English, 1973; Griffin, 1978; Guiley, 1989). This infamous book, which advocated the implementation of torture to force women, accused of being Witches, to confess to crimes that were mostly sexual in nature (Barstow, 1993), profoundly influenced the attitudes and actions of witch-hunters for over two hundred years.

It seems that the priests and secular rulers feared powerful, magical, strong willed women, and they used the torture and deaths of women as a way to subdue the rest of the population, and discourage them from using magical knowledge. When Witches were burned, the church declared a holiday, and “people thus grew to look unmoved upon the most atrocious tortures” (Gage, 1893/1990, p. 99). People were encouraged to assist the church in finding evidence against close friends and family members in order to escape witchcraft charges themselves. This totally demoralized the lower classes, fractured the cohesiveness necessary for organized peasant revolts, and prepared the peasants for exploitation by newly emerging capitalists (Bovenschen, 1978, p. 105). The persecutions ensured continued domination and control of the people, especially women, by the church and the ruling classes. This has had a detrimental effect on all women and on all of humankind. “A holocaust of women were sacrificed, victims of the ignorance and barbarity of the church, which thus retarded civilization and delayed spiritual progress for many hundred years” (Gage, 1893/1980, p.103).

There is still fear, and that may be past life memories, or the collective unconscious, or memories passed on from mother to daughter. Because you have to remember that nine million women were burned, tortured, drowned, stoned, simply for being midwives or practicing alternative medicine through herbs or being wise ones and counselors. No one could have gone untouched by what was going on. Everyone would have had a mother, or a friend, or a cousin, or a sister, they had to have known people who were burned and stoned simply for using their wisdom - following ancient wisdom (Terry Whitmore).

In recent years, many feminist authors have written about the horrors that were inflicted on women throughout Europe between the early fifteenth and the late seventeenth centuries (Barstow, 1993 ; Bovenschen, 1978; Daly, 1978; Ehrenreich & English, 1973; Merchant, 1980; Ruether, 1975; Starhawk, 1988). They have demonstrated that "The Burning Times", as those years have come to be known following the release of a National Film Board film of that name, have had a profound effect on all women from then until now. "The church degraded woman by destroying her self-respect, and teaching her to feel consciousness of guilt in the very fact of her existence (Gage, 1893/1980, p. 97). The persecutions were especially effective in severing bonds between women, silencing women's voices, and ensuring women's confinement to the private sphere of society (Daly, 1978).

When modern women identify as Witches, they are redressing what Paula James called *the powerful political slandering of women, animism, and magic that occurred during the Inquisition*. At the same time, they are reclaiming the dignity and integrity of the Witch's way of knowing and being, thereby undermining an essential pillar of patriarchy - the evilization of women and feminine culture. By learning about the Great Goddesses and acknowledging the Maiden, Mother and Crone (the Creator, Sustainer, and Destroyer) they are affirming the cycle of birth, growth and death, and celebrating and confirming human embeddedness in nature.

Without negating the light, we reclaim the dark: the fertile earth where the hidden seed lies unfolding, the unseen power that lies within us, the dark of sacred human flesh, the depths of the ocean, the night - when our senses quicken; we reclaim all the lost parts of ourselves we have shoved down into the dark (Starhawk, 1988, p. 26).

The mythology of previously existing cultures that worshipped the Great Goddesses, and the stories about the origin of patriarchy, remind women that patriarchal domination is a relatively recent phenomenon. These stories also affirm what many modern Witches knew as young children and came home to when they discovered Wicca - that humans can be loving, cooperative, and interconnected with all of life. They deny the assumption that separation, alienation, and competition are essential characteristics of human nature, and they provide hope that healing is possible.

Our culture needs a lot of... you know, we have the holocaust, we have wars, we have all kinds of events that have been great human tragedies, but there's more healing needed around the killing of the Witches - they say six million in Europe. So I believe that the psychic damage and memory and even that the word "Witch" is a negative word to many of us. I believe that there's a great deal of loss and grief and mystery, confusion about those matrilineal times, and I think we have much more healing to do as culture to incorporate, in a healthy way, the gifts of those times and the skills... and the craft - the craft of it (Sylvia Owens).

How Do You Know?

The above origin story assumes that the Witch's perspective was once widely accepted among Western European people. It attempts to account for the replacement of the Great Goddesses by a transcendent patriarchal God, and it offers a possible explanation for the

persecution of Witches during the Middle Ages. The continuation of this story endeavors to explain how the persecution of Witches during the Middle Ages has contributed to the present state of the world, and why the contemporary practice of feminist witchcraft is an effective means of resistance to modern patriarchy.

Carolyn Merchant (1980) has demonstrated that throughout history, and in many parts of the world where people have lived in harmony with their environment, the awareness that the earth is alive amounts to common sense. In Medieval Europe, the magical-animistic knowledge that the Witches were persecuted for using was fairly common, however, since the Enlightenment, Western European society has been based on the belief that the earth is dead, inert, and passive - a machine set in motion, and now simply following mechanical laws. In her book The Death of Nature (1980), Merchant chronicles the intellectual and social conditions that led people to ignore the obvious life and spirit in nature, and come to envision themselves as separate from the earth. Her work illustrates that the Witch persecutions of the Middle Ages stand at a critical juncture in the suppression of animistic consciousness and the development of modern mechanistic cosmology.

Brian Easlea (1980), Carolyn Merchant (1980), and Charles Webster (1982) have examined European philosophical and scientific publications that were written between the fifteenth and the seventeenth century, which reveal that the animistic-magical perspective was apparent well into the Enlightenment period. However, as the Witch persecutions intensified, the danger of being accused of witchcraft became one factor that encouraged the abandonment of animism. If philosophers or scientists admitted that nature was inspirited, they had to somehow demonstrate, to the satisfaction of religious authorities, that the spirits were not demons. If they could not do so, they would almost certainly be accused of consorting with demons, and brought to trial for witchcraft.

Brian Easlea (1980) demonstrates that the Royal Society, a group of educated, upper class men, vigorously supported mechanical philosophy because it distanced them from Witches and the lower classes of society, and because animism appeared to be an important source of empowerment for the poor. Two of the most well known proponents of animism, Paracelsus (1493-1541) and Cornelius Agrippa von Nettesheim (1486-1535), openly criticized the persecution of Witches and supported the peasant uprisings of the sixteenth century. Easlea points to an alliance between religious authorities and the upper classes of society that caused the church to support mechanistic cosmology, which was practically atheistic, since God's interest in the world was denied. He argues that animism was not defeated because mechanism was the best way of advancing knowledge, but because it was the best way for the church and the upper classes to maintain domination and control.

One good thing about mechanism was that it ended the witchcraft persecutions. If nature was dead, there were no longer any spirits to consort with, no unseen realm to assist the Witch in producing invisible harm from a distance, and therefore no such thing as witchcraft. This must have been a great relief to many women. However, several authors (Keller, 1985; Mathews, 1991; Merchant, 1980) argue that the mechanistic world view that has informed modern Western consciousness since the Enlightenment has created many social, psychological, and environmental problems, because domination and control, or power-over, was built into mechanistic cosmology from the beginning.

While the debates between animism and mechanism were going on, Francis Bacon (1561-1626), one of the celebrated founders of modern science, was articulating a method of acquiring knowledge that would allow scientists to conquer and subdue nature and establish the dominion of men over all the earth (Merchant, 1980). Bacon was a lawyer, experienced in witchcraft trials, and it is not an accident that he used imagery of masculine science probing into every corner of a

passive and subdued feminine earth, that was very reminiscent of the witch hunter probing a woman's body in search of the witch's mark (Keller, 1985). His method was adopted by subsequent mechanistic philosophers and became the modern scientific method.

Rene Descartes (1596-1650), a philosopher who was nearly contemporary with Francis Bacon, wanted to establish a method of philosophical inquiry that would have the same precision as Bacon's scientific method. He thought the best way to know the world was through abstract rationality - the disembodied mind that could separate itself from, and be independent of, that which it would know (Merchant, 1980). This disembodied mind and Bacon's scientific method went together like a hand in a glove, and matched perfectly the shroud of mechanism which was thrown over a dead earth.

Mechanism, disembodied rationality, and the scientific method functioned together to ensure that official knowledge would be sought and used to secure the power-over of privileged (usually white male) persons and perspectives. Recent feminist critiques of science have demonstrated that scientific investigation since the Enlightenment has been preoccupied with power (Harding, 1986; Keller, 1985; Schiebinger, 1989). Many experiments have been done and theories developed to "prove" the inferiority of European women and people of other cultures, and to demonstrate that innate or biological characteristics made it "natural" for people of certain races to be dominated and for women to be confined to certain roles (Schiebinger, 1989). Many late twentieth century scientists continue to aspire to disembodied objectivity which radically separates the knower from the known, and ensures the researcher a position of power-over the researched (Keller, 1985).

When mechanism and the scientific method were transferred from science and philosophy to the social sciences, the emphasis on power and control remained in effect, but there were new objects to study, count, analyze, and make predictions about, such as relationships, personalities,

health and sexuality, marriages and families, work histories and consumption patterns. The scientists who sought this knowledge were purported to be objective, neutral, seekers after truth, but their findings were often used to manipulate and control the populace (Fraser, 1989). Experts and authorities emerged in every area of life, conferring their superior knowledge about what was “normal” and how people ought to behave. David Noble (1992) theorizes that these experts have become the clergy of modern science, effectively informing the populace of the criteria for salvation (p. 59).

In the psychological sphere, people began to identify themselves with their minds, which created a contemptuous attitude toward bodies and emotions, both of which became the objects of domination and control. Sexuality, emotionality, impulsiveness and joy were repressed. Individuals were seen as isolated, solitary, and self-enclosed, which conferred legitimacy on individual self-interest, excessive material acquisition, and the free-market economy (Mathews, 1991). Rugged individualism and constant competition were stressed as criteria for success, and people became more and more alienated from each other, the earth, and even their own selves. Exploitation and oppression necessarily followed, as the accumulation of individual wealth for some created poverty for many others (Shiva, 1989).

I wanted to have access to that power out there in the patriarchy. I wanted to be a part of it, I wanted to do, and be like the men. And so, anything that was even remotely related to female in me, I'd just try and squash as much as possible. And of course, the more I squashed it, the more silent the voice became. Now I practice listening to my intuition, no matter how small or big it is, because it's all practice, and hopefully, I can get to the point where I can really have a sense of knowing (Wendy Halvorson).

The mechanistic world view which replaced animism in the Middle Ages has dominated Western European culture and has contributed substantially to the destruction of the environment

and the alienation of humans from themselves and each other. But there have always been people who have resisted this dominant world view. The creation of the middle class white male as the norm has marginalized many others, and when people, like the contemporary women Witches in this study, begin to interpret their marginality in a positive way and use their position on the margins to undermine the seemingly all encompassing power-over of patriarchy, they provide hope for the future.

One of the ways that contemporary women Witches express their resistance to patriarchy is through invocations and chants. The following is one chant that links modern Witches back to their Medieval foremothers, and informs the patriarchy that the Witch persecutions succeeded in stifling earth-centered spirituality and feminine values only partially and temporarily.

We are an old people, We are a new people,
We are the same people, Stronger than before
(Deena Metzger & Will Shepardson, 1980).

When you're talking about witchcraft or Wicca, you're talking about allied sciences as well. You're talking about astrology, you're talking about the healing arts, you're talking about nurturing, you're talking about herbology, you're talking about all of those things. And as we see today, more and more people are talking about ecology, we're talking about respecting this planet, how to do it, how to build a garden, how to compost, how to heal with stones, you know, massage, bodywork, that's all involved. Those are all the old wise woman's skills that are being brought up to the surface again. We have the opportunity to choose a way that is healthy and productive and earth focused, or we have a way to completely destroy ourselves. And basically, it comes down to those two things - there's no halfway between those two. It's either you choose that way, or you choose madness. And therein, lies the tale of this society that is consumed by madness (Elaine Krentz).

Witch Ecofeminism

Recently, I was invited to appear as a guest speaker for a group of women on Vancouver Island in honor of International Women's Day. The woman who contacted me asked me what my "field of expertise" was. When I said I would be speaking about women and the environment, she wondered if I would be talking about the protests and blockades at Clayoquot Sound. When I said I would not be specifically addressing that issue, she said, "Good. That's a very sensitive issue around here. A lot of people's jobs depend on the forests."

I felt saddened by this statement because it confirmed that the large forestry corporations, that are responsible for horrendously destructive and wasteful practices like clear-cut logging, removing only the best and most accessible timber, and slash-burning vast ecosystems, have succeeded in their campaign to divide forestry workers from environmentalists. The newspaper and television coverage of these issues assists the corporations by pitting workers against "greens", and creating a situation of intense conflict. I understood why the woman I was speaking to expressed relief that the issue would not be raised.

Some time after the initial contact with this women's group, I was asked to send them a summary of my speech and a biographical sketch. I complied with their request: my speech would be about ecofeminism, and my biographical sketch revealed that I was researching contemporary women Witches. I received a telephone call a week later informing me that some members of the group were concerned about my interest in Witches and wanted to be assured that I would not be speaking about that. Their concern was the possibility of bad publicity if the local newspapers were to learn that they had sponsored a talk about Witches. I promised that I would not mention Witches in my speech.

There are interesting connections between being asked not to talk about the protests at Clayoquot Sound and being asked not to talk about Witches. As I have said earlier, simply saying

“Witches”, evokes images of devil worship, connotations which emerge from the Medieval construction of the Witch. In this instance, these images were so overwhelming that there was no space for me to argue on behalf of animism and magic, or in defense of the wise women who were so powerfully slandered. Rather than challenge this woman’s reality openly, I remained silent and, using the knowledge I have gained from my interaction with contemporary women Witches, I resisted. Following Matilda Gage’s (1893/1980) suggestion that in order to understand the significance of the patriarchal construction of Witches and witchcraft, the word “woman” could be substituted for the word “Witch”, I prepared a presentation in which I discussed the ecofeminist perspective, the implications of power-to, power-with, and power-from-within as opposed to power-over, and the ways that building community provides hope for personal and social transformation, without specifically mentioning Witches or any particular geographical region.

Just as the witchcraft persecutions of the Middle Ages were about silencing animistic/magical knowledge, and maintaining power and control, not talking about Clayoquot Sound and not mentioning Witches is also about silencing. It is intended to assure the continuation of business-as-usual for established religions and the wealthy executives of resource extraction corporations, at least until the resources are used up and the corporations move away. Clearly, this silencing extends well beyond my one little speech, and it allows the rich and powerful to proceed unencumbered by concerns for the long-term welfare of the people or the land.

This story illustrates that certain kinds of knowledge are still suppressed. It is only one of many examples of the way that large businesses manipulate governments and misuse economic power. Politicians promise to take the welfare of the larger community into consideration, and then they knuckle under to pressure from conservative forces who benefit from the continued exploitation of people and the environment. The recent implementation of the North American Free Trade Agreement, severe cut-backs in social programs, the elimination of thousands of civil

service jobs, privatization of services, and anti-union tactics are undermining the well-being of many people. Yet, politicians like Newton Gingrich in the US, Preston Manning in Canada, and Ralph Klein in Alberta are applauded by the wealthy and praised in the media for policies that would go even further in these directions. Oppositional voices are either silenced outright, not reported, or trivialized and effectively silenced.

In modern North American society, experts and professionals dominate every aspect of life. But most experts and professionals are invested in maintaining the status quo. In educational institutions where knowledge is sought by eager young minds determined to find solutions to overconsumption, waste, social injustice, and environmental devastation, courses and research often benefit the large corporations who offer lucrative grants, and then employ the most promising graduates who support the interests of their employers. Research into discovering and developing potential alternatives to centralized power is, of course, not funded by wealthy corporations. Recent reductions in government funding for education will ensure that many such projects will be silenced by lack of money.

I see it as a big circle, and you have the capitalist patriarchy as three quarters of that circle. We're very much affected by that. And in this quarter of the circle, you have the feminists, who have raised consciousness about people, about the earth, and about themselves. And my worry is that they hold the power - this three quarters. So I'm really concerned about the balance of power and how the patriarchy is so complete in its destruction, that it may take us all with it. I am very worried, because it is an acute situation - it's critical.

But hopefully, this little quarter of the pie can create a kind of a wedge, you know. I don't feel defeated. My hope is that the wedge will be strong enough. And I think that feminists are the ones that are going to move the whole thing forward. If anyone is going to move it, it

will be women. But if you have a son, and you bring him up in a nonsexist atmosphere, that will help too (Grace Fletcher).

Feminism emerges as a source of hope in an otherwise bleak landscape because the feminist analysis, with its emphasis on non-hierarchical relationships, and its awareness of the interconnectedness of all forms of oppression, perceives the struggle for women's liberation as dependent on the elimination of, not just sexism, but all oppressions. The feminist analysis of power-over as the standard way of relating within patriarchy, led to the development of power-with as a potential means of resisting the established order. When some feminists applied their understanding of oppression and patriarchal power-over to environmental problems, ecofeminism came into being.

Ecofeminism is very diverse, just as feminism is. The basic commonality among ecofeminists is the recognition of connections between the domination of women and the destruction of the environment, and the desire to establish non-dominating ways of relating to other humans and the environment that include accepting diversity, caring for all life forms, and practicing responsibility and respect (Plant, 1989). The branch of ecofeminism that stresses the elimination of dualisms, the transformation of consciousness from individualistic to holistic, and the earth as sacred, is the spiritual ecofeminist perspective. This perspective includes many different spiritual and religious frameworks, including Christian, Jewish, Buddhist, Hindu, African, American First Nations, and of course, Pagan (Warren, 1993). One thread that seems to be common among these perspectives is the need to return divinity to the earth. This is referred to as the re-animation of nature, the re-birth of Gaia, the re-awakening of the Goddess: "If we call the world non-living, we will surely kill her. But when we name the world alive, we begin to bring her back to life" (Starhawk, 1987, p. 8).

The Witches whose words appear in these pages are spiritual ecofeminists. These women Witches easily recognize the connections between the oppression of women and the destruction of the earth, and witchcraft practices consistently make connections with the natural environment. Starhawk (1989a) strongly emphasizes that witchcraft is about experiencing immanent divinity: “the awareness of the world and everything in it as alive, dynamic, interdependent, interacting, and infused with moving energies: a living being, a weaving dance” (Starhawk, 1988, p. 9). The sacredness of all of life compels Witches to preserve and protect the natural environment.

Some people seem to be able to segregate their environmentalism from the rest of their lives and still be out there fighting for the forest. The difference to me is a place of quality. It's like I'm not out there fighting for the forest. I know that the forests are part of me and I am fighting for that part of me. So it's kind of like a different starting point. Rather than the forests are out there, somewhat separate from me, they are nice and I understand somewhat scientifically that we need to co-exist together - that's still a different stand than that kind of relational place (Paula James).

The practice of witchcraft restores human connection with the natural world. The presence of the sacred life force and the experience of intimate connection with all of life necessarily alters the relationship between humans and the earth from domination and exploitation to caring and responsibility (Starhawk, 1989a, p. 91-92). The experience of living in bodies, connected with other people and the cosmos, brings forth power-from-within and power-with in place of power-over. Witches know that power-from-within and power-with are effective means of resisting the seemingly all-encompassing power-over of patriarchal capitalism. The use of magic as a tool for empowerment is a reclaiming of a collective way of knowing, a denial of separation and isolation, an affirmation of connection, caring, and love.

I think that the kind of consciousness that Witches have, is growing. I mean, there are more and more people coming around to thinking our way about things and seeing that as the only possible way to solve some of the problems that we have. I just hope we can survive long enough to get that critical mass that is needed to change things. And, in some ways, I kind of believe that that's happening. Although I see much more of, like huge multinational corporations, raping the environment and oppressing people and things like that. It's almost as though it's gone to the extreme of being like that - it's more evident now than it's ever been, or at least to me it is. And it's as though they're kind of in their death throes and they're going to the ultimate extreme of it and then they're going to die. At least I hope that's what's going to happen - or they will dwindle off, or maybe die without taking us all with them (chuckle). That's what I would like to see happen. I mean you can just see it everywhere now. And I think people are beginning, just beginning, to wake up to the fact that that's what's happening.

End Notes

1. There are a variety of people who are involved in magical/spiritual practices within many diverse cultures who can be called Witches, and their practices can be called witchcraft. However, as Luisah Teish (1985) points out, Witches and witchcraft are understood to be rooted in Western European based cultures, while other similar magical/animistic practices have other names.

Although there are many similarities between Western European magical/animistic practices and magical/animistic practices in other cultures, there are also differences. The Witches in this study are primarily Western European or Celtic in ancestry, and the witchcraft they practice is rooted in Western European magical/animistic traditions.

2. The figure of nine million Witches executed during the Inquisition is now thought to be inaccurate. Some estimates are as low as one hundred thousand, others are between these two. The records of the trials are lost or defective and many died in prison or committed suicide and would not have been included in executioners' tallies (Barstow, 1993; Starhawk, 1989a). The point is that the witch burnings were a legally and ecumenically sanctioned mass murder of women.

3. One interviewee stated that she does not strictly think of herself as a Witch or as Pagan. However, she does practice a form of earth spirituality and clearly has magical experiences. She has attended some witchcraft events with Starhawk, and participates in community rituals with members of the Witch community that have been trained in the Dianic and Reclaiming traditions. Because of her contacts with the larger Witch community, and because her work is so similar to witchcraft, I have counted her as a Witch.

4. This is not to say that there is no such thing as Satanism, just that there is no connection between groups that call themselves Satanists and contemporary neo-pagan Witches. One well-known, self-proclaimed Satanist, Anton LaVey, heads a Satanist Church in California. He published a manifesto called The Satanic Bible (1969) in which the seven cardinal sins of

Christianity are encouraged as ways to acquire material possessions and control of others. There is no connection between Medieval European witchcraft or modern neo-pagan witchcraft and La Vey's brand of hedonistic, materialistic, theatrical magic (Russell, 1980, p. 145-146). However, La Vey does call himself a Witch and this continues to be a source of confusion between Satanism and modern witchcraft (Guiley, 1989, p. 309).

Satanic activities that are not linked to LaVey or his church seem to be quite widespread as well. Many victims of childhood ritual abuse are reclaiming horrendous memories of sexual, physical, and emotional violence perpetrated by members of small cults who call themselves Satanists (Guiley, 1989, p. 310). Again, there is no connection between these activities and modern Neo-pagan witchcraft. The Witches I interviewed do not worship, or even believe in a personification of evil. Good and evil are like light and dark, or life and death, both are necessary parts of the whole.

5. This is not to say that all environmentalists are animists and pantheists, or even that all environmentalists share the Witch's concern about environmental destruction. It is just to say that because Witches regard the earth and all of life as sacred, the destruction of ecosystems, pollution of air and water, and lack of respect for non-human species are deeply distressing.

6. Ecofeminism is as diverse as feminism, and just as the theory and practice of feminism are mutually informing, so are the theory and practice of ecofeminism. Although the conceptual aspects of ecofeminism, which I am concerned with here, are theoretical, not all ecofeminists are theoreticians. In fact, many women are working on projects like building community gardens, saving seeds, starting recycling projects, protesting clear-cut logging, educating and informing people about environmentally sensitive areas, and promoting production and use of organic foods. These women are undoubtedly ecofeminists in action.

7. This makes sense in light of the fact that Witches and witchcraft are primarily constructions of Western European discourse (see note one). When women of color become involved in magical/spiritual practices, they often do so within traditions that are based on their own cultural, racial, or ethnic origins (Teish, 1985).
8. Three women left the significant events question blank. Only one woman mentioned a significant event that did not pertain to her father. Her grandmother was a medium who exerted quite a profound influence on the family as a whole.
9. There are elaborate initiation ceremonies in the Gardnerian, Alexandrian, and Saxon traditions, which is not usually the case among the Reclaiming, Dianic, or Eclectic traditions. Also, finding and joining a coven that practices within the Gardnerian, Alexandrian or Saxon traditions might be more difficult than finding and joining a coven in the Reclaiming, Dianic, or Eclectic traditions, due to more concern with secrecy in the former groups.
10. US Senator Jesse Helms is quite notorious for his right-wing Christian fundamentalist point of view.

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INFORMED CONSENT BY SUBJECTS
TO PARTICIPATE IN
A RESEARCH PROJECT

Having been asked by Janet E. Dahr of the Department of Women's Studies in the Faculty of Arts of Simon Fraser University to participate in a research project, I have read the procedures specified in the document entitled: Wild Women Witches in Greater Vancouver: Gyn/Ecology? and I understand these procedures.

I understand that I may withdraw my participation in this project at any time, and that I may also decline to answer any specific question.

I also understand that I may register any complaint I might have about the project with Janet Dahr (597-9593), the chief researcher, or with her supervisor, Meredith Kimball, Chairperson of Women's Studies, Simon Fraser University, telephone 291-4130, or Susan Wendell, Graduate Chairperson of Women's Studies.

Copies of a summary of the results of this study and a copy of the transcript of my own interview, may be obtained by completing a self-addressed envelope which I will receive from Janet Dahr at the time of my participation.

I agree to participate by allowing the above named researcher to tape record an interview with me, that will be one to two hours in length, at a time and place that will be arranged according to my convenience.

I understand that the tape recording of my interview will be transcribed verbatim by the above named researcher, and that she will alter my name and any other identifying characteristics to ensure that confidentiality is maintained. After the interview is transcribed, the original tape recordings will be destroyed.

Name (please print): _____

Address: _____

Signature: _____

Witness: _____ Date: _____

Once signed, a copy of this consent form and a subject feedback form will be provided to you.

Interview Schedule
for
Wild Women Witches in Greater Vancouver: Gyn/Ecology?

Part 1: Demographic Data

The following questions are for statistical purposes. All information will be held in confidence. In my written report, specific references to material that could potentially identify you will be altered to protect your privacy.

1. In what district within the Greater Vancouver area do you normally reside?

- North or West Vancouver _____
- Vancouver _____
- Burnaby, Coquitlam & East _____
- Surrey, N. Delta _____
- Ladner, Tsawwassen, W. Rock _____
- Other:(pls. specify) _____

2. What is your date of birth? What is your place of birth?
 Month _____ Day _____ Year _____ _____

3. What is your Marital status? Number of children? _____
 _____ Ages _____

4. If you were born outside of the Lower Mainland of B.C., please indicate when and why you came to this area. How long have you lived at your present address?

5. Please describe your occupational history. Please be as complete as possible, including any volunteer work or time spent as a full-time homemaker.

From:	To:	Type of work:
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____

6. Please indicate your highest level of formal education. Please include any specialized training programs that you have completed

7. Please indicate the approximate annual income of your household.

Less than \$10,000.	_____	\$30,000. - \$40,000.	_____
\$10,000. - \$20,000.	_____	\$40,000. - \$50,000.	_____
\$20,000. - \$30,000.	_____	\$50,000. - \$60,000.	_____
		Over \$60,000.	_____

8. Please indicate your own personal annual income.

Less than \$10,000.	_____	\$30,000. - \$40,000.	_____
\$10,000. - \$20,000.	_____	\$40,000. - \$50,000.	_____
\$20,000. - \$30,000.	_____	\$50,000. - \$60,000.	_____
		Over \$60,000.	_____

9. Family of Origin Information:

Please describe your racial or ethnic background.

Please describe your religious background.

Please describe the structure of your family of origin. (i.e. Did you have one or two parents, step-parents, or were you raised by someone other than your parents?)

Number of Siblings	_____	Step- siblings	_____	Half-siblings	_____
Older sisters	_____	Step-sisters	_____	Half-sisters	_____
Younger sisters	_____	Step-sisters	_____	Half-sisters	_____
Older brothers	_____	Step brothers	_____	Half-brothers	_____
Younger brothers	_____	Step-brothers	_____	Half-brothers	_____

Please describe your parents' (or parent substitute's) occupation(s):

Mother's _____

Father's _____

Other (please specify) _____

Please describe your parents' (or parent substitute's) level of education (Highest level completed):

	Mother	Father	Other
Less than grade six	_____	_____	_____
Less than high school	_____	_____	_____
High school graduation	_____	_____	_____
Some post secondary	_____	_____	_____
Trade or Technical certificate	_____	_____	_____
University degree	_____	_____	_____
Post-graduate degree	_____	_____	_____

How would you describe your family's socio-economic status, while you were living at home.

Please describe any significant events that happened in your family of origin including; the death of a parent(s), divorce or separation of parents, re-marriage of parent(s), other events that you wish to share.

Part 2: Personal Involvement in Witchcraft

The questions in this section are intended to act only as a guide. I am most interested in hearing your story about the spiritual journey that brought you to witchcraft, what meaning Wicca has for you, and some aspects of your actual practice of witchcraft. I will give you my full attention, but I want you to say what is important for you, so I will interfere as little as possible. I will be checking off questions as I hear you cover them. When you have told your story, I will ask you specific questions if there are certain areas you have not touched on. **Please remember that you can choose not to answer any question(s) that you feel uncomfortable about.**

Becoming involved:

1. Please take time to focus on the way in which you became involved in witchcraft. Try to include turning points or specific experiences that were significant. Also, particular books, articles, or personalities that were influential in your choice to become a practitioner of Witchcraft, would be important here.

Wiccan activities:

2. Please describe your involvement with the practice of Witchcraft.

When and how did you begin your involvement?

Have you stopped your involvement for significant periods of time?

If so, why did you stop, and why did you start again?

About how often do you practice Wicca?

What kinds of activities do you engage in?

Do you practice alone sometimes, or always in a group?

If both, which do you like better? Why?

3. Please describe the process of initiation that you experienced (if any):

- into the practice of witchcraft,

- into your coven(s).

4. If you practice Wicca with one or more groups, please describe each group in terms of:

size,

mixed or women only,

numbers of men and women,

approximate ages,

sexual orientation of members(if known),

racial or ethnic origin of members (if known),

usual occupations of the members (if known),

length of time this group has been meeting together,

how new members join, why members leave,

who leads the group(s), anything else you think might be relevant.

5. What styles or traditions of witchcraft have you had experience with? What style or tradition is most favorable to you? Why?

6. In what ways are you public or secretive about your involvement with witchcraft?

	Yes	No
Family knows	_____	_____
Close friends know	_____	_____
Closed coven group	_____	_____
Attend semi-public events	_____	_____
Lead semi-public groups	_____	_____
Occasional teaching	_____	_____
Wear identifying jewelry	_____	_____
Open if approached	_____	_____
Completely open	_____	_____
Other (please specify)	_____	

7. Briefly describe some activities that occur at Wiccan gatherings.

- What kinds of gatherings have you attended?
- What activities seem most relevant to you? Why?
- Who plans the activities?
- If specific rituals are followed, how are they learned?
- What are the purposes of rituals?

8. Raising energy, or raising a cone of power seem to be significant parts of using witchcraft. Please comment on your experiences with this.

- When is it done?
- How is it done?
- Why is it done?

9. Please describe how magic is used by Wicca practitioners? If you have used magic yourself, please describe one of your experiences with using magic.

The Meaning of Witchcraft:

10. What is the greatest benefit that you derive from your involvement in Wicca?

11. What are the most important things you have learned from your involvement with witchcraft?

- new learning,
- validation of, or insight into prior experiences,
- other.

12. In what ways has your involvement in Witchcraft influenced your work, your lifestyle or your politics? I am especially interested in activities that demonstrate successes or struggles with:

- cooperation,
- non-hierarchical relationships,
- consensus decision making,
- acceptance of diversity,
- sensitivity to the environment,
- decrease in desire to accumulate material wealth,
- increase in activism.

13. What do you think is the relationship between witchcraft and feminism?
Do you think that witchcraft is important for women? If so, why?
14. Please describe any differences that you see between Witchcraft and Goddess worship.
15. What do you think is the relationship between witchcraft and environmentalism?
16. What do you know about eco-feminism? How do you think it relates to witchcraft?
17. What changes (if any) would you like to see in our culture? Describe your vision of the ideal culture. How has witchcraft influenced this vision?
18. Do you think that witchcraft is a threat to the status quo? If so, how? If not, why not?
19. What is your best guess about the numbers of people, in the Lower Mainland, who are currently involved in the practice of witchcraft on a regular basis? Approximately what percentage of them would you say are women?
20. What do you think are the problems or challenges facing Wiccan women in the Lower Mainland?
21. Please describe any ways that Witches in the Lower Mainland are organizing.
22. What does being a witch mean to you?

SFU RESEARCH ETHICS REVIEW COMMITTEE**SUBJECT FEEDBACK FORM**

Completion of this form is optional, and is not a requirement of participation in the project. However, if you have served as a subject in a project and would care to comment on the procedures involved, you may complete the following form and send it to the Chairman, University Research Ethics Review Committee. All information received will be treated in a strictly confidential manner.

Name of Principal Investigator: _____

Title of Project: _____

Department: _____

Did you sign an Informed Consent Form before participating in the project? _____

Were you given a copy of the Consent Form? _____

Were there significant deviations from the originally stated procedures? _____

I wish to comment on my involvement in the above project which took place:

(Date)	(Place)	(Time)

Comments: _____

Completion of this section is optional

Your name: _____

Address: _____ Telephone: _____

This form should be sent to the Chairman, University Ethics Review Committee, c/o Vice-President, Research and Information Systems, Simon Fraser University, Burnaby, B.C., V5A 1S6

SUMMARY OF PARTICIPANTS

Appendix E

Code Name	Birth Year	Place of Birth	Education	Occupation	SES 1 2 3 4 5 6 7	Religious Origin	Racial / Ethnic Origin	Family of Origin SES
Margaret Becker	1940	Victoria, B.C.	B.S.W.	Health Educator	3	United/Angl.	English/Scot/Irish	Middle Class
Sara Brannigan	1961	St. Stephen, N.B.	Some Univ.	Student/Musician	2	R. Catholic	Irish/Scottish	Poor/Working Class
Mary Jane Brooks	1955	The Pas, Man.	Some College	Mother/Homemaker	1	Mixed Christian	W.A.S.P.	Middle Class
Liz Clawson	1958	Sacramento, Calif.	Some Univ.	Retail Sales/Acct.	1	7th Day Adv.	1st Nation/Dutch	Middle Class
Jean Davis	1956	Toronto, Ont.	Some Univ.	Draft Person/Artist	3	R. Catholic	Ukrainian	Poor/Working Class
Anna Dvorak	1973	Squamish, B.C.	H.S.	Body Work/Retail Sales	1	Agnostic	European	Middle Class
Grace Fletcher	1949	London, Ont.	R.N.	Massage Therapist	1	United	Celtic	Poor/Working Class
Wendy Halvorson	1951	-----	B.Sc.	Printer/Cook	2	Baptist	English/Scot/Irish	Working Class
Klim Hume	1939	Innisfail, Alta.	MSW	Mental Health Worker	5	United	Scottish/German	Poor
Paula James	1955	Pr. George, B.C.	Some Univ.	Body Work/Retail Sales	2	United	Scot/Irish/American	Lower Middle Class
Elaine Krentz	1938	Toronto, Ont.	B.A.	Support Worker	1	Pantheist	Russian/Ukrainian	Middle Class
Betty MacLeod	1942	Red Deer, Alta.	Post Grad	Student/Homeworker	1	United	Scottish/Swede	Poor/Working Class
Sylvia Owens	1950	Auburn, N.Y.	M. Ed.	Body Work/Day Care Advisor	1	Presbyterian	Scottish/English	Middle Class
Kate Schulman	1939	Putnam, Ct.	Some Univ.	Organizer/Producer	1	R. Catholic	Irish	Working Class
Clara Singer	1953	Toronto, Ont.	Some Univ.	Student/Performer	2	R. Catholic	Irish/Scottish	Working Class
Anita Varden	1961	Brooks, Alta.	B.Sc.	Herbalist/Museum Curator	5	United.	Scottish/English	Middle Class
Meg Wallace	1955	Edmonton, Alta.	M. Ed.	Counselor	3	Anglican	Scottish/English	Middle Class
Terry Witmore	1951	Vancouver, B.C.	B.A.	Counselor	3	Baptist	European	Working Class

*** INCOME LEVEL - 1 = < \$10,000
 2 = \$10,000 - \$20,000
 3 = \$20,000 - \$30,000
 4 = \$30,000 - \$40,000
 5 = \$40,000 - \$50,000
 6 = \$50,000 - \$60,000
 7 = > \$60,000

