

From coven to couch

By Ruth Ostrow

IT was about 18 years ago. A group of students stood in a circle in a clapped-out warehouse in the back streets of Melbourne, holding a paper cup up to the sky. Naked except for the thin, black capes that covered their freezing bodies.

Too poor to afford real Wiccan paraphernalia, they improvised with a cardboard sword and painted pentacle that looked like props made by school kids. Dirty, red rags were draped over bed lights to give an eerie feel, but let off a foul smell of burning dust.

I was among the faithful, standing trembling as the full moon shone through broken windows -- filled with fear, filled with cold, but mostly filled with a sense of strange magic and endless possibilities.

We were part of a white witchcraft coven; a group of teenagers loosely affiliated with The Golden Dawn, which had come to prominence at the end of the last century in Europe under the auspices of Russian theosophist Madame Blavatsky.

According to our Wiccan leader -- an obese and hairy hippie in his 30s who I'd met through university friends -- we were the lucky recipients of wisdom handed down over the aeons in secret gatherings like these.

We were part of the magical cycle of death and birth. We were the keepers of the key. This made me giddy with joy because at the time I wasn't even keeper of my own door key, still living at home and longing for some control over my self, my weight and, ultimately, over the boy I loved.

Which was the real reason I was there. Unrequited love. I'd lie on my beanbag every night listening to Bread moaning: "I would give everything I own ..." and blowing my nose into snotty tissues. I grew tired of dreaming and dieting. Hocus pocus seemed a better alternative.

This was a time of youth, you understand -- when people still believe they have some control over the order of things, can change the world, can make people love them. Youth. When people still believe their lives are special in some mystical way.

I had grown up on a diet of Star Trek, The Twilight Zone, Bewitched. There was magic out there: new galaxies and exotic creatures, men who were wise and honest like Captain James Kirk. There were other dimensions, and power over one's destiny for those who possessed magic objects.

But I'd come to the wrong place for all that. Our temple, for want of a better word, was inhabited by the saddest souls I had ever encountered. Misfits who looked like walking zombies, who had been damaged by life, unemployed, helpless, hopeless, overweight -- all looking for the magic. Night after night I would listen to their unmagical stories of abuse and loneliness while we waddled around in ritualistic circles, drawing pentacles in the air and worshipping the forces of nature, before our candles blew out from the bitter draught.

F was "in a bad relationship scene" with a woman who channelled entities that ran off with other men. E was a gifted poet but also an alcoholic.

For me, the daughter of a workaholic "absent" father, I was desperately trying to replace something I never had. I guess I believed that by casting spells I'd magically find the sense of safety and romantic love I so yearned for.

So it is with great sympathy I reflect on the modern resurgence of matters mystical, particularly among youth. According to the last census, paganism is the fastest growing religion in Australia and more than 30,000 people identify with New Age beliefs. Between 1991 and 1996 paganism tripled and Earth-based religions grew by 130 per cent. All this at a time in history -- the coming millennium -- when we're truly fearful of the future.

This month, rock star Fiona Horne launched her book *Witch, A Magickal Year*, following the success of her first Wiccan book. What is significant is that her books are published by respectable Random House, which now has a plethora of other pagan titles on its mainstream reading lists, such as Helen Glisic's *Spellbound*, *Book of Love*.

A spokesman confirmed the publisher is targeting this growing market because it's lucrative. Meanwhile, Hollywood is churning out movies such as *Practical Magic* and *The Craft*, and the television series *Charmed*, because paganism means big bickies -- particularly from audiences of young women who feel abandoned by conventional religions.

I can see the appeal. To this day I continue to be a great supporter of New Age spirituality. I have never given up scouring the sky for flying saucers, and recently studied shamanism through Mystery's bookshop and healing centre, based in the Sydney suburb of Balmain, in one of the many occultist courses thriving across the country.

But something has changed. I've come to understand that most seekers of occult-based magick are really seeking personal power over their own destructive emotional tendencies, body image problems or relationship dramas. And that trying to control the order of things is a desperate attempt to control the wounded self.

Like many of the new followers of Earth-based religions, I have spent my life looking for magic. Only to discover that the most potent, meaningful and healing magic I ever experienced was -- quite frankly -- to be found on a therapist's couch.

From the heart

Dear Ruth,

Don't believe that SeaChange rubbish for a minute. My family moved to the Sunshine Coast hinterland of Queensland 11 years ago so we could escape the Sydney rat-race and live in a close, friendly community. Since then, I have joined every local sports club, spent years on the canteen committee of the local school and done everything possible to make friends with the locals. Nothing has worked. It's obvious that, unless you are at least a third-generation Queenslander, they don't want to know you. After nine years' residence, a local farmer told me: "This land should never have been sold to the likes of you." If it were not for our little band of ex-pat NSW friends, we would be lonelier than we were in the cold heart of suburban Sydney.

Name withheld on request

Beerwah, Queensland

Dear Ruth,

Your story on Marie Gai brought tears to my eyes. I know how she felt, having also lost a child to adoption, and my heart goes out to her. She is correct in describing the process of adoption as torture. The pain never leaves, even when you have met your child, because the baby you lost has gone forever. All we can do is be grateful for the consolation of being reunited.

Barbara Maison, e-mail

Dear Ruth,

I was saddened by S. Lear's letter revealing her disappointment that she could not "properly" grieve her uncle's death. There is no right or wrong way to handle death. Sometimes grief hits people much later, triggered by something else. There can be a complex mix of emotions if the relationship has not been a good one. We each handle death in our own way and should not judge ourselves or others for how we get through it.

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First published in The Weekend Australian SAT 30 OCT 1999