

The Modern Witch: Dispelling the Myths

Franks Green doesn't ride on brooms. He doesn't worship the devil, practice black magic, or sacrifice animals and children. He doesn't have green skin with warts and he doesn't wear a tall black hat. No demons, cauldrons or black cats surround him. When most people think of witches, they think of women. Yet Green calls himself as a witch.

Green is in his late 50s. He's soft-spoken, friendly and relates fond anecdotes of his family. Yet people react rather strangely when he tells them he is a witch.

"Usually it's a laugh a first, like a disbelief, but then when I explain what it's about, you know, as opposed to what's on television [and in] Hollywood, they seem to understand better," he relates.

**Written by Maria Kotovych
Photos by Krystina Sulatycki**

Building a Community and Friendships

Witchcraft and neo-Paganism are alive and well here in Edmonton, and Green is an example of one of these modern witches. Green attends Fireside Chats, a bi-monthly event at Where Faeries Live, a local store that sells Pagan books, candles, jewelry, herbs and other Pagan-related items. The Fireside Chats allow Pagans to get together to discuss a spiritual topic and socialize afterwards. Many of the Pagans are solitary practitioners, so this event allows them to build friendships and develop a community.

The Fireside Chats take place in the back of the store; the room's soft colours, lighting and gentle aroma of incense create a homey and comfortable feeling. A dozen or so tables fill the room, and men and women of all ages sit at the tables, chatting and laughing excitedly with one another. Pictures and paintings adorn the pinkish-lavender walls, lacy curtains embrace the windows, soft music plays in the background, and cookies and tea are set out on a back counter. Vases overflowing with sprigs of pussy willow adorn the mantel of the fireplace.

A number of the Pagans, witches and Wiccans present mention that the Fireside Chats allow them to get support from each other and assist each other in individual growth. Even though they believe from the heart, they still like to believe together. Friendship is mentioned more than once. There's a genuine sense of community and acceptance in the room.

'Out of the broom closet' and into the fire

Despite the friendly atmosphere at the Fireside Chat and the general welcoming nature of the community, Green explains that he still faces negative stereotypes and misconceptions about witches.

"A lot of people think we're devil-worshipping. Devil-worshipping is the opposite side, it's the black side of Christianity, the same as black magic is the black side of witchcraft," Green explains. "We don't believe in the devil. We have never believed in any kind of devil. We believe in a balance of energies."

Alexis Mapstone knows all about the misconceptions of witches and pagans; she used to harbour them herself.

"Before I came to doing a ritual or anything like that, I didn't know what a real witch was, I didn't even know that witches really did exist," Mapstone says, explaining that she understood witches only from fairy tales.

"The thought of a witch freaked me out because so many people were telling me that witches were the nuns of Satan, or something like that, or they're evil, and now I'm learning about the community and stuff and just finding that it's so not evil," she relates.

Nikita Volkova has also experienced strong reactions from people when she tells them that she's a witch.

"Most people are horrified. Stereotypes are propagated by Hollywood, and most people assume that I am uneducated. But I was going to take Holy Orders at one point, I was going to be a nun," Volkova says.

"The only two members of my family that have remained accepting of me over the years—once I finally decided okay, I'm coming out of the proverbial 'broom closet'—was to a certain extent my mother, and very surprisingly, my grandfather. The majority of the rest of my family I haven't spoken to since"

Although she did believe in God at one time, she decided not to become a nun, as unanswered prayers made her doubt her beliefs.

"Why should I devote my life to someone who couldn't answer a simple prayer? It seems that we stopped talking, or I stopped talking, He stopped listening, and that was the end of that for me," Volkova says.

Kriggi is an Eclectic Wiccan. Not only has he been on the receiving end of the stereotypes, he has also been subject to violent reactions after leaving "the broom closet."

"The only two members of my family that have remained accepting of me over the years—once I finally decided okay, I'm coming out of the proverbial 'broom closet'—was to a certain extent my mother, and very surprisingly, my grandfather. The majority of the rest of my family I haven't spoken to since," he explains.

Afraid of similar reactions from members of his family and community, Brad (who declines to give his last name) is still hiding his religious leanings. The 43-year-old describes himself as a "very hard Pagan, and a very soft Christian," but when living in small-town Alberta a few years ago, he experienced prejudice and rejection when he revealed himself as a Pagan. He took a break from Paganism for a while, and is slowly revisiting it, and though he lives in a new community, he's ready to take the risk again.

While some witches experience negative reactions, others are careful to whom they reveal their beliefs, thus shielding themselves from potential criticisms. Dee is one such witch.

"Before I tell anybody, I get a sense of where their religious beliefs are and how open they are to different things," Dee says.

However, when visiting her husband's Catholic family in Winnipeg, Dee hides all signs of her Pagan beliefs, and attends church with her in-laws. Although she herself hasn't experienced negative reactions, she identifies many untrue stereotypes

that people often attribute to modern witches.

"The belief that we're evil, the belief that we sacrifice animals [or] children, the belief that we dance naked around cauldrons and have big huge orgies all the time, that we do black magic all the time with the intent to harm, that we do it without permission from other people, any kind of magic, [or that] we keep demons as pets," Dee lists.

Dee feels that pop culture nurtures misconceptions about modern witches, misconceptions that include witches giving their soul to the devil in order to have power. Green agrees.

"I'd like to see the image changed. In fact, if they're going to put on another show on about us, I think they should hire somebody as technical support on it," Green says.

While it's clear that some feel Hollywood is not fair to witches, Kriggi believes some TV shows actually help with the image of witches.

"The misconceptions are slowly starting to eat away a little bit. But they are still very strong in a lot of aspects. Other TV shows actually help—believe it or not, they do. It's surprising. It throws back a bit of the realization that, 'Hey look, they're witches, but they hold jobs,'" he says.

Developing an interest in witchcraft

Green explains that his interest in witchcraft developed when he was a child.

"When I was seven years old I was baptized, and I didn't want to be baptized, because I said there's a father and a son, but no mother or daughter, and the balance didn't make sense to me," Green says.

Green's late wife was a devout Catholic, so he remained a Christian until 1998. Yet he admits that witchcraft always had a draw for him, and now he's "out of the broom closet." He explains that witchcraft was attractive to him because he had always wanted to honour a goddess.

"I guess I was always looking for a goddess, because little boys are brought up with women running their lives," he jokes.

"It just didn't make sense that in [Christianity] there wasn't one," he adds, this time more seriously.

Volkova, 30, also developed an interest in witchcraft as a young child.

"I learned to read when I was in kindergarten, and when I was old enough to get a library card, the first books I ever took out were on witchcraft. I had no idea why—it was just an instinctual thing. I don't even remember hearing about witches, though. I just came home with books on witchcraft. It just made sense at the age of five. My family didn't like that," she laughs at the memory.

Carla is a shy, 31-year-old woman who refers to herself as an Eclectic Wiccan. She describes some of the false stereotypes that people have of Pagans, witches, and Wiccans. Among those stereotypes is people's belief that Pagans use magic for personal gain or to harm people.

"The biggest rules are do what you want, just don't harm anybody, and never mess with somebody's free will. Do your own thing," Carla says.

Carla practices magic, specifically faerie magic, but clearly outlines how she uses it.

"I use it just for protection for myself. I don't use it to hurt people or anybody. If my emotions are rather high, I'll call on the angels to help me. Or I'll ask the faeries to help me with these issues," Carla says.

Dee, a 32-year-old witch, honours the Egyptian deities, the god Anubis, and the goddess Bast.

