

Ancient Craft, Modern Practice - Witchcraft in the 21st Century

by

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Transcript of talk given by Vikki Bramshaw at Glastonbury Halls, May 09, author of 'Craft of the Wise', more details at the end of the article.

Good afternoon! Firstly, thank you to everyone for coming along today. My name is Vikki Bramshaw and I am the author of '*Craft of the Wise: A Practical Guide to Paganism and Witchcraft*'. My talk today will be about the Craft which I follow, both an ancient art, and a modern practice. I hope you will enjoy listening to this talk as much as I enjoyed writing it.

I have been training in modern witchcraft for almost 10 years. I started my training with a coven who worked in the New Forest in Hampshire. A few years later, I was invited to join a group on the outskirts of Southampton with Maureen Wheeler, an initiate of Gavin Bone. Gavin is a prolific author and Priest of modern witchcraft, and has co-authored books such as 'Progressive Witchcraft' with his wife and High Priestess Janet Farrar. Several years later, I continued my training with a coven in the West Country, where I trained in Initiatory witchcraft and the Egyptian mysteries. After receiving my third degree initiation with that coven I hived off, and formed my own working group near the New Forest.

The New Forest is a fascinating place, which is enveloped in folklore and mystery. I am sure that some of you have visited the forest, or at least driven through it. It was there that Gerald Gardner, often termed the 'father of modern witchcraft' worked with his coven in the 1940's and 1950's. It was also Gerald that first coined the term, 'Wicca' to describe his form of modern witchcraft, a practice which would gain interest in Britain and soon spread abroad to America - and the rest of the world. Gerald was also instrumental in bringing modern witchcraft into the public eye, publishing some of his first books on Wicca soon after the repeal of the witchcraft act, in the 1950's.

There have been many books written on the Craft over the last 50 years; some of the first were published by those characters we call the 'founders' of modern wicca - Gerald Gardner, Doreen Valiente, and Ray Buckland. Since then, many covens have been formed by witches who have initiated themselves from books, without any formal initiation through a lineaged coven. Although there is nothing wrong with this process - and by writing these books, our founders themselves provided the material for this process to happen - the practice of Wicca was originally supposed to be a specific path which was only passed down through initiated lineage.

Technically, by the original laws, if you are not initiated by one of Gardner's students, or indeed Gardner himself, then you were not actually 'Wiccan'. This view has now become outdated, as the practice has expanded and the word 'Wicca' has grown to define a religion open to all; although, many traditional Wiccans still hold the elitist view.

Whilst I am trained in Traditional lineaged Wicca, I have also been involved in working with the Egyptian mysteries, the Old Craft, and other forms of magic and ceremony, which are very separate to Wicca. So, I describe my practice simply as Initiatory witchcraft, which encompasses the many ritual practices of Paganism and modern witchcraft, whilst incorporating much of the structure of wicca. I believe this removes limitations which may be set by following one path alone, and allows the person to grow.

The aim of my talk today is to first give an introduction to modern witchcraft and wicca, and briefly discuss my views on some of the practices. I also want to speak about some of the misconceptions of the Craft, and also discuss the future of the Craft, as both a religion and a practice.

Witchcraft and wicca are branches of Paganism; an umbrella term of eclectic belief systems which are based on the practices of our ancestors, but adapted for a modern world. In order to truly understand witchcraft and Wicca, we have to first identify what Paganism is.

The term 'Pagan' is a broad one and many meanings have been given to it, including 'one who worships false Gods; an idolater' and 'a person who has no religious beliefs'. The Middle English translation for the word Pagan comes from the Latin 'paganus', meaning 'country dweller' or, 'one who lives off the land'. Looking at these definitions you can see that there is no reference to any

religion, or even a belief system. Then again, when that belief system is so ancient that it precedes language, reasoning and the written word, it comes as no surprise that for every era in history people have viewed Paganism in different ways.

Paganism can embrace all pre-Christian religions, as well as other polytheistic religions: that is, religions which believe in many Gods, which have managed to continue through to today. These religions are normally very conducive with the ideals of Paganism, for instance Hinduism, Shinto and Shamanism. Like the Craft, these religions also pay reverence to the old Gods and Goddesses, and work with, and respect, nature. On the whole, polytheistic religions also embrace the feminine deity as well as the male; a key element to the practices of modern witchcraft – worship.

If someone had told me 10 years ago that I would become a religious person, I would have laughed at the idea. I can't really say I was brought up in an atheist household; because whilst my father never recognised a God as such, he was downright Pagan in many ways, living on a smallholding in Wales and planting his crops by the moon phases. Looking back, I realise now that I was taught to respect a non-descript Animist view, that deity is within nature – but nothing that at the time that I would have described as God.

But with Paganism and Craft, the deities start to become part of our everyday lives; they are there in the supermarket whilst we complain about rising food prices, they are there when things go wrong, and we need someone to talk to. And, like my father taught me, deity also lies in the earth, the trees, the vegetables, and even in death. They are also extremely forgiving ... somewhat like a long-suffering parent, they roll their eyes at all our mortal mistakes and wild tantrums, and patiently wait for us to reassess the important things in life. But, as long as we are good people at heart, the Old Gods don't judge, and they also accept us as who we are; people, with flaws, and no one is perfect.

By working with these inner aspects of the Goddess and God, we discover the realisation of the divine self. It is only by recognising the inner divine that we are able to appreciate and respect ourselves, and live our spiritual lives to the full. This Craft ideology reflects the contrast between the "we are not worthy" mindset of monotheistic religion and the pantheist belief of "we are god".

The word 'witch' is a very broad, and very misunderstood term. I'm sure everyone here has seen the word witch used to describe a Haggared old woman? Someone who nobody likes? A stepmother? Perhaps an old lady, sat around a cauldron, on a dark and windy moor?

But, despite misconception, the meaning of the word 'witch' is not confined to any specific religion or country; neither does it point to any particular form of magic, gender, or ethics. The most popular theory for the origin of the word 'witch' is that it traces back to the Proto-Indo word 'wie- ik' (veek), meaning 'to consecrate', and 'to practice religion and magic'. This word was also associated with seasons, and cycles of the earth. The related Germanic word, 'wikk-en' meant 'to use magic, divination and sorcery'. But, no matter which theory we favour, or where we look in the world, the witch has always been a symbol of power, transformation and magic.

So then, back to the Craft. If you ask 5 people what the Craft is all about, you will probably get 5 different answers. The reason for this is that the Craft is an intuitive and fluid practice - rather than defining an exact way of worship, it allows for creativity and diversity. It allows a person to make their own decisions as to which practices to follow, and how to follow them. Just like the word 'Pagan' the phrase 'The Craft' is also an umbrella term, this time used to describe a common ground of pagan magical traditions, and incorporates both modern witchcraft (which, as I mentioned, Gerald called Wicca) and other forms of witchcraft, such as Traditional Witchcraft, Italian Strega, and my own path of Initiatory Craft.

However, whilst the traditions of modern witchcraft vary, in general they all profess to be nature based mystery traditions, which work with the seasons, and acknowledge the cycles of life. We embrace old Pagan rites, develop our occult understanding and progress with our own personal development through the mysteries. It blends the early religions of Britain, Egypt, Mesopotamia and Greece; the mysteries of Freemasonry, and Qabalah; and the ways of the European Cunning Craft, whilst absorbing various different magical systems from around the world. Our modern Craft borrows all the 'best bits' of ancient and modern mysticism and combines them all, altering the way we see the world on both a conscious, and subconscious, level.

So, without trying to be too specific about the practices of the Craft as a whole, I will try to explain very briefly what is involved.

Unlike many other religions, the Craft does not advertise itself as being 'a religion suitable for all'. In fact, many covens will actively work to put someone off joining; a test, if you will, of the persons' commitment to learn. Nor is admittance to a coven given lightly; my own coven will meet with a potential member several times before a decision is made. The reason is, in my opinion, you have to be a certain type of person to work with the Craft.

An important quality for a witch is an open mind - a willingness to shed pre-conceptions, and learn the mysteries. The person must also have a reverence for the earth, the planet and all things. This doesn't mean they have to be tree-hugging hippies; what it does mean, is that they have a respect, and an understanding for the world they live in; that they appreciate the turning of the seasons and the cycles of the earth.

This doesn't mean a witch has to be a vegetarian or a vegan, either; for the cycles of life are light and dark, and death is an integral part on the wheel of life. Many witches and pagans come from farming backgrounds, people who are already aware of the ebb and flow of the seasons and the cycles of life. For those of us living in towns and cities, the Craft gives us a way to understand and embrace the natural cycles that we might otherwise not be aware of.

This introduces us to the Sabbats, the seasonal festivals. Witches meet at the eight Sabbats of the year – these are, the Winter Solstice in december, Imbolc in february, the Spring Equinox in march, Beltane in may, the Summer Solstice in june, Lughnassadh in august, the Autumn Equinox in september, and Samhaine, in october. At these festivals, we celebrate and give thanks to the abundance of the time of year: at Lughnassadh we give thanks for the harvest, whilst at Samhaine we give thanks for darkness, and rest.

The sabbats comprise of four 'Greater Sabbats' and four 'Lesser Sabbats'. The practice of celebrating the eight festivals together as one system is a relatively new idea, which was designed by Gerald Gardner and Doreen Valiente in the 1950's who named the system 'The Wheel of the Year'.

However these sabbats are based on some very old festivals which, although not always practiced at the same time, nor by the same people, have been followed

for thousands of years. Even today, outside of Pagan communities, these sabbats are celebrated in our bank holidays, village festivals, and culture.

The purpose of celebrating these sabbats are threefold. The first is that they allow us to connect with the cycles of life and the turning seasons of the year, which, in this modern world, we might otherwise forget. The second is to make the best of what is offered to us at that time of the year; to evoke the powers of the season and direct those powers, towards our goals in the form of magic. The third is to acknowledge and re-enact the myths of the seasons, which themselves have a subtle effect on our sub-conscious.

Some people argue that to follow the Pagan seasonal festivals is outdated, and we are trying to reconstruct something which is not relevant to modern life. But it is not simply a question of nostalgia. We humans are animals; we are part of the earth and her movements. Just like all other animals, and plant life, we are effected by the seasons on subtle levels, physically, mentally and spiritually. In this way, the seasonal cycles are inherently sacred, and act as a framework for celebrating the cycle of human life. Just as things change in nature, so changes take place within ourselves, allowing us to embrace the cycle of life and recognise our own relationship with the land, and the earth.

We also identify deities as a particular season, or seasons' change; traditionally, their myths were designed to be read and re-enacted at certain times of the year, in order to help our inner-selves become more connected to the Wheel of the Year, and the cycles of life. The sabbats follow the progress of the sun, seen as a masculine deity, throughout the year; as the sun grows in power the days become longer, it draws to the height of its power at midsummer, and then, as it starts to wane, the nights become longer as we approach the longest night at Yule.

The sabbats are described as solar festivals, and are based on the solar year. A Solar Year is the period of time that the sun takes to travel across the heavens and back to the start of its journey. Along its path, the sun passes through four principal points – two Equinoxes, when both day and night are equal in length, and two Solstices, when either day or night is at its longest.

Astronomical reckoning says that these are the midpoints of the seasons, cross quarter days, like on a hot cross bun. These festivals are called the Lesser Sabbats, or 'Solar Rites'. The remaining four sabbats mark the start of the

energy of that season. These four festivals are therefore usually seen as being of a more agricultural significance, as they mark the beginning of that particular farming period. These festivals are called the Greater Sabbats, or 'Nature Rites'.

Another cycle that is followed by witches is the Lunar cycle – the moon festivals, called the Esbats. Moon worship is as old as mankind itself. Our ancestors witnessed the moon as it reflected the rhythms of life, the cycles of the seasons, and the tides of the seas. They watched the moon move across the sky, transforming and changing – a beacon of light, that shone through the darkness of night. Women's menstrual cycles were also effected by the phase of the moon, and in short, it seemed to our ancestors that the moon caused the rhythms of life that they relied on so very heavily.

The gravitational pull of the moon moved bodies of water, causing fluctuations in fishing, travel, and flooding. The weather, was also affected by the changes in the moon and this also had a direct effect on mankind. Bad weather and storms were more likely around the time of the full moon, and rings around the moon predicted rain. A red moon signified the time for harvest or an impending death, called 'blood on the moon', whilst a lunar eclipse meant a time to perform magic to appease the moon and ask it to return its light to the earth.

In craft today, the esbats are rituals performed on the New and the Full Moons, which honour the moon and make use of its energy, although some may also work during the Dark Moon, later in their training. The structure of the Full and the New Moon esbats are fairly similar, although the magical working of the ritual often changes depending on the phase of the moon. It is normal for the members of the coven to bring along requests for the evening esbat: spells, chants, healing and so on, types of magic; which works by first understanding, and secondly transforming, the web of life.

Invocations are also performed on the Full Moon, better known as the 'Drawing down the Moon' which is carried out as a ritualised way of inviting the Goddess into the body of the Priestess. Contrary to belief, 'Drawing down the Moon' is not a modern rite, neither is its name; illustrations of female magicians performing this rite can be found depicted on old carved reliefs from Greece. The 'Drawing down the Sun' is performed in a similar way, to invoke the God into the body of the Priest, although this is more likely to be performed sabbats, the festivals of the Sun, in most covens.

The elements are also a core principle in European Pagan culture and ritual, and many ancient traditions from all around the world hold the concept of the elements close to their heart. The classical elements of air, fire, water and earth are the building blocks of life, both physically and spiritually; take one of these elements away and life as we know it ceases to exist. The air that we breathe, the fire that warms us, the water that hydrates us and the earth which nourishes us, are all in a fragile balance, which keeps us, and the world we live in, alive.

In the Craft, we learn to embrace each element and acknowledge its nature in our lives. The elements rule our emotions, our skills, our thoughts and our actions, and therefore an understanding of the elements allows us a greater understanding of ourselves and the world that we live in. We begin to appreciate things which seemed insignificant before, and understand their important roles in the cycle of life. We begin to not only embrace the sunny days, but the 'rainy ones' too, so to speak, and to see every part of our world as sacred.

The elements are also closely linked with the seasons, the festivals, the moon phases and even the time of day. They are of special significance in the tarot deck, and also play a part in a magic circle. In my opinion, it would not be sufficient to perform a ritual of air, without climbing the highest peak, and feeling the power of the wind upon your back. This is the nature of the elements; a part of the realisation that the sacred can, indeed, be the mundane. As part of the degree system within the craft, each initiate is given a test, which usually incorporates the elements; a getting back to your roots, if you like.

The relationship between practitioners of witchcraft or wicca and their Gods is also an interesting one. I'm sure that some of you have already had some experience of deities, either spiritually or religiously. But the misconception often is that witches/pagans are not religious. The problem is, both with Wicca and Paganism, is that it is so in depth and at times apparently complicated that you cant really describe what it all means in one conversation - or even in a one hour talk.

People outside of the Craft seem to have a problem getting their heads around the idea that a magical tradition can be a religion, because many people still associate the word 'religion' with the main world religions only, such as christianity and islam.

Others say, "I understand. Its honouring nature. Its not following a God. It makes sense, in this day and age." Well, maybe part of that is true, but on large these are all misconceptions which are born out of the monotheistic mindset – which very often says that to worship God is to worship something untouchable, unfathomable. How about worshipping the God within and without? Above and below? The all, everything, and ourselves?

Belief systems are not a science, and therefore defining your own view is not always going to be as easy as a, b, or c. In addition, it is very difficult to attribute modern witchcraft to just one theology, as it is a composite and eclectic practice, built upon many different traditions. My own coven identifies most closely with Pantheism; a belief system that deity and the universe as one. Yet, we also believe that the Gods reside in the rocks, the trees, the animals and the spirit of nature: the belief of Animism. But we also visualise the God and the Goddess in personified forms, such as Aphrodite the Goddess of Love, Cernunnos the Horned Lord, Artemis the Goddess of the Hunt, and Anubis the God of Death: the belief of Polytheism.

But what exactly happens when a witch starts to work with Deity on a ritual and a magical level? As we progress through Initiatory witchcraft, we start to work with deity on several levels. The first, and perhaps the most obvious level, is the role of the devotee - we begin to worship the Gods and research their history and mythology, a practice which is not dissimilar to any other religion - although unlike most other religions, witches start to incorporate the Gods into spellwork and ritual and begin working with them very closely.

The second phase – perhaps an inevitability due to the connection that is forged between a mortal and a deity when working on a ritual or magical level - is that we start to build a relationship with them. This is a very different sort of relationship than what one might expect from a religion per-se; unlike most belief systems, Paganism does not place the deity on a pedestal, somewhere unreachable and unfathomable. Nor does it demand we speak only through ordained Priests. Whilst all due respect is always given, the Gods become almost friends and family to us, and, often, we start to recognise a God or Goddess who we particularly associate with.

Most people begin to undergo a transformation when they begin to connect with the Old Gods, but for those who want to further this connection and learn more about the Craft, there is ini-shia-tory witchcraft, and training covens who initiate their trainees through the Degrees.

This leads me on to the degree system of wicca, and other types of Initiatory craft. Contrary to popular opinion, the Degree System is not a badge of power, or a status symbol. In true Craft, the witch is given an initiation to represent the hard work that he or she has undertaken in order to achieve a certain level of training. This training involves learning how to control the ego. Within this training, the student shifts the ego in order to unite self with spirit, with the aim to achieve full consciousness and the ability to transform fate.

Training leads to Priesthood; a journey which takes the initiate through the Gods and Goddesses of the Craft. The initiate will spend a month, or more, immersed in the ways of the deity; wearing their colours, eating the foods native to their country of origin, and performing rites almost every day. The purpose is to become closer to that deity, and also in order to evoke the positive aspects of that deity – causing them to 'rub-off' on the initiate, if you like. The strength of Zeus, the beauty of Aphrodite, and the wisdom of the Egyptian Thoth.

Of course; the Priestess or Priest guiding the initiate through this process can only give so much, and, - as with all Craft practices, - this journey is wholly in the hands of the initiate. The more effort they make, the more they will progress, and the more they will learn. The training I am speaking of here relates to First Degree inner circle work, and therefore much of it is oathbound; but I can vouch for the fact that this process works; as long as the initiate has the dedication to learn. The priesthood of the Craft is a way of life; it is unfortunate that we also have to do mundane office jobs to pay the mortgage, and perhaps even sleep occasionally - because any Priest or Priestess of the Craft will tell you there are just not enough hours in the day to fit it all in..!

Through the Craft mystery tradition, we find a way in which we can strive to understand the Gods, by identifying them within our own lives and experiences. Ultimately, modern witchcraft brings together the worship of the old Gods and Goddesses and combines it with a focus on self empowerment, and transformation. In the words of Vivianne Crowley, 'The Craft is a religion that looks to the good of human beings rather than to the evil, and seeks to bring out the best in a person, rather than dwelling on their faults.'

A difficult thing to achieve for many, after 2,000 years of we are not worthy! Paganism and the Craft has been almost 200,000 years in the making, and its rule stretched from the practices of early neanderthals, right through to the

egyptians, the greeks and even the early romans, all polytheistic societies who revered both masculine and feminine aspects of deity:- a God and a Goddess, male and female - a balance lost at the rise of Christianity.

But the first real attempt of mass conversion to Christianity, a monotheistic religion worshipping only a masculine deity, was made by Pope Gregory, around 500 AD. He commissioned churches to be built over the sites of Pagan temples and holy ground, and in an attempt to convert the local people, many sacred sites were adopted as well as the local customs and festivals. Pagan Gods were demonised, and sacred places destroyed.

The New Testament embodies early Christianity's views on the Pagan Gods very well, when it says, 'The temple of the Great Goddess should be despised, and Her magnificence should be destroyed, whom all Asia and the world worship.' Great Goddess; Magnificence; fitting words of a new belief system seeking to eradicate a powerful and ancient religion. The rise of Christianity brought an end to the divine partnership between the Goddess and God that had lasted thousands of years, and left the God without his lover.

As Christianity became the official religion throughout Europe, a fear developed of the old ways, and those old Gods which had been demonised become symbols of the Christian Satan. This fear was passed down from generation to generation, and it was in fourteenth century that witch hysteria began, led by the 'Holy Office of the Inquisition' in Rome. The Holy Office of the Inquisition was an institution set up to 'defend the (catholic) faith and trial heresy or false doctrines' and was one of the most feared offices in Europe.

It approved in the use of torture and execution as forms of punishment, and many of its victims other than witches included Cathars, Hindus, Jews, homosexuals and even other types of Christianity. It is estimated that approximately 50,000 individuals were burnt, hung or tortured to death on the charge of witchcraft in Europe alone. I should take this opportunity to point out that it was 50,000, not the 9 million, which is so often claimed...!

When modern witchcraft came to conception in the late 1940's and early 1950's, much of the medieval dogma of the past was still reflected onto the practice. Whilst people were fascinated with witchcraft and wanted to learn more, there was still the underlying mediaeval fear which was associated with witchcraft, magic, and worship of the old Gods.

>The author shows magazine cuttings on a board - Article from the Manchester Comet written by Alex Sanders, founder of the Alexandrian Tradition, dated 1965, and an article featuring Cecil Williamson who founded the Folklore Centre in Castletown in the Isle of Man, which eventually moved to Bostcastle in Cornwall where it is still running today, dated 1951. <<

Gerald Gardner was the first person to openly admit his beliefs and declare himself a practicing witch; he was closely followed by other trail blazers, such as Alex Sanders, Robert Cochrane and Doreen Valiente. It is true that mistakes have been made since modern witchcraft started to be recognised, too much press coverage, misunderstandings, and practices having to be tweaked in order for them to truly work. But Wicca is a new religion, only 60 years young, based on ancient and fragmented practices. For 60 years, we have come a long way, and these people who stood at the forefront of a new religion did a fantastic job in bringing the old ways back.

And now, the future of the craft is in our hands. Since perhaps the late 90's, the practice of Paganism, and in particular Wicca, has experienced a boom in interest from both the media and people seeking to practice the craft. In my opinion, it is a good thing that paganism and the craft is starting to be practiced by more people, although it should be said that statistics show that we are still only 0.07% of the UK population. Paganism embraces all ages, all genders, sexualities, ethnicities, and, to some extent, many faiths. The lifestyle that comes with Paganism encourages a respect for nature, a respect for one another, and gives an emphasis on self development and balance. In my opinion, the more people living this lifestyle, the better the world will be.

It is a fundamental flaw in the culture of neo-Paganism that to be Pagan, one must turn their back on progression. Perhaps, people seek validation for the belief system which they are following or perhaps they feel Paganism is an escape from 'real life'. But, in my opinion, Paganism is the very opposite. In keeping with much of Pagan teaching, the key word here again is balance; the ability to embrace the modern world whilst not forgetting our origins and the earth beneath us, - which nurtures us, feeds us, and to whom we return when we die.

Well, I hope that has given you all some further understanding on the Craft, and if this has sparked your interest my book is available to buy in October 2009,

although you can pre-order at Waterstones and other online retailers. What I have given you this afternoon is just an overview to fill this one-hour talk, but I think that you will all be able to take something from the book and I hope that it gives some of you a comprehensive and thorough understanding of the craft.

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