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Spiritual Guidance in the Neo-Pagan Traditions

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A BRIEF HISTORY OF NEO-PAGANISM

Paganism and Neo-Paganism (terms used interchangeably) refer to a group of mainly Eurocentric religions that focus on reviving the pre-Christian practices of Europe and/or developing new and borrowed practices compatible with ancient Pagan worldviews. These religions include the many traditions of Wicca (the largest religion in the cluster), British Traditional Witchcraft,[1] Asatru (the worship of ancient Norse and Germanic deities), Hellenismos (the worship of Greek gods), Druidism, and many others.

Aboriginal faiths, African diaspora religions (Regla de Ocha/Santeria, Voudun, Umbanda, Candomble), major non-Abrahamic faiths from Asia, and other scripture-based religions are not included. Satanism is also not included as it is viewed by most Neo-Pagans as a reaction to Christianity, which has nothing to do with either ancient or contemporary Pagan belief or practice.

The cluster of Neo-Pagan religions are similar enough that they can be discussed together in a broad way. Due in part to the scarce numbers of adherents, these religions often mount joint conferences and semipublic rituals at which they all participate and which tend to be mostly Wiccan in structure by default.

Interest in European Pagan religions began to revive in the mid-twentieth century. These revivals can be seen as either the public reemergence of hidden ancient sects or the modern re-creation of practices from scraps of records and myth that survived destruction

during the Christianization of Europe. Regardless, Pagan religions today incorporate both ancient pre-Christian European beliefs as well as newly invented elements. Many followers of these Eurocentric religions borrow practices from around the world, while retaining distinctly Pagan identity and worship patterns. Neo-Pagans are distinct from the New Age movement, although the two share many practices and tools (crystals, astrology).

Some precursor source material to modern Neo-Paganism can be found in the works of Charles Leland, Aleister Crowley, Dr. Margaret Murray, Israel Regardie, Dion Fortune, and Robert Graves.

Gerald Gardner, a retired British civil servant, founded the first Wiccan tradition, a mystery tradition that he billed as a revival of British folk witchcraft traditions. This tradition eventually became known as Gardnerian Wicca. After the British Parliament did away with laws making witchcraft illegal, Gardner published *Witchcraft Today* in 1954. It is contested by Doreen Valiente (1989) and numerous others as to what ancient knowledge Gardner actually revealed versus what he and his associates borrowed or invented. Regardless, Gardner was a colorful founder who generated the excitement and charisma necessary to launch Wicca as a world religion. Along the way, associates such as Doreen Valiente, one of Gardner's high priestesses, and Raymond and Rosemary Buckland, initiates of Gardner, helped to develop the religion further.

A few other strains of Wicca include Alexandrian Wicca (from Alex Sanders), which is highly ceremonial, also initiatory, but more liberal in practices than Gardnerian Wicca; Dianic Wicca (founded by Morgan McFarland and Mark Roberts), which has a branch that is primarily oriented around the Goddess and another that is politically feminist; Blue Star Wicca; various forms of Faery Wicca, which put more emphasis on spirit contacts with fairies or the fey; Correllian Nativist Tradition; Georgian Wicca; Central Valley Wicca; Strega (an Italian witchcraft); Reclaiming Tradition (Starhawk is one of its most famous authors); and countless others.

In the early 1960s, Robert Cochrane, a rival of Gardner, put forth an alternative variation of British Traditional Witchcraft (BTW). Some surviving forms derived in part from his teachings include the 1734 Tradition, the Regency, and the Clan of Tubal Cain. There are

notable differences in methodology, ethics, and emphasis of practice between Wicca and BTW. These groups are highly secretive.

The Feri Tradition (not Wicca) was founded in the 1940s and 1950s by Victor and Cora Anderson and carried along by persons such as Gwydion Pendderwen and most recently T. Thorn Coyle. Feri incorporates the use of tools for personal power (like the iron pentacle), the Hawaiian Huna concept of three souls, and sexual mysticism. It has an especially strong emphasis on evolving the spiritual self.

The Order of Bards, Ovates, and Druids, currently the largest Druid organization in the world, was founded by Cambridge academic Ross Nichols in 1964 along with other former members of the Ancient Druid Order—a turn-of-the-century organization with roots traceable to the seventeenth century. Isaac Bonewits was a well-known American Druid who founded Ár nDraíocht Féin (also known as ADF) in 1983 (the largest Druidic organization in the United States). Druidism, like all Neo-Paganism, is a combination of invention, scholarship, and ancient practice. ADF attempts to base its teachings on contemporary scholarship. Its beliefs are not tremendously different from Wicca, but its organizations, politics, ritual forms, and traditions all differ from Wicca.

Norse Paganism (you may hear such groups referred to as Heathen, Asatru, Odinist, Theodist, and/or Wotanist) refers primarily to the worship of the Norse gods (like Odin, Thor, and Freya). There is also a revival of elements of Old Norse culture, ethical conduct, and feelings of kinship. Honoring the ancestors and the earth are emphasized. The nineteenth century and Nazi periods saw revivals of romanticized versions of Germanic faith. Many current folklore- and history-based Norse Pagan groups arose in the 1970s, such as the Asatru Association in Iceland and the Odinic Rite in England. Current organizations in the United States include the Troth and the Asatru Alliance. Most contemporary groups go to great pains to distance themselves from any sort of racist doctrine or practice.

Hellenic Polytheistic Reconstructionism concerns itself with the reconstruction of the ancient Greek faiths, such as Hellenismos (primarily the worship of the Olympian gods) and other Greek spiritual practices like the Eleusinian and Dionysian mysteries.

Modern reconstruction of these religions and practices has been occurring mainly since the 1990s.

Recently, with increased access to Russia and Eastern European countries, other culture-specific Pagan practices, revivals, and reconstructions have begun emerging in English-language publications.

BASIC TEACHINGS OF NEO-PAGAN TRADITIONS

Beliefs in the Neo-Pagan traditions vary widely but in general include the following.

Immanence of Deity and the Interconnectedness of Life

Neo-Pagans believe that deity is present on and in the earth here with us. Most Neo-Pagans also believe deity to be transcendent as well, to have a concentration of presence somewhere beyond our sphere. In addition to distinct god forms, there is a holy interconnection of spirit flowing through all of us and nature. The immanence of deity and the interconnectedness of life are foundational beliefs for many Pagans.

A Predominant Focus on the Here and Now Rather Than the Afterlife

A curious thing happens when you ask most Neo-Pagans about the afterlife. They will hesitate and then give you a vague memorized answer as though they were instructed in it years ago for about ten minutes and have not thought about it since. There is a rather pervasive belief in reincarnation, although this belief is not central to most forms of Neo-Paganism. What matters is how you live your life now; the afterlife will take care of itself.

The Earth as Sacred, Not a Trial, Punishment, or Exile from the Divine

This belief is very important. It is not sinful or a mistake to focus on your life here and now (rather than the hereafter) and to enjoy physical sensations. "Pleasure is of the Goddess" is an oft-quoted phrase, and many groups have some Dionysian tendencies (an enjoyment of earthly pleasures, emotion, and a bit of excited chaos). Neo-Pagans believe they can be in direct connection with the Divine right now here on earth. There is a strong undercurrent of environmentalism and reconnection with nature.

Many Pagans believe in inherent divinity, that we are perfect and divine, only needing to grow into our full expression. The ideas of reincarnation and the earth as a training school for evolving our souls into this full expression are prevalent in Neo-Paganism.

A Religious Interest in and Rites to Acknowledge the Seasons of the Year and Other Sacred Natural Processes such as Birth, Growth, Dying, and Fertility

A change in season, an equinox, a rainstorm—all are aspects of the Divine. Regardless of the particularities of a given Neo-Pagan religion's holidays, these holidays will convey a belief in the sacredness of the earth, the body, and the processes of life. For example, the Wiccan wheel of the year includes eight major holidays spaced roughly six weeks apart. Dates given are for the Northern Hemisphere:

Samhain: October 31–November 2. The beginning of the new year in most systems, the last harvest festival of the fall, and a time to remember and communicate with the Ancestors.

Yule/Winter Solstice: December 19–23. The rebirth of the God or the Oak King. Wiccan traditions generally have God growing and dying in accordance with the seasons. Some traditions have two gods battling for control—one more associated with growth (Oak King) and one with decline and renewal (Holly King).

Imbolc/Candlemas: February 1–2. Related to the Irish deity Bridget. This is a time when new plans for the coming spring and year are set after a period of winter reflection and retreat.

Ostara/Vernal Equinox: March 19–23. The Lord and Lady are growing and bonding, and spring is arriving. Painted eggs as symbols of new life are often incorporated into celebrations.

Beltaine: May 1. A fertility holiday with bonfires and maypoles. The Lord and Lady may consummate their love. Actual orgies among Neo-Pagans, while not unheard of, are almost entirely the stuff of urban legend.

Litha/Midsummer (Summer Solstice): June 19–23. The fertility and growing power of the earth reaches its zenith and starts declining into fall and winter. In some traditions, the Oak King and Holly King again fight for control as the cycle turns to the decline and renewal.

Lammas/Lughnasadh: This is the first of three harvest festivals, which often concentrates on grain and bread.

Mabon/Autumn Equinox: September 20–24. A harvest festival often concerned with fruit.

These holidays are derived from a mixture of Celtic, Germanic, and other European festivals.

A Freedom to Be Creative in Belief and Practice

Newness, creativity, and borrowing are not generally considered negative, and most Neo-Pagans assume they are authorized to improvise. Some Neo-Pagans are reconstructionists, basing their practice more firmly in historical contexts, but most are not.

There is also the curious phenomenon of "Techno-Pagans." While nature is sacred, a large number of Pagans really love computers, libraries, and air-conditioning. The culture of Neo-Paganism has grown to rely on online communications to keep scattered adherents in communication, and there are some who seem to mainly funnel their spiritual activities into online discussions and websites.

Exploration of Ancient Wisdom for Its Relevance to the Modern World

Neo-Pagans tend to buy lots of books. There is no assumption that new is better. A Neo-Pagan may be as likely to read a history or anthropology textbook as a religious book. There is more than the usual amount of scholarship involved, as bits of lore are actively being discovered, researched, and/or invented. Spiritual directors and other counselors need to understand that for their Neo-Pagan clients, what constitutes spiritual activity is broader than for the general population. So, reading a history text on the ancient Roman Empire is spiritual activity if that person worships Athena, in part because ancient religion has become lost or obscured and so you can't just study books in the religion section in order to reclaim it.

Direct Personal Deity Contact with Little to No Church Hierarchy

Neo-Pagans pray, trance journey, paint, write, sing, and engage in divination, all with the assumption that the Divine is right there waiting for them to figure out how to complete contact. Clergy are not needed for this, although guided trance journeys during rituals

are very common (think group hypnosis, as the procedure is similar, but assume that actual spiritual contacts are happening and astral travel occurring). Each Neo-Pagan has the ability to pursue deity contacts that are right for him or her, and individual deities may contact people, too.

Personal Responsibility for Spiritual Growth and Mundane World Affairs

Individuals being responsible for their own spiritual development has meant rather slow growth for spiritual guidance skills among Neo-Pagan clergy. It has also resulted at times in the custom of making would-be group members jump through hoops to find and contact Neo-Pagan organizations (thus proving they are serious enough to be worth attention from the group). This is slowly changing. Many Neo-Pagans consider evangelism an obnoxious tool and make no efforts to be visible to Neo-Pagan seekers looking for them.

Extensive Use of Tools and Props in Religious Ritual

Pagans use techniques and concepts such as the dark night of the soul, meditation, guided journeys, labyrinths, sweats, Reiki, shamanic journeying and healing, chanting, and self-hypnosis. They are also generally interested in divination (like tarot cards and runes), herbalism, auras, Kabbalah, and all manner of occult subjects.

To better focus the will and mind, Pagans use tools like wands, stones, and robes. Successful magic is thought to have energy behind it, and so chanting and dancing may be used to whip up energy. As people themselves are a part of the Divine, magic may be accomplished through their own power as well as by requesting the aid of the gods.

In this context, seemingly outlandish practices make lots of sense. If you believe that robes and candles help set mood and intent to worship, then you will use them. If you believe movement adds energy to the effectiveness of prayer or magic, then you will dance.

Subdivision of the Divine into Components for Easier Understanding and More Personal Relationship (Gods and Goddesses, Nature Spirits, Ancestor Spirits, Elemental Forces)

Neo-Paganism is about relationship. Pagans feel it is very hard to relate to an all-powerful, all-knowing god in the sky. So gods are broken down into functions to make them easier to get to know.

Pagans consider this approach more useful to them because individuals know to whom to go with what type of concern.

Spirit is in everything (pantheism), so many Pagans believe there to be a spirit inhabiting just about everything (even rocks and trees) that can be talked with and interacted with. That said, most Pagans will only do this in specific spiritual activities and don't go through life constantly hearing voices coming at them from all the objects around them. An operating assumption is that all gods and spirits are real. This is both to be polite to others and a safe expediency just to be sure. There will be certain spirits and gods that matter to individuals and others to which they never give a second thought.

Neo-Paganism is a spiritual system of interacting with the world; it is not defined by which entities are interacted with. Thus, Wicca has a series of customs, rituals, and beliefs, but which gods and goddesses the system is applied to work with depends on individual covens and traditions.

The subdivision of spiritual powers into multiple gods, goddesses, spirits, and elemental forces can also lead to a sense of balance as one learns to use multiple such contacts for different reasons. In particular, each of the four elements (earth, air, fire, water—and sometimes spirit for a fifth element) has different important qualities that together sum up just about the whole of what is possible in life and provide a life-balancing system.

Wiccan traditions are often duo-theistic, worshipping the Lord and Lady. Some feel that all of the various gods and goddesses are alternative names for the Lord and the Lady, while others are "hard polytheists" who work with a pantheon of discretely separate deities. Some groups place a stronger focus on the Goddess in their workings. For some, referring to the Lord and Lady is merely convenient shorthand for the male and female principles of the Divine and also extremely useful for Pagan gatherings where Neo-Pagans of differing stripes get together and somehow have to worship in concert. So an observer may well encounter a Wiccan who refers to a singular "the Goddess" in one sentence and then in the next launches into a rendition of the many different goddesses she believes in. Another variant on this would be a Wiccan who believes it is possible to pray to and connect with a giant amorphous Goddess but who also believes he can select from within that "Goddess cloud"

more concrete specific deities such as Isis, Hecate, or Cerridwen, among others, all of whom sort of blend together (but, there's no "sort of" blending; you either blend elements or you don't) into the Goddess.

A Belief in Magic

The Pagan belief in magic may best be thought of as prayer that is enhanced through the use of tools and rituals. Well-known early-twentieth-century occultist Dion Fortune (otherwise known as psychotherapist Violet Firth) defined magic as "the art of bringing about change in consciousness in conformity with the will."[2] It may be best to leave it ambiguous as to whether or not Pagans are changing their own mental states or the world around them with magic. The overlap between magic, psychotherapeutic techniques, and self-hypnosis is considerable. Not all Pagans use magic, though Wiccans almost always do. Usually the intended effects of magic are similar to the hoped-for effects of prayer: healing, good fortune, guidance requests, and the like. Neo-Pagans and Wiccans generally don't believe they can physically manipulate objects (like flying on broomsticks or turning into toads).

A "Harm None" Philosophy and Strong Ethical Code

Generally Wicca will tend to have a prohibition against harming others. Wicca also allows members to do whatever they want to as long as no one is harmed. Other Neo-Pagan religions may instead emphasize doing what is necessary to protect loved ones. They (such as some forms of British Traditional Witchcraft) will not have a "harm none" approach to ethics but may instead be constrained by the law of return—that is, the energy and intent you send out into the universe tend to come back at you in similar form. Therefore, you'd typically better act and intend the best for others unless there is a really strong need to do otherwise, since you can expect to get smacked in return for whatever actions you take against or on behalf of someone. The Asatru (Norse deity worship) system of ethics consists of the nine noble virtues: courage, truth, honor, fidelity, discipline, hospitality, self-reliance, industriousness, and perseverance. Druids have wisdom texts from ancient lore and mythology from which can be gleaned ethics related to honor, balance, and reverence for life. Regardless, a strong emphasis on personal responsibility tends to occur in Neo-Pagan religions.

NEO-PAGAN COMMUNITIES

Many Pagan paths, particularly in British Traditional Witchcraft and some Wicca, are closed and secret. Members undergo a many-year "traditional" training program, which controls quality and conveys power. An initiatory tradition may believe that there is a "power download" conveyed through the lineage to the new initiate upon initiation; that is, the initiate will have greater magical abilities and connection with divinities due to the energy and authority transmitted from generation to generation down through the lineage. Clients from these traditions may not be permitted to tell spiritual guides everything about what they do.

On the other hand, many strains of knowledge have been released into publication and onto the Internet. Today the majority of Neo-Pagans are reading from eclectic sources and talking openly about topics as they find their way well outside of secret paths. They may be more generically Neo-Pagan; that is, they are not members of a particular Pagan religion, like Wicca, but rather are solitary practitioners. The common community that this cluster of religions holds in common makes such solitary practice easy. Pagan festivals and conferences typically invite all Pagans to play, learn, and worship together. This is also in part why it is proper to capitalize Paganism and Neo-Paganism as a religion even as it becomes apparent that there are several religions under the Pagan umbrella.

DEMOGRAPHICS OF NEO-PAGANS

Reliable statistics and demographics regarding Neo-Pagans are hard to determine because of individuals' reluctance to come forward for fear of persecution, solitary followers unaffiliated with known groups, and Pagans identifying themselves as "no religion," Unitarian Universalist, or New Age on surveys.

Estimates in the United States have the Neo-Pagan population placed at between two hundred thousand and one million. A number of surveys show the Wiccan population exploding at astounding rates.

The best survey research data available is from the book *Voices from the Pagan Census*, derived from a nationwide sample of 2,089 people across the United States. It lists the U.S. Pagan population as follows:

90.8 percent white

64.8 percent female

52.9 percent with at least a college degree or better

87.9 percent between the ages of twenty and forty-nine

28.3 percent homosexual or bisexual

There are also high rates of acceptance and/or practice of group marriages, cohabitation, and ritual but not legal marriages (called handfastings). Neo-Pagans are active politically, trend strongly toward liberalism and the Democratic Party (only 6.6 percent are Republicans), and strongly support environmental concerns.[3]

Neo-Pagans generally look like anyone else. They may have a tendency to wear fantasy symbols, like dragons and fairies, on their clothes, and some may sport symbols such as pentacles, goddess symbols, triple moons, and spirals on jewelry or tattoos. Not all people wearing pentacles are Neo-Pagan; some wear them for shock effect or other reasons.

TRADITIONS OF SPIRITUAL GUIDANCE IN NEO-PAGANISM

At first glance there would not seem to be much of a tradition of spiritual guidance in most of Neo-Paganism. Clergy usually lack training in counseling skills and instead are trained to facilitate group rituals, teach knowledge of the tradition to students, and be proficient in specific spiritual tools, like the proper use of incense, candles, herbs, and divinatory methods. Most clergy (certainly of the Wiccan variety) go through a three- to ten-year course of tutorage with veteran clergy, home study, and a series of initiations. When they are considered fully trained (third degree in some Wiccan traditions), they are blessed to go form their own group. It is also the case that Neo-Pagan clergy are facilitators of energy rather than the primary performers of religious acts. In Neo-Pagan circles, everyone is being trained to be his or her own priest or priestess, and the clergy member (usually known as a high priest or priestess) is more of a clergy instructor and arbiter of disputes within the group. As such, there is much less of an expectation that the clergy member will take care of the members.

For most Neo-Pagans spiritual guidance would usually consist of studying a curriculum (often set out as degrees of initiation) involving learning about the self, the spirits, the gods, the four elements (earth, air, fire, and water), ritual protocol, the major holidays, and the tools of craft such as divination systems, herbs,

crystals, and perhaps spell casting. There is a strong expectation of personal responsibility; members learn their own capabilities, and then they care for themselves.

A member having personal troubles in a Wiccan coven might approach the clergy member for permission to have the group engage in spell work at the next appropriate ritual, such as a money spell for poor finances, healing work for health concerns, or construction of a protective amulet against spiritual attacks and negative influences.

Clergy meeting privately with members are likely to use divination to assist with the member's questions—such as a tarot spread or casting runes to help the member make a decision. Most clergy will have rudimentary peer counseling training at best and will be quick to refer complicated counseling and mental health concerns to professional therapists, and medical concerns to licensed doctors or an accomplished lay herbalist.

Most Neo-Pagans are first-generation converts of Caucasian descent from Western industrial cultures. Although they believe in magic and spiritual interventions, they also believe in the scientific method and modern medicine. They will usually seek standard Western medical and counseling help first and resort to their spiritual communities and clergy only in a secondary way. They will, however, often choose to not discuss their spirituality with helping professions, which can lead to shallower therapeutic alliance.

The topic of spiritual guidance in Neo-Paganism is, in fact, currently a hot and contentious topic. There is an increasing cognizance of the lack of spiritual direction and counseling training of clergy and a difference of opinion as to what to do about it. Some clergy are forming alliances with community members who are also licensed helping professionals, and others are going to newly formed professional seminaries like Cherry Hill Seminary. Some are taking crash courses in peer counseling similar to those that crisis hotline or hospital volunteers complete. Still others do not see this as being part of their job description; members are to learn to take care of themselves or seek professional help.

HOW SPIRITUAL DEVELOPMENT IS UNDERSTOOD IN NEO-PAGANISM

Each tradition is likely to have its own model of spiritual development, which the spiritual guide should endeavor to understand. Generally, most Neo-Pagans will view life as a training school, and their religious

leaders as the instructors or mentors. It is their job to achieve personal responsibility and efficacy of action on both the mundane and spiritual planes. Most Neo-Pagans will have a vague understanding that they are involved in a series of earthly reincarnations, but the final outcome of such is murky, as Neo-Paganism is more concerned with the here and now.

Some other assumptions underlie spiritual development, although they are rarely stated aloud:

- The members will have a variety and depth of communication with spirits and gods. The members will use these communications in conducting their lives and benefiting the community.
- The members will have a sense of personal mission, quite possibly as a result of alignment with personal gods with which they resonate.
- The members will have a proper balance and relationship with earth, air, water, and fire, which will result in greater balance across all areas of life, including mental and physical health.
- The members will have a good understanding of themselves.
- The members will be effective and decisive in the world.

SPIRITUAL PRACTICES IN NEO-PAGANISM

Neo-Pagan practices include active and energetic methodologies to connect with the Divine (prayer, trance journeys, painting, writing, singing, divination, guided journeys, chanting, dancing) along with an expectation that individual Neo-Pagans have the power to initiate such contacts. Neo-Pagan worship is as much concerned with the movement and facilitation of energies as it is with connection to people, place, spirits, and gods. So, in addition to connecting with a wealth deity, a Neo-Pagan performing magic might conceive of ways to get the energy of wealth flowing toward her.

Neo-Pagans will also use focal points to fix their attention and intent. They will typically have shrines and altars with many images and statues of deities. They may have shrines to dead loved ones at which they may leave offerings. These could be altars inside one's home or offerings left outside at sites deemed holy.

Neo-Pagans will attempt connections with the living land and spirits around them for the purposes of being good neighbors, to

solicit assistance, and because felt connection to the earth leads to caring about the earth. The altars and offerings mentioned above are one method of doing this because they direct the Neo-Pagan's energy and attention and strengthen intent to interact with the land and spirits.

Healing and facilitation of energy movement is often accomplished through the mastery and application of herbalism, Reiki, crystals, and other tools. Vast correspondence lists exist of what different herbs do (medicinally and magically), the purposes of different types of crystals, the purposes of different colors of candles, and the specific uses of different incenses. An experienced Neo-Pagan client will have memorized listings of such correspondences, and many seemingly random scents, colors, and objects around them will be purposefully chosen. The stone selected for a necklace likely has a purpose, and your client's color of clothing might be helping him or her with emotional mood. Concrete representations effect mental and spiritual states and sometimes physical reality. So, for example, a green or gold candle set on top of a magnet and a dollar bill might be drawing money to the Neo-Pagan. A ring with a certain type of stone in it might be providing spiritual protection.

Divination systems are popular; some folks will have regular consultations with tarot cards, runes, and the like. Some Neo-Pagans will rely heavily on such tools for important decision making.

COMMON SPIRITUAL ISSUES FOR NEO-PAGANS

The concept of personal responsibility is central in most forms of Paganism. Wiccans handle religious matters personally, pursuing direct contact with the Divine and often acting as their own priest or priestess. This religious stance can be used to empower clients toward taking responsibility for their lives. Believing that life events are under one's own control can lead to significantly better coping skills. In a similar vein, the concept of inherent divinity should be useful with clients suffering low self-esteem or feelings of worthlessness.

Personal connection to the Divine is critical in Paganism. In some cases, the type of gods being worked with can be adjusted to help the client. An artist might look to Bridget (Irish goddess of healing, inspiration, and smith craft) for inspiration. A client with social skills deficits might work with Oghma (Irish god of eloquence) or

Aphrodite (Greek love goddess). The nurturing, mothering aspects of goddesses (or the Wiccan Goddess) can be emphasized for clients needing healing and love. These gods' myths can be looked to for inspiration and ideas to emulate.

Spiritual guides could look to Jungian and archetypal psychology for ways that they or individuals might work with gods. Some clients will be amenable to the idea that gods are alive and formational in the makeup of the human unconscious and personality.

Books such as Seena Frost's *SoulCollage: An Intuitive Collage Process for Individuals and Groups* or Judy Harrow's *Devoted to You: Honoring Deity in Wiccan Practice* can also assist spiritual directors in helping Neo-Pagan clients deepen their faith and find meaning in it (see resources at the end of this chapter). Using Frost's book, clients develop collage pictures representing different pieces of themselves ("adult," "warrior") and do exercises and meditations with these pictures or collages to get to know themselves better. Clients could do very similar work to determine which deities the client thinks she is most similar to or composed of and the nature of the personal relationship with each deity. Harrow's book outlines ways to set up altars, collect myths, run rituals, and generally grow closer to various deities.

Spiritual directors can take meditations, guided imagery, affirmations, and relaxation exercises from Pagan rituals and spiritual practices to facilitate working with Neo-Pagan clients. Pagan clients usually carry with them a well-developed arsenal of practices that most spiritual guides don't know their clients have and that can be reactivated. Spiritual guides who have studied hypnosis will see huge overlaps between many Neo-Pagan spiritual and meditative techniques and their hypnotherapy training.

For example, many Neo-Pagans will have developed astral travel capabilities—similar to guided meditation techniques and self-hypnosis—in which they are able to leave themselves and go in search of spirit guides, deities, or experiences that will answer a problem or question. A spiritual guide might ask a Neo-Pagan client trying to find a career more in touch with her spiritual needs to use known astral travel techniques to look for guidance on this issue. Similarly, the client might develop and conduct a ritual in which guidance is requested from a spiritual source, use a divination technique, or watch for information in dreams and signs in nature.

Many spiritual guides can start sessions with a prayer, deep cleansing breaths, a vowel sound, or some other method to calm and focus the client's mind and mark the time in the session as special. Most Wiccan clients will already know a "ground and center" exercise (a relaxation visualization and breathing technique) that the spiritual guide might use instead of other calming and focusing exercises from their own tradition.

Most active Neo-Pagans will likely go to see a Neo-Pagan spiritual leader for spiritual issues. Neo-Pagans consulting a spiritual guide may be coming because they have doubts about the Neo-Pagan religious path as a whole or have had an especially negative experience with a Neo-Pagan leader or group.

To help address the questions or needs of clients with overall doubts as to their proper spiritual path, spiritual guides might use general toolsets for spiritual seekers. I like to use the "Belief-O-Matic," a questionnaire at www.beliefnet.com named with tongue-in-cheek playfulness but useful in initially matching seekers with the world religious traditions that might best match their views. Seekers can then investigate religions as their hearts dictate. Spiritual guides should notice that there is no general restriction within Neo-Paganism forbidding Neo-Pagans from participating in other religions as well as Neo-Paganism. You may well have a client come to you for spiritual guidance in another religion, only to find out that the client also attends Pagan rituals. Indeed, people who mix other religious traditions with Paganism often refer to themselves playfully with terms such as "Jewitches" or "Episcopagans." Some Pagan groups may limit such participation for persons in specific advanced Pagan clergy training programs.

The varied quality and homegrown nature of some Pagan organizations can result in poor experiences. Therefore spiritual guides may find themselves assisting Neo-Pagans who have fled a disappointing group. Spiritual guides may assist discouraged Pagans to realize that disastrous encounters with specific groups or individuals do not mean that their spiritual paths are entirely unsuitable.

Some Neo-Pagans struggle with the challenge of understanding or discerning which gods and goddesses are calling to them. Spiritual guides may wish to help these clients develop a structure in which the clients read about, meditate on, and participate in rituals for various

entities until they feel some affinity and connection with gods as a result. Some clients may have lost their feeling of connection with specific deities with which they once worked. In addition to trying to help clients regain their connections with deities, it is also okay for spiritual guides to advise Neo-Pagans to let connections lapse and to try new deity relationships if this feels right to the client. Sometimes certain gods and spirits will work with a person for a time, only to bow out when they have completed their work or finished the lesson they wanted to teach the person.

There are many common spiritual guidance problems that a non-Pagan spiritual guide is unlikely to be called upon to address with Pagans. These include learning to feel and communicate with the four elements (earth, air, fire, and water), learning to hear Spirit as a channel for successful divination or mediumship, learning to set up and take down the energies of sacred space used for rituals, and learning to submit to entities for divine possession. Spiritual guides who happen to have skillsets with the use of crystals, herbs, and incense should feel encouraged to ask if these might be of benefit to Neo-Pagan clients.

Dr. Ruth Crocker outlines many ways in which a client's Paganism might have an impact on the issues she brings to a psychotherapy session, many of which are also pertinent to spiritual guidance. Pagans who only attend occasional festivals, instead of regular congregational involvement, may be experiencing feelings of isolation. The client might be questioning the reality of shamanic experiences, such as hearing voices or seeing visions, because the larger society around her might question the truth of such experiences. Due to a higher percentage of women, lesbians, and gays participating in Neo-Paganism, spiritual guides may see more conscious, personal grappling with issues of sexuality, gender, and sexual orientation than in other religions with different demographics. Pagans often struggle with the impact of telling others about their religion ("coming out of the broom closet"), and the social implications of being known as Pagan can affect jobs, relationships, and child custody. Symptoms of trauma may be more prevalent among Pagans, owing to the lack of acceptance or the outright hostility shown by family and prior religious institutions. Issues regarding confidentiality may surface in spiritual guidance because many Pagans are forbidden by oath from discussing certain aspects of their training or rituals.

Dr. Crocker also suggests strengths upon which spiritual guides can capitalize, including existing familiarity with Jungian psychology, high educational level, strong social support from small ritual groups, the psychotherapeutic value of Pagan rituals, Pagan leadership training in helping professions, and a generally high sense of personal responsibility.

SPIRITUAL GUIDE ATTITUDES AND SPIRITUALITY VERSUS PSYCHOSIS

Pagan clients often do not tell their helping professionals about their religion for fear of being thought crazy. In my own psychotherapy practice, I had one client quit her former psychiatrist and therapist after he increased her antipsychotic medications without discussion once she made mention of talking with her goddesses. Our dialogue on this topic quickly revealed her deity contacts to be sources of comfort and strength that in no way damaged her abilities to hold a job, maintain friendships, or otherwise engage mundane reality.

Spiritual guides do not generally diagnose nor work with clear mental health concerns. Yet spiritual guides have to learn when to handle client concerns spiritually versus referring them to licensed mental health professionals. This may prove especially challenging with Neo-Pagan clients, whose spiritual beliefs and abilities would seem psychotic to some in mainstream Western society.

While it is wise to seek licensed mental health consultation as a precaution, I think that you can apply some commonsense questions when making a preliminary determination if mental health boundaries have been crossed:

- Are the spiritual contacts harming the client or causing him or her to lose connection with mundane reality?
- Are the client's activities, beliefs, and perceptions well outside the Pagan norm?
- Does the situation bother, hurt, or move the client away from health?
- Does the situation interfere with work or everyday living?
- Can the client put the situation aside when needed? Can the client focus on mundane life when needed?

- Will the client listen to trusted people to tell the client when situations are interfering with life and social connections?
- Is the client unduly rigid and inflexible in religious matters?
- Does the situation assist the client's functioning in some way and/or bring peace and joy?

I find Neo-Pagans to be among the most enjoyable clients. There is so much variety among them; one moment you will be discussing ancient practices, and the next moment your Pagan clients will simply invent or modify practices to their liking! These clients tend to be action oriented, and so brainstorming plans with them can be very rewarding. Just keep an open mind, be willing to be educated—you may learn some fascinating practices and history—and treat them as empowered and esteemed co-creators in spiritual development. You will enjoy being able to suggest tools you have learned elsewhere (meditations, crystals, incense, Reiki) and see how they can be integrated into your Pagan clients' practices.

NOTES

1. Generally Wicca and British Traditional Witchcraft (BTW) are thought of as separate religions, but there is a bit of overlap. Gardnerian Wicca is thought of as being BTW in part because it is an initiatory secret religion revealed from older British witchcraft practices. Generic Wicca, especially where it lacks initiations and is freely available in published books, is not considered BTW.
2. W. E. Butler, *Magic: Its Ritual, Power and Purpose* (London: Aquarian Press, 1952).
3. Helen A. Berger, Evan A. Leach, and Leigh S. Shaffer, *Voices from the Pagan Census: A National Survey of Witches and Neo-Pagans in the United States* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2003), 1–35.
4. Ruth Crocker, "Psychotherapy with Pagans: Religiously Sensitive Therapy with Followers of the 'Old Religion'" (lecture, symposium on "Implications for Counseling" at the Third Annual Mid-Year Conference on Religion and Spirituality, sponsored by the American Psychological Association, Division 36 and the Department of Pastoral Counseling at Loyola College, Columbia, MD, April 1–2, 2005).

RESOURCES

Online Resources

Ár nDraíocht Féin: A Druid Fellowship (ADF): www.adf.org/core
Covenant of the Goddess (CoG): www.cog.org

A guide for hospital chaplains and other health care providers: www.washington-baltimore-paganclergy.org/archives/hospital-chaplaincy-education-slideshow

The Order of Bards, Ovates, and Druids: www.druidry.org

Proteus Coven Library: http://proteuscoven.com/library.htm

Raven Kindred (Asatru): www.ravenkindred.com

The Shadow of Olympus (Hellenismos): www.iskios.com

The Witches' Voice: www.witchvox.com/basics/wfaq.html

A Few Good Basic Books

Clifton, Chas S. *Her Hidden Children: The Rise of Wicca and Paganism in America*. Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press, 2006.

Cunningham, Scott. *Wicca: A Guide for the Solitary Practitioner*. St. Paul, MN: Llewellyn, 2001.

Farrar, Janet, and Stewart Farrar. *The Witches' Goddess*. Blaine, WA: Phoenix, 1987.

Frost, Seena B. *SoulCollage: An Intuitive Collage Process for Individuals and Groups*. Santa Cruz, CA: Hanford Mead, 2001.

Harrow, Judy. *Devoted to You: Honoring Deity in Wiccan Practice*. New York: Citadel Press, 2003.

Harrow, Judy. *Spiritual Mentoring: A Pagan Guide*. Toronto, CA: ECW Press, 2002.

Hillman, James. *A Blue Fire: Selected Writings by James Hillman*. Edited by Thomas Moore. New York: Harper & Row, 1989.

K, Amber. *True Magick: A Beginner's Guide*. St. Paul, MN: Llewellyn, 1997.