On a beautiful May afternoon, I arrived at Julie’s house in San Jose with Grace and her son. I carried my offering of potted mums and plate of homemade chocolate chunk cookies to the front door. Grace carried her wicker basket filled with altar items and her son carried a vase of flowers. We entered Julie’s well-kept family home the entry was filled with family photos. There was a feeling of warmth as we entered. Kids were sitting in the family room watching cartoons on the big screen T.V. as adults stood in the kitchen munching on snacks they had brought. Introductions were made all around as we waited for other members of the circle to arrive so that we could start the ritual. When everyone arrived, we gathered in the kitchen and adjacent dining room forming a circle.

We were given a program for the afternoon ritual that Julie had typed up. I was nervous because this was only the third ritual I had attended and only the second one I had participated in. Adding to my nervousness was that I would be calling a quarter in this ritual. I would be calling the east, which “is associated with beginnings, with springtime, and with childhood” (McColman 2002). When Grace invited me to the ritual I thought this would be a great opportunity to participate without having my notebook and pencil in hand. Instead, I would have a piece of paper with the words that I would use to “honor the spirit of Air.” (McColman 2002) Grace had given me a crash course in the elements, but I was still unsure of what to say, so I turned to The Complete Idiot’s Guide to Paganism. I was able to find two simple lines to honor air. “Spirits of the east, element of Air! We invite you to come and join us in our sacred rites” (McColman 2002). This is
what I had been waiting for, a chance to really experience this religion called Wicca. A religion that has given Grace more confidence, has grounded her, and has helped her to educate people about the religion, the way of life that means so much to her.

Grace had invited me to celebrate Beltane with her circle during our formal interview in her altar room in her home. During our four hour interview we discussed a great many things, including her path to Wicca and what being a witch has meant to her. Grace sat cross-legged on the daybed and I sat in a rocking chair across from her. Grace brewed some chamomile and St. John’s Wart tea for us. My thoughts on how the interview or conversation should go didn’t turn out the way I envisioned it. I was inspired by Barbara Meyerhoff and Karen McCarthy Brown I wanted to have a rich, detailed conversation. But instead, I got something that seemed forced and when I played back the video tape, I found that I paused a lot before asking questions. I believe this was because I was nervous about my questions and the video camera. Technology that should have helped me only seemed to hinder our conversation.

As we sat and sipped our tea, we started right away with a list of questions that I had compiled over the course of my fieldwork. We started at the beginning, her childhood. Grace grew up with her El Salvadorian mother, grandmother and brother in the East Bay. During her early school years, she attended a Catholic school. After she graduated from junior high school, she decided to attend a public high school. She felt that there was something missing from the Catholic church even at a young age. Not until a cousin of her brother’s friend came to visit from Germany when Grace was in college did she discover Wicca. Grace and Sylvia became good friends, in Sylvia Grace saw a woman who was interested in things and investigated them. Sylvia wasn’t interested in
the status quo. Because of Sylvia, Grace started dabbling in Wicca, reading and doing her own investigating. That was around 1989, now 18 years later and Grace is a High Priestess with her own circle.

At the time she wasn’t sure if she could make a full commitment to Wicca. She knew that if she were going to commit she would need a mentor, someone to guide her down her path. She held the thought of finding a mentor in her head and found her in Lady Ro of Circle of the Sacred Feathers. In Lady Ro, Grace found someone who would allow her to ask questions and receive answers. If Lady Ro did not know, they would investigate the answer together, she wasn’t afraid to tell Grace that she did not know something. Perhaps a lot of Grace’s confidence comes from this inquisitive nature, she has questions and is willing to look for answers and has the ability to accept or reject what she finds. “Wicca doesn’t have one specific book. It is a basic code of life. Nobody tells you how to celebrate any of the holidays. You have to read and educate yourself to decide how to celebrate the holidays” (Cardinalli, 4/29/07).

This confidence has helped Grace to educate others about Wicca, what it is and what it isn’t. Grace does this by being a guest lecturer in Dr. Klein’s Anthropology class. In her everyday life, she presents herself as an individual and as a positive representative of what she believes in. She hopes that after people get to know her if they had a negative perception of Wicca or Witchcraft it will be dispelled. She believes that by being herself, she can educate people on what she believes if they have questions. She wants to be a positive example for the beliefs she carries with her every day. Wicca has given Grace “a more conscious awareness of herself and how she behaves in surroundings.” She is more “aware of her emotions, anxious, nervous, (she has learned to) trust her instincts. (She is)
open to different things and changes, willing to step outside of her comfort zone. (She is) willing to be open and more accepting of herself” (Cardinalli, 4/29/07). Wicca, for Grace is a lifestyle in which you should try to be a better person, strive for self-improvement and the betterment of yourself. Wicca is about finding your own enlightenment.

Wicca, according to Grace is empowering for a person because you have the ability to create your own surroundings. If she puts out her energy she gets what she wants back. She has been empowered to be confident and accepting of herself. As a woman, she has found empowerment in the knowledge that she is not at the beck and call of any man, she is not property. Wicca is not a patriarchal religion, male and female are equal, no one is higher than the other.

Grace has used her confidence to help her own family understand her decision to become a Wiccan Witch. While her mom still may not understand Grace’s religion, Grace has asked her mom a few questions to help her mom try to understand. “Am I a good person? Am I a good mom? A good daughter? Then how can all that is considered good be bad?” (Cardinalli, 4/29/07) For Grace and her mom, it is easier if they don’t talk about it. For her husband, his attitude is that if it makes her happy, it’s okay. During an Imbolc celebration a while back, Grace wanted to take their son with her. Her husband didn’t want her to take him because he was afraid that they would be seen as different in the neighborhood. Grace asked her husband the same questions that she had asked her mother adding, “Then why would I belong to a group that was hurtful?” (Ibid) Grace wants to show her son another way to worship, not just that you have to be in a building, but be part of the earth. Her husband agreed that their son attending the ritual would not be a bad thing. Imbolc is the celebration of the receding of winter and the coming of
In Scotland, it was usually celebrated by women making corn dolls to symbolize the Goddess Brighid (McColman 2002). That year the celebration was held at the beach. The circle planned to make a symbolic offering of a corn husk doll to mother earth and they were going to throw the doll into the ocean. Her son needed to use the restroom and didn’t want to miss the doll being throw into the water, so he came running down the beach saying “don’t throw the baby in the water, yet” (Cardinalli, 4/29/07). Grace tells this story with a big smile on her face and a laugh. “Anybody who heard that probably wouldn’t understand what he was talking about” (Ibid). Grace teaches her son about both the God and the Goddess, she wants him to know that they are both needed aspects for life to continue. Graces says that she would encourage him to learn about other religions as well as Wicca. She says of her son “his personal beliefs are up to him. I want him to be an individual thinker” (Ibid).

Grace’s confidence, individuality, secular and Wiccan education has paid off for her. She recently became High Priestess of her own circle, Circle of the Shining Star. I was in attendance at the hiving ceremony and I asked Grace about how her new circle was going. “I’m trying to figure out what I want to represent.” (Cardinalli, 4/29/07). She is trying to find curriculum and “doesn’t want to go into it blindly before she teaches, helps and leads others” (Ibid). She feels that as a High Priestess, she is a mom, she “is setting an example” (Ibid). Like she wants to do for her son, she also wants to do for her circle members. She wants to “bring up and ethical, moral people, to teach, show what I know and lead by example. I’m more conscious of how I act now” (Ibid). I asked her how she felt about her new role as spiritual leader. “We all want to help people, the issue is knowing when I won’t be able to help. You don’t do for someone else. I’m mentally
preparing myself for when to say when” (Ibid).

As the circle members and I stood on Julie’s sweet smelling backyard lawn surrounded by fragrant rose petals, Pagan chants streaming from the boom box on the patio, the warm May sun shining brightly down on this circle of women, children and men, I thought about all that Grace had talked about over the course of my fieldwork. This earth-based religion gives a lot to its believers, grounding, oneness, and a sense of community and of being part of something bigger than you are, not separate from you. I felt a connection to the people in the circle as well a connection to the earth, the ground that I stood on. I felt present. Perhaps this is what has helped Grace to be confident with herself, she knows that she is part of something special, something old and it feels right. Perhaps because she is in tune with her inner self, she is able to be confident in whatever task she decides to undertake. For the first time during the course of my fieldwork, I felt like I might have an inkling of what Wicca is all about because I experienced something that sunny May day standing on Julie’s lawn, holding hands and dancing around in a circle. I felt a peace and calmness. I felt happy. Perhaps I felt why Grace chose Wicca for her own path.

When it was time for us to give our offerings to the Goddess and God we each went up and placed them on the altar or tree branch. When it was my turn to give my offering of potted mums, I walked up looking at them and thought about the meaning of Beltane fertility of the earth and new beginnings. At the closing of the circle, I bade farewell to the spirits of the east. “Spirits of the east, element of air! Thank you for joining us in our sacred rites. As you depart to your fair and lovely realm, we bid you hail and farewell!” (McColman 2002). At the close of the ritual, I went to Grace and hugged
her. I felt really good about attending and taking part in the ritual. She smiled and said I did very well for my first time calling a quarter.

References Cited


Interviews

Cardinalli, Grace. (2007, April 29). Personal interview. (Hollister, CA).