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Earthwise Spirituality for Today



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HEATHEN & NORTHERN TRADITIONS

ISSUE 24

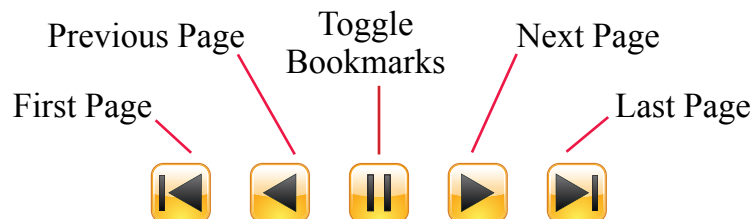


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Heathenism: a return to tribal-based religion.

Today's Northern traditions represent an entirely different way of doing religion.

I'm writing this editorial the day after Thanksgiving, which seems to me an eminently appropriate occasion to address the conundrums of Northern/Heathen culture. Why? Because, like Thanksgiving Day, Heathen/Northern traditions are centered in trying to promote the bonds of kinship and family tradition.

I'd like to begin by acknowledging that I have little first-hand experience with Heathen rituals and theology; I'm a thorough-going Neo-Pagan and my personal experience lies entirely within the rather porous boundaries of West Coast Paganism. But I've been fascinated for some time with what I've observed of Germanic-based reconstructionist religion, and thus the concept of this issue — our most detailed look at a specific tradition to date — was born.

Naturally, as soon as I started working on this issue I ran into trouble. I suppose this was to be expected as I naïvely wandered into what turned out to be a very complex culture, but the first thing I discovered was that Heathenism was almost impossible to pin down. What I had imagined as a simple group of faiths — akin perhaps to the sprouting of many branches of Wicca from Gardnerian roots — turned out to be more like an entire forest, sharing a common soil but manifesting in a bewildering set of divisions. Even the title of issue refused to settle down! (Eventually, finding both "Heathen" and "Northern" inadequate to the task, I settled on including both words in the title.)

Thoroughly out of my depth, I decided that the simplest approach was to present our readers with a wide variety of voices from within these movements and traditions. I am happy to report that this particular goal has succeeded beyond my hopes; with thirteen different interviews, sidebars, articles and personal stories, this issue offers a wide-ranging (if hardly comprehensive) look at many of the influential people and ideas that constitute the Heathen/Northern Tradition Renaissance. While all these voices do have at least one thing in common — they all honor the traditions embedded in the history and lore of the cultures of pre-Christian Northern Europe — they are so varied in their interpretations, theologies, and methods of practice that many of them do not recognize one another as members of the same community. From an outside perspective, however, all the fractious infighting I've observed while putting together this issue reminds me of nothing so much than the kind of arguments that characterize a sprawling, contentious *family*.

This is a defining attribute of the tribal religions of the North: in a post-modern culture largely characterized by increasingly amorphous and constantly-evolving definitions of identity, Heathen/Northern traditions place their strongest emphasis on creating sharply-defined boundaries of kinship, identity, and tribe.

Creating boundaries is nothing new on the religious landscape; the vast majority of new religious movements begin by defining themselves as separate from the culture in which they are embedded. However, as I discussed in my editorial in the previous issue, a major thrust of modern Paganism in the last fifty-plus years has been towards acquiring greater acceptance within mainstream culture. One major difference between Northern/Heathen traditions and Pagan culture then, is the fact that Heathen traditions today are evolving in precisely the *opposite* direction. Paganism today strives to portray itself as yet another world religion deserving of respect, but Heathenry is largely unconcerned with (and in some cases, disdainful of) interfaith dialogue. This should come as no surprise, since the hot button issues in Northern Tradition culture fracture along lines of purity — of practice, theology, and yes, occasionally ethnicity — and strict adherence to ancestral tradition (especially as defined within the accepted lore,) issues that have little meaning outside of Heathenry itself.

The exalted place of written tradition within Heathen/Northern culture is yet another fundamental departure from "standard-brand" Paganism. It's often said in Pagan circles that "our traditions are not defined by any holy text." This assertion — often presented as a none-too-subtle dig at the Abrahamic traditions — is given as evidence that our religious practices, by virtue of being free of the "dead hand" of revealed knowledge, encourage direct connection to the divine in unique ways.

To the religions of the North, however, the written lore (particularly the *Eddas*) forms the absolute bedrock of all proper theology and practice. In fact, one of the deepest fault lines in Heathenry today divides along the question of whether the Lore is the *sole* arbiter of Heathen tradition and whether personal *gnosis* (the focal point of so much Pagan practice) has any place whatsoever in Heathenry. This emphasis on written tradition places Heathenry directly in opposition to the more *laissez faire* approach of eclecticism representative of popular Paganism, creating a divide somewhat akin to the one which exists in evangelical Christianity between Biblical literalism and ecstatic Pentecostalism.

There's still more differences; while Pagans tend to practice as solitaires, or circle in loosely-organized groups at seasonal festivals, most Heathens I spoke to described their practice in familial terms. Furthermore, while Pagan popular culture emphasizes spellwork (which places power directly in the hands of the practitioner) magic is only marginally-accepted in Heathenry. Last, but certainly not least, is what can only be described as a gaping gulf in belief; while Pagans embrace a panoply of theologies ranging from Dianic monotheism to polytheism to Jungian agnosticism, every Heathen I have ever encountered testified to the individual, personal nature of the Gods. Furthermore, most Heathens venerate not just specific pantheons, but actual families of deities within those pantheons. Thus Heathen religion is henotheism — a tribal style of communally-defined religion representative of many ancient cultures. This form (evident in the oldest parts of the Hebrew scriptures) defines itself around a specific pantheon, but is not itself monotheistic. The monotheist says, "there are no other Gods but mine," while the polytheist retorts, "there are many Gods" and the henotheist cuts in, "these are my Gods, and those of my people, and that's all I care about."

In Northern and Heathen traditions the primary emphasis is not on individual spiritual growth, but rather on participating in the traditions of one's chosen tribe. In today's post-modern, multicultural world, Heathen/Northern religion offers a sharp, even retrograde, focus on practices largely ignored elsewhere in Pagan culture: written tradition, familial and tribal bonds, and communal experience. Heathens can (and often do) form common cause with Pagans — especially in opposition to mass (Abrahamic/materialist/consumerist) culture — but these traditions aren't simply just another branch of the broader Pagan tree. Perhaps the most useful question both Heathens and Pagans might ask is a simple one: what can we learn from one another? Hopefully this issue will offer a few perspectives on this fascinating subject. ANNE NEWKIRK NIVEN. 

UPCOMING THEMES & DEADLINES

- #25 "Element of Air." Deadline past.
 - #26 "Element of Fire." Deadline: 3-1-2012.
 - #27 "Element of Water." Deadline: 7-1-2012.
 - #28 "Element of Earth." Deadline 10-1-2012.
 - #29 "Marriage & Family." Deadline 2-1-2013.
- Contact www.bbimedia.com/email for guidelines.

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WRITERS AND INTERVIEWERS



Interviewer **JOSEPH BLOCH** ("Robin Artisson: Bringing Forth the Gods of My Kin") first came to Heathenry in 1989, and his experience encompasses Asatru,

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Writer, interviewer, and all-around Renaissance man **SATYROS PHIL BRUCATO** ("Viking Chick Kaboom") has been Pagan since the late 1970s, and has written professionally since the late 1980s. Given the name Satyros by his tribe in Greece, he is an ecstatic dancer, fire-spinner, and hypercreative malcontent, and makes his home in Seattle, WA.



Interviewer **VICTORIA L. CLARE** ("Patricia Lafayllve: Giving Honor to All Life") became a member of the Troth in 2004, was Troth Steward for Rhode Island for three years, certified as a Godwoman in 2008, and in 2010, was elected as Steerswoman (President) of the Troth.



Writer, columnist, and interviewer

KENAZ FILAN ("Galina Krasskova: Claimed by the Gods") is an initiate of Societe La Belle Venus #2. Her most recent book *The Power of the Poppy* was published by Inner Traditions in 2011. Find her online at www.kenazfilan.com.



Having earned a M.A. in Humanities at the University of Texas at Arlington, **K. C. HULSMAN** ("Holy Tides: Feasts & Festivals for Modern



Heathens") uses scholarly research and personal exploration to provide interesting insights into modern day Heathenry. Ms. Hulsmann draws on over a decade

of experience as both a gythia and an active member of her local Asatru community, and has contributed to several devotionals, magazines, and the interfaith website *Patheos*. She can be reached on Facebook at Wyrd Dottir, or by email at wyrddesigns@gmail.com.

PATRICIA LAFAYLLVE

("Heathen Ethics") is a godwoman, *seidhkona*, and leader with the Asatru organization The Troth. The author of *Freyja, Lady, Vanadis: An Introduction to the Goddess* and *Njal's Saga, Book One: Fanning the Embers*, Ms. Lafayllve is a proud member of Two Ravens Kindred and Bjornsal. Patricia earned her Master of English from Southern Connecticut State University and presently lives with a loving husband and the World's Smallest Pit Bull in New Haven, CT.



HENRY LAUER "Rediscovering the Runes" has always been drawn to things mysterious. He reads runes: www.findrune.com. He makes music: www.ironwoodsound.com.au. He weaves words: www.hexmagazine.com. He has a secret identity: www.elhazablaze.com.

RAVEN KALDERA ("My Path: Why I am Not a Heathen") is a Northern Tradition shaman, activist, homesteader, astrologer, Ordeal Master, and founding member of the eclectic Pagan (and not Northern Tradition) First Kingdom Church of Asphodel. NTP, and specifically shamanism, is his private practice; the eclectic Pagan demographic is his wider community. He is the author of 24 books (and counting), and teaches all over the world. He can be found online at www.ravenkaldera.org.



STEFAN MEARS

("Pinging the Gods") Stefon Mears has been a practicing Witch and Chaos Magician for over 25 years, including almost a decade as an

Elder in the NROOGD tradition. He has taught classes in the runes, and sat in the high seat of the *seiðmaðr*. When away from the keyboard, he is often seen training at Capoeira, a Brazilian martial art. He can be found online at www.stefonmears.com.

Interviewer **MICHAEL NIGHT SKY** ("Rooted in the Ancestors: Arrowyn Craban Lauer") is a Witch and student of Magick, currently Red Priest with the Circle of the Heartbeat's Drum and a longtime contributor to *Witches & Pagans*. He lives in San Diego County, email him at mysticism13@aol.com.



A leader in the Neopagan and Heathen revivals, **DIANA PAXSON** ("In Search of Modern Heathenism") is the founder of the The Fellowship of the Spiral

Path, has been Steerswoman of The Troth, a member of its Board of Directors, and currently edits its journal, *Idunna*. Her newest book, *The Way of the Oracle*, will be published by Weiser in February of 2012.