

The Survival of Witchcraft

Feared by some and misunderstood by others, the ancient religion continues to exist in Eugene.

BY LUCINDA DILLON

First the circle must be cast — the sacred circle inside which practicing witches in Eugene will perform their seasonal ritual. Dressed in robes of various colors, 19 local witches enter the area singing a preparation chant:

*"Ground, ground, ground, ground,
Anchor myself to the depths of the earth.
Nothing can sweep me
off my feet anymore.
Centered and settled I stand."*

It is dusk and several lighted candles on an altar and a small fire illuminate the faces of participants in this outside ceremony. Some are smiling softly, eyes closed. Others are somber. One woman steps forward slowly and with a tapered knife, cuts the air surrounding the group, establishing a circular force field of energy that must not be broken.

Witch, Wicca, witchcraft, the Craft. The terms are different, yet similar, and all refer to a controversial and often-feared religion some people consider to be the oldest in all of history. It is also a widely misunderstood set of beliefs, according to local witches who practice the Craft.

Samantha is a Eugene witch. She has been forced to deal with the attitudes and violence of those who disagree with her beliefs in the 18 years she has been practicing the Craft.

"The biggest myth is that we are somehow different than others. All human beings have their humanness in common, we are simply people who have chosen another lifestyle," she says.

Regardless, there are many who do not agree with her beliefs. Samantha's life has been threatened and last year someone fired a shotgun through her living room window. "I think anyone who would do that must be in a pretty intense hell themselves," she says.

"We're all part of a living planet. Why we're so threatening I don't know, but some people see us as such," she says.

Witches and researchers admit witchcraft, with all its connotations, is ferociously difficult to define. "The only way to put it into a nutshell is to say it is a celebration of being. Most other religions are a celebration of death. We celebrate life and all its aspects, including death," Samantha says.

The witches are quiet now, waiting for the salt and water blessing that will purify the sacred circle. One woman holds a goblet of water into which she drops chunks of salt crystals. She starts the procedure with a verse

*"Blessed be thou, creature of earth
Blessed be thou, creature of water."*

One witch removes a cauldron of white-hot coals from the altar and sprinkles herbs on the coals. Closing her eyes, she breathes deeply, inhaling the rich, sweet essence of incense. The cauldron is passed from person to person, allowing the fragrance to engulf those gathered inside the circle. A sing-song chant begins, back and forth across the circle, one witch taking a turn then the next.

*"I purify this circle. I consecrate this sacred space."
The verse is repeated by another witch across the fire,
"I purify this circle. I consecrate this sacred space."*

The purification now is complete and the witches rise and go to places within the circle where they will do their part in calling the god and goddess to their ritual.

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Illustration by Lorraine Rath