

LOST RITES

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Maybe Rilke would have understood. Standing in front of an ancient marble torso of Apollo, Rilke felt its headless, eyeless form watching him, and he knew: *Du mußt dein Leben ändern*. You must change your life.

I have been stared down by such a statue. She stood taller than I in her glass case in Athens, solemnly ignoring the overly friendly light on her coarse-crystallized marble. Five thousand years old, she looked spare and timeless: an almost flat, oblong spade of a face, featureless, free to be everyone and no one; a long but firmly planted neck, crossed arms under gentle breasts, legs together, knees just slightly bent. I had seen this type of figure before, in books and lectures and videotapes about the long-lost goddess culture that blanketed the Mediterranean. But this one, so imposing and present, demanded something with her blank face and crossed arms. I stood fixed to the floor before her, and, no longer aware of the bored Greek guards or the chattering tourists, caught myself muttering, "Who are you?"

"You must change your life."

Oh, but I've tried. Like many Judeo-Christian refugees, I hear the whispers of an Ur-faith that lived for eons just back there, just beyond written history. I've read about its ancient hints and relics; I've tried the well-meaning solstice ceremonies and reconstructed books of spells, looking for some ritual path to its core. The tenets hold a palpable allure: that Nature is alive and sacred, neither a flood-and-firestorm prop for a jealous god nor a shackled servant to man; that the feminine is divine, even when—especially when—it is not meek and virginal; that Nature has secrets that we can share if we honor our connection to it.

I have always longed for that connection. Like a lot of kids who grow up rural, I learned the smell of coming snow, the life cycles of frogs, which field flowers released their scent at night. In summer I lay for hours in the juicy night grass, staring at the full moon, craving some fuller communion.

And when bulldozers came to tear apart those fields of frogs and scented flowers and unfettered moon-views, my siblings and I cried and marched impotently along the raw gaping earth with picket signs. Field after field fell, hill after wooded hill was taken by men who knew so little about that land—any land—that they could claim they were “developing” it. Witnessing that forced conversion from habitat to houses was my initiation into the sect of people who side with Nature against the push of “progress.”

During those same childhood years, I spent hours in church, kneeling and gazing up at the crucified Christ. We were instructed to love him, and I professed I did. When my class made the Stations of the Cross to commemorate his being scourged and scorned and crucified, and when we sang the 13 verses of *Pange Lingua* through clouds of incense and were reminded to be sorry for our sins and for his pain, I believed I was. But I had drawn a line even then: I knew that I didn't love that god as much as I loved Nature, and I didn't feel as pained by his death as I did by her destruction.

I was fourteen and reading in a lawn chair under our wineglass elm when that line was drawn darker, in print. That afternoon, Joseph Campbell explained away my childhood religion as one of many mythical patterns humans had woven to cushion and guide their walk through life. Like a rug dealer in a bazaar, he rolled out an array of cosmologies beside it. I finished that book feeling not only regret that I had been born too late to have known those other traditions, but anger that Christianity had insisted on replacing their evocative designs with so much wall-to-wall. An unlikely place for an epiphany, perhaps, but when I stood up from that lawn chair, I was facing away from Christianity.

I never returned. Still, years of High Masses and benedictions had hard-wired me for religion and ritual, so I went looking for a live socket with a more compatible current. I read the Don Juan books (I'm not that brave), and spent several weeks visiting a Zen Buddhist monastery (I admire them, but don't want to join them). Like a lot of people seeking some spiritual connection to the natural world, I read up on Native American religions. But there is a wall of hurt there, and I can't bring myself to trespass it just to find a seat for my white ass in the sweat lodge. What I am, I realized, is spiritually hungry and European.

“Come and celebrate the Winter Solstice! We will feast our fill and merry make!” The self-consciously antiquated verb placement should have a warning given, but at the time the flyer posted on a New York City utility pole seemed like kismet: For years I'd wanted to mark the solstices—maybe they knew how.

I came alone to the Unitarian Church (the Unitarians, bless their open hearts, shelter a lot of pagan events, being up for anything as long as no one gets hurt. Bruised dignity doesn't count). I entered with the requested offering of canned food for the poor, and felt a slight lift: There was a live band with strings and woodwinds, there were decorations, there were two hundred people! I'd be spared that pall of the marginal, when just a few souls bob on the same ideological raft and stare at each other for reassurance. I grabbed the hand of the last guy in the line dance, and we snaked to the music in front of a huge banner with a

teal-green spiral, the “eye of the goddess” that symbolizes both life and death (or trouble if you’re epileptic). Soon the music stopped. We were asked to take our seats. The ceremony was about to begin.

Maybe it was the costumes—tunics and coronets and feathered masks straight from a summer-stock double bill of *Camelot* and *La Cage aux Folles*. Maybe it was the high priest’s frosted blue eyeshadow and the beerbelly threatening to smother his jeweled belt and scabbard. Maybe it was the high priestess, a blonde whose floppy, noodle-like posture fell short of the rootedness I expected in a caster of natural spells, her credentials notwithstanding (the program listed her as “Cynthia Cummins, H.Pr.” for “High Priestess”). Maybe it was the text: Each of the feathered Four Winds addressed Cynthia, H.Pr. in Renaissance-Faire language (“Behold, Lady! I am the South, guardian of Fire!”) after which Cynthia would noodle over in her long white dress and dub them with her sword.

Or maybe it was just me, but I started getting that itch to back away. This was a masque conjuring some period when humans were at Nature’s mercy; I wanted some recognition that the balance has changed. I looked around at my fellow celebrants, whose expressions were hard to read. Surely, I thought, I’m not the only one here with years of environmental activism under her belt. Surely I’m not the only one who, in working to protect them, has made herself learn more than she ever intended to know about monarch butterflies, coral reefs, or old-growth root systems. Then why aren’t we celebrating what we know about the natural world? Why instead are we beseeching the sun to return in the spring when we all learned in fourth grade why it will? Why do the people conducting this ceremony seem so domesticated and flabby, as if they’d last ten minutes outdoors? I wanted something gamy, like pheasant, and this was chicken. I wanted the throb of the Nature I know.

Instead I got a gold guy (gold body paint, gold lamé loincloth, gold Spartacus sandals) who skipped around the circle with deer antlers while leading our reluctant chorus of Bette Midler’s “The Rose” in his best Broadway belt (“But remember in the winter, far beneath the bitter snow...”). I thought of staying just to see if a cab would stop for golden boy and his rack, but I had reached maximum cringe load. I tried to get up but was almost skewered by the robust, cantering entrance of the kilted lesbian sword-dancers. Once they retreated with their weapons, I grabbed my coat and left, tiptoeing past the half-dozen bowls of Doritos that looked to be the “feast our fill” portion of the program. The subway seemed blessedly normal by comparison.

I’ve given it my best shot, attending other pagan rites in other cities, even, and the scenario is inevitably the same, with much ado about robes, men who like Maybelline, and no detectable spiritual substance. The nagging problem is this: Despite rousing archeological evidence that a long-lived religion sacralizing Nature and the feminine once flourished in Europe, the Middle East, and northern Africa, and however much anyone might long for its return, the traditions are lost. They have been crushed or appropriated by Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, lost in cultural wars, burned with “witches,” and driven underground until their only recognizable survivors are the harvest festivals of a

few agrarian regions. Without that continuity, reconstructing the rites of pre-literate cultures becomes the plaything of drama majors.

But still, although I can't keep a straight face at pagan pageants, I look for a socket that has some juice. I've traveled to ancient sites in Europe, tiny, out-of-the-way towns inhabited for eight or ten thousand years, and I sit at the ruins or at the holy wells and try to absorb some remaining current. I read about these cultures. I don't know what to do with what I know.

There was one solstice gathering a few years ago that felt truly celebratory. It made no attempts at ceremony; it was a guided tour of the flora and fauna in New York's Central Park, called something appropriately in-your-face like, "Winter Solstice in New York: Who Survives?" Ten of us strangers gathered at the entrance of Central Park West and 72nd Street on a ripping cold Saturday morning. The only costumes were our insulated parkas and mittens and our two female guides' green park-ranger mufti. We headed into the park, our guides occasionally stopping us to describe how a particular tree or bush withstands a Northeast winter.

These women knew their turf: They pointed out lofty holes in oak trees where a half-hidden raccoon would be sleeping off a rough night in Upper West Side alleys; they knew where to look for the hawk when all we had noticed was the scattering sparrows. At one point we stopped in front of a glossy green holly tree, a real extrovert against December's taupe and gray. Holly leaves survive, one guide explained, because the tree stores water not in the leaf cells, but in interstices between cells; there the water can freeze and expand, and the cells remain intact. A thrill bubbled up through my half-frozen marrow at the genius and beauty of this little system. I stepped back to take in the whole huge holly. Oh, you are wise, I thought. You are glorious! This tree, and these women who knew it, and the light that clicked on in our faces when we knew it too—this was a catechism of sorts, a *Magnificat* in which science could sing its stanza.

I've stopped looking for pagan rituals. What I "practice" now borrows from Buddhist and Catholic monastic traditions: the idea that work and awareness can be worship. I take long walks and pick up litter as I go. I try to bike instead of driving. I sit quietly in fields and under trees. Upstairs on my desk stands a small alabaster copy of that Cycladic goddess, her arms crossed expectantly while I keep my weekly vigil of environmental e-mails and calls to elected officials, of letters to the editor about policies and preservation. The nature religion I've sought seems irretrievably lost. Nature might still have a chance.