



Schedule of Services

Services are held every Sunday at 10:30 at Kirribilli Neighbourhood Centre

5 February, Sandy Biar, "Harnessing nationalism for good: the upside of global nationalistic sentiment."

19 Feb. Helen Whatmough, "Post Truth / Post Fact"

Is vocabulary usage / meaning being distorted and/or changed leading to confusion of meaning?

Are we all complicit in confusing reality and truth in a post-truth era?

26 Feb. Rev. Daniel Jantos "Patterns of liberation and constraint."

Theology has historically been for the purpose of liberation. Various ones like the Buddha and Jesus offered people a framework of understanding that provided relief from oppression or suffering or isolation. "What we hope for is always better than what we know." The function of theology has changed. The current purpose of Theology today seems to be mostly frameworks of constraint. What is right and what is wrong? Who belongs and who does not? So what would constitute a contemporary theology of liberation?

Daniel Jantos is Chaplaincy Coordinator at Western Sydney University where the students represent 150 different countries of birth and where 60% of the student population are first in their family to attend university. From 2000-2015, he served as the minister of the North Chapel Unitarian Universalist Society in Woodstock Vermont. He grew up in the Adelaide hills having migrated to Australia from Poland with his parents in 1963. His work is motivated by a strong interest in understanding borders and border crossings.

NOTE THAT THE ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING WILL BE ON SUN. 2ND APRIL

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**Would you care to join Spirit of Life Unitarian Fellowship?**

**Membership is open to all adults and includes this newsletter. Full membership \$50 concession \$20 .** If you would like to join us as an active member of Spirit of Life, please ring **0466 940 461** or consult our website [www.sydneyunitarians.org](http://www.sydneyunitarians.org) . Please note that all membership applications are subject to approval at a meeting of the Committee. Ask Rev. Geoff Usher for an application form at the Sunday service. **(See p. 8)**

# Witches!

Part of an article contributed by  
*Cassie Thornley*

....The hotel was flooded with about 2,000 American witches, as it is one weekend a year, and nearly a quarter of them – from teenagers to septuagenarians – were immersed in a ceremony led by Morpheus Ravenna, a rising pagan priestess. They had been called, with ceremonial daggers and invocations, to form a consecrated circle. Under dimmed lights, there had been full-voiced chanting as the witches “raised power” to welcome their deity into the carpeted space.

The ritual was a devotional to the Morrigan, the heavyweight Celtic goddess of war, prophecy and self-transformation. In the center of the circle, surrounded by her ritual crew, stood Morpheus, with all eyes on her.

Dressed in black, in a leather corset and a long skirt slit up each side, she wore her hair in elaborate, heavy braids that hung to her waist. She stalked the circle’s edge, flapping the vulture wings she’d strapped to her arms and staring into the crowd. Her slender body doubled over, as if suddenly heavy, and began bobbing up and down as if something was bubbling up inside her.

The sight of a possession, for those who’d never witnessed one, was alien, impressive. After what felt like a long time, she raised her head up and in a growling voice not her own, announced that she was Morrighu! Badb Catha! The roomful of witches circled closer, tightening around her, and a fellow priestess lifted a heavy sword above our heads: she directed us to take a vow. “But only if it’s one you can keep. Don’t take it lightly.”

As Morpheus (or the goddess she was channeling) continued heaving, breathing hard, hundreds of people crowded in, taking turns to raise their hand up and touch the tip of the blade.

**I was one of them.**

It all started three years earlier, when I set out to make a documentary about a handful of

fringe religious communities around the country. The idea stemmed from a longtime fascination with how and why people rally around belief systems, and the ceremonies that hold those systems in place.

It was also more personal than that. I was born and raised in New York City, but my roots are more exotic: between my Cuban Catholic mother and my Greek Orthodox father, family religion involved the lushest, most high-drama strains of Christianity. The elaborate clerical robes, the incense and tiers of prayer candles, the stories of the martyrs cut into stained glass, the barely decipherable chants – as a child, these were embedded in my brain. To this day, despite my liberal feminist politics, I still imagine the world as overseen by a handsome, bearded young white man.

Once I was old enough to think for myself, I broke with the church on issues of sexuality, marriage, the right to choose and the concept of “sin”; I also couldn’t swallow the thin reasoning behind excluding women from the Catholic and Eastern Orthodox priesthoods. At the same time, however, I was haunted by the memory of high mass, the sense that there are mysteries in the universe. When I learned that there was a living, growing American witchcraft movement – one that is radically inclusive, that views women as equals to men, and in which God is just as likely to be female – I was instantly curious.

During the six years of immersion that ensued, I made a documentary about modern witchcraft, and eventually dove even deeper to write a book, Witches of America. In the process, I would come to understand a lot more about the American witchcraft movement.

Since the 1960s, the “pagan” movement – what most people are referring to when they talk about American witchcraft today – has grown into a hard-to-dismiss new religious movement. In this country alone, a responsible estimate places the number of self-identified witches (typically called pagan priests and priestesses) at about one million – comparable to those of Seventh-Day Adventists and Jehovah’s Witnesses.

In the past, it may have been tempting to dismiss this community as Earth-loving crystal collectors or velvet-wearing goths. In fact, the dozens of esoteric but related traditions share a spiritual core: they are polytheistic, worship nature and hold that female and male forces have equal weight in the universe. Pagans believe that the divine can be found all around us and that we can communicate regularly with the dead and the gods without a go-between. They don't believe in heaven or hell; many subscribe to some version of reincarnation, or a next world called the Summerland. Nor is there a concept of "shame", but an idea of karma: do what you want, as long as you don't harm others.

**Pagan traditions, however alien on the surface, contain elements that are universal: priesthood; rituals and holidays to mark the seasons and the life cycle; personal prayer (in this case, spellcasting and offerings to the gods). Major pagan holidays have already bled into popular culture: Beltane, the fertility celebration, is known as May Day; Samhain, the time of (literal) communion with the dead, as Halloween.**

And perhaps the most radical-seeming practices, from the perspective of Christian America, are still recognizable to Hindus (polytheism) and followers of African diaspora religions (spirit possession, as in Morpheus's devotion to the Morrigan).

At the same time, some typical pagan practices are in line – at least on the surface – with what Hollywood has taught us about witchcraft: witches do gather in a circle when performing rituals, often at night, out in nature; they do chant, sometimes in ancient (or ancient-sounding) languages; they use wands and consecrated daggers and swords and chalices.

In casting the documentary, I traveled the country for months, from Tennessee to Montana to the Bay Area. There are practicing pagans in every state, in cities and suburbs and small towns, ranging from schoolteachers to tech entrepreneurs to the cashier at your local Whole Foods.

On one of these dizzying trips, I met Morpheus: at the time, she worked a day job for a federal environmental agency, driving around in her truck to inspect Santa Clara County ranches in khakis and a hoodie. But she had another life: she and her then husband oversaw what they called Stone City, one of the only major pagan sanctuaries in the Bay Area.

There, an hour's drive off the grid, stood 100 acres of tough-to-tread land completely dedicated to witchcraft. High up on a plateau shielded by trees, they built a circle of enormous vertical stones, huge slabs they'd buried in the ground to rise six feet tall – their very own henge. Ceremonies inside the circle, attended over the years by hundreds of pagans, had involved daggers and cloaks and torches, and California academics and carpenters and nuclear physicists chanting to the moon or perhaps speaking in tongues, invoking some god or goddess until, when it became too late to drive home, the worshippers gathered around a fire, drank whiskey, and wandered off to their tents.

I saw that henge for the first time after dinner with Morpheus and her husband in their double-wide trailer: up the hillside, in the moonlight, there it was. An extraordinary sight.

Over the course of several months, my tiny crew and I stayed at Stone City many times – for Beltane, or Samhain, or just to get a sense of the rhythm of their intensely untraditional lives – and my relationship with Morpheus began to feel more like a friendship. She could be intimidating to witness in ritual, but in her everyday existence, maybe frying an egg in the kitchen or running an errand for her teenage stepdaughter, she was laid-back, quick to laugh, wholly unpretentious. By coincidence, we were the same age (both recently turned 30), and she was easy to talk to, perfectly comfortable with my own skepticism and my probing questions.

**Morpheus had found her religion as a nature-loving child of open-minded west coast parents:** she grew up surrounded by redwoods, with a mother intrigued by eastern mysticism. But pagans, male and female, find

the “Craft” in many ways – during a collegiate rebellion against an evangelical upbringing, as a teenager who happened to wander into his local occult bookstore, as a devout Catholic woman frustrated by the limitations of her church (there are plenty of Baptists and “recovering Catholics” in the pagan community). And I think Morpheus was aware of how personal my own interest in witchcraft was becoming.

Once filming was over, that was just what I knew I had to confront: my own deep-seated curiosity. I returned to California – this time with a new excuse: **I had a book to write. Witches of America was first intended as a snapshot of the pagan movement today – but it quickly became, equally, a memoir of my own spiritual seeking.**

Throughout my life, most of my friends have been fashionable atheists of the creative classes, but it was becoming clearer to me that this does not exempt anyone from the very human need for meaning. As someone with a strong “religious impulse” but without a practice to relate to, I’d long been envious of people whose lives are structured around a clear system of belief. It seems like a tremendous relief, to be able to wake up everyday with a shared sense of purpose versus the low-level existential pain of living without something to believe in, a religious tradition to guide and ground you.

Within months of starting my research, I made a decision: I would study the Craft myself. Many witches practice on their own, as “solitaries”, but many also regularly practice magic with a group, or “coven”. They gather, whether out in nature or in each other’s homes, for the annual holidays and solstices, perhaps once a month (according to the position of the moon), or when a specific spell is needed – maybe to heal or help a member of the coven or their family.

For me, Morpheus recommended a priestess in Massachusetts of the same specific witchcraft tradition in which she had trained – a smaller, particularly intense and ecstatic branch of the Craft known as Feri.

Understanding that most students of Feri

train for about five years before being initiated (if they last that long), I began studying with my teacher long-distance from New York, through phone calls and long emails. (In the internet era of witchcraft, this isn’t that uncommon.) I knew I’d “circle” in person with the coven when we gathered in a few months, coming together from many parts of the country for Samhain – the time of year (right now, actually) when they say the boundary between this world and the next is thinnest.

Soon, I moved to New Orleans, and there, as I continued my Feri lessons, I also began working with an occult society: Ordo Templi Orientis (OTO), an international group to which the legendary (and notorious) magician Aleister Crowley once belonged. The OTO crew there was unusually young and rigorous, and they held their ceremonies in a former Christian church they’d recently converted into an ornate temple.

**My life was becoming headier, populated by Americans who believe in the practice of magic. Taking part in the OTO occult mass in that grand room made me feel drunk; its intricate costumes, chalices and daggers, and thick incense reminded me of the Eastern Orthodox mass that inspired it – an offering-up of the sacrament by those who don’t believe in sin.**

When the next Samhain arrived, I was finally able to circle with the coven – in, of all places, a castle in New Hampshire. There, for three days and nights, about 30 of us took part in barely-lit rituals to commune with the dead. During one of those nights, deep into a ceremony that lasted over three hours, I came very close, I thought, to an ancestor I’d never met before. I thought we had an encounter, somewhere in that dark place, across who knows how many centuries, but I knew I would never have proof of it.

Within the pagan community, the reaction to Witches of America has been deeply divided. I have been called a lot of names online, threatened with hexes, and more. (My mother, last fall: “Can you imagine if you’d chosen to write about Isis?”) I could say a lot about this, but I’ll keep it simple here and

state what should have been obvious to me all along: examining any form of faith, any religious movement, no matter how liberal, is fraught and intensely sensitive.

I should have known that there would be many pagans who wanted to see another version of their practice represented, who were unhappy to have witchcraft depicted by a novice and occasional skeptic, or who, when confronted with a book about the Craft written for the mainstream, realized they weren't interested in being understood by the "normal" folks after all.

At the same time, I also received many messages, from readers of a range of beliefs – pagans, Catholics, atheists – who were excited to see contemporary witchcraft practice depicted for a larger audience. I've heard from older, 1960s-era practitioners; new generation hipster witches from Brooklyn; gay men raised in evangelical households who'd been searching for a more inclusive, sex-positive form of spirituality.

**But the majority of notes I've gotten have been from readers attracted to what I call the "gray zone" of belief, that combination of spiritual longing and skepticism, openly expressed. Many found relief in seeing that very human amalgam of curiosity and confusion mapped out on the page.**

**Read more of this Alex Mar article, [The Guardian](#), October, 2016:**

[https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2016/oct/29/witches-of-america-alex-mar-pagan-witchcraft?CMP=share\\_btn\\_link](https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2016/oct/29/witches-of-america-alex-mar-pagan-witchcraft?CMP=share_btn_link)

***Thanks for that, Cassie. Pagans are an established part of the spectrum of beliefs in Unitarian Universalist Churches in the US. See CUUPS. Pagans are welcome at Spirit of Life Unitarian Fellowship. JT***

***Cassie also wrote a note on a related subject: Coincidentally have been reading a most exciting book - Lynne Kelly's [The Memory Code](#). This is a brilliant new cultural interpretation of the wonderful variety of monumental construc-***

*tions by pre-literate peoples as they transitioned from hunter-gatherer to large agrarian societies.*

*She examines constructions at Stonehenge and Avebury, Orkneys, Ireland, Brittany, Malta and the variously different societies of Nth & Sth America. A fascinating read which leaves one in awe of the imagination and dedication of our ancestors to their need for a coherent culture and the ceremonies which sustain it.*

***(Sounds like a birthday present for Morandir. It is always good to receive articles of interest & reading recommendations from the membership. JT)***

## **The Unitarian Church in South Australia Inc**

### **Our Statement of Purpose**

**Our church is a congregation of people of all ages who support each other in the search for a better understanding of the Unitarian ideals of freedom, tolerance and reason. In our spiritual quest we respect and willingly explore all religious heritages and all sources of wisdom, believing all contain truths from which we may learn. In an atmosphere of inspiration and creativity, we strive for peace with justice, understanding and acceptance of each other, serenity and hope. We celebrate life and faith by responding to each other and the wider community with love, compassion and respect for the interdependence of all life.**

**Explore the website: <http://users.pickknowl.com.au/~unitariansa/>**

**Note: the dates for the 2017 ANZUUA Conference in Adelaide are 20-22 October. The venue will be The Unitarian Church of South Australia at 99 Osmond Tce., Norwood.**

## **Two Poems of Louisa Lawson**

### **The Lonely Crossing**

A man on foot came down to the river,  
A silent man, on the road alone,  
And dropped his swag with a chill-born shiver,  
And sat to rest on a wind-worn stone.  
He slid then down to the long grass, bending  
His arms above as the resting do,  
And watched a snow-white chariot trending  
Its wind-made way o'er the wedgewood blue.  
In it sat one of the fairest ladies  
That mind could mould, in a crown of white,  
But close beside came a fiend from Hades  
In a chariot black as the heart of night.  
The man, he sighed as the fiend would clasp  
her,  
Then smiled as the wind by a wise decree  
Her white steeds turned to the streets of  
Jaspar,  
And Satan drave to a sin-black sea.  
The wattles waved, and their sweet reflection  
In crystal fathoms responses made;  
The sunlight silted each soft inflection  
And fretted with silver the short'ning shade.  
A restless fish made the thin reeds shiver,  
A waking wind made the willows moan,  
But the resting man by the noon-bright river  
Lay dreaming on, in the long grass prone.

The bell-bird called to its tardy lover,  
The grebe clouds all to the west had sped,  
But the river of death had a soul crossed  
over,  
The man with the swag on the bank was  
dead.

### **The Reformers.**

We lead the way, we lead the way,  
We rise alert to meet each day,  
We start the fight, we head the fray,  
We lead the way, we lead the way.  
We turn the sod, we stir the pool,  
We point the way to those who rule.  
We cheek the rogue, we chide the fool,  
We point the way to those who rule.  
We bear reverse, we breast rebuff,  
We force a way o'er passes rough,  
We stand the kick, we take the cuff,  
Till Death's stern umpire calls "Enough."

**Louisa Lawson** was the daughter of a station hand. She was born on 'Hungry' Rouses's Guntawang Station near Mudgee in New South Wales in February 1848 and baptized in the homestead drawing room. Louisa resented being kept home from school to care for her younger siblings. She married Niels Hertzberg Larsen (Peter Lawson) in July 1866.

Peter and Louisa joined the Weddin Mountain gold rush and then took up a selection near Mudgee. Louisa's five children were born between 1867 and 1877. As frequently happened at that time, one of their children,

her beloved Annette, twin of her surviving daughter, Gertrude, died in infancy.

Peter was often away on the goldfields or on contract work. Louisa fattened cattle, opened a store, and ran a post office at Eurunderee. Drought forced them off their farm in 1883. Louisa left for Sydney.

Louisa was only 35 when she arrived in Sydney. In Eurunderee, the centre of her life had to be her family, her house and the selection, the tenuous viability of which – grimly sustained by her towering will – gave life such meaning as it had. Stability for her family was still the centre but in Sydney, but now the centre became her aims and interests. Although the appearance of marriage was retained, the relationship may have actually ended at the time Louisa moved to Sydney.

Louisa's first home in Sydney was in Philip Street. To make ends meet, Louisa took in boarders and then moved the family to a larger house where she took in more boarders. Some of these were compositors from the government printing office. Her whole life had been a battle for sheer existence and her struggles continued. She was also forced to take in sewing and washing. In the 1880s, Louisa became very interested in spiritualism and was a regular visitor to the Progressive Spiritualist Lyceum at Leigh House where she met a variety of radicals, reformers and progressive thinkers. Louisa's true radicalism was the vision she had of the role women could play in a new order, a form of the Utopianism which was a feature of radical thinking in the 1890s.

Louisa's own home in Clarence Street became a meeting place for radicals and also followers of the temperance movement. She became caught up in enthusiasms such as socialism, republicanism, women's issues, poor relief and utopianism.

In 1887-8, with her son, Henry, Louisa edited The Republican and, in 1888, opened The Dawn, announcing that it would battle for women's rights, and the vote. The Dawn offered a mixture of service items – household hints and dressmaking patterns – and literary pieces. It was a commercial success. The

Dawn turned out to be what Louisa had been seeking for so long. She wrote articles on marriage and even dared to point out that many marriages were not happy. An editorial in June 1892 said, for instance:

***'Among the things which we women have to be thankful for stands the unhappy married life ... If the promise solemnly given 'to love and to cherish' were kept, then women would probably have settled down contentedly in their nests for another century or two, and never have evolved'.***

In August 1891, a woman wrote to The Dawn that she had married because it was the only respectable way of getting a living within society's constraints.

The Dawn's mission was to help women to live a better, simpler life and to avoid dependencies of all kinds. Its advertisement proudly proclaimed:

***'The Dawn remains the only paper in Australia printed and published by women, and no effort will be spared to make and keep it worthy to be the Australian Woman's Journal. By subscribing you will help to enlarge the scope for employment of respectable working women in New South Wales.'***

The paper tackled many issues. In May 1891, it attacked the beauty cult ***'Homely women are frequently good looking. Expression has a lasting charm'***. In 1889, painful corsets were the target:

***'It has come to be believed that corsets are really necessary to the due support and bracing together of a woman; is the race then grown so limp and invertebrate? If anyone is unable to remain perpendicular without a steel waist-coat it is clear that the muscles responsible for her natural support have had no opportunity to develop'*** (1)

In October 1896, an article appeared on how to ride a bicycle, considered an important skill because of the independence it could give and, in July 1891, an article on an issue of importance to all women – being over-worked. ***'Greater simplicity of life, dress, food and surroundings would at once***

***mitigate, if not abolish, the evil'.***

Peter died in December 1888 and left Louisa 1103 pounds which she used to enlarge her printing press and accept job printing. In 1889, the Typographical Association, which refused membership to women, tried to run her out of business. Her printers were all women, trained outside Australia, who were frequently harassed by the unionists. Quite undaunted, Louisa established the Dawn Club for women in which became a suffrage society. She encouraged women to become practiced public speakers, trained by the Sydney School of Arts debating society which she persuaded to admit women. In her editorials, Louisa argued for the opening of the professions to women, among other more directly political topics, such as the need for all women to be equipped to earn their own living:

***'The 'bachelor' girl is now the term applied to the young woman who leaves the paternal home and strikes out for herself. She is a more numerous quantity than is generally supposed. In every city there are thousands of these 'bachelor girls' who are putting the bachelor men to shame by their industry and the self respect which they maintain under all circumstances.'*** (2)

Louisa joined the Womanhood Suffrage League when it was established in 1891. After sustaining injuries to her knee and spine in 1900, Louisa was bedridden for many months. She used this time to develop her invention of a buckle for fastening mail bags.

The Dawn lost much of its spirit after 1901 and closed in 1905. Louisa retired to her cottage at Marrickville and supported herself as a freelance writer. Like Catherine Helen Spence's novel Clara Morison, Louisa's poems have recently been evaluated and received some belated acclaim. Louisa's photographs depict her as a tall, big boned, stern faced woman, attributes she regarded with some pride, as she informed the editor of The Bulletin.

Louisa died in August 1920, (3)

- (1) The Dawn, 1 July 1889, pp 5-6
- (2) The Dawn, 1 July 1891, p.26.
- (3) L Rutherford and M Roughley with Nigel Spence, Louisa Lawson. Collected poems with selected critical commentaries, University of New England, 1996; B Matthews, Louisa, 1987; H Radi, 'Louisa Lawson' in H Radi, ed, 200 Australian women, pp 51-3



The above account comes from:

Louisa Lawson - Australian Workers Heritage Centre  
[www.australianworkersheritagecentre.com.au/10\\_pdf/lawson.pdf](http://www.australianworkersheritagecentre.com.au/10_pdf/lawson.pdf)

***(From front page)***

***If you have a news item or written article you believe would be of interest to the congregation, we invite you to submit it for Esprit.***

It would be helpful if items for publication, including articles and talk topics with themes could reach Esprit editor by the 15th of each month: [jtendys@yahoo.com.au](mailto:jtendys@yahoo.com.au) or hand to Jan Tendys at the Sunday service.

***Do you have a topic of a spiritual / ethical nature that you would like to share with the congregation?*** As Unitarians, we support an "Open Pulpit" and invite members of the congregation to lead the service if they so wish. *Please see Caz Donnelly at the Sunday service.*