

E'Star's Story: An Interview with a Wiccan Elder

By Rowan

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E'Star is a respected elder of the Albuquerque, NM pagan community who grew up in the Craft. Rowan interviewed her in November 1997.

Most of us found the Craft after we were adults. We may look with envy at the children we see running around at festivals with their pagan parents. What would it have been like, we think, to be raised in this path, to know it from the very beginning, rather than finding it later after years of searching? To answer that question, I interviewed Garthenia E'Star, elder of the Albuquerque community, who was raised in the Craft in northern New Mexico in the 1940's and '50's. My preconceived notions, as usual, didn't fit reality very well.

Star knew from the beginning that her family was different. While her parents didn't live together, they were friendly towards each other, and she had good relationships with both. Her father was a prospector and mechanic who preferred life in an isolated cabin to the company of other people, yet he shared with Star his knowledge and appreciation of nature. He lived off the land as much as he could, hunting and gardening. Star's mother held many jobs in her life and eventually became a nurse. Notably, Star remembers her mother as a wonderful storyteller, and storytelling was a prominent feature in their celebrations. Star's favorites were the winter and harvest festivals, marked by cooking, baking, canning, and decorating in the spirit of the seasons, and, of course, stories. She continues these practices to this day.

When she was about seven, Star developed a serious illness that left her completely paralyzed, with enlarged organs and periodic high fevers. She was hospitalized for long periods in several hospitals in New Mexico and Colorado. While in St. Joseph's hospital in Albuquerque, she had a near death experience. She rose above her body, her room on the first floor of the hospital, and eventually the hospital building itself. She clearly remembers seeing the doctors tell her mother that she was dead and her mother's violent expressions of grief. "I knew I could go towards the light, and leave the pain in my body behind," she said, "but I made a decision not to. I couldn't do that to my mother." So she returned and began the long journey back to a complete recovery. Star was in hospitals and crippled children's facilities until she was ten years old. During the time she was paralyzed, she taught herself to astral project.

Star is not the only magical person I've meet or read about who used a severe childhood illness as a means of developing astral projection and other magical skills. Michael Harner calls near death experiences such as Star's "personal experiments that tested, and commonly changed, the . . . survivor's previous assumptions about reality and the existence of spirit." (1) Certainly this experience sustained her in the years that she spent recovering in facilities that did not support her beliefs. Star now feels that the whole journey of her illness was her spiritual initiation.

Her formal training in the Craft began when she was a child, and was conducted by a man named Eli, whose travels periodically brought him to New Mexico to share what he knew of the Craft and of the larger Craft community with his friends, including Star's mother. Eli, Star pointed out, held the title of Magi of the Druidic Craft of the Wise-American Rite. He and Star's mother may well have been covenmates in the 1930's. Certainly they were good friends.

Eli lived on the road, traveling from one tiny group to another to provide training and networking between groups. His home base was in Arkansas, Star remembers. He taught the

children astrology. But rather than base the lessons on charts or complex mathematical calculations, he taught by the cycles of nature, and the lessons were organized around the seasons. Star learned Tarot, runes, automatic writing and Craft lore and history from him. Even so, this group required that a child be exposed to five different religions before they could ask for initiation as an adult member of the community.

Star's stories about Eli remind me of the contemporary pagan nomads, who go from festival to group to festival, teaching and singing, for a modest fee plus free accommodations. Issac Bonewits, for example, tried to make a living as a pagan bard and scholar in this way, and like Eli, seems to have spent a lot of time camping out on the sofas of friends and sympathetic strangers.

In the 1950's and 1960's, the Craft community looked very different than it does today. It had no public presence. Members who were comfortable doing so would give Tarot or other types of readings in parks and other public spaces. If someone visited a reader frequently and expressed a sincere interest in the Craft, a meeting might be arranged in a restaurant, park, or other public place with two members of the group to discuss background information. After a series of several such meetings, further meetings (lasting over a period of three months) were held in the seeker's home. The purpose of these meetings was to teach the landmarks (or laws) of the Craft to the seeker, and they continued for about three months.

Only after the seeker had expressed an interest in more study would he or she be invited to join a coven. The seeker was taken, blindfolded, to the covenstead by a route that was intended to be confusing, and interviewed by the whole coven on the material he or she had learned. After the interview, the coven voted with black and white beans on the seeker's membership. One black bean was enough to disqualify a seeker for membership. Typically, the first circle that a seeker witnessed or participated in was the circle in which they were initiated to the rank of Neophyte. The studies for Neophytes were called astrological lessons, and took a minimum of a year and a day.

The covens these Neophytes joined were ideally (Star admitted that a group didn't always achieve this) made up of one member of each astrological sign, plus a High Priest and Priestess. The ideal coven would also be composed equally of men and women. It probably helped that Neophytes were assigned to a coven, rather than selecting one themselves. "We never had more than fourteen people," she explained. "We said thirteen, but really it was fourteen, since the High Priestess and High Priest counted as one in this system." This explains the traditional Gardnerian coven of thirteen, equally divided between men and women. Students were assigned to a coven based on geographical area. No last names were used in these circles, and other precautions were taken to assure anonymity, even among covenmates.

When Neophytes had completed their studies to the coven's satisfaction and their own, they were eligible for Ordination as a Priest or Priestess. After Ordination, the individual studied the priesthood. It was a time to give back to the community through service. After their Ordination ceremony, the student learned the ceremonies, record keeping and other skills that were necessary to run a group independently. Administrative skills were taught in these magical groups at this level, and no sooner. When these studies were completed, the individual was eligible for the rank of High Priest/ess, to lead a group of their own and for membership in a star coven. Coven leaders met in their own groups, called star covens, once a month, in addition to the groups, which they lead, which met weekly. The star covens existed for the purpose of supporting each coven's leadership. A High Priest/ess might retire from active magical work for a period of time to study alone or work on a special magical skill. The goal of this retirement was to attain the rank of Wizard. Once attained, a Wizard might return to active group work, or continue to work as a solitary. Star was quite clear that this structure was hierarchical. The entire organization was overseen by a Mage, who was responsible for overseeing all workings. A man or a woman might hold the office of Mage, which traditionally took forty years to achieve.

In the early 1960's, Eli settled in New Mexico briefly. He and his group were very aware that it

was time to get ready for the Age of Aquarius, which would herald a profound shift in society's organization. Eli returned to his base in Arkansas at the end of this period, where he died some years later. At that time, there was a dispute in the magical community. Some chose to remain underground, while others, Star among them, felt that the best preparation for the coming shift in consciousness would be to make themselves available to more people and take the risk of being public. Fortune-telling was illegal, and there was much more misinformation about and prejudice towards the Craft than there is today, so those risks were no small matter.

Whether or not you believe that modern Craft practice is descended in a straight or circuitous line from prehistory, Star's story of her youth and childhood in the craft has much to teach us. I wonder if there are many Craft students today who would have survived the rigorous screening process she describes. We all like to think we'd be just as dedicated as anyone else, but it does give one pause to think of all the hurdles one had to overcome to study magick in those days. Would we have leaped them?

In talking with Star, it was obvious to me that the elaborate structure she describes was the ideal towards which they strove, rather than the reality they lived and worked in. Those ideals are what keep us going in those difficult times, and they are no less real for that. Modern Craft practitioners need an ideal towards which we can build, just as Star and her covenmates did in the 1950's. Eli, and other itinerant teachers like him, fulfilled networking and training functions in the Craft of fifty years ago which are now filled by the Internet; groups like the Covenant of the Goddess, Circle and the Aquarian Tabernacle; and the many books on magical practice now available.

Perhaps the single most valuable concept is the support and advisory group for coven leaders, the star coven. As a working High Priestess, I have assembled my own star coven of sorts. Every coven leader should take this concept to heart, for it is impossible to be an effective spiritual leader without a support system of one's own. No single human being can possess expertise on all magical subjects, plus have wise council on mundane and administrative matters. It would certainly be reassuring to know that a group that met regularly was available to you when problems arose. Finally, I am delighted to have a reasonable explanation for the "traditional Gardnerian coven!" For that piece of information alone, I am indebted to Star for the time she spent talking to me, and grateful for her willingness to share her experiences with the larger community yet again.

Let's hope she writes it all down herself one day.

Footnote: (1) Michael Harner, *The Way of the Shaman*, p xii Harper/San Francisco, 1980.