

IMPRESSIONS

Do we have Pagan culture?



Culture is the process by which a person becomes all that they were created capable of being.

– Thomas Carlyle

What is culture, anyway? How does it work? Why do we need it?

These are short, simple questions with long, complicated answers. The word “culture” means many different things, all related, yet each distinct. It is both directed and organic, specific yet multifaceted. So let’s see what we can find in old Webster’s reliable book.

One definition concerns “the development of micro-organisms,” which leads to jokes about bacteria being the only culture some people have. That’s not what we’re talking about here, but its close relative – farming – enters our sphere of discussion, with the raising of plants or animals “especially with a view to improvement.” Here are the first two pieces of our puzzle: deliberation and evolution. “Culture” means working with what you find to make it better. Inherent in this is the belief that humanity *can* improve on nature, if we set our Will to constructive rather than destructive ends.

It doesn’t stop with plants and animals, although as Pagans, we should never forget that connection. “Culture” also covers “the act of developing the intellectual and moral faculties, especially by education” and the resulting “excellence of taste.” It is both the process and the product. This derives pretty directly from the Greek root meaning “enlightenment or civilization.” To the material technique of pushing things in the right direction, we’ve now added uniquely human concerns – a cultivation of souls.

This keeps getting bigger and better. What exactly goes into this process? Anthropologists explain culture as “the sum total of the attainments and activities of any specific race, period, or people including their implements, handicrafts, agriculture, economics, music, art, religious beliefs, traditions, language, and story.” If this sounds so broad as to become meaningless, look again: “culture” relates to the achievements of any *specific* group. Women. Americans. Renaissance artists. Witches. In this sense you can speak about people or place or time period; in all of these cases, culture is what draws a line around a given set of circumstances and distinguishes it from other people, places, or periods. This is culture as identity, and it’s much the same as what we mean when we say “a culture” – a society, unique and cohesive. This is the ecosystem of the soul.

Thus, our works come to represent us. Another definition is “those physical features of a terrain which are of human origin or construction, as roads, trails, canals, buildings, boundary lines.” This is the map of our mental terrain, of society seen as a dimension unto itself. Here we begin to see the danger. Culture can divide us, not just from each other, but from nature itself. In our desire to get from here to there, we may create barriers as well as bridges. Bringing the water to our fields can dry the lake that feeds the canals.

We are human; we can learn from our mistakes and build on our triumphs. So the final aspect of culture is this: “the integrated pattern of human knowledge, belief, and behavior that depends on man’s capacity for learning and transmitting knowledge to succeeding genera-

tions.” None of this matters unless we pass it on. Nothing of us can survive – not our songs, not our ceremonies, not our mighty structures – without continuity over time. If we do not absorb the right lessons and make them part of our culture, our culture will fall apart, and something else will take its place.

This brings us full circle, to the quote from Thomas Carlyle about culture as our means of enabling ourselves and each other to reach our maximum potential. Culture is the mirror in which we find our reflection, the lens through which we see the world, the light with which we illuminate the dark unknown. What, then, do we make of Pagan culture, the topic of this issue?

Among the more conspicuous aspects of harmony in a vast field of diversity are those deriving from agriculture: we value both nature and improvement, and we balance them with care. No matter what their tradition, most Pagans try to make the world a better place. We do this in part by making ourselves better people. Within each of us lie two competing seeds, barbarism and enlightenment. Which do you water more frequently? Which do you cultivate?

At this time in history, we have established “the contemporary Pagan community.” It’s quite an achievement, given that leading Pagans is like herding cats. It’s something that hasn’t always existed – it exists now because people cared enough to create it, and will continue to exist only so long as we cultivate it. We *are* a culture now, with much in common, despite the many subcultures of Wiccan and Asatru and feminism and shamanism and magic and spirituality. We can choose to emphasize our similarities more than our differences. We can study the body of lore, add to it, refine it. These things define our identity as a culture.

Look at all the books, artwork, music and tools we have available today! Look at the small and large Pagan groups creating land sanctuaries, temple buildings, stone circles and other monuments! We cannot

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live forever on the leavings of our ancestors; we must create new things to leave to our own descendants.

And we are. *You are*. You are a link between past and present, connected by the bonds of culture. This is what makes us Pagan. This is what makes us people.

In this issue, our contributors explore different aspects of Pagan culture. We begin at the beginning, with "Initiation: More Than Skin Deep." In this article, Kevin Filan explains how a religion maintains its identity and group boundaries, how a ritual can bring a person across the boundary into the group, and the effects on individual and group consciousness.

As Archer explains however, the process of finding your place in society is not always easy. In her article, "Bumps Along the Pagan Path," she examines some of the pitfalls people encounter in their search for a coven or other group to join. Because Pagan culture is inherently diverse, what delights some may offend or bore others. But Archer sees that if we diligently seek to understand and look beyond the surface differences, we can find inspiration and community in places we may not have thought to look. This is how a culture grows.

In any culture whose common bonds derive from spirituality, the clergy play an important role in collating and teaching customs, tenets of belief, and bits of lore such as songs and stories. Genevieve Williams explores becoming part of this Pagan vocation in "Lights, Camera — Priestess?"

Barbara Fisher presents "Footsteps of the Goddess: Discovering the Sacred Art of Rangoli." Originally from India but now beginning to make headroads in the North American Pagan community, this technique of making beautiful designs with flour is both prayer and picture, an ephemeral art form in danger of extinction if not transmitted to new practitioners. If you admire sand paintings, you'll love this beautiful art form.

We have not one, but *two* pieces on the topic of the music of Pagan culture. Our popular series, "Creating a Pagan Bookshelf," continues with

its third installment, "Pagan Music." Here Carl McColman and his team of reviewers introduce the most popular songs of our culture, including a sidebar on the late-breaking album. *The Best of Pagan Song as well as suggestions of Pagan-friendly music from mainstream sources.* Still a relatively new genre of music (albeit drawing on many older traditions), Pagan song has its limitations — and only by analyzing them can we get past them. Zak Kramer works on moving past critique to offering some avenues to explore in his essay "Pagan Music — Beyond the Bardic Circle."

Another mode of cultural expression is storytelling. Barbara Fisher tours an up-and-coming genre in "Tales Seldom Told: Pagan Fiction Comes of Age." We also are pleased to present Carol Hightshoe's haunting yet hopeful story, "Legends Reborn."

This issue we have four poems, touching on everything from knowledge to nature. Kathryn Boundy muses on the place of mythology in modern life in "Demeter at the Boston Public Library." Two of our writers speak of water: Andrew Grossman in his untitled poem and Chele Bryant in "Ocean Song." Patricia Dines challenges our discernment with "Signal to Noise."

Summer is a season devoted to culture in all its guises, a time when the weather is pleasant enough to spend the day outside. Our days can be filled with a wealth of activities. We can choose from art fairs, park concerts, parades, county fairs, Pagan festivals, and much more, each celebrating a different part of what it means to be human in this time and place. So after you finish reading, put the magazine on your coffee table and go dive into one of the many cultural events in your area. Enjoy our Pagan culture! ▲

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