

Toe-to-Toe

A Forum for Controversy and Opinion



There's No Place Like Home: should we hunt for a "Pagan Paradise"?

Bloom where you are planted.

Where is Paradise? Is it hidden deep in some huge city? Is it somewhere farther off the beaten path? Or is it a lot closer to home?

Throughout human existence, many have searched for Paradise, the land of milk and honey. It has been known as Shangri-La and Eden, among countless other names. Ancient maps and cryptic prophecies have led many on lifetime journeys, searching in remote mountain hideaways and deep jungles. That search goes on today, driven by the certain knowledge that perfection exists in some other place. "If only I could put together the resources to move to _____," the logic goes, "I'd be living in Paradise."

That logic is horribly flawed.

Paradise is on the West Coast. It's also on the East Coast — and countless places in between. It's in the cities, but it's also very much out in the countryside. There is no one physical place on the map where exists, for it can truly be anywhere. Why pine for something hundreds of miles away, when it can found no further away than your own backyard?

Several years ago, I read an interview with the Dalai Lama, in which he was asked about the location of Shangri-La. He replied that he believed there to be no such place, and went on to say that he did not worry himself with such things, but rather concerned himself with the beauty of the Earth around him and maintaining peace in his own life. Missing the point completely, the interviewer went on to imply that the Dalai Lama had simply avoided the question.

Here at our home in central New York, my wife and I find that our spirituality is more related to the amount of attention that we pay to the land around us than to any one characteristic of that land. Our home has become Paradise because of our everyday awareness of the beauty around us. It also required a great deal of hard work to turn this place into what it is today.

Paradise is more than a place, though; it is also a sense of community, of being able to share spirit with others. There was a time when we figured that because of the rural nature of our home, community was something we'd have to drive

to. We were wrong. As our version of paradise emerged, we continued to network and make friends with more like-minded folks. Soon many of them began to visit us here — in this place where they could find peace and harmony.

In seeking paradise, many make the mistake of expecting perfection ... and it simply doesn't exist. Our home has its share of downsides, and while it's certainly not everyone's idea of Utopia, it's damn close to being ours. We could move anywhere we chose in order to find the perfect place, but it simply made more sense to build it right here at home.

You'll never find paradise on the map: it exists wherever you make it. No matter where you live, there will always be another place that somehow seems better. Make the connections, draw the elements together, mix generously with hard work, and one day you'll find yourself waking up in Shangri-La. ▲

— Kurt lives in central New York with his wife and a small menagerie. He's a freelance corporate trainer, tech writer, and software breaker, when he's not out communing with Nature or working on his novel.

No

"No matter where you live, there will always be another place that seems better. But make the connections where you are and one day you'll find yourself waking up in Shangri-La."

Toe-to-Toe: A Call for Submissions

“Toe-to-Toe” is our forum for dialogue and opinion. Upcoming themes we’d like to hear about include:

“Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell: Should Secrecy within Pagan Organizations be Absolute?” As Pagan covens, churches, and groups grow, the potential for conflict within them grows as well. How much secrecy do such organizations need — or deserve? Should Pagans take other Pagans to court? Should Pagan media report on misconduct within the Pagan community?

“Under Eighteen Need Not Apply?” As Paganism grows in popularity, the number of under-age seekers has exploded. But many believe that Paganism (especially Witchcraft) is best left to adults, except in the context of family worship and practice. Should parental consent be required before teaching minors? Who decides when someone is old enough to learn about Paganism (or the Craft)?

“Who’s That Knocking on My Door: Should Pagans Proselytize?” Many old-style Pagan groups demand that seekers come to them, and operate primarily as “secret societies.” But in a world searching for answers, is there a place for Pagans to actively advocate their religious faith and practices — even (*gasp*) Pagan missionaries? ▲

To share your opinion on these topics, write to: Toe-to-Toe, PanGaia, P. O. Box 641, Point Arena, CA 95468 or email (preferred) m_editor@pangaia.com.

Pagan Paradise? Dear Goddess, No!

It has been suggested that Pagans pack up their swords and their cauldrons and their jewelry and decamp. It has been suggested that we find a nice piece of unspoiled real estate (preferably, I suppose, with Internet hookups and plenty of parking) and set ourselves up as Pagan Paradise, Unlimited.

Sure thing. For starters, how would our PPU be organized? Would it be a theAcrary or a theOcracy? History tells us something about theocracies. The Massachusetts Bay Colony in the 1690s was a theocracy. The Vatican has been a theocracy for at least 1500 years. Iran has been a theocracy for twenty-odd years. Afghanistan under the Taliban was a theocracy. For seventy years, the Soviet Union was an atheocracy. Are these models on which we want to build our Pagan paradise on? Would anyone be in charge? When it is run by fallible human beings, why do we fancy that a Goddess government might be any better than a God government? If we have a group of more than three people, does anyone seriously think we can run our PPU by consensus and still actually get anything accomplished?

We know rituals are important to Pagans, and we are also given to understand that our own tradition Does It The Right Way. So picture this. High-church Alexandrians dancing in a circle with radical separatist Dianics. Asatru quaffing their mead next to Twelve-Step Pagans. Would Myjastics and other traditions so secret-ridden that they don’t even let their first-year students attend their rituals be present in our circles at PPU? How would Dianic Guardians get along with traditional Gardnerians? Where would the fluff-bunnies get to stand and what on Earth would they do? How long would it take before we started waving ceremonial swords and burning sage at each other? How long before we started flinging banishing pentagrams at each other?

Seriously, folks, setting up Pagan Paradise, Unlimited, is an addelepaated idea. As history shows, when a

group of coreligionists betakes itself (or gets herded) to some separate but equal location, what we get is a ghetto. In the United States, we’ve had Irish ghettos, Chinese ghettos, and Japanese ghettos that were concentration camps. The Land of the Free has produced Indian reservations and Jim Crow laws, the consequences of which (including genocide) remain troublesome even today. The Jews have the longest history of being ghettoized, of course. How handy it was for the Cossacks and the Nazis not to have to search them out but to find them all packaged up. Although the story of the Warsaw Ghetto and its uprising is inspirational and heart-rending at the same time, one lesson we can learn is that a ghetto is not a safe or pretty place to live.

Sure, we could just run away and establish a Pagan utopia. Are we aware that the history of utopias shows that most of them quickly turn into dystopias? People’s ideals fail to mesh and their lifestyles falter and fizzle without the infrastructure provided by the society the utopians are running away from. Examples from Plato to Francis Bacon to our current, unelected president show how easily idealism can turn into tyranny.

Let’s stay where we are. Let’s continue to worship the Earth we walk on. Let’s endeavor to live peacefully in our apartments, and condos, and houses. Let’s work productively in our jobs at fast-food restaurants and computer companies. Let us take seriously our belief in “harm none” and serve as examples that people can indeed get along together. Let us live comfortably in or out of our broomclosets and make magic that will make the world as it is a better place. Then we won’t have to run away from it. ▲

— *Barbara Ardinger PhD is author of Finding New Goddesses, Quicksilver Moon, Goddess Meditations and Practicing the Presence of the Goddess. Her newest book, Pagan Every Day: Finding the Extraordinary in Our Ordinary Lives, is a book of daily meditations to be published in 2006.*

Yes

“By living together in large numbers, Pagans could gain respectability and influence.”

A Gathering of Eagles

Whether to relocate or not is a very individual decision for which there is no universal “right answer.” Some people seemed to be “potted” from birth and never deign to venture away for longer than brief vacations. Others are gypsies at heart and are thrilled at the prospect of each new relocation, as it provides an opportunity to explore another part of Mother Earth. Some people would love to move but can’t because of jobs, economics, health, or family. Others hate to move but have to do so because of these same or similar factors.

If you are already in a good location, there is generally little point in relocating. If you live in Northern California (my pick for the best place on Earth), why move? But if you live in rural Mississippi, you might prefer a more progressive or cosmopolitan atmosphere. So the number of factors are infinite and no generic answer is possible. However, I will make a brief argument in support of the advantages of Neo-Pagans relocating to certain common areas rather than living in isolated locations, at least for those Neo-Pagans able and willing to relocate.

First of all, there is power in numbers. Consider the gay rights movement. When most gays were scattered about the nation and most were “in the closet,” homosexuality was literally considered a mental illness by the psychiatric establishment and a crime by legal authorities. When gays started moving *en masse* to central locations (the Village in New York City, the Castro in San Francisco, etc.), they started coming out of the closet and making their presence known. Suddenly politicians were eager to get their votes and companies were keen to sell them products and services. Instead

of being “mentally ill,” they were treated like pillars of the community – which of course, they were. So by living together in large numbers, Pagans could gain more respectability and influence in political and community affairs.

Second, the areas Pagans are most likely to move to are already the progressive or liberal areas of the nation and world. Even if Pagans are never a large enough segment of the population to dominate the local political process, Pagans are unlikely to be harassed for their beliefs and practices while living in these highly tolerant areas, like Boston, Northampton, Cape Cod, Hartford, Iowa City, Madison, Austin, Berkeley, Charlottesville, Chapel Hill, Eugene, Corvallis, Portland, Seattle, Honolulu, Key West, Santa Fe, etc. (My own legal research, which you are free to question, has found that the most progressive states of the U.S.A. in terms of state laws are all in the West, namely California, Oregon, Washington, and Hawaii. Of course, Canada and parts of Europe are even more progressive.) All too many Pagans are fearful that if they were discovered they would be discriminated against (especially by employers), and in many areas, this would indeed happen. Why live in a place where you must hide your true identity? Although in the U.S.A., it is generally illegal under the civil rights laws to discriminate against someone based upon religious beliefs, it still happens all the time in both subtle and blatant ways, especially when your religion or spiritual practice is a distinct minority in a particular area or where the practice is as misunderstood as many Pagan and Wiccan practices are.

Third, while Pagans don’t generally proselytize if an area has a high population of Pagans who are “out

of the broom closet,” many people who might never explore Paganism would be exposed to the ideas and may well find that Paganism is the right lifestyle for them as well.

As long as Pagans are just isolated individuals and small groups scattered here and there, we will never be the type of “life force” of which we are capable. Since I think the world is in an environmental and political crisis, and that Paganism offers many insights into handling these various planetary catastrophes, I would like to see Paganism more widely known and practiced. This is my argument for a “gathering of eagles” in the more progressive and enlightened areas.

Again, I’m not suggesting that any particular person, family, or group pick up and move – there are far too many variables in your life of which I can’t possibly be aware – but you should at least give the matter some thought unless you are absolutely “potted” where you are at present and/or deliriously happy there. If you are at all open to the idea of relocation, I recommend you take the little quiz at findyourspot.com which will help you identify the cities most suited to your individual needs and preferences, or email me at zentranshumanism@aol.com for a free article that analyzes the best places in the U. S. for Neo-Pagans to live. Whether you move or not, I hope you find peace, love, pleasure, happiness, and serenity wherever you are. ▲

— Ron Garland is the author of many articles and dozens of books – such as *Making Work Fun*; *Humanity Sucks*; *Charles Darwin Meets the Buddha at Woodstock*; and a Spanish language book titled *Trabajar y Dirigir en la New Age*.