

Interview with Sean Manning on June 20, 2014

Sean: Do you have questions set up for me?

Diana: I do. Um, so if you're ready, uh, this is Diana Brown, interviewing Sean Manning on June 20, 2014, um, can you just say like, your age and where you live, and what you do, if you—

S: Okay. Well, my, I'm thirty six years old, I grew up in Overland Park, Kansas, where I live again. I lived in Lawrence for a while, um, I am a restaurant manager, um, I have academic experience in history and religious studies from the University of Kansas, so.

D: Okay, cool. Um, so my first question will sort of get to what we were talking about before, which is kind of like, where are you coming from, and what's your religious background from your parents, what did you grow up doing.

S: I was raised Roman Catholic.

D: Okay.

S: My parents are, I guess you would call them conservative, but religiously, they're pretty flexible.

D: Uh huh.

S: Um, my—

D: What do you mean by conservative? Like, politically conservative?

S: Politically, um, although, it really depends on the issue, I suppose, um, but uh, they do tend to be kind of liberal with some—liberal as in, they're, they're flexible on a lot of religious concepts, they're not very strict Catholics, they don't strictly adhere to official doctrine. My mother has always complained openly that, uh, there were not female priests in the Catholic Church or that they didn't allow altar girls, um, and in fact when her church started doing it, um, she actually helped, uh, encourage the priest to do it and they would keep track of where the bishop was so that he wouldn't find out. Um, they hid 'em. Um, my dad had, always had kind of a, he, he always just had kind of a casual, hands-off kind of attitude towards religion. He went to the church and he participated in church, but he never held too strict of a doctrine, he, he always maintained that the uh that the primary commandment was to, uh, love your neighbor as yourself and basically, be, treat other people decently and with respect. So. He tended to ignore or look over certain doctrines as it was convenient.

D: Okay. Yeah. So, I mean at what age did you, I guess this is sort of a two-part question, I like at what age, on the one hand, did you start doing Pagan things, or reading about it, or, and on the other hand, would you ever identify yourself, at any point in the past or now as a Pagan, or would you use some other word to describe yourself?

S: Well, in the past, I always looked back and a, a lot of modern Pagans will go back and say, oh, this was like coming home, this was, I always had, I always had this connection with nature, and uh, or I was clairvoyant, or I saw spirits, or things like that. I don't remember a lot of stuff like that. I always remember my dreams being very significant, but I don't, I, I didn't really associate

that with a lot of, with anything that was outside of Catholicism, 'cause my mother was very flexible, I guess you would call her superstitious. She believed in psychic phenomenon, she believed in angels and spirits and things like that, so, those kinds of experiences were explained by Catholicism for me, so I never really worried about it. Um, and when uh, when I was seven years old, um, one of my close friends died of leukemia, and her mother was my mother's best friend, and that was how I knew her, and I remember, um, her mother saying that when she died she actually called out to her and said, "Mom, I just had a vision from Mary, and she says she's coming to take me tonight, and I'm gonna go," and then she died that night, and, um, and my mother's always known, like, whenever her friends were in trouble, or, or, injured, or sick, or when they've died, she just knew. She knew exactly when it was happening and she would call them first. So, looking back, I, I didn't see that as unusual, um, I didn't see it as anything that was extra special. When I got older, I kind of, I kind of went through a, a, I guess an agnostic or an atheistic phase, where I was questioning a lot of that, and, part of that was I started having some negative experiences with the church itself. Um, I, I started looking at the actual structure and political nature of the church as an entity versus the religion, and so I kind of rebelled a little bit, and but I really didn't get into anything that would be considered Paganism or occult until I was about sixteen or seventeen years old, and uh, it's actually a funny story, I tell it a lot, I got into it to impress a girl.

D: I see.

S: So. She said that she could see auras, and I couldn't see auras, and I wanted to impress her, and so I had a friend of mine, he bought me a book for Christmas on how to see and read auras, and to this day I cannot see auras, and I, I think I'm friends with her on Facebook, and I hear from her once every year or so, but, you know, both of those efforts failed, but I'm still involved in all this stuff, so.

D: So what happened after that that sort of got you more involved, or how did your path start evolving?

S: Well, uh, I started reading Tarot, and when I started reading Tarot, um, my, my friend Tim is the one that introduced me to, um, he's the one that bought me the book—

D: Okay.

S: And uh, he introduced me to Tarot, and he introduced me to the person that was teaching him Tarot, a gentleman by the name of Josef Luben.

D: Okay.

S: And he had these classes that he was teaching on metaphysics and tarot, but what they really were, were classes on occult Qabalah.

D: Okay. Yeah.

S: And so I started getting really heavily into that, reading books by Aleister Crowley, and everything just kind of went on from there, the idea that you could attain altered states of consciousness and have an impact on your reality or on future outcomes was very appealing to me, you know, I was young, I had very little if any direction in life, and I was looking for some way to kind of get a grips on things, so-

D: Yeah. Huh. So, I guess uh, how important then, it seems like, I mean people were certainly important in your sort of development basically, early on, like how important I guess was and is community, or, you know, people sort of face to face?

S: I kinda had, uh, two groups that I worked with, um, as far as like, people. There was an online community that I got involved with, and, the old Yahoo message boards. And when I started out, when I first got online, I was young, I was cocky, I was arrogant, and I was, uh, you know, basically, bullshitting a lot, just to kind of impress and intimidate people, and it didn't work. And I very quickly learned that and stopped, 'cause it was obnoxious. Um, but there were some online message boards that people would just go to discuss things, just to talk shop, and so I kind of got some perspective outside of what I was used to. As far as, um, local community, the personal interaction I had was in Josef's metaphysics class, and there was kind of a core group of about six or seven people that kept going and then we had, uh, layers outside of that. The class would go anywhere from five or six people to about twelve or thirteen, depending on how many people we'd get. And uh, you had a lot of people from a lot of different backgrounds that were trying to learn different things, and we just kind of went there and we listened to what he said and we discussed it, and we practiced sometimes techniques or just talked about our own backgrounds and experiences and we all got a lot from it. And he played the role of facilitator fairly well, because he would take what one person said and tie it into what another person said, and bring things around full circle, and, and it would, he would speak directly to one person, or another person, and it would impact that person directly, but would also be relevant for somebody else.

D: Was he teaching, was he teaching out of a shop, or out of his home, or—

S: Uh, he taught out of his home for a while, and he also taught, um, the class eventually moved to our friend, Rick's house, and that's kind of where it stayed for a while, it, it then became of and on as, uh, both of them had health issues and other things going on personally and it kind of fell apart after, a, a few times, it would stop and then start up again, but eventually it just kind of ended and the way that he described it was that, the people who got what they needed moved on, and the people that stayed were the ones that were never going to get it. So, and, and eventually it got the point where me and my friend, Tim, we, we, we weren't getting anything else from it, so we kind of moved on and made our own little group where we kind of worked with a few people, that didn't end up working out very well either, so.

D: So you're doing these thing when you're a teenager, so what do your parents think about this?

S: Ooh. Um. At the time, my mother, first she went through the, "it's a phase."

D: Mmhmm.

S: And then she freaked out because she thought I was worshipping Satan.

D: Mmhm.

S: And, we actually had a talk once, and what she said is, she just asked me outright, she said, "Do you still acknowledge God, or have you turned away from him." And I told her, "Mom, what we're doing is founded in Jewish philosophy, what I deal with, you could, you could term God. I'm not questioning that, what I'm questioning at is how you interact with it." And she was okay with that, as long as I wasn't worshipping Satan, she was fine with it. Um, a few years

later, she started changing her mind, and started ribbing me on it a little bit, and even know she'll make jokes about my witchy stuff, and she'll antagonize me a little bit, not very severely, but lightly. My uncle's not very forgiving about it. He actually left, uh, when I was staying with my parents for awhile, he actually left a clove of garlic in my room, on top of my Tarot decks. Part of that's funny, because that's the way he is, but it was also a pretty blatant statement. Um, my dad doesn't care. My dad has actually asked me technical questions about the occult, about magic, about Tarot readings, and about things like that, and he's shown an aptitude for it and an interest in it, he's just never actually gotten into it, and I think that if he actually did, he'd probably work with it, fairly well with it, he just, he didn't care as long as I wasn't a jerk to people, that's pretty much it.

D: Mmhm. Hm. Can you talk about, I guess, I don't know, how your practice has sort of evolved, so it started out with like this kind of qabalistic, um, I don't know, philosophy and techniques and you know, at this point, um, I know that you have some involvement with sort of like Roman, I don't know if you would call it like, Reconstructionist, or—

S: Uh, you could call it Reconstructionist influenced, I suppose.

D: Okay. Yeah. But uh, so it's been, you know, twenty years, basically, that you've been practicing.

S: Has it? Ouch.

D: So, so what's, what's changed over the years, and, you know?

S: I went, I was going through the Qabalah*—

D: Mmhm.

S: And then I got into chaos magic.

D: Mmhm.

S: And the core principle of chaos magic is that belief itself is a tool and can be changed, used, and adapted as needed.

D: Right.

S: So, a really good chaos magician is perfectly fine with being a monotheist, and then shifting to a polytheist, and then becoming an agnostic, or even an atheist, depending on the environment they're in, or who they're interacting with, or what they need to do.

D: Mmhm.

S: If you've got a client, and that's really what it comes down to at this point, if you've got a client that's dealing with a disturbance in their home—

D: Mmhm.

S: --if they're Catholic, you would want to come in with, you'd want to put yourself in a, a monotheistic framework, you'd wanna come in with guardian angels, and saints, and you would wanna push it out that way. If you've got somebody that's more New Age-y, then you might want to come in with some sage, and some quartz crystals, and do something a little more

general; if you're dealing with somebody who's an out-and-out Pagan, you would have a completely different approach.

D: Yeah.

S: And the whole key of chaos magic is that you should be able to shift all those, because the belief itself just serves as a tool to make sense of the experience which is brought on by a certain practice, and that practice at its core is similar enough through hall of those different belief systems that it makes no difference which one you go with.

D: So is the belief there, is it that you're really changing your beliefs, or that you're sort of accommodating other people's beliefs by sort of changing your framework?

S: Both.

D: Okay. Okay.

S: But, when I got into that, it, um, I kind of looked, I kind of went through an agnostic phase—

D: Mmhm.

S: And, um, just kind of looked at what the techniques were for achieving altered states of consciousness or doing things, and I wasn't focusing too much on religious devotion or anything like that.

D: Right. Mmhm.

S: And I stayed that way for a long time. I, at that point, I would question whether it would have been appropriate to call myself a Pagan, and I actually had that discussion, the internal debate, and discussed it with other people, because I viewed myself as, I guess you'd call me a mystic, or a magician, or a lot of other things, but I didn't have that religious component.

D: Yeah.

S: And, I would say, I'm trying to think how long ago it was. What year is it now? Okay. Umm, I'd say maybe about six years ago or so, six or seven years ago I started feeling an absence. I, um, when my grandmother died and my cousin died—uh, my cousin died of leukemia in around 2001, and um, I went to those funeral services, and they were very Catholic, and I found myself missing that religious experience, that emotional experience, it had become an intellectual experience, and I wanted more of the emotional comfort. And that kind of accelerated and compounded throughout the years and around 2007 or so I started feeling an absence of that religious experience and I started looking for a god—who do I devote myself to?

D: Uh huh.

S: And I've, I've actually written, I write under a, a nom de plume online, and I've written on this topic of finding, how do you know what gods to align yourself with, what do you look for—

D: Mm. Mmhm.

S: And I, I went through and tried to devise a method for, you know, how do you figure out what you should go with, and, I picked a couple, and I did research on 'em, and I made some offerings, and I took it as a sign when I, I lit some incense and um, poured some wine and made

an offering and the incense went out. I couldn't keep it lit. And I took that as a sign—this is the wrong one. And I did that for a few times. And I, I struggled with this for a few years before I finally settled on the Roman pantheon, and I'm, for my ethnic background, my father's half of the family is Irish and my mother's is Italian, and I always identified myself with the Irish side of the family, and something happened, um, about five years ago or so where I suddenly shifted and made that identification with the Italian side, and at that point my association at Rome just clicked, and I felt myself, I was dealing with some, uh, I guess you'd call them aggression issues, um, and so I was attracted to Mars, and I went through that, and set up a devotional practice, and it's adjusted significantly over the years, but that's kinda how I got on that. I was actively looking, and finally I found one that I was comfortable with. And I went through a period where I went through like, Nova Roma, and some of the reconstructionist organizations. I actually have a tunic and a toga that I've made by hand. It's not an, an official toga 'cause it's not wool, 'cause wool's expensive, but, um, I have used those in devotional practices, and I have uh, a lararium set up for my ancestral spirits, and, uh, I would even be willing to share photographs of, of, of some of those, if you'd be interested. I've got, um, my altar combines those devotional elements. They're not strictly reconstructionist though, um, I have metal on my altar, you know, a strict reconstructionist wouldn't do that, but I've kind of adapted some of those themes, and combined them back to the kabalistic themes of planetary spheres, and the gods have kind of taken on those roles for me, of, this is how the Roman deity actually acts, and this is a related sphere that, a, qabalistically would be associated with that God, and so I've kind of blended those together. Um, and that's how I handle the Roman side. I also have got a lot more active in celebrating the Wiccan calendar, the, the cycle of the year, and I view that as like more of a cultural thing. It's just because so many other Pagans and Neo-Pagans are familiar with that and celebrate it, it, it's an excuse for people to get together. So.

D: I was gonna ask, I mean how important is community for you now, um, both in a more, sort of like general, social sense, like that, and also in terms of like, do you know other people who are invested in sort of like uh, the Roman pantheon or—

S: I do not know anybody else in the area that is involved in worship of the Roman pantheon.

D: Okay.

S: Um, the only organizations I've found have been groups like Nova Roma, and they're very heavily politicized. Nova Roma describes itself as a micro-nation, and that's way more than I'm willing to invest into, um, I don't want to change my name and go for a political position in a micro-nation, I, I just want to worship the divine in my, in a way that's comfortable, and find peace and success and happiness in my life and stuff. So, for community I have a, uh, I have a network of friends that, uh, most of my really close friends are involved in metaphysics or Paganism in some way. Um, even my, uh, one of my friends, she's very Christian—she is a very talented Tarot reader, and she is a strong empath and she has, uh, precognitive dreams, and, uh, premonitions. And she's very open to all that stuff, but when it comes down to it, she's Christian. Um, my ex-girlfriend is a rather potent kitchen witch, uh, she does lots of witchcraft, lots of herbal stuff, very Catholic. And she had discomfort with that because she associated with a lot of Pagans, and they just assumed she was Pagan, and she would have to dance around the fact that she was Christian, because she was afraid they would reject her. And she, you can't be Catholic and hang out with Pagans, and feel fully a part of that group, but you can't be a witch and hang out with Catholics, and feel totally in with that group, so she had that kind of issue she

was dealing with. But, um, a lot of, uh, friends are very important to me. Um, I tend to get, uh, I have a small group of very close friends, and a lot of them are open to that, they kinda have to be. Uh, 'cause it's pretty much how I am. Um, I also have a, uh, 'cause I don't have that circle of Roman-based Pagans, I have, uh, other Pagan groups that I've been involved with. Um, the, uh, Tribe Three, that I've become more and more actively involved with, is a good one because it's just nice to be with people that get together for mutual things like that. Um, I still talk to Josef and some of the people from that group, but that group has fallen apart and most people have either died or gone their separate ways.

D: But Josef is still obviously like important in your life.

S: Josef is still, he's, well he's a very close friend of mine now. Um, I, I will often call him my mentor. He tells, he introduces me as his son. Uh, he very much is a father figure, which is difficult sometimes because he's been very supportive and offered a lot of guidance and instruction, but he also, shall we say, is a product of his times, which is uh, uh, code for, he has a lot of racist and misogynistic attitudes that I very, very diplomatically sidestep or try and correct him on, and..

D: How old is he?

S: Sixty-seven.

D: Oh, okay.

S: Um, he's either sixty-seven or sixty-eight, he's only a couple years younger than my parents. My, my dad is seventy now, so. Yeah, he actually was, um, they didn't actually meet each other, but he was in the navy at the same time as my father and they were both stationed together in Norfolk, uh, for a year or so. Um, but um, as far as like the greater community, um—

D: Is there much of a community in Overland Park, or resources there, or--?

S: Overland Park itself, uh, the big area is, uh, there's a shop called Crescent Springs in downtown Overland Park, and there's that, but the Kansas City area in general has a pretty extensive Pagan, or metaphysical community, and, um, you have the hub, the center point is, will always be Aquarius in Westport. Um, and Barb Criswell, who runs Aquarius is a very significant, and very diplomatic and well respected figure. Um, she doesn't take like a leadership role as far as affecting the direction that the community takes. She doesn't make like decrees or put herself up as a figurehead, but she is incredibly respected and what she says is taken very seriously in a lot of things. And she's a sweetheart, too. She's a very friendly person, and she will just let you spill your heart out for stupid things to her, and, as long as you're not taking away from her business too much. Um, but there's a pretty extensive network of—the Pagan community's mostly centered around authors and shop owners, and so you have a couple, you have a couple shops in Leavenworth, uh, in the Kansas City area, in, in Lawrence, and one in Manhattan that I know about, and, uh, most of those shop owners are pretty well connected. You also have a psychic fair circuit, and you have certain people that run covens or other groups that help organize or work with those fairs, and a lot of those are run by the same people. Um, the Phoenix Goddess, uh, Circle is one such group. Um, as far as I know they're, uh, a women only group, although they have a couple of male, um, I don't know if you call them “allies,” “outliers,” “pets,” uh... whatever, that are associated with the group, but they still don't go to like the primary functions, and those people, um, they have their figures in a lot of pies in the

community and they help organize a lot of things. Um, so there's a lot of networking going on, and a lot of smaller groups, that—I, I'm not personally involved with, but that I know of, and that they interact with each other and put on events and activities and Pagan Pride Day, and then of course there's also, uh—

D: Pagan Pride Day is in Kansas City? [. . .] a Kansas City one?

S: Uh, yeah, the, it was, I think it was last August, or September, and it's in, uh, Mission, Mission, Kansas.

D: Oh. Okay.

S: Um, and they just have some vendors and other things going on up there, uh, some workshops and other stuff. And then of course there's, uh, Heartland Spiritual Alliance, which runs the Heartland Pagan Festival, and then there's Earth Rising, that, uh, maintains the, uh, Gaea Retreat Center.

D: Now is Earth Rising specifically, is it a Pagan group? Like, what are they?

S: Earth Rising is a group that is specifically designed just to maintain the Gaea Retreat.

D: Okay.

S: Um, they maintain the land, they set up reservations, and they, they take care of the land itself. Um, to my knowledge it is a Pagan group in the sense that most people that are in it are Pagan. But the Gaea Retreat is open to all people, of all religions, as long as they want to come there and play nice. So.

D: Yeah, yeah. Okay. I was gonna ask, then, are there sort of like, I don't know, does land or specific spots, do they play like any important role for you, you know places like Gaea for instance.

S: Gaea, definitely. Um, I have a rather personal and kind of intense connection to the land at Gaea. Um, I guess you would call it a spiritual connection, or, I actually had an experience up there where I made a very deep connection to the land. Um, and plus when you go someplace like that, and have, you know, religious experiences or just parties, or other things up there, you know, it's, it, it affects you, you stay there and it is a retreat. You retreat from the rest of society and go to this place where everyone's got kind of a mindset that's outside of normal, everyday life, and that becomes significant, and so the place where you hold that at becomes significant. I'm sure that if we had an event like Heartland Pagan Festival someplace else, it would still have a significance, but the land itself is, is important. So, um, other places, um, there's a, um, a location on Indian Creek, by, uh, off of 107th and Knoll, um, and, uh, there's a park up along there, it's Knoll Park, and there's a place where the creek goes through the park, and there's like a little forested area, and I used to go there a lot and do meditations and things like that, and, uh, that's kind of a personal spot. 'Cause you can climb back through the woods and go down into the creek bed which is far below the level of the path and you can hide down in there and people can walk by, they can be walking right above you, and they can't see you. And so, um, that's kind of a place where I've retreated in the past. Um, Shawnee Mission Park, uh, has a lot of places that I've been, and spent time with people of that same mindset, we've done exercises or meditations and things like that, or just kind of gone to hang out, and get away. There was one spot where, uh, some friends of mine and I, we actually set up a ritual site, and the way that this,

this was actually near the interstate, and um, it was at a cloverleaf, interchange, on the interstate, you had the, the main road go through, and it was a road that isn't very well travelled, most times, and then the interstate goes by and you've got the little cloverleaf exchanges on the exit, so you have this bluff that's surrounded by the exit ramp, and it's just kind of sitting there on its own, and it's elevated very high so you can get on top of it, and people can't see you. So we would, we found a, a way to climb up there easily, and we made a clearing, and we made a clearing, and we got some stones and made like a little ritual circle, and we used to go up there and hold ritual, and that was a pretty significant spot for awhile, but then, that group of people, we had a falling out, and, uh, the spot just became kind of too difficult to maintain on my own, and even to access. You've gotta be very careful when, especially when you're doing stuff with witchcraft, when you're going out at night by yourself, and the cops'll find you, and you've got swords or knives and stuff, and they're like, what are you doing here, you can't have that here, come with us, so..um, Olathe Lake, there were a couple spots down there that we used to meet up, I mean, basically anywhere where you had a park or an easily accessible natural area that was isolated, we would find it, and we would go there. There was even a cave complex up near Liberty, Missouri that was an abandoned, uh, it was an abandoned storage cave that was partially collapsed, and we would go in there, and just, you could go in there and I mean, it's dark, it's quiet, you can do some interesting things in there, or you could just go 'round with a flashlight and find the graffiti that says what year they had the party there. So, but, anything that removes you from the mindset of regular, everyday life, was, was valuable, and any place you could go back to that was secluded enough to do that.

D: Can you talk about, I guess, I don't know, what some of the reasons are that you would do ritual?

S: Umm, well. Magic, uh, getting a bunch of people together and having them focus on attaining a common goal for one person or for everyone there. The idea being that the more people you have raising that energy, or consciousness, the more effective it would be. Um, at the time a religious experience wasn't something that I was looking for, but there have been plenty of rituals, especially recently, that have had very significant religious experiences for me too, and it's the same thing. You have a group of people, they raise a certain energy, and you, you have that contact with the numinous, and you have that experience, and it affects everyone a little differently, but, you have a group of people there that are still having an experience, and they can support you as you try and make sense of it, and that's pretty important.

D: And what's the difference I guess between, can you talk a little bit more about this distinction between religious and not religions, and what the difference is in the experience?

S: Well, ooh, that's a good one. Um, I would say that the religious, the emphasis on the religious is, um, then you end up using the word spiritual and we have to define that, uh. What I consider religious is getting in touch with the divine, or whatever you'd want to call the divine, in a way that you have an experience that you have a connection with the divine, and ideally you would bring something back from that, it would change you somehow or give you insight somehow, but what you're really looking for is an ecstatic experience where you have this contact with something that is beyond the edge of what we consider the real or the normal.

D: So contact, connection, interaction, that sort of thing.

S: Yeah, uh, magic itself, it can involve altered states of consciousness, but for me, magic is very much about reaching that state of consciousness in order to achieve direct results. You do it for a purpose. It's not, it's sometimes, there are some types of magic that are spiritual in nature, and especially when you're dealing with Qabalah, you have a lot of ritual magic that is aimed at attaining higher states of consciousness in union with the Godhead, so you do have that, but you have, um, very much you have a specific goal in mind, and with a religious experience, it's, it's a little more vague, um, it's also can be more communal—

D: Not goal directed, necessarily, beyond the connecting—

S: Yeah, but it's just more of, I would say, gaining a perspective on the fact that you're not the center of the universe, that there is something beyond your understanding, and that you're capable of getting a taste of it, but you can't fully grasp it. There's, there's something beyond the edge that you can just barely make out, but if you actually fully reach out and grasp it, you have to go over the edge yourself, and you're not comin' back. So, there's kind of, I've worked with the idea of the liminal a lot in some of my writings, where witches, and magicians and wizards, or whatever you have, the people of the crossroads, they exist in that liminal place, and deal with liminal things, they help you make sense of things that don't fit in the normal world, when people die, when people are, are hurt, when you, when you have unusual experiences, when things don't make sense, there, we exist in that kind of in-between place where the unusual isn't that unusual for us, and so, when we encounter people that are lost in there, we either, it's either our obligation to guide, you know, comfort them and guide them back into the "real," or, teach them what we know so they can help us out, but you know, people that keep moving on don't generally come back. I guess that would be where they die or something.

D: So I guess I wanna back up a little bit and ask you to tell me a little bit about Qabalah. You know, the elevator speech, about, you know, not really, but I guess talk about, for our listening audience, what is the Qabalah, what do you mean when you talk about...

S: The Qabalah is a system of, um, mysticism that is based out of Jewish philosophy and mythology, and also of medieval Christian philosophy and mythology, and it is essentially a series of correspondences between different elements of reality to different aspects of the divine, and I think that the simplest way I can explain it is, one Qabalistic author and magician, uh, Lon Milo DuQuette, I love that guy, he was a student of Israel Regardie, and, uh, he basically said that the Qabalah is a way of studying the world around you, and focusing on how everything is interconnected to the point where you can look at one thing, and see the entire universe reflected in it, and focus on that to the point where your mind snaps, you go insane, and achieve enlightenment. And for a lot of the more traditional Qabalah, the whole point of it is to attain that union with the Godhead, to attain that kind of enlightenment, and most of the more ceremonial magic versions of the Qabalah have the same goal, they just accept that if you're going to align yourself with certain aspects of the divine in certain ways, the road works both ways, the divine essence can influence you, but you can also influence reality in general, and you can cause things to go better for you, or things to go worse for someone else, or you can adjust, you, you can stack the deck, as it were.

D: And it's all based on these connections among everything.

S: Yes. It really essentially is the way that everything is interconnected, and how you influence those connections.

D: Well, how important have books been for you?

S: Recently, not very. I have kind of stagnated a little bit. But, with anyone who's involved in the occult or Paganism, books are vital. Especially since we're still very small in numbers, and we're still very spread out, and like I said, the centers of the Pagan community are shops, and authors. We don't have celebrities, we have authors. Those are the big names. Books are vitally important because that's where you learn your stuff. It's really hard, especially if you live out in rural Kansas, or, or even in Kansas City, to go out and find a group of people. You start with the books. And that's where you learn all your background, and that's where you learn all your theories, and then you start, through the bookstores always have the interest of, you meet people in the bookstore. You talk to people there, you would go online and do searches for people talking about this book and you'd ask questions about it and they'd recommend more books, and that's how a lot of people learn a lot of their practices, and then maybe, most, most Pagan practitioners are solitary. So, books become the primary source of information, and then a lot of people will maintain their own records, develop their own rituals, their own correspondences, and then you have the, the Book of Shadows, which is the, the record of a coven, or, or a magical group, um, I draw a distinction between a Book of Shadows and a journal. Uh, I keep a journal. It's personal. It's just for me. A Book of Shadows is typically meant for other people to see as well. It's meant to be passed on, or viewed by other people. So, but writing your own book is actually religiously significant in a lot of Wiccan groups. You would have, sure you'd have books, and sources that you'd read for certain things, but then you have your own book that the group itself makes, and that becomes specific to that group, and important to that group.

D: Well then, I guess as a follow-up to that, I mean how important is, um, how important is creativity, or how important is, like art-making in, in your practice, for instance?

S: Um, in my practice?

D: Yeah.

S: I guess that depends on how you define art. In general art is very widely, creativity and art is very widely prized in the Pagan community, and in fact there are some people I've encountered who say that you can't really be Pagan if you're not an artist. And I find that a little pretentious and obnoxious, because what it implies to me is that if you can't draw or play music, you can't really be Pagan.

D: Yeah. Well, what if what it means is that, you know, you know, you must, sort of, necessarily be kind of coming up with ritual and stuff like that, and that's an art form in itself, in order to be Pagan.

S: Well, you could argue that, but the people that I was specifically dealing with were arguing specifically that if you can't draw or paint or something then you're not, you're not receiving divine inspiration and you don't have a connection to the divine. So, but I've also been told by people that I can't practice magic because I have a penis, so, you know. There's a lot of ways of looking at the world, but. Um.

D: Well for yourself, according to your own definitions.

S: I value art. Um, I can't draw to save my life. Uh, I can't paint very well. I can sculpt. I can sculpt very well. Or at least I used to be able to. Um, I actually have, um, my lararium and, uh, I

don't have statuary on my altar, I actually got Sculpey, that little home-bake clay, and I have made busts of my gods out of that.

D: Can you say, sorry to interrupt you for just a second—can you give a brief definition of what a lararium is?

S: Uh, a lararium is a specific shrine to the ancestral gods, to the, the paterfamilias, uh, the specific, I guess you'd call it a deity or a spirit, that is an embodiment of the family itself. Um, I believe historically it was considered that the oldest patri-, it would be patriarch, was regarded in that way, and they would actually have a representation of that person, or it may, I'm not too up on my research, I've been slacking, it may also refer to the, uh, the oldest remembered male figure, but you would actually have a figure of that family member, a figure that embodied the spirit of the family itself and its lineage and history. And then you have little figures of cup bearers, and, you usually have like a little shelf around it, and you'd have a place where you leave offerings of wine or incense or other things, and then there's, there's a very specific way, traditionally, you're supposed to do it, and I don't adhere to that because it's very technical and everything, and, I basically have a little thing that I've made out of Sculpey that looks kinda cool, and I don't have a image of a particular person, I actually have the shield from my family crest. That represents the, the family quite well for me. And then I have a little incense burner in front of it, and, uh, I've got a couple other trinkets on that part of the altar. I actually have it in front of a large, uh, replica of the Statue of Liberty that I got from Ellis Island when I was like nine, and then I have a little copy of the Constitution, because I figured that, you know, home country, all that stuff should kinda go together, you know, so, it's more of a gesture, I suppose, I, I don't actually worship political figures. But that's, that's pretty much it.

D: But I mean, uh, for instance, so you keep a, I guess here's sort of a two-part question, you know: one is, sort of a follow-up, insofar as, so writing is something that's important to you, and you've blogged and, I don't know if you're still blogging or not, but you know, that to me is sort of being, participating in a spiritual community, or a religious community or something like that, and that's also creating.

S: I very much consider, I've been frustrated 'cause I haven't been writing recently, and I do view that as a spiritual exercise and as an expression of myself, um, and I've actually, I'll do, I'll even do Tarot readings online for people, and then do write-ups, and I try and be poetic about how I write it, I try and make it entertaining, um, I, I answer questions about it, but writing is a spiritual exercise for me, um, music is very important to me, um, I, I can play music, not very well, I'm not professionally trained or anything and I haven't done it seriously for a long time, but I, I have a, a couple instruments and I'll occasionally, uh, the music I play when I gave offerings is part of the offering. I've got a really great, uh, I've got a couple of albums, it's from a group of archaeology students and classics students that actually went and reconstructed the music of the time as they think it would have been, using authentic reconstructed instruments, and it's really interesting. Some of it's a little stuffy, it sounds like a bunch of grad students playing, that aren't familiar with the instruments, trying to play 'em, but the later ones get very, and they actually, those groups actually consulted like the HBO miniseries Rome and helped them develop the soundtrack for it. And I love the soundtrack for that too, so. Uh, but I can do some of the sculpting, uh, the music, um, those aspects of art I can very well do, and, I don't write poetry or anything specifically as devotionals, but I suppose I could, but, um, but those, those elements are pretty important, um, and even in general if I'm not creating something, the

way my altar itself is set up, that's an aesthetic quality that's important to me. It, it can't just be the right stuff kind of piled together, it has to have, it has to be arranged in a way that feels right. So I think there's kind of an art to that.

D: I mean, I really consider the whole spectrum of, I mean it's a, you know, you're creating what you do, I guess inspired by, but ultimately your practice, you create it, you know, so I don't, I don't know, it seems like a wholly creative endeavor to me, really.

S: Food. Food is also very important. Food offerings on special occasions and for me, if, if I were to call myself an artist for anything, it's because I'm a cook, and I take a lot of pride in what I cook, and [. . .] my food that I cook, and the way that I do it, and the way that I present it, so that's definitely an art for me, so.

D: And what kind of stuff would you make for an offering?

S: I actually developed these things, um, I read up on a Roman rite, uh, I'm probably pronouncing it wrong, uh, Suovetaurilia, and apparently during a ritual, they would actually slaughter, um, a bull, a pig, and a sheep. And they would parade, they would roast them and parade the meat around an area to purify it, and then they would have a feast featuring those three meats, and, whatever else.

D: Purify the area, or purify the meat?

S: The area.

D: The area, okay.

S: They'd actually purify the area by, by parading those, those meats around, it would purify that area. Um, and it was used to like, dedicate buildings and um, um, marketplaces and other things like that. Um, but it was a purification ritual. So what I did, is I looked, okay, you've got beef, you've got lamb, you've got pork. And so I actually got inspired by it and I, I went out and got some little cuts of, um, I got some steaks and some, uh, some lamb, and I cut them up into little cubes, or little kind of strips, and I put, uh, I marinated the, uh the steak in red wine and olive oil, and the, the lamb in I think lemon juice and olive oil, and some garlic and seasonings, and then I cut 'em into little strips, and I add those together, and I put an onion slice on one side and a bell pepper slice on the other, and then I wrapped them in bacon. And then I broiled 'em, and besides the fact that they're absolutely delicious, leaving that as an offering for me was a modern interpretation of that, that ritual, and the first time I did it, I actually had one, and I paraded it around the house on a platter and then set it down on the altar. Um, otherwise, normally, it's just kind of, whatever you've got from a meal. Sometimes the meals are catered to whatever holiday, but, it's just kinda whatever you've got, you leave some there. Most of what I leave is wine, or, uh, uh rum, or, uh, bourbon, depending on what deity I'm dealing with. Jupiter is partial to bourbon.

D: Okay. From personal experience, or--?

S: From personal experience, um, and, also from some experiences that other people I've talked to have recommended. Um, for me, Venus prefers rum, not sure why that is, but, uh, Venus tends to prefer rum. Uh, Mars is okay with rum, or Venus, or rum or bourbon. Um, and they all go with wine, Mercury loves coffee. It increases your mental acuity, it's perfect. Um, for my personal practice I will tend to leave offerings to specific deities based on the day of the week,

uh, so, uh, Wednesday's associated with uh, Mercury, so on that day I would light incense to Mercury and then maybe, leave a little espresso in his offering dish, and then uh, on Fridays, that would be Venus, so I would leave some incense for her, and, and pour some rum or some wine in her little dish. And I have little shrines set up to each deity on the altar, and they're very specific what's included, like, my Mercury shrine, I don't have a little bust or statue of Mercury, so I was looking for something to represent him, and I have an old cellphone, so that seemed to embody him pretty well, the idea of communication and that quickness and so I have a cellphone, one of my favorite pens, and a, uh, a twenty-sided die, so.

D: Um, a little bit, over here...how important has the Internet been to you?

S: Vital. Absolutely vital. Um, a lot of the um, the biggest connection that I made without the Internet was my friend Tim, and through him, Josef, and that was pure happenstance. Um, basically, uh, Tim used to get high with a friend whose mother was dating Josef at the time. I may not have wanted to say that. Whatever. Anyways, um—

D: I can cut out whatever you want.

S: But uh, uh, I'm sure it was past the statute of limitations. Um, but beyond that, a large portion of the other connections that I've made were based upon contacts that I've made online, or groups that I've found online. Um, even my experience with the, uh, the Pagan group at KU, the, uh, Wiccan/Pagan Alliance, or which then became KU Cauldron and then became Wiccan/Pagan Alliance again, and then, I believe is defunct, um, um, but I found that through an online search, you know. I suppose I could have asked around at student services and found it, but, [...] everything's online. And, there are several people that I've met that I consider friends that I talk to, that I've never met in person, I've only known them online, and especially now, you know I run a blog, I've got a Tumblr account, and I've met a lot of people through Tumblr that I, I consider reasonably close friends, that I've talked to about some personal stuff and they've given me advice, um, we've even done like, video chats, uh, with like five or six people together, you know, that's a good time. The, the theory is, is that we were supposed to talk about Pagan stuff, but we ended just gossiping, you know, and that's good, that's part of it, connecting with people is very important to me, um. Hospitality, um, is, I view it as a religious obligation, both from the aspect of my Roman orientation, and also just the family tradition of the fact that my mother's side of the family was Italian. And, and even on my father's Irish side, were hospitality cultures, hospitality is very important, when you take somebody into your house, you take care of them, you feed them, food is very important there, so.

D: Um, let's see. Well I guess, um, have you ever, have you ever experienced any problems because of doing what you do and being open about it, I guess.

S: Nothing too directly. Um, most of the problems that I've encountered have been pretty passive or minor. Um, people giving you dirty looks if you wear a pentacle necklace out in public, uh, people accusing you of worshipping Satan, people passive aggressively asking you to go to church with them, people saying they'll pray for you. Those are, those are annoyances to me, it's, it's not a big deal, and honestly, I know that on some level deep down inside they mean well, and it doesn't bother me if someone's genuinely concerned for me. Uh, even if it's annoying, it doesn't bother me that much, um, if someone truly and genuinely believes that what I do puts my soul in jeopardy and they're trying to help me, that's kind of sweet. I mean, they barely know me and they're that concerned about my spiritual wellbeing that they want to talk to

me about it. I can deal with that. Now if I still them to stop, and they keep doing it, then they're being jerks and you know, I may have to get rude with them, but you know, most people I've encountered haven't. Um, a lot of it is more of a dismissive attitude. I actually helped the political campaign once for a, uh, uh, candidate in a Republican primary, and, uh, I actually mentioned to her that I was Pagan, and she just made the comment, "Well, we won't, we just won't mention that," and it's like, "Why not? Don't you want to know that your policies are so awesome that you have Pagans supporting you?" I mean, wouldn't that be a bonus? But, you know, it was very dismissive, and I could kind of see that that could be turned to a negative for a political campaign, but you know, those, those kinds of things. Um, I've, I haven't worried about it in situations of like, child custody or anything like that. Um, mostly because my ex-wife was pretty okay with it. She did refer to it as, that weird stuff I'm into, but, you know, and she's never been aggressive about anything like that, so. Um—

D: Is your son involved in any of this kind of stuff, or not really?

S: Noo. Uh, I would say that that's probably the biggest concern that I've had is that my ex-wife is, uh, nominally Christian, um, and we basically made an agreement when we had a divorce that my son would not be involved in that weird stuff that I'm involved in, at least until he became an adult and was able to make his own decisions into it. So he was raised vaguely Christian, as I call it, as you call it non-denominational something or other, but he's vaguely Christian, and he's been allowed to go with me to psychic fairs and stuff like that where I've done Tarot readings or even, uh, helped out, and that seems to be okay, but, he's, he's not Pagan in any sense, he, he isn't involved in any of that stuff, and I honestly don't know what he would think about it, because we haven't had those discussions.

D: Oh, that's interesting.

S: Um, he is getting old-, he is getting near that age where I am going to start asking, talking to my ex-wife about, would it be okay if I talked to him about it. I don't know if he'd be interested or not, he could kind of make his own choice on that. So.

D: Okay. And then I, I have sort of a question that you can take any way you want, which is that, is there anything special about being a Pagan in Kansas? Is there anything special about the experience of it, do you think?

S: Well, I don't know because I haven't been a Pagan anywhere else.

D: Mmhm.

S: So I'm not sure. Um, the Pagan community in Kansas City is very vibrant. We have a very, there's always infighting, especially in Paganism, it's gonna happen in any community where you have a bunch of small groups with strong, leaders that have strong personalities—

D: I can attest to that, yeah.

S: Um, but, the Pagan community in this area is pretty good. Um, and they're pretty supportive, um, as long as you don't bruise certain egos. And um, I think that that's actually a resource, uh, and I think it's valuable, and I don't know, I know that there are a lot of other places where that's not the case, um, Wichita is supposed to have a very, very tight-lipped and, uh, prone to infighting Pagan community. Uh, I've talked to people that have come from out there, and, and they've come to Kansas City, and they just talked about how relaxed it is out here, and how

everyone's friendly and engaging, and out there everyone's very secretive and this group will talk smack on that group and they're fighting them and everything else, and there's a lot of that that seems to be going along. Um, in Manhattan, you have a lot of Norse Paganism, uh, in part because there's a strong military community there, and that tends to draw the Heathen crowd. Um, but again, I mean, Kansas, it's a, Kansas is an unusual place on its own, because it's a conservative place that has historically had progressive ideas, and so you've got this kind of interesting mix there, where the general population leans conservative on some issues you wouldn't expect them to, and leans liberal on some issues you might not expect them to, for being a, quote, red state, um, and so, and some aspects of that Pagan religiosity fit in very well to Kansas, and some of 'em don't, it really depends on how you present it, I suppose.

D: Yeah, I mean I guess I'm kind of wondering too about, you know, so I've talked to you, and I've talked to Jeremy so far, and Jeremy is obviously very liberal, Democrat, whatever, and you, on the other hand, were like, working for a Republican campaign. Do you find that the community, um, tends one way or the other, or Pagans tend one way or the other in Kansas—

S: Yes.

D: Or, are they pretty split?

S: Um, if you're dealing with Heathens, they're most likely to be politically conservative. Um, most of the Pagans that I've dealt with, um, personally I'm much more of a libertarian, um, I deal with the Republican party because that way I can influence the primaries. Um, but, um, they, in general the Pagan community in Kansas doesn't tend to get much farther right than Libertarian-esque, uh, and they tend to be very liberal, and in fact, I have been more accepted as an open Pagan in Republican circles than I have as a Republican in some Pagan circles. Um, in fact I had one lady, uh, one girl at Camp Gaea yelling at me for about five minutes 'cause I mentioned I was Republican, and she was screaming at me about how Republicans steal money, food, and birth control from poor people. And, I mean, I just, I had no idea what she was going on about, I was like, I've never broken into anybody's house and stolen condoms, you know, I, I, if you want to have a discussion about some issues, we can do that, but, you're being kind of, mean. So, and, still in both of those circles they're a little skeptical of you know, why are you here. I've been accused, because I'm a capitalist, I've been accused of being a Christian plant in some Pagan groups.

D: Hm. Interesting. COINTELPRO's comin' back, or whatever.

S: It's, whatever, so, some people, and then I think a lot of that is because you have people, especially in a more conservative place, um, Paganism in general tends to be very open and accepting and it's, it's an outsider religion, so if you don't fit in for whatever reason, they'll take you in, and so there's a lot of, uh, rejection of mainstream cultural values or anything seen as conservative, and it, you know, it's a fair critique, I mean, um, I've, I've supported gay marriage for quite some time, um, and the Republican party still seems to not be catching up on, with that, and I've, I've been vocal of the Republican Party for it, and that's kind of aggravated some of my Republican friends, but, you know the, a lot of those issues go back and forth, but the community itself tends to be much more politically liberal than anything else.

D: Interesting. Okay. Well then, I guess, finally I would just say, is there anything else you want to say? Anything you think we haven't covered, or that you think is important.

S: Um...Not really, I, I didn't know if you wanted to talk about the WPA or anything like that?

D: The WPA?

S: The Wiccan/Pagan Alliance, uh, the student group at KU?

D: I don't know anything about that, actually, I was asking Jeremy a little about the, when it was the Cauldron, but, uh, yeah, tell me, tell me about that.

S: Well, the, it's a funny story because, when I was originally commuting to, uh, K, to Lawrence, to KU from Overland Park, and I was just looking for a group to join in, and it's funny because I was hoping to meet women. It's a common theme, I know. The irony is, is that, um, I ended up meeting a woman that I dated for six and a half years in that group, and she wasn't even Pagan. Um, but uh, but um, no, it was, it was a student group, and it offered a lot of support for, um, it wasn't just the students, 'cause about half the members weren't students, they were just locals from Lawrence, and that helped me, I met a lot of friends through that, um, and that helped me integrate into the community in general, in Lawrence. But it was basically, we, we had discussions once a week, and that was pretty much it, and we had a couple of ritual activities and everything, but it helped me develop more of a leadership role, um, as I was president for a couple years, um, but it was just another networking group, um, we tried to be as active as possible and advertise for the student community and, and cater to them, but eventually the influence from the people that weren't students was, and we talked about actually splitting the group up and having a group that was just for the locals and a group that was just for the students, that would have worked, and then there was the name change, to KU Cauldron, and then the name change back eventually, and...but, um, it was a group, it, it was a group that stood out a little bit on the, we tried to make it shine a little bit for the campus community, and we did attract a lot of people there, and had some pretty, uh, active discussions going on there for a little while, in its more active years, and I think that that did help people who were not sure about where to go, or that weren't sure how to approach an interest in Paganism, we, we had a lot of people that would come for a couple of sessions, ask a lot of questions, and then kind of had to go off on their own and I've even encountered some of them later on, and, and that group wasn't for them, but we pointed them in the right direction, and when you're dealing with college-age people that are just leaving home and trying to figure out who they are, and trying to access resources that are different, you know, outside of what they could normally get, that's very important. And so I think that that group was a good thing. I kind of hope that they get enough people to start it up again some time.

D: Yeah, I was surprised to discover that it was sort of defunct.

S: The membership dwindled down to about three people, and they didn't have enough people to actually have the necessary officers, so it kind of went down.

D: Oh, gotcha. Okay—

S: But that's—

D: Yeah.

S: --the general gist of it.

D: Yeah. Anything, anything else?

S: Not that I can think of, is there anything else you'd like to ask about?

D: I don't think so, I think I've, I think I've pretty much covered...so, thank you so much, this was really great!

S: Thank you.

D: Thanks.

*I have used a "Q" here, as opposed to a "K" or a "C," in line with the spelling used by many practitioners of magic—including Sean.