

Gwyneth

Interviewed by Diana Brown in Lawrence, Kansas

June 31st, 2014

Transcribed by Diana Brown

Abstract: Oral history interview with Gwyneth conducted by Diana Brown at the Lawrence Public Library in Lawrence, Kansas, on July 31, 2014. Gwyneth is a second generation Pagan of a sort, whose parents participated in Pagan celebrations but did not intentionally raise her in any one religion. In this interview, Gwyneth talks about her early experiences with Paganism, her love of mythology and nature, and the functioning of the Web of Oz coven. This interview was conducted for the Religion in Kansas Project as part of a summer fieldwork internship funded by the Friends of the Department of Religious Studies.

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DIANA BROWN: Okay. So, if you just wanna say, like your name, and where you're from, that'd be great to start us out.

GWYNETH: Yeah. I'm Gwyneth [. . .]. I'm from hereabouts.

DIANA BROWN: Cool. Okay, um, and I guess, um, I want to ask sort of, where did it all begin, in terms of, did you have any kind of prior religious background, were you raised with anything, or—

GWYNETH: Uh, well, my dad would like to describe himself as an anti-social Pagan.

DIANA BROWN: Okay.

GWYNETH: He didn't bother with any of the gatherings or anything. Going out to the garden was religious enough for him. And my mom likes to describe herself as a militant agnostic.

DIANA BROWN: Okay.

GWYNETH: She doesn't know, and nobody else does either. But she's, she sort of, mm, hung out with the Pagan crowd from college on, so, I was not exactly raised Pagan, because neither of them believed that children should be raised in any religion, but, it was one of the ones that was batting around the house.

DIANA BROWN: That's interesting. I think you're the first person I've interviewed so far who's been, of a sort, of a second generation. So that was around, basically, and then, so when did you start, I don't know, becoming interested in it for yourself?

GWYNETH: Uh, let's see, for some reason when I was eleven, there was a May Day that a friend of mine, my, my mom took a friend of mine and me too, and that was fun,

the may pole was fun. And then there was a Brigit the year after that, right after that, I was twelve, and, yeah, I, I liked the guided meditation that they did, I, I liked the meditation, I said, “that was fun, I want to do that again.” So that’s pretty much when it started.

DIANA BROWN: Yeah. And then what form did it sort of take for you at first?

GWYNETH: Um, it was--, well, there wasn’t really a form, yeah, I liked reading mythology, I liked going out and playing in the trees.

DIANA BROWN: Almost all the standard things, except that you had this background to plug some of into, maybe.

GWYNETH: Right, yeah.

DIANA BROWN: That’s interesting. And then, I guess, was there a point when, um, so you’re in Web of Oz, for instance, now, so was there a point when it became something where you sought out a social, or a group to practice with?

GWYNETH: Technically the first May Day that I went to was a pre-Web of Oz event.

DIANA BROWN: Ohh. Okay.

GWYNETH: And, the Brigit that I went to was the first Brigit the Web of Oz did.

DIANA BROWN: Oh, wow.

GWYNETH: It wasn’t their first ritual, but, it was in their first year. So, I’m not quite a founding member of that group—

DIANA BROWN: However...

GWYNETH: Yeah.

DIANA BROWN: Almost again, like a second generation sort of member. And that group just kind of clicked with you?

GWYNETH: Yeah, pretty, well, they’re convenient.

DIANA BROWN: Yeah.

GWYNETH: And I do have a lot of friends in that group, so it’s usually been a pretty reasonable place to go hang out.

DIANA BROWN: Yeah. ‘Cause I mean, not every group that’s just around necessarily does, like ultimately jibe with you, so—

GWYNETH: Right, yeah.

DIANA BROWN: --you know.

GWYNETH: When I was at school, there was a group in Denver that I would sometimes go to their events, and it didn’t sync up quite as well. It was fine, it was fun. I missed the Web of Oz.

DIANA BROWN: Yeah. Um, so—

GWYNETH: I'm not big on a laid out structure, and the Web of Oz, the structure is mostly about how you're gonna plan what you're gonna do, and anything else you do is kind of up in the air. So that works for me quite well.

DIANA BROWN: Yeah. So there's sort of, a kind of creative, I don't know...

GWYNETH: Yeah. Yeah, it can be wildly different every time.

DIANA BROWN: Yeah.

GWYNETH: Although we fall into patterns.

DIANA BROWN: That is...can you tell me a little bit about the Web of Oz, actually?

GWYNETH: Yeah, sure. Um...

DIANA BROWN: I don't know that much about it except from what I found on the website, which basically stated that it was kind of inspired by Starhawk.

GWYNETH: It's more the organizational structure that's inspired by Starhawk, yeah. Um, yeah, the consensus process, and, uh, what we have learned about the consensus process is, you can usually come up with something that everybody can tolerate, but it's gonna take a long time, as everybody voices their opinions.

DIANA BROWN: But it works, for you guys, anyway, for the most party?

GWYNETH: It's worked pretty well, for the most part. There've been some dust ups here and there, a few feuds, I was a little too young to be aware of the worst of them. That was good.

DIANA BROWN: Okay. And I guess, I mean as far as, I don't know, what, can you say anything more about sort of the kind of, I don't know, I guess anything about, about the group beyond it's sort of, beyond the way it organizes itself.

GWYNETH: Yeah, well, it's very fluid.

DIANA BROWN: Yeah.

GWYNETH: It's really very, the active people in it are very, it's a very small group right now, but it's been really big in the past, and just, it's, and you know, it's, once you've been in the Web of Oz, as long as somebody still remembers you, you're pretty much allowed back in any time, unless you had a serious dustup. We've never actually banned anybody, so, uh.

DIANA BROWN: Are there, do you do things like initiations, or, no?

GWYNETH: Uh, if somebody asked the Web to do an initiation, I'm sure they would.

DIANA BROWN: Okay. But that's not a required thing, it's not a matter of course...

GWYNETH: Yeah. It's really more of a, uh, I forget how they described it on the website, but it's, yeah, it's, it's a, uh, community meeting place for various people of the

Pagan, earth-religion bent. And uh, it's not a formal coven. Even though sometimes, like right now, it's down to coven size!

DIANA BROWN: Yeah, yeah. Okay, so it's almost like a bunch of people with very, like, individual, you know, sort of beliefs and practices coming together to do something in a, in a group setting.

GWYNETH: Yeah.

DIANA BROWN: And it's interesting that you do figure out how to make it work then, if you're each...yeah.

GWYNETH: Yeah. And it's pretty different, depending, well, 'cause it's the people who turn up for the planning meeting who plan the ritual, so—

DIANA BROWN: Who have something that invested in—

GWYNETH: --Yeah, yeah.

DIANA BROWN: That's interesting. Um, what else was I gonna say about, uh, um, I guess, do you find that there are people who sort of, decide, like, sometimes, there might for one particular holiday some person has more invested in some particular thing and so they'll end up kind of, and everybody's like, "alright, you do your thing, and we'll"—

GWYNETH: It's, people have been known to come in with an entire ritual in their mind—

DIANA BROWN: Really.

GWYNETH:--And say, "I would love to do this"—

DIANA BROWN: Yeah.

GWYNETH:--"How does that sound to everybody?"

DIANA BROWN: It requires a group.

GWYNETH: Right. You still have to go through the consensus process for hashing it out, but, you know it's not terribly uncommon for the group to go, "Hey, nobody else has any ideas—cool! Let's do it!"

DIANA BROWN: [. . .] do your vision.

GWYNETH: Yeah. And, you know, other times we all gather and go, "So, anybody have any ideas, at all?"

DIANA BROWN: Yeah. Well, okay, so, what is your, how has your individual practice aside from a group kind of changed over time and what does it look like?

GWYNETH: Yeah, it's just sort of everyday life. It's, uh, there's another group of people that wanted to do more about the interior work and meditation that I meet with and we're struggling to explain what our daily practice is to each other—I still can't do it. And it's, 'cause I'm not big on rules and formula, so the whole idea of, "I will get up and meditate every morning at 6 o'clock doesn't jibe with me very well, so, yeah, it's just that

everyday life is about spirit, in every conceivable way. Trying to maintain that awareness.

DIANA BROWN: So it ends up being more of like an ethos than equating to a specific set of practices.

GWYNETH: Yeah. It's a mindset. I think the closest I come to a spiritual practice is the music. And that's just because I'm so completely involved in music that it takes over everything.

DIANA BROWN: How long have you been doing that?

GWYNETH: Well I started playing flute when I was ten, but my first instrumental lesson was back on violin when I was four. Musical family, so.

DIANA BROWN: And do you compose anything that you feel like has sort of explicit themes of, you know, that relate to spirituality?

GWYNETH: Absolutely. Yeah, I do a lot of improv in fact, and doing improv for ritual purposes is kind of how I got started on that, well, that and I like improv. So.

DIANA BROWN: And then I guess, I don't know, you were mentioning, so you live out in the middle of nowhere. Is, you know is land and nature writ large kind of, very—

GWYNETH: For me it really is. Being in an earth-centered area, being aware of the natural world. It's, yeah, it's, that's very much what it is.

DIANA BROWN: I guess then, sort on the opposite of that, then, how, has the Internet been important for you at all, in terms of—

GWYNETH: Uh, I want to say, not really, because I dislike the Internet so much. Um, it is true that you can do a lot of research online. The Web of Oz is doing their Lughnasadh this Saturday, and invoking Yemaya, who, I know a little about, but, it's like, 'kay, I need to do some reading, so.

DIANA BROWN: It's useful for sort of on the spot stuff.

GWYNETH: Yeah. Again, family of readers, so it's not like at the library itself I couldn't find something.

DIANA BROWN: Right. But again, sort of, you're in the moment.

GWYNETH: Yeah.

DIANA BROWN: So then have books been important to you, in your practice?

GWYNETH: Yes, oh yes.

DIANA BROWN: You said, reading mythology.

GWYNETH: I'm a big reader. Books are just important. Books and music might be more of my spiritual practice than anything else.

DIANA BROWN: Well, are there any, I guess, specific books that were, I don't know, if it's hard to sort of take books out of the whole picture, but I guess, are there any specific books that were important, that you know, that sort of catalyzed...

GWYNETH: Uh, not one in particular. It's fairy tales, mythology, uh...

DIANA BROWN: Are there ones that you read over and over again, or particular mythology that really speaks to you, or...

GWYNETH: Bunches of them. Yeah. Extremely eclectic.

DIANA BROWN: Okay.

GWYNETH: Um. There is kind of a common ground in the Pagan community of the Greek mythology, and therefore I have a tendency to keep going back to that, but that's because most people have at least some familiarity with that.

DIANA BROWN: And then, I guess, um, what would you, what words do you use to describe yourself?

GWYNETH: Um, let's see, actually I skipped the whole Pagan thing and just go straight for, you know, agnostic pantheistic animist.

DIANA BROWN: Okay.

GWYNETH: Let's get down to the definitions here.

DIANA BROWN: Okay. And how would you explain something like that to somebody.

GWYNETH: Well the agnostic is, "I don't really know for certain," it's, I just freely acknowledge that I can't know what's going on, doubt is an accepted part of...for me, and the pantheistic is, you know, whatever is divine is in everything, especially the natural world, and animistic is everything has something divine in it. They're kind of two sides of the same coin there. Which doesn't mean I don't have polytheistic leanings too, but, the other ones...

DIANA BROWN: Do you?

GWYNETH: Yes, but the other ones work better.

DIANA BROWN: Yeah.

GWYNETH: I drive some of the other more hard core polytheists a little crazy 'cause I'm very fluid with all the different deities, and "Oh, yes, of course this one turns into that one, and then of course they can be a tree, that's all fine."

DIANA BROWN: It does seem like that's becoming a very, sort of somewhat divisive kind of issue, theologically for some people.

GWYNETH: Yeah. Well, you know the groups that are trying to come up with a set liturgy, that can get a little restrictive for me. My personal definition of what Pagan ought to be is that it's very open to interpretation, that all the different paths that people follow can still be lumped in under "Pagan," that there isn't just one practice that goes there.

DIANA BROWN: Yeah. I definitely agree with that.

GWYNETH: Yeah.

DIANA BROWN: I guess, have you ever experienced any issues because of, I don't know, of your practices, or—

GWYNETH: Not especially, but I'm not very vocal about my practice, and not especially because I'm worried about it—in certain places, I would be, certainly, but—it's not relevant, no, relevant's the wrong word, it's not important that people know what my spiritual practice is, in most everyday settings, it's just not important that they know. It is important, but, only to me. So. So yeah. Mostly it doesn't really come up. And usually by the time it does, they know me quite well, and we get along well, and it's not a problem.

DIANA BROWN: That's good. Um, well, that's pretty much, that pretty much covers it for me. Is there anything else you want to say, that you think is important to say?

GWYNETH: I don't know. What sort of things were you—

DIANA BROWN: Um, I guess I'm interested in, I am interested in, sort of, um, uh, people's kind of theology and how they think about deity and, um, that's definitely kind of a particular sort of pet research things of mine. So, I mean...

GWYNETH: I really don't have a set deity image or even images. It's, I, I like variety. That's one reason I do have polytheistic leanings, I like reading the different stories, I like changing it up. I feel very limited when I try to stick to just one, even one that I like a lot, so.

DIANA BROWN: That seems like, kind of like, in some ways it's sort of like an art religion, for you. Maybe.

GWYNETH: Yeah, well, in some ways, but, at least that's how it gets expressed for me, but that's, it's not necessarily just about art. It's, I'll go out and talk to this lemon balm plant now.

DIANA BROWN: I definitely, you know, like to develop both of those things in my own, sort of leanings, I guess.

GWYNETH: Yeah. Yeah the, it's, it sounds, everybody says, "Oh yes, it's a very nature oriented thing," which sounds kind, well, what does that mean? But that's what it is. It's living with nature as much as possible, which is, I know Pagans that are like, "Oh, that means you can't kill anything and you must respect all life." Well, no—

DIANA BROWN: My cats kill things all the time.

GWYNETH: Exactly. And, your immune system kills things all the time. It's not physically possible to live without killing things. But what you're doing is working with the natural world as much as possible.

DIANA BROWN: Well, thank you very much for taking the time to do this. I appreciate it.

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