

Barbara Criswell

Interviewed by Diana Brown in Kansas City, Missouri

August 11, 2014

Transcribed by Lillian Klebenow

Abstract: Oral history interview with Barbara Criswell conducted by Diana Brown on August 11, 2014. This interview was conducted at Aquarius in Kansas City, Missouri. Barbara is the owner of Aquarius, and is involved with interfaith and philanthropic activities in Kansas City. This interview also includes discussion of Barbara's engagement with Peruvian and Mexican native religious practices. 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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Brown: Um, maybe I'll just, can I just put this here?

Criswell: If you can find a place!

Brown: So if we could start by, if you could say a little bit about yourself. Just your name and what you do.

Criswell: Okay. I'm Barbara Criswell. I'm the owner of Aquarius; it's a new age metaphysical store in Kansas City. I started in 1989 so we just celebrated our 25th anniversary.

Brown: And if you had to, I guess, identify yourself as anything in particular, religiously speaking, or spiritually speaking, what would you use?

Criswell: I would, um, classify myself as pagan. Pagan incorporates so many different things that it's kind of broad because probably eighty percent of the people who say they're pagan classify themselves as Wiccan. And I don't feel that's quite accurate for me but I certainly do see myself as an uh, nature related, um spirituality.

Brown: Is that, primarily how you would define pagan?

Criswell: Yeah, let me give you a little flyer that I did for another college.

Brown: okay, yeah!

Criswell: And it really, it's important right now. Be right back!

(Criswell gets flyer 1:23-2:35)

Criswell: (unintelligible)

Brown: Could I put that up on the site that I'm making actually?

Criswell: Yeah! I'll have to track it down because it may be on, it appears it's on another computer but yes I feel that it's um, accurate that most people that self classify

themselves as pagan would head nod with it. And it might not be everything exactly that they do but in the big concept they would agree that these things, and there's things like um, nature related, both god and goddess, uh direct contact rather than true um, intermediary things. No one holy text, um, self directed. It was those kinds of things. So I'll track that down and give that to you.

Brown: Yeah, okay. That would be great. Well um, I guess did you have any prior religious background before you got...?

Criswell: Yeah, well I have always from childhood was very interested in religion and seriously, seriously studied Christianity. And there came a point when I felt that it just didn't fit for me. The things that I read in the Bible and the things I'd been taught um, just didn't make sense. There were too many things that just didn't um—I just couldn't reconcile. So uh, I first went to Unity School of Christianity because that was a still Christian, uh but yet allowed more metaphysical input, allowed more direct access, and so that really was my um, pattern or my, my um, the way I changed from Christianity through Unity and then to the next step of a little more direct access, a little more um, little more nature centered.

Brown: I didn't realize that Unity was Christian at all.

Criswell: It's in the name, the Unity School of Christianity.

Brown: Okay, yeah there you go. Well I guess then, then what happened that you started getting in to, I don't know, something that looked a little more like paganism in particular.

Criswell: I started the store, really the thing that kicked it to the next level.

Brown: Really?

Criswell: Yeah, in fact I was still going to Christian churches when I started this store. Um, even though I knew that I was not comfortable with what was going on in them. But the more I was in the store the more I realized that um, that that was not being true to me.

Brown: Mmhm.

Criswell: But it really was being in the store and being around the customers that are here, um, working with stones for instance that, uh, made me self identify differently.

Brown: And what was the impetus to start the store then?

Criswell: Um, I'd been the vice president of marketing for a life insurance company. And they were bought by GE that was bought by [unintelligible] and all that. They were moving the company from here to Texas. And I could have gone there, they offered me my choice of several jobs and then asked if I wanted to, if would go, if I could write my own job description. But the voice in my head said "They won't be there a year" so I chose not to go. And while I was looking for things to do um, this was something that, uh, I started out and I knew that I could start a little nature centered store and that would be fun and there was potential for it.

And I didn't know at the time, I didn't fully understand at the time that more and more people were using stone energy and crystals. And it just was an opportune time to be starting a store that I was thinking of as a nature store and one that was uh, fossils and collectibles. And um, then all of the sudden there was this additional market to the new age pagan community of stones and crystals.

(7:13)

Brown: And so when was the store started, how old was it at this point?

Criswell: April 1st, 1989, we just had our 25th birthday. So this is our 25th year in business.

Brown: So you were still involved in Unity then when you started the store.

Criswell: No no, I had ten years in between.

Brown: Oh okay.

Criswell: I was at unity then for ten years I was in the insurance company.

Brown: Okay.

Criswell: And I'm 75 so I'm kind of out of years here! (laughter)

Brown: To keep track of! (laughter)

Criswell: And so 25 years here. So I started the store when I was 50 years old. 25 years ago.

Brown: Oh okay wow. But um, oh were you working for Unity then?

Criswell: No, um I was at Unity for 10 years, before I was in the insurance business.

Brown: Oh, I see I understand.

Briswell: And there I did, I was at [unintelligible] school. And also I did a lot of writing for the magazines.

Brown: Can you talk a little bit about what Unity is?

Criswell: Unity is a way of, a metaphysical way of studying Christianity. Um, they incorporate meditation, they incorporate spiritual being but I've not been directly involved with Unity in a few years. I still think they would still consider themselves as Christian even though they employ, they encourage healing, for instance. Which they're using affirmations in order to bring in what you want to create in your life.

Brown: Well what does your practice look like now then? What are some components?

Criswell: The things I do now, um, I've very intensely studied it with the indigenous people in both Mexico and in Peru. And I'm um, a priestess and a curandero both with the Mayans in Mexico and Guatemala and with the hachatuti [phonetically spelled] mesa tradition in Peru.

(9:29)

Brown: How did you find these people? How did that happen? [laughter]

Criswell: Well those things that go beyond coincidence! I had the story in one of the elders of the Itza **(9:46)** Mayans in Mexico had just written a book that had been translated into English. And he was kind of doing a tour of the United States and

was at Cahokia mounds in Saint Louis doing some work there and a mutual friend brought him back to her house in Saint Joseph and called and asked if I would be interested in doing a book signing for him. So I'd never heard of him or his book but I said "Oh sure of course I'd love it". And it was really just really short notice but we put the word out and the night he was doing his little talk there was a huge crowd. It was really well received. He talked about his book and about the Mayan belief and of course this was way way before all the 2012 stuff. This is years before that. Um, but people really enjoyed hearing him and as he finished I was talking to him and said, doing all the polite conversation stuff, so "I'm so glad you came here", "There was such a nice crowd", "You did a wonderful presentation", just that polite stuff. And while I was doing that talk I could see my mouth and all that and hear the conversation but I felt and saw the two of us on the top of this hill with the grass blowing in the wind blowing and he was talking. And I turned to him and I said "Hunbatz (11:06) what are you doing" and he said "I'm teaching you." So that was my first introduction to the Mayan shaman and the Mayan indigenous teachers. Hunbatz Men (11:18) of Mexico City is a professor at the university there but also um, one of the leading elders of the Mayan council. So after that there was an opportunity to go and study with him, [unintelligible], and I did that. Still would do it, I haven't gone in a couple of years, but I still would do that. But learned with him there and then with Don Alejandro (11:49) who is one of the leading elders in Guatemala, and his group is the Itza Mayans in the highlands of Guatemala. And he was one of the representatives to the United Nations. So very accepted and respected as a teacher. So I studied with him. So that was the Mayan part. Um, and I got credentials that they look at. Firebowl carrier and sword sister and those kinds of things that are credentials in their systems. Um, so then a mutual friend here in town had been studying with people from the Peruvian tradition. And um, the group offered a two year apprenticeship program, and I took that. And was just amazed at how similar the two beliefs systems were and the practices were. So it was just a really wonderful path formation, confirmation that this was a belief system I didn't have to make apologies for. Because I found in Christianity I was saying "Well, this verse is okay and we'll believe it and we'll act by it, but this verse we just kind of ignore or explain away". And so I was really grateful to find a path that I could follow but not have to make explanations for or rationalizations for.

(13:32)

Brown: Well I guess, what kinds of practices are involved in those paths? Or what kind of training did you have to undertake?

Criswell: Um, there's a lot of similarity between the Mayan practices and the Peruvian practices and Native American practices. So many of the same things that

people are familiar with the Native American practices are also in the others. Maybe slightly different in how they're done but the meanings behind them are much the same. Ritual, group or personal, using stones or maybe natural things as a part of that ritual symbolizing um, powers, being open to personal messages from spirits, using sage for instance for cleansing and protection. So a typical ceremony and I think maybe that's what you're asking me about. For the Mayans, okay now. The Mayans are really 30 different groups. Saying Mayan is like saying Native American. So the Itza (14:53) would have one way of doing it like maybe the Mandan would have one way of doing it which would be a little different from what the Hopi might do. But they're all Mayan, they're all Native American. So if I were talking about the group from Yucatan (15:19) which is about 2/3rds of the Mayans. The largest group. If they were going, the most important ritual they would do would be to have a cloth. Now, um, I don't want to tell you more than you want to know.

(15:26)

Brown: No no, go on!

Criswell: Because of the, the persecution of the Mayans by the Catholic party in Mexico, they had to be very um, secret about their religions. You had to be Catholic in Mexico. So they carried on their practices very quietly, very secretly, and they couldn't have a church, they couldn't have a meeting place. So the custom, and they would call it, rather than call it religion they called it the custom, was for a group of people to get together and then take all the tools they needed and carry them to a place where perhaps they've done ritual for thousands of years. But a secluded place in a mountain or [unintelligible], a stream, or especially a cave. Caves had water in it was especially sacred. And these are places where all the people came. They might not come at the same time but they would use this sacred place. And often you had to walk some distance to get to it because they really needed the secrecy, and each person would carry something different that would be used in the ritual. So one person would carry a gourd of water and another person would carry sage for smudging and another person would carry the alter cloth. Someone else would have a drum, um, then if they were fortunate enough to have someone who's a firebowl carrier, almost always a woman but it doesn't have to be but usually a woman. And she would have the sacred copal (17:14) which is an incense in a bowl and that was used if they had someone that could do that. She would take precedence over the priest if they had it, and they were more likely to have a priest than a firebowl carrier. If she was there she would have precedence over the priest. And everyone would walk into the thing, then they'd lay the cloth on the ground and have something to represent each of the elements, the four directions of the four elements. So east would be the color red and fire, and there would be a candle for instance.

And west would be black and um, water. So there would be a very, it was important that things would be very natural. So you wouldn't use plastic, and these were poor people so things were not ornate, so it was likely to be a gourd with water in it. North was white and that was spirit, and that would be a feather or a musical instrument. And south was yellow and that's earth. That's flowers that were picked along the way, um, maybe a little dish of beads or corn. Then in the center, which represents the column of energy that goes from the great central source down through the earth and then down into the earth and by the same energy it would do the same thing through us, so we were connected with the great central source. The creator is Hunab Ku. Hunab Ku is the faceless one and is recognized as an energy rather than a personification. He who gave time and measurement would be one way of defining that.

(19:10)

Brown: How would I spell that?

Criswell: H-U-N-A-B and then K-U.

Brown: Okay.

Criswell: Since there's so many different dialects within the Mayan, you might find it spelled a little differently if you go to a different translator. But that's the most common one. Um, so the purpose of a Mayan is to unite with this eternal source. And it seems pulses of energy that come from the great central sign, from the creators' space, which is Hunab Ku. So while they have what has been translated as gods and goddesses it's really much more in the Hindu sense that Brahma is the creator source and then you have Shiva and all the others as deities or gods and goddesses but in fact they are aspects of the creator's source and a way of understanding creator. So the Hindu, there's a huge amount of similarities with Hinduism which makes no sense at all but is true. Um, so for instance the east, which is the sun and red, the personification or the god that would be that would be Kanicha How, (20:30) father son. And while they might address and talk to father son and even make prayers to father son, Kanicha How, there's always that knowledge that it's an aspect not creator. This is a way of understanding it, it's a way of making it more accessible.

Brown: It's an interface.

Criswell: Mmhm. And there will be many of those when we talk about Mayan gods and goddesses. Kay, Did I give you what you wanted?

Brown: So when you're training with them, how did they train you I guess?

Criswell: It's about experience. There's no written things, you can't take notes, you can't take pictures. You listen and you do.

Brown: Yeah, okay.

Criswell: So, none of this is written down. I, I think I may well have the most complete written down thing so far as rituals go.

Brown: Just your own notes reconstructed afterwards basically?

Criswell: Yes, uh huh. So when people ask if there's a book that you read there's not. It's all um.

Brown: It's all, you've gotta learn with somebody.

Criswell: Yeah, it's oral teaching.

Brown: So do you feel like, I don't know. Do you feel like land is important for you then? Is it important for you to, to visit these places? Or is it a very sort of mobile kind of spirituality?

Criswell: I did go there, and um, but I don't know that you have to go there to experience it. It would be a different experience though. Um, I think there's something to be said for visiting any sacred sites. So I've gone to others in addition to the ones in Guatemala and Mexico. I've been to Egypt and Ireland and other places visiting sacred sites. Perhaps if you felt that your spirituality had to be absolutely authentically pure, maybe then you have to go to that place. But if we find our spirituality in any of those places that other people have recognized it, then maybe we find it in you know in the Ozarks in Missouri or the Rockies or wherever you are.

(23:09)

Brown: So you used these teachings in your life here and in Kansas City?

Criswell: Absolutely. I think that any spirituality has to be a way of life rather than a ritual with a group.

Brown: So how is it integrated into your daily life?

Criswell: Well for instance the Mayans in seeing one another, I would say to you "In Makeh" (23:33) and it means "I see divine in you". And your answer is "Alla kin," "I am another you". So I think that's the key thing, seeing that everyone and everything is divine, there isn't anything that isn't of creator. So, so that changes my respect and my love and my appreciation, um, of everything and everyone around me.

Brown: It's like an ethos for living.

Criswell: mmhm

Brown: Lets see. Um, oh my gosh. That touched on a lot of things.

Criswell: (laughs)

Brown: Um well, I guess what kinds of, you get a pretty broad span of customers in here?

Criswell: Yes. My goal from the very start was to help people find the truth they need for their own spirituality. I didn't want to be, I won't be seen as a mentor or um, the one who has the teaching but rather what's important to you and what you need right now and how can I help you find the tools or the resources you need for your own study. So we've got many things on Hinduism and Buddhism and

Native American as well as the things people think more traditionally as pagan, Wiccan, Asatru or the Celtic religions.

Brown: and do you see the sort of impact of the community that this store has?

Criswell: I think we've created a community. Um, we've created a place where people can feel that they are not outside, that they can come here and be inside a welcoming community no matter what their faith is no matter what their belief is. It seems to me that originally Wicca especially, um, attracted people that were disenfranchised. Women were especially powerful at the start of witchcraft and Wicca as a religion because of that inequality and discrimination and so that also um, made it available, not quite the right words but made it accessible to the other people that felt they didn't fit in for some reason or another. Their beliefs weren't the same as the Judeo Christian. And so by that, and the need and the discrimination against people that don't fit in with the Judeo Christian beliefs. Um, this has created a community. And especially I think since we aren't Wicca only, because always the whole intent was to be but the resource provider rather than the teacher.

(27:00)

Brown: Yeah. Are there other sort of communities that have been important for you while you've been here? That are formed around other things that are religious or spiritual? You talked about Unity and.

Criswell: Yeah, okay I'm not quite sure what response you're wanting here. Okay, rephrase it if you would please?

Brown: um, yeah. I guess I'm wondering if there are other religious or spiritual communities that have been important for you, in this area.

Criswell: Okay for me personally or for the community?

Brown: For you personally.

Criswell: Um. I'm not coming up with a, a one because each thing you work with is a piece that you put into your own jigsaw puzzle. You know, another flower in the bouquet. So I'm a director of the Greater Kansas City interfaith council.

Brown: Oh I didn't know that, okay.

Criswell: Now of course that's an inspiration, a multicultural inspiration, just being with people that are open and receptive and seeking and encouraging, so that's a piece. Um, the Heartland Spiritual Alliance, um, is a Pagan tradition of 30 years probably here in Kansas City. Um and while I'm not an active member in it certainly I'm involved in the community of it. As well as um, Pagan Pride Day. So rather than one I think that we pick the flowers from each one of these and bring them in if that fits.

Brown: Well can you tell me a little bit more about the interfaith council and what you do there?

Criswell: Yeah, the Greater Kansas City Interfaith Council has um, members from, oh I don't know how many, 15 probably different groups there. Um, they meet several times; they have different committees that meet several times a month. The council itself meets once a month. Through that, there are multiple activities in the Kansas City area. There are book discussion groups, there's ah teaching things of different sorts. They have the speaker bureau. There's an interfaith thanksgiving meal, there's quarterly a different church, church means building, and different denominations within it, a different religion will sponsor either a potluck or serve a meal and invite everyone in the world in and do something to help them learn about that religion. So not too long ago we went to the Hindu temple. On Lackman (30:25) road, wherever that is? Up that way. And they served Indian food to the group and then had some music and some dance and some prayers and things that are part of the faith, and then a tour of the building to show how people there celebrate. And so that's done several times a year, four times a year I guess. Um, the most recent one was the Ubuntu (30:53) group over on Troost and it was a more pagan thing that time. But each specific to that religion and a chance to get people in to experience it. So there's that, the table of faiths is another thing they do. It started out as a fancy dinner in a hotel um, and a way of awarding things to people within the city that had done special things but also a way to bring people in because each of the faiths would have their own little booth and handouts so that anyone who came could pick up information and get information about any faith that they were interested in. So that happens every year too. Um, then there are two things going on right now that I'm personally involved in. One is we had a project to work with the Kansas City Library to collect money and then there was a matching fund in and the Plaza Library now has bought the books with it and did special book cases for it for an interfaith library.

Brown: Oh cool, okay!

Criswell: And that will be introduced next, "The Human Spirit Library" on the 17th will be the dedication of it. But they're having a problem! They put the books on the shelf and people are taking them. I mean, checking them out!

Brown: Oh oh okay! So the shelves are very bare! For a good reason!
(32:40)

Criswell: Whenever they dedicated it, but the idea was to have a place where people could go and browse them. Now many of these books will be in other places in the library too but this puts them all in one place so you can look in one place for different ones. So that's being dedicated. And then, I'm working, and this is a little more personal than the interfaith council, I'm working with the Nelson library, Nelson Atkins, to have (phone rings "for Barbara") Give me just a second. I'm expecting one from the car insurance people. Hello this is Barbara.

Oh, oh yea. Can we do something real fast? Oh. Oh, oh well that's a nice offer. Um, yeah we're doing pretty well. Why don't you give me your phone number and if I find we're, we're desperate I'll be sure and do that. Got it. Mhm. (hangs up phone) With the Nelson, we're organizing some tours of special events at the Nelson where the docent that leads it, rather than giving the history and talking about techniques and color harmonies and that sort of thing, really looks at the spirituality of what was going on with it. So, um, there's a Native American exhibit coming up the middle of September going to January, a world class one. And so in this case for instance they might look at a modern beaded shoe and compare it with an ancient moccasin that was beaded. So what was going on with the people and why is this, uh, so it's looking at art as the spirituality of it rather than the techniques of it. So we've got five tours set up. And it's open to the public, um, but we promote it through the Greater Kansas City Interfaith Council as well as the director's religions.

Brown: I guess, to ask um, have you ever experienced any problems or has the store experienced any problems just for being what it is.

Criswell: Well you'd think so, but no!

Brown: No?

Criswell: Yeah! We have been openly Pagan from the beginning, and there was a time I was more concerned about it than I am now. But, but no, we've never been picketed, we've never been criticized, we've never had bad press. In fact it's been just the opposite. Television stations have seen us as a resource and so we've been interviewed at times that I think we've made a very positive information, to help.

Brown: yeah, that's great.

Criswell: Yeah, just amazing. And it really was brought home to me when I was awarded a couple years ago, there ya go! There!

Brwon: Oh wow!

Criswell: One of the 25 outstanding small businesses in Kansas City that hire less than 25 people. So I never expected a store like this to be acknowledged by the suits.

Brwon: Right right right, yeah. This mainstream award. That's cool!

Criswell: So I really saw that as a, a validation that rather than being the outsider that I expected, we were being awarded, rewarded instead of being criticized. Another nice story, um, I'm very friendly with the pastor then, he's retired since then, at the Baptist Church next door. And he was doing a talk on, and using a quote from some new age author. And he said now if you want to get this book go to the church next door, Aquarius has it for you.

Brown: Oh!

Criswell: So rather than being criticized we have really good relations with the three churches that are right here. There's the Baptist church next door, a Methodist church behind us and a Catholic Church right next to us.

Brown: And do you think there's any particular reason for that?

Criswell: Um, boy I don't know. The churches were all um, have all been here for a long long time. Um, the Methodist church in fact was used as a hospital during the battle of Westport that was right here. And the injured people were taken to the church right behind us. The one next door is not as old; it was built in the early 1900's if I remember right by the Jewish, not Jewish, by the Swedish people in Kansas City. I don't know the history of the Catholic Church. So I think that, you know how churches kind of cluster together in this city? I think that it just happened.

Brown: Well I mean, that's pretty much, I think we've covered basically all the questions that I wanted to ask unless there's anything else you want to say.

Criswell: No, is there anything I could clarify? I get rambly I know.

Brown: No, I'm okay.

Criswell: Did you get what you needed for what you're doing?

Brown: I did, yes thank you.

Criswell: Oh, you're welcome. And I have no problems with you, using whatever you've got.

(38:47)

End of Tape.