

Renee: 0:00

This is Renee Cyr conducting an interview with Jim Mosher on July 21 2019 at the Topeka Shawnee Public Library concerning Paganism in Topeka as part of the Religion in Kansas Project. How do you define your personal religion or path?

Jim: 0:24

Well, I'm Pagan, have been for quite some time, but I am actually specifically Gardnerian. I'm a high priest for the only current official Gardnerian coven that's in Kansas. It's located here in Topeka.

Renee: 0:42

And that's the Web of Oz?.

Jim 0:44

No, that's not the Web of Oz. Yeah, the Web is really a more of a collection of like minded people. I've heard a lot of them who've said that if the someone calls them a coven, those are kind of fighting words. Really they're not. They are a circle of Pagans who like to practice together. They gather and celebrate mainly the sabbats. But the Gardnerian coven I'm in is the coven Ancora Imparo, which that's Latin for always learning. And we hail from the Long Island line, which comes... Our mother coven is in the Philadelphia area. And we have been in existence for about 10 years now.

Renee: 1:39

And how long have you been a member?

Jim1:41

About 10 years now.

Renee: 1:44

Okay. You were one of the early founding members?

Jim:

Yes.

Renee: 1:50

And do you use the term Wiccan or Witch or Pagan? Or do you mostly mix...?

Jim: 1:59

I use all of the above. Part of it depends upon the context. But specifically, because of being Gardnerian, I am Wiccan yes.

Renee: 2:12

Do you embrace the label of Witch? How do you see the relationship of your beliefs with

Witchcraft?

Jim: 2:22

We do absolutely use the word Witch as part of what we do, both for male and female. And it's really more just a descriptor. It's a description of what we are, who we are. And depending upon the situation it's really not anything that calls for anything in particular. Whether I'm Pagan, Wiccan or a Witch it's, it's all descriptive of what I am. Really has no specific purpose.

Renee: 3:04

How would you describe your general beliefs? What do you think are the defining characteristics?

Jim: 3:10

Mostly the the reverence we have for the natural world. The cycles of life that comes and shows itself through the process that we see in the world not only with the lunar cycle, the solar cycle, but also the life and death cycle and life reborn, through the plants and the animals and everything else that's going around. We also celebrate the diversity within us, both male and female elements. Both as far as physical representation as well as the spiritual and the energies that are there.

Renee: 3:58

Are there particular gods or goddess you worship?

Jim: 4:03

We do have some that we mainly call, but the names aren't spoken outside of our circle.

Renee: 4:12

Okay. And do you believe in and seek assistance from other supernatural beings?

Jim: 4:20

Oh, yeah. They're all part of the god and goddess and that whole deity aspect, and so yes, we go for even for the angelic forces. Yeah, we do.

Renee: 4:37

Would you describe your beliefs as animistic?

Jim: 4:44

After a fashion. In the way that we recognize that there is deity, there is god and goddess within all things. It's not necessarily that the book here in the library is alive, but it contains that life source that is god and goddess.

Renee: 5:10

What are your beliefs about the afterlife?

Jim: 5:19

We like to go into something that we call the Summerland. And what that is specifically, I don't know. Because I don't remember. And that's part of what we're all about here on this particular plane, this particular life. So we believe in reincarnation. And so we do have glimpses of what that might be. But considering we're dealing with a current physical world, and the physical brain and all of that, we don't necessarily remember before. And so what I would like to envision is something not only that's lovely, and good, peaceful, but that is just a communion of being one with the deity, one with the god and goddess.

Renee: 6:24

Do you believe the Summerland is a place your soul goes permanently after you have finished reincarnating? Or is it a place you go in between lives?

Jim: 6:37

I think of it more as that waiting resting place, where we kind of recuperate and learn the lessons that we had in this life, we take it into ourselves and make it a part of our being so that we are ready for what comes next. I don't know that we ever stop. I think we do. And that point in which we stop, is when we attain perfect unity with our deities.

Renee: 7:16

Do you consider your beliefs more of a religion or spiritual practice?

Jim: 7:20

It's more spiritual practice. And I think it's because, with our way of working, there is no real hierarchy. And religion per se, has that hierarchy. There is a way of going up to one final say so individual that's here on this physical plane. And I don't like that. I like being able to go directly to god and goddess and get whatever answers I need directly from them.

Renee: 8:00

How active would you say you are in terms of your religious spiritual practice?

Jim: 8:06

Oh, very active. I try to embody god and goddess every day. In every action in every experience that happens both personally and with individuals, with the animals and everything I have, that goes around me, I like to try and make sure that I keep that sense of divine in all ways.

Renee: 8:39

How do you see your beliefs play out in your daily life?

Jim: 8:45

Well, anywhere from blessing roadkill, I say a small blessing every anytime I see an animal alongside the road, asking that they return to the the god and goddess and wait until it's time to

return again, get strong. Because I don't like to see anything harmed and just lying around waiting. Something like that is very distressing. I try to make sure that every experience, every interpersonal action that I have, there is that sense that I recognize the deity within every individual with whom I go. That they know that they are important, and that they are loved. And that to me is really the majority of the spiritual practice.

Renee: 9:55

What do you see, as the pros and cons of being in a coven or a group in general versus solitary worship?

Jim: 10:04

I've been both, of course. And anyone who's part of a group is also solitary. The group dynamic is very different from a solo dynamic. If you're trying to raise energy, for any given situation, a group can actually raise a lot more than an individual can. And I miss that communion. That interpersonal experience with the individuals, the given and take, the talk. It's nice to sing, but I like to sing with others. I like having that, drumming is the same way. It's nice to drum by yourself, but if you get into a drum circle, it is an amazing experience. And that's how I see it. Now groups can also get too large. I've been involved with large, large rituals, where there have been several hundred in attendance. And it gets, that gets a little unwieldy, and you lose that personal ritual aspect. It becomes more of a presentational play, that you're doing it for them. And so the people who are there, they should be participating, but really can't because there's just way too many of them. So I like that interaction with everyone and have everyone interact with all the rest of the people who are part of it. And you miss that when you're not in the group. You missed that when you're alone as a solitary. And there are times as a solitary, where you're unsure. If you have questions, where do you go? Of course, you go within, you go to the god and goddess. But those answers can be very cryptic, a lot less straightforward than the ones you might be able to get from another physical person. And so that's why it's it's really nice to have some sort of a group available.

Renee: 12:30

Do you have any family that are also involved in Paganism?

Jim: 12:36

I have friends and I have former family who are, and I have family who were but are no longer. My personal background is, my father was a Christian minister. And my mother was the organist for the church. So we were very, very strongly included in everything that was going on. And in my searching, and in my searching, I finally came around to where I found Paganism. And that was what felt right to me. So that's how I kind of came into the craft. And it wasn't until after my parents had passed, that I was able to actually say, "Hey, folks, guess what?"

Jim: 13:40

It wasn't because my parents were that close minded. I have a brother who doesn't follow the Christian path. He's more agnostic than anything else nowadays. And they know, and

understand that and express their dismay for him. But they would never express it to him, because that would harm him. And so it came down to what the Wiccans call the Rede. It's a really really nice poem. But actually, the whole thing comes down to eight words. And that's "An it harm none, do as you will." Which means take responsibility for your actions. Do what you need to do, but as you as you do that, make sure, or try to make sure, that no one is harmed. And by my staying silent... Which would have harmed them more, my telling them orl my staying silent. That was the question that was going through my mind. And so it was my decision to keep that part of my life from them. Because I truly believe that they would be even more dismayed. And partly because of the bad press that Paganism gets.

Renee: 15:38

How old were you when you converted to Paganism?

Jim: 15:48

Oh I was old. I've been involved in the Pagan community since the late 1980s. And that point, I was about 50 years old. So I did come to it rather late in life. But I actually believe that I was practicing and a part of that particular spirituality for much longer than that. I just didn't know what to call it. I hadn't come across it at that point.

Renee: 16:27

Growing up, how aware were you of other religious traditions?

Jim: 16:33

Oh very aware of other traditions. Of course we considered the other Christian denominations, other traditions, and they are in their own right. We also knew of the Jewish belief system, and I knew of the others. And partly because I did take a course in high school on world religions. So I knew some of most of them, but not a lot about any of them.

Renee: 17:15

After your initial discovery of Paganism, were there other particular experiences, books or people that influenced you to go further?

Jim: 17:27

Oh my, where do I start? Well, the first time I came to the realization of what I was doing and what felt right, a friend was doing a full moon ritual. And she had invited us to participate. I was co-owner of a store, currently it's called The Enchanted Willow, it was The Enchanted Willow Alchemy Shop at the time. And we started off mainly as New Age, and that kind of thing. And it was through there that I came across the Pagan sector that was here in town. And from there, I was invited to attend this ritual where I felt at home. From then on, I started reading everything I could, talking with the people in town that I knew. Of course people can be very very closeted, very secretive. And so I didn't know of many. But from there, I became aware of the Heartland Pagan festival, which is a very large festival that's held in the area every year. And through them, I have met people like Silver RavenWolf, Christopher Penczak. I met Gavin Bone and

Janet Farrar. So their writings, and being able to meet them and chat with them has been amazing. There's a woman who's fondly referred to as grandmother, by a lot of people all over the world. Her name is Elisabeth and her husband's name is my Nibor. Now Nibor is an artist, and he does all sorts of amazing work. And she has been to Hartland as well. And there is a special place in my heart for her.

Renee: 19:55

Why do you think people are attracted to Paganism?

Jim: 20:03

That's a very loaded question. And I think, because.... They're searching for something that they have not been able to find elsewhere. Whether it be the freedom to act to believe and to practice the as they wish. Whether it's a freedom to care for the world and for each other. Whether it's being part of something where magick is real. I don't know. But I think there is a draw, there's a draw that there is something there, some connection with deity there, that has not been available to them in other places.

Renee: 21:08

How often does your coven meet?

Jim: 21:11

We try and meet on a weekly basis. Actually, in fact, we were together this afternoon. We're doing a book discussion or reading a book and discussing it right now. And sometimes it's ritual. Sometimes it's discussions, sometimes it's a teaching session, sometimes it's doing a craft something hands on, it's really, really, really kind of fun. We do try and meet every single week, but it doesn't always happen. Of course, there are things that fall in the way. We do have some people who travel some, and the area we meet is not accessible when the snows around. So we keep that in mind. And so whenever we don't meet, we always make sure that we do something at home by ourselves to commemorate, whether it's ritual we were going to do whether it's the full moon or we'll read a book or something.

Renee: 22:17

And how many members are there?

Jim: 22:21

Oh, it varies. It's a small group. And that's really all I can say.

Renee: 22:28

Do Gardnerians generally follow the idea that a coven should have 13?

Jim: 22:40

I think in general, that is the maximum Yeah.

Renee: 22:52

Do you as a group do any community service or outreach activity?

Jim: 22:58

Not as a group. But we all do in our own way. Part of mine is I'm a musician, I play a number of instruments and sing. But what I do, mainly, that would be part of this service, is I have a harp that I take out and I play at the bedside of people who are under hospice care. And I do that on a weekly basis.

Renee: 23:34

Can you tell me anything about the founding of the organization? And like, what was the impetus to create this group?

Jim: 23:47

The covenant here in town? Or are you talking about the Web of Oz?

Renee: 23:51

Either.

Jim: 23:54

I don't know much of the history of the Web, so you'd have to check with someone from there about that. For the coven, well, our priestess held, basically what's called a 101, a basic introduction to Wicca and had some interested parties. They got together and they decided that they wanted more. They wanted to delve deeper than what they could in a simple 101 type session. And so it was decided that they would start up the coven. And started going deeper from then on.

Renee: 24:52

And what kind of practices are involved within the group? Any particular rituals or ceremonies?

Jim: 25:03

Oh, of course. The full moon celebrations, the Sabbat celebrations. We have had to date two of our members pass on. And so we've had the commemoration of their lives. So yeah, there's that kind of thing that goes on pretty much all the time.

Renee: 25:27

Has your membership and participation in the group affected your life outside of the group?

Jim: 25:36

Well, in the way that I comport myself in a more dignified manner, at least I would hope I do. That is unless I forget about a meeting while I'm doing something else. But, yeah, it's mainly because of the outlook that I have in trying to make sure that I recognize the deity that resides within us all. And I think I would have come to that on my own, but I don't think I would have

come to that as quickly as I have with being in the group.

Renee: 26:22

How much planning goes into each ritual? Are you creating new rituals each time? Or do you have...?

Jim: 26:28

Not generally. We pretty much do a set ritual for it. But you know, that alters as well. But there really is no fancy fancy planning. Now, I was a founder of a coven before this as well, Moonshadow Coven. I was one of the founding members of it. And that was through the store. And yes, we did a lot of planning for that, when I did most of the rituals for those for that group.

Renee: 27:03

And are they still active?

Jim: 27:05

They are, I think, but not terribly active. There are a few members of group still.

Renee: 27:17

Are there particular art forms that are present, either visual symbols, music, that are included in your rituals?

Jim: 27:26

Yes. All of it. Art of all sorts, and especially music. But with my harp, I like to take the harp in and play. I do a lot of things that are improvisational. And so we utilize that quite a bit. But yeah, there's the music. There's all sorts of art that goes on with the groups.

Renee: 27:57

Overall, how would you describe the Pagan community in Topeka and the surrounding area?

Jim: 28:04

It is relatively active. It is secretive, very closeted, unfortunately. I have the great joy and to be able to be out, not only with friends and family, but also at work. I do work for the Topeka and Shawnee County Public Library, and they have known since well before I was part of the coven Ancora Imparo. And there are times when we get questions and they'll say, "Oh, you need to talk with this guy." So I'm very, very open, and have been for many, many, many years. But I know there are people still, who do not say anything to family, coworkers, anything for fear of losing their job, for fear of losing family. And it's a shame. It is a great pity that that kind of thinking is still prevalent in today's society.

Renee: 29:18

Have you seen a lot of active discrimination?



Jim: 29:24

Bits and pieces. But like I said, being here at the Library, it's a very open, open community. And so I don't see it on a day to day basis. Now, when we first opened the store, we had one particular church, I don't even remember what it was, who would litter our door and floor area, we were in a mall type of situation to where we had an open gate, basically. And there will be things littered on the floor, tracts saying "The devil is going to take you. You're going to go to hell," that kind of thing. Every single day, every single day. And so it's out there. But we've no direct specific discrimination per se. Not that I have experienced. So I'm very fortunate in that.

Renee: 30:31

And at the store, is there a particular item that sells really well, that people are really interested in?

Jim: 30:44

Well, we have a number of things anywhere from incense and dried herbs, candles, stones, we have books and all, everything is very popular. People love their incense love, they love burning the sage, they love candles. We get people who buy bags and bags of stones, which is really interesting.

Renee: 31:20

How would you say members of either the Web of Oz or your coven interact with the general public?

Jim: 31:32

Well, I'm not exactly sure.

Renee: 31:39

Is there animosity between them or a sense of fear?

Jim: 31:46

Not fear per se and not animosity. At least not with the coven. I do know that there are some people in the web who experience those kinds of issues, but I I don't know why. I haven't been around and it's happened to them. But with my coven, no. But then again, you know, we are who we are, and we let we let our lives and our deeds speak for us.

Renee: 32:25

How is the coven governed? Are there leaders or committees?

Jim: 32:33

Well, it's mainly the priest and priestess who do most of the decision working. When it comes, if there is really a decision to be made, it's the priestess that has the final say in anything. But most of the time we talk things out, we come to a consensus. And a lot of times, they'll just come and say, "Okay, what do you want?" For instance, when we're planning the schedule,

when we when we want to do ritual, or when we want to do a craft day, or when we want to do a study when we're studying the book. We, the priestess and I, go through and actually with this particular schedule, we had three other members there with us, and we just kind of talked it out. "This sounds good here, this sounds good there." But that's, that's really the way it is. It's very much a consensus basis unless there is something really, really major that needs to be decided. And that is up to the priestess.

Renee: 33:41

And do you embrace using technology for communicating or for planning tools?

Jim: 33:48

Oh yeah. It's just not necessarily a good idea to have something there with you during ritual. Because that kind of energy that is built up during ritual, is not necessarily good with electronics.

Renee: 34:10

Does food figure into your religious life?

Jim: 34:14

Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. Well, just like, if you go into a ceremony, a Christian ceremony and see communion up there, that kind of act of sharing food and drink during the ceremony is not only very grounding, but it's it's a very spiritual and interpersonal thing anyway. There's also something known as kitchen witchery, where when you're working with food and in the kitchen making something you can actually put a part of yourself and part of deity into that intentionally.

Renee: 35:00

Does the group own any real estate or buildings?

Jim: 35:05

Not as a group no. We of course each own our own homes and such. We do meet the home of the high priestess usually. But no, we don't own a communal property. That would be nice to have some sort of communal property that we could all go live together. But that hasn't happened yet.

Renee: 35:32

What are the economic arrangements of the group? How is money raised? And who makes spending decisions?

Jim: 35:40

We don't deal with money. Yeah, the the classes, the 101 type classes that we give we hold for free.

Renee: 35:49

Are those open to the public, or for members of the coven?

Jim: 35:53

The 101s, the basic introductions are for the public. And they're not, we don't do them all the time. We couldn't. Just time wise we couldn't. But we don't ask donations. We don't ask for money. We don't ask for tithing, anything of that nature. Now, yes, I will take some things when I go up if we're needing some more incense or if we're needing some new candles or something. Sure I'll provide them, no biggie.

Renee: 36:39

Do you recruit members?

Unknown 36:43

No no, we do no recruiting per se. We wait for people to come to us. And then we of course have that trial period where they can say "no this isn't quite the right group for me." Or we can say "well, we're just not quite fitting, we're not quite meshing. Maybe we can help find someone else." But go out and knock on doors, no we don't do that.

Renee: 37:19

Are there behavior codes or prohibitions you practice?

Jim: 37:24

Well, we do follow the Wiccan Rede. What I mentioned earlier about those eight lines that say, "An it harm none do as you will." We truly believe that the impact that we have makes a difference. And we need to be responsible for whatever we do. That's the main ethic that we have.

Renee: 37:48

And do encourage things like vegetarianism?

Jim: 37:54

We don't encourage, but if that's what someone wants to do, that's wonderful. I was a strict vegetarian for a very, very long time. I am no longer strict. Our priestess has gone back and forth a number of times being strict vegetarian, to adding meat to the diet, to doing the macrobiotic diet, all depending upon what the body is telling us that it needs.

Renee: 38:30

And are there rules regarding matters of dress or style?

Jim: 38:35

No. The only only rule per se, is that when we have a ritual where we have members outside the coven, we always wear robes.

Renee: 38:53

Have you ever thought about leaving the group? And if so, why?

Jim: 38:58

This particular group no, not yet. But I did leave Moonshadow. And the reason there was, there for a long time we had a real nice group going, and the dynamics changed. We had some people who left. And actually for a very long time, I was the only one there. I was the coven. And then we had some more people who came back and joined. And they were wanting to go a different direction. They were wanting to celebrate in different ways. And it was just time for me to go. It was at that point where I had contacted the priestess. And she was actually, they were just in them in the process of starting up the group. And so we made that connection, and it was a very good match, and has been since.

Renee: 40:09

Is there anything you would like to change about the group?

Jim: 40:14

Oh no. Other than maybe the fact that we all live together. We could all meet more often than just once a week. Yeah, no there really is nothing I would change about the group.

Renee: 40:28

How do you see the future of the group?

Jim: 40:34

Flexible. You know, trying to envision a future, I would love to see a few more people, but it's not necessary. I love the people that are part of it now, and we have a very strong bond. And the practices we do, the discussions we have, the chit chats that we have, are wonderful. And so it's an amazing part of existence.

Renee: 41:06

What have been the best and worst things about being involved with the local Pagan community.

Jim: 41:14

Some of the best things are being able to celebrate deity in a fashion that is meaningful, meaningful to everyone. When we had the store and Moonshadow coven going very strongly, we would hold monthly rituals that were open, always open. And it was fun to see the dynamics, and the people come and go, and their experiences. It's also, well going back to your question about issues with other individuals, we had an instance where we were in a public place, we were in a park, and there was a wedding that had gone on and they were there celebrating in the shelter house, and we were just outside in the grass. They came up to us and said "You're weird. You're acting weird. You need to leave." And we were almost finished with ritual anyway. And of course that kind of broke it up. But at one point, the man who was the groom, turns out he was part of the sheriff's department with Osage County, pulled out his gun.

Renee: 42:51

Wow.

Jim 42:55

Yeah. So that's not a very good thing. That's part of that discrimination. And so we've seen both sides of that kind of thing with ritual. I think the saddest part is having to be secretive about who you are. And that fear that people live with on a daily basis, that is just very, very disheartening for me.

Renee: 43:29

What do you wish more people understood about Paganism?

Jim: 43:35

That we are worshiping in the same way as they are. That we feel and do the same things they do. That we are not strange, we're not weird. I had the great joy of being a part of the board of the Topeka Interfaith for a number of years. In fact, I was the first Pagan to be elected to the board, and the first Pagan to be elected as president. So I have that great joy. And being able to share my experiences, our beliefs, with that diverse group is a wonderful thing. And there are times when you wish you could expand it outward even more. To try and let people know "hey, we're human. We are human. We are here. Prick us do we not bleed?" kind of thing. But yeah, that we are really no different than anyone else.

Renee: 44:59

Anything else you want to tell me, any anecdotes you'd like to share?

Jim: 45:07

Nothing really that comes to mind. I don't like to be name dropper, but it's really, it was really fun to be able to meet up with people like Jannet Farrar. I always called it Fare-r but when I met her, that's how she pronounced it was Farrar. So had passed before I met up with them, but Gavin Bone was with her. And being able to meet and talk with people from all over the world, basically is really a fabulous, fabulous thing.

Renee: 45:51

All right, I think that's everything. Thank you so much.

Jim:

My pleasure. Thank you.