

No more broomsticks

BY MARC GODIN

Say the word "witch" to someone and they are likely to imagine an old, ugly woman who has sold her soul to the devil and who rides overhead on a broomstick. It is this wildly inaccurate image that Vanessa Smith, co-owner of Little Mysteries Bookshop and a practising Wiccan or witch, would like to dispel.

"I practise a contemporary spirituality that looks to the old ways," she says. Smith describes Wicca as a belief system which encourages people to "do as you will and it harms no one."

"It's a magical, earth-oriented spirituality," she says.

Vanessa Smith, whose pagan name is Rowen, took the time to give a free talk about Wicca last

Thursday in her store. This "Wicca 101" focused on the history and basic tenets of the religion, as well as explaining the different types of Wicca.

Wicca is one of a group of loosely-organised religions known collectively as pagan, which comes from a Greek word meaning country dweller. Wiccans worship a Goddess, and usually a God, both of which differ from the typical judeo-Christian archetypes. The Goddess is seen in the earth and in everything that surrounds us. Wicca has a triple goddess view, in that the one being is seen in three incarnations: the maiden, who represents fertility, spring, and life; the mother, who has given birth to both children and ideas; and the crone, a wise and knowledgeable woman.

The Wiccan God, quite different from the Christian version, is the master of the animals. He is the hunter, and the ruler of crops and the sun. He is often called the Horned God, a man with ram's horns.

The form that the Wiccan God takes has caused some problems for modern day Wiccans. In the age of the Inquisition, or "the burning times" as pagans commonly call it, many Christians took it upon themselves to try and convert everyone to their religion by declaring the other religions immoral or evil. One way they did this was to make Satan appear as a horned demon, stealing and perverting the Wiccan image.

The outcome of the Inquisition was the deaths of many people, most of them not witches.

"You could be accused of Satan worship if you looked at a neighbour's cow oddly and the cow got sick the next day," says Smith.

This persecution has continued up to modern times. Until the middle of this century it was illegal to be a witch in England. Even today many Wiccans get odd looks, and have to do a lot of talking before people will believe that they aren't evil or demon worshippers.

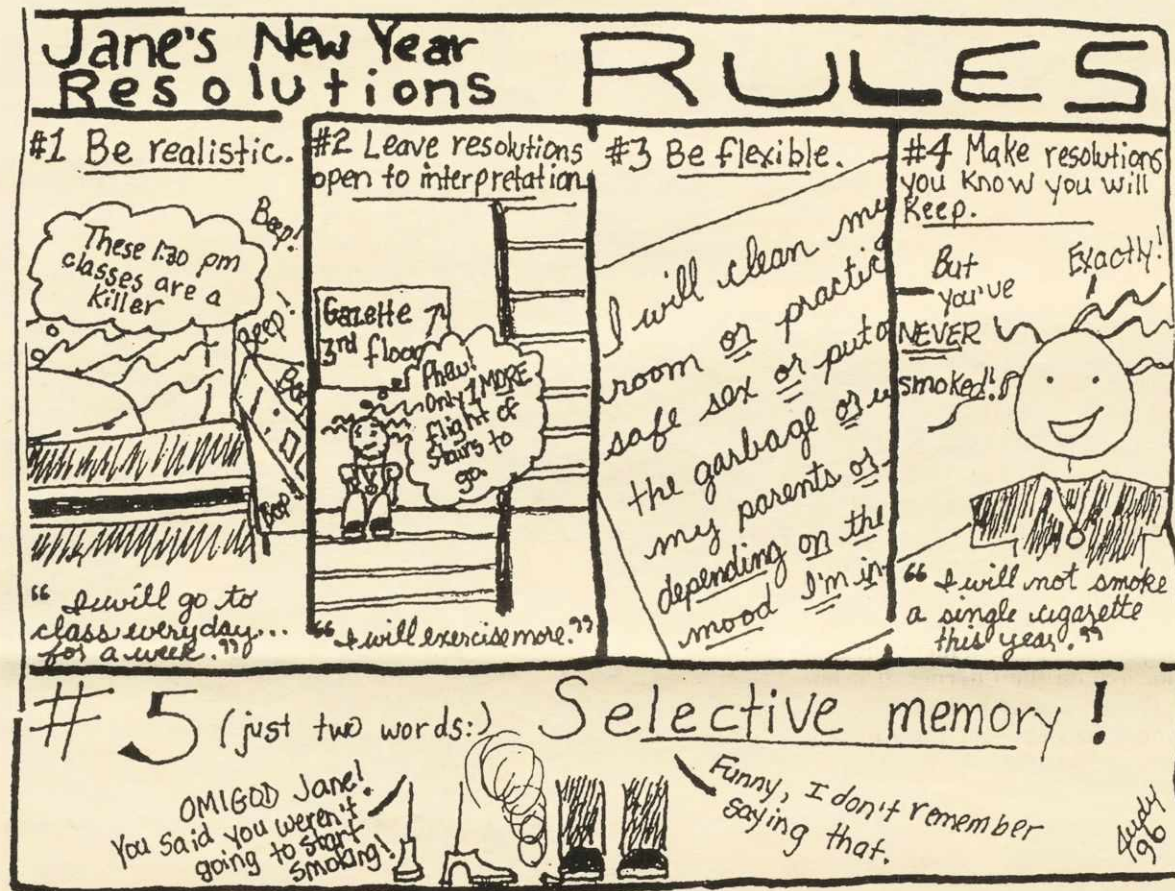
Even their symbols have been misinterpreted. The pentacle, a five-pointed star enclosed in a circle, is a symbol used in many of their ceremonies, but has been thought to be used by Satanists. There is a reason for this: just as Satanists have taken the Christian cross and perverted it by turning it upside down, they have done the same to this sacred symbol.

Although there are some exceptions, most Wiccans use a pentacle with one point facing up, resembling a person with their arms outstretched.

Here in Halifax the prejudice is not so severe, but it can still be an ordeal for a Wiccan to "come out of the broom closet." Wicca and other pagan religions are still seen as strange or weird by many people. Vanessa is hopeful that this will change.

"A lot of people seem to have an interest in it these days," says Chris Hardy, a Dalhousie student and pagan. He and Vanessa agree that the best way to bring Wicca out of the Dark Ages is to educate people.

"It can't be forced on people," says Hardy. "But for those who want to learn, education about paganism would be very beneficial to people."



You make me and you break me

BY ANDREA SMITH

New Year's Resolutions. How long did it take you to break yours?

I vowed to quit smoking. Only 7 days into the year (ironically after the Gazette staff meeting), while having a beverage at the Grad House, I crumbled and I had a drag. Nevertheless, a pretty noble week's effort.

So, if you're like me and you've had your moment of weakness, at least take comfort in the fact that you're not alone. More than 50 percent of us make New Year's resolutions. Less than 40 percent are still committed to their goal after a week, but that number dwindles further to less than 15 percent after 6 months.

I'm trying to quit smoking. My roommate is trying to cut down on her swearing. So, whether your goal is to eat smart, go to the Dalplex daily, party more, read more, stop biting your nails or whatever, read on. Don't find yourself making the same resolution next year.

First off, write down your goal. A study was done where 3% of graduating university students wrote down their aspirations at the end of their schooling years. At a reunion 20 years later, the

3% that had written out their ambitions had a net worth greater than the remaining 97% of the class combined. Writing down a statement tells your brain (whether consciously or subconsciously) to become more committed to the task. Hence, why we use "to do" lists, agenda books, writing appointments on your hands, etc.

Now if you want to get even more thorough, try writing down a step-by-step plan on how to accomplish your goal. For example, if your resolution is to exercise more, brainstorm all the physical activities you love to do (or could learn to love to do). For starters, Dalhousie offers a wide range of facilities at Dalplex and the Studley Arena that are very accessible to students.

The last step is to figure out something you can do in the next 24 hours that will help you accomplish your goal. You need to get the ball rolling while you are still feeling motivated, especially if you've already broken your resolution.

Most importantly, don't expect immediate gratification or get discouraged if you slip up. Those are the most common mistakes people make when they announce a resolution and why so many resolutions are abandoned.

If you haven't already, it's not too late to think about what you'd like to accomplish in 1997. And if you've broken your resolution, remember it can take days, weeks or years to break an old habit.

I hope to see you at Dalplex or at Birdland (not smoking). Congrats on deciding to better your life and best of luck.

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