

## The WITCHING HOUR

For Pashta witchcraft represents feminist freedom, power and sexuality. She says witchcraft is an earlier, bloodier version of the battle of the sexes and the fight for equal rights. The same misogynist myths which fuelled the genocide of women in the witch trials are resurfacing today in the backlash against feminism.



By K. SANFORD and M. ANDERSON

**P**ashta is a thirty-two year old woman with long red hair and an affinity for silver jewelry. She describes herself as a mother, a student and an activist. She is also a witch.

During a family trip through New England at the age of four Pashta woke up one night and saw the moon. "I was convinced it followed me to protect me."

She remembers attending a Christian mass as a child, to the disapproval of her mother, an atheist. "At the same time," she recalls, "my relationship with the moon and earth grew stronger and stronger. All these things occurred to me when I was 24. I realized I was a witch and all these things made sense—why I liked the dark, why I thought better in moonlight, why black was not fearful to me at all."

Modern-day witchcraft is commonly referred to as wicca. Wicca, based on the old English word *Wicca* which means 'wise woman', is derived from ancient pre-Christian fertility celebrations where high priestesses were responsible for the success of the harvest and the well-being of society in general.

"There are essentially three parts of wicca: the politics, the feeling of belonging and the actual craft," says Pashta. "I believe a person can have the first two and call herself a witch. She doesn't have to have psychic abilities. I also strongly

object to calling someone a witch because she has psychic skills. The philosophy is essential."

In her book *Witches*, Erica Jong explains witches were persecuted because men feared, and still fear, power in women. This was the real reason behind the Salem witch trials in the 1600's, where 16 women were burned at the stake or hanged. These women were believed to have supernatural powers which were supposed to reside only in the male-dominated church.

Witchcraft is an earlier, bloodier version of the battle of the sexes and the fight for equal rights. The same misogynist myths which fuelled the genocide of women between the 13th and 16th centuries, where an estimated 12 million were slaughtered, are resurfacing today in the condemnation of feminism and equality.

Witches were tortured and burned at the stake for many reasons, all church sanctioned. They were alleged to have caused everything from impotence to wet dreams, evil spells to miraculous healings. If a landowner wanted a woman's land, the easiest way to get it was to accuse her of making him impotent or casting a spell on his son.

... witches were persecuted because men feared, and still fear, power in women

A woman accused of being a witch was put to the test by the church through various means of torture which usually resulted in

the woman's death. One such test was to tie up the accused and throw her into deep water. If she sank and drowned, she was innocent. But if she floated it was a sign she was the devil's own child and she was put to death.

Pashta says to equate witchcraft with Satanism is completely false. She says the forces and powers witches have come from a sensitivity to the moon and earth. Satanists are rebellious Christians who choose to worship 'evil' rather than 'good', and thus intrinsically accept the Christian duality between good and evil. Witches see good and evil as indivisible parts of a cosmic whole and as allies.

"I don't believe in any one diet or dieties," says Pashta. "The concept is called pantheism—the idea that all is one, but that there are many facts."

She says modern witchcraft has never left its early roots in pre-Christian paganism. Modern witches place more of an emphasis on natural healing and developing innate psychic powers rather than contemplating ways to turn people into toads or potted petunias.

Besides being naturalistic, witchcraft is inherently feminist. Erica Jong says to be a witch is to celebrate female power, sexuality and fertility. Women have an affinity with the reproductive powers of the earth, something she says men have always feared and tried to put down.

Witch-hunting, ancient or modern, serves a variety of purposes. Politically, it can be used to intimidate women into a powerless position, to strengthen shaky ecclesiastical authority, and can shift emphasis away from economic and health problems such as famine, plague and war.

Feminism may represent female freedom, power and sexuality but the violence and torture directed at witches points to the fierce retribution that usually follows when women attempt to assert their power.

Although the intensity of the hatred and misogyny of the Salem trials has passed, Pashta says witches are still persecuted.

"They have just changed form as crusades against midwifery and psychic and herbal medicine," she says. "In [British Columbia], where I used to live, they even tried to pass a law that would have made it illegal to counsel someone about vitamins."

Pashta says her own specialties are "mainly intuitive—knowing things before I should. I can psychically read what's going on with someone. I can see their energy movement, freeflowing or blocked. I also do a particular kind of healing with pendulums that anyone could do if they were tuned enough." She says she has recently tried to develop the skill of listening to bodies. "Lately I've noticed that I can sometimes hear where an injury is."

Witchcraft is ruled by the "three-fold law," Pashta says. This means whatever one does or puts into the universe will come back to one three-fold. "That is why I so strongly object to spells," Pashta says. "Spells are manipulative and clearly against the only law in witchcraft." A real witch, contrary to popular lore, will never use her powers to manipulate other people.

Pashta says she also has no use for the notion that certain tools must be used for witchcraft. "I have no objection to symbolic tools, like candles and burning sage, which I use. But to me, it is very clear that

the symbol helps to evoke the power that is in the person, not the tool. I have strong objection to books that say you have to use a red candle to do this, or a black candle to do that. You should do whatever feels good for you."

The art of witchcraft is foreign and frightening to many people and Pashta says she has had her share of born-again Christians "say I'm going to burn in hell, and that kind of stuff, but I don't get a lot of that here [in Ottawa]." She says her children, aged 11 and 14, know "there's certain kinds of people it's better not to tell, but don't make a big deal of it."

The wicca movement is growing, says Pashta, despite the opposition it faces. She says although the growing number of women involved in wicca may take away from the seriousness of the witch circles, the power remains.

One example of the power of witchcraft is Pashta's latest project, spiritual abortion. "This is when you contract with the child to abort. You talk to the child and ask it to release you from the contract of being its parent."

She also remembers an incident in a downtown Ottawa park where a witch's circle was meeting. The women were being harassed by some men, "real redneck kind, dead drunk and getting drunker, and so they started yelling at us. A couple of us, we focussed our energy on them, and they got real quiet, and sat down and watched. Then one of them stumbled and knocked over a bike which fell into our circle. He was very apologetic, and picked up the bike."

The power remains.

Reprinted from *The Charlatan* by Canadian University Press.