

## What I Did at My Summer Camp

Ostara Hollyoak July 23, 2023

It's Monday morning. *This past* Monday morning. On waking, my first thought is, "I'm late for breakfast." I would be, if I were still at camp. But I'm not *at* camp; I'm in my familiar bed. At camp, by this time, I'd be arriving at the dining hall clean enough and human enough to interact in a room full of around 60 people.

On *this* morning, I come downstairs to a blinking phone machine. My first phone message upon landing is from BlueCross BlueShield about my personal health maintenance program— Or something like that. I hit "erase" and wonder: Is all this spam something new in human lives, or is it just the modern day version of predators? No, I think— It's more like that pesky other species that's always trying to get your food as soon as you're not looking. You can never quite forget that they may be just around the corner. Life would be nicer if we could just relax into what we're doing— But it's not like these intruders are life threatening. It's just that we have to be constantly on the ready to shoo them away when they come around.

I'd returned home, but hadn't yet returned *ho-o-ome*— to my normal frame of mind.

As I sit down to jot down some close-to-the-event notes for this sermon, I realize I don't feel normal *at all*. I feel a peculiar heaviness of head. In part, I just feel odd being so very indoors. I can see outside and hear the birds, but I'm not feeling the elements the way I've become accustomed to. Also, although I'm away from the intense spiritual energies of camp, I haven't quite grounded in this reality yet. I'm in a liminal space, and that's okay, but not entirely comfortable.

We'd left for camp the prior Monday morning and arrived home sometime in the late-ish afternoon on Sunday.

Where had we been, *exactly*?

One way of saying it is that we'd been at Buffalo Gap Retreat Center in West Virginia, about 25 miles northwest of Winchester, Virginia. That's about 2 hours away for us. Others had come from various places in the Mid-Atlantic; plus quite a few from midwestern states like Ohio, Minnesota and Michigan; and some from California and points in Canada.

Buffalo Gap is nestled between tree-covered mountains, helping you feel really away once you've arrived. The cabins we stayed in are somewhat– but not too– rustic. In addition to cabins the retreat center includes: A beach house; a wood fired, lakefront sauna (which we weren't using this time around); a semi-open air dining hall adjoining a commercial kitchen; and a 3600 square foot open air pavilion.

That's the physical setting, but where were we, *really*?

This was “a week between the worlds,” otherwise known as a Reclaiming Summer Intensive– or: Witchcamp. There are quite a few of these camps throughout the U.S., and around the world. This Mid-Atlantic camp is organized, as I said, by SpiralHeart, a community within the Reclaiming Tradition of witchcraft.

On the evening after we arrive at camp, we cast a circle, creating sacred space, and we remain in that space until we open the circle a week later, on Sunday. One of the hallmarks of witchcamp is that we let our “Talking Selves,” usually so in the driver's seat, take more of a passenger seat position. Part of the closing ritual is getting ready to re-adjust this so we get back *safely* to the places we're going home to, and don't have too rough a landing getting back to things like people's jobs on Monday morning. Because we have just done a week of deep and intense spiritual work and play, we've spent the week in a state of openness, emotionally and spiritually, that doesn't support all our needs in the ordinary day-to-day.

Another way of describing Witchcamp, is that it's the only place:

- Where I hear one man say to another, “Your outfit looked great last night!”;
- Where Baz is *never* mis-gendered– for a whole week among people who mostly didn't know him before;
- And, where one of the participants declares her pronouns are “she/hag.”

But what do we actually *do* at camp?

The day starts with breakfast, cooked by the blessed Mirabai and her little team of kitchen witches. I don't know how they manage to cook for 60 people including omnivores, vegetarians, vegans, and some who are gluten-free or dairy-free, to the satisfaction and delight of *everyone*. That's a form of magic.

The rest of the morning we attend our “path,” which is like a class. There are five offerings to choose from for the week.

After lunch, we get together and talk in our “affinity groups.” These are small check-in groups, some chosen randomly and some based on some commonly held identity. I take the random assignment approach.

The mid-late afternoons are filled with optional offerings– but I usually need rest more than another activity– and the occasional other event, like the all-camp anti-racism meeting on Friday.

At 5:40, we meet for “ritual conspiracy.” This is led by the Ritual Arc Team, more commonly referred to by their initialism, the RATs. Here we’re let in on the intention for the evening’s ritual, and we’re clued in on practical things, like whether masks will be required for a portion of the ritual. And the folks known as the Sound Spinners might teach us a chant we’ll be using.

Dinner is at 6:00. Thursday night Baz and I are signed up for our “gift of service,” doing dishes after dinner, and Dan is on for pots and pans. Otherwise, we’re free after dinner to get ready for the ritual.

We do a lot of ritual. The entire week is a ritual, really; and we do smaller, but meaningful and effective rituals at other points in the day. But the main, pull-out-all-the-stops rituals are in the evenings.

The rituals are anchored by the RATS, but many people lead parts of it, and everyone participates actively.

To give you the general flavor of the beast, I’d like to read to you a description of Reclaiming ritual from the Reclaiming website. This is excerpted from an article titled, “A Working Definition of Reclaiming,” by Starhawk:

Our approach to magic and ritual is experimental.... Some of the techniques we use include meditation, breathwork, movement, trance, drumming, chanting, visualization, drum-trance, divination, aspecting, anchoring, and others. Our training teaches us how to read and shape the energy of groups of people.

Our style of ritual could be described with the acronym EIEIO:

Ecstatic: in that we aim to create a high intensity of energy that is passionate and pleasurable.

Improvisational: We value spontaneity within the overall structure of our rituals, encourage people to create liturgy in the moment rather than script it beforehand, to respond to the energy around us rather than predetermine how it should move.

Ensemble: In our larger group rituals, we work with many priest/esses together taking different roles and performing different functions that, ideally, support each other like the members of a good jazz ensemble. We encourage a fluid sharing of those roles over time, to prevent the development of hierarchy and to allow each person to experience many facets of ritual.

Inspired: Because we each have access to the sacred, we are each capable of creating elements of ritual. Although we honor the myths, the poems, the songs and the stories that have come down to us from the past, we are not bound by the past, for divine inspiration is constantly present in each of us.

Organic: We strive for a smooth, coherent flow of energy in a ritual that has a life of its own to be honored. Our rituals are linked to the rhythms of cyclical time and organic life.

-<https://reclaimingcollective.wordpress.com/about-working-definition/>

Most people treat dressing for these rituals as part of preparing to enter ritual space physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually. We arrive changed and ready for change. But you can come just as you are, if you want to.

The Sound Spinners draw us to the pavilion with a soundscape, largely drumming. As we ascend the steps or ramp to the space, someone offers some form of pre-ritual purification, and we enter.

Drums and other instruments pull us in and get us moving. Some of us let the energy move through us and respond to it moving our bodies, dancing around the space, both receiving and shaping the energy in *that* way. Others sit along the edges, joining in more inwardly, and also serving to hold those edges. Everyone here is their own authority and chooses how they participate at any time, and all participation is integral to the whole.

Each ritual formally begins with a land acknowledgement, followed by a meditative grounding. We cast a circle and call on the elements and directions of air/east, fire/south, water/west, earth/north, and spirit/center. We invoke Ancestors and Descendants; and, since our overall camp theme this year was “The Descent of Inanna,” or “Inanna and the 7 Gates of *Me*,” each night we invoked Inanna, Neti, and Ereshkigal.

All of this preparing and invoking is followed by the symbolic action at the heart of the ritual.

At the close of each ritual, we say our thanks and farewells to all the forces we invited in, and open our circle.

During the week of this particular camp, we worked only with the portion of the Inanna story involving the actual descent to the Underworld, in which the goddess passes through the seven gates. Each night of camp we symbolically undertook a piece of Inanna's journey. I'm not going to try to describe the symbolic activity we engaged in for the heart of each ritual. I *will* enumerate just the intention of each night's ritual and the gates we traversed.

1. Monday: We created sacred space not just for this evening's ritual, but cast a circle around the entire Buffalo Gap space to be our container for the whole week. Another special piece for our first night was what we call "catching the thread." The various Reclaiming Camps throughout the world are connected by these symbolic threads that we toss from camp to camp. On the first night of this SpiralHeart camp, we caught the thread thrown to us on July 2nd at the end of the California WitchCamp in the Mendocino Woodlands.

The ritual intent for this first evening was: "We arrive to this work along comfortable paths, only to find uncomfortable truths. We find power in surrender."

On this first night, we began our journey, but we did not, yet, pass through a gate.

2. Tuesday: Our second night's intention was: "Peeling away our armor, our discomfort is our guide to deeper understanding."

On this night we passed through the first gate, the Gate of Authority, where Inanna relinquishes her crown; and, later, the second gate, the Gate of Perception, where the goddess lays down her scepter (or measuring rod).

3. Wednesday: The intention for our third ritual was: "Making space for the parts of us that are raw and tender, we fully embrace the diversity of our shared and individual experiences."

At the Gate of Communication, where Inanna removes her necklace, we were asked to give up our voice. This ritual ended with our passing through the Gate of Compassion, where Inanna removes her breast plate.

After this ritual, instead of going off and socializing over snacks, as usual, we were asked to observe "silence on the land."

4. Thursday: The intent for our 5th ritual was: “Examining our tolerance for the sacred “no,” we reckon with the true sources and costs of our power.”

On this night, we experienced the limitations of our individual power and the strength and resilience of our communal power before we crossed through the Gate of Power, where Inanna removes her rings.

5. Friday: On Friday, the night of SpiralHeart’s talent ritual and auction, we engaged in a different kind of ritual, indulging in repose and delight as we enjoyed the creative treasures offered by some among us. Before exiting the pavilion, we passed through the Gate of Creativity, where Inanna surrenders the jewelry from her feet and ankles.

6. Saturday: The intention for our 6th night of ritual was: “Bare and vulnerable, we honor the path we have traveled. Deep calls to deep.”

On this night, we gazed into the mirror and came face to face with Ereshkigal, passing through the Gate of Manifestation, where Inanna is stripped of her robes and stands bare.

7. Sunday: The intention for our final ritual was: “The work of the Underworld continues. We plant our seeds for tomorrow.”

Before emerging into the outer world, we consolidated and recognized the magical work of the week and looked toward how we’d bring it back with us. We said our farewells to all the spirits we’d worked with, including Neti, Ereshkigal, and Inanna, thanking them all, especially Inanna who’d guided us to and through the Underworld; and marveling at how— as a mythical being— she embarks on this journey *over and over and over*. We opened the sacred space that had held us all week. And we threw the thread back toward northern California, to be caught at the opening of Witchlets in the Woods camp on August 5th.

Why do I go to Witchcamp? I go for the magic. I go to suspend time, stepping between the worlds. I go to dive deep into a cycle or a story— to enact it and integrate it in many ways, on many levels, involving my whole person. I go for healing. And I go for the wonderful, diverse, entertaining, caring community that a bunch of witches can be.