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Prepare for winter

By Jon Busdeker
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The lights are low, the house smells of incense and two cats roam through Nancy McAndrew's living room.

In her normal-looking house, on her normal-looking street, in normal Lynchburg, people chat about local restaurants, cider recipes and their jobs.

Normal stuff.

Then someone speaks up.

"Come on. Let's go."

It is time to honor Bacchus, the Roman god of wine.

Eight people file into the kitchen and await McAndrew's instructions.

She's the senior druid and she's in charge of the Grove of the Seven Hills, a Lynchburg-based religious group of neopagan druids.

On this night, the group is celebrating the Bacchanalia, one of eight high days recognized by the Grove of the Seven Hills and other neopagan groups worldwide.

Neopagan druidry, according to the Grove of the Seven Hills bylaws, is polytheistic, non-dualist, non-sexist, non-racist, scientific, holistic and ecologically oriented in faith.

The members of the Grove of the Seven Hills are not devil worshipers, witches or believe in sacrifices. Their religion is based on the love of nature, the respect of their ancestors' religion and, in this particular grove, the pre-Christian traditions of the Celtic and Norse people.

In ancient times, druids came from the clergy class of Celts. Druids were teachers, ritual leaders and important figures, but little is known about the their culture.

"They considered knowledge sacred," said J.C. Hallman, author of "The Devil is a Gentleman: Exploring American's Religious Fringe" and the writer-in-residence at Sweet Briar College. "Nothing was written down. ... There is no original source material from the druids." (The Romans, when they invaded, did record some aspects of druid culture.)

By 300 A.D., Christianity nearly wiped out Paganism, but after the Middle Ages and into the 18th century, Europeans started to explore the ancient religion. Many of the rituals were made up because of the lack of historical texts, Hallman said.

Neopagan druidry in America began as the Reformed Druids of North America in the early 1960s by a group of students at Carlton College in Minnesota. Later Isaac Bonewits, an early member of the Reformed Druids of North America, split from the group and founded A Druid Fellowship in 1983. A Druid Fellowship is a form of the neopagan druidry, like Presbyterianism is a form of Christianity.

Grove of the Seven Hills is the local affiliate of A Druid Fellowship and the only official grove in Virginia.

A Druid Fellowship members are few in numbers (there are about 1,000 people who subscribe to this form of paganism worldwide, according to McAndrew) and people outside the religion don't know much about the groups' practices. Misconceptions are not uncommon.

A Druid Fellowship members form groves, usually based on geography, in order to perform rituals and create a community, much like a congregation.

"This is my church," said Katherine Rosser, member of Grove of the Seven Hills. "We're serious about it. It's not just a place to dress up in black." McAndrew said the ethical code of paganism is strict and inflexible because responsibility is doled out "for every single action."

"You must accept the consequences," McAndrew said. "You are responsible for that."

And those actions may or may not have an effect on the afterlife, because everyone has their own set of beliefs. Some believe in an afterlife, others think they will be reincarnated and some think they'll become "worm food."

According to the A Druid Fellowship Web site, there is "no concept of 'eternal' punishment, (and they) refuse to worship deities who could be that cruel."

A Druid Fellowship has no scared text, like a Bible, and takes it teachings from historical and archaeological texts.

There are more than 55 A Druid Fellowship groves in the world.

Back in McAndrew's kitchen, the members of Grove of the Seven Hills are eager to commence the Bacchanalia. The ritual represents the final day of harvest and the beginning of winter.

All eyes turn to McAndrew.

The ceremony begins.

'Hail and welcome!'

A semi-circle of eight grove members encloses McAndrew. The group is made up of men and women both young and old.

Some grove members are holding baskets and others are holding flowers. Soon, the trinkets will become offerings to various Hellenic gods and goddesses. (Normally the Grove of the Seven Hills deals with Celtic and Norse gods and goddesses, but it's been a grove tradition to honor Bacchus this time of year.)

McAndrew, 30, begins to talk and welcomes everyone to the celebration. The grove is a close-knit community so no introductions are needed.

McAndrew has long, brown hair that reaches down to the middle of her back. She's wearing a grey sweater and a red skirt that drapes down to her ankles.

McAndrew outlines what's about to happen. Most of the members know the different parts of the ritual, but McAndrew offers the refresher anyway.

She explains which offerings are allowed at this ritual, which ones aren't and when to make those offerings. No items containing wheat are allowed to be given to the gods, because Bacchus is the god of wine and not grain.

Also, McAndrew reminds the grove that Bacchus is a Hellenic god and the ritual will be within the Hellenic Pantheon.

The grove is allowed to honor only one set of gods and goddesses per ritual. When working in the Hellenic pantheon, McAndrew said, it is not proper to call on Norse or Celtic gods and goddesses.

"It would be kind of rude," McAndrew said.

McAndrew wraps up her ritual refresher, and leads the grove outside.

One by one, the members exit the kitchen and walk into McAndrew's backyard. It's past 10 p.m. and the rain is coming down.

"Ia, ia iaccous. Ia, ia Iaccous. Ia, ia Iaccous," the group chants as they skip through the wet grass. The chant is Greek and, when translated, means "Hail, hail, Bacchus."

Before calling on Bacchus, the grove must first honor the Earth Mother. They make an offering and continue to the edge of McAndrew's backyard

where a small fire is burning. The fire, along with the well and the world tree, make up the grove's ritual space called the "Triple Center of our Rite."

There's a picnic table near the fire holding the flowers, the incense and the other items that will be used during the ritual. With everyone standing around the fire, flowers are dropped into the flames and sticks of incense are lit and placed into the ground. "Hail and welcome," McAndrew says, and then follows the greeting up with A Druid Fellowship hymn called the "Portal Song." "By fire and by water, between the Earth and sky," the grove sings. "We stand like the world tree, rooted deep, crowned high." After the grove gives an offering to any sprites that might hinder their ritual, they get down to business.

Open the gates

"Open the gates, open the gates, open the gates, open the gates," McAndrew and the eight members chant. The calls to the gatekeeper get louder and louder and faster and faster until McAndrew announces: "The gates are open."

With the pathway between this world and the spiritual world opened, the grove can make offerings to the Three Kindreds - the Nature Spirits, the Ancestors and the Shining Ones.

The first offering goes to the Nature Spirits or the spirits in the soil, stones, water, wind, birds and beasts. A mixture of oils is thrown into the fire and the flames jump into the air.

Next, an offering is made to the Ancestors. A lantern on a nearby tree is lit to guide the spirits.

"We are your branches, you are our roots," says James Zimmerman, one of the grove members holding a bottle. "You are the north, east, west and south."

"I hope you enjoy it," he says, while emptying the contents into the fire. "Hail and welcome."

Finally the Shining Ones are called and welcomed to the ritual.

Now it's time to invite Bacchus. The group calls on the god of wine.

"Ia, Ia, Iaccous. Ia, Ia, Iaccous," the group sings.

With Bacchus listening, each grove member makes an offering. They burn flowers and pour oils into the fire.

Bacchus accepts their offerings.

In return, he offers the Grove of the Seven Hills something for the upcoming winter.

McAndrew tells the grove Bacchus offers them protection from the elements and protection from those who might try and harm them.

"Do the folks accept the blessing?" McAndrew asks three times.

The grove members accept, thank the Shining Ones, the Ancestors, the Nature Spirits and Bacchus.

"We bid you farewell," McAndrew says.

The chanting starts: "Close the gates, close the gates, close the gates." The voices get slower and slower until they turn to whispers.

The gates are closed, the Bacchanalia is over and Grove of the Seven Hills is ready for the coming winter.

Confessions of a senior druid and her grove

"What is this?" McAndrew remembers asking herself while flipping through a book on paganism and mythology. At the time, McAndrew was in high school and working on research paper. The book sparked her interest.

As she continued to dig up facts for her research paper, she got deeper and deeper into the mysteries of pre-Christian religions.

McAndrew, a lifelong Lynchburg resident, is a self-proclaimed nature lover and remembers growing up with a deep respect for the environment.

She began buying books related to druidism and reading anything she could find.

"It just made sense," McAndrew said about mixing her love for nature into her religion.

In her teenage years, she held ceremonies in a small sanctuary she set up in her bedroom closet. After graduating from Randolph-Macon Woman's College and moving to Guatemala to run an orphanage, McAndrew came back to Lynchburg and started to explore neopaganism.

In 2001, McAndrew started holding druid discussion meetings, which, she said, catered to the local Wicca community. The group grew and more people came out to discuss the different aspects of the pagan religion.

Rosser, an original member of Grove of the Seven Hills, attended one of those druid discussion meetings. Rosser had been searching for spiritual answers. She had dabbled in Wicca, but knew it wasn't for her.

When she heard McAndrew speak about neopaganism, Rosser was hooked.

"(McAndrew) is a walking dictionary and encyclopedia of everything pagan," Rosser said. "I liked it so much better than (Wicca). (Paganism) was older. It had its roots."

Later that year, McAndrew, Rosser and other interested souls created the Grove of the Seven Hills. The grove was actually a proto-grove, or a grove with training wheels. The group was still learning the ways of A Druid Fellowship.

At Rosser's first ritual, she remembered feeling comfortable with her new religion.

"This is right," Rosser said about paganism and the gods and goddesses.

Rosser grew up going to an Episcopal church, but felt a void in her life with Christianity.

"I needed a female figure," she said. "I needed balance."

The grove, she said, allowed her to explore different parts of spirituality.

"I like how I like being just me," Rosser said. "It doesn't feel like a chore. It doesn't feel like a job."

In 2003, the Grove of the Seven Hills was made an official A Druid Fellowship grove with McAndrew as the senior druid. Apart from the eight high days, the Grove of the Seven Hills meets every couple of weeks for discussions and Pagan Nights Out.

During the Pagan Nights Out, the grove members go to a local restaurant, have dinner and maybe a couple of drinks afterward. It's a way for the group to stay connected and involved in each other's lives.

"I really like the close community," McAndrew said. "It's very much a family religion, almost tribal."

Living in a city "full of churches," the group has run into people with contradictory belief systems, but they try to dispel the misconceptions behind the negative connotations of the word "pagan."

"We're not going to eat your children," Rosser said.

And the Grove of the Seven Hills does not practice a form of Satanism.

"We have nothing to do with Satan," Rosser said.

In fact, Rosser has been told she will spend an eternity in hell.

"I'm not," she said, "because I don't believe in it."

According to McAndrew, the biggest misconception about paganism comes from people who don't believe her religion is a religion. McAndrew has been told her religion is an excuse to drink, dress up and play in the woods.

"That's offensive," she said. "I don't belittle your faith. Don't belittle mine."

Want to find out more?

- The Grove of the Seven Hills can be found online at www.sevenhillsadf.org, where you can find contact information for the group.

This story can be found at:

http://www.newsadvance.com/servlet/Satellite?pagename=LNA%2FMGArticle%2FLNA_BasicArticle&c=MGArticle&cid=1149191362718&path=!burg

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