

What Do We Teach the Children? *by Jaq D. Hawkins*

Pagans and Magicians are like other people in many very human ways. We laugh, we cry, we fall in love, we have jobs, and many of us have families. It is not surprising that nature religions which revere fertility and the cycles of nature would include members who have children. Even solitary Magicians are subject to human emotions, and many may have spouses and offspring who function in the mundane world just as "normally" as the neighbors who go to church on Sunday.

The primary difference between "Us" and "Them" is one of personal philosophy and belief. Parents who believe in a magical religion or philosophy have to deal with the exact same issues of child raising that members of any other religion will encounter. Potty training, nutrition, schools, teaching acceptable behavior and how to get along with others are universal concerns for all parents.

Like all parents, we want to teach our beliefs to our children as they grow, and this is where we run up against the differences between "Us" and "Them", especially if we live somewhere like the Bible Belt of the United States where publicly admitting to our beliefs can lead to all sorts of trouble.

Another issue we must deal with is the vast spectrum of beliefs among "Us". In general, magical people are more inclined to allow for individuality within our belief structures rather than insisting on black or white dogma. For example, there are many variations on the concept of reincarnation. We may be sure that we believe in reincarnation, yet be open to various theories about being reincarnated through lifetimes as other creatures, specifically humans, or even carried down through our own ancestral line, not to mention simultaneous incarnations. Keeping an open mind is integral to most magical philosophies.

It is natural for parents awaiting the birth of their first child to speculate on all the wonderful things that they will someday teach their child. However, when the child is born they will soon discover that the child has much more primal concerns in mind for some time to come. Even as the child learns language and begins to play with other children, deep philosophical concepts are unlikely to be high on the agenda. In the years between learning to speak and beginning school, a child is likely to begin to ask simple questions about life and death and the general nature of the universe, which is where many seeds can be sown.

At this age, simple answers to direct questions are most appropriate, rather than active teaching. There may be some who would disagree with this, but in my personal observations I've seen that children more readily accept things which they learn at a pace set by themselves according to their interest level.

My own daughter began to question the nature of death in relation to animals around the age of three, to which I answered with a very simple explanation of death and rebirth cycling. She now accepts reincarnation so naturally that the recent death of one of her human playmates in a house fire was accepted as stoically as such news would be accepted by a Buddhist monk. Her only regret was that she wouldn't see him again in this life, because he would come back as a baby in a different family and not live near her anymore. She will have turned seven years old by the time this article reaches print.

When children begin school, these differences in belief from mainstream Christian philosophy can potentially cause large or small problems, for them or for us. For them, it's a matter of being 'different' in any way from the rest of the children. How different they are depends on the religious climate in the area within which we live. A child making comments about astrological signs in a school filled with children of born-again Christian parents may find aggressive opposition to simple ideas which the child has learned from parents. This can be upsetting and confusing to the child, to say the least. In other areas where there is more of a cross-cultural mix, it is much easier for the child who may encounter the normal disagreements of various children who will all insist that whatever their parents taught them is true and everything else not true. This sort of bantering between children is very normal whether it is over religion, local politics, or which entertainers are "the best". It is a normal part of growing up and learning that different people have different opinions about things.

There is a definite danger in attempting to teach a child too much at a very young age. I've recently spent some time living in a small Northern California town which has a large Jehovah's Witnesses population, and find myself sickened at the sight of a mother walking down the street with her smartly dressed and combed young son, both of them holding their 'Watchtower' magazines before them in display for all who pass. "This child is being brainwashed", I think to myself. Mind control through religion.

Then I have to ask myself, am I doing such a thing to my own child in my own way? With a sigh of relief, I can honestly answer myself "No". With hand on heart, I can honestly say that I have not shoveled my own ideas into my child's impressionable mind by force or scare tactics as are used by some of the more adamant religions. I have even felt a hint of dismay when she has reported conversations at school where she has proudly proclaimed, "We don't believe in that Christian religion, we believe in the fairy religion". My child is learning my ways, but only by asking her own questions.

As our children get older, and especially when they become teenagers, they will learn from exposure to society that there are many different beliefs among people. They will form ideas of their own, and may well choose a different path than ours. This could be a different magical path, an agnostic disinterest, or even a serious interest in a religion that we do not approve of. I've asked myself what I would do if my child fell in with the "wrong" crowd at the delicate age of fifteen and joined a cult of Jesus freaks. It's a frightening thought, and one I have no answer for as yet. The best we can do is to teach our children to think for themselves and give them enough love that they do not become prime targets for programming cults.

This still leaves open the possibility that an impressionable child, possibly through peer group exposure, may take an interest in a serious religion such as Catholicism or the Anglican Church. I have friends who find solace in these religions and I respect their right to choose their own path, as they respect mine. Could I respect a similar choice from my child? I think I could, but of course it hasn't been put to the test.

Meanwhile, the question remains, 'How much shall we teach our children about the mysteries and magic?' It is a difficult one to answer. We want our children to know the things we have learned, yet we want them to think for themselves. We hope they will take an interest on their own initiative, but if they get caught up in the mundane concerns of growing up and coping with life's stages, as they are sure to do, we will be tempted to bring our spirituality into conversation to try to spark an interest and offer 'helpful' guidance.

There is also the social issue to consider. Some of us can be quite open about our beliefs, others live in areas where it is much more sensible to keep a low profile. Will exposing my rather effusive seven-year-old to 'new age' philosophy, or even ritual, lead to misunderstandings at school, or even attention from social services?

A rather amusing story was related to me by a friend who was invited, along with his own seven-year-old daughter, to a Gnostic Mass. The child was very well behaved during the ceremony and seemed to pay close attention, but didn't have a lot to say about it afterwards. It took place on a weekend. The following Monday at school, her teacher asked what she had done over the weekend. The child answered that her Daddy had taken her to a play. When asked what it was all about, she replied that she wasn't sure but that there had been a very rude lady there who had taken all her clothes off. The teacher then calmly asked the child if she had enjoyed the play, to which she answered, "No, it was boring." No more was said about the matter.

This situation occurred in a small English town where knowledge of the parent's pagan beliefs is accepted as a little eccentric, but harmless. The child is known to be well cared for. She shows no signs of being adversely affected by her father's beliefs or practices. If the child had seemed upset by what she had witnessed, questions might have been asked.

There are places where these same comments from a child could easily lead to serious attention from social service organizations. People who live in these places must give serious thought to what their children may be likely to say at school before they expose their children to information which would be locally considered to be of a controversial, or even threatening nature.

An extreme scenario comes to mind. In Nazi Germany, children were encouraged to turn in parents who were unsympathetic to, or actively working against, Nazi ideology. What would happen if a series of serious persecutions of occultists were to occur in a particular area in the manner of the infamous witch hunts? A child's maturity level and disposition toward speaking their mind without forethought should be taken into consideration in relation to potential local reaction toward public exposure of our magical practices.

A less extreme scenario is one where a disinterested teenager may be embarrassed to bring friends home because the parents have 'weird' interests and have decorated the house with pentagrams and gargoyles. To an adolescent with a strong focus on 'normal' adolescent concerns in a material world, any form of non-conformity which will make parents stand out from the parents of peers is a potential point of conflict.

Some of our children will follow our examples, others will choose their own ways. Many will strike a balance between the two, learning some things from us and striking out into new territory of their own choosing. We will do them most justice if we teach by example, but allow them to come to us for information rather than try to force a particular set of beliefs onto them. Making every effort to keep an open mind to areas of the occult outside of our personal chosen paths will allow our children to experiment for themselves and find their own chosen paths, rather than be forced into a mold which could easily lead to complete rebellion.

As for myself, I expect that I will be haunted for the next ten years by the sight of that same Jehovah's Witness woman, outside the post office this morning with two sons instead of one, wearing full dress suits and jackets in the morning heat, which was in the high nineties. They were holding their magazines proudly for all to see, trying not to look uncomfortable as the sweat ran down their young foreheads. My daughter asked me what they were doing. I answered as simply as I could that they were a form of Christianity which forced their children to stand in the heat in hot clothes to try to push their religion on other people. I also said, loudly enough to be heard by the children and their mother, that I considered it child abuse and would never do such a thing to her.

Our children are free spirits. They play in the park on hot Summer mornings, and they think their own thoughts. May we always remember to allow them to do so.