

A woman with long, wavy hair, wearing a dark sleeveless top, is sitting on the ground in a forest. She is looking down at something in her hands. The forest is dense with trees and sunlight filters through the canopy, creating a dappled light effect on the ground and foliage. The overall mood is serene and natural.

Season of the Witch

They walk among us, though you might never know it. And their numbers are growing. Inside the hidden world of modern-day witches and pagans.

WRITTEN BY JANET REYNOLDS

PHOTOGRAPHED BY LISA NICHOLS

Nicole Wardwell Sleath is high priestess of the Society of Witchcraft and Old Magick, a Canton-based coven with about 100 members.

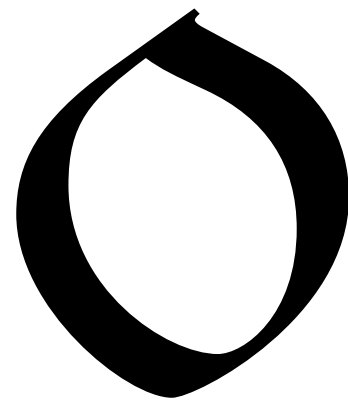


(opposite page) The Connecticut Wiccan & Pagan Network's Harvest Gathering nears its opening crescendo, as participants await the lighting of a ceremonial fire.

(at right) Overseeing proceedings is Jessica VanHentenryck, president of the CWPAN, who stands in front of the ancestral altar, on which photos of deceased loved ones and other meaningful objects are placed.



**The gathering is a chance to
“be around people like us.
We’re not afraid anymore.”**



guided sound journeys. It's a way, she says, "to bring you to your astral realm through guided meditation and sound. You can meet your inner child at your playground."

Camp Cedarcrest in Orange is the setting for the Connecticut Wiccan & Pagan Network's (CWPAN) August Harvest Gathering, one of several such events the non-profit educational and networking organization hosts across the state throughout the year. Think Grateful Dead festival meets summer camp and you've got a good idea of the Harvest Gathering's vibe.

Following a communal dinner under the picnic pavilion and the usual reminders about whom to contact for help and remembering not to be too noisy after 10 p.m. — "We do not operate on Pagan Standard Time for rituals," jokes organizer Aalie Herron. "Be on time." — the weekend begins at the ancestral altar.

Located in a shed a bit off the main area, the altar is decorated with bits of blue gauze to evoke water, the element being celebrated in this year's Sacred Waters gathering. (The other elements are fire, earth, air and spirit.) Photos of loved ones who have died perch on the shelves, interspersed with candles and shells. Mixed in are objects that initially seem out of place — a nip bottle of Jim Beam, a wine opener, a small broom — and yet clearly are meaningful remembrances of people's previous lives.

Before the gathering begins its opening ceremony, people approach the altar and place additional memorabilia. Barbara Wainscott of Prospect, known as Mama Wolf, places a photo of her parents and two small urns holding the ashes of her daughter and her mother on a shelf. "My daughter has been coming with me here since 2016," she says of the urn. A

witch and pagan, Wainscott was raised Catholic before turning to paganism. Her practice includes elements of Native American and Celtic beliefs. "We all have these abilities," Wainscott says. "You see it in children. That's the magic. Society takes that away." The gathering, she adds, is a chance to "be around people like us. We're not afraid anymore."

As people gather at the altar, the two leaders remind people of their ties to their ancestors and to water. After asking everyone to take a deep breath and open their hearts and minds to the weekend, the leaders ask participants to reach through the gauzy veil of water to choose one of the cemetery stones in a large container lit with blue light at the front of the altar. "We are all made of water," they intone. "Water is the current that connects us to the past, present and future. One day we will return to the earth. Remember your ancestors, their lives and their strength."

After taking a stone and inviting an ancestor to join them on their weekend journey, people walk down the short hill to the waiting fire circle, a bonfire ringed with benches. Each person is "smudged" (burning sage is circled around their head) before gathering around the circle. Mary Kimball, who works at a community theater when she is not leading rituals, stands in a blue hooded robe in the circle's center. Some people have donned capes and ornamental jewelry — one bare-chested man wears an animal skull with horns — but most are dressed for camp life. "We are here to raise awareness of the greater good," Kimball says.

Jessica VanHentenryck, CWPAN president and Kimball's daughter, assists her mother in the opening ceremony. VanHentenryck walks around the circle, placing a few drops of water in front of each person, saying, "Blessed be."

The wood for the fire is composed of pieces of the maypole used to celebrate Beltane, a May 1 pagan holiday celebrating the peak of spring and the coming of summer. After Kimball asks people to consider their intention for the weekend, VanHentenryck carries one of the beribboned logs to each person in the circle, each of whom solemnly touches it while contemplating their intention. When she is done, Kimball asks everyone to join hands and calls to the elements. "You have all you need inside for your journey," she says, as people raise their joined hands and the fire is lit. People begin moving into the circle, and the drumming and dancing begins.

ON A HOT EVENING at the end of August, people drive up to the gate of a campground and are met with a "Welcome home" from an older man. "Just drive down this dirt road to park," he instructs. Not far from the parking area is a small, open field encircled by a few cabins, and a large picnic pavilion sits in the center. Children scamper around and people greet each other with hugs and laughter as people set up tents and vendors organize their goods and areas for massage, as well as tarot and rune readings and the other classes that will be held over the four-day event.

In one tent, Nici Derosier, a retired middle school principal who is a shamanic healer and green witch (one who has a deep connection to nature and plant life), sells flowing skirts as well as jewelry, bowls, pipes, rings and drinking horns that she crafts herself. The Art Child tent offers therapeutic art activities for the young and old, while Linda Brom of Derby offers

A glossary to the occult

Not sure about the difference between a pagan, a Wiccan and a witch? Here's a cheat sheet with the caveat that this is the very tip of the wand.

Paganism and neo-paganism - Incorporating beliefs and practices outside the major, mostly monotheistic, world religions, paganism is especially associated with nature worship and is often polytheistic. Pagans may worship gods and goddesses of nature. Colloquially, people who consider themselves agnostic may be called pagans. Paganism is an umbrella term that can include Wicca, Druidism, Discordianism and everything in between. Neo-paganism is the reconstruction of ancient pagan traditions for the modern era.

Wicca - Wicca as a religion was introduced in the 1950s in the U.K. by Gerald Gardner and then spread to the U.S. Wiccans see the divine in nature and may honor one god or goddess, or choose to worship a variety of deities tied to a particular tradition, such as Celtic. Despite a wide variety of practices and traditions, Wiccans have one overarching belief: "Harm none and do as you will." Most Wiccans practice magic in some form. They may do magic to heal themselves or others. They celebrate the new and full moons as well as other holidays during the year, such as Samhain and the summer solstice. Not all pagans are Wiccans.

Witch - A person who is often a practitioner of witchcraft who may or may not worship gods or goddesses and who believes in self-empowerment and healing. Not all witches consider themselves Wiccans.

Druidism or Druidry - A spiritual practice that involves communing with nature and being fully present in your life. There is no one sacred text or way of practicing Druidism. Monotheistic Druids believe in one deity or spirit, while duotheistic Druids believe in a pair of forces. Polytheistic Druids believe many gods and goddesses exist.

Occultism - In its broadest sense, occultism is the study of the occult, which is a wide-ranging category of ideas and practices generally found outside traditional religions. It can refer to everything from magic to ESP to the paranormal. An occultist is someone who believes in or practices the arts that fall under occultism.

Heathen - Historically, the term "heathen," much like "pagan," was used to refer to people who did not follow one of the major religions. Today, heathenry focuses on reverence of deities, especially from the Norse and Germanic traditions, and ancestors. Unlike Wiccans and some pagans, magic and witchcraft are not central for heathens.

SAY THE WORD "witch" to people and chances are they will picture a haggard, usually older, woman, maybe green (thank you, Wizard of Oz), dressed in black, stirring a bubbling cauldron filled with mysterious (read: dangerous) substances.

What they likely don't imagine are teachers, lawyers, massage therapists, mothers and fathers (yes, men can be witches). They don't picture like-minded folks peacefully gathering to celebrate nature, self-empowerment and love.

And yet, as witnessed at the CWPN's Harvest Gathering, it is this latter vision that is closer to the norm in modern witchcraft. Contrary to their bad rap in history and to the stereotypical tropes found throughout much of the entertainment media, pagans and witches are, for the most part, simply people on a spiritual path. And like those following one of the more traditional world religions—Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism—followers range in the level of their devotion and in the personal ways in which they celebrate and recognize their religion.

While some might want to dismiss this kind of gathering as fringe and something for society's outsiders, the reality increasingly suggests otherwise. As the number of people practicing traditional organized religion continues to decline, interest in paganism, and with it Wicca, Druidism and other neo-pagan religions, is on the rise.

The Pew Research Center found in 2018 and 2019 that 65 percent of Americans identified as Christians, down 12 percent from the previous decade. Pew also found in a 2014 survey that about 1 million to 1.5 million people in the U.S. identify as Wiccan or pagan. That's potentially more than the 1.4 million members of the Presbyterian Church. Pew projects that by 2050, the number of practicing pagans in the U.S. could triple to 6.6 million.

Paganism is the umbrella term for religions that do not fall under the traditional world religions of Christianity, Judaism and Islam. Wicca is just one of its many subsets, which include Druidry, witchcraft (not all witches are Wiccans and there are many subsets of all), and Celtic paganism, to name just a very few. The divinity of nature is a recurring theme in all, as is taking responsibility for one's own beliefs. Some worship more than one god or goddess. (See "A glossary to the occult" on page XX.) Most pagans celebrate eight major holidays, including Yule (winter solstice), Beltane, Litha (summer solstice) and Samhain (the witch's new year). (See "Major pagan holidays" on page XX.)

A scroll through social media finds a vibrant scene. On Facebook, New England Pagan & Witches has 1,700 members, while Witchcraft & Spells for Beginners has 166,000 members and Beginning Witches and Witchcraft has 50,000 members. And these are just three of innumerable public and private group options. The hashtag #witchesofinstagram has 9 million posts, and over on TikTok, WitchTok includes traditional practitioners along with so-called "baby" witches who seem closer to the alternative wellness movement. The community has over 30 billion views.

Online, Mandragoramagika.com offers one-stop worldwide shopping for finding a coven or like-minded pagan group. Groups can be found in 45 of the 50 states, including Connecticut options for Windham, Windsor Locks, Vernon, Torrington, New Haven, Hartford, East Haven and Bristol, to name just a few.

"If you want to join a traditional coven in New England, that



(at left) In the moments before the fire is lit, CWPN Jessica Vanhentenryck holds out a wooden log wrapped in ribbon for people to touch and ponder their goals for the weekend.

(below) Vanhentenryck's mother, Mary Kimball presides over the fire ritual, which also features the significant element of water, represented by her blue robe and a bowl of water.

(bottom right) A participant who goes by "Mr. Wolf" partakes in the opening ritual.

(bottom left) Barbara Wainscott, also known as Mama Wolf, places relics representing her mother and daughter on the ancestral table.



"More people are willing to say they're pagan than in the '80s and '90s. Back then, if you had families, you were terrified, at least I was."



would not be hard,” sums up Tim Landry, an associate professor of anthropology at Trinity College and a witch and occultist. “You can throw a stone and hit one.”

Kimball thinks people are more open to the idea of paganism than when she first began to practice. “More people are willing to say they’re pagan than in the ’80s and ’90s. Back then, if you had families, you were terrified, at least I was,” she says. Kimball raised her children as pagans but also encouraged them to participate in the Episcopal Church of her youth. “I always worried some teacher or my kids would say something and they would jump to conclusions that can turn your entire world upside down. I told the kids when they were young, we are not ashamed of our beliefs but we don’t need to scream them from the rooftops either.”

Dan Lupacchino, a licensed massage therapist in Hartford, thinks some of the growing interest in pagan religions comes from a recognition that traditional religions are too stagnant. “To be a living religion you have to adapt and change and support your modern practitioners,” says Luppachino, who is a high priest at the Temple of Witchcraft, a global group with its U.S. headquarters in Salem, N.H. “People are looking for something deeper, that personal empowerment.”

“There’s no control over your self, over your destiny,” Luppachino says of other religions. “There’s no connection with the divine unless there’s an intermediary.” In contrast, the witch, the healer, the priest, the seer does that all for themselves. “It’s our own responsibility to connect and maintain and nourish that connection for ourselves,” he says. “People are looking for freedom and autonomy, and that extends into their spiritual lives as well.”

In addition, ritual can help provide meaning and comfort in an increasingly alarming world. While people who find the rituals associated with paganism and witches unnerving and a sign of otherness, these same people may not realize they have their own rituals. For some it’s morning coffee. Athletes wear certain socks for games. In Christian churches, people practice Communion. “It’s a way to provide groundedness and a sense of control,” Luppachino says of pagan and Wiccan rituals. “Those rituals provide us that comfort and safety in a shitstorm of a world. It helps us to try to feel tied down to something when you feel the world is falling apart.”

“I’m worried about American individualism and where it will lead us,” Landry says. “Our profound focus on individualism will be our demise. Witchcraft or Wicca works against that.”

The reason, he says, is the overall focus on community and nature. Celebrating holidays that connect participants to the Earth and attune them to seasonal cycles is a long tradition, and one that builds community. “The idea is if you harvest your crops now and you have a lot left over, you should help your neighbor,” he says of the history of some of the celebrations. “This sense of community is profoundly important. The anthropologist in me loves the idea that we need to be in this together. We are on the precipice of fascism and on the precipice of lots of different political winters.

“When you’re a witch, you’re never powerless,” Landry adds. “There’s always something you can do.”

WHILE PAGANS AND witches may come to their various beliefs in a multitude of ways, their origin stories about becoming a pagan/Wiccan/witch are variations on one theme: they were outsiders trying to find a way to fit in. Some iteration of the sentence, “I was a weird child growing up,” is said by virtually everyone interviewed for this story. That and a moment when the traditional religion in which they were being raised failed them in some way.

Eileen Gillis was raised Anglican in Canada. After her father died, the minister told her he wouldn’t be going to heaven even though he had been a good man. “That broke me from the church,” she says. After seeking something else for a long time, she found Druidism. “This is what clicked,” she says, noting there is no god or goddess. “We believe everything is in our own energy and power.” Rituals exist as in Wicca, “but when I need a connection, I just go out and walk barefoot in the grass. It’s just me and nature.”

Landry talks of growing up Catholic in the South. “I remember struggling with my own sexuality and feeling very rejected by the church but also having a profound embodied desire and even a need for ritual,” he says.

In high school he started reading about Wicca and witchcraft. “For the first time I was meeting people who aren’t judgmental. They weren’t trying to impose their own ideologies on me,” he says. “Witchcraft supported my own politics, my own struggle growing up in the American South as a gay man.”

Witchcraft provided Landry with a similar community. He remembers being a new faculty member at Trinity in 2015 and knowing no one. “Witchcraft saved me. I don’t say that hyperbolically,” he says. “A lot of people who come to witchcraft, it’s more about developing a supportive community than anything weird or esoteric or scary. I’m with a group of people I love and sometimes we dance under the moon and do magic together. I know if I was in trouble, they would be here in two seconds.”

“You love them perfectly, which means imperfectly. You accept each other’s flaws,” says Landry of being in a coven, or group of witches. “In a coven you have to be able to vocalize your vulnerabilities. By giving vulnerabilities a voice, you can change them. Like you trust your therapist, you have to trust your coven.”

Lupacchino grew up in East Hartford, spending a lot of time outdoors. “As a child I thought it was normal. I spoke to trees and made potions in the backyard without knowing what I was doing,” he says. “There was always this undertone or undercurrent that there was something more to this, something more serious, almost like I was remembering something.”

It wasn’t until he was taking a Reiki class and each person identified as a witch that he became more open to recognizing this part of himself. “They were normal—doctors, lawyers, mothers, teachers. They were grounded, healthy, empowered people, so I thought maybe there was more to that.”

Of the word “witch,” Luppachino says, “I like reclaiming that word. It’s an empowerment word for me as well as an identity and vocation.” Still, even though he leads public rituals, he is cautious about how he talks about his witchiness. “I will

use the word Wiccan depending on the group I’m with. Sometimes Wiccan is more palatable or more understood.”

THEIR ORIGIN STORIES and interest in finding community may be similar, but how pagans, Wiccans and witches practice their craft is as multifaceted as the people themselves. There are green witches, eclectic witches, strict Gardnerian and Alexandrian witches, hedge witches, solitary witches, and witches who belong to covens—and everything in between. It’s a virtual tossed salad of spiritualism.

“The unfortunate part of paganism is there is no set doctrine,” says Lupacchino. “If you put 10 people in a room and ask what being a witch means you’ll get 10 different definitions.”

VanHentenryck, who is a birth and death doula, calls herself an ancestral agnostic, witch and pagan. “I worship my ancestors as my gods,” she says. “My ancestors put me on this planet. I can prove they’re there and they’re a part of my everyday life. I don’t lean toward a pantheon of gods or any goddess but I don’t not believe in them.”

She uses magic to guide her decision making and “to keep me well grounded and connected to my ancestors and my family in general,” she says. “Magic is important to me to keep me here. Working in between that veil [between life and death] can be heavy.”

Kimball, VanHentenryck’s mother, started as a Wiccan and is now an eclectic heathen in the Norse tradition. “You can have one faith,” she says, “and then something changes and you find a different faith that attunes to you better.”

“Unless you remain a traditionalist, it becomes eclectic,” sums up Sean Kane, who is a heathen witch. Married to the daughter of a Congregational minister, Kane, who goes by **Starwolf** at the gathering, has been practicing for 50 years.

But while eclectic is the name of the game for many Wiccans and witches, others prefer organized training. Nicole Wardwell Sleath is a witch, occultist and high priestess of the Society of Witchcraft and Old Magick. A branch of American witchcraft based in Canton, she started the local society in 2014 and has created a specific curriculum in this tradition. Today the coven has about 100 active members. To become an initiated witch, people must study for a year and a day. Classes are 90 minutes weekly and Sleath takes on 10–15 new students each time.

“It takes immense discipline to get real magical skill,” says Sleath, adding that the internet helps to empower dabblers posing as professionals. “Millions of people are trying to sell themselves as teachers but they don’t know how the mechanics of magic really work.”

An occultist is a student of the mysteries of the universe’s arcane mysteries at a deep level, she says. “It’s very personal. You have to conduct yourself so you live the most contented life you can.”

One goal of her group, which is private, is to help students be discerning about information. “You can tell a lot about how an occult teacher is by the way they live their lives,” she says. “If they’re posting photos on social media saying come be a wild woman, they’re just creating a thing because they want to revel in it.”

The society holds private ceremonies for full moons and the eight pagan sabbaths. “The idea behind American

“People are looking for freedom and autonomy, and that extends into their spiritual lives as well.”



“It takes immense discipline to get real magical skill.”



Isabel Carrington, owner of The Bell and Raven shop in Simsbury, walks a customer through the process of making a spell jar at the shop's "Spell Jar Bar." Such concoctions are created to carry out specific needs and goals.

(below) Customers Alyssa and Kaz browse the Bell and Raven's metaphysical offerings.



Major pagan holidays

Generally speaking, pagans celebrate eight annual festivals spaced six to seven weeks apart starting in December, a cycle known as the Wheel of the Year.

Yule - Also known as winter solstice or Midwinter, yule is celebrated on the shortest day of the year, around Dec. 21. For many pagans, this period marks the start of a new life cycle that will usher in spring.

Imbolc - On the first day of February, this holiday further presages the coming of spring, as signs of the changing of the seasons start to be seen. Though uncertain, the meaning of Imbolc may derive from the Old Irish for "in the belly" or "in the womb."

Ostara - Named for the Celtic goddess of spring, this is the spring equinox and is celebrated around March 21 when the day's light and darkness are roughly equal.

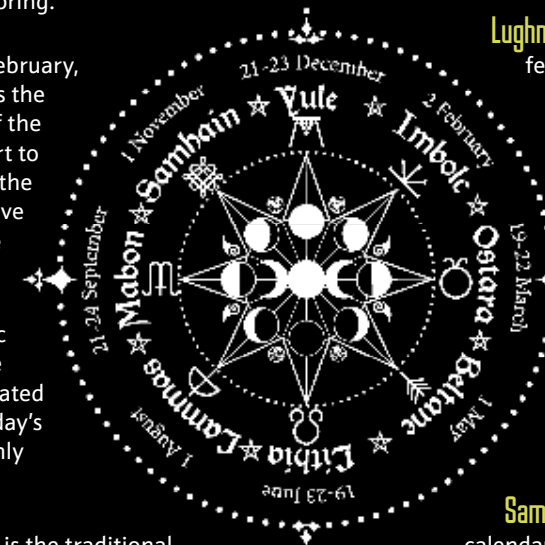
Beltane - Arriving May 1, this is the traditional Celtic May Eve or May Day celebration and marks the coming of summer. The maypole and the circling of ribbons symbolize fertility and life's cycle.

Litha - The summer solstice or Midsummer is the longest day of the year and arrives around June 21. Though practices vary, the focus is nearly always on the power of the sun.

Lughnasadh - The year's first harvest festival occurs at the start of August. Meaning "gathering of Lugh" in Old Irish, referring to a god from Irish mythology, the holiday is also called Lammas, Anglo-Saxon for "loaf mass."

Mabon - Falling between Sept. 21 and 24, this is the autumn equinox and roughly coincides with traditional European harvest festivals which give thanks for the bounty and the filling of food stores for the winter.

Samhain - Aligning with Halloween on the calendar, this harvest festival starts on the night of Oct. 31 and ends on the following evening. Possibly meaning "summer's end" in ancient Irish, Samhain marks the return of winter and the thinning of the barrier between this world and the next.



witchcraft is it respects the large variety from around the world, just the way America is a melting pot," Sleath says, noting that the branch is not Wiccan. "It's another sect under paganism."

Wicca tends to focus on the Celtic pantheon of gods and ritual style with role playing. In American witchcraft, practitioners don't have to be polytheistic. Rituals are more ceremonial.

While not against self-trained practitioners, Sleath is skeptical. "You go to college and get a medical license. Can you be self-trained?" she says. "One of the hard truths? Natural talent has nothing to do with it. It's not a level playing field."

THE GROWING INTEREST in paganism, Wicca and witchcraft is clear in the number of shops devoted to all things occult in Connecticut. The state has dozens of stores devoted to the metaphysical at large—and they are as varied as the practices themselves.

The Bell and Raven in Simsbury is an entry-point shop. Through one doorway, customers walk down an inviting hallway with fairy lights and greenery. There are curated areas for various metaphysical interests, from crystals and stones to candles and books. In one corner is the Spell Jar Bar, where, with guidance from owner Isabel Carrington, you can create your own spell jar for a particular intention or need. Also containing books, candles, stones, crystals and

more, the area is welcoming and comforting.

Carrington spent 18 years as director of education at the Warner Theatre in Torrington before deciding to open the shop of her dreams. "Though I felt the universe pulling me in a different direction for many years, as we do, we push those signs away," she says, adding that she's been a practicing witch for years. The COVID lockdown changed that for her. "If I'm going to make a split, this is the time to do it. I started thinking about what brings me fulfillment and joy but also how to inspire and celebrate that inner fire, inner magic, inner individuality in other people."

She wanted to make it easy for people to access their potential magic on whatever level they want. "Everyone's magic is so special. It should feel special when you walk into the space," she says.

Carrington became interested in the metaphysical through her sister, who discovered Wicca as a teen. Her sister dragged her to metaphysical bookstores, where she found books and ideas that suddenly made sense. "It was like something clicked in my soul," she says. "It felt like I was connecting with something that had been in me for ages and ages and ages."

Carrington didn't share her feelings with anyone other than her sister, however. "It was considered weird," she says, referencing movies like *The Craft* and *Practical Magic* that were popular at the time. "I never got into those shows or movies. It felt probably the way devout Christians feel when



A moan- and hiss-producing séance machine adds to the ambiance of the "haunted shopping experience" that is Hartford's Curioporium.

some of those goofy Christmas movies come along and it's trivialized."

To her, the practice is sacred. "If you're exploring your mystical path, there should be no gatekeeping, no judgment, no one telling you that's not the way to do it," Carrington says. "So many organized religions, that's exactly what they say. To me paganism and magic and mysticism say you can do this. You can be your authentic self. You won't be judged. How wonderful is that?"

"I feel sad for those who miss out on this. If we can't touch it, see it, feel it, we think it doesn't exist," she says. "Well, I breathe oxygen every day and I don't see it."

Carrington, who identifies as pagan and a lunar witch, is still a bit cautious in the world at large about her beliefs. "People are afraid to say they're a witch because it's perceived as a villain," she says, noting Grimms' fairy tales in which witches starve or eat children. "Nobody wants that connotation."

The Curioporium in Hartford is an entirely different kind of mystical and metaphysical shop. Where the Bell and Raven's tagline is "discover your magic," the Curioporium bills itself as "New England's Premier Haunted Shopping Experience."

The store is chockablock with items for sale as well as things to observe. In the first room of the multi-room "vault," as the store is styled, a séance machine moans and hisses as different spirits and entities make themselves known in preparation for séances held at the shop. Visitors can get items for their altars, antiques with a past, and strange taxidermy as well as candles, sage and stickers. Each of the five rooms in the store is devoted to a particular storyline and curated accordingly. The Sanctum of Obscura and Library includes all kinds of books about magic, the occult and more. The Parlor of Lost Souls has items—some for sale, some not—that are tethered to the Earth in some way (aka cursed). When someone purchases a tethered item, staff advises the purchaser on how to cleanse it.

"We try to make sure all that are here are not malicious and that people are protected while they're here," says Joey Marsocci, an owner along with Nathan Nunez and co-creator of the storylines and experiences that occur regularly at the store. He points to the symbols on the floor, noting there is salt under the doorway and the store is cleansed with sage both before opening and at closing.

The shop also hosts events which it calls "darkly humorous entertainment." In the "Vault Experience," visitors take in a séance and paranormal events; the Grim Reaper leads lantern tours; master of the macabre Edgar Allen Poe pays a visit; and Beetlejuice comes to life in the "Netherworld Experience."

Marsocci realized he was a witch after reading Augusten Burroughs' memoir *Toil & Trouble*. He was working at the Mark Twain House & Museum in Hartford at the time and also found his sister's journals after she had died in which she wrote about being a witch. He is also married to a witch.

"We're not Halloween," he says of the Curioporium. "This is a way of life for us. Being accepted for being different is what this place is all about."

SALEM, THE WITCH mecca of New England, if not the U.S., is another facet of commercialization of all things witch-re-

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Joey Marsocci (left), creative director, and Nathan Nunez, owner, stand in the salon of the Curioporium.

Unique items—some for sale, some not—include "cursed" artifacts, taxidermy, as well as more mundane objects such as books and candles.



"We're not Halloween. This is a way of life for us. Being accepted for being different is what this place is all about."

WITCHES

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lated and, as such, impacts how people perceive Wicca and witches. Most of the witches interviewed for this story have a love/hate relationship with the shoreline city north of Boston. “It’s like Mardi Gras times 12,” says Luppachino, who, like every other witch interviewed, refuses to visit in the fall.

Most agree Salem can be a great starting point for people who are witch-curious. “Salem can be an awakening for people,” says Luppachino. With shops galore, people can find books, tools and potential community.

And the history is there to find beyond the kitsch. “Those individuals did not die in vain,” Luppachino says. “For the good or the bad, people can go there where these atrocities occurred and find healing.”

“There is a cultural zeitgeist around Salem that helps make witches [in Connecticut] part of this community. “Salem is a good entry point into witchcraft,” Landry says. “On the other hand, it produces this image of witchcraft that’s not exactly true.”

“Salem doesn’t support witchcraft in a practical sense but in a psychological way,” Landry adds. “It’s like being gay and going to Provincetown.”

“I think it’s wonderful from the standpoint that Disney World is great. But for me there’s a dichotomy,” says Carrington. “This is a place where women were jailed, persecuted, confined, sometimes for doing nothing out of the ordinary or just trying to help or be themselves.”

Carrington’s ancestor by marriage, John Carrington was among the last people to be executed for witchcraft in Connecticut. “That ties to my heaviness about my feelings about Salem,” she says. “I wouldn’t want people going to our family gravesite and not knowing anything about my family or caring and then having a fun drunken time with girlfriends.”

While the commercialization of all things pagan and witchy as well as the general increased interest in paganism suggests a normalization or acceptance of these beliefs, stigma persists. Our collective history regarding witches — or those accused of being witches — is part of the reason.

“The word witch was a weapon used against people who were different, typically women, or gay or effeminate men, people born with physical differences like albinos or twins. The difference became the worry of the church.”

Connecticut was the site of the first witch hanging in the colonies, a full 40 years before the first witch trial in Salem. Else Young of Windsor was accused of witchcraft in 1647 and hanged in Hartford. In 1646, Mary Johnson was accused of being a witch, and after being tormented for years, ultimately confessed and was hanged. Though most of those accused of witchcraft were women, two men in Connecticut were also hanged — John Carrington and Nathaniel Greensmith, both of whom died with their wives. In total, 46 people in Connecticut were accused of witchcraft during the hysteria. Thirty-three of them were women. Nine women and two men were known to have been executed. Despite the last Salem “witch” being exonerated this summer in Massachusetts, descendants of those convicted of witchcraft in Connecticut have tried unsuccessfully for years to clear their ancestors’ names.

“Most people who were killed for witchcraft weren’t witches,” says Landry. “The word witch was a weapon used against people who were different, typically women, or gay or effeminate men, people born with physical differences like albinos or twins. The difference became the worry of the church.”

While that worry has abated somewhat, the potential stigma is still real. “Like many things in culture, we fear what we don’t know or understand,” Luppachino says. “You have [hundreds of] years of fears around the word witch inherited in our bodies. Just like racism, it’s passed on genetically. We’ve been trained to believe and act a certain way for so long it goes on autopilot.”

“We have all that inheritance in our system that we have to unlearn, like learning to be unracist and unhomophobic,” Luppachino says. “You really have to examine where this is coming from.”

He admits it took him a while to be comfortable saying he was a witch. “Every time I come out,” he says, adding that he is gay, “there is this moment of how is this going to be received.”

“Some people you’ll never change their mind,” Kimball says, recalling a Baptist woman who thought Kimball would put a curse on her. “If I see the shutdown happening or their body language telling you they’re uncomfortable, I will change the conversation or walk away.”

Misinformation about witches and pagans, such as the fear of hexing people or turning them into newts, feeds the stigma. Luppachino points out that many of us already perform “curses,” in a way. “Have you ever flipped off someone while you’re in your car? You’re doing a curse,” he says, adding that blowing out candles on birthday cake and wishing for something to happen is based in old folk traditions. “You attach the word witch to it and it suddenly becomes demonic.”

“It’s important to remember these curses and hexes were largely levied against oppressors and abusers,” Landry says. “There are certainly people who are just not good people. They often find what they think is witchcraft is not that negative.”

“The central mystery of Wicca,” adds Landry, “is love and how powerful love is as a magical force in the world. Those people who do negative magic are the profound exception to the rule.”

Shea Boresi, a witch and creative writing graduate student, is sanguine about potential stigma. “There’s a certain Christian old-fashioned reaction I encounter and that’s silly,” she says. “It’s futile to try to police the boundaries of who’s a witch.” ■

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