



# GURUS, GOOP

Jennifer Aniston and her girlfriends bond over a “talking stick”, and Gwyneth Paltrow swears by her shaman. So is it new New Age nonsense or the key to enlightenment? Madeleine Collins goes on a spiritual journey to find out

# & GODDESS CIRCLES

It's a sweltering afternoon in Hollywood and I'm navigating a grittier part of town in search of my soul. In truth, anyone searching for their soul in Hollywood should probably be directed to the nearest mental health facility, but I'm on the trail of Harry the Healer, shaman to the stars.

As I pull up to the address Harry texted me, it appears to not exist, or is somehow hidden on the street of mostly run-down cottages. This is where celebs come for healing? I'd expected a ritzy mansion given Harry's supposed clientele (his devotees range from screen vet Anthony Hopkins to Aussie Hollywood brat packers Todd Lasance, Liam McIntyre and Luke Mitchell). My stomach tightens. What the hell am I doing, going to a strange man's house on my own? I text my husband the address, just in case.

When I finally find the front door, I'm greeted by a slim but muscular older man whose golden skin literally glows back at me as he leans in for a warm hug. Harry the Healer (real name Harry Paul) looks exceedingly healthy and happy.

He leads me to a dark treatment room where a massage bed glimmers under slowly flashing disco lights. Spa music plays and the air conditioning hums (thank God). I must be in the right place after all. Plus, Harry told me on the phone that he once got drunk with Chris Hemsworth; call me shallow but that counts for something.

While I wouldn't have assumed getting wasted would lead to spiritual enlightenment, this is Hollywood. Celebrities have long espoused their devotion to some form of spirituality, be it Madonna, Britney Spears and Demi Moore following Kabbalah or Tom Cruise's obsession with Scientology. But while those are huge organisations with textbook religious studies, the current spiritual trend is getting more personal, and making superstars out of individual healers who are tapping into the world's current obsession with all things woo woo and wellness.

Jennifer Aniston's recent revelation that she's been partaking in “goddess circles” for the past three decades – where she and her girlfriends sit in a circle and pass around a “talking stick” to help navigate major life events – sparked a slew of internet headlines. And when Gwyneth Paltrow isn't spruiking vaginal steaming or Psychic Vampire Repellent, she's extolling the powers of her personal spirit guide and “bro”, shaman Durek – who calls her his “soul sis”.

But why exactly am I here?

Like most mums of young children, I'm consumed by the needs of my two daughters to the point that I've found myself asking, “Who am I, again?” Or rather, “Who was I?” I'm longing to rediscover myself and, over the next two weeks, I plan to make like Gwyn and Jen and do some serious soul-searching.

In preparation for today, I watched a video of a shaman performing healing on a woman. She sits closed-eyed as he converses with spirits through her body, speaking rapidly in an African language, which then propels her into what looks like a nightmare of an orgasm. It looks horrific but I'm oddly intrigued.

The main reason I'm here, though, is to strengthen my connection to my mother, who passed away 26 years ago,

and who introduced me to spirituality. I have many happy memories of perusing the aisles of London's annual Mind, Body and Spirit Festival with her in my early teens, watching reiki masters and crystal healers at work.

And when Mum got cancer, after radiotherapy didn't help, she had electromagnetism therapy, which uses crystals to help balance energy frequencies in the body. Even her sceptical GP attributed it to her living for four years after her diagnosis and called it a miracle.

“What would you say life is asking of you at the moment?” Harry interrupts my thoughts.

“You're not going to make me cry, are you?” I blurt out. In the serene setting I suddenly feel emotionally vulnerable, which in real life I thankfully don't have time to. “Probably,” he smiles gently. I tell him of my yearning to connect with Mum.

“We're either connected or we're distracted,” Harry croons smoothly. “The mind is connected to the breath so you need to be aware of your breathing.” I rarely am. “Shallow breathing, shallow life. If you start getting distracted, breathe and connect internally.

“We're human beings, not human doings,” he goes on. I love that. “So when you authentically let go, you'll get more than you dreamed of.” He tells me of superstar clients who have the adulation of the world but still want to kill themselves. “Remember, your opinion is the only one that matters.” Try telling my kids that.

Harry reads that I'm addicted to heavy-dense energy due to my habit of expecting things to go wrong so that I can't be disappointed, and that I'm here because my soul and spirit is calling for me to elevate, let go and be free. He's a wise man ... who's suddenly brandishing a huge vibrating machine. It looks like it's straight out of the '80s, just like the disco lights.

“Let's find where you hold tension in your body,” Harry says, as he slowly moves the machine up and down my legs, over my stomach, across my heart and back again. Then, after asking permission to touch me, he begins to knead my jaw, which really hurts.

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“Hang in there,” he says. “Can you see your mum? She’s here.” But he’s mistaken. Behind closed eyes, I suddenly see the beautiful face and hear the voice of my friend and former flatmate, who died in 2018 of a swift and aggressive form of cancer.

I was so devastated when I learnt of her passing via her husband’s Facebook page that I couldn’t leave my house for a week.

Tears roll down my cheeks as she answers a question I’ve wrestled with since her death. I hadn’t expected this and feel huge relief that I’ve found some way to connect with my friend, who I never got to say goodbye to.

I leave Harry’s hidden house with a sense of inner calm (and a strict recommendation to switch to pH-balanced alkaline water).

I’m staring at Andrea Bendewald’s chiselled jawline, trying to work out where I know it from ... it’s *Suddenly Susan*, the critically panned but oh-so juicy ’90s sitcom. Recently, she had a bit part in Apple TV’s *Morning Wars*, but today, she’s guiding me in a full-moon circle.

Andrea is something of a circling savant – she regularly leads circles for Jennifer Aniston, including at her 50th birthday getaway in Mexico. The actresses have been friends for more than 30 years; they both attended Manhattan’s High School of Performing Arts before moving to LA.

Needless to say, my expectations are high as I rock up to DEN Meditation in Studio City, just over the hill from Hollywood. I enter the large, dimly lit room and see 12 other women setting up their place. Thankfully I fit in well in my no-label activewear. There are women of all shapes and sizes, none displaying the sports-bra-bursting boob jobs you often see in Hollywood “wellness” classes.

Andrea begins slowly beating a drum to connect us to our own heartbeat. “Imagine there’s a lotus flower at the top of your crown chakra, it opens up and a beautiful white light extends into the sky and the full moon we’re sitting under,” she guides.

I try my best but my mind keeps wandering to where I’d rather be: the beach. Luckily, attention soon turns to the “talking stick”, the centrepiece of circling, which Andrea describes as an interactive mindfulness practice and talking meditation. She encourages us to channel the full



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moon’s energy in positive ways, which can otherwise lead to anger and sadness.

Guidelines include no commenting on what someone else says, and whatever’s shared in the circle stays there. If we hear something that resonates with us, we’re encouraged to murmur “a-ho”, a spiritually polite version of “ken oath”.

Each person holds the stick in turn and speaks their truth: overwhelmed mums; women feeling stuck from moving forward or going through dark times; those who find meditating lonely and came seeking a community from the circle. It’s all relatable stuff and we’re “a-hoing” galore.

I’m the only one who has an ugly cry, after speaking about Mum.

I feel a kinship with all the strangers in the room, yet don’t feel the need to swap numbers when the circle ends. I leave vowing to return, despite the four-hour round trip. Goddess or full-moon circles may sometimes be dismissed as zany or frivolous (a common pattern when it comes to groups of females throughout history), but there’s something undeniably powerful about women banding together and sharing their struggles to lift one another up.

I’m still on a spiritual high three days later when I speak to shaman Durek on the phone. We couldn’t meet in person due to scheduling conflicts, but I’m determined to absorb his wisdom (he also counts Nina Dobrev, Selma Blair and Gerard Butler as fans).



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE Gwyneth Paltrow’s “bro” shaman Durek; writer Madeleine Collins with her mum; and Jennifer Aniston with Andrea Bendewald.

I tell Durek about my mum and he speaks at breakneck speed, imparting all kinds of fascinating and life-affirming information I can’t possibly keep up with. No wonder he has Hollywood enthralled.

Suddenly he tells me to tap my left hand three times. I eagerly oblige. Was he going to give me the connection to Mum I was craving? Gwyneth had lost her beloved father and she trusted him ... After a few more instructions, I feel a floating feeling throughout my body and my feet start tingling. But then Durek tells me a hawk has just landed outside his window and is staring at him, and that hawks signify a breakthrough to “the other side”.

Oooh, you just lost me, says my inner sceptic.

Not that I don’t believe him. In grief, religion or any kind of healing, my motto is “whatever works”. And having taken time to focus, I feel more connected to myself than I have in years, and to Mum, too. Above all, I’ve realised that pausing to breathe and be in the moment is perhaps the most powerful tonic for this often-crazy world. So while summoning ancient spirits isn’t my thing, I’m already counting down the days until the next full moon.

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