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MODERN PAGAN NEWS & COMMENTARY

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Culture And Community: Challenging the Narrative (Part 1)

[Crystal Blanton](#) — July 22, 2016 — [6 Comments](#)

Every community has common stories, images, histories, and practices that help to shape and define a narrative. This very narrative can serve as a thread of culture and togetherness among the community, yet it can also serve as a gatekeeper that restricts change or expansion. This intricate dance exists within every group, society, and even within modern Paganism and Polytheist communities.



[Pixabay, Public Domain]

Shared narratives help to define what becomes the status quo, even among smaller subset groups and cultures. The default beliefs and practices often shape how we relate with one another, what becomes acceptable, and what is expected within a given space, community or interaction. Not everyone is fond of pushing against the boundaries of the status quo, it often rubs against our understanding of the world, and it challenges our relationship with change, empathy and cultural sensitivity.

In his piece titled [Changing Stories: Using narrative to shift societal values](#), Jonathan Dawson

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speaks to the power of the narrative. He writes:

There has, in recent years, been a growing recognition of the power of story to frame how we understand the world around us and our place within it. By ‘story’ in this context, I refer to the grand societal narratives, those clusters of beliefs and cultural norms that give shape and meaning to the human cultures within which we live. In general, these stories are so deeply rooted and so thoroughly embedded within a society’s language, behavior patterns and rituals as to be all but imperceptible. They constitute the bedrock of beliefs that are widely, if generally unconsciously, accepted to be universally true, even though they tend in fact to represent a distinct break with the dominant societal stories of previous epochs.

How does the current narrative within our community support us, and how does it also limit our ability to see beyond the walls we use to contain us? Who is brought in and who is left out in our cultural narratives? Do our narratives keep us stuck and without the ability to grow magically or spiritually? Questions like this often open the doors for dialogue that can lead to an increased awareness and understanding of the way that our community engages internally, and within the world.

Understanding that challenging our narratives can lead to renewed possibilities and a deeper reflection of the many nuances within community can bring about a lot of personal and societal growth. This very concept is not a new one, and there are many people within the modern Pagan and Polytheistic communities, who are doing pushing against the many narratives that often go unchallenged.

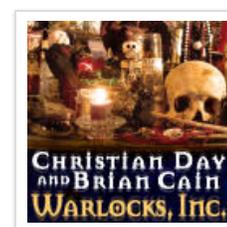
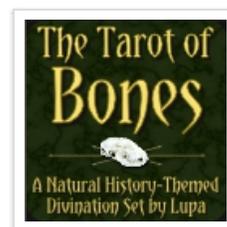
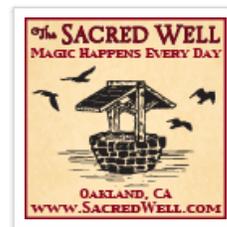
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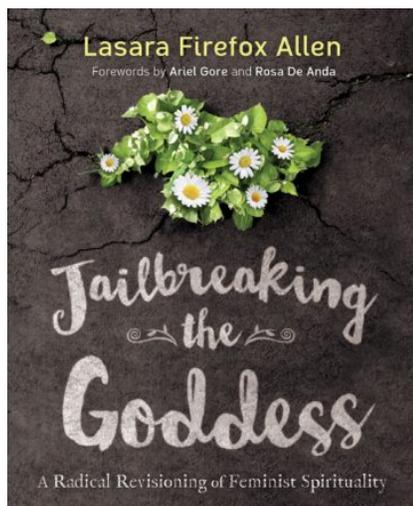
I reached out in three different directions to explore the radical and often difficult work of deconstructing the overculture of the Pagan community. There are so many depictions of the challenger’s work — too many to capture in any one piece. This notion leads me to consider the value of this as an ongoing discussion, which looks at the many ways that this work is being done by people within our community today.

For this piece I reached out to [Lasara Firefox Allen](#), the [Order of the Black Madonna](#), and the High Priestess Clio Ajana, to discuss how their work challenges the very narratives that help to shape our shared story.

* * *

Lasara, author and spiritual coach, is not new to Goddess’ work. Her latest book, [Jailbreaking the Goddess: A Radical Revisioning of Feminist Spirituality](#), has generated some discussion that challenges the very narrative of the way that we view, engage, and represent the Goddess.





Crystal Blanton: Your most recent work in *Jailbreaking the Goddess* approaches the Goddess in a radically different way than many previously accepted narratives within modern Paganism. What motivated you to approach the many forms of the Goddess within the framework that you did?

Lasara Firefox Allen: Coming from a strong feminist, anarchist, and somewhat anti-capitalist frame, I experienced the threefold model as both limiting and delegitimizing, in a sense. As women we have been told that our bodies are not our own. The threefold model, being based in biology, is rooted in our utility and productivity.

In addition, the strict binary, and how the threefold model is in a sense responsive to that, removes our agency.

I am a great believer in my politics and my spiritual systems lining up. I didn't feel that alignment with the threefold model.

The fivefold model that I put forth in *Jailbreaking the Goddess* is fluid, flexible, self-defining, and offers the group for women to truly stand fully in our power, unto ourselves. Not merely as producers, not only as mother-in-potencia, but as whole and holy beings that are complete at every stage.

CB: The maiden, mother, crone archetypes often highlighted within modern Pagan circles have brought about dialogue of limiting the myriad of faces of the Goddess. This has been challenging for many women who do not see themselves within the faces of a fertility based system. How does your work challenge this narrative?



Lasara Firefox Allen [Photo credit: Angela Greystar / Greystar Pictures]

LFA: The fivefold model, and the work of *Jailbreaking the Goddess* in total, recognizes the divine femal in all. And it recognizes our process of creativity not singularly as the power of motherhood, but recognizes the divine power in all the ways we create, design, divine, play, love, destroy, teach,

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craft, compose, sing, dance, fuck, cry, cocreate, collaborate, weave, reap, plant, burn. It also acknowledges the child as a divine being – again, whole and holy unto Herself. And the Old woman.

The five faces are Femella, Potens, Creatrix, Spaienia, and Antiqua. The model can be viewed in the linear, but also has nonlinear application. We may exist in more than one of her faces at a time. We may experience ourselves in Potens in a new interest, while embodying Sapientia in our chosen vocation. We may experience both Femella and Antiqua in us as we sit with a dying parent.

The flexibility of this model really speaks to people – most of us don't experience life progression in a strictly linear manner.

Many say that the threefold for them is metaphor – that motherhood can really be any kind of creation. Well, I think there is a great deal of value to be found in stepping into models that mean what we believe. I feel that the fivefold model offers this to those of us who have not felt seen or honored in the threefold model.

CB: How does challenging the narrative within your work enhance your personal spiritual path, and how does it support a change in the status quo of our spiritual community?

LFA: I believe it is time for us all to ask, "Is my spiritual system in integrity with my personal beliefs?" And if not, let's create and recreate it in greater alignment. Does your spiritual system speak of power in a way consistent with your heart? Does it address matters of importance? Does your system allow you to align your personal values, spiritual values, and your acts in the world?

We have been making excuses for outmoded beliefs for too long. you see it in most faiths. Here's the deal: we don't need to settle for the inconsistencies.

Throughout Jailbreaking the Goddess I offer tools to create greater alignment. My hope is that each person who reads the book will come out of the experience with a sense of alignment that allows for grace, love, and power in her path.

* * *

The Order of the Black Madonna has a radically different approach to Pagan space. The last two years of public ritual at PantheaCon have shown a diverse audience with very different concepts of Paganism, coming together to share devotion with the Sisters of the Order of the Black Madonna. While the order originated in the Bay Area, it has since grown to having members in all different areas of the United States.



[Courtesy Photo]

There are answers from different people within the Order that show many commonalities and some differences in the diversity of thought. This alone challenges the idea of a static narrative.

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Crystal Blanton: How does the Order challenge common narratives in Neo Paganism around inclusivity, gender, and devotion?

Sr Marie Courage: The Order of the Black Madonna was established to be a radically inclusive, feminized, social justice-oriented working group for people from all backgrounds to connect with the Dark Mothers in personally-relevant practices, to all experience the essential-but-not-essentialist meaning of spiritual sisterhood, and to make room for culturally-diverse ritual activities and discussions relevant to Goddess spirituality and peace through justice. Our workings in the name of the Dark Mothers are by and for the benefit of everyone.

Sister C: Most Pagans believe they're inclusive and they wouldn't intentionally discriminate against racial, ethnic or sexual minorities, or people who have a disability. But being inclusive is more than thinking you're inclusive and saying you're inclusive. Just as Paganism isn't the norm, inclusivity is not the norm either. We have to continually educate ourselves, challenge ourselves, and actively work towards building inclusivity into our spaces.

Tradition is valuable, but traditions can also be oppressive. Pagans leave Christianity because of its patriarchal traditions. Why uphold Pagan traditions that are equally patriarchal and oppressive? The Order of the Black Madonna challenges male supremacy. It challenges White supremacy. It challenges Christian supremacy. We are racially, ethnically, and sexually diverse. We use inclusive language. We make space for members to use our own symbols and ceremonies. If Pagan groups want to be more inclusive, they should examine their theologies and practices.

Soeur Marie Verité: The Order of the Black Madonna challenges its members and ritual participants to see differences, not to ignore them; to acknowledge how our differences make us great as a culture and a society, and how celebrating differences and honoring the experiences and voices of those who are different from ourselves brings even greater strength to the community as a whole.

We do not exclude anyone based on race, gender expression or lack of gender expression, paths of devotion, or sexual preference; we emphasize and prioritize a culture of respect and consent; and we make space to allow all voices to be heard, especially the voices of marginalized groups who experience blockage, silencing, and exclusion elsewhere. We have created public rituals naming and honoring those who have been murdered by the dominant culture simply for being different; we have stood up together in public to call attention to these events and the systemic destruction of people of color, to say as loudly as we can, "We stand for unity and respect for all, especially the most vulnerable among us, because that's what She would do, who is Mother of All."

CB: The Order of the Black Madonna also includes many differing cultural expressions and a radical inclusion of diversity in its shared spaces. How does the Order navigate such shared space while leaving room for the complexity of varying cultural expressions without prioritizing dominant culture?

Sr Marie Courage: In the Order of the Black Madonna, because our members are culturally and ethnically diverse, we align our rituals and workings with some of these basic common denominators, and then invite each member to bring relevant personal practices of their own to the table. In any given ritual, we might involve a multiplicity of languages, cultural concepts, and activities, each represented by a member of the Order who is genuinely connected deeply to what they have brought either by blood or lengthy study. In this way, rather than conforming to a single common belief system, or appropriating belief systems with which we are unfamiliar, we can include numerous different belief systems with respect.

Sister Maria Socorro: The Order's main priority is to make the world a more just place for those that have been trampled on by the dominant culture, so following that nature we would never prioritize dominant culture. We aim to hold a space that is sacred and all inclusive while not encroaching on cultural appropriation.

CB: Centering devotion for the infinite Blackness brings about many examples of challenging the framework of modern Paganism. How can the devotional space of the Black Madonna expand the (too often) Eurocentric narrative of deity within Pagan practices?

Sr Marie Courage: One of my favorite prayers found in modern Paganism is the Charge of the Star Goddess. I feel deeply the connection in my heart when I say the words, "I am the beauty of the green earth and the white moon among the stars." However, the dominant narrative in the west is about Good Versus Bad, Light Versus Dark. So, although lots of Pagan groups do their work to explain that in Paganism, Dark is not seen as equivalent to Bad, there is nonetheless a really strong paradigm we are battling from the overculture.

The Order of the Black Madonna shifts our focus entirely away from the Eurocentric Light=Good, Dark=Bad paradigm by centering Darkness, specifically Blackness, as the Original Goodness, provider of all possible solutions to our own and society's current problems, infinite in both compassion and capacity for creating transformation. This has scientific, mythic, and sympathetic implications.

Scientifically, The Black Madonna is the Blackness of space, the generative void beyond the sun, moon, and stars from which all arises and into which all dissolves. Mythically, she is the Black Earth which births us and shapes our flesh, and she is the dark space of creative power at the center of each being. Sympathetically, in the view of the Order, the Black Madonna is each and every woman of color, and we specifically make the effort to honor the rights, needs, and accomplishments of women of color in our ritual and service works.

Sister Maria Socorro: The Order aims to open the eyes of Pagans who have only followed Eurocentric paths, we create a space that is magically straightforward and understandable so that people can comprehend that even if they're not POC they can still respect, adore, and access the Blackness that is ultimately the source of us all.

Soeur Marie Verité: The Order of the Black Madonna worships the Great Dark Mother at the center of all, in all Her enormous variety and forms that include but also range far beyond the boundaries of Europe. Our members currently worship Her in Her manifestations as a Buddhist goddess, a West African goddess, a Norse shamanic giantess, and the Catholic Theotokos and patron Saint of Poland, Mexican Holy Mother of the Dead, and Notre Dame de Sous-Terre.

We welcome and cherish Her priestesses who feel called to honor and worship Her within their indigenous traditions, and we welcome and respect all matriarchal expressions of deity as they appear in Pagan and non-Pagan practice. Presenting a vision of Her that is clearly multi-cultural, multi-ethnic, multi-layered, multi-storied, and multi-Ancestral, yet all functioning together in a harmonious dance to celebrate Her power and love, has and will hopefully continue to demonstrate in Pagan spaces that the Eurocentricity of too much modern Paganism is leaving out an enormous pathway of connection, understanding, and devotion that no longer needs to be.

Soeur Marie Intégrité: Devotional practice to the Black Madonna challenges the common Eurocentric deities within pagan practices: because she is the Mother of All, and images of the Black Madonna can be found in most cultures going back through history, I think that pagans can connect to a cultural representation of the Black Madonna that resonates with them.

Sister LH: One pernicious iteration of systemic racism lurks in the way black and dark are framed in the occult and New Age, that position darkness/blackness as inherently negative (ugly, violent, transgressive, etc). We talk about Black vs white magic, we praise the light and devalue darkness. At best, and I have heard this from all kinds of witches and have been shocked each time i do, the Dark is something which we must accept, to balance the goodness and light. This framing itself shows how deeply embedded this bias is rooted, in language, so deep that white magickians who absolutely consider themselves not racists, can perpetuate this really destructive polar binary hegemony without knowing it.

Sister LMR: One of my favorite prayers is the Charge of the Dark Goddess. One of the most moving passages there for me is "when you gaze into the mirrored abyss, I am there". The New Age fear and negation of all things dark shows up in our mundane lives as well. Darkness and blackness is feared in our society, and people are dying due to this fear. When we do not actively acknowledge our shadow, it begins to run the show. Confronting our wounds, our prejudices, our privileges is essential to our growth as individuals, to the Order as a whole, and to society at large. Knowing that She is there in the deep blackness, that She is that deep blackness, makes it possible for us to explore the side of our psyche that is often dismissed and discounted.

* * *

As a Black woman that is a High Priestess of a Hellenic tradition, Clio Ajana embodies the very spirit of challenging the common narrative of the Eurocentric framework within Pagan leadership.



Clio Ajana

Crystal Blanton: How do you feel that being your whole self within Pagan leadership brings a newness that expands previous limitations in our community culture?

Clio Anja: As a Seeker in 2004, I saw few persons of color, maybe five in my first year or so. I did not think about leadership as I found only one person who was in a leadership position, and that was after two years of active involvement in the community. I felt then, and on occasion now, as though I was the “near-invisible” person who might not be the traditional “face” of a typical Pagan.

I am a lesbian and in a tradition that is very pro-LGBTQIA oriented. When I first came to the community, I got the sense that I would have to hide or compromise my sexuality (since I could not hide my skin color) in order to fit in with any particular group. Unfortunately, previous limitations in our community culture have included those who are LGBTQIA, less physically able, geographically-challenged, non-white, or just not practicing according one’s culture of origin. If I see someone now, my personal goal is to encourage folks to embrace the tradition or path of their choice, regardless of perceived limitations in larger Paganism. Being my whole self means that if someone like me were to come along now, in 2016, that person would feel more comfortable knowing that there is a place at the table.

Now, I can lead ritual, teach classes, give back to the community through public discussions or working with those who are confined in some way. Visibly, every time I show up to give a talk or to act as a high priestess, there is both surprise and gradual acceptance that a large, black woman is embracing Modern Paganism with such fervor.

The more Pagans see others who do not fit the image of a white female or male practitioner of traditional Wicca, which remains the more commonly-advertised narrative, the more they are seeing that Modern Paganism is moving away from stereotypes that have restricted or even repelled those who might consider practicing or joining a religion under the Pagan umbrella. Being my whole self means that others who are coming along will see that yes, you *can* embrace your culture while being a Pagan leader.

CB: How do you feel your spiritual and community work stretches our common expectation of what the average practitioner within Modern Paganism looks like?”

CA: Again, it comes to appearance and the expectation that if you are X, you will follow Y tradition; if you are a Pagan, you must look like A, dress like B, and engage in activities C, D, and E. Through

leading and appearing at public ritual, I am a clear statement that not all average practitioners are white, Eurocentric, and from a certain background. I also have done community work where I was very well received, but tested at first for skills.

Early on, I was a participant and leader at rituals where someone has walked past me to one of my fellow practitioners to ask questions, even though I was clearly a part of the ritual. I've also been in spaces where the presumption was that I only practiced African tradition, since I am black. Over the years, by doing the work, others see that those who identify as practitioner are more than just those who are hiding in the shadows. We are open, we are out, and we render service to let others know that they are welcome.

In a few decades, I sincerely hope that the common expectation is that the "average" practitioner has no stereotypical appearance or particular path. We need those who are willing to serve as chaplains, as clergy, for the community at large. We won't get them if our expectation remain small.

CB: How do you feel that challenging the narrative empowers people magically and spiritually?"

CA: The narrative can only be changed when those who don't fit the "norm" are willing to stand up and be counted. Magically, we grow as individuals and as a community when all who are within dig deep to practice the traditions we are fighting so hard to keep and to maintain. Our spirituality grows from sharing with others, interacting with public ritual and in the circles, groves, blots, and rituals that Pagans maintain throughout the year.

Challenging the narrative permits a larger use of cultural background to broaden the horizon of what can be done regardless of skin color. As persons of color, we draw from the ancestors, from a variety of traditions, and a core of strength. I like to think of it as a residue left from how my ancestors were treated – to survive, we had to have strength. As a practitioner of color, regardless of tradition practiced, I feel all gain empowerment with the gods and in religious devotion.

Magic, Witchcraft, Conjure and Rootwork has always been a way that we privately and collectively challenge the status quo. Embracing and working from a different perspective than the mainstream religious framework has helped to shape the common narrative of Modern Paganism. The story of any community can be a very powerful thing, contributing to the ways that we create, interpret, inherit and apply our spirituality within our lives.

* * *

While a cultural foundation can be created on ideals that challenge acceptable greater societal norms, challenging those very structures can open up the many areas of growth and opportunities. When communities become more invested in ideals that reinforce comfort than pushing against those stories as a means to explore our understanding, we limit our ability to grow beyond the boxes we create.

People are doing amazing work to challenge and reconstruct some of the narratives of our modern Pagan status quo. Pushing against the walls of our static stories can breed possibilities and great spiritual opportunities.

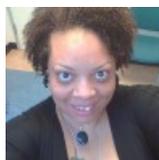
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In [Paganism, Perspectives](#) Clio Ajana, Jonathan dawson, Lasara Firefox Allen, Order of the Black Madonna, sister maria Socorro, social narrative, Soeur Marie Verite, Sr Marie Courage





Crystal Blanton

Posts Website

Crystal Blanton writes the monthly TWH column "Culture and Community." She is an activist, writer, priestess, mother, wife and social worker in the Bay Area.

She has published two books "Bridging the Gap" and "Pain and Faith in a Wiccan World," and was the editor of the anthology "Shades of Faith; Minority Voices in Paganism." She is a writer for the magazine Sage Woman and Patheos' Daughters of Eve blog. She is passionate about the integration of community, spirituality, and healing from our ancestral past, and is an advocate for true diversity and multiculturalism within the Pagan community.

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"Loosely affiliated", how, exactly? I never said they were one in the same.

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Certainly, more than a loose affiliation, as seen here and as I've been told by members of the order:

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"Human beings live by stories.
Whatever the story that you tell yourself,

consciously or unconsciously,
that is the life you will bring forth.

Chose your story wisely.

The real power of the story is that as you tell it
it begins to happen."

(as taught by E. Cogburn to this commenter, original source unknown)

Crystal thank you so much for these three interviews of those who are telling our
story, very consciously, and in wonderful new ways.

Blessings!

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