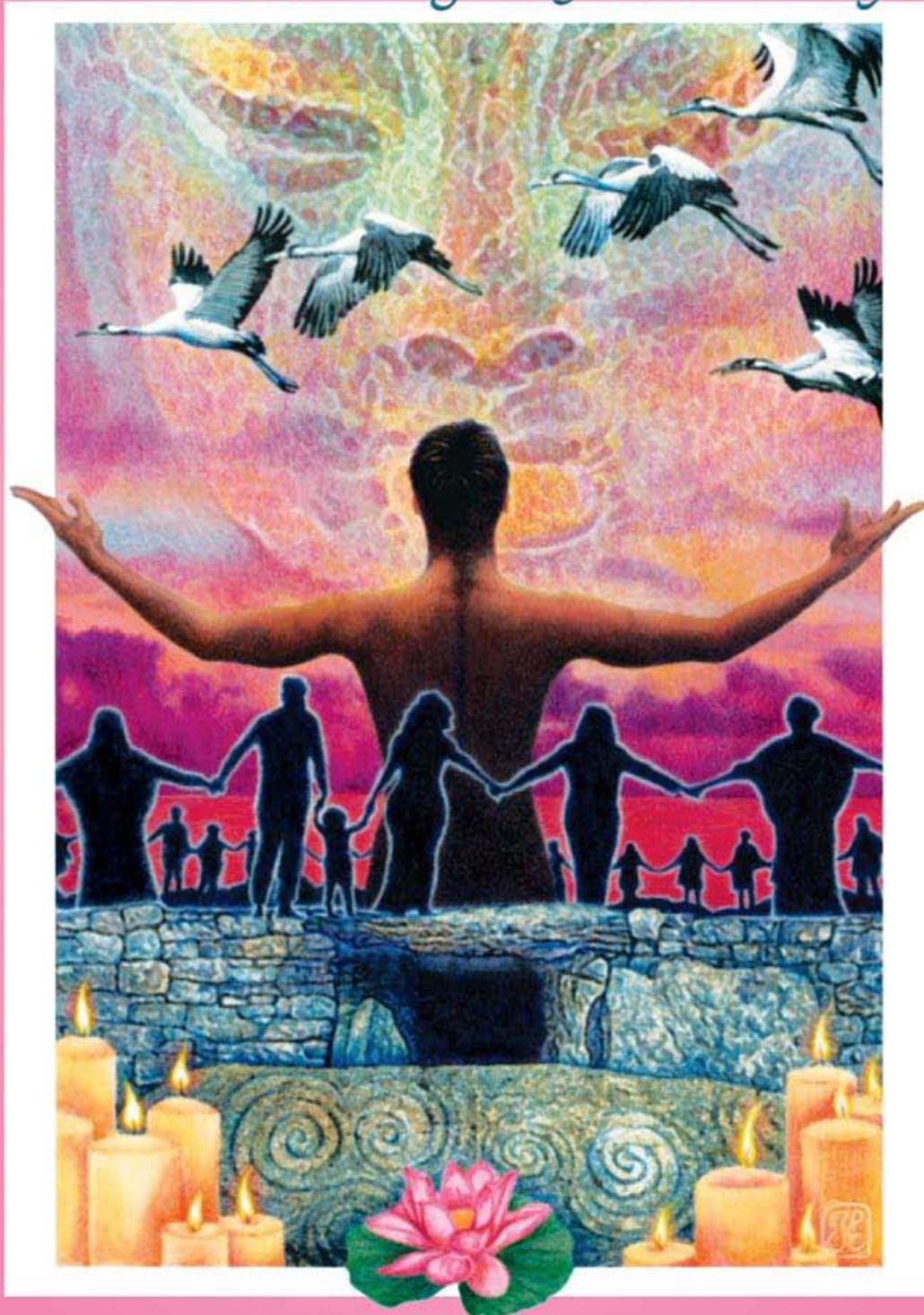


SageWoman

Celebrating the Goddess in Every Woman



Women & Men

Wisdom Keepers of the Goddess Spirituality Movement
Crystal Blanton: Bridging the Gap · The Deeds of Isis
Fathers & Daughters · Marriage by the Stars

INTERVIEW BY
JEN MCCONNEL

Crystal Blanton is used to wearing many hats. The author of *Bridging the Gap: Working within the Dynamics of Pagan Groups and Society*, Crystal also edited the multi-cultural collection *Shades of Faith: Minority Voices in Paganism*. An African-American Pagan woman, Blanton has learned to embrace her position as a minority-within-a-minority, and speaks candidly about issues of faith and race. She is also a gifted poet, and a regular contributor to the Patheos blog “Daughters of Eve,” where Pagan women of color gather to share their experiences. As if her those accomplishments aren’t dizzying enough, Blanton is a mother, a grandmother, and a wife and is devoted to her professional life.

Everything this amazing woman does is infused with Spirit. Blanton doesn’t set down her mantle of High Priestess at any point in her day, and perhaps it is this deep spirituality that propels her through a challenging career. She is currently pursuing a Master’s program within the California State University system, works as an alcohol and other drug counselor (AOD) in California, and is a Wiccan High Priestess.

During the last few months of 2012, I had the opportunity to sit down and chat with Crystal via email. Through our long correspondence, my awe of this amazing woman increased, and I am so excited to be able to share our conversation with you.



photo ©2013 Jonathan Blanton

Crystal BRIDGING THE GAP blanton

I am so excited to be able to sit down with you; I've been reading your book, Bridging the Gap, and I can't wait to get our conversation started.

Now, this may be a corny question, but I have to know, since you live there: does San Francisco live up to all the hype it gets?

I am happy to be doing this interview, and how wonderful that you are reading *Bridging the Gap*. To answer your opening question: Yes, the San Francisco Bay Area is all it is made up to be. The diversity in this area is one of the main attractions: the beauty of seeing so many different people, types of food, and various cultures all coexisting in a single community. Hopefully, you will have a chance to come out one day and visit.



From there, She gave me permission to dive further into my own culture and integrate that more into my practice. Being of African American decent while being Wiccan has always felt like a cultural division and this [devotional connection to Yemaya] supported a healthier integration between those two worlds.

Have you blended the Celtic-based sabbats with specific African rituals, or do you keep them separate from each other? What

From what I've read of your writing, I see that you're comfortable discussing ethnic diversity in Paganism. Did you ever struggle with that?

I think that I became so accustomed to being the "minority voice" that I was conditioned to be comfortable; so much so that after a while it didn't register as the first thing on my radar.

However, I started to really look at how it felt to carry myself in a bi-cultural position between being Black and being Pagan during the *Shades of Faith* writing adventure. The issue was always apparent within my own coven, certain conversations would come up, but I don't think I had identified some of the struggles until more recently.

You write in Shades of Faith that you eventually found yourself working with the deities of the African Diaspora. What led you to this little-discussed corner of Paganism?

That was an interesting process! I was not looking to work with the African deities — I was more invested in the Celtic deities at the time — but had been doing research in my Third Degree studies on pantheons. It just so happened that Yemaya was one of the deities I read a little bit about; and shortly after that I went on a trip to New Orleans, and my adventure began.

Yemaya came to me strongly and claimed me without question. Honestly, I was not prepared! I thought I was a child of Cerridwen and was preparing to do my dedication to Her, but I now understand that it was Yemaya all along, coming to me in a form I felt comfortable with at the time. I wasn't ready, and She waited until I was.

advice would you give to non-white Pagans about integrating their faith with their own ethnic background?

I am a Wiccan, and I do not do specific African-based rituals, which has made my work with deities like Yemaya more complex. Yemaya communicated to me directly, but the difficulty came in getting information that is otherwise protected in the African traditions, and difficult to access for a non-initiate. This meant that I had to cultivate my personal relationship with Yemaya without much of the information that would otherwise be accessible.

So my practice is that of a Wiccan that works with some of the African Gods and Goddesses. I am a true eclectic, and that reflects the diversity of my racial mix. Integration is a strange thing; it is really a process of learning, listening, and application. It is important to have the ability to strike a balance between knowledge coming from research and tradition, and learned wisdom which flows from personal reflection.

Here is what I have to say for those, like me, who are working between cultures: this is not an either/or scenario. No one should have to decide between their culture and their faith; we must value them both and allow them to work together for the whole of our being.



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Since we're talking about balance, I was wondering how you incorporate your faith into your everyday life. Do you include your family members in rituals, or carve out time for yourself, or something in between?

Everyday spiritual balance is complicated, even without a family. I believe that I am a priestess twenty-four hours a day, but finding time to invest in my spiritual self has been a challenge. I work hard to have a morning and nighttime routine that includes some form of spiritual centering. Sometimes it includes lighting a candle, taking an inventory of what I am grateful for, blessing my food or even taking a moment to listen to a spiritually-evoking CD in the car during my commute.

One way that I have integrated Pagan spiritual culture into my home is creating little rituals that the kids perform. The one they like the most is "family circle time" for dinner: we sit at the table, candles lit, lights off, music on and hold hands for a prayer. We thank the Lord and Lady, our ancestors and each other for our blessings. Recently we have focused on doing this ritual with the kids at least three or four times a week.

How has your spiritual training impacted your work as an alcohol and drug use counselor?

My job requires me to stay spiritually centered; dealing with some of the devastation and disparities that I experience in my inner city community demands that I am in alignment with myself and with divinity.

This work has impacted my life in many ways. I have the distinct pleasure of working with some of the most incredible children, children in some of the most devastating circumstances. Teaching children how to make healthier choices, identify goals, assess their options, and assert themselves in positive ways is a very spiritual mission. I get paid to give hope and be a messenger when it feels like there is nothing to hear. These children teach me, too; how to be concise with my words, clear with my intentions, honest in my approach, and loving in my presence.

As a priestess, I believe that my spirituality impacts my message to the children as well. My connection with the Gods allows me to know I am right where I am suppose to be, doing the work that is important to myself and to them. I treasure the opportunity to genuinely connect with others, despite time and place, circumstances, or differences.

Do you ever have any qualms about being out of the "Broom Closet"? You speak and write openly about your faith, but do you still keep it to yourself in some areas?

I've always struggled with that, but as my writing is taking me more "out" in the Pagan community, I'm learning to worry less. One of the things I am able to do is to release my concern about my spiritual choices being judged by others. If I cannot be at peace with the many facets of my being, how can I ask someone else to?

When I first embraced the Wiccan path, I remember feeling uncomfortable. The first pentacle I bought for everyday use was very small and I wore it on a decorative chain that almost camouflaged it. One time when I was working in adult treatment a client pointed to my pentacle and said that he knew what it meant. It was then that I noticed the Baphomet-and-goat tattoo he had. Seeing that I was Wiccan gave him comfort in talking about a non-traditional Higher Power. That experience was a turning point.

I don't go out of my way to broadcast my religion in my professional life; although I wear my pentacle all day, every day, I do not talk in my professional world about my spiritual choices. But since my first book came out, in 2010, my online persona has grown, and the necessity of having a level of transparency with those I work with, and to those I walk beside, has grown as well. It is refreshing and humbling to have the opportunity to be who I am regardless of who is around.

Can we talk a little bit about your book, Bridging the Gap? What inspired you to write it?

Writing this book was a calling for me. I was inspired to write it after see many experiences within the Craft through the lens of my professional training. I feel it is important to the health of our community to use tools that have proven to work in other arenas.

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THE PAINTING

I am the painting of the child
with copper hair kneeling on wooden bench in
autumn-ambient almost winter sky surrounded
by bare-branched white birches and communing
with robin.

I feel lonely, sad, abandoned, and afraid,
but I am protected and comforted there
in the bare-branched birch copse with rust-
breasted robin stark in comparison.
All watched over me and graced me with connection.

I am still the painting of the child
with copper hair kneeling on wooden bench
in autumn-ambient almost winter sky surrounded
by bare-branched white birches and communing
with robin...but today, I am just the painting.
Not the feelings.

For the robin of rusted breast, the bare-branched white
birches and the autumn-ambient almost
winter sky gifted me with the magic of
forever-awe and forever-wonder sharing with
me Universal Spirit which reached out
And eternally embraced me.

Merideth Allyn

Do you prefer to work in a group or alone?

I love working in a group. There are so many skills we learn from interacting with other people and being pushed to points that are often uncomfortable. Being able to learn and grow within a group is very rewarding.

Solitary practice can also be very rewarding by giving us the chance to reflect and connect individually to Divine Spirit. Group work and solitary work shouldn't exist in isolation. I think that those who work in groups should also cultivate a solitary practice as well.

I totally agree: I was a solitary for a decade, and I still consider my deepest practice my solitary work, but the circle of women I've found to celebrate the Sabbats with has enriched my life and my own understanding of spirituality!

One final question: what advice would you give to other women about finding their spiritual path?

It is so important to have a personal practice to complement any group work; our connections to the Gods is a very personal relationship that is not normally satisfied unless we cultivate an intimate relationship with any spiritual path or deities.

I, too, practice with a group of women and enjoy that community a great deal. We have been together for a long time, and my relationship with them complements my relationship with myself and my practice. I enjoy and need both of those things, group and solitary work, to feel spiritually whole in my spiritual practice. ☺

Editor's note: Crystal Blanton has graciously accepted our invitation to become a regular columnist for SageWoman. Her column, "Goddess of Color: My Journey as a Sun-Drenched Priestess" will begin in our next issue. To find out more about Crystal's work, please see her website at www.crystalblanton.com.



JEN McCONNEL loves living and writing in North Carolina. An avid believer in the magic of words, she teaches part time to support her writing habit. Her first novel, *The Burning of Isobel Key*, is now available. Visit jennifermcconnel.wordpress.com to learn more.



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