

## **The Mirror Within: Abuse and Hope in Devotional Spirituality**

Hello everyone. It is an unfortunate truth that modern spiritual communities are perpetuating a culture of abuse. Disempowerment is happening in the form of shame, humiliation, manipulation, forced isolation, and retaliation. These experiences mimic the indoctrination and behavior patterns of dominant religious institutions, the very same institutions that many of us seek to break free from.

My name is Izzy Swanson. I am a devotional polytheist. I was raised in a Pentecostal Cult in a small town in Texas. I am here today to share a little bit of my story with you and tell you about how my experiences in paganism mirrored my experiences growing up in the Church.

I would like to give you a bit of a content warning. I will be talking about sensitive issues that may feel traumatic to some people. What I am sharing here is deeply personal and it sometimes makes me emotional. It is possible you may have the same experience. Please take care of yourself.

I also want to acknowledge that the conversation about abuse and trauma in our spiritual communities is much larger than the time I have allotted for this presentation today. I will stay focused on the parts of this that are relevant to the story that I am going to share with you. I am happy to discuss this more if you would like to reach out to me.

I grew up in a Pentecostal church. My great grandmother and grandmother were like matriarchs who had a lot of influence in the community. Their beliefs were important to everyone around me. Their words carried weight. They had this belief when I was born that I was going to be a prophet and set the world on fire for God which is a lot of responsibility for a kid. I was also constantly given the message that I was born bad. That I was a sinner and if I didn't behave a certain way I was going to go to Hell. On one hand I was being groomed to be someone important in the Church and on the other I was constantly being told something was wrong with me. Both of these messages were used to enforce a concept of purity. If I didn't dress properly or behave like I should, I was going to Hell. I couldn't question these things. I was expected to just obey the rules. The other part of this story is that my mother was violent. She was physically and emotionally abusive. The message that I received from my family and the Church was that that was just the way she was. She was still my mother. I still had to love her. God would take care of it. Everyone in a position of authority, members of my family, members of the Church, did nothing. They all turned away from what was happening in the name of God.

I learned at a very young age that something was wrong with me and that whatever was wrong with me was not only my fault but my responsibility. I came away from my childhood with a deeply internalized sense of shame and guilt. I believed that I didn't deserve to be loved and that I had to change everything that anyone didn't like about me so that I could be good enough. Because if I was good enough maybe these things would not have happened to me. I learned that nothing I could do was right and that nothing I would do would ever be enough. I also learned that I couldn't trust anyone. No one was going to save me. I had to tough it out and figure it out on my own.

Many years later after becoming a pagan and becoming active in my community, someone I believed to be a teacher, mentor, and a friend got very upset that I would not end my relationship with a God that they believed was bad and wrong. They told me that all of the problems in my life were happening because of my relationship with this God and that I needed to let him go and make him leave my life. When I disagreed with them and tried to talk to them about how that was not ok to do, they retreated

and began to openly, publicly, shame me and anyone who supported me. They were able to convince many people to pull away from me and effectively forced me out of community.

The hardest part of this experience was that so many people in the community turned away from me. Many people agreed with what this person had to say, even when what they were saying was not true. Many people that I believed were friends left me alone in isolation and the people who were in a position to say or do something did nothing. Once again, my community turned away.

My experience in the polytheist pagan community ripped open the wounds of my childhood. It was a mirror of everything that I had fought so hard to get away from and heal from. I was reminded that I wasn't safe and that I couldn't trust anyone. I was that scared child again who couldn't do anything right. Everything was my fault. I felt humiliated and ashamed. Only this time it hurt a little more because I learned that I could not trust myself. I questioned everything, even my Gods. I couldn't trust that my experiences were real or that my choices were valid. I felt like I was doing everything wrong, that I had no idea what I was talking about. I felt like I had no right to be of service and that I didn't belong in pagan spaces anymore. I wanted to give up. I lost my faith in myself and my community.

Devotional Polytheism is a form of modern pagan worship characterized by profound dedication in spiritual practice and the belief that there is more than one God. An intimate bond is formed between practitioner and God through prayer, meditation, and active action. A practitioner of devotional polytheism strives to maintain conscious contact with their gods and the otherworld through consistent communication, reciprocity, and living in right relationship.

Reciprocity is an exchange. In practice it means that we must give in order to receive. In devotional polytheism a practitioner honors their gods with effort, and action, and offerings. It's not just about the support that we request, it is also about what we give in return.

Right relationship means that we live in relationship to the world around us. It means that we have an active awareness of the Otherworld, the living landscape, and our community. Living in right relationship is a commitment to protecting and caring for these relationships. It is a commitment to integrity and truth.

Right action means that we have a responsibility to live in alignment with the values that our Gods represent. It means that our actions, behaviors, and lifestyle should reflect the values of reciprocity, right action, truth, integrity and others like hospitality and sovereignty.

As a devotional polytheist, if I want my practice to be authentic, my actions must reflect the relationships that I have with my gods by putting the values that they teach me into practice in my everyday life. So, I live my life as an offering to my Gods. This means that I am in service to the Otherworld, to my Gods, and to my community even if I am not in a position of authority. I have a responsibility to provide safety and hospitality to those I serve. It is my responsibility to care for and support the people that I am in relationship with. I am also responsible for doing these same things for myself because if I can't do them for myself, I definitely will not be able to do them for someone else.

Community, by definition, is a feeling of fellowship with others as a result of sharing common attitudes, interests, and goals. I asked some of my peers why they sought out community and this is the definition that I put together from their feedback. Spiritual community is a group of people with a shared belief system who are working together to support each other as they learn more about the culture, history,

and lore of the gods and beliefs they feel called to follow. It is a place to share spiritual experiences with others so that we know that we are not alone. It is a group of people who provide stability and safety, who care for us, and help to hold us accountable to the values that are vital components of our spiritual practices.

In spite of the experiences of my youth, I still believed that there was something more, that something greater than myself existed, but I had been a solitary practitioner for many years. I sought out community because I wanted to learn more and not feel so alone in my practice. I remember the feeling I had after I attended my first Morrigan conference. I thought I had found my place. The best part was being in a space where everyone shared the same beliefs as me and I didn't have to try and make it make sense to them.

I came to community to find a safe space. Instead, I learned that many groups in modern spiritual spaces were really no different than the religious institution that I grew up in. Sadly, my experience, while an extreme example, is not unique. When I asked some of my peers to share stories of the harmful things that had happened to them in modern alternative spiritual communities a set of common themes emerged. Every one of them described events that involved gaslighting and psychological manipulation through fear of retaliation, suppression of dissent, and bullying. Many of them experienced some form of attack by the leaders of these groups, attacks that were reinforced by their followers, for simply asking questions or for expressing a difference of beliefs and opinions. The most common result of these attacks was forced isolation and withdrawal.

How are we any better than the dominant religious cultures that we came from? How are we any different than the religious institutions that we claim to take a stand against if we continue to enforce the same dogma and patterns of indoctrination of these institutions? By perpetuating a culture of fear and shame, we continue to be the very same thing we sought to break away from. We are continuing a cycle of abuse and hypocrisy. If we are ever going to topple the toxicity of these beliefs, we have to change how we engage with the people we are in relationship with.

Humiliation is an abuse tactic. Forced isolation is an abuse tactic. If leaders, teachers, and healers are actively attacking members of their community or making them feel ashamed of themselves, this is bullying, and it is a sign of a toxic community. If people in positions of authority allow members of their community to also attack and bully members of their community, it is a sign of a cult of personality. If a leader claims to be the only person allowed to speak for the gods, if a leader claims to be the spiritual authority on how you can have relationships or practice your beliefs, it is a sign that your community is not safe. If your leader is trying to manage every facet of care and the flow of information, it is a sign of an unhealthy community. If you are afraid to engage, ask questions, or initiate change, it is a sign that your leaders are controlling and that your community is destructive.

Community is only a concept until it is put into practice. If a community doesn't embody the values it claims to venerate, and deliver on those values through action, the idea of it is useless. When we step into community, we have a responsibility to live in right relationship with that community. We have a responsibility to adhere to the values of safety, reciprocity, truth, integrity, hospitality, and sovereignty. These are not abstract concepts to be discussed online or in scholarly debate. We have to show up and practice them actively. If we are humiliating people and making them feel so bad about themselves that they withdraw, if we demoralize people so badly that it compromises the stability of their mental health, we are not living in right relationship. We are dishonoring the gods and the otherworld when we are not

actively living in alignment with the values that they represent. If we are living representations of these values then we are also dishonoring ourselves and compromising our spiritual integrity.

My experience in the modern pagan community taught me a lot of hard lessons about myself. I believe that we find the truest parts of ourselves in the darkest places. The moments when we feel the most broken, when we have hit bottom, when our faith is shattered, are the moments when we learn just how strong and courageous we are. In the beginning, when I felt like I had nothing left, I clung to the values that I held so dear. I made a commitment to follow them, no matter what. Even though my heart was broken, I knew I could not compromise the integrity of who I am. My relationships with my gods mean more to me than anything. They are the reason I survived years of trauma and addiction. They have never left me so I did not give up on them and sacrifice my promise to live in right relationship. This made my practice deeper. I was determined to understand what I could do better and to learn more about the history, culture, and lore of my gods. This in turn made my connections with the Otherworld and my gods stronger than it had ever been. As those bonds became stronger and I gained more awareness, I began to trust myself more, and the voice that I thought I had lost came back to me.

I also learned that we need community. We cannot do this alone. We cannot heal and learn and grow in isolation. We need community to show us that we are worthy of love and acceptance. We need it to reflect back to us the depth of compassion that we have for ourselves and each other. We need it to reflect back to us our actions and values. Relationships in community are what gives us hope and strength to keep going.

Over the past four years I have learned that healthy community does exist. I have seen it in the friends that stayed by my side, the ones that simply listened to me rant and the ones that indulged my coping strategies. I have seen it in the people that acknowledged that what happened to me was real and not ok. I have seen it in the people who openly supported me even though they did not have to. I have seen it in the people who sent me small gifts, love notes, and encouraging messages to let me know I was not alone. I have seen it in the people who took the time to stop and evaluate and learn when they have been held accountable. I have seen it in the groups that make decisions by consensus rather than allowing one person to dictate everything. I have seen it in the people who are committed to their personal healing and the groups that take the time to learn about trauma-informed care.

When we speak about our responsibility to community, we have to come to the reality that we are responsible for our own personal work. If we are going to be a living representation of our values, we must be accountable for our healing. Let me be clear that we are not responsible for what happened to us but we are responsible for our lives now. Spiritual practice is not a substitute for mental health and medical care. Your emotional responses and trauma are not separate from your spiritual practice. Your practice does not replace the need to address these issues or to be held accountable for the actions you carry out as a result of them. You might ask why I am telling you this? Why is this important? And I will respond that your emotional state will influence your relationship with yourself, with your community, and with your gods. It will be the lens through which you receive messages and view the world around you.

This also applies to your leaders. They have the same responsibility, if not more so, to healing and accountability that the rest of us do. I encourage you to remember that they are still humans. They are living life on life's terms just like the rest of us, dealing with their own daily stressors, with their own traumas and emotional wounds, their own indoctrination and beliefs.

We have to stop putting our leaders on pedestals. We have to stop following them without critical thinking simply because they have done something to make us feel included and special. Your leaders, teachers, and healers, work in service to their gods. They are in service to the community. They are meant to be guides and guardians, not the gods themselves. Even though they may have a profound connection, they cannot be the authority about the relationships you have with your gods. No one can do that. I encourage you to trust yourself and your experiences. Stay focused on your values and your relationships with your gods. Let them be the ones to guide you. Sovereignty is a core value of our traditions so remember that you always have a choice. No one can take that away from you.

Dominant religious cultures indoctrinated us to believe that we did not have any choices and that we had to blindly follow without question. It taught us to believe that something was wrong with us if we did not. But we have an opportunity to break through the dogma and do something different than what we have been taught.

We have a responsibility to ask questions and to figure out what right action is for ourselves. We have a responsibility to hold our leaders accountable. If we do nothing, nothing changes. We cannot turn away and accept members of our community being bullied because they see our leaders doing it without consequence. We can't ignore harmful and problematic behaviors simply because it is too uncomfortable to acknowledge what is happening. When we leave people alone with their wounds, when we leave them alone in isolation, we teach them that they cannot trust us, that they cannot trust themselves. We may also be teaching them that they cannot trust their gods. We teach them that they are unworthy of connection and support.

There is a difference between calling someone to the mat for problematic behavior and attacking people. We cannot create safety with fear, anger, guilt, shame, and manipulation. I encourage you to see compassion as an act of defiance against the systems of indoctrination that perpetuate these cultures of trauma and abuse. When you engage with the otherworld, the gods, your community, and even yourself, ask "What can I do to help instead of hurt?" I know that it seems like a lot of work but I can promise you that doing the right thing is always worth it.

There will always be challenges when vulnerable people are called upon to support each other; however, I am hopeful and have faith that we can make these changes. I look forward to witnessing our community as it learns to live in right relationship with each other. I look forward to witnessing how this shapes our relationships with our gods. I look forward to witnessing us become something more than what we came from. Thank you for your support and taking the time to be here with me today.