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Silhouetted against the Full Moon, a group of robes figures chants while a Priestess raises her arms in the candlelight to welcome the Goddess, the ancient Mother in her many names and forms, to their ceremony.

This is not a scene from a fantasy novel, but rather a typical celebration held in a park, a backyard or a living room for modern Wiccans and Neo-Pagans.

Neo-Paganism is a broad term covering contemporary practice of many nature-based spiritual paths that honor the Divine as immanent in creation. Some Neo-Pagan traditions try to reconstruct pre-Christian pagan religions; others base practices on ancient pantheons newly interpreted for a modern world. Neo-Pagans are generally polytheists, honoring more than one Deity, although many Neo-Pagans are also monists, believing that the many Gods and Goddesses are all aspects of a single Source.

The concept of immanence is also key to Neo-Pagan spirituality: The Divine is in all creation and everything has Divinity within. Immanence is why many Neo-Pagans are active environmentalists; honoring the Earth Mother as Gaea, the living organism, comes naturally to those who work with the cycles of nature and the interconnectedness of all beings.

Neo-Paganism is a growing religion. Current estimates of the number of practitioners range from 500,000 to 2.5 million; numbers are difficult to determine because many Neo-Pagans, fearing reprisal from members of monotheistic religions, keep their practices quiet.

One of the most common "denominations" of Neo-Paganism is Wicca, or Neo-Pagan Witchcraft. Wicca is not related to Satanism as is commonly misconstrued. Satan is a figure from the Christian religion. The misconception comes from medieval witch-hunts, which equated the Horned God of the Old Religion with the adversary of the new, and from the sensationalism of popular media.

Wicca is a religion based on personal experience of Deity as male and female, a God and Goddess manifest within the cycle of the seasons and the cycle of death and rebirth. Wiccans celebrate these cycles through eight major holidays, the beginning and midpoint of each season.

Wiccans also gather at the Full Moons and sometimes at New Moons to celebrate spirituality and practice magick, which involves ancient practices such as chanting, spells and energy focus, and a great deal of what contemporary self-help authors have rediscovered as "creative visualization". Wiccans practice in small groups called covens or circles, and many keep to the traditional size of 13 or fewer, primarily on the basis of practical group dynamics.

Wicca and Neo-Paganism emphasize personal responsibility: You must make your own decisions on what is right and wrong. There are only two fundamental guidelines: The Wiccan Rede -- "An thou harm none, do what thou wilt," and the Law of Threes -- "Whatever you do shall come back to you three times". Between these two is an exacting ethical standard. If you do good, good comes back to you; if you do harm, that harm is returned three-fold. And the Rede does not say "Do what you want" but "Do what you will" -- a stricture that requires the Wiccan to know herself well enough to be honest about what she really wants.

Because Wicca has no dogma, there are as many interpretations of its spiritual practices as there are practitioners. Some Wiccans emphasize formal ritual; some practice shamanism in ways similar to Native American traditions; some focus on psychic development; some practice "kitchen witchery" -- arts and crafts, herbalism, spells and other hands-on activities; and many practice parts of all of these.

Covens whose traditions trace back to a British Witch named Gerald Gardner call themselves Gardnerian; they are closely related to Alexandrian Wicca, founded by Alex Sanders, a student of Gardner. Raymond Buckland brought Gardnerian Witchcraft to the United States, founded a different tradition called Seax Wicca, and wrote a book that helped many solitary Wiccans who had no access to covens or group training.

Dianic Witches, such as Z. Budapest and Barbara Walker, focus on the Goddess, women's issues, and eco-feminism. Many eclectic circles were created based on the writings of Americans Scott Cunningham and Starhawk. While there is controversy about whether modern Wiccans can trace their spirituality directly from survivals of European pre-Christian religions, most Wiccans would agree that whatever its source, Wicca is a living and growing spiritual path that satisfies its practitioners' needs.

While Wicca is perhaps the best-known Neo-Pagan spiritual path, there are other traditions. Asatru is based upon ancient Nordic deities and rituals. An Draocht Fein is one of the better-known American Druidic groups, and is based upon the ancient Celtic order of bards, wise men and clergy. The Church of All Worlds is an eclectic group based on Gaeian ecological spirituality and the works of science fiction author Robert Heinlein. There are many other groups of varying sizes and practices. What they all share, the common thread within the multicolored tapestry of modern Neo-Paganism, is a reverence for Nature's ever-returning cycles, a spirit of community among individual diversity, and a search for personal truth, found not within another's revelation, but engraved on the spirit of the individual.

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