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A path less traveled

While browsing the shelves at Borders bookstore, this freshman picked up, "Teen Witch," the book that would change her life, catapulting her into a world of spirits and leading her down

by **Roy Maurer**
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In 2000, at the age of 13, Burke Denning found the gateway to her faith at Borders bookstore. After convincing her father to buy her a copy of Silver Ravenwolf's "Teen Witch," she devoured it in two days and decided to become a pagan.

Presently a precocious 18-year-old freshman at IU and considering a major in folklore or outdoor recreation, she marks that fateful moment in her life as truly defining. In the five years since, her faith in and devotion to paganism has strengthened. Sitting in the sun outside Collins Living-Learning Center, her face lights up when speaking about it.

"I owe so much to it. I have gotten so much from it, and I still get so much from it," Denning said, extending her finger to a colorful spider scurrying across the picnic table in front of her. "It's a really great way to structure your life if you're a person like me."

Googling a religion

Burke stumbled upon paganism, a revival of pre-Christian religious traditions characterized by a reverence for both the natural world and the spirit world. It was a time of personal turmoil and distress in her life. Against the backdrop of her parents' divorce, she was uprooted from the only home she had ever known. She was also struggling spiritually, feeling that her given faith of Catholicism was lacking. Unable to ignore her strong belief in a spiritual realm, a world of God and ghosts separated from our own by the thinnest of veils, she sought out a more self-meaningful experience. She searched Google for various faiths, researched them and considered Buddhism and Judaism, but she eventually found her fit as a pagan.

The modern version of paganism has its roots in 19th-century Romanticism, although the publication of books on the subject of Wicca by Gerald Gardner in the 1950s jumpstarted the movement in Europe and the United States.

Adherents.com estimates there are 1 million pagans worldwide. The American Religious Identification Study of 2001, conducted by the City University of New York, found 307,000 Americans identify themselves as pagans. The Covenant of the Goddess.org estimates 65 percent of pagans are between the ages of 26 and 39

and three times as many women as men practice paganism.



A new sensation

Despite the growing number of adherents, Burke felt she alone had discovered a new magical elixir of being. Excited and empowered as a reborn, seventh-grade Wiccan witch and proudly wearing a drawn black pentacle on her hand for all to see, she was confronted with slings and arrows from intolerant and skeptical classmates, until, fortuitously, she sat down next to a girl with a matching pentacle and entered into a group of like-minded peers. She has been part of a pagan community ever since.

Born to an Irish Catholic father employed by the Pentagon and a free-spirited agnostic mother who spent her days crafting a novel, Burke grew up an only child in rustic Great Falls, Va., a 30-minute drive from the nation's capitol. It was in the woods surrounding her home that she first felt what she later realized were pagan stirrings. With her father at work, her mother immersed in her writing and the nearest neighbor two miles away, Burke was a child of the forest.

"I played by myself in the woods a lot. I actually developed a sense of someone in the woods with me, someone watching over me," she said. "Looking back, I feel it was a forest spirit, The Green Man, who protects the forest and dwells in all nature."

By the time she was 12, everything had changed. Her parents had separated, she was being prescribed anti-depressants and anti-anxiety medications, she turned her back on God and moved to Indianapolis to attend a private school for gifted children.

"I had trouble making friends and I couldn't understand why," Denning said. "So I looked through the different aspects of my life, and thought, 'Huh, maybe it's because I've forsaken God and God's punishing me.'"

A life-changing book

She returned to her rosary and Catholic prayer books but found only emptiness in return.

"I didn't understand why I wasn't feeling any fulfillment from it, even though I was putting my heart and soul into it," she said.

Enter Borders bookstore and "Teen Witch."

"The teens on the cover were all beautiful, and on the back it read, 'You can invoke the power of the goddess and be a strong person too,'" she said.

She read the book cover to cover, drank it all in and soon after knew she was pagan. The realization arrived with perfect timing. Reading about incorporating the Goddess into herself, Burke began to deal positively with her parents' divorce. During one such meditation, she came to understand that life's events aren't about

pain, but growth. Right then, her healing began.

Over time, she shared her newfound identity with her parents. Final acceptance has only come recently. Traveling through Ireland this past spring with her father set the scene for an effort at understanding.

"I told him that I'm still pagan, and that it wasn't a phase," Denning said, "and he said that he had figured that out and he was proud that I believed in something so strongly with a power in faith that he himself didn't have."

Today, both her father Dan and her mother Candace support her religious vocation.

"It's not my first choice, but I'm comfortable with Burke finding her own way in these decisions," her father said. "If it's what she's comfortable with, then I'm comfortable too."

Pagan and Proud

Burke is a proud pagan, serving as the events coordinator for the IU Pagans Club and still learning about her chosen faith. With the support of her parents and a welcoming pagan community in Bloomington and at IU, she feels she has been fated for it.

"People in the past have said to me, 'You were going through a big change, you'd been really unsettled, you didn't have any friends, your parents were getting divorced, of course you turned away from God, of course I turned to paganism,'" Denning said. "But I answer that, 'Yes, that's part of it, but what makes paganism right for me has always been there. It was there the whole time.' If someone had shown me that book when I was younger, it would have happened sooner. It fits me like a glove."

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Spiritual rebirth

Dalai Lama appoints new director of Bloomington Tibetan Cultural Center

by **Roy Maurer**
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When faced with the choice of appointing a new director of Bloomington's Tibetan Cultural Center, the Dalai Lama chose Arjia Rinpoche for his many years of service and dedication to Tibetan Buddhists worldwide.

Rinpoche is the Abbot of Kumbum Monastery in Tibet, and the founder of the Tibetan Center for Compassion and Wisdom in Mill Valley, Calif., and Oakland, Calif.

"The appointment by His Holiness the Dalai Lama is very exciting," said Lisa Morrison, director of public relations and media for the Tibetan Cultural Center. "I think we will see great developments in the upcoming years -- developments that will not only be important to furthering the mission of His Holiness, Director Rinpoche and the TCC, but also developments that will have an impact on the local and regional communities."

Rinpoche, as director and president, will oversee the operations of both the TCC, its class offerings in philosophy and yoga, arts workshops, and function as a cultural outreach service to the community. He will also overlook the recently consecrated Chamtse Ling Temple, resting on a 90 acre plot in south Bloomington.

Though he was reluctant to leave the center he founded in California, Rinpoche felt obliged to accept the appointment by the Dalai Lama.

"In our Tibetan tradition, we respect our lamas very much," said Rinpoche. "If His Holiness the Dalai Lama asks us to do something, there is no choice to say 'no.' I accepted and am very happy to be here."

His hesitation to take the position, however, has not caused him to delay planning for the future and making goals.

"We have lots of dreams and plans," Rinpoche said. "In the future, our goal is to be non-sectarian, where Buddhists of all traditions can come in and practice. We can share our culture and benefit each other."

Born to Mongolian nomads in Eastern Tibet, Rinpoche is one of the most important religious leaders to leave Tibet since the Dalai Lama fled into exile in 1959. As a young boy he was believed to be the reincarnation of Lumbum Gye, the father of the founder of Gelugpa. During the Chinese Cultural Revolution, Rinpoche was forced to work as a farmer in the fields, yet he still managed to continue his Buddhist practices in secrecy.

When the political situation eased a little during the 1980s, Rinpoche furthered his spiritual practice through

postgraduate Buddhist studies at Qinghai University, where he followed the high Gelugpa tradition. He then became a research fellow in the Tibetan Department at Chinese Buddhism College at Beijing, where he studied with the late Panchen Lama. During this period, he served as president of the regional Buddhist association, and deputy president of the National Buddhist Association.

As Abbott of Kumbum Monastery, he established a new order of Buddhist monks, and worked with hundreds of students. To improve the education and health conditions of Tibetans throughout his country, he established new schools and charitable foundations like the Kumbum Red Cross.

In 1998, due to political and religious pressures, Rinpoche left China to settle in the United States.

Rinpoche fills a vacancy at the Tibetan Cultural Center brought about by the declining health of the founder and de facto director since 1979, Thubten Jigme Norbu, the elder brother of the Dalai Lama and a former IU professor.

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New Hindu temple draws Midwest followers IU Indian Student Association president excited about shrine

by **Roy Maurer**
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Since its opening Feb. 5, Indianapolis' new Hindu temple has provided Bloomington-area Hindus with a place to worship only an hour away.

The Hindu Temple of Central Indiana, located on the city's eastside, is Indiana's only Hindu temple. Its continuing construction and expansion underscores the growth of the Hindu community in Indianapolis, which has reached nearly 3,000 families, according to the HTCI.

"The temple serves a very important spiritual, religious, social and cultural need in the Hindu way of life," said Srinivasan Chandrasekhar, vice chairman for the HTCI. "Naturally, we are absolutely thrilled about having built the first phase of the temple."

The temple -- in the first of its three development phases -- is currently an 11,500-square foot multipurpose hall that contains classrooms, a kitchen and space for religious services and community gatherings. Eventually, the temple will cover more than 30,000 square feet on a 13-acre site and is projected to cost \$7 million. The architecture will be distinctly Indian, with a wide stone staircase ascending to an elevated colonnade, and three-dimensional elephant murals that will appear to be towing the temple like a colossal chariot.

The shrines of 12 Hindu deities will be installed inside.

The temple is planning classes that will provide guidance to children regarding the practice of Hinduism in a modern setting. Plans for a variety of cultural activities involving local and visiting artists are also in the works, Chandrasekhar said.

The opening of the temple has caught the attention of members of IU's Indian community.

"When I heard they were

building the temple, I thought that was really great," said Karan Chaudhri, president of IU's Indian Student Association. "I was shocked that a state the size of Indiana didn't have one."

Until recently, the only option for the state's Hindus was to worship at home or travel out of state to places like Chicago, Cincinnati, St. Louis, Dayton or Columbus, Ohio.

The idea of the temple in Indianapolis has evolved over decades. With the influx of Hindu families to Indiana in the 1960s and '70s, the Indian community debated between building a community center or a temple. A community center was decided upon, and a small room was leased to Geetha Mandal, a Hindu religious group, to conduct religious services once a month, Chandrasekhar said.

Six years ago, the Hindu community evaluated the situation and concluded that a full-fledged temple was needed and possible. With a fund-raising event in October 2000 that resulted in a pledge of \$1.5 million and a land donation from a group of devotees, the temple committee began the planning. The special architectural design of the temple was developed by an architect from India who subsequently worked with a local architect and builder from Indianapolis.

"Religion is a very important part of my life," Chaudhri said. "Now Hindus from abroad and Indian Americans have access to a temple where we can pray, practice our faith and educate others about Hinduism."

Hinduism is one of the world's oldest religions, about 4,000 years old, and revolves around belief in reincarnation and a supreme god worshipped as many deities. There are about 800 million Hindus in India and some 1.5 million in the United States, according to the U.S. State Department's International Religious Freedom Report 2004.

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