On using magic to channel your creative force

Pam Grossman, author and witch, discusses being on the unknown path, magic as a normal creative process, and what to do when facing down a demon.

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As told to Meredith Graves, 2277 words.

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Do you remember a moment, either—the two aren't really different zones, but—*either* in your mundane life, or in your magical practice, when it hit you that it was time to write a guide to magical creativity?

Oh, I wish I did. I don't remember the moment because this has been percolating for so many years. It's been on a low simmer in my creative cauldron for a long, long time.

During the pandemic we were trying to sell a TV show. I was going to be the Anthony Bourdain of witches, and I was going to, docu-series, take people all around and introduce them to real witches. And I still would love to do a show like that. We tried to sell this show for two years. It got really close, and then it didn't happen. I was genuinely at peace with it not happening, because one of the spells I cast for the show, I said, "I only want to do this if it's in alignment, if the people involved in the show will be protected, if I can do it with ease and joy and support and abundance, and in a sustainable manner." So, if the show wasn't meant to be, that is okay.

But after that point, I was pretty exhausted. I had put so much creative effort into that, and I wasn't sure what project to focus on next. I mean, I'm always doing my podcast [The Witch Wave] and teaching, and a million things, but—I said this so many times to people—I wasn't sure what lily pad I was supposed to jump to next.

So I wish I had a beautiful origin story for you, but one day, it just *occurred* to me that all of these different threads of magic, occulture, and art-making that are so precious to me, it felt like they wanted to be woven together in a book. I'm a big fan of other creativity books, and there are lots of wonderful creativity books about spirituality and creativity out there, but there didn't seem to me to be one that explicitly teaches you techniques to tap into your own magic. And it felt like I was the right person to write this one. I often find myself writing the books that I need.

How do you know when you're the right person for an idea?

I often say that witchcraft is an embodied practice, but I think this is true of honing one's intuition in general. You feel it, literally, in your physical body. It's not just an idea that flashes in your head; something shifts in your body that feels like a steady, supportive, encouraging force. It is not accompanied by anxiety—because I'm someone who battles anxiety, and I've had to learn when my anxiety is talking to me versus when my intuition is talking to me. Intuition never feels anxious. Even if intuition is telling me something potentially negative, I still find it to be a steady, anchoring presence, whereas anxiety gets me spun up and scared and very stuck in spiraling thoughts. It's just totally different energy.

***Magic Maker*, to me, functions as a grimoire, a creativity handbook, as well as sort of an anthology of thinkers and doers throughout history who people can become inspired by and draw from. In the first couple sections, you place a really high premium on encouraging practitioners at all levels to develop individual, unique habits and rituals. Was this a specific choice that speaks back to some of your beliefs about creativity? Was it a reaction to the sort of '90s witch lit that so many of us were fed, that was prescriptive and rigid? Was it some combination of these factors?**

I think it's a combo. I also think it's my personality. It's valuable to learn from other people and to learn rules and guidelines, absolutely. But this is true of learning how to write, how to make music, how to paint, how to make magic, how to cook. You can learn from other people's recipes, but you don't become a chef until you start experimenting on your own and trusting your own taste and fascination.

I get approached frequently to teach classes in certain kinds of spell casting or to write books filled with spells, and that is uninteresting to me. Other people write those books, and they're valuable and beautiful. I don't want to do that. I would so much rather teach somebody that they already know how to do a lot of this shit, and encourage them to trust themselves and develop their own path and practice. Again, it loops back to that idea of the personal being the most potent.

I'm glad you brought up the fact that there are a lot of other people throughout history that I write about in the book, because I'm also trying to show people that magic isn't that weird. Creative people have been using magical techniques to make their work throughout human history. Now, my book mostly focuses on the last roughly 200 years, but I think it's useful for people to see that John Coltrane, David Bowie, Sylvia Plath, Octavia E. Butler, folks who occupy the absolute highest glittering firmament of creative leaders, they were making magic, whether or not they called it that. They were using techniques to help them tap into something greater than themselves, to push aside their own egos and anxieties and fears and allow some other force, I call it creative force, to allow that to flow through them.

How do you, or how can one, tap into that idea of magical ancestry? How did these magical ancestors or these creative forces avail themselves to you as you were writing this manuscript?

I believe that the ideas and artworks that we encounter that enliven us and that we fall head over heels in love with are cosmic breadcrumbs that we're supposed to follow. There's a reason certain works resonate with us. Those works are clues and messages for you to listen to and follow. Maybe they're there to inspire you to make your own work, or maybe they're there to heal you, to fortify you, to bring you joy. Those works and the people who make them become part of your own spiritual pantheon. So, even though the makers might be dead and they might not be in the material realm anymore, their energy, their intentions, their magic, their work is eternal. You can follow those threads of magic for the rest of your life, and you get to add to that tapestry by creating your own work that other people can be enlivened by. It's such a beautiful lineage and magical web that we're all part of.

My ancestor veneration absolutely includes a lot of my own biological ancestors, for sure. And I call on them sometimes and I communicate with them sometimes. I thank them and I ask them for assistance. I send them love and I receive their love and support. But I am often calling into my magic circle the creative ancestors that I feel as if I am the progeny of, so that includes Remedios Varo and Jim Henson and David Lynch, and Billie Holiday. We all have those magical family trees of which we are a part.

Now, when we get to the book's third act it stops being quite as nice. I laughed my head off when I got to the chapter where you categorize the presence of certain negative tendencies and motives as demons. No pun intended, or maybe pun intended, what *possessed* you to tackle the issue of creative insecurity as if it were something akin to a spirit catalog or a handbook of demonology?

So, I was raised Jewish, and I call myself Jew-witch sometimes. Jewish folk magic and folklore have become much more important to me as I've entered middle age, and I'm reconnecting to that ancestral line of magic. And the ancient Jewish people believed that demons were everywhere. As the saying goes: there are 10,000 demons on your left and 1,000 demons on your right. So, you're surrounded by 11,00 demons at all times. And the way they talked about demons, yeah, some of them are really scary, but some of them are just a pain in the ass. And some of these

demons, it seems like, were proto-metaphors for what we now understand as germs and bacteria and things like that. If people got sick, they would often think it was a demon.

So, there's a long tradition of anthropomorphizing any harmful force as a demon. And in my experience, when you name something and bring it out into the light, it has less power over you. So I really wanted to sit with a lot of my own discomfort, my own shortcomings. I wanted to catalog them and think about them deeply and figure out what they can teach me and how I can then honor them, but also respectfully invite them to leave me alone.

Your demons are more these forces that show up from time to time like an annoying fucking relative. And they might keep showing up for the rest of your life, but they do not have to knock you off your path. And so, that section of the book is me really trying to, if not make friends with my demons, at least get to know them a little better so that I wasn't so scared of them anymore.

Another notable section in your book, and one that by your own admission you had the most fun writing, is about the necessity of the magician to channel or conjure the spirit of play. Why was that such an important part of the book?

Well, because I think people tend to take their creative practice too seriously, and I think people tend to take their spiritual practice too seriously. And it's supposed to be fun. If you're having fun, it's a good sign that you're on the right track, and you're allowing yourself to be supple and curious and open and experimental.

I was recently invited by my friend Jinkx Monsoon to be part of her Valentine's Day show at Carnegie Hall. She invited me to cast a love spell as part of the show. I was so honored to do it, and it was one of the most joyful experiences of my life, and such a culmination of that spirit of play, creativity, and magic, or I should say the spirits of play, creativity, and magic coming together. Jinkx is such a powerful witch and such a radiant creative spirit. So it was absolute bliss.

One of the biggest blocks I think that happens for people is, they get very caught up in how something is going to be perceived or judged. I try to remind myself, when I'm feeling those feelings, that it's not just about me. That creative force is working with and through me, and I'm there to support it and work with it. And so I try to go into what I call "magician mode" before I do any kind of creative work or any kind of public performance or appearance. Because when I'm in that mode, I'm pushing aside my self-consciousness and fear and remembering that something so much bigger than me is trying to flow through me. And when I remember that, I'm able to be more playful and more joyful and trust that I'm doing exactly what I'm meant to be doing in that moment.

Okay, so we have one opportunity here to cast a spell in print over *The Creative Independent*… My friend Hawk Grubb, the great astrologer, they do this thing with their students and mentees called Omen Walk. They love to get people looking for omens and using that as a tool to hone their intuition and learn to distinguish between what is and isn't a sign. If anyone reading this interview right now is flabbergasted, flummoxed, and they've been looking for a sign, what would you say to those people? What would you tell them to do?

I would say that every creative person I know feels uncomfortable and scared and doesn't know exactly how their work is going to turn out. And that is part of the process. Creative people are mystery wranglers. And so, if you are feeling nervous or uncomfortable or unsure about what you want to make or how to make it, that is absolutely normal. And in fact, I think that's a really good omen, because it means that you are walking toward the unknown. And the unknown is the space of creativity. Magical techniques can help you navigate that mystery with more joy, more ease, and more support. And you were born to make things. So, trust your own magic.

Five things conjured by Magic Makers that Pam Grossman adores:

Experimental filmmaker and poet James Broughton's manifesto on cinema as magic, *Making Light of It*

My favorite painting by my favorite painter, surrealist witch Remedios Varo, "Nacer de Nuevo"

Lucille Clifton's poetry, particularly "daughters" and "i was born with twelve fingers"

All of artist Jesse Bransford's visual spells (but his Magic Circles series is a good place to start)

There’s far too much spellbinding music to choose from, so please enjoy this playlist of some songs that, for me at least, manifest some major Magician vibes

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