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# On choosing your guides

Writer and witch Amanda Yates Garcia on how an appearance on Fox News changed her career, rejecting capitalism as a guide, and how the present moment is calling us to rethink what we want, appreciate what we have, and be of service to others.

**When did you realize you could make a living as a professional witch?**

I came to the work through my art practice. I started doing ritual ceremonies, and people started to get quite interested in that and started to want to hire me to do it privately. And I was always very interested in the tarot. I was taught by my mother. So for a long time, those two modalities were percolating. Meanwhile, I had a series of jobs that made me really miserable. They were creative-adjacent. I was working in museums. I was working in arts education. I ended up working this job that was like content creation for independent museums. It was nine hours a day in front of my desk in a windowless office. I was so miserable. I saw my days stretching out ahead of me in perpetuity, and I was like, "How am I ever going to get out of this?"

During some ceremonial work, I had this epiphany. The Goddess came to me and said, "You can be free." I came home from this ceremony, and I was like, "Okay, I need to do something about this." I did this ritual, and I was really humbled. I made a beautiful altar, and I was on my knees, naked, just being like, "Show me the way forward. I need your help. I can't figure this out."

Within two weeks, I was laid off from my office job, which meant I could collect unemployment. Then, a random relative unexpectedly sent me a \$5,000 check. I said to myself, "I'm only going to do the work I want to do, the creative work I truly believe in, until my money runs out." Up until that point, I'd been trying to figure out what other people wanted from me. That was eight years ago, or more. The money never ran out, and I just kept doing what I was doing.

In 2016 [building on the work of Michael M. Hughes], I was leading a ceremony to bind Trump when he first got elected. At that ceremony, which I did because a lot of my clients asked me to do it, there was a writer for the *LA Times* who was a friend of a friend of mine. She wrote about my work, and it was published in the *LA Times*. Then, seven or eight months later, Fox News emailed me and asked, "Will you come on *Tucker Carlson* and talk about these binding spells?" I was like, "No way." I said no three or four

times. But my spirits, my guides, my guardians—my intuition, you might call it—kept being like, “You have to go on this show. You have to speak out for what you believe in.” They woke me up in the middle of the night and were like, “You’ve got to do it! You’ve got to do it!” So I went, “Fine, okay.”

I went on, and then everything just blew up, in a good way. I was contacted by agents, and that’s how I sold my book. Every news outlet wanted to talk to me. I was like, “Wow, this is crazy. I did this thing for three minutes, and suddenly my whole life is transformed, and it’s transformed because of this crazy fascist talk show.”

I could not have planned for that. I didn’t do anything to make that happen. I was just doing my work. I always tell my clients, you just have to do your work. You have to keep making it, and keep creating it. You can’t really plan for how it’s going to come together, but if you keep making it, and keep refining it, and keep focusing it, and keep doing it, eventually something will open up for you.

**How do you find balance between all of your creative practices? How do you find balance between the things you’re doing for money and the things you’re doing for yourself?**

That is the million-dollar question. Right now, in my practice, I’m working on going back to that original spark that launched me on this journey, which was like, do what you want. Focus on what you want. That’s why people like your work.

When we feel vulnerable, or when we feel financially vulnerable, it’s very tempting to focus on what you think you *should* do. For instance, something a lot of creative people will identify with is feeling like I should be writing my newsletter, or I should be posting on Instagram, or I should be writing social media content, which doesn’t directly make me money, and it doesn’t satisfy me creatively, but it takes up a lot of my time. Having a social media presence or a following does help me be able to support and sustain myself. But I think what helps me more is my voice and doing the work only I can do. I can’t do that if I’m constantly thinking up little pithy things [to post] on Instagram. That’s my real battle right now, trying to navigate that.

What I’m trying to do right now is set aside time to do the work, the creative work, the big-picture work I want to do. What do I want to talk about right now? What am I working on with ceremony, with ritual, with magic, with mythology, with spirit, with the land, with nature, with earth-based spirituality practices? What am I thinking about? Do that work, and then pull from that to fill in my social media. But often, it ends up being the other way around, where I’m like, “I have to write this social media post, otherwise my engagement will go down,” and then I end up spending all my time doing that.

Then there’s a lot of backend stuff I have to do, which people don’t really think about. I had a friend who was a pretty successful artist in London. He said, “What people don’t know when they want to be an artist is a lot of it is just business. A lot of it is you writing invoices and sending letters and figuring out logistics.” That’s true for me too. Even though I’m a witch, a lot of my work is figuring out how to send things in batches on MailChimp or whatever.

I try and block off my time. I only see clients on select days of the week, and then I have one or two days for administrative labor. I try to do all my creative work in the mornings. I don’t start my workday with my clients until 11, so I try to get up at 6 or 7 and get several hours of work done on my own, like writing and creative work. Otherwise, by the end of the day, I just don’t have the bandwidth to do it.

**How have your creative practices changed as a result of social distancing and self-isolation and the anxiety of this moment?**

The work I do with my clients is now all online. A third of it was online before, so that part isn’t so hard. I think [the biggest difference is] the kinds of things they’re worried about now. There’s a lot of healing work or grounding work to be done, whereas before [it] was focused on more aspirational stuff—jobs they wanted, schools they wanted to go to, babies they wanted to have, marriages they wanted to get into. This moment has really made us all stop and reevaluate what we want. Why do we want it? Why are we doing the work we’re doing? It certainly made me stop and realize how much I’ve been hustling for years. Why? To what end am I doing this?

I think this time has revealed so many of the underlying structures of our culture that are just not sustainable and are truly ugly and horrific. All of these people are suffering. It's always been that way, but it took this moment for a lot of people to be able to come together and say, "This is not what we want." Because we were all so busy before, we didn't have time to stop and [ask] if this is the right way. We were just like, "Hustle, hustle, hustle." This time has really made me reevaluate how I work, and how I want to work. It's made me want to be even more focused on social justice and regenerative culture, and working to create those things, and finding ways to be alive, and to be doing my work without having to participate so much in capitalism.

One of the confusing, contradictory things is that in some ways I'm happier now, because I have more time to be slow and appreciate the things that are going on in my life. I spend more time doing my own tarot readings, doing my own ceremonies. Not feeling like I have to go out and be doing everything all the time. I feel like this moment is calling us all to come back to the present and appreciate what we have and the things that are really important. A lot of us realize we don't need as much as we thought we did, and the things that give us life and joy are the people we love, having good, healthy food, having time to enjoy one another, and beauty, like the beauty of nature. All that stuff, we don't need to hustle for. It's there.

Also, though, there's so much work to be done. This crisis has shown the cracks in our culture where we have tolerated so much suffering—endless suffering and bloodshed, and genocide, and destruction of the environment, and it's all just considered collateral damage. It's so crazy that we're like, "Well, that's just the way it is." Because it doesn't have to be that way.

We can't change our culture by doing more of what it does. We can't change our culture by working harder, or being more violent, or being more brutal. We have to be more loving, be more beautiful, take more pleasure in the present moment. adrienne maree brown talks about how cultivating pleasure in the moment is what will lead us out of this displacement of pleasure, which is what happens in capitalism. We're working so hard so that we can have pleasure when we retire, or in some fantastical future. These moments call us back to saying, "What about right now? What am I doing right now?"

#### **What rituals or practices have helped you stay grounded, or find solace, or connect with community?**

The new moon and full moon rituals I've been doing online have meant a lot to me. I connect with people all over the world, and it's really wonderful to be in spaces where we're all feeling the same thing and we're prioritizing being in ritual and ceremony together. We sing songs, we light candles, and we talk about the seasons in astrology. For instance, this past new moon ritual was the new moon in Taurus. Taurus is the sign most closely associated with the earth and with beauty. We talked about what that means, and how we can bring more beauty into our lives, and what is beautiful in our lives right now. It was so gratifying to hear all these people talking about their friends, their family, their garden. The sound of the wind in the trees, music, poetry—all this stuff we can have already. We don't need to work for that thing.

Another thing I do in my practice is invocation. Invocation is when you invoke a spirit and call it into the room. A lot of my clients invoke artists, like Maya Deren, Frida Kahlo, Hildegard von Bingen. When you say their names and call them in, you're receiving guidance from them. A lot of people don't understand what that is. They think, "Oh, that's some woo-woo, cockamamie thing." But it guides you. If you call in the spirit of Patti Smith, you're like, "How would Patti handle this?" You're holding that idea, that force in your mind and soul. It shows you the path. A lot of psychologists do this as well. They'll say, "Can you think of someone in your life who's supported you? Can you visualize them right now? Can you think of your grandmother who took care of you as a child?" That kind of invocation works, it's something human beings have been doing since the beginning of time.

A lot of people understand the idea of spirits in different ways. When I say spirit, I mean the *anima mundi*, the life force of the universe, and specifically the life force of our planet, the intelligence of our planet, all the things that come through it, through our imaginations. That's a manifestation of our planet as well—imagination, heart, poetry, that all comes from nature as well.

I've also been using this time to spend a lot of time with the tarot, pulling cards at the beginning of the day and looking at what's coming up throughout the day, writing that down, and looking for patterns.

Working with my altar. Your altar gives you space for spirit to enter. It also gives you a place to focus your energy, to write out your intentions on petitions and place them there. Or if you have your god, your guardian, the spirit you want to call in, the artist you admire, the writer you love, the deity you're working with, [you can] put their image there. Give them fresh water, bring them fresh flowers, burn incense for them. It's a way of grounding and connecting to the thing you want to lead you.

If we don't choose our guides, they are chosen for us. That's what we're seeing in our culture right now. If we don't choose our guides, then capital is our guide, and we do what we're told in order to pursue capital. If we decide on our own guides and say, "I want my witch ancestors to be leading me forward," or, "I want this sixth-century mystic to be leading me forward," that intention changes the way we behave and the way we think.

**I love this idea of redefining what we value and thinking about what guides us. I'd love to hear how you define success, and also failure, beyond the capitalist definitions.**

I feel like my work is a success when I am being honest and authentic with what I am hearing and receiving from spirit, and what is coming through me when I'm speaking. But also, it has to be of service to people. If I can use my authentic voice, and be of service, and sustain my organism in relative comfort, in relative security, and be able to surround myself with beauty as I understand it, that's what I consider success. Success is doing the work you want, and having it be of service to the world, and being able to do it in a sustainable way.

Failure is when we don't meet those criteria. When we're doing work that isn't what we want, isn't true, isn't what we believe in. When we're being inauthentic, when we're not being of service, when we're being destructive, when we're not contributing to the health, vitality, and happiness of all beings, but instead are harming, or causing more harm. When you can't do your work in a way that is sustainable. When you're constantly struggling, and you don't know if you will be able to meet your most basic needs. However, that is not a failure of you. That is not your personal failure. That's a systemic failure, and most of our failures are systemic. If the system weren't failing us as artists, then [we'd be able to keep] working through it. We're trying to figure out our voice. All artists want to do that, and if they had the time and the resources, they would.

I think failure doesn't really exist, except on a systemic level, and success is really about being able to have the freedom to do the work you want to do in healthy relationship with the world around you.

Amanda Yates Garcia Recommends:

Create an altar.

Draw a tarot card every day, and write down what comes up for you.

Choose a guide from your life to actually name as your guide. Most people already have one. Who calls you forward? [It might be] an animal, or a being, or a poet, or a musician.

Choose an herb to work with. Work with something you have around you, maybe that grows in your neighborhood or in your part of the world. Become familiar with it. Learn its properties. Smell it, burn it, grow it. That's one way to really connect with the earth and the wisdom of plants.

The first book about witchcraft my mother gave me was Starhawk's *The Spiral Dance*. That's a good place to start.

Get to know the sacred places around you, and start to become aware of what is sacred for you. Where is the sacred tree in your neighborhood? Where is the sacred well? Where is the sacred water? What animals do you have around you, guiding you? How can you be of service to them?

If you want to stay grounded, finding ways to be of service is really, really

helpful. It helps you feel less out of control. Witches know that when you're doing a magical working, you're not just doing it for yourself. You're doing work you want everyone to have and do. When you're doing work for abundance, it's not just so you have abundance. We're not like, "I will live in this palace, and y'all can go fuck yourselves." It's that we want to create abundance for all beings.

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Siri Kaur, 2019

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