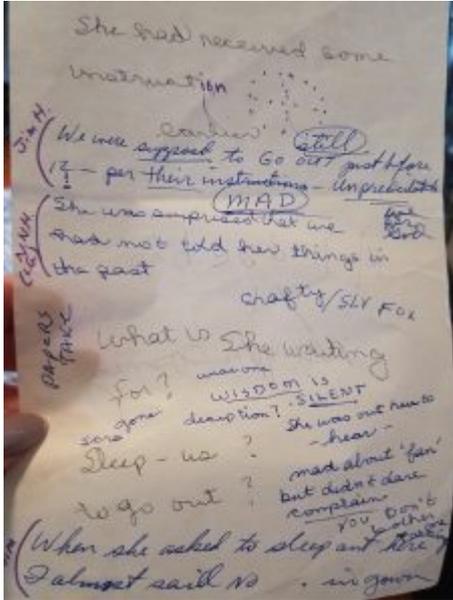


# I Was a Twelve Year Old Priestess in the Occult, or so I Was Made to Believe

written by Nancy Hightower | January 4, 2017



"Where is my real daughter? What have you done to her?" My mother is inside the apartment, pacing back and forth. I'm standing just outside the front door where she has ordered me to stay until I answer her. I am shaking uncontrollably. It's a cold February evening. She asks again, "Where have they taken her?" and taps the door a little every time she walks past so that it is slowly closing. "Once the door is shut, they'll come after you." It's 1982, and there's no Internet yet, no Snopes website to warn me this might not be real. I am alone in Denton, Texas with my mother and her lover who believe I'm in the occult.

I beg her to let me back in as she hits the door a final time, leaving only a crack that reveals a bit of light from the living room. The neighbor's door opens. An old woman peeks out and asks if I am okay, and I'm not sure what to say. Should I tell her that at twelve years old, I'm a high-ranking occult priestess, out to murder my mother and her boyfriend? Do I tell her how, that after months of interrogation at home, I now believe that I've sacrificed babies and participated in orgies, that I can leave my body to visit other places via astral projection? There's no time to say anything as my mother throws open the door and with a quick nod allows me to enter. I rush in, thankful for temporary sanctuary.

Once inside, I am told to sit in the chair facing the couch. Mom sits beside Jim. "Now - tell me where she is."

When you are expected to give an answer, you create a story so convincing that you begin to believe it yourself.

The pictures flashing through your mind become real. "I see a man's smiling face. There's a knife in his hand." Surrounded by a forest? Near a lake? Every part of the panorama feels like a possibility, but I tell them she is in the woods about to be laid on a stone altar. I see powder-white faces. I see the hoods (isn't that what is shown in all the Jack Chick tracts I grew up reading?). My mother seems to accept these answers, but since I am unsure, she doesn't call the police to investigate. Instead I'm told to go brush my teeth. Later that week, I wake up in the middle of the night. My mother hovers over me, waving an oil lamp inches above my body muttering to herself. I lie very still, unsure of what she is doing until she walks over to my closet door and throws it open. "All bodiless spirits who talk the dry places must return to the abyss," she commands. Since I was eight years old, she has been studying demons and spiritual warfare and considers herself an expert on binding and casting them out. I keep my hands over my heart like some kind of vampire while trying to hold back tears with the realization that I attract evil things even in my sleep.

This narrative isn't built in a day. It takes time for story and reality to be woven together into something believable. But it's not as hard as you might think. We spin truths all the time, rewire memories to fit the jigsaw of our lives. In 1982, there was no social media to alert me to the inaccuracy of these occult child sex rings being peddled to the masses. Our television only had a few channels. I didn't read the newspaper. My two primary sources of information about the outside world were my mother and Jim. I didn't know that at the same time they were interrogating me nightly—often times taping the sessions so I could not back out of my answers—there were rash allegations concerning daycare workers sexually abusing children in an occult setting. My Pentecostal upbringing had already taught me about demons, witchcraft, and possession; it wasn't that much of a stretch to believe in secret societies dedicated to such evil. Being an unconscious participant in that world was a twist I hadn't seen coming. But a twelve year old can be convinced of almost anything if there are enough environmental factors to encourage it. I had already been raised in a world of secrets, with a missionary grandfather who had molested me and at least five others, with more suspected victims. It wasn't like I thought the world was a safe place. It wasn't like I ever thought I was a *good* person or even a good Christian. And now coupled with lack of sleep and being forced to answer double bind questions about my own religious convictions, it wasn't that hard to believe outlandish theories of satanic celebrations. It matched a psychological reality.

Once these lines are blurred and crossed, there is no stopping point. One day after school, my mother gets out my 4th and 5th grade yearbooks to show to Jim. He looks for a long time at the class picture of us dressed up as Native Americans, then asks me what is the meaning of the hidden symbol? I am confused, seeing nothing out of the ordinary—just a bunch of kids. My mother warns me not to hold anything back, which automatically makes me think that I might be. The longer I stare at it, the more I begin to think that I can see symbols, too. My mother gets out my baby pictures so we can trace other

occult signs.

This storyline went on for a few more months until I began to really think that I was a high priestess in the occult. I stopped sleeping. I thought I was damned, and one day finally burst into tears in the middle of class. My teacher pulled me aside and asked what was the matter. Again, there was no way to explain what was going on. But she must have called my mother to inquire, must have scared my mother enough to call my father and have him fly out to Texas and collect me within the week. Mom said she didn't know what to believe anymore even though ended up burning my tainted baby pictures in a tin can. After she sent me to live with my father, I never saw her again.

It took years of therapy to undo those lies and the underlying emotions of worthlessness that had allowed the lies to stick for so long. It took years of researching the symbols and names I had drawn during the months of suggestive interrogations—making sure none of them matched up with any known occult alphabet—to convince me I was innocent. My doctoral dissertation was a memoir about growing up in the evangelical south. Despite this psychological and academic work, I still wasn't ready to feel the surprise, rage and long-forgotten shame when I read about the man who walked into Comet Pizza with a gun to rescue child slaves from satanic abuse. There were no children found, of course, yet I can't mock Edgar Welch. Instead I remember a door slowly closing on me in the night; I remember the power and seduction, the double bind and devastation of believing in those conspiracy theories. I wonder if he had looked long and hard enough, could he have found me?