

# NO HEXES HERE

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Ryan Silvola/Beloit Daily News Psychic artist Erin Pregont uses her abilities to draw what looks like reporter Ryan Silvola's great grandfather during a reading at Nine Bells & Cat Tails in downtown Beloit.

BELOIT- Magic and mysticism don't have to be forgotten just because it's after Halloween. In fact for some, it's a way of life.

Witches are in the Stateline Area, including longtime friends Karen Koyama, of Beloit, and Rhonda Ledman, of Janesville.

The pair identify as 'eclectic witches,' mostly for lack of a better term, Ledman joked. For them, the idea of being an eclectic witch is a spiritual practice combining ideas from numerous religions including Wicca, a form of modern paganism.

"It means I've taken a little from a lot of sources and brought it together," Ledman said. "That's what I work from. It's constantly changing as I get new information or a new way of thinking, that's added something or taken something away. I'm also more drawn to Wicca more than anything else."

Koyama grew up practicing Buddhism in a spiritual family. In fact, her family - mostly still in Japan - has a Buddhist temple that's been in the family for over 2,000 years. She said both Buddhism and Wicca religions are tied to the natural earth and are considered to be Pagan. Koyama adds that she finds being an eclectic witch to be very organic.

"It has to do with getting in touch with yourself and nature and the earth, and it makes you really aware," Koyama said. "I like it a lot and I enjoy practicing it, because it's a really mindful way of life...it's beautiful and very positive."

Instead of the more institutional belief systems that utilize buildings and have more regimented spiritual practices, the women said being an eclectic witch is more about meditation and being grateful for what you have.

"It's something as simple as saying 'thank you' and meaning the thank you," Ledman said.

She joked that no one is casting hexes on people.

Koyama looks to teach curious minds more about her beliefs.

She opened a new store in downtown Beloit called Nine Bells & Cat Tails earlier this year. The business, at 550 East Grand Ave., features an eccentric collection of items such as homemade tea leaves, jewelry, antiques, artwork done by local artists and books on witchcraft as well as spirituality, along with a plethora of other services including psychic readings, meditation classes and more.

Ledman, also known as Rhonda Morningstar, often will teach classes on meditation, reading tarot cards, spoon bending and more at the shop as well as in her home in Janesville.

"I've been an intuitive my whole life," Ledman said. "About 25 years ago I decided it was time to use it to benefit other people...I never saw it as anything special."

When she was in her 20s, Ledman made a comment about how someone was feeling. When her friend questioned how she could possibly know, she began to realize not everyone has the same level of intuition that she possesses. After that, she taught herself how to read tarot cards.

Koyama had a more organic transition to mystic world. In the Buddhist faith, readings are done every year by priests to forecast what the year ahead will look like.

While living in Las Vegas, Koyama took a class on reading tarot cards. Though the class, she became attracted to different ideas that aren't in Buddhism, such as utilizing crystals.

When Koyama moved to Beloit 10 years ago, she took one of Ledman's guided meditation classes.

"I felt really connected, because I felt really comfortable with her and I liked her style of practicing," Koyama said. "The way she practices her belief system runs alongside what I practice, and so she's been a really strong main guide for me through all of this."

Finding more like them

Through the years the pair have met other psychics, including Erin Pregont, of Milton.

Pregont describes herself as a psychic artist, combining her skills as an artist with her gifts as a psychic to draw most often the faces of departed loved ones or guides.

"A few years ago it became obvious to me I was doing something outside of the normal experience," Pregont said. "I've probably done it my whole life but haven't given it a thought until it was blatantly in my face."

That experience came a few years ago when she woke up to a woman screaming at her in the middle of the night. The first night she had thought she had dreamed the whole thing.

Eventually Pregont decided to talk to the spirit, which helped calm her down. Not sure what to think, Pregont spoke to her friend who identifies as a medium, and that friend convinced her it wasn't just in her imagination.

Though Pregont has seen other spirits, she's never seen that screaming woman again.

"Which is fine, because she was so upset. I think she knew I would be able to see her, and that's why she came," Pregont said. "I was talking to her to help her understand that she was dead. She needed help, and when I helped her she moved on. Some people just are lonely and want to talk to someone."

She first said her gifts scared her, but as she started seeing more spirits she realized they were mostly just lonely.

When she does readings, she starts out by seeing the face of whatever spirit has been called, then seeing their clothes and other details.

Honing the craft

Though not everyone has Pregont's artistic abilities, Ledman said anyone can learn to read tarot cards.

"The way I teach tarot cards is intuitively, and everyone is intuitive," Ledman said. "That's why (intuition) is called the sixth sense. It's just one more sense that we have that we use more than we realize."

Koyama said she enjoyed learning more about how to rely on her intuition instead of memorizing the meaning of symbols in Ledman's classes.

"Once she learned and guided me through how to trust my instincts it was way more accurate and way easier to read that way," Koyama said. "It's basically about trusting your gut."

She hopes her store will help unlock people's sixth sense. Personally, the businesses also connects art, music and spirituality.

Koyama is an piano instructor at Beloit College who also teaches private lessons and serves on the board of the Turtle Creek Chamber Orchestra. Her personal piano is front and center in her store.

"Playing the piano is spiritual for me. It's my outlet. It's my art form, so I won't be stopping that any time soon," Koyama said.

In addition to music, she also sells the work of local artists as one more way to help people.

The name Nine Bells & Cat Tails is as eclectic as the items and services she offers within. Koyama's lucky number is the number nine, and bells often have been seen as cleansing in many faiths. In fact, a concierge bell Koyama bought in college was one of the first items she bought for the store that she's been planning to open since childhood. And Koyama also loves cats.

Her beliefs and the services she offers may be a mystery to some people, which she said is part of the appeal.

"People are very curious about everything Wiccan," Koyama said. "I think they feel very comfortable here to find out more about it, so they're asking questions that they may be afraid to ask other places."

Nine Bells and Cat Tails is open noon-6 p.m. Tuesday through Thursday, noon-7 p.m. on Friday and 10 a.m.-3 p.m. on Saturday. The store is closed on Sunday and Monday. For more information, search Nine Bells & Cat Tails on Facebook.

## My reading

Admittedly, sitting down with Erin Pregont wasn't the first time I had done a psychic reading. Besides getting a tarot card reading from Rhonda Ledman the week before, I had done numerous tarot card and palm readings over the years. However, this was my first artist reading, which involved Pregont drawing (more often than not) a loved one. When she started drawing, for the longest time I had no idea who it was. As the man's face slowly came more into focus, it hit me: I had always been very creeped out by a portrait of my great-grandfather hanging in my aunt's house. It was one of those portraits that should've been a part of the plot of a "Scooby Doo" episode. I was convinced it was somehow alive and that the eyes of this man who looked like he was from a different time were following me.

As the identity of the drawing dawned on me, Erin said the man she was seeing laughed. Though I clearly had never met him, he and my great grandmother apparently thought I would get a kick out of seeing him one more time, Erin told me. After begging my aunt to send me a picture of the portrait after digging it out of her basement, I'm convinced it's him. I'm also no longer really creeped out by a man who seems to care for his family even beyond the grave. Don't take my word for it, though. See for yourself.