The Broom Closet: Coming Out as a Witch

Secrecy and Witchcraft

Back in the early days of modern witchcraft, covens required their members to take vows of secrecy. There was a reason for this: in the UK, where Gerald Gardner founded the Gardnerian Wiccan tradition, claiming to be a witch was illegal based on a law from 1735. While that law was overturned in 1951, many witches still choose to keep their beliefs private.

Witches who don’t openly express their beliefs do so for a variety of reasons. A young witch still living in his parent’s home might be afraid of making his family angry by going against their beliefs. A witch might tell her close friends and family, but keep quiet at work for fear of being persecuted. Or a witch might simply prefer not to discuss their beliefs openly with others. And there is nothing wrong with any of those things. By its very nature,
witchcraft allows the individual practitioner the freedom to decide how they are going to practice. Persecution against witches in the modern day certainly does happen.

However, regardless of whether a witch is “in” or “out” of the proverbial broom closet, it is valuable to look at the benefits and risks, the process of revealing your beliefs to different people in your life and how to deal with misinformation and persecution.

Should You, or Shouldn’t You?

Ultimately, deciding whether or not you want to reveal yourself as a witch openly is a personal decision that you have to make for yourself. Remember that you may decide to be open about your beliefs in some areas of your life and not in others. For convenience, we will divide it into family, friends and work/school. However, it is also possible that you might choose to discuss being a witch with only certain family members or certain friends, so these general categories are not absolute.

As you consider your own unique situation, you might want to add a little structure to your decision making process. One way of doing this is to make a sheet of paper for the question, such as whether to come out as a witch to your family, and make three columns labeled “Positive,” “Negative” and “Neutral.” Consider the possible outcomes to coming out to your family and assign them to the appropriate column. When you have thought of all of the possible outcomes, look at the sheet and see how it weighs out. The important thing is not how many outcomes in each category, but the weight of the specific outcomes.

To get you thinking, let’s list some of the benefits and risks associated with revealing yourself as a witch. This list is by no means exhaustive, it is just some possible examples to help you start thinking about your own situation.
Benefits & Risks to Coming Out as a Witch to Family

✿ Benefit: not having to conceal your beliefs and hide your alter when family visits.
✿ Risk: angering family members who have other religious beliefs. In extreme cases, this could lead to estrangements within the family.
✿ Benefit: being able to share your practice with family members and include them if they desire.
✿ Risk: causing problems at the holidays.
✿ Benefit: teaching family members about witchcraft to help them to a more open mindset.
✿ Risk: becoming the source of jokes or ridicule regarding your beliefs.
✿ Benefit: being more confident in your family.
✿ Risk: having family attempt to convert or “save” you. For underage witches, this is a particular concern as they may be forbidden to practice their beliefs or have their magickal tools confiscated.

Benefits & Risks to Coming Out as a Witch to Friends

✿ Benefit: being free to share your thoughts without having to censor yourself.
✿ Risk: causing friends with different beliefs to end their friendship.
✿ Benefit: finding out who your true friends are by revealing the truth.
✿ Risk: feeling lonely and isolated if others are not accepting of your beliefs.

Benefits & Risks to Coming Out as a Witch at Work

✿ Benefit: not having to make up excuses to take the Sabbat days off work.
Risk: being discriminated against by supervisors who do not approve of your beliefs.
Benefit: making your workplace more open and accepting of different religions.
Risk: becoming the target of gossip or slander because of your beliefs.

Dealing with Your Family

If you decide to come out as a witch to your family, you will want to put some thought into how you go about it. Declaring yourself a witch as your Great Aunt Mary passes you the gravy over Christmas dinner is usually not the best tactic.

Planning
Plan a neutral time for the discussion. You don’t want to choose a day where the focus of the family should be on someone else, so family member’s birthdays and other parties for specific people should be avoided. Likewise, you don’t want to have this discussion on a day your family traditionally reserves for celebration, like Christmas or New Year. Let your family know that you have something you want to discuss with them ahead of time so they won’t feel ambushed.

Before sitting down to talk with your family, plan what you are going to say and think about the questions they are likely to ask you. It is a good idea to write out some notes. Consider how you will open the conversation and how much detail you will give. Think about how you will respond to questions about magick, spells, what happens when you die and what you believe versus the prevailing religion of the family. Be prepared to answer the concerns your family might have based on misinformation about witchcraft.

During the Discussion
As you actually have this discussion with your family, it is very important that you remain calm. You may encounter anger or fear from family members, depending on their personalities and religious beliefs. Remember that what you have told them probably comes as a big surprise, so give them a chance to digest the information, even if they don’t seem to be digesting it well. The worst thing you can do at this point is to become visibly angry and start shouting back. Regardless of what is said, you will appear to be out of control and your beliefs will be an easy target of blame. Keep your cool, and speak in a normal tone of voice.
If others are yelling, do not raise your voice to talk over them, just keep talking in a normal voice so they must quiet down to hear what you are saying.

When you field questions from your family, it is a good idea to talk about what you believe rather than what you don’t believe. For example, if someone asks, “So you worship Satan instead of God now?” You don’t want to answer “Witchcraft isn’t about Satan at all.” Rather, you should explain your specific beliefs. So you might say something like, “As a witch, I believe in the cycle of life and death that plays out in nature. I believe in the God and the Goddess as opposing and complementary forces of the universe.” Prove to your family that concerns of Satanism are unfounded by not even mentioning Satan at all. Another common line of questioning in these discussions revolves around morality. For this, you can answer questions by explaining how your beliefs guide you in the same direction as other religions.

In addition to anger, it is also possible you might have other reactions. The best reaction is obviously one in which your family is supportive of your beliefs. You could also have a very quiet reaction in which there is little positive or negative response to your announcement. In that case, your family may need time to consider what you have told them or they may be unsure about how they feel.

**After the Discussion**

No matter how the actual discussion goes, how you handle yourself afterwards is important. For family members who are upset or angry, they may be watching you to see if your behavior proves the negative feelings they have. For family members who were very quiet, they may be waiting to see whether you seem strange or different after finding out about your beliefs.
You should remember that it is likely you will be discussing your beliefs on more than just the “big discussion” day. Your family members may have individual questions for you, so be open to receiving them. You may want to point them in the direction of certain books that you have read and connect to or books that are designed for family members of witches. When Someone You Love is Wiccan by Carl McColman is a good option, as is The Truth About Witchcraft Today by Scott Cunningham. If your family is receptive, you could bring them with you to a witchcraft event that is open to the public, so they can get a better idea of what it is about.

Dealing with Your Friends

Friends and family are very different groups of people. Coming out as a witch to your friends is probably less risky than coming out to family and work colleagues for most people, but that doesn’t mean it is unimportant.

If you want to reveal your beliefs to your friends, it probably isn’t necessary to sit down with all of them at once. Rather than the “big discussion” for family, consider having smaller discussions. If your circle of friends talks among themselves frequently, you may need to ask those to whom you talk to wait before mentioning it to others so you avoid a situation where a close friend learns of your beliefs from someone who isn’t you. If you have a small group of close friends, you may want to sit down over a drink with them to let them know about your beliefs all at once so that there is no confusion.

In the same way as preparing for a family discussion, you should think about what you want to tell your friends in advance. Consider the words you want to use and think about the questions they are likely to ask. This will give you confidence when you answer their questions and they will be reassured by your confidence.

In many families, it is assumed that a family member will follow the family’s traditional religious beliefs, however, this is not true in most friendships. Therefore, you may want to reveal your beliefs slowly. Perhaps by wearing some jewelry with a pentagram or by not hiding your altar when a friend visits, you can open up a discussion.

If you have been very private about your beliefs, you may encounter friends who are hurt or confused that you waited so long to tell them you practice witchcraft.
In these cases, focus on the fact that you are telling them at this time because of how important they are to you and that you trust them with this valuable piece of information about you.

Friends who are very religious or who you met in a situation involving religion may have a hard time understanding this aspect of your life. Try to reassure them that your differing beliefs do not impact your desire to be their friend. You will also want to assure them that you are not trying to convert them to your way of thinking and that proselytizing is not something that practitioners of magick engage in.

Dealing with Work/School

Revealing yourself as a witch at your place of business is very different from coming out as a witch to your friends and family. You are protected against discrimination at work on the basis of your religion, however, you should practice care if and when you let your beliefs come into the open. Work is not really the best place for heavy demonstrations of any religious beliefs, so for many witches, coming out at work is really a matter of no longer making an issue secret rather than telling everyone your beliefs. You don’t need to sit down and have a big discussion with your co-workers, you can just allow the information to come out naturally.

When you are requesting days off work to celebrate a Sabbat, you can give your reasoning openly. You can wear jewelry that indicates your beliefs and allow other signs to become visible. If you are asked questions about your plans for Christmas, you can answer honestly. Being open about your beliefs at work will likely result in some questions. Answer questions completely, but remember not to go into unnecessary detail unless it is requested. When your cubicle-mate asks about a Goddess pendant, give them an answer that takes less than a minute unless they ask for more. Long answers may come off as inappropriate or as though you are trying to convert someone.
If you are in school, you can treat coming out as a witch at school in much the same way as someone would at work. Just like work, school is not a place where you need to discuss your religious beliefs every day. However, you can choose to be honest about your beliefs when it comes up naturally. Teachers may ask you questions to find out about your beliefs and also to ensure you are not involved in anything dangerous.

Dealing with Misinformation

One of the things that is both good and bad about coming out as a witch is that everyone who knows you are a witch now has their own personal expert on witchcraft—you!

You will likely find yourself answering a number of questions about your beliefs, and your answers are important, because they will shape how the person asking them sees you and other witches. Every time you have the chance to clear up some of the misinformation about witchcraft, you have the chance to help other witches. After all, who doesn’t get sick of hearing witchcraft equated with Satanism.
To help you field questions and comments about witchcraft that are rooted in misinformation, we are going to look at some of the most common things you will hear about witchcraft and suggest the best way to counter them with solid information. The specific response you give to a question or comment may differ from these examples based on your own personal beliefs.

What do witches believe?
This question is a tricky one, and you will want to make sure that you explain that different witches will answer this question differently. One way of explaining the different traditions of witchcraft is to point out how the different sects of Christianity are all variations on a set of shared beliefs. When you explain what you believe as a witch, you will want to at least discuss what you believe in terms of deities, the afterlife, magic and morality.

How is witchcraft different from Satanism?
This is perhaps one of the most frustrating questions a witch can be asked. One option, when asked this question, is to ask a question in return, “what do you think Satanism is?” Many people do not actually have any concept of what Satanism is, beyond worshiping the devil. Most witches don’t know any more about Satanism that regular folks, since we don’t study it and have nothing to do with it. In actual fact, Satanism is very much based on Christianity. It parodies Christian rituals, symbols and beliefs by inverting them. After you have established this, you can explain that witchcraft is not based on Christianity or Satanism. Witchcraft is based on the natural world, and it draws from older pagan beliefs to create rituals. Very few witches believe in Satan. Witches, unlike Satanists, believe that Christianity is one of many valid religions and are tolerant of other beliefs rather than contemptuous.

That necklace looks like the symbol of Satan...
Pentacles can be mistaken for a symbol of Satan. A five-pointed star cannot be traced back through time to a single source, and it is a symbol that has been used in many cultures. The pagan understanding of the pentacle goes back to its use in Ancient Greece, where it was used to represent the elements. The Satanic pentacle is inverted so that two points are at the top and one point is at the bottom. The Satanic pentacle is often inscribed with the image of
a goat. The Satanic pentacle based on older Christian symbolism of the pentacle as a means of protection. Because the symbol was used by Satanists, it lost popularity with Christians overall. So, when people ask about a pentacle, it is necessary to explain that your pentacle is very different from a Satanic pentacle.

Do you cast spells? Can you make it rain gold coins or guess what card I’m holding?
Explaining that you cast magick spells is likely to cause some confusion and scorn with others. Those who are confused may think that you are claiming to perform stage magic like a magician. For them, you will need to offer some clarification and explain exactly what you do mean. For those who are scornful or disbelieving, do not try to convince them. Instead, simply explain that spells are very similar to prayer in other faiths.

Do you sacrifice animals?
The funny thing with this question is that many witches choose to be vegetarians. When asked a question like this, it is a good opportunity to explain that witches do not willingly harm others because we believe that negative energies come back to us. You may also want to let them know that there are some ingredients used in spells, such as dragon’s blood and crowfoot, but that these ingredients are not in any way made from animals. Another source of confusion may be the athame or ritual knife used by many witches. Explain that this is a tool used in rituals, not something that is used to hurt or kill.

Is it true that witches run around naked and have orgies?
While it may be tempting to answer this question with a quick and firm, “no,” it is best to strive for complete information when you are trying to clear up misconceptions. So, you can answer this question first in terms of your own practice and then explain that some witches hold rituals in the nude, or “skyclad,” to be more closely connected with the Divine through the natural world. You can also explain that some practices do have rituals that show symbolic sex as a union between the God and the Goddess, this is not the same as an orgy. In general, witches tend to be more open about sex than other religions. As long as the involved parties are consenting and of age according to the laws wherever they live, most witches consider it to be a personal matter. People asking this question may be having a hard time picturing how
you practice witchcraft, so explain things to them. Tell them what a normal ritual or a celebration looks like.

What is the difference between a witch, a Wiccan and a pagan?
When you get this question, you might want to pay the asker a compliment, because they have been paying attention if they’ve asked such a good question. So, pagans are those who have polytheistic beliefs, that is to say they believe in more than one god or goddess. Some pagans are witches, and others are not. Wicca is a pagan religion and there are many different traditions of Wicca and most Wiccans consider themselves witches. However, not all witches are Wiccans.

Aren’t you worried about going to Hell?
This question is one that isn’t terribly hard to answer, but you should take care when you answer it. This is a loaded question and it may be coming from someone who wants to try to frighten you or make you feel badly about your beliefs. A good way of answering is to explain that as a witch you do not believe in Hell, so it is not something you worry about. You may also want to add that your beliefs help to guide you to do good things and put positive energy into the world.

Who is in charge of the witches?
There is no governing authority for witches. You can explain to those who are looking for some sort of equivalent to the Pope that witches tend to be more open in how they practice. If you are a part of a lineaged tradition that has specific texts, you can explain about them. If you are part of a coven with a high priest and priestess, you can explain how that works.
You aren’t a real witch unless you joint a coven…
Watch out for people who attempt to define your beliefs under their terms. This kind of comment is designed to raise your ire. The best way to handle it is to brush it off. Don’t attempt to convince anyone that you can be a solitary witch. You know who you are, and that is enough. If you feel the person is making the comment from general confusion, you can explain to them how solitary practice works and even direct them to one of the books that has been written about solitary practice.

Do you hate (God? Men? Christians?)
Some people assume that being a witch must be a response to something. They wonder if you are angry at God and it has caused you to turn away from him. They wonder if you are turning to a belief system that traditionally attracts many feminists because you hate men (this is doubly wrong since feminists don’t hate men either!) They wonder if you are just rebelling against Christianity. The best way to deal with these concerns is to talk about your beliefs and show the listener that they have nothing to do with hate.

How can you have a moral compass if you don’t follow the bible?
For some, it is hard to accept the idea that it is possible to be a good person without following the bible. Questions like these are tricky because they usually show that the person has a prejudice against other systems of belief. A good way of approaching this is to explain about the Rede and the Law of Return and then show how those things lead you to actions that are good and moral under any system of belief. So, for instance, you could explain that while one of the Ten Commandments tells a Christian not to steal, you know that same moral truth from the Rede, which tells you not to do harm. Try to find the common ground and you will help the person asking this question to broaden their own world view.