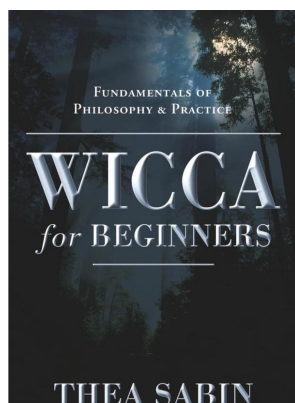
A close-up portrait of a woman with long, wavy, reddish-brown hair and light green eyes. She is smiling warmly at the camera. She is wearing a colorful, patterned top and a necklace with green, pink, and black beads. The background is a light-colored, textured surface.

INTERVIEW BY
ROBERT SCOTT
PHOTO BY DINEA DE PHOTO

BETTER TO LIGHT A CANDLE

Thea Sabin

ON WHY SHE WROTE A BOOK FOR NEWCOMERS TO THE CRAFT — AS WELL AS ONE FOR TEACHERS.



Author, editor, and British Traditional Witch Thea Sabin holds a master's degree in education and has taught for more than two decades. She has been a practicing Wiccan since her teens. She recently wrote two books for Llewellyn, *Wicca for Beginners* and *A Teaching Handbook for Wiccans & Pagans*. We got her to sit down and explain herself late last fall.

W&P *I'm sorry, Thea – but I really have to start here – what possessed you to write a book for beginners? Let me be less snarky and just ask: how did your first book Wicca for Beginners come about?*

THEA I would love to tell you that the Goddess appeared to me on a mountaintop and told me to write a beginning Wicca book, but the unglamorous truth is that I wrote it because Llewellyn (the publisher) asked me to. They have a “for beginners” series that didn’t have a book about Wicca in it.

I’ll admit – I wasn’t excited about the idea at first. I figured there was little that hadn’t already been said, probably more eloquently than I could. But as I thought about it more, I realized I’d been given a wonderful opportunity to create a book that presented information in the way that I personally teach it to my students. At that time I was using bits and pieces of many other books with my students, but this project gave me the opportunity to structure information in a way that made the most sense to me as a teacher.

W&P *How did you decide what was essential to teach to the complete beginner?*


THEA I wrote it with the idea of creating a foundation of basic history and philosophy, and then layering concepts in a logical progression. I was aiming to be positive and empowering, especially for people who might not have a community of their own. (I have zero patience for the cattiness that sometimes plagues our community!) I tried to be unbiased about specific traditions and beliefs because I think critical thinking is absolutely essential to being Wiccan, and I want beginners to make their own choices. I also added a little humor. I’m a firm believer that spiritual growth requires both mirth and reverence. And also, as the estimable Mary Poppins says, “a spoonful of sugar makes the medicine go down.”

W&P *I couldn’t help but notice the prominence of ethics in the book. It shows up really quite early for a beginner’s guide. Why do you place so much emphasis on this topic?*


THEA I believe it is essential for students to analyze and really think through what it means to be a person, and to be a Wiccan. People come to Wicca from all kinds of places, including many from families, religions, or social groups with strong ethical guidelines that everyone is supposed to know and follow. Shifting to a new paradigm such as Wicca gives these newcomers an opportunity to examine (or re-examine) what they feel is right and wrong for themselves.

Wicca is a challenging path, not least because it doesn’t demand on a book of hard-and-fast rules that offer absolute certainty. Students must be responsible for themselves and their own actions, and that requires critical thinking that some may not be accustomed to in a spiritual path. I don’t want my students to abdicate their power to fit into my group or into the Wiccan community as a whole; I want them to think for themselves. Personal responsibility and self-understanding are two primary themes of my teaching, and ethical exploration is one of the best ways to emphasize that.

Self-exploration is very empowering. As I wrote in the book, “the Wiccan Rede says ‘do what you will,’ not ‘do what you want.’” Understanding your ethical principles is a big step toward working your will or acting in service of your inner purpose. It also helps to know yourself before you try to know the gods. Ethics is an area in which beginning Wiccans (and those of us who have been around for a while, too) can begin to understand the power of Wicca as a spiritual path.


 *What traits are important to success for students who want to learn about Wicca?*

THEA Everyone who teaches Wicca or leads a group probably has a different answer to this question, but for me the most important trait is being open to change and transformation, being willing to speak their minds and listen to others do the same, and commitment to doing the work. If a student manages to find the sweet spot between a healthy skepticism and a sense of wonder, that's even better.


 *So, having succeeded with your "beginners" book, you extended your foray into Wiccan education by writing a book about how to teach Wicca. Wasn't that jumping out of the frying pan into the fire?*

THEA [Laughs] I can see that it looks that way! However, knowing *what* to teach and knowing *how* to teach are two completely different things. Many Wiccans and Pagans know a great deal about their subject matter, have no idea how to pass it on to others effectively. When I started teaching Wicca, I was clumsy and unprepared, despite my best efforts I did a terrible job.

In the years since then I've been working in educational publishing, teaching, and managing e-learning and instructional design projects. With *A Teaching Handbook* I hoped to put some of what I've learned into a resource that would help new Wiccan and Pagan teachers. I was also motivated by my own students, some of whom were getting ready to teach themselves by this time, so I was thinking a lot about what I wanted them to know before they took on students of their own.

 *Is *A Teaching Handbook* based solely on your own experience as a teacher?*


THEA Goddess forbid! The Wiccan and Pagan communities are very diverse, so there's no one way to teach that would work across the board, and I wouldn't presume to tell people they had to teach in a certain way. I tried to describe techniques and tools that could be modified for different circumstances rather than a specific teaching methodology. I also interviewed other teachers in order to make the picture of teaching I was presenting more well-rounded and I'm very grateful to the people who allowed me to interview them for the book.

 *Is *A Teaching Handbook* geared towards personal teachers, online groups, or all of the above?*

THEA I hope that the book is equally useful for all kinds of learning environments. Personally, I am very much in favor of using technology for teaching — after all, I help build educational websites for a living — but I am even more in favor of using the right tool for the job. Sometimes that is a technological tool, but sometimes it isn't.

It's important to look at all the variables when choosing whether to use technology. Questions such as "will it help me meet your class objectives," "will help me reach more students," and "does it work with my students' learning styles?" are essential in these decisions. Online teaching can be a great option for people who don't have face-to-face access to a teacher, those who want to learn at their own speed in their own time, and

for teachers to reach many more students. But, as Patrick McCollum pointed out when I interviewed him for the book, sometimes nothing is better than leaving the technology behind and getting out into nature. For some things, like teaching energy work, it's close to essential to have other people in the room with you. It's hard to feel people's energy over a webcam. I've also learned from experience is that even motivated, self-directed online learners retain things better when they've discussed them with others in a group. The social aspects of teaching and learning are really important.

 *What other advice do you have for Wiccan teachers. Can you describe ways to avoid burnout?*

THEA Well, I'm afraid that my advice would be *not* to do what I do! I've always been one of those "eat your vegetables before you have dessert" kind of people, but the problem with that is I get hung up on the veggies and rarely get to dessert.

Last year I truly burned out: between work, writing the teaching book, running my student group, and a back injury, I was just *done*. I scaled back at work, dissolved my student group — which was very difficult — and cut out a lot of other commitments. Then I found myself standing at the edge of a cliff of sorts. I didn't have to do anything for anyone else and I didn't know what to do with myself. So I decided to get back to basics. Eat better food; exercise more; and rejuvenate my personal spiritual practice. Plus spend time with good friends, drink a little wine, laugh as much as possible. I still have a way to go to crawl out of the burnout hole, but I'm making progress.

W I know of groups which make your teaching book “required reading” in their clergy training program. Did you expect that to happen?

THEA I have known for a while that people use the beginner book in training, but I wasn’t I didn’t know anyone was using the teaching book for training, so yes, that surprises me. But I’m glad! I hope it helps them. It was much, much harder to write than the beginner book for many reasons, so it would be very gratifying — and satisfying — to know that it had done some good.

Writing the teaching book was more of a catalyst in my life than the beginner book. I’ve also learned a lot from talking with people who have read the book. It never ceases to surprise me which parts they find most useful and which they disagree with. But I think that’s been the real plus of having written both books — the opportunity to talk with a wide variety of people I never would have met otherwise about the material and use those conversations and learnings to inform my own practice.

W *We have talked about the “Beginner,” and the “Teacher” in Paganism, so now I’m moved to ask you to share your opinions about the role of Pagan clergy.*

THEA Clergy is a word that means many various things to people in the Wiccan and Pagan communities. Some Wiccan traditions consider all initiated members to be clergy, whereas other paths require members to go through designated training if they wish to fulfill that role. I wrote a little about clergy in the teaching book because these roles overlap

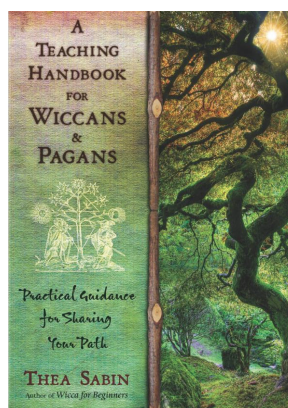
a lot. Both teachers and clergy are asked to mentor others, help handle spiritual and emotional problems, and be role models and leaders. If you act as a teacher, it’s quite likely that at some point you will act as clergy, and vice-versa.

W *What do you do to unwind from your very busy schedule?*

THEA My favorite thing to do to unwind is travel; I love wandering around places I’ve never been before. I am somewhat obsessed with obscure movies and I’m pretty sure some of the films I’ve made my husband sit through are grounds for divorce in some states! I love art and music and find both essential to maintaining my sense of well-being. My husband and I are both animal lovers, so when I really need to calm down and shake something off, I spend time with my hubby and our menagerie. Especially our parrot, who is hilarious and delightful and who probably would be ruling the world if she wasn’t terrified of my exercise ball.

W *Is there anything else you would just generally like to share with the community at large?*

THEA There have been a lot of discussion lately about “the nones” — people who claim no religious affinity. Many of these people haven’t turned their backs on spirituality; they’ve just turned away from organized religion in favor of more unconventional ways of interacting with deity.



We live in a time and place where we have some freedom to create rituals, traditions, and relationships with deity on our own terms and in a way that people who went before us might not have had. One of the underlying themes I tried to get across in

both of my books is that if this kind of spiritual journey speaks to you, you should go for it. Build your own relationship to deity. Do your own spiritual exploration. Make your own mistakes. Have your own epiphanies. Delve into the mysteries on your own terms. Teachers, mentors, circles, clergy, and books are very helpful in pointing out the path, but the best spiritual discoveries are the ones we make for ourselves.

Our heart’s desire, as Dorothy discovers at the end of the *Wizard of Oz*, is no further away than our own backyard, and we have power within us all along. But sometimes it takes a few flying monkeys and a horse of a different color to help us believe it.

W *What new projects do you think might be in the works for you?*

THEA I don’t know, and I think that’s probably a good thing. My best guess is that there might be a backpacking trip in Italy in my future. I do have a partially finished (non-Pagan) manuscript, but mostly I’m looking forward to getting outside, digging my toes back into the earth, and reconnecting. ♦