

Hi! I'm Carol Garr, a Wiccan priestess for 20 years and a volunteer in the AZ state prison system for more than 13. I serve both on the AZ DOC Religious Advisory Committee and as an active volunteer working directly with inmates, and have co-authored a book: *Enchantment Encumbered: the Study and Practice of Wicca in Restricted Environments*.

Wicca is a nature-based, life affirming, religion with a pantheistic worldview. Deity is ubiquitous. Everything contains its spark; humans, animals, plants, stones. We are all brothers and sisters, all children of our Mother Goddess and the Lord of the cosmic Dance of life, death, and rebirth. Regardless of the color of clothing or skin, or even number of legs, wings, fins or whatever we are each related, and interconnected.

In my years in prison ministry I have seen heartwarming changes in those who embrace this life path, though prison politics sometimes limit expression of their worldview, I have seen inmates learn tolerance, respect, self-control, and personal responsibility. They learn that, no matter what they've done in the past, that from this moment on they will make choices for which only they are responsible. No one else is to blame; no one else can take credit.

Prisoners are prone to embracing their crime as their identity. It affects the way they view themselves, hurting their chances for a positive change. Wicca teaches them to embrace that spark of deity within, to fan that flame to a light that will guide their path. What they have done cannot be undone. We have no means to absolve them of the karmic balance that is a natural law of cause and effect. We can, however, counsel them to add positive things in their karmic ledger, whether offering a smile instead of a curse, treating others with fairness and respect, or just seeking to promote harmony and goodwill as best they can. When one truly honors all life it's a lot harder to re-offend.

I encourage them to speak of their offenses only in the past tense. Wicca believes words have power, so to say "I am ????" will help make it so. Make those positive aspirations! They set personal goals, make plans to improve themselves, and look to the God/dess within, and Their manifestations all around us, for guidance and inspiration. Positive affirmations are common in many faiths, including ours.

I have seen men cry as they apologized to the spirits of murdered victims. I experienced the peace that a lifer showed as he embraced impending death during a passing rite we did just after he stopped dialysis. I feel blessed. One of our releasees was once on death row, but his sentence was commuted to life with the possibility of release. I worked with him inside for years. He spoke of what a nasty and hateful person he'd been, and how he deserved his sentence, but that he was no longer that same man. And the energy he gave off supported that. After being incarcerated for 32 years he was granted parole. Now, out almost 3 years, he's had the same job for most of that time, has a vehicle, a stable living arrangement, and is a contributing member of society. It can happen. Learning to find the sacred within, living with the heartbeat of Mother Earth as one's guide, can affect positive change.

Wicca describes the way we look at life. Our connections with the receptive (feminine) and projective (masculine) forces of Nature, and our intimate communication with the powers of Air, Fire, Water, Earth, and Spirit are the essence of our worldview. Yet we are polytheists, so it is silly to think that our pantheon is the only valid one. Therefore we teach that whatever spiritual path makes one a better person, which speaks to an individual's soul, is the right faith for that human being. Followers of all religions, or of none, are all our kin.

And that's where we come in. A good chaplain is a haven in the storm of inmate lives, aiding them in their search for, and study of, their faith of choice. We offer hope, comfort, and acceptance through the love of the Source of Life in whatever form a prisoner sees Him or Her. We promote positive change, self-respect, and fairness to all. May the powers of life guide each of us, in brotherhood, in this vital task.