

The Coyote Ridge Festival
June 11, 2011
reported by Ashleen O'Gaea

On June 11th, something really important happened: the Coyote Ridge Pagan/Heathen Festival, the first-ever pan-Pagan *prison* festival. The event was organized at Coyote Ridge Correction Center by Rev. Kirk Thomas (ADF's Archdruid). ADF Druids Rev. Ian Corrigan and Rev. Sue Parker, along with the Troth's Patricia Lafayllve and I, were there for Druid, Ásatrú, and Wiccan inmates. From 8 a.m. to a little after 9 p.m., we facilitated workshops and rituals with men of our faiths. We got to meet and converse with several Protestant prison chaplains. And we were treated to a concert by Revs. Ian and Sue, who together are the duo Awen.

The Wiccan men talked about ritual and ethics and magic, and we got to chant a bit, too. Our ritual celebrated Litha a few days early, and left everyone with a blessing written on a crepe-paper ray of sunshine. The group ritual toward the end of the day included elements of Wicca, Ásatrú and Druidry, and modeled the truth that we *can* all just get along. In his blog, Rev. Thomas called the event "intense, but fulfilling," and I think that pretty much says it for all of us. (Thanks, Kirk, not only for organizing this, but also for successfully herding all us two-legged "cats.")

There were lots of wonderful things about this festival: the support and cooperation we had from host chaplain Rev. Eric Askren and Joenne McGreer, the woman in charge of religious and family programs for all of Washington State's prisons, was awesome. The open-mindedness of the chaplains from various facilities throughout the state was impressive, and much appreciated. The Pagan and Heathen clergy shared friendship with Kirk, and knew each other by reputation, but hadn't met in person before, and that was a welcome opportunity. Revs. Ian, Sue, and Patricia had no previous involvement of any kind with prison ministry, and that they were willing to dare this experience is beyond admirable.

For me, it was an extra special experience in two ways in particular. First, as MEM's writing priestess and co-author with Carol Garr of *Enchantment Encumbered* I've been involved in Pagan prison ministry for 11 years now, but I'd never been "in" before. Coyote Ridge Correctional Center is unusual in allowing its inmates as much religious gear as it does, but it gives my mind's eye a place to start when I try to see where the inmates who write to me are coming from. Second, it was a powerful affirmation that our Pagan prison ministries, however limited they must be, are Meaningful, with a

capital M. One inmate at CRCC put it this way (and I'm paraphrasing, but pretty accurately): "Today was the first time since I've been in prison that I've been able to relax. Usually there's so much hostility thrown at us that we have to watch our backs and we can't really focus on our studies or our rituals. But today was different. Today I felt like a normal person."

Anyone involved with prison ministry has heard, countless times, that inmates *aren't* normal people, that they're criminals, they're wicked, they're violators of moral codes, etc. Well, my responses to those comments in order are, yes they are, yes, not necessarily, and who isn't? But rather than argue those points, I'll paraphrase again, this time remembering what my colleague and co-author Lady Garr has to say about it. "Most inmates are going to be released one day, and it behooves us to help them become better people, and show them that there are guidelines and resources to keep them on track when they do get out." The guys and gals I write to tell me that hearing from me in letters am helpful; the guys at CRCC told me in person that even a few hours of my time was precious to them.

I'll tell you what. The work inmates are doing, with pretty good support at Coyote Ridge but against considerable resistance in lots of institutions, is precious to *us*, too. A lot of us think that prison ministry is scary, and yes, I guess it can be -- but so are lots of new experiences. I think that as clergy, we have a responsibility to model the growth we expect of our students and dedicants (congregations?), to take a step or two out of our own comfort zones now and again, and see our worlds from different perspectives. I think we have obligated ourselves to our Gods to face our fears and move beyond them, especially when Elders we can trust -- in all Pagan and Heathen Trads -- tell us it will benefit the community as a whole.

As far as any of us know, this was the first event of its kind ever, anywhere -- and I hope the energy it raised in those of us who were there will work as an encouragement spell to interest our colleagues in supporting Pagan and Heathen prison ministry. In ten years or so, I'd like us all to be able to look back and say that the Coyote Ridge Festival was where a flourishing nation-wide set of Heathen/Pagan prison ministry programs got its kick-start. Hailsa, huzzah, and blessed be!