

- THE WILD HUNT -

MODERN PAGAN NEWS & COMMENTARY

The Life and Death of Deana Reed

Terence P Ward — March 15, 2016 — 13 Comments

ROSENDALE, N.Y. — Not every Pagan has written books, given lectures, or led life-altering rituals. Most are ordinary people, expressing their faith in simple ways as they live their lives far from the spotlight that follows the luminaries of the Pagan communities. Such was the life of Deana Reed, whose loved ones approached this reporter after her death and burial to tell her story.



Deana Reed [Courtesy Gene Santagada]

Reed and her sister, Regina Chiarello, grew up next to one of the many apple orchards which once dominated the Hudson Valley in New York. Her sister recalls the cloud that would sometimes follow tractors working among the trees, and come into their house without warning. The toxins which were used to maintain those pristine apples are today the reason why it is so difficult to re-purpose old orchard lands; the top several inches of soil often must be removed and replaced because it's irrevocably poisoned.

While that's understood in 2016, the consequences of those chemicals on human life was not nearly so well considered years ago. Reed believed that her chronic health problems began due to that exposure, and Chiarello agrees.

Deana Reed suffered from Crohn's disease, an inflammatory condition that can affect any part of the gastrointestinal tract from mouth to anus, and impact virtually every inch of it, as was her

case. Chiarello tearfully recalled the sores that would erupt in her sister's mouth, and the "hours of injections every month" to try to stem the ravages of the disease. The side effects of those treatments were often as bad as the condition itself, she said.

Crohn's disease caused Reed to be in near-constant pain, but it did not stop her from living her life, especially when it came to caring for other creatures. Her longtime boyfriend Gene Santagada is full of stories about that compassion, from her willingness to climb a rickety ladder even when crippled by her disease so that she could fill bird feeders, to the time she saved the life of a crow that he didn't believe would have lasted another hour without her help. "Its head was flopping," he said, and it looked like its neck was broken. Hundreds of crows were gathered around the house when she brought it inside, standing as if in witness to their comrade's fall.

Reed got advice from a bird specialist who was too far away to come and help in person, and by the next morning the bird's head seemed to be atop its shoulders properly again. Not long after, a state wildlife specialist was able to release it into the sky.

Chiarello said that her sister was a devotee of Bast, and one day a feral cat that she had fed from a distance came to the door, crying, ahead of a storm. "That cat never came near," Chiarello said, "but I could see that his face was cut up." Reed ordered them to trap it, and the veterinarian who examined the cat discovered it was both injured and riddled with parasites.

"It was like a M*A*S*H unit," said Santagada. "The vet said that cat would not have survived the storm." Another vet in the same office ended up adopting the cat, who became known as Ulysses, and now he spends his days curled up by a wood stove.

In the [eulogy](#) he gave to his lover of 27 years, Santagada said,

In our belief system, cat's spiritual journeys through life are somewhat similar to our own. Many of us believe it is the Great Egyptian Goddess Bast who can grant a cat up to 9 Sacred Lives, but when those lives are all expended, or Bast decides to grant no more, the soul of the cat is transported to Bast's Temple, where all the cat souls gather before Bast. There, they tell the Goddess about the humans who were kind and good to them. Goddess Bast, over the years you must have gotten an ear-full about Deana!

Environmentally conscious to a fault, Reed had been excited by the prospect of a green burial since first hearing of the concept ten years ago. At the time, however, no nearby cemetery offered such interments, so she and Santagada always kept their ear to the ground in the hopes that this would change. Neither of them was aware that the [Rosendale Cemetery](#), less than an hour's drive away, had started offering natural burial plots until after Reed's passing.

Santagada became horrified by standard burial practices as he researched alternatives. "It's not the formaldehyde," he said. "It's the other chemicals that they mix in with it," and then inject into the deceased through existing body cavities.

"They even embalm you before cremation," added Chiarello, eager to share a fact which had stunned her. Cremation is an alternative that many people consider when natural burial is not an option, but their research suggested it was not in any way an environmentally preferable choice. According to Santagada, in addition to the embalming, the cremation process can take up to two days, releasing toxins into the air all the while.

Cremation "is the least environmentally sensitive way, the total antithesis of what Deana wanted," said Santagada. "Her whole life, she felt like she was the victim of chemicals and drugs."

No such artificiality followed her body into the ground. The natural burial rules at Rosendale Cemetery not only don't permit embalming, but also disallow artificial fibers in the burial clothing. "If her shirt had plastic buttons, we'd have to remove them," Santagada said. Interment is either done in a pine box built in the tongue-and-groove method, or simply on a plank with a shroud.



Hudson Valley, New York [Photo Credit: Tin Brook / Flickr]

According to Dick Hermance, president of board of the Rosendale Cemetery, where Reed was the first to receive a green burial, the rules are based on those of the Green Burial Council, with only a few modifications. "We had requests from people to dig their own graves, and at first we were all for it, because it would save us the work," he said, as green graves must be dug by hand. "We opted to dig them ourselves for insurance reasons, but we do allow people to throw a few shovelfuls of dirt in," he explained.

The natural section has both field and forest sections, Hermance said, but all the plots so far sold have been among the trees. Chiarello was struck by how Reed's funerary procession led participants far beyond the rows of headstones until finally they were "stepping over tree roots and rocks until we got to the edge of the forest." Deer tracks were in evidence, and one person in attendance saw a crow watching the service.

Rosendale is a non-denominational cemetery, and Reed was given a Wiccan service, as she had been an initiated member of a coven for nearly eight years. Santagada serves as the coven's High Priest. The ceremony included blessing her with frankincense and myrrh, and leaving her with a walking stick that Santagada fashioned to help her on her way to the next life; no varnish allowed. "Metal is allowed, because it comes from the earth," he said, and she was buried wearing some jewelry.

Santagada added that the Pagan path spoke to his girlfriend because she felt those beliefs were “closer to reality” than those of the Abrahamic faiths, which she found to be full of “terrible stories of rape and incest, and not relevant for today.” She didn’t hate Christianity, he said, but she felt it had failed her when she needed it most.

Reed’s mother wanted her Christian minister to say a few words, and he did attend, but the offer was declined. “I told her that Deana wasn’t a Christian,” Chiarello said, and her mother “didn’t argue. It wasn’t Deana’s way.”

Burying his companion when she was only in her fifties has made Santagada think long and hard about his own fate. He and Chiarello now have made arrangements to be buried beside their beloved Deana, but as he said, “There are Christians in my family, too, and if I don’t make my wishes clear, they might give me something I don’t want.” His advice to anyone who wants to ensure that their wishes are honored in death is to make those plans now, and not to wait.

Deana Reed’s name will not be found in the New Alexandrian Library, nor did her love of music ever translate into her making albums of her own. If Santagada is correct, though, her name is being whispered in Bast’s ear, and will be for some time to come.

That which is remembered, lives.

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