

Paola

It never felt right to me to be in a box. It didn't make any sense. It is easiest for me to function when I am at work as a nurse, because I understand the boundaries between patient and practitioner. I don't understand the boundaries of everyday life.



I was brought to this country from Guatemala when I was nine months old. I'm so grateful to be in California, because I don't think I could exist anywhere else. I am this uncultured Latina mom who carries her yoga mat in the back of the SUV and drinks green juice. Yes, these are my chakra centering crystals. I'm such the California stereotype. At the same time, I don't fit most people's expectations. I never have.

"Brown woman" is pretty much my favorite label for myself, because all the other pigeonholes are too constraining. The boxes that we divide ourselves into have never made sense to me, and I've been pushing out the walls to mine since I was little.

The earliest memory I have is when I was seven years old. I was in speech therapy and, because I started to annunciate, suddenly I was being told I'm whitewashed, I'm a coconut, I'm trying to be better than I am. In high school I tried to be part of a Brown Student Union and was told that I wasn't "ethnic enough." I also remember

my mother telling me as a kid that I had "lesbian lips." She'd ask me, "Are you a lesbian?" I had no idea what that meant, but the tone behind it was so fierce that the automatic answer was, "Of course not!" and I took to always covering my mouth. When I did try to come out as bisexual, the gay community told me that I didn't have the "right lifestyle." They told me I was "just curious" and "greedy." I was like, "Damn it! I can't get anything right."

And then I found this little black book at the library. It was called *The Witch's Bible*. And I was like, "This is a thing?" I flipped through a few pages and read about how in the Pagan tradition everything is considered connected. It could be the biggest star or the tiniest speck of dust - it's all made of the same stuff! It was one of the first times that I felt that there were other people who could think the way I do. I was hooked.

A lot of times when I tell people I'm Pagan they mishear and think I'm vegan. So they're like, "Why are you eating pork chops?" And I'm like, "Cause they're



Cauldrons have a womb-like shape, and are sometimes used to symbolically represent female force. They can also be used to hold or to ritually burn items. Paola's cauldron is pictured here.



"I conjure in everything I do in life. Everything is magic, everything is beautiful cosmic synchronicity, and I'm so grateful to have been born human so that everything I do, whether it be physical intention, emotional intention, or private secret desires, they will all ultimately have this rippling fractal effect throughout the universe and in my life."

freakin' delicious, I don't even understand you right now." Pagan is an umbrella term for people who believe in the harmony of nature. You use spells to set intention, and energy goes to where it is most focused.

Part of being Pagan is aspiring to be as authentic as possible. I don't want to misrepresent the type of emotion I'm having at any moment, so I do wear a lot of black. And I look good in black! Because I appear "goth," some people are afraid of me. They think I'm gonna do something weird to their children. My ex-mother-in-law was constantly asking when I was gonna get over this "dark phase," because I'm a grown woman with a child to raise.

I'm no longer married. When I had a bruise on my throat that was "my fault," and I was told it "wasn't that bad," and I was "just exaggerating," I finally couldn't take it anymore. I was alone in my house and the silence was absolutely deafening. I allowed myself to scream in every room, and to feel the energy and every bit of life that happened in them. And then I left.

It wasn't in my plans, but I became homeless. I took my daughter with me, because I wanted her to see that no matter how you got where you are, it is important to recognize that you still have power to move forward. In my spiritual path, even when the most heinous of things happen, you are present in that moment. And, there's a dance that you do with the universe that gets you where you wanna be.

I'm a firm believer in a cosmic web of love and trust that women have that extends through space and time. And for every time that a woman gets beat down by her partner and she gets up the next day, she is able to do it because collectively we have this blanket of love that cradles us when things get really bad. My actions will set the course for my daughter, and my fellow women, just like countless of them have done that for me.

I've stopped covering up my smile. I don't care anymore if I have lesbian lips. It doesn't matter, because this is me. It's not necessary to assimilate for acceptance; it's perfectly fine to appreciate things for what they are.