

Ep #250: The Beauty/Power of Ritual with Jaguar Mary X



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Victoria Albina, NP, MPH

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This is *Feminist Wellness*, and I'm your host, Nurse Practitioner, Functional Medicine expert, and life coach, Victoria Albina. I'll show you how to get unstuck, drop the anxiety, perfectionism, and codependency so you can live from your beautiful heart. Welcome, my love, let's get started.

Hello, hello, my love. I hope this finds you doing so well. I am here today with a very special guest. You know I do not normally have guests on, but this human is so incredible and so exciting and just so magnificent. I cannot wait to share their beautiful presence with you.

Victoria Albina: Jaguar Mary, thank you for being here.

Jaguar Mary X: Oh, you're welcome. I am so excited to be here. I love that introduction. Thank you.

Victoria: It was from my heart. Very much from my heart.

Jaguar Mary: Yeah, I could tell. I could feel it.

Victoria: I'm hoping you can tell the good people a little bit about you and the magical work you do in this world.

Jaguar Mary: Oh, yeah. The keyword definitely is magical. I work with plants. Most of my background, my educational background, is in performance art, performance studies, and in filmmaking. I actually have been working with this particular plant called Mugwort, or *Artemisia vulgaris*, which grows bountifully here in the Hudson Valley where I live.

I also am a mover. I used to actually study dance, but I call myself more "the mover." I engage somatically with my body. I am a glossolalia vocalist. So, that might mean speaking in tongues. It could mean just toning. It could mean so many different things vocally. I'm interested in accessing the indecipherable. I feel like there's another source for energy for me.

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All of my work is informed by the different teachers that have been so wonderful and given me grace. I am a queer, non-binary, femme-bodied person, and I love that. I love all the discussion and theory and activism that comes out of that space. And that's influenced my work, as well.

Victoria: Thank you.

Jaguar Mary: You're welcome.

Victoria: I'm just sitting here soaking in and receiving, again, the magic of who you are as a mammal, and all the beauty you bring into the world. One of the things that you are best known for, in my experience here on occupied Munce-Lenape territory, in the Hudson Valley where we live, is ritual. It's bringing Artemisia, who's such a gorgeous plant... Can we pause for just a wow? It's just stunning.

Yeah, I've been taking a lot of baths with her. It's been really beautiful. Billey and I both sleep like the actual dead, when we take baths with Artemisa. We wake up and we have had the most luscious dreams. She's just so supportive.

So, yes, I think of you as this supporter of ritual, creator of ritual, and it's something we've talked about. So, I'd love to hear from you. Let's just start really basic. What is ritual to you?

Jaguar Mary: Well, ritual is a very ancient practice. I mean, ritual is the first theater, and so shamans and shaman-like people... some people wouldn't use the word "shaman" for the work that they do. But it's people who had the ability to access different realms, the space that we're living in right now and other realms unseen but felt.

People were able to access those realms, bringing medicine to the people, bringing information and knowledge to the people. "This plant is good for

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this. This animal is going to be here at this time.” All kinds of important information for the survival of the community.

And so, now, since we live in these times, and we go to the grocery store, and we plant gardens and grass, some of our connection to the other kingdoms, the plant kingdom for example, are less involved, less dense, less considered.

For me, ritual is using intention to connect with the unseen, unknown, undecipherable parts of myself. And that is part of the healing of doing ritual work, is that the things that you bury... and for good reason. Many of us bury things to save ourselves. Then the question becomes, how do we actually uncover those things safely for ourselves? Ritual is one of those things; it's a great assist.

Victoria: Will you say more about that? Because I know how I use ritual with my clients, and in my own life. In my work, I talk about how baby steps are way too friggin' big, right? I would never recommend a client take a baby step. You're going to freak your entire nervous system out, don't you dare! But a kitten paw, think about a little kitten paw, it is so small.

Jaguar Mary: That' so wise.

Victoria: Little, kitten paw-sized steps towards change. So, would you talk more about the beauty of ritual as the kitten step?

Jaguar Mary: Yeah, sure. For me, it is a practice of listening. So, we hear all kinds of voices in our heads. We can listen to those too, we could just kind of listen to them and hear them and allow them to be present. We can sense if we're feeling something in our bodies. We can feel our feet on the ground.

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We can take a deep breath; the most basic ritual is just breathing. That is the ritual that we all practice. Now, however, I will say that ritually, when you're talking about breathing, it's also paying attention. Paying attention to that breath and just kind of noticing. That is the genesis of ritual, because through the breath, you're just like, "The truth of it is, I'm alive." That's the truth of it.

And so, from there, you make decisions, you become discerning, you're noticing things around you. I mean, ritual is a practice of intention. It's very much a practice of intention. So, when I think about baby steps... This could be a daily thing too, just taking five minutes to just listen to your breathing, pay attention to your breathing.

For some people, that means actually sitting down and being still. But if that's not possible, if you got a bunch of kids, or you're trying to do a bunch of work, or you've got things going on, you can notice what's going on during those moments.

As human beings, and especially femme-bodied human beings, women, we've become very good at multitasking. Sometimes the multitasking is, oftentimes it's necessary, but many times it's like we could do one thing and maybe we could do one other thing. And, that is great.

So, we could do a breath. And then, we could maybe notice what that breath is doing, how it's traveling in our bodies. Whether it's rapid, or whether it is raspy or feels labored. These are indications that you're tired, that maybe you do need to take a break and sit down.

Victoria: Yeah, I mean, talk about genesis, right? There's this ritual and magic of two humans who are interested in this interconnectedness with the divine, with plants and with other realms, when we connect and hold space for each other and for this discourse.

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Your incenses are something that we have here at the house and are constantly burning, both within a ritual, energetic space, in a ceremonial space, but also just because they smell really good. Let's not forget the importance of pleasure, right? Pleasure *is* ritual. Pleasure is a somatic practice. And, they just smell really good.

Jaguar Mary: Thank you.

Victoria: Yeah. You came on to talk about ritual, and I'm about to turn it into a total commercial for your products. Can I just do that for a second? Folks, Jaguar Mary is not of the assortment that would be 'let me come on your show and make an advertisement.' I am doing that. They are blushing. I am doing this.

Will you please tell the good people about your work, and what happens when you burn your Freedom blend? Can you tell us about the magic that comes from interacting with this plant, in this way?

Jaguar Mary: Yeah, so we're used to this idea of smudging to clear space. I was listening to Chief George; I think is his name. There's something that he said that just blew my mind. He's an indigenous elder, and he was talking about how when people light a smudge and the smoke is coming up, that smoke represents spirits.

And so, when you're smudging with your intention, you are applying your prayer, your intention, to that smoke. It's going up into the ethers, to the Divine, to the heavens, whatever you think about the fifth dimension, whatever spaces you call to that are beyond beyond.

It's that practice of lighting these very special plants and seeing them alchemize into smoke, and then using the alchemy of your mind and intention to attach to that smoke, that then take that intention to a space where it can become amplified, activated, manifest, whatever it is.

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And so, right now I've got four different kinds of incenses and they do very specific things. So, you mentioned Freedom. Freedom has pine, mullein, juniper, and they all have Mugwort, of course, and rosemary.

These are all plants that I imagine my ancestors, my formerly enslaved ancestors, coming from the South and using whatever was around for food, for medicine, for encouragement. Burning as incense to speak to God, like, "Help us on this journey." So, all of those plants. Also, "Banish. Please, banish any evil that may come our way." Juniper is awesome for banishing.

So, we're talking about forging new paths. And sometimes the obstacles are not outer obstacles, they are inner obstacles. So, we want to kind of gently address those by... When you're burning Freedom you're saying, "I'm ready to be free. I'm ready to be free of the obstacles that I've placed before myself."

And so, when I'm burning incense, I say all kinds of things like that. All kinds of affirmations like, "I am ready. Thank you. Thank you, Mugwort. Thank you, Pine." It feels very important to deepen that connection between myself and the plant kingdom, which is always here to support our journey. Always.

Victoria: I think you're speaking there to something that's really key and core to what we talk about here on *Feminist Wellness*. Which is, that the opposite of codependence is not independence. That's not it. That's not the game, right? That's not where we're headed. It's interdependence. So, every breath we take we can thank a plant for. I love this interdependence of connecting with ritual through the ages, across the planet, across time, across space, across dimensions, if one is so inclined.

I will also pipe in with some science. One of the things I say, is that my work is one half science nerd and one half woo. All the witchy woo, all the

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science. My loves, the olfactory bulb, the first cranial nerve right there in the snout.

So, the things that we are inhaling go directly into our brain and lead to neurotransmitter change. The things that we inhale go right into our brains and literally change the chemical composition. It sparks neurotransmitters. It sparks sense memories, interacts with the amygdala or the hippocampus.

Think, if you're in the middle of the city and you smell fire, your amygdala immediately turns on before the rest of your senses have clocked that it's time for sympathetic activation. So too, when we smell lavender, you probably know this, but lavender works in the body in the same way as a benzodiazepine drug, which is so amazing. Xanax works with the calcium-ion channels and it opens them right up.

Jaguar Mary: That is so great! I didn't know that.

Victoria: It's amazing. Deep breathing... The breathwork I teach... Please come to my next breathwork event. Please. The breathwork I teach does the same thing. It opens up those calcium-ion channels and leads to deep relaxation. So, if you're listening and you're more on the science and less on the woo, my angels, have I got news for you.

The science of aroma, of burning herbs, of interacting with herbs, there's a not insignificant amount of science to back this up. If your brain and your spirit, and just you on this planet in this moment isn't available for the woo, that's cool. I mean, I'm here for it. You're pure woo. Compliment!

I will also back this up a little more with some science for folks who are like, "Oh, okay, so you're like talking to a plant. Okay, cute. But you're visualizing peace and visualizing," whatever... There was a study where they took competitive bodybuilders and they had them not lift weights for two weeks.

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Instead, every day had them visualize themselves doing their heaviest super CrossFit workout.

At the end of the two weeks, they had a 13% improvement in muscle mass. Thirteen percent!

Jaguar Mary: Wow, that's huge.

Victoria: That's huge. That's bonkers bananas. Had they been Olympic lifting every day for hours, that's hard to get to. So, that's the power of visualization. Which is the power of ritual, right? It's engaging all of this. And science is very slowly catching up to what has been known, what is part of witch's wisdom, woman's wisdom.

Jaguar Mary: And, children's wisdom.

Victoria: Oh, yeah. Imagination.

Jaguar Mary: Exactly. Which, I love the marriage of imagination and scientific thought and inquiry. I feel like I've learned so much, though I do lean more into my woo self. Because I get so much pleasure there.

Victoria: Yeah, me too.

Jaguar Mary: I think about how I love to watch wisps of smoke, anyway. It makes sense to me to definitely sort of substantiate some of this, because we have fear in our bodies. We've gone through many challenges. We have had trauma. And so, whatever helps us see through our trauma and into whatever that release is going to be, whether it's science or whether it's the woo or a combination of both, is perfect. Is really, really perfect.

Victoria: Right on. I came from herbalism, I was a birth doula, and I was very much more, in my public-facing work, on the woo side. And when I

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became a nurse practitioner and started doing functional medicine, particularly in New York City, I realized just how many people wanted the healing, but the leap of faith was too much.

And so, that's what's led me to really bring a scientific explanation into everything. Because I want to honor many journeys to the same goal. Where the goal is more embodiment, more peace, more love, more interdependence, more kindness, and more community.

So, I want to go back to something you said 16 hours ago, when we started talking. Which is, you were talking about the ritual of awareness, right? Intentional awareness of the breath. You were like, you could have a bunch of kids and doing a thousand things and just take one conscious breath. I just really wanted to come back to that, to highlight that, and put a little more discourse around it.

Because there's so much happening in the #somatic healing Instagram world. Where there's this big push to hack the nervous system; which is garbage. Please, don't attempt to hack your vagus nerve or your nervous system. It's not for hacking, it's for being with. There's a lot of talk about resetting, which also is not how that works. What works, and what works to bring the most healing, is being with.

Jaguar Mary: Yeah, that's part of when you were talking about the little kitten paw step. It's one of the things that has felt really important to me, along with the act of noticing breath for example, or looking around the room to see where I am.

I mean, I was thinking about the practice of slowing down. For me, that is definitely meant all the elements that comprise a ritual. And so, you mentioned heating the water, getting the tea pot, letting it steep, pouring it out, sitting with it for a second, smelling it, let it cool until you're able to actually drink it, taking sips and not gulps. So, it's the whole practice.

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I think about that when I'm burning incense, or about to go into meditation or some other practice. To gather up these plants, put them in something in which they can safely burn, and then lighting them, paying attention to the wisps of smoke that come up, the smoldering that occurs, the scent that's filling the room, that maybe is traveling around my body if I'm doing something like that. All of that is such precious, ritualistic gesture.

Certainly, there are things that we do every day that can be considered ritual, like taking a bath, or taking a walk or something. Again, if we attend to ourselves more slowly, a little more slowly than we usually do... If we notice those footsteps, each falling foot... If we look around... The whole practice of noticing, and the somatics around that, blows my mind really. I'm sure you can talk forever about that.

Victoria: I am prone to talk forever about many things.

Jaguar Mary: So, it's just the time to apply one's attention. It might take a while to actually learn how to intend. And, I think that that's something that we could definitely forgive ourselves for. Just stop a minute to intend or attend. It's a different timing. It's a different rhythm. And that's another aspect of ritual. That when you're doing ritual work, you're entering into a different rhythm intentionally. You're surrendering to that rhythm; you're allowing it, for a time, to wash over you.

Victoria: I love that. There's an interdependent theme in there too, right? Where it's not about each of us forcing our will onto the energetic of the moment, but bringing awareness to what is. It's winter wintering. Almost, up here where we live. We're on Zoom, but we're like 10 blocks away from each other. Which is really funny.

Yeah, there's a pace now. And there's really something beautiful that happens when we attune to the earth, to Pachamama, to the earth around

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us, to the winds, to the trees. For me, it allows me to honor my own energetic in such a different way.

Something so simple as... We're recording right after lunch.... "I don't want salad right now." Right? You brought up the digestion, Artemisia, and actually I'd love the rest of that story if you're game. But like, "What is the energetic of my body?"

There's so much talk right now about regulating our nervous system, and for me, I think if we can come back into this concept of bio-rhythms, and really connect into the rhythmic nature of being a human, being a mammal, living on this planet and attuning to the sometimes very obvious signs and signals of the world around us, we can have so much more peace within our nervous systems.

Jaguar Mary: This is the first year that I actually have used the phrase, "I'm going into hibernation," and it feels significant because there's something in me that is finally, after 61 years or whatever, kind of coming to terms with what it means to "winter."

I've been working in a garden. I've worked in a couple gardens during the season, and we just harvested all this sweet potato. We harvested the sunchokes. We got these root vegetables. And we're attending to them. We're preparing them so that they can feed us. They're coming out of the earth. And that's going to be part of our food source. We're doing this preservation thing.

I'm just like, "Wow. I really did move out of Washington, DC, New York, Los Angeles," and ended up in the Hudson Valley, where I have finally allowed myself to hibernate.

Victoria: I'm curious, what you would say to folks who would say, "What a privilege thing to be able to say, 'I'm hibernating? I'm slowing down. I'm

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listening to the earth.” I'll just pause there. What would you say? What comes up for you?

Jaguar Mary: I feel like the truth of it is, when I do this for myself, I become more available to my community. And also, I'm practicing one of the ways I am authentic to myself, which is therefore healing to me and healing to my community.

I do understand. I live in my house with my partner. We don't have any young ones. We have a cat and some plants; they don't require very much. But when you're in a community that requires a lot, then the conversation becomes not just how can I slow down, but how can *we* slow down?

Victoria: How can we support one another to slow down? I lived once in a smallish community, where we would take turns making soup for all the neighbors. On Sundays we'd do soup exchange, which was phenomenal. Right? And those of us who had — you know I'm a nurse practitioner, permanently employable — so, those of us who had the privilege of laburo, of a steady job, would make more soup. Those who did not, would make less. Then it was part of my hibernation, was to be like a bear in the kitchen stirring the pot.

Jaguar Mary: That is the symbiotic relationship. It's the balance that we're able to fall into when we're in community, if we're allowed. It's a journey, actually, to get there. I mean, I just said I lived in all these cities and I finally ended up here. I mean, I did live in Alaska for a little while. That's a whole 'nother experience which changed my life.

Victoria: So, as we're talking about ritual, and how we're bringing in so much beautiful ritual, I just realized that one of the things that I love talking about with you so much is the magic of mugwort. You came on to talk about ritual. And it's this beautiful holiday season that can be complex, right?

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Jaguar Mary: Yes. Oh, my gosh, yes.

Victoria: I want to make sure we do talk about artemisia, because she's such a gift. I want folks to feel the invitation to bring her into their home, should they feel so moved. So, will you tell us more about her magic?

Jaguar Mary: Sure, sure. Sure. Artemisia grows all over the world. There are so many different kinds of artemisia. I think in the wintertime, during the holidays, people become more familiar with Artemisia annua, which smells sweet and glorious.

I'm working with Artemisia vulgaris specifically, and the reason why I'm working with Artemisia vulgaris is because I became acquainted with it during moxibustion, during continual moxibustion, to heal my gastrointestinal space. And, it worked for me.

So, medicinally it's really great for the gastrointestinal space, for women's reproductive organs. It's very healing. It's healing and tonify. So, it's not to be used if you're trying to get pregnant or if you are pregnant. You wouldn't want to take it internally. It's okay to smell it, but you really don't want to take it internally.

In the incenses I make, I'll have mugwort, because mugwort is a visioning plant. It's protective the same way that sage is. They're different plants, so they're protective in different ways. But mugwort is the plant that grows with me, has been my ally, and has kept me company for many years.

Victoria: I'll chime in to say we've talked here before about not burning white sage, because she is endangered. And so, really leaving her be. Leaving her for folks in Native American and First Nations communities, for whom she is traditional medicine; for them and their lineage.

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If that's not your lineage, there's so many other beautiful things to burn; lavender, rosemary. Ah, you should come back so we can talk about rosmarinic acid, Rosemary for remembrance. All of the studies about cognitive decline and Alzheimer's, and rosemary.

Jaguar Mary: Yeah. Well, that is one of the main reasons why I started working with mugwort. Because I was doing this smudging practice... I've gone through this whole period... I mean, I'm not super adverse to it, but I pretty much will never burn desert sage because of the things that you just mentioned. It's not really in my lineage, and it is endangered. I feel like it's overused, and not in a way that is filled with gratitude and ritual knowing that has been present in the past.

So mugwort, which is a weed that grows prolifically, and I mean, it is everywhere, will dry and burn so sweetly, so beautifully. It has this amazing ability to support anyone who is on a dream journey. Who's studying their dreams or engaged with their dreams, and wants to actually deepen their dream work. Mugwort is one of those plants that is incredible for that.

It's super protective in visioning. I was actually speaking to an indigenous elder about getting some other objects. I was talking about how I was going to make a rattle, and I said, "Yeah, I'm working with mugwort." And they were like, "That's really great. I'm so glad that you're in relationship with that plant, because it is a gift." It is a gift. It's an amazing ally for us as human beings, especially now.

We need to use whatever creative and visionary and dreaming devices we have available to rethink what our world can be. This is the visioning. This is the plant that's going to help us get through the hard times. And that's how I think about mugwort.

Victoria: I want to just pause on that, because there is so much pain on this planet right now. What are there, like eight genocides happening right now?

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It is a complex moment to be a human animal. I think what you are inviting us into, this power of visioning a new world, making your phone calls, not buying a new Apple phone just for fun, and not going to Starbucks, right? It's all the yes and yes, and yes and. But let us not forget the power of our collective visioning, as a yes and.

Jaguar Mary: When we talk about doing the work, we're talking about doing all the work. So, that's showing up for the protest, or making soup for the protests. Or taking care of somebody's kids, for the protest, or whatever it is.

That is also doing the inner work. The inner work is very, very important. Mugwort is a great... Burning mugwort as a smudger in the meditation practice or in a journaling practice; you're dreaming up something that may have been beyond your conscious mind.

Victoria: That's an incredible place to pause for... Will you please come back on the show again?

Jaguar Mary: Yeah. I would love to, thank you.

Victoria: I would be so honored. Thank you. I think everyone listening should go buy your incense right now. It makes a beautiful holiday present. We use it around here, literally every day. I mean, we're also a two-witch household, so there's that.

Jaguar Mary: I know. I know about Billey's witchiness. You know what? I also want to let people know too, that I made mugwort oil; one with rose, and one with lavender. I made those because I know that smoke isn't always an option for people. I call them a layer of plant protection that you wear on the body. So, it's an external experience; you wear it on the body. It's organic and very clean, very beautiful. I've gotten all kinds of amazing reports about this oil. I'm so happy.

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Victoria: Wow, smudge energy for our beloved asthmatics.

Jaguar Mary: Yes. Yeah.

Victoria: What a gift. I can imagine the long COVID community, for example. Burning things is suboptimal. What a beautiful... You're so thoughtful. Thank you. I am touched by that.

Jaguar Mary: You're welcome.

Victoria: That's beautiful. You embody community care, that's what you're doing. You're thinking, "Who is the most marginalized within this marginalized community? Let me attend to them first."

Jaguar Mary: Yeah. I think there's always something that we can figure out that is going to work for all of us in some way, shape, or form. And it's just the consideration.

Victoria: The considerations, thoughtfulness, interdependent thinking.

Jaguar Mary: Yeah. And the dreaming, too. It's just like, "I don't know what to do, but maybe someone else does. And, who is that person?"

Victoria: I love that. Hey, so where can the good people find you?

Jaguar Mary: Oh, you can find me @artemisianegra on Instagram. Or you can go to my website at ArtemisiaNegra.com.

Victoria: Will you spell Artemisia? Because when I say it it's like "All day long, we're so used to these Latin botanical names..."

Jaguar Mary: A-r-t-e-m-i-s-i-aN-e-g-r-a.com

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Victoria: I will, of course, put links to everything in the show notes, and on the Instagram post. It'll be in all of the places; it will be in the email. Check out Jaguar Mary's work. They are an incredible, incredible human, who I am so lucky and so grateful to be in community with. Thank you for your presence and your time, and just being you in the world.

Jaguar Mary: Thank you, same to you.

Thank you so much for tuning in, for listening in, for spending some time with me and the beautiful, amazing Jaguar Mary. I just want to remind you of the power of presence. Of the ritual of everyday life. Of tuning in to yourself. Because the truth of the matter is, that you matter. Your experience of your day, your life, it matters.

At the end of the day, what matters more than the connection that you have stepped into with yourself and with the beautiful people that you're interdependently living with? So, my love, thanks once again. Thank you for showing up. Thank you for connecting.

Let's do what we do. A gentle hand on your heart, should you feel so moved. And remember, you are safe. You are held. You are loved. And, when one of us heals, we help heal the world. Be well, my beauty. I'll talk to you soon.

Thank you for listening to this episode of *Feminist Wellness*. If you want to learn more all about somatics, what the heck that word means, and why it matters for your life, head on over to VictoriaAlbina.com/somaticswebinar for a free webinar all about it. Have a beautiful day my darling and I'll see you next week. Ciao.