

dealing with departures from and dissolutions of Pagan groups

a handbook for Pagan clergy

by
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Elders Handbook

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We would very much appreciate your feedback! Please contact [Judy Harrow](#) with news about how you're using these notes. We also welcome advice, corrections, inspirations, suggestions for improvement, etc.

About the authors:

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During our marriage, we were working partners as well, collaborating on writing projects like this one. However, Anglo-American inconsistencies in spelling continually plagued us, so you will find Americanisms and Anglicisms both within these pages.

About this book:

We intend these notes for use by Pagan elders who are working as clergy for their people, and by those brave people who preparing to become elders, and who are working toward that goal, preferably with the support of a circle and the guidance of an elder. This book contains some of what we have learned up until now, but it is hardly the last word on the subject. As usual with us, this is a work in progress. We hope to receive your advice, corrections, inspirations, great ideas, criticisms and manifestos concerning this book. Please email [Judy](#) with your feedback.

As you might expect from Wiccan High Priestesses, our primary religious vocabulary is Wiccan. But these notes were intended for Pagans of all Paths, and for anybody else who may find them useful. We hope that our Druid, Heathen, Reconstructionist (and anybody else we may have missed) readers will not feel left out, and will make any translation that is necessary to suit their own Paths.

We dedicate these notes to all those who seek to learn how to better serve their Gods, their People, and their Earth.

Acknowledgements:

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Thanks are also due to our own elders who gave us the benefit of their hard-won insights, and to our dear friend, the late [Lady Galadriel](#), who shared some of her ritual ideas with us. Mistakes, as usual, remain our responsibility.

Cautions to the reader:

Opinions expressed within these notes are solely those of the authors and are not to be construed as the opinions or positions of our covens, the organizations to which we belong, or any particular Tradition of our religion.

Thoughts here shared are not intended to become the basis for the next Pagan fad, nor should they supplant what you learn from your Circle, your elders, your Tradition or your own experience and inspiration.

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Endings:

As Pagans, we acknowledge that endings are part of the cycle, part of the Whole. Some endings can be prevented; others cannot, or even should not, be prevented. Some endings are joyous, although even their sweetness is often spiced with wistfulness and nostalgia. Some endings are angry, ugly, wrenchingly painful. Some are simple. Some are complex and dangerous passages that can bring us to very different outcomes depending on the skill with which we navigate them.

This material is not about preventing endings. It's about managing them well, so they bring the least harm and the greatest good both to those who depart and those who remain, and to our precious web of community.

Any ending, however difficult or painful, can be used as an opportunity for learning and growth, an opening into the next adventure. Blessed be all the twistings and turnings of the Paths that lead us Home!

[Happy departures: graduation and branching](#)

Branching-off: a happy mutual decision

Very few of us were born into Pagan families or grew up practising any of the Pagan religions. Most of us came to Paganism as adults, and so necessarily we came to it as students. If we persist, the time will come when we know as much as our teachers, and are perhaps developing some new ideas or approaches of our own.

Add to that our propensity to study and worship together in fairly small groups. Then think about our very rapid rate of growth. It's hard to find a good place, proper training, for each new seeker. Yet, we well remember our own time of seeking and of homecoming, our search for a group where we could learn and grow in our new-found faith. We don't ever want to turn a sincere seeker away. Because of all this, there is a strong incentive, in fact an expectation, that people who have completed their own training will leave their home groups and start new groups of their own.

This departure is often known to Witches as 'hiving off,' as when a young queen bee flies off to start a new hive, but that implies a

hierarchical structure that only some of us accept. It can also be described as 'budding off' as in yeast culture, but that suggests an amorphous cluster of cells, a blob. The model that fits most of us best is that of a family tree, a pattern of loving relationships. Most good teaching groups generate multiple offspring groups, which extend and ramify the lineage. Accordingly, we think the most descriptive term for departures of this type is 'branching off.'

A BITTERSWEET TRANSITION:

Whose idea is it to branch off? Sometimes the decision is truly mutual and joyous. It may start from one side, and be easily accepted by the other. The leaders of the old group may recognise that their group has reached an unwieldy size. There may be a waiting list of eager seekers. It's time to make some room. Or it may be that one or more of the advanced students are chafing at the bit, more than ready to strut their stuff, but not yet fully aware, or even a bit intimidated by the responsibilities of leadership. It's time for a gentle push.

Sometimes the student feels ready and eager to graduate, to take on the next challenge, but the elder is a bit overprotective, a little reluctant to lose their most advanced student, who is often also their backup and their best assistant. Respectful assertiveness can help elders overcome their resistance to letting students go.

Other departures are not quite so happy. We may cling too long. Elders may feel abandoned. Sometimes elders, enmeshed by their own control and codependency issues, are unwilling to let go. Some advanced students who were encouraged to move on may feel like they were unwillingly evicted from their cosy nest. In other cases, students who are hesitant to take on the responsibilities of leadership project their own reluctance onto their elders.

Or we may move too hastily to ill-considered and premature branchings, under the goad of ego. Sometimes a contentious member is urged to branch off just because the group leader cannot tolerate challenge. Sometimes people who leave have an inflated idea of their own skill and ability to lead a group well.

We can only urge you to talk openly and honestly with each other and to seek your own inner wisdom and the leadings of the Old Gods through such practices as meditation, divination and dreamwork. Remember that everything that lives changes, including this cherished relationship.

At best, the process is bittersweet. Those who love each other best will miss each other most. Starting a new group is daunting. Losing a cherished group member is sad. Both sides fear the loss of a cherished relationship. Proper preparation helps.

Preparing for branching-off: issues of readiness

In the best of all possible worlds, the timing of branching-off is perfect. People neither go before they have learned all that they should learn, nor is their departure unduly delayed to the point that they become burnt-out and frustrated where they are. In our world of reality, picking that correct point in time requires that we give serious and careful consideration to just what 'readiness' means for us.

IF YOU'RE THINKING ABOUT BRANCHING-OFF

Whoever truly understands the depth and complexity of a group leader's responsibilities will have serious qualms about assuming the role. When people ask you to teach them, ask yourself whether you honestly can. Have you the knowledge, the skill, the grounded wisdom?

Think carefully about this decision. Dream and meditate upon it as well. It is not trivial. It will change your life as profoundly as having a baby. Don't do it for power, or prestige, or popularity. Do it for love, or not at all. Do it only when the ideal group of your imagining demands to be given form, when your inner voices sing to you of possibilities. Do it when you have to, not before.

PERSONAL PREPARATION:

Are you ready to branch off and start your own group? Here are some questions to consider:

- Have you completed the training program of your group and Tradition?
- If not, why not? If there were extenuating circumstances, critical situations elsewhere in your life that you needed to attend to, have these now been resolved?
- If you simply didn't find the time or energy to do your homework, what has changed for you? Leading a group will require a good deal more time and energy than that homework ever did. Prove your readiness by completing whatever work is still outstanding. If some of the requirements are irritating, do them anyhow. Only this will ensure that those you bring in will be fully recognized. However, if any of the requirements actually go against your deep values, you should not do them for social or political advantage. What we do is, after all, religious: values-based and Spirit-led.

In some groups, you will be expected to lead a training group under

supervision before you are given formal permission to branch off. It makes perfect sense to ask you to demonstrate your ability before giving you the authority to lead an autonomous group. Think of it as an internship project. When you are feeling ready to take it on, have a long talk with your mentors.

Clarifying your vision

Do you have a clear idea of what your new group will be like, or will do? Describe your new group in a sentence or two, as though you were writing a classified ad for prospective students. This is a good exercise in self-definition, whether or not you have any intention of advertising. In general, whether you are planning a project, a ritual or a group, it's a good idea to start with the results you want and work backwards through the necessary antecedents. As one priestess recalls it:

"When I started my first coven, I planned rituals in linear time order, start to finish. This very intuitive and common-sense approach inevitably led to time crunches, running out of materials, elegantly-crafted bits of ritual that were so incompatible that they had no hope of working together. Now, after many years of trial and error, I start my planning by asking why we want to do this ritual and what we want it to accomplish. Then I think about what the culmination of the ritual should be like, and work backwards from there, step by step, figuring out what the necessary precursors are.

My rituals work better this way. Also, I get a good night's sleep before the rite, because things are ready. This method, by the way, works just as well for designing casseroles, workshops and gardens."

Gathering the people

Sometimes, when a group is getting too large for comfort, it splits. A cluster of friends leave together, forming the core of a new group, which will eventually accept and train students. If this is your plan, ask yourself whether members of your core group have among them the necessary "starter set" of skills or competencies? As you add new members, this list of desired skills can be a guide for your screening, just as though you were hiring workers for a new project. Following are a few questions to help figure out whether you have a full starter set:

1. What knowledge and skills do you think every individual member should have? Which of these do you consider prerequisites and which are you able and willing to teach?
2. What knowledge and skills do you think a leader should have? Do

you feel properly prepared to lead a group? If not, how do you propose to fill any identified gaps?

3. What skills are necessary to have isomewhere in every group, but not necessarily in the leader? (for example, Judy can't carry a tune, so other members lead the chants in Proteus) Does someone in your potential core group have whichever of these skills you lack?
4. Are there any "extra" skills, or areas of knowledge, that are needed for your group's intended specialty, although they are not universally necessary? (for example, a group specialising in ritual arts may need stagecrafters and musicians) Again, which of these are prerequisites and which are you willing and able to teach?
5. Conversely, are there any "extra" skills that exist by happenstance among your potential core group that you expect will enrich your group and influence its future direction?

On the other hand, you may be starting an entry-level study group. You can't count on your beginning students having any of the relevant knowledge or skills. Be very sure that you (and/or your partner) can teach every single thing you consider essential for your students to learn. Failing that, please be absolutely certain that other local elders are able and willing to act as "guest lecturers" in areas where they are strong and you are weak.

Remember this: 'beginner' does not usually mean 'ignoramus.' Although new to your particular tradition, your students may have explored specific related interests in focused classes or programs elsewhere. They may have participated in other Pagan groups. Find out what gifts they bring to your group. The healthiest group is one where every member, from the newest beginner to the leader, has something to learn and something to teach.

You can find a lot more information about finding, screening, orienting and dedicating new students in another of our workbooks, [The Front Gate](#).

Make sure you have lots of support.

Most importantly, please find yourself a working partner, another qualified elder, even if they are as newly-minted as yourself. In fact, some traditions require that any group be led by a couple rather than an individual. At a very minimum, your working partner will share the work load and contribute an all-important second opinion, observations of your group's progress from another perspective. Another constant observer will help work out ideas and plans regarding the group. If, as is often customary, your working partner is also your lover or best friend, the synergy of that will greatly increase both of your effectiveness as leaders.

Co-leadership is of benefit to any group, no matter how long

established. For a new group composed of raw beginners, just finding its way, shared leadership is nearly essential. We also advise you to maintain a close consulting relationship with your direct elders and create lateral support networks with other group leaders.

ADVICE TO THE ELDERS

If you are working in a tradition that holds the expectation that students will in due course evolve into teachers - or even if this is just your personal hope - you start preparations for this transformation as each new student arrives.

Choose your students carefully

Don't start training anybody unless they appear to have leadership potential. Of course you'll make mistakes. Of course their lives may change in unpredictable ways, possibly including the discovery of other interests or goals that supersede this one. But it's stupid, and perhaps even cruel, to waste both their time and energy and your own unless you can see some possibility of their completing the program.

Putting it that bluntly reveals a more basic question: what is the core purpose of the parent group? If your primary purpose is worship, then every sincere-hearted believer is surely entitled to a venue for worship. In contrast, if your purpose is training new leaders in a religious path, it's still very appropriate for students and teachers to worship together. Even though you may often look exactly like a worship group, a training group needs to be highly selective about its members. Also, although some few members may stay on as 'faculty' or 'staff' when they complete their training, most will eventually graduate and go. If this is your clear expectation, it will hurt much less when they leave.

Be very clear about your curriculum

If you have a degree system of advancement, let people know what they must do to earn each degree. For one possible example, see Proteus Coven's [curriculum](#). You may want to wait until one degree is completed before informing the student of the requirements for the next. It can seem less daunting that way. Still, they're entitled to a general idea.

Your students need to know from the very beginning that promotion and graduation are to be earned. If your requirements include intangibles such as maturity or wisdom or depth of connection with Deity, let your students know that as well. If you need to delay promotion after all the specific tasks are completed because of such inner developmental issues, there may well be resentment and accusations of unfairness, but these will be reduced if your students at least knew from the outset that such delays were a possibility.

Identify and teach group leadership skills

Some understandings and skills are required for intelligent participation in any religion. Other understandings and skills are specific to group leadership or teaching. Identify what those are and be sure to offer your advanced students many opportunities to learn and practice them.

Encourage understudying

Give advanced students lots of opportunity for backstage views of what you do. Delegate as much as you can – this both reduces your work load and gives them practice. Be available to help them reflect on what they perceive and experience as they perform delegated leadership functions. In some traditions, it's standard practice for group leaders to have deputies, or for people who will probably branch off soon to conduct beginners' study groups under supervision.

If members know that yours is a training group, with the expectation of eventual graduation, and then see someone acting as deputy, it will not shock them when this person soon branches off. By delegating and watching them grow in confidence and skill, you will even give yourself some warning and some comfort about their leaving.

Seek outside assessment

You've been a mentor to some good people. You are emotionally invested in their success. You're also by now well bonded with them, and some part of you hates the thought of their leaving your immediate circle. This is a stressful conflict, only made worse by the inherent [role conflict](#) between mentor and evaluator. You can make yourself much more comfortable by asking a respected elder from outside your group for an objective assessment of their readiness to branch off.

Re-inventing the student/teacher relationship

Starting a new group, even when it has branched-off from an established parent group that provided really good apprentice leadership training, is hard, and sometimes confusing, work. The leaders of the new group often feel as if they are alone in the world, as if they were unable to escape having to reinvent all the ways we do what we do.

Often, this birthing struggle is quite visible to the new leader's elders. They may feel tempted to come over and help out with the new group, without waiting for an invitation to do so. This is usually a bad move, since it imperils the development of autonomous identity on the part of

the new group. They need space to learn from their mistakes.

You may, hopefully rarely, also feel the need to confront the new leaders about actions that seem seriously unethical or dangerous. Sometimes you may be called upon to make a really difficult judgement call about when to keep silence and when to speak. Unless you perceive imminent and serious danger of harm being done to the leaders or their students, we'd suggest respectfully waiting till they seek your aid or advice.

Like children now adult and in homes of their own and their empty-nester parents, both parties need to negotiate a new, more equal, adult relationship, to move from the reciprocal roles of student and teacher to the mutual role of colleagues. We recommend that both of you - teacher and student - think carefully about your expectations of one another, and work out any differences well in advance. Unexamined and unshared assumptions may cause serious problems in times to come. This is a task faced by new graduates and young workers in every profession, and one that always requires tact, assertiveness, patience and humor.

TRANSITION TO A COLLEGIAL RELATIONSHIP

Models become widely accepted when they encapsulate and reflect a lot of people's experience. Here is a widespread model of the stages of this transition that can help you understand what you are going through:

Stage 1: Dependency: The elder teaches basic and intermediate topics, sets safe limits, and gives a great deal of guidance. This is roughly comparable to the old craft guild status of apprentice.

Stage 2: Differentiation: The student pursues advanced topics and follows personal interests, learning from many elders. Students test their personal limits of talent and skill (and also sometimes test the limits of safety and ethics - this is adolescent rebellion). The elder facilitates differentiation by giving the student increasing responsibility, much less specific direction. However, the elder is still actively watching over the student, and still volunteers direction and correction when necessary. This is comparable to the old status of journeyman.

Stage 3: Autonomy: The student is self-directed and under no one's protection. The elder gives advice only upon the former student's request. The elder's advice is not binding. The former guild student is now a master, and entitled to begin teaching others.

Resolution

It's a loss as well as a thrill every time a fledgling leaves the nest. Each of us will miss the other. Although you were often irritated with each other as you struggled through the differentiation phase, your deep bonds of love and trust are all you see as you approach separation. Allow yourself to feel your sense of loss, like parents and siblings of the newlyweds crying at a wedding. It's just as real as your pride and elation.

For every action there is an equal and opposite reaction. In many of the lineage-based Wiccan traditions, an elder who has taken someone through the complete training process to the point where that person is now leading a new coven is acclaimed as Queen or Magus. The vocabulary is overblown – Grandparent would be both warmer and more accurate – but the underlying psychological principle is very sound. The personally-chosen charm for the charm-bracelet, or other token of recognition, is the elder's compensation for loss. The gift helps us to reframe our grief into the deep satisfaction of a job well done. In our religion, pride is not a sin.

BLESSING RITUALS

Branching-off is a major life transition. We strongly recommend that it be ritually marked with a group blessing. The templates we offer here, like all of our ritual templates, are just possibilities, models to start from. Please adapt them to your own customs and needs.

- Blessing for a [new group](#)
- Celebration of the [Elders](#)

Lessons learned

- Healthy branching off requires years of preparation. This can be the entire goal of a teaching group's curriculum.
- Even though it is expected and joyously anticipated, it can still be a bittersweet transition. Make room for both feelings.
- Branching-off is a major life passage for all people concerned, and should be ritually marked with sensitivity, skill and care.

These two statements, for us, sum up the reciprocal process of branching-off:

- ***Graduates: as you branch off, remember, you came to them in trust, now leave them in love.***

- ***Elders: as they branch off, remember, you brought them in in love, now let them go in trust.***

Intentional early departures

Sometimes people leave a group before they are ready to branch off because of something unrelated changing in their lives. Others leave because their needs or expectations are just not being met. Sometimes members discover some personal incompatibility that cannot be reconciled. Sometimes they run into serious disagreements with the leaders or with other members.

Sometimes it's the group leaders who decide that this person no longer belongs in the group. Their decision may be grounded upon many different reasons ranging from no-fault incompatibility to insubordination to serious breaches of ethics or safety, or even oathbreaking. If the leaders sincerely believe that the person being ejected is unethical or dangerous, they may publicly warn other groups, lest those groups inadvertently open themselves to the same problem. They may be entirely correct, honestly mistaken, or mean-spirited and vindictive when they spread the word about an expulsion.

Why do they go?

People leave groups, or are asked to leave, for a whole range of reasons. Different types of reasons tend to arouse different levels of acrimony.

DEPARTURE FOR UNRELATED CAUSES

People follow their bliss, and so they should. Sometimes this leads away from your group, or even away from Pagan practice altogether. If they find the next piece of the puzzle at the nearest Buddhist meditation center, they won't be the first Pagan to do so. Honor the person who is true to their own inner leadings. It shows how well you taught them to listen.

He got a great new job in Minneapolis. She's moving in with her sweetie in Florida. They inherited her parents' house just outside of Chicago. Your group is in Albany. No way they can commute. Perhaps you know a good group in their new location and can make some introductions.

She had a baby. He got into medical school. Neither one feels they can do justice to their new responsibilities and your group's rigorous training program. They may leave, or they may take extended leaves of absence. Respect their realism and, if the door is open for their eventual return,

make sure they know it.

Departures like these are inevitable. There are no problems to be resolved, and so there need be no hard feelings. The reason the person is going lies in some other part of their life, entirely outside your group. Trying to hold them will only lead to resentment. Let go gracefully and you can keep a friend.

Throw them a bon voyage party. Send them away with your wistful blessings. Help your group find its new centre and balance, and redraw its boundary a little bit smaller. Soon you'll be expanding again. Life moves through a rhythm of contraction and expansion; all that lives must change.

A [bon voyage ritual](#) might help all concerned draw closure.

COMPATIBILITY ISSUES

Compatibility issues can arise from many causes. If they are discussed and addressed in a timely manner, they may well be satisfactorily resolved. At worst, the member will leave in a friendly manner. Here are some typical compatibility issues:

Differences in interests

The member particularly wants to learn about some specialty, for example shamanic journeying, but nobody is qualified to teach this and the rest of the group is not really interested in it. Neither side is right or wrong, just different.

Some differences of this sort are caught in the screening process, but it's entirely possible for students to discover strong interests, even a sense of calling, later on, after they've had a broad survey of related subjects. If you know a group that specializes in what this person wants to learn, it's time for a friendly referral, and possibly a friendly transfer.

Differences in aesthetic or ritual style

Some of us are more formal "high Episcopagan" in our approach, while others are more shamanic "holy Pagan rollers." A beginner may well not know what he or she prefers, so this incompatibility is less likely to be identified in screening. Again, consider referral or transfer.

Logistical conflicts

One member has a conflict with the meeting day or time most convenient to everybody else. Commuting difficulties. Conflicting family, school or career obligations. Child care problems. It's possible that another group can accommodate their needs, more likely that they will need to take a longish leave of absence. If they can leave without anger,

the door stays open for their return when external circumstances clear up.

Pacing issues

Pacing issues typically involve differing expectations as to how fast the group is moving, or how fast the student is working through the group's curriculum.

In our own teaching groups, we've had different people complain (at different times, thankfully!) that we're asking for too much work, or providing too little formal instruction.

One particularly tricky situation is the case of the 'coven potato,' the person who doesn't seem to be learning or growing. This person could still be a warm, supportive presence in the group, and do their full share of the work (like helping clean up after meetings). They may be a beloved friend to all group members. But there's only just so much space in your living room. What happens when you fill that space and develop a waiting list of eager seekers? The answer to this dilemma seems to lie in whether you consider your group's primary purpose to be teaching or worship.

Another pacing issue is the promotion/holdback dilemma, which arises when one of the group's members has completed most or all of the group's formal instructional objectives but, in the considered judgement of the group's leaders, is not yet ready for promotion to the next level of responsibility or empowerment.

This issue is not unique to religious groups: it could just as easily arise in a martial-arts school where the student has mastered the physical or technical skills (the 'moves') for a particular level of accomplishment, but has not yet developed the mature situational awareness to know when to fight and when to retreat from a conflict.

Pacing issues can often, but not always, be successfully resolved. What underlies them is the dynamic tension between the needs and desires of each individual member and those of the group as a whole. If you feel stuck, seek outside help from a respected elder, perhaps your own group's Grandparent.

Personality conflicts

Personality conflicts often simmer quietly below the surface of the group's awareness, eventually emerging as an unexpected, painful and destructive exit fight which may propagate through the entire group. Some examples:

- conflicts between introverted and extroverted personality types
- preference for passive versus assertive communication strategies
- attention-seeking versus goal-seeking behavioural objectives
- some member's disapproval of another member's chosen lifestyle.

“He’s gay and promiscuous,” she said, in great anger, “which means he’s at a high risk for AIDS. If he gets sick, he’ll be a huge drain on the group’s energy, both practical and spiritual. You have to either convince him to limit his sexual contacts or ask him to leave.” Ironically, she was chain-smoking as she issued her ultimatum.

Look a bit deeper and you’ll probably find unexamined assumptions. The members who are in conflict are very likely unaware that they are working from different understandings of human interaction or spiritual development. When these differences are made conscious, and if people have the will to work them out, they can almost always be resolved. People can allow for their differences and make small adjustments to accommodate each other.

A Zen Buddhist metaphor for community portrays the members of a *sangha* as rough stones in a tumbler, gradually polishing one another. This image is worth any group leader’s consideration. However, not everybody does actually want to work out a win/win solution or make small compromises for the sake of group cohesion. There’s no way to force somebody to negotiate in good faith. If the issue is not one of right and wrong, it may become the leader’s unpleasant duty to tell the person who will not adapt that they need to depart.

If you, as group leader, become convinced that there is a real difference here, not of style but of principles and values, and that the minority is right, then even if this is a minority of one, you must support them and let the chips fall. In the short run, this may result in a group with two members, but that’s better than losing the group’s authenticity.

Conflict: boon and bane

Conflict is a part of group life. It can be corrosive and ultimately destructive, or it can reveal real problems and lead to their correction. The various skills and techniques of conflict resolution are explored in depth in another workbook in this series.

For now, we just want to recommend two books. Although both books are excellent, we seriously discourage you from reading either one unless you read both. Either can lead you astray. Together, they define the balance point, the safe and navigable channel between two hazards.

Haugk, Kenneth C.

1988: ***Antagonists in the church: how to identify and deal with destructive conflict***; Augsburg Publishing House, Minneapolis.

Haugk’s book is about too much conflict, and how it tears

groups apart. Examples are mostly drawn from Christian churches.

Janis, Irving L.

1983: ***Groupthink: psychological studies of policy decisions and fiascoes***; Houghton Mifflin, Boston.

Janis' book is about too little conflict, and how enforced conformity leads to terribly bad decisions. Examples are mostly drawn from political life.

Issues of ethics and safety

Unfortunately, sometimes people go suddenly and dramatically wrong. They become dysfunctional, pathological or even corrupt. Sometimes, this happens to group leaders or even to whole groups. It happens in every religion. Ours is no exception. Members can and should leave groups that have become corrupted. People who are unethical or dangerous can and should be banished from groups. But it's not always that simple: group members who challenge incompetent or corrupt leadership might be pre-emptively banished to punish or silence them.

We'd advise those of you who observe such break-ups from outside to act sensibly, just as you would when you hear about somebody's marital break-up:

- try not to form opinions from a distance;
- until you learn otherwise, assume it's the normal human 50/50 distribution of fault;
- don't take sides unless you have to (for example, if the banished party seeks admission to your group);
- try to hear out both sides before forming an opinion, unless the aggrieved party can show you objective evidence of wrongdoing (for example, a person who took an oath of confidentiality and later published others' names and addresses without permission)

Toxic groups: symptoms and cautions for members

Here's the hard truth: you may feel that inappropriate, unethical or dangerous things are happening in your group. You may be right. You may be wrong. Either way, you should leave. If you can't feel basic trust in the group and its leaders, it's unlikely that you will learn or grow in that environment. Appropriate challenge and demanding work can also be uncomfortable, but most sensible folks can tell the difference between a charley-horse and a sprain or fracture.

Unethical or dangerous things can happen in groups, behind a veil of

secrecy and a manipulative leader's cult of personality. Beware if you are directed to avoid contact with other Pagans or if your teacher tries to censor what you may read or hear. A teacher who wants to be your only source of information might simply be afraid that you'll find out how ignorant and/or incompetent they are. Or they may want you to believe that their wrongful acts are "normal" in the Pagan community. Here, in no particular order, are just a few things to watch out for:

- Predators: elders who expect or require group members to satisfy their sexual needs.
- Exploiters: elders who expect or require group members to work for free in their profit-making business or to perform domestic chores that are not associated with setting up for group meetings or cleaning up after them.
- Pushers: elders who tell you that using dangerous drugs is an essential part of Pagan spiritual practice. Worse yet, elders who use the group as a cover for drug dealing.
- Panderers: elders who expect or require you to violate your own conscience in any way (although a good teacher may well ask you to go beyond cultural programming or comfortable personal habit)
- Fight managers: elders who play one member off against another, or who foment distrust and competition instead of cooperation within the group. This is the old "divide and rule" game, and it's rotten.
- Bigots: elders who tell you that they have the one, true, right and only way, that any other approach to Pagan spirituality could not possibly be as good as theirs. They fear comparisons, probably with good reason.
- Control freaks: elders who discourage questioning, or who get angry when they can't come up with answers. Elders who tell you that mere students have no right to disagree.

Whistle-blowers or raiders?

The distinction between whistle-blowers and raiders is a convoluted one. We said it just above, but we'll say it again. Beware, beware of censors and control freaks, of group leaders who try to put blinders on their members, to deny members alternative sources of information or bases for comparison.

As Witches, we also uphold the principles of [confidentiality](#). However, many good things can be taken out of balance or used for abusive ends. Healthy confidentiality applies to personal privacy, to workings still in progress, to techniques that should only be in the hands of those mature enough to use them wisely and to a few markers of identity, "secret club handshakes" by which we can know our own. When the expectation of secrecy extends much beyond that, it can easily become a set of blinders, a mechanism of control, a scab beneath which corrosive "family

secrets” can continue to fester.

Group members may, without violating appropriate confidentiality, talk with friends who are not part of their group about some of what they are learning and doing in group. And sometimes caring friends hear stories that give them pause, that resemble some of the dire warnings we just ran through. Now what? A caring friend speaks up, before real harm is done, right?

Our community frowns on “raiders,” manipulators who foment conflict and discord in other people’s groups in the hope of luring away their members. This is ego-driven, mean, destructive behavior. A person who attacks some other group also weakens the inter-group trust and respect that is essential to healthy community.

And yet, consider this: group members are not property. It’s surely not right to restrict their access to information as a way of keeping them dependent on you, tethered in your group. We have room in our community for a wide variety of approaches and working styles. People can and should find the group that suits them best, and that may mean a few false starts before they can really settle in.

Gwyneth holds that in Pagandom in general, and amongst Witches in particular, people can and inevitably will sort themselves out according to chosen working style, liturgical preference, and social orientation. It’s silly for any group leader to think that they can prevent their members from finding out what their other choices amongst various groups might be. It’s all to the good, then, to encourage frank and open communication between groups, so that people can find the place where they will be the happiest together.

There is a difference, however, between frank and open communication and malicious gossip intended to destroy somebody else’s student/teacher relationship.

TELLING THEM APART

So what is the difference between the caring whistleblower and the mean and destructive raider? How do I know, if I hear something that causes me concern, when to speak, when to wait for questions and when to hold my peace?

Judy would like to suggest that the [Rede](#) is, as usual, an excellent guide. What they are doing in that group across town may be very different from what you would do. But unless you perceive an imminent, serious danger of harm to individual members or to the community as a whole, it’s not your place to intervene. Disrupting the peace and trust of somebody else’s group is also potentially harmful.

Ah, but what is harm? What danger is immanent and serious enough to warrant crossing this boundary? The answer to that must lie within your own conscience. So all the usual advice for working through tough

issues applies: think clearly and meditate deeply, use whatever divination methods you prefer, and consult with trusted elders.

PROTECTING YOUR OWN GROUP

Meanwhile, here are some suggestions for protecting your own group against raiders:

- Stay open to hearing the gripes and grievances of members. Use them as a basis for ongoing improvement of your group. It's tougher to disrupt a healthy relationship.
- If you are part of a lineage, and your group's Grandparent is willing, give members the Grandparent's contact information, so they can seek help in case of bad internal trouble.
- Most important: warn them that raiders exist. If anyone has raided your group, or tried to raid your group in the past, let members know exactly what the raider told your members and your response to the raider's claims. This inoculation is a much better protection than blinders!
- If you lose a member to a raider, consider it a pruning or even a medical debriding. You've lost a weakness. Your group will heal stronger than before.

Resignations

For all of the reasons described above, and probably many more, people choose to leave Pagan groups, sometimes abruptly and painfully, often before they have completed the group's training curriculum. Although they are not qualified to branch off within their original group's Tradition, some will create bootstrap groups based on what they had learned so far and their own ideas and/or research. Most will say some sort of farewell to their erstwhile teachers.

Depending on the reasons for their departure, the intensity of their feelings, and their capacity for dignity and self-control, this farewell could range anywhere from a tearful final visit to obscenities and slanders broadcast on the Internet. We've received both.

Exit interviews

If they're leaving because of some incompatibility, personality conflict or perceived grievance, any responsible group leader would want to know why. Sometimes you can invite them to meet with you and talk about it, or just have a frank phone conversation. If this is possible, it will help you both reach some closure. This delicate discussion must be handled with respect and tact, even though the circumstances surrounding it may be emotionally charged. Don't argue with, harangue, or browbeat the departing person. Don't cajole them to remain or return. If you do, the chances of mutual understanding rapidly diminish.

Honoring complaints

When a member leaves angrily, those who remain are likely to feel defensive. But sometimes the “deserter” had a good point. Wait till the worst of the emotional bruises have faded, then re-examine their stated complaints, as analytically and objectively as you can. Then examine them again, this time meditatively. Try doing a role play in which you take the part of the person who left. You may also want to take counsel with other group leaders, or with your own teacher. The aggrieved member may have identified a real problem with the way in which the group functions, or in its decision-making or consultative processes. They’re gone, so you’ve no further need to be on the defensive about their points.

If you find some merit in their complaint, and you address the problems thus revealed, you can prevent further painful departures, and improve everybody’s experience within the group. If you have fostered a climate of open communications within the group, the aggrieved member may even voice their grievance before it’s too late for them. If they feel heard, if they see efforts towards improvement, they may stay with the group after all.

Exit fights

Some people seem to be unable to simply decide that a situation no longer meets their needs, make polite farewells, and move on. To quietly go away would feel to them like they were breaking a commitment. Instead, they need to justify their departure with raging ‘exit fights.’ They may even try to incite other group members to join them in a walkout. And, to complicate matters, sometimes their grievance is righteous, and they are encouraging other members to leave a group that is dysfunctional, or even pathological.

It can be very difficult to distinguish beforehand between an exit fight which will justify a resignation, and a particularly intense disagreement on principles. Intense disagreements can be beneficial to a group, since they can bring into focus those new and challenging ideas which help a group’s process remain fresh and forward-thinking. Group leaders should demonstrate respect, openness and a willingness to hear out all group members, regardless of their level of experience or their verbal sophistication. This fosters a group atmosphere in which you can hash out disagreements and harvest good ideas from them.

Expulsions

Some of us call this ‘banishment.’ Other terms include ‘disfellowshipping’, ‘banning’, or ‘reculing.’ They all amount to the same thing in the end: the enforced departure of a member of a group, under

terms and timing not of that member's choosing, and for what the leader considers to be good cause.

Those are all harsh words, implying severe punishment. This section will focus on expulsion as a response to serious wrongdoing, because that is the most painful and difficult task a group leader is likely ever to face. It's important to remember, however, that group leaders might sometimes have to ask somebody to leave for reasons of simple incompatibility, personality conflicts, etc. These situations are still difficult and embarrassing, but not nearly as traumatic.

Considerations for the leader

Group leaders generally have major emotional investment in the continuing stability of the group and the collective well-being of its members. Accordingly, expulsion feels to most leaders like the emotional equivalent of an amputation, a bitter, wrenching last resort. It should only be used in an irretrievable situation, when all other avenues of remediation have been exhausted. It must be done fairly, righteously, unambiguously, and with full consideration of extenuating circumstances.

Consultation

Check in with experienced group leaders. They may have survived similar situations, and have good ideas for you. If you really do need to expel this member, they can offer you emotional support. If at all possible, seek the counsel of your own teachers, and other elder colleagues whom you respect and trust.

Confrontation

If a group member is being so difficult or disruptive that you're considering asking them to leave, basic fairness requires that you warn them and give them a chance to improve their behaviour. [Appropriate confrontation](#) is a difficult, demanding act of grace. Here are some basic guidelines:

- Confrontation is not a punishment, but a gift. You are offering the person something even more valuable than a second chance – information that they can use to grow and change for the better.
- Confront as soon as you become concerned, while there is still a chance for the person to change their behaviour and retrieve the situation. Don't wait until it's too late.
- Except in emergencies, confront in private. Don't humiliate the person before the rest of the group.
- Don't confront anyone when either of you is hungry, angry, or tired. Wait till you are both calm, grounded, centred and physically comfortable. Do it when you have time to explain fully and answer any questions that arise.

- Be specific about the undesirable behaviour and about how it impacts the group. Only confront a person about things they are capable of changing. Don't confront them with too many things at one time.
- Don't confront anybody about anything unless you are willing to increase your involvement with them. Confrontation obliges you to give them ongoing feedback as they attempt to make the changes you have requested of them.
- At least in your own mind, give them enough time to change. A fair confrontation necessarily defers your final decision to expel this person.

Justice

The toughest question of all is this: how do we ensure that an expulsion is fair and righteous?

Be absolutely sure that you are accusing the right person. Sometimes people try to redirect the blame for a bad act to an innocent third party. If you confronted the person you suspect of inappropriate behaviour, they may have claimed that it wasn't their doing. Hopefully you heard them out fully and investigated their claims thoroughly before proceeding to expel them.

On the other side of the balance, sometimes the individual member is clearly in the wrong, and some or all of the grievances expressed by the member may be 'red herrings', aimed at further obfuscating the situation.

If you are considering expelling one member because of complaints made by another, carefully consider the possibility that a personality conflict, and not principles or values, was the real motivation for the complaints. Be absolutely sure that you have heard out both sides of the story. If there is the slightest possibility that you might be, or even seem, partial to one side, ask a respected elder from outside your group to hear out both sides and advise you. The toughest thing about distinguishing a personality conflict from a legitimate complaint is that it's usually both!

The person who is about to be expelled from the group must be told why.

They must also be given an [explanation of how they might make amends and possibly earn their way back into the group](#). People do change and grow over time. The banished person might come to understand and regret their bad actions, and might become ready to resume following a spiritual path. In your present state of hurt and anger, it may seem to you that nothing short of Divine intervention could accomplish such a miracle. Well, remaining open to that possibility is part of being religious, is it not?

Often the departing person maintains contact with one or more group

members with whom they were most close. If the former member is angry and resentful, and they probably are, they may try to persuade their friends who have stayed to leave the group as well, acting, at least temporarily, as a raider.

With human good will and Divine blessing, sometimes this continued communication becomes the channel for renewed communication and reconciliation, leading on a few occasions to the person's decision to return to the group. More often, though, the best we can hope for is that cordial communications can be restored, and that bonds of friendship survive the temporary strain of angry departure.

Resolution

A member leaves a group. There's a gap in the group mind. Even if they were offensive or frightening, they were part of our shared experience. We may also have been wounded by the manner of their departure. We need to heal ourselves and our group, and to feel into the new pattern of how the group will feel and will work without this person.

Grief work

Remember Elisabeth Kubler-Ross and her famous theory of stages of grief? We're not so sure things are ever that neatly sequential, particularly not in tangled situations like these. Still it's worth reviewing these stages, just as feelings and reactions that might come up.

- **Denial:** the refusal to believe that this is really happening. The vain hope that it will all go away, that things will be back to normal by next meeting
- **Bargaining:** the delusion that we can control the situation, that if we can figure out what to offer or what to do all this hurt and shock will just disappear
- **Anger:** feelings of resentment, placing the blame entirely on others
- **Acceptance:** the recognition that something bad really is happening, and the healing resolution to deal with it in the best way we can.

Grief work means expressing and acknowledging your sorrow. It may literally mean crying till the emotions are drained. It means dealing with each of these reactions as they arrive. It means coming to terms with the bad thing that has happened, reaching through to acceptance, after which comes healing.

After emotions have settled some, a facilitated discussion of the issues surrounding the departure might help the group understand what went wrong. They may decide to make some changes in the way they do things to correct any problems they identified and make further difficulties of this kind less likely.

Eventually, we become ready to draw closure on an unpleasant episode and move on with our individual lives and our collective work. [Ritual](#) is a way of telling our deep minds that we have reached that very welcome bend in the road and are ready to proceed.

Some thoughts for the person who is leaving a group

If you're leaving a group in peace, because of other circumstances in your life, you may be happily anticipating adventures. Still there'll be a touch of sadness. You'll miss old friends. If you're leaving a group because of simple incompatibilities, etc., the sadness may be more pronounced. Be gentle with yourself, and take some time to rest, heal and clarify your wishes before you try to join another group.

But this section is mostly for the person who *had* to leave. Either you perceived that the group was so corrupt that you could not remain or you were expelled. Your resignation may have been your best choice in a bad situation, or a terrible mistake. Your expulsion may have been just or unjust. All of these possibilities collapse to one immediate certainty: you're hurting and very probably traumatised by the disappointment of all the high hopes with which you joined that group. And you're very likely facing it alone.

First you cry. Then you rest. Then you heal. We promise: the Wheel turns.

Take care of yourself physically. Be careful about nutrition, sleep and exercise. Do those things that relax you and give you pleasure. Take your time. Take it easy.

When you're feeling better, you're going to want to reflect on what happened, see what you can learn from it. We strongly recommend that you seek help from someone experienced whom you respect and trust. You might feel safer just at first with a professional counsellor, somebody unconnected with the conflicts you recently went through.

This is tough, but we're asking you to examine the possibility that you were wrong, or even that the person who expelled you was right. Remember, the only thing you can change is your own behavior. So, if you want better experiences in the future, you must ask yourself this terrible question: how did you contribute to the situation? What did you do that you should do differently next time?

Let's just assume that you did nothing that was morally wrong. You were the innocent and injured party, the victim of a predator or exploiter, of a dysfunctional group. Well, you chose that group, you gave your trust to the wrong person. That's your lesson.

There's always a lesson, always, and bane transforms to blessing when you find it.

But what if you did something that was not just dumb but actually

morally wrong? What if you broke your oath? What if you intentionally did harm? What if you were justly expelled? Even this is not the end of your spiritual growth. In fact, it may be the beginning. Give yourself some time to sit with your new understanding. Be compassionate with yourself. When you are ready, apologise. Make any feasible amends. Accept that we cannot change the past. Some damage done cannot be repaired, but clean up your mess as best you can.

Then, having cleaned the slate, take even more time to rest and recover. Don't rush to join another group. Wait till you feel some clear sense of what you want to learn or what kind of environment will best nurture the inner work you need to do next.

The Gods will judge you, yes. But they judge from infinite knowledge, which creates infinite mercy. While you live, and perhaps beyond, there is always another chance. Only, please, allow yourself to accept it.

The outside view: how can other elders help?

Someday the survivor of a traumatic departure or group break-up may ask for your help. After all, we've been advising them, again and again throughout these notes, to seek the aid of a respected elder. What if that turns out to be you?

- [Listen](#). The very best help you can offer is an ear and a shoulder.
- If you are asked, and if you feel competent, you may be able to mediate between parties in conflict. What this really means is helping them learn how to listen to one another.
- If a person who departed a group in anger seeks to enter yours, be careful. Investigate the situation as best you can. Don't automatically assume that the elder is always right, nor that the person in authority is necessarily ego-driven or corrupt. Hear both sides out with an open mind.
- Even if you feel the applicant was right in their previous conflicts, even if they have your total sympathy, always also assess how well they would fit in with the rest of your group, and your way of doing things. Your first responsibility is to your present group members.
- Offer the same listening ear and supportive shoulder to a group leader who needs to understand why a member left, or sort out the feelings around an expulsion.
- Consider the possibility of conducting a healing ritual for a group or individual too upset to do their own.

Lessons learned

- **No person or group is perfect.**
- **Conflict can show both groups and individuals where we have room for improvement.**

- **By searching for the lesson, and by applying it, we can make something good happen in the most unlikely circumstances.**

Silent departures

Sometimes a member just stops coming to the group's meetings, without notice or explanation. If this happens, we may well wonder whether the missing person is sick or hurt. We might worry that they had gone away so angrily that they didn't want to talk about it with any of the group's members. Even if the member has left for happy reasons, involving no apparent conflict or problem with the group, we are concerned that their silent departure probably reveals some blockage in the group's communications.

Fortunately, very few people up and leave Pagan groups without at least saying goodbye. When they do, we need to remember that even their silence may not be about us. Pressures from outside the group, from situations, events and responsibilities having nothing to do with the group, may be so emotionally draining as to lead someone to silently depart because she or he simply doesn't have the emotional resources to make any sort of parting statement at all.

A silent departure may be even harder for a group to handle than angry walkouts complete with nasty exit fights. The ambiguity posed by a silent departure may weaken the group's sense of identity and the clarity of its boundaries. A strong need for collective closure may develop.

Inability to discuss the reasons for leaving

There are many conceivable situations in which a group's member may feel unsafe or embarrassed to discuss the reasons for leaving. To consider just a few:

- the member is averse to conflict because of previous trauma in their personal history. Something troubling happened, so they just quietly left;
- the member may have felt uncomfortable in the face of social or sexual pressure from another member or the group;
- the member may have contracted an illness about which they feel profoundly embarrassed; or perhaps a spouse or a child has taken ill;
- marital difficulties may have erupted for the member. An angry

spouse may have forbidden further contact with any of the group's members or leaders;

- the member got fired from a job for cause, or lost a substantial amount of money gambling. They cannot afford to travel to meetings and is now too ashamed to admit why not;
- They can't continue in the group for reasons entirely beyond their control. The member sees this as shamefully breaking a commitment, and so chooses to avoid embarrassment by just disappearing. This is the introvert's equivalent of an exit fight.

It is at least very difficult, and perhaps impossible, for a group leader to foresee all the possible reasons for silent departure.

However, the very possibility itself can certainly be foreseen, and perhaps best addressed in the group's opening 'ground rules' by making it plain to new members that departure without notice is rude and that 'no shame, no blame' departures are certainly an option for any member at any time.

Dealing with the leader's feelings of confusion or rejection

Good group leaders, quite understandably, care deeply about the well-being of all of the members of their groups. When members just stop coming, the leader will probably be worried about them at first. Later, if they still don't hear from the missing people, the leader may become confused as to what has happened and why, and so may begin a process of soul-searching and self-recrimination. They may come to feel that they and the group had failed to interest the people enough to motivate their continuing participation. A sense of rejection may lead to hurt feelings, or the leader and other group members may become defensive and angry at the departing member's rudeness.

Reactions like these are normal and understandable. We are not in some way unworthy as leaders for feeling confused and rejected. In time, as the feelings settle, we can begin to figure out what we might have done differently under the circumstances. We can try to change our ways so as to reduce the possibility of this happening again. But if nothing we did caused the silent departure, then nothing we can change will completely prevent others in the future.

Managing the situation: reaching out

Remember, people are not property. As Pagans, we reject the notion that there is one single spiritual path appropriate for everyone. We respect diversity and personal choice, so we do not engage in dropout control.

Still, it is natural for us to care about missing members, to want to make sure that all is well with them, to know whether their departure

highlights any correctable problems in our group.

Try to contact the absent members to find out what's happening. But don't pressure or harass them. Respect any limits they had previously set on contact -- for example, they may have asked you not to discuss Pagan business on their office phone. Judy thinks it's best to begin with the phone calls and e-mails we usually use these days. Paper letters seem so official and intimidating now that we mostly only get them from bureaucrats and lawyers. Gwyneth disagrees, feeling that high-tech communication tends to be more invasive. She notes that a person can wait to open a letter till they feel able to deal with its content.

Both of us suggest that if missing persons do not respond to your more casual efforts at contact, you should write a gently worded letter to them, explaining your need for clarification and understanding. If they were valuable members, you may want to offer the option of a leave of absence.

How much effort is appropriate?

There are no hard and fast rules. Silent departure is a circumstance where great tact, discretion and respect are called for. Here are some points to ponder in dealing with it.

- How hard do you or the group really want to try? How badly will you miss this person? Frankly, there are some members who, while they do nothing wrong, just don't fit. You may be happy to see them go in peace, saving face for all concerned.
- Harassment means repeated and unwelcome attempts at contact. Don't harass someone. If you don't receive any response, or don't like the response you received. Don't stalk them.
- Don't attempt to cajole a disaffected person to return to your group. Basic respect demands that you be willing to take 'no' for an answer.
- Some traditions call for holding a space open for a departed member for a year and a day. In the absence of a waiting list, this might be a reasonable amount of time to allow any member who left without prejudice to return without re-application. You might want to make some such grace period, of whatever length seems reasonable to you, an explicit part of your group's rules.
- If the group has a waiting list for membership, a silent departure puts you into a special quandary: how long do you hold the space open when this means keeping someone else out? Trying to be fair to both the absent member and the eager seeker may create pressure to act hastily in a variety of ways. Please take the very fact that you have a waiting list as a reminder to proceed with care and deliberation.
- On the other hand, the fact that others are waiting for this place

probably means that you should give the missing person a generous but explicit time limit to respond to your letter. Do explain the reason for this time limit. If you haven't heard from them by then, it's fair to consider them gone. If they eventually want to return, it's fair to put them at the end of your waiting list.

- If the person ever does re-apply to your group, you will want a full explanation -- not just of why they left, but of why they failed to give notice. Most important: look in to why they feel ready -- and called -- to resume working with your group. What has changed for them? Do consider any extenuating circumstances, as well as the person's prior value to the group and apparent growth during their absence, in deciding whether to have them back.

Resolution

Unless the information is embarrassing and confidential, share what you've learned with the group. At minimum, let the group know whether the missing person has requested a leave of absence or definitely departed. A regrouping and healing [ritual](#) may resolve the disturbing ambiguity caused by the silent departure of a member, and further help restore the group's boundaries and its sense of collective identity.

Lessons learned

- **It's healthy for a group to know clearly who is and is not an active member at any time. When this becomes confused, the leader should move to clarify the boundaries that support a group's sense of identity.**
- **The best way to protect your group against the trauma of a silent departure is to nurture an atmosphere of trust and open communications, in which everyone feels free to say their piece and everyone feels heard.**

Dissolution of the entire group

All that lives changes. We've said that again and again throughout these notes. It's also true that all that lives dies. So we turn from departures to dissolutions, to what happens when the group itself reaches its ending.

Circumstances of group dissolution

Groups dissolve under a whole range of circumstances. Sometimes the

dissolution is planned; sometimes it comes as a surprise. Sometimes groups end with a bang; sometimes they just fade away.

PLANNED ENDINGS

Some groups, for example formal classes, are planned from the beginning to cover a certain curriculum over a defined period of time and then end. These anticipated endings may still be sad, but they are not shocking or traumatic. People can leave anticipating the next adventure.

EXTERNALLY-IMPOSED ENDINGS

Some groups end because of circumstances that are outside the group's control and have nothing to do with the quality of the group's functioning. These endings can be very sad, even traumatic. We know of one coven that ended when their leader suffered a sudden heart attack and instantly died.

Under such circumstances, no hint of guilt corrodes the grief, and so healing is relatively simple. People just need some time to mourn.

ENDING WITH A BANG

Some groups explode in angry internal battles, perhaps leaving deep emotional scars. People need to heal. These sorts of endings are sometimes presaged by warning signs such as a general increase in interpersonal tension, but sometimes they come abruptly, seemingly 'out of the blue' as it were.

Gwyneth once watched in shock and amazement as a study group which she was co-leading disintegrated in fifteen minutes, through a series of increasingly nasty arguments, accusations and recriminations that started with a member's simple statement concerning difficulties in group communication.

FADING AWAY

Finally, some groups just quietly dwindle into nothingness, ending with a whimper, not a bang. The few members who are left at the end may need to understand why the group failed. Or, they may just feel relieved.

Practical considerations

Differing circumstances of dissolution carry different emotional overtones and require different actions. Following are some things to think about and do as you navigate through the ending of a group. Please use what seems applicable and ignore what does not. Some of these suggestions also apply to healing after the loss of a member.

HOUSEKEEPING MATTERS

Was there any group property? Where does it go? Often, items in common use were actually purchased or created by a single member. These items might go back to that person, or they might be passed along to an offspring group if one exists.

Either option works just fine if we're talking about ritual items, or something like sound equipment. But what if your group owns something really major, like real estate? We implore you to make arrangements at the time you acquire anything really substantial about what happens to it if your group dissolves. Otherwise you could be involved in some ugly disputes, or even lawsuits.

FINANCIAL MATTERS

How about money? A group treasury could be a tiny 'cookies and candles' fund, or it could be a substantial amount if you were saving toward a major purchase. Do you divide it among the last remaining members? Among all who were members in the last year? You might also divide it among offspring groups or donate it to a charity of your consensual choice.

ARCHIVAL MATTERS

If you are part of an initiatory lineage, consider who will maintain records, to protect your members' ongoing right to participate in your Tradition or lineage. Judy faced a similar problem in secular life, when the college from which she graduated closed down. A nearby university agreed to maintain the records and provide transcripts to graduates as needed. You may also need to ensure the safe custody of liturgical materials that are restricted to members of your tradition.

Grief Work

We've dealt with this topic in the section on [early departures](#). What we had to say there serves equally well here. After the initial emotional storms have subsided somewhat, the group may benefit from a facilitated discussion of the issues surrounding the departure. Pay especial attention to gathering lessons learned, so that further difficulties of this kind will be less likely.

Learning the Lessons

Failure is a harsh word, but when groups explode in anger or dwindle in apathy, it's accurate to say they failed. Give yourself some recovery time. When the initial pain fades, you can learn from any failure, increasing your chances for success in the future. We recommend the following framework for understanding a failure. Here's the model:

1. Describe what happened as completely and objectively as possible.
2. Describe your thoughts, feelings and hunches while this was going on. Also, describe the reasons for your choices and actions.
3. In retrospect, what insights can you draw out about your own underlying motivations or hidden assumptions or any covert group assumptions or norms.
4. Identify some other ways you or the group might have acted in the situation.
5. See if you can abstract any general lessons or operating principles from all this.

You can use this for personal introspection, of course, but it works even better when two co-leaders compare their perspectives on how things collapsed. You may also want to ask a wise and respected elder to help you work through this or a similar retrospective process. If you feel up to it, consider writing an article about your experience, so others can learn from it and perhaps avoid making the same mistakes.

Celebrating the Successes

Good memories deserve to be highlighted and celebrated. Our friend Lady Galadriel suggests a “nostalgia session.” Here’s her description:

“This should be focused on the good things and memories of the group, not be a bitching session. Everyone should be given a chance to speak (use a talking stick or something similar) and should recall some especially good and poignant moments with the group. Grief processing may also occur, if needed. The point is to help everyone focus on the positive, instead of dwelling on their gripes.”

Rituals for closure

Rituals for closure will vary drastically according to the circumstances under which the group dissolved and the feelings left behind. A study-group class may simply share a bottle of wine at term’s end, perhaps toasting one another’s future. A group which was broken by its leader’s sudden death may find closure in the memorial service.

If your group’s ending was more perplexing, you probably would benefit from a ritual intended to draw formal closure on the group’s experience and allow members to move along with their lives. The problem is that the more you need such a ritual, the less you are likely to be able to gather the former members together to wind things up in peace. So you may have to do it for yourself, or ask trusted friends to do it with or for you. The symbolic gesture can be simple: Judy remembers a friend who carried a handful of dried spaghetti onto the walkway of a bridge, snapped the pasta to break unwanted ties, then dropped the broken bits into the river. That sufficed.

The pitfall of rebound

Don't rush into a new group affiliation. Sure, it can work. When Judy's first coven blew up, she joined another within a week. But it's as risky as marriage on the rebound. Your chances will be better if you allow yourself a month, or better yet a quarter, to recover. Take some fallow time to rest and recover. Have some fun, far away from deep spiritual issues.

Wait until you have digested and appreciated both what you learned and how you grew while the group was working well and what you can learn from its failure. Wait, also, until you clearly know what aspects you want to explore next, what kind of group environment will best nurture the next phase of your growth.

Then, be open to surprises. The Old Gods still have many of those in store for us!

APPENDICES:

1.

Please adapt all ritual templates in these notes to suit your circumstances.

Ritual Templates

1. Blessing for a New Group
2. Bon Voyage Ritual
3. Celebration of the Elders
4. Group Healing after an Angry Departure
5. Group Healing after a Silent Departure

Please feel free to adapt this template, and all others in these notes, to suit your circumstances.

Blessing for a New Group

Invite all members of the parent group, and all core group members of the offspring group, to attend.

Ask each to bring a tiny gift (small enough to comfortably fit in the palm of their hand) that symbolises their wish for the new group. Leaders of the parent group are asked to provide an ornamental jar or container large enough to hold all these tokens. If either or both of the groups is a non-hierarchical collective, they can draw lots in advance to choose who will act as their representative in this rite in lieu of a leader.

- Parent group representative makes sacred space or opens ritual in their usual way.
- If the new group will focus on particular Deities, those are the ones that should be called.
- Guided group meditation - invite each person to imagine their ideal of a nurturant, fully-functioning group.
- Pass the container around. Each person explains their wish and adds their token.

- Parent group representative presents filled jar to the quarters, invokes the blessings of the Elemental Guardians upon it and upon the new group.
- Raise power in the parent group's usual way, release it into the container, then close the container.
- A representative of the parent group presents container to a representative of the offspring group.
- A representative of the offspring group expresses gratitude verbally, or with a gift of some ritual object to the parent group if they wish.
- Ritual blessing and sharing of food and drink together.
- Lots of conversation: embarrassing reminiscences about their training, pedantic advice and other expressions of love.
- Close in your usual way. Consider whether the parent or offspring representative should close. Each choice makes a different symbolic statement.

If this is also the first branch from this elder, a promotion ritual for the elder is equally in order. You can combine these rituals, but be careful to give full attention to both statements. Invite the extended family, especially all of those who are elder to your elder, and make it a great, big feast!

Bon Voyage ritual

To prepare for this ritual, the leaders and members of the group should think about what ongoing support they want to offer to the person who is leaving. Also, the group may wish to select a gift of remembrance for the person – something small which might, nonetheless, represent the good wishes of the group. Similarly, the departing person should think about what he or she might care to have in the way of ongoing contact and support. Also, the departing person might wish to select a small token of esteem to give to the group, as a memento of the happy times spent together.

- Invite all of the members of the current group, as well as former members with whom the departing member has shared happy times.
- Set aside a corner of the ritual space for any tokens, mementos or other gifts to be exchanged. Consider perhaps having a basket or other container that the departing person can take with him or her.

- Create sacred space according to your customs. If the departing person takes part in this, so much the better.
 - Invite the members of the group to share their happy memories and parting wishes for the person. If they brought gifts, these may be placed in the container which the person is to take away.
 - Invite the departing person to speak of his or her own memories and hopes. If she or he has a gift for the group, now is the time to present it.
 - Ritual blessing and sharing of food and drink together.
 - Leaders of the group should now offer any words of blessing and farewell that seem appropriate.
- Option:** one last dance together within sacred space, perhaps with the departing person in a seat of honor in the center of the dance. If this is your custom, you can raise power for the person's future success.
- At this point a group hug is virtually inevitable.
 - Whoever opened the ritual should close it in the usual way.

CELEBRATION OF THE ELDERS

It's always appropriate to celebrate and honor the leader of a parent group, whenever a new offspring group branches off, even if this is the tenth or fifteenth offspring. But the first is special, a life changing event in which the elder gains a whole new role – that of elder consultant to an autonomous offspring – and a whole new level of status and respect in the larger community. Later branchings add, but do not change. We believe this important life passage deserves to be ritually marked and celebrated.

Celebration for a new Grandparent

To prepare for this ritual, the leaders of the parent and offspring groups should think about their mutual expectations and obligations. We strongly suggest that they compare notes, and work out any disharmonies in advance of the actual branching-off, let alone of the rite. They may want to bring written copies of these statements, in nicely typeset or calligraphed versions if at all possible.

- Invite all the members of your tradition or lineage who are significant to the new Grandparent, certainly including their own direct elders and, if possible, their elders' elders as far back as you can go. Try to contact the old members of their own parent group, the people with whom they trained.

Also invite anybody within your lineage or tradition with whom the new Grandparent is particularly friendly.

- Consider decorating a chair or special cushion for the 'guest of honour,' or two seats if the parent group is led by a couple.

Choice point: either the new Grandparent's teacher or the student who is now branching might create sacred space or open the ritual according to their own customs. These are two different ritual statements, so consider which is best for you. In either case, invoke the primary Deities of all three generations. These may or may not be the same, depending on your customs.

- Invite the new Grandparent's elders, direct and indirect, as many as are present, to give advice on the new role being assumed and blessings to both parent and offspring.
- Invite the leader of the first offspring group and the new Grandparent to read and exchange their understandings about their transformed relationship.

Option: you may want to consider creating a token of Grandparent status. In ordinary "marriage and birth" type families, this is often a charm bracelet. How it works is that the great-grandparent presents the new grandparent with a bracelet, then the adult and married children present a charm for each new grandchild. You can do something parallel, such that the elder's gift unifies the diverse gifts of the juniors, to symbolise that this is a branch point, connected at both ends to the original lineage.

- If there is a physical token of any kind, ask the new Grandparent's teachers to bless and consecrate it in their own manner and to lead the group in empowering it.
- Ritual blessing and sharing of food and drink together.
- Lots of conversation: embarrassing reminiscences about their actions, pedantic advice and other expressions of love.
- Whoever opened the ritual should close it in their usual way.

GROUP HEALING RITUAL

To prepare for this ritual, the leaders and remaining members of the group should meditate on the things which they value about each other and about the group as

a collective whole. Members might wish to select and bring along tokens and decorative materials which they could add to a representation of the group's collective identity – these might be pieces to be added to a coven banner, or objects for a kinetic sculpture such as a webwork.

Invite all of the remaining members of the group to participate. If one or more of the group's leaders were among the people who departed, the group's direct Grandparents should be invited to participate. In cases where the group has been 'decapitated' by the departure of all of its leaders, the Grandparents should facilitate this rite in consultation with any remaining elder members.

- Create sacred space or open the ritual according to the group's usual customs.
- Hold discussions in rounds, using a talking-stick or similar object if you wish.
- The first round should be of feelings and recollections surrounding the departure of the former members; not everyone may wish to speak to this in the first or any round, and some members may have a great deal to say. Allow time for them to speak fully; repeat this round if need be.
- The second round should be of the members' sense of group value, encouraging frank statements of the strengths and weaknesses of the group's process; repeat this round if need be.
- The third round should be of the members' sense of the group's future, and its ongoing collective identity.
- Ritual blessing and sharing of food and drink together. This might best be done in silence.
- Open discussion and sharing of ideas, including lessons learned from the preceding events.
- Work together on creating (or recreating) the group's collective symbol. If a previous symbol was in use, this would be a good time to deconsecrate and retire it, taking care not to focus anger towards symbolic components that betokened departed members.
- Joint blessing and empowering of the group's symbol.
- Whoever opened the ritual should close it in their usual way.

Ritual for Regrouping and Healing

When designing and conducting this ritual, be careful to avoid directing anger or ill-will towards the departed member. Don't do anything that might draw the missing member back or bind them to the group against their own will. By acknowledging the former member's right to freely leave, the remaining members indirectly affirm their own right and choice to stay.

In preparation, the leaders and remaining members of the group should meditate on the things which they value about each other and about the group as

a collective whole. Members might wish to select and bring along tokens and decorative materials which they could add to a representation of the group's collective identity – these might be pieces to be added to a group banner, or objects for a kinetic sculpture such as a webwork.

- Invite all of the remaining members of the group to participate.
- Create sacred space or open the ritual according to the group's usual customs.
- Consider having members enter into the sacred space with a great deal of fuss and celebration -- welcome them in, and make clear by your collective welcoming that the group values all its remaining members.
- The leader or other intermediary should make a clear and respectful statement concerning what is known of the circumstances of the missing person or persons' departure from the group. If nothing is known, say so. If certain matters were shared in confidence, respect that confidence.
- Hold discussions in rounds, using a talking-stick or similar object if you wish. Avoid the temptation to denigrate the character, or impugn the motives, of the person or people who went missing.
- Ritual blessing and sharing of food and drink together. This might best be done in silence.
- Open discussion and sharing of ideas, including lessons learned from the preceding events.
- Reclaim, repair, and perhaps rearrange the group's collective symbol.
- Joint blessing and empowering of the group's symbol.
- Whoever opened the ritual should close it in their usual way.

2.

Self -Examination For Coven Leaders



LOOKING AT YOURSELF

Before you go a step further, take a good long look at your desires, motivation and skills. What role do you see yourself playing in this new group? "Ordinary" member? Democratic facilitator? High Priestess? And if the last -- why do you want the job?

The title of High Priestess and Priestess are seductive, conjuring up exotic images of yourself in embroidered robes, a silver crescent (or horned helm) on your brow, adoring celebrants hanging on

every word which drops from your lips...

Reality check. The robes will be stained with wine and candle wax soon enough, and not every word you speak is worth remembering. A coven leader's job is mostly hard work between rituals and behind the scene. It is not always a good place to act out your fantasies, because the lives and well-being of others are involved, and what is flattering or enjoyable to you may not be in their best interest. So consider carefully.

If your prime motive in establishing a coven is to gain status and ego gratification, other people will quickly sense that. If they are intelligent, independent individuals, they will refuse to play Adoring Disciple to your Witch Queen impressions. They will disappear, and that vanishing act will be the last magick they do with you.

And if you do attract a group ready to be subservient Spear Carriers in your fantasy drama -- well, do you really want to associate with that kind of personality? What are you going to do when you want someone strong around to help you or teach you, and next New Moon you look out upon a handful of Henry Milquetoasts and Frieda Handmaidens? If a person is willing to serve you, they will also become dependent on you, drain your energy, and become disillusioned if you ever let down the Infallible Witch Queen mask for even a moment.

Some other not-so-great reasons for starting a coven: a) because it seems glamorous, exotic, and a little wicked; b) because it will shock your mother, or c) because you can endure your boring, flunkie job more easily if you get to go home and play Witch at night.

Some better reasons for setting up a coven, and even nominating yourself as High Priest/ess, include: a) you feel that you will be performing a useful job for yourself and others; b) you have enjoyed leadership roles in the past, and proven yourself capable; or c) you look forward to learning and growing in the role.

Even with the best motives in the world, you will still need to have -- or quickly develop -- a whole range of skills in order to handle a leadership role. If you are to be a facilitator of a study group, group process insights and skills are important.

These include:

- 1) Gatekeeping, or guiding discussion in such a way that everyone has an opportunity to express ideas and opinions;
- 2) Summarizing and clarifying;
- 3) Conflict resolution, or helping participants understand points of disagreement and find potential solutions which respect everyone's interests;
- 4) Moving the discussion toward consensus, or at any rate decision, by identifying diversions and refocusing attention on goals and priorities; and
- 5) Achieving closure smoothly when the essential work is completed, or an appropriate stopping place is reached.

In addition to group process skills, four other competencies necessary to the functioning of a coven are:

ritual leadership, administration, teaching, and counseling. In a study group the last one may not be considered a necessary function, and the other three may be shared among all participants. But in a coven the leaders are expected to be fairly capable in all these areas, even if responsibilities are frequently shared or delegated. Let us look briefly at each.

Ritual leadership involves much more than reading invocations by candlelight. Leaders must understand the powers they intend to manipulate: how they are raised, channeled and grounded. They must be adept at designing rituals which involve all the sensory modes. They should have a repertoire of songs and chants, dances and gestures or mudras, incense and oils, invocations and spells, visual effects and symbols, meditations and postures; and the skill to combine these in a powerful, focused pattern. They must have clarity of purpose and firm ethics. And they must understand timing: both where a given ritual fits in the cycles of the Moon, the Wheel of the Year, and the dance of the spheres, and how to pace the ritual once started, so that energy peaks and is channeled at the perfect moment. And they must understand the Laws of Magick, and the correspondences, and when ritual is appropriate and when it is not.

By administration, we refer to basic management practices necessary to any organization. These include apportioning work fairly, and following up on its progress; locating resources and obtaining them (information, money, supplies); fostering communications (by telephone, printed schedules, newsletters etc.); and keeping records (minutes, accounts, Witch Book entries, or ritual logbook). Someone or several someones has to collect the dues if any, buy the candles, chill the wine, and so forth.

Teaching is crucial to both covens and study groups. If only one person has any formal training or experience in magick, s/he should transmit that knowledge in a way which respects the intuitions, re-emerging past life skills, and creativity of the others. If several participants have some knowledge in differing areas, they can all share the teaching role. If no one in the group has training and you are uncertain where to begin, they you may need to call on outside resources: informed and ethical priest/esses who can act as visiting faculty, or who are willing to offer guidance by telephone or correspondence. Much can be gleaned from books, or course -- assuming you know which books are trustworthy and at the appropriate level -- but there is no substitute for personal instruction for some things. Magick can be harmful if misused, and an experienced practitioner can help you avoid pitfalls as well as offering hints and techniques not found in the literature.

Counseling is a special role of the High Priest/ess. It is assumed that all members of a coven share concern for each other's physical, mental, emotional and spiritual welfare, and are willing to help each other out in practical ways. However, coven leaders are expected to have a special ability to help coveners explore the roots of their personal problems and choose strategies and tactics to overcome them. This is not to suggest that one must be a trained psychoanalyst; but at the least, good listening skills, clear thinking and some insight into human nature are helpful. Often, magickal skills such as guided visualization, Tarot counseling and radiesthesia (pendulum work) are valuable tools as well.

Think carefully about your skills in these areas, as you have demonstrated them in other organizations. Ask acquaintances or co-workers, who can be trusted to give you a candid opinion, how they see you in some of these roles. Meditate, and decide what you really want for yourself in organizing the new group. Will you be content with being a catalyst and contact person -- simply bringing people with a common interest together, then letting the group guide its destiny from that point on? Would you rather be a facilitator, either for the first months or permanently: a low-key discussion leader who enables the group to move forward with a minimum of misunderstanding and wasted energy? Or do you really

want to be High Priestess -- whatever that means to you -- and serve as the guiding spirit and acknowledged leader of a coven? And if you do want that job, exactly how much authority and work do you envision as part of it? Some coven leaders want a great deal of power and control; others simply take an extra share of responsibility for setting up the rituals (whether or not they actually conduct the rites), and act as "magickal advisor" to less experienced members. Thus the High Priest/ess can be the center around which the life of the coven revolves, or primarily an honorary title, or anything in between.

That is one area which you will need to have crystal-clear in your own mind before the first meeting (of if you are flexible, at least be very clear that you are). You must also be clear as to your personal needs on other points: program emphasis, size, meeting schedule, finances, degree of secrecy, and affiliation with a tradition or network. You owe it to prospective members and to yourself to make your minimum requirements known from the outset: it can be disastrous to a group to discover that members have major disagreements on these points after you have been meeting for six months.

3.

Tough Healing: Bringing an Oathbreaker Back Home

As Witches, in our Dedication, Initiation and Elevation rituals, we give and take oaths, nor do we do this lightly. Yet none of us is perfect, and some will slip. Most such slips are handled quietly and simply, one on one: a word of reminder, an acknowledgement of error, both sides knowing that, whatever other mistakes may be made, this one will not be repeated. Who of us has not on occasion been called to task by a teacher or elder?

But sometimes even a single incident is of extreme severity. Sometimes there is a pattern of behavior, an implicit attitude, or even an attitude explicitly stated, that shows us that this person no longer shares our common values, no longer abides by our social contract. Perhaps they really never did; our initiation decisions are not infallible either. Sometimes we have to recognize that a person we held as one of our kindred is an oathbreaker, and therefore kin no longer. We can't take back an initiation once given, but we can, with terrible grief, take back our trust.

When a person has stepped beyond the line of values and ethics that define our community, is there a way for that person to step back? All communities have the need and the right to define their boundaries and defend their values, so facile re-acceptance is a bad idea. And yet, if we accept that people are fallible, if we believe that ours is a path of psycho-spiritual growth, then logic demands that there must be some healing option.

Priest/esses are fallible, too, and the procedure we are proposing here might also serve as a means of appeal from a banishment that seems unjust, excessive or arbitrary to the person who has been banished. We think this may serve our need:

1. The person has to show us that they understand why we find their behavior unacceptable. They have to demonstrate clear understanding of what conduct we expect of each other and why, and willingness to abide by basic Wiccan values in the future. And they will have to demonstrate this understanding and intention to three elders well enough to satisfy each one of those elders that the person "got it."

For sake of fresh perspective, we recommend that one of the three elders not be part of the line directly senior to the person. For fairness, we recommend that, if the person feels before attempting this communication process, that any of the three elders selected is unalterably prejudiced, the most senior Queen available hear and evaluate the reasons for that feeling and possibly choose a different elder. For fairness, we must also accept the small but real possibility that the person might convince all three elders that no oathbreaking actually took place, and the matter be resolved with that.

2. The person must take whatever action is possible to undo their action and reduce or repair any damage caused. They should certainly offer a direct apology to any individual who was personally affected. We recognize that sometimes nothing at all can be done, and would not let that by itself be an impediment to healing. We honor symbolic gestures and good faith attempts.

3. A broken oath cannot be repaired, but it can be replaced. If all three elders are satisfied that the person now fully understands what we expect and intends to abide by it, then formally and in Circle, the person may take their oath anew, witnessed by any or all of the three elders, and anyone else the person and the elders agree to invite.

We hope and believe that this procedure could adequately balance our need to protect the group's sense of self, based on religious values, with our duty to nurture each person and our heartfelt desire to heal wherever possible. We welcome the insights of our kindred.

Blessed be.

Meredydd Harper
Barry Marin
Judy Harrow
Margot Adler

4.