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COMING TO THE EDGE OF THE CIRCLE:
A WICCAN INITIATION RITUAL

DISSERTATION

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree Doctor of Philosophy in the Graduate School of The Ohio State University

By

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Approved by

Interdisciplinary Graduate Program
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ABSTRACT

This paper is a thick ethnographic description and exploration of an initiation ritual performed by a small coven of Witches located in Ohio. Members of this religious community, called either Wiccans or Witches within this paper, practice a contemporary nature religion variously called Wicca, Witchcraft, the Old Religion, or the Craft by its practitioners. Wicca is an extremely diverse and decentralized religion with a great deal of local autonomy in membership, practices, and organizational structure. Within this particular religious community, initiation is both a ceremony through which an individual becomes a member of the community and a central, significant transformative religious experience that is expressed through ritual performance and bodily praxis. An examination of how Wiccans express and use ritual may, in turn, give us a clue about how such performance and praxis might function in other religions as well.

In addition to exploring ritual performance and bodily praxis, I hope with this work to challenge traditional notions of initiation as a tripartite process of transformation with sharply defined movements of separation, liminality, and reincorporation. This model of initiation has been prevalent in the scholarship since Arnold van Gennep first published The Rites of Passage in 1909. The etically derived tripartite model and its
variations usually employ a unidirectional spatiality and a linear understanding of the process of transformation. However, when approaching the ceremony from the dual perspective of a scholar-practitioner, a linear and spatial analysis proves inadequate to describe particular emic aspects of the ceremony.

As a practitioner and an interdisciplinary scholar, my approach to initiation is necessarily reflexive and pluralistic. Within a broad philosophical framework, I draw upon the insights and methods of ethnographic folklore studies, somatic theories, the feminist critique of androcentrism, metacommunication theories, and especially a performance approach in order to access meaningful aspects of the initiation within both the immediate and the larger process of a particular ritual performance. Key to understanding this process is a concept of ritual as a somatic praxis, a repetitive discipline that engages both the body and the mind in learning.
Dedicated to my loving husband,
Eric T. Fralick,
who always believed in me, even when I didn't
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INTRODUCTION

Witches say you'll never forget your initiation into the Craft. This may be true, as the memory of my own seems vividly alive to me, although it happened nearly twenty-five years ago. I can still feel the hardness of the chair I sat in, my eyes fixed inwardly in reflection before the flame of a candle glowing softly against the darkness, its flickering light setting shadows dancing. I concentrated on my breath, counting slowly, trying with varying degrees of success to "breathe myself" into a state of deliberate calmness. The cavernous room of the old house had a slight chill to it, even though the time of year for that sort of chill was nearly past. It was May in Ohio. Maybe the cold came from the sound of Walter Carlos' synthesized wolves howling to their winter moon, their stark music set to distract me from sounds I could barely make out coming from the rooms above. Surely the shiver came from the cold and not from hearing the soft tread of footsteps on the stairs, coming to bring me to the edge of the Circle,¹ to the place of my own death and rebirth—for that is precisely what initiation into the Craft is....

It has now been many years since my own initiation. I stand again at the edge of the Circle and wait, reflecting. That many things change is not surprising in twenty-five cycles of the Solar Wheel. The cavernous room and
the old house have long been replaced by a grove of trees and a deep night sky, tonight sprinkled with stars and the ominous flash of lightning we hope is only “heat lightning.” No electronic wolves serenade the moon tonight with their howls—only the chirp of crickets, the occasional squawk of a night bird, and the ever-present whine of mosquitoes. I am no longer a newcomer to the old ways, but a High Priestess in my lineage, one who is well seasoned in the rites of initiation.

Surprisingly, some things seem the same. Shadows still flicker, set dancing now by the bonfire at the center of the Circle—useful tonight more for its light than its heat. I still breathe myself into a state of calm awareness, but now automatically, my body adopting what I call “ritual mode” without thinking. The familiar shiver returns, despite the fire and the sticky heat of the night, as footsteps heard along the path bring the initiate-to-be to the edge of the Circle, where I—hooded and robed as Death—await to deliver the challenge that ultimately transforms.

Come with me as I stand again at the Circle’s edge and attempt to fashion a rich description of a ritual initiation into the Craft of the Wise, variously called The Old Religion, Wicca, Witchcraft, or just “the Craft” by its practitioners. Initiation varies widely in both ritual form and practice within the Craft. Generally speaking, it is one means by which a person assumes an identity as a member of a religious community. For example, some Witches recognize and practice initiation into a group or coven, often after a period of study and training. Other Witches, especially those who are solitary practitioners or who are not otherwise connected with a particular
community, may practice self-initiation as a means of expressing identity. Still others may have no formal initiation rituals at all. Those Witches, or Wiccans, who do practice group initiation rites tend to view them as central and highly significant religious experiences—something that an initiate truly never does forget. Such an initiation ritual should, therefore, be a good candidate for exploring some ways in which Wiccan belief is expressed through ritual performance and bodily praxis. In turn, this may give us a clue about how such performance and praxis might function in other religions as well.

In addition to exploring ritual performance and bodily praxis, I hope with this work to challenge traditional notions of initiation as a tripartite process of transformation with sharply defined movements of separation, liminality, and reincorporation. This model of initiation has been prevalent in the scholarship since Arnold van Gennep first published *The Rites of Passage* in 1909. The etically derived tripartite model and its variations (e.g., Turner 1969, 1987 and Lincoln 1981) usually employ a unidirectional spatiality and a linear understanding of the process of transformation. However, when approaching the ceremony from the dual perspective of a scholar-practitioner, a linear and spatial analysis proves inadequate to describe particular emic aspects of the ceremony.

As both a practitioner of the Wiccan religion and an interdisciplinary scholar, my approach to initiation ritual is necessarily reflexive and pluralistic. Within a broad philosophical framework, I shall draw upon the insights and methods of ethnographic folklore studies, somatic theories, the
feminist critique of androcentrism, metacommunication theories, and especially a performance approach in order to access meaningful aspects of the initiation within both the immediate and the larger process of a particular ritual performance.
CHAPTER 1
Dancing Between Binary Poles: Life as a Scholar-Practitioner

At this point in my narrative, it is necessary to stop and reflect upon some issues critical to my work. According to a kind of scholarly thinking once quite common in both ethnography and the academic study of religions, the Introduction to this work labels me an “insider,” a “believer,” and that immediately makes my scholarship suspect. In fact, the insider/outsider problem remains one of the most controversial and divisive issues among scholars of religions and belief studies, impacting not only whose voices are heard within the Academy, but hiring and tenure processes within universities as well. The dichotomy between insider and outsider or native and non-native reserves “scientific” objectivity only for the outsider. Insider knowledge is perceived as “tainted” with subjectivity and is therefore useless to the serious scholar.

I have encountered several instances of this dichotomy in my career. As an undergraduate studying the philosophy of religion, I was early advised that it would be best to study a religion that was either “long ago or far away—preferably both.” Such ethnographic distance was thought to provide a fortress for scholars, surrounding them with a protective moat of objectivity that insulated them from the potentially messy and sometimes
contentious interactions with, or criticisms of, natives who might disagree with their scholarly analysis. In the ethnography of the times it was perfectly acceptable for a scholar to adopt the stance of "participant/observer" as long as he was careful not to participate too much. "Going native" was an egregious sin tantamount to committing scholarly suicide.

While this situation has changed considerably in the field of ethnography (e.g., Clifford and Marcus 1986), it can be argued that religious studies has lagged behind. Quite a few years after receiving that bit of undergraduate philosophical wisdom, I submitted an abstract for my first paper at the national American Academy of Religion conference in 1990. The subject of that paper, which was eventually accepted and presented at the conference, was the influence of the women's movement on The Old Religion—a topic that makes me an "insider" in at least two major directions. While my being a woman was curiously ignored as a possibly contaminating influence, I was advised by the section chair not to make my abstract sound too much like it was written by a religious practitioner in order to avoid the appearance of "insider pleading" or "Wiccan apologetics."

With these experiences in mind, I acknowledge that identifying myself as a Wiccan High Priestess can be a risky venture. At the extreme, it may indeed be calling forth a response similar to the one Donald Sutherland got in the movie Invasion of the Body Snatchers: having survived all sorts of harrowing scrapes, he was discovered in the end to be "other" and was encircled by pointing pod people. Is revealing myself as "insider"
tantamount to identifying myself as “other” to the scholarly enterprise, the equivalent of committing scholarly suicide?

Let us address the question together to see if we can get beyond the insider/outsider dichotomy into a more useful way of understanding and utilizing the work of scholar-practitioners. First of all, is the insider/outsider distinction even an accurate or useful one? The scholarship that produces the insider/outsider distinction shares some similarities with other forms of dichotomous thinking, thinking that produces such binary oppositions as subjective versus objective and practice versus theory. In fact, the poles of these binary oppositions are frequently philosophically aligned: outsider/objective/theory against insider/subjective/practice. These distinctions are often far too easily and quickly made, concealing the underlying assumptions making the distinction problematic.

For example, the insider/outsider distinction tends to assume that there is only one insider voice, or that an insider perspective is only one sort of thing. Also implied by the insider/outsider distinction is the assumption that there is only one “correct” or objective outsider voice. However, this is rarely seriously entertained by scholars who are quite familiar with the diversity of scholarly voices and the competition of scholarly perspectives with one another. Perhaps less familiar to the scholar is the fact that insiders also participate in a variety of perspectives and disagree among themselves at least as much as scholars do. Dichotomous thinking almost always essentializes, reducing each end of the binary construction to a uniform monolith that is not reflected in actual human experience. Rather
than a single, unitary voice or perspective, the terms "insider" and "outsider" conceal an entire realm of discourse engaged in by a multitude of shifting voices and perspectives in negotiation or even in contestation with one another. Religious, like scholarly, praxis tends rather to be a "messy" affair, with various descriptions, judgments, analyses, and outright opinions contending and sometimes conflicting with one another. In religious practice as in scholarship, there is more than one legitimate point of view.

Moreover, dichotomous thinking is problematic in itself. Dichotomies are sets of binary absolutes that function logically as "on/off" switches. No interplay or dynamic shifting tension is implied between the binary pairs. Why is this an important point? A metaphor of light and dark inspired by the pre-Socratic philosophers' gets at the difference between a dynamic polarity and a dichotomous absolute. In dichotomous thinking, light and dark function as absolutes, very much like the on/off light switch we're familiar with in our homes. In absolute darkness, we are blind. In absolute light, we are also blind. If sight is the point, neither absolute darkness nor absolute light gives us what we want. It is only through the dynamic interplay of light and dark—the shifting of lights and shadows—that sight exists.

Furthermore, we are able to see differently according to the degree that the lights and shadows play with one another. This shifting play of light and dark, the dynamic tension between and movement of lights and shadows, produces the wondrous multitude of sights and perspectives possible in the human experience.
How does this light/dark metaphor help us understand the problem with the insider/outside dichotomy? And why have I emphasized the word “play” above? The static binary absolutes produced by dichotomous thinking conceal the extent to which each of the binary pairs actually does “play” with its opposite in human experience. Objective and outsider, used together to describe the “proper” scholarly stance vis-à-vis religion, conceal the constructed rhetoric of scholarly discourse. All knowledge—including scholarly knowledge—is a mixture of shifting degrees of objectivity and subjectivity, distance and closeness, outsider and insider, theory and practice. Knowing is an activity; it is a doing, a praxis—the dynamic participation in and creation of a “discourse of lights and shadows” that constantly shifts and changes to reveal new perspectives or to accommodate new voices. Knowledge, then, is experiential and perspectival. Emphasizing the ludic element draws our attention to the degree of creativity and constructedness, the play and perspective obtaining in the human experience of knowing.

Dichotomous thinking is therefore unsatisfactory in several respects. It obscures the range of perspectives, activities, and voices in each end of the binary pair. Further, it misconstrues the relationship of the binary pairs to one another, concealing the extent to which such oppositions as insider/outsider, objective/subjective actually play off of one another dynamically and intertwine in human experience. Dichotomous thinking obscures both the practices of scholars and the theories of practitioners. It obscures the playful, creative, and constructed praxis of knowledge making.
Although many ethnographers today recognize the inadequacy of
dichotomous thinking (e.g., Clifford and Marcus 1986, Bruner and Turner
1986, Fabian 1971, 1983, 1994 and others) and some fine reflexive and
nonreductionistic ethnographies have been produced by folklorists and
anthropologists (e.g., Lawless 1993, O'Connor 1995, Goodman, 1988b,
Jackson 1989, and Gold and Raheja 1994, to name a few), the
insider/outsider dichotomy is nevertheless difficult for some scholars of
religions to give up (e.g., Segal 1983). Folklorist and belief scholar Diane
Goldstein in her article "The Secularization of Religious Ethnography and
Narrative Competence in a Discourse of Faith" suggests that it is the
subject of our study—religion itself—that throws off our ethnography.

As ethnographers, we describe cultural groups and practices, hopefully with an eye toward at least trying to understand notions of significance and meaning for the people we study. But... in the church, at prayer meetings, at religious ceremonies, we become frightened scientists hiding behind complex theories, narrow definitions, and sometimes even older notions of an irrational-but-quaint peasantry clinging to remnants of primitive thought and behavior. We don't do this in our other ethnographic works, only in those which involve belief issues, only in those which present a threat to our own safe worldview. (1995:25)

For these scholars insider pleading poses a very real problem and remains a threat to scholarly objectivity. Is “insider scholarship” or the work of scholar-practitioners automatically the equivalent of insider pleading or religious advocacy? Does insider knowledge taint my scholarship with bias, making it less worthy of consideration than an outsider’s perspective? Is a
nonnative or outsider's perspective automatically more trustworthy, more accurate than that of a native informant who is also a scholar?

Such questions are ultimately rooted in a "culture of disbelief," or what folklorist David Hufford in his article "The Scholarly Voice and the Personal Voice: Reflexivity in Belief Studies" calls a stance of "methodological atheism" (1995:68). Methodological atheism goes beyond the bracketing of truth claims familiar to us in phenomenology or the suspension of judgment that simple agnosticism or skepticism would entail (e.g., Smart 1973). Hufford notes a shift in the meaning of rational skepticism that warps its usage as a methodology in belief studies.

Skepticism as methodological doubt, suspension of certainty, critical examination of claims, is essential to balanced scholarship....But skepticism as fixed disbelief of specific propositions, a sort of anti-credo, is neither rational nor productive in any intellectual activity. (Hufford 1995:6) (See also Hufford 1987, Simpson 1988, Goldstein 1989 and Hufford 1990 for a debate on skepticism and neutrality.)

Skepticism thus moves from the idea of "suspended judgment" to a determination that "certain kinds of traditional religious ideas are false." This "naively advances one culturally loaded belief" (methodological atheism) "as dispassionate neutrality" and fails completely to "grant atheism its due as a religious position" [italics mine] (Hufford 1995:68-9).

While methodological atheism pretends to be a "neutral position" that requires no "reflexive component," it demands that scholars with any other methodological posture "display personal reflexivity in a social context that
guarantees such reflexivity will result in charges of bias unless one's scholarly work discredits one's personal beliefs" [italics in the original] (1995:69).

Within the culture of disbelief the scholar-practitioner is left with an unappealing choice between religion and scholarship, forcing alliance with one and betrayal of the other.

Less often considered by the academic community, but perhaps equally important to the religious community, is the parallel question “does scholarship taint my religious practice?” Can I simultaneously be both a “real” Witch capable of performing effective and magical rituals and a questioning scholar aware of the constructed nature of ritual performance? Religious practitioners are all too familiar with scholarly treatments of their religions rooted in the culture of disbelief. By extending beyond mere suspension of judgment, the culture of disbelief must necessarily explain away religious experience as an essential and fundamental “misrecognition” on the part of practitioners. What is “really going on” is either some form of psychological wish-fulfillment or neurosis (Freud), or society worshipping itself (Durkheim), or an outright failure on the part of the religious to realize that they are being duped by an agent of economic oppression (Marx).

That human religious experiences frequently have psychological, socio-political, and economic dimensions is not the issue. The issue is what is missed by a reduction of religious experiences to everything but something called “religion.” As Goldstein notes, “the centrality of emotional and experiential factors to religious life must be described and understood before religious scholarship can claim any kind of empirical adequacy” (1995:25).
Even when the power of ritual performance is recognized (e.g., Kuipers 1990) it is removed from its context in the embodied world of ritual praxis; it is duly cleansed of any reference to the transformative power of magic, prayer, or other discourse of faith; it is understood by scholars as disembodied text, its power reduced to that of narrative—the power of words to represent or symbolize the possibility of changes that are primarily psychological or political in nature. While text and narrative undoubtedly have great power, it is not the only thing capable of effecting transformation. Nor is disembodied text likely to be recognized by religious practitioners as the agent of change capable of effecting transformation in the physical or "objective" as well as the psychological or "subjective" world. Such a reduction misses or fails to address what "feels real" to the religious practitioner. It does not "capture magic."

Confronting the "m-word"—magic—head on, ritual studies scholar Tom Driver in his book *The Magic of Ritual* points us to an interesting "curiosity."

Many persons in Western society are skeptical of any transformative powers that may be claimed for ritual, except perhaps the inducement of changes that can be taken as primarily subjective or psychological in nature. This skepticism, being partly a matter of ideology, is strongest in those sectors of society that would have the most to lose were any major social transformation to occur . . . . One way of guarding the status quo against change is to deny the rationality of any expectation that rituals can do much to alter it. (1991:166-7)

Faced with the actual practice of religious rituals or magic, a scholar working out of the methodological stance of cultural disbelief can always
simply throw up her hands in bafflement over how "seemingly normal," well-educated adults could possibly believe this stuff! And when such a scholar obtains her data from religious communities by merely posing as a believer or practitioner and subsequently publishes the results, the religious community is likely to interpret her scholarship as an act of betrayal.

The level of mistrust and suspicion can therefore be quite high between the scholarly and the religious communities. Certainly, neither scholars nor religious practitioners have all the right answers, or even probably all the right questions. Neither group automatically "misrecognizes," but both scholars and religious practitioners may differently and also legitimately recognize. The mere suggestion that religious practitioners may have legitimate insights into religious phenomena sometimes elicits a curious response—as if this were the equivalent of saying that religious practitioners have the only valid perspective or that scholars must believe in magic, perform rituals, or deliver emotional and heartfelt testimony as to the “power of prayer.” Certainly this would be as ludicrous as the idea that the religious always misrecognize. Yet this reaction indicates to what extent our scholarship on religion is rooted in the either/or stance of the culture of disbelief, a stance that ultimately demands an untenable allegiance to a single, monolithic perspective. A more accurate description of the task at hand involves the exploration of a multitude of perspectives—a discourse of lights and shadows—that will yield the most insight into experiences of the sacred.
In the rather unlikely event that relations between scholars and religious practitioners were to become suddenly unproblematic, crucial questions nevertheless remain for the scholar-practitioner. Can a person be both a devoted religious practitioner and a devoted scholar without compromising the integrity of either? Is it possible to participate competently in multiple discourses, to be simultaneously informed by both scholarly and religious praxis without reducing either one to the other or confusing the two?

Because I am a "self-professed" Witch (as we are so often referred to by the media), it will not come as a shock that I am sympathetic to the negative reactions that some religious practitioners have expressed toward some of the treatment they have received by scholars—treatment that can be described at best as insensitive and at worst as arrogant and even unethical. Yet, I also consider legitimate the concern over "insider pleading" or "apologetics," but I think the problem is somewhat mistakenly expressed or misdiagnosed—"misrecognized," if you will—by scholars. Typically the issue is formulated as a loss of "objectivity" to the "subjectivity" of religious practice. As we have noted above, careful examination of the problematic nature of dichotomous thinking reveals that this is not the case. But what can happen is a misunderstanding—a kind of "category mistake"—that conflates one kind of praxis with another, in this case confusing religious affirmation or advocacy with scholarship. Such a category mistake is often caused by a failure to apprehend the nature of scholarly praxis or a failure to recognize the differences between scholarly and religious forms of praxes.
A metaphor from language philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* (1958) helps articulate the significance of understanding both religion and scholarship as kinds of praxes. Wittgenstein conceived of ordinary language as a kind of living "game" that has its own dynamically evolving set of rules, acceptable moves, and winning strategies. To master the game, the language player must first learn and eventually even "internalize" the rules of the game—what works, what doesn't, what counts as a good move, what is illegal, what becomes a winning play—until the rules and strategies become almost invisible and function on the level of habit. This metaphor provides us with several levels of skill that can be imagined between that of "beginner" or learner and "expert" or highly accomplished player. Wittgenstein's language as game and the idea of skillful play can help us develop sets of evaluative criteria for discourses about religion that get us beyond questions of mere allegiance.

Let us take papers recently written by two students in my class on women and religion as an illustration. The assignment was to research some aspect of women and religion, broadly defined, and to present those findings in a paper roughly ten to fifteen pages in length. The paper needed to have a central thesis, to develop a coherent argument based on relevant scholarship, and to make some point that illuminates an aspect of women's religious lives. One of the two papers in question was written by a male Catholic, the other by a female Pagan who was interested in Wicca. The Catholic chose the issue of female ordination in the Catholic Church for his topic and agreed with the Church's stance. The Pagan's paper was rather
unfocused in topic. It ranged from women's esteemed role in religion at the
dawn of time, to the creation of patriarchy by invading hordes, and finally to
the millions of (women) witches persecuted during the Inquisition. Both
papers were failures. Why?

At this point, dichotomous thinking might lead us to diagnose the
students' failures as summarily due to "insider pleading" or as examples of
religious advocacy. To be sure, each paper reflected some aspect of religious
practice on the part of the writer. The Catholic's paper was a
straightforward account of the Pope's statements or the Church's ruling on
the issue of women and the priesthood. It presented, without question,
justification, or explanation, what many practicing Catholics might
reasonably be expected to accept and follow. The Pagan's paper, on the
other hand, also accepted without critical reflection or argument one and
only one line of interpretation about the role of women in what appear to be
ancient "Goddess religions," the rise of patriarchy, and the subsequent
persecution during the Inquisition of women as Witches.

However, a closer look at the two papers reveals that insider pleading
or religious advocacy is not really an accurate diagnosis. The students'
papers were problematic in similar ways, but they were ways that had
nothing to do with a loss of objectivity due to religious practice and everything
to do with an ignorance or misunderstanding of the nature of scholarly
practice. The Catholic's paper was an almost unbroken series of quotes from
websites that affirmed or simply listed the Church's position on women and
the priesthood, advocating the Church's position without attempt at
argument or presentation of reasoning. The Pagan's paper was an extremely unfocused and very poorly written rehash of some of the most popular and at the same time controversial mythic themes in certain Pagan and feminist spirituality circles. Both topics chosen by the students are potentially worthy of scholarly exploration and could have produced fine papers. In these particular papers, however, there was no analysis, no development of context or rationale for the various statements, no articulation of the issues at stake, no reference to the copious amounts of scholarship (pro and con) on the issues, no central thesis, and no well developed argument—actually no "argument" at all.

Both students failed not because of religious praxis, but because they failed to understand the requirements of scholarly praxis. The students' scholarly objectivity was not clouded or compromised by a contaminating allegiance to a religious practice. Instead, like many students, they simply failed to understand what kinds of rhetorical strategies are convincing and appropriate within the discourse of scholarly praxis. Both papers were failures because neither student understood what constituted an acceptable piece of academic writing. In terms of Wittgenstein's notion of a language game, neither student understood what constituted skillful play or an acceptable move in the "game of scholarly discourse."

We discover that a closer examination of the two students' papers has effectively moved the locus of our discussion from questions of allegiance to ones of skill. Shifting our attention to an examination of the skills required of participants engaged in a particular discourse removes us from the trap
of dichotomous thinking necessarily lurking in the background of any discussion framed in terms of insider/outsider. Such a shift in focus releases us from having to choose between religion and profession and defuses the emotional reactions incumbent upon such a devastating and unnecessary choice. Freed from the blindness imposed by the on/off switch of dichotomy, we are able to see and begin to explore the “discourse of lights and shadows” at play in the multitude of perspectives taken by both scholars and religious practitioners. Additionally, reframing our observation in terms of skillful practice gives us a way to compare and evaluate differing modes of discourse about religion more fruitfully. Focusing on issues of practice and skill makes it possible to explore the range of discourses produced by players from the most elementary to the most advanced levels and from the most scholarly to the most personal of perspectives.

Wittgenstein’s image of a person’s skillfully playing a game suggests several provocative directions for the comparative study of both religious and scholarly discourses, which may prove profitable to take up at some future time. We can begin, for example, by thinking about scholarly and religious discourses as kinds of “games,” however serious, very much like Wittgenstein’s language game. Like a game, let us assume that religious and scholarly praxes have their own sets of rules, acceptable moves, and winning strategies. We can probably also safely assume that each game or praxis has many levels of skill, ranging from “beginner” to “expert,” and that it would be possible to evaluate those levels by the criteria appropriate to that particular game.
With these assumptions, we might profitably begin to address several issues. For instance, how might the “games” of religious and scholarly discourse differ from one another? In what ways might they be similar? How do games of scholarly and religious discourse function within our society? As a scholar, I suspect that perhaps one source of the uneasiness of many scholars with respect to religious praxis is that scholarly and religious praxes sometimes share common goals or common agendas. Each is often concerned about describing the way the world works, and each may be invested in changing that world to a greater or lesser extent. Religious and scholarly discourses therefore sometimes compete and even conflict in the process of “worldmaking.”

Focusing our attention on skills instead of allegiance enables us to ask similar kinds of comparative questions about the discourses produced by different kinds of religious practice or different kinds of scholarship. For example, how does one form of religious discourse or game resemble or differ from another? Do different types of scholarship require different discourses with different sets of evaluative criteria? What is the range of evaluative criteria employed within and across particular forms of religious discourse? By what criteria do scholars and religious practitioners judge the success or failure of a “play of the game?” What strategies do the practitioners of particular religious discourses employ to compete with those of other religious discourses? Do practitioners of scholarly discourse employ similarly competitive strategies?
At this point in our discussion, we might be tempted to try to develop a "comprehensive set" of evaluative criteria for all discourses about religion. And it is here that we must carefully proceed in order to avoid producing the same sorts of essentializing, reductionizing, and decontextualizing analyses that typically emerge from the insider/outside dichotomy. Notice, however, that all above questions focus our attention on the nature of the particular games being played. At least beginning our inquiry at the level of particular discourses helps reduce the risk of producing categories and criteria totally removed from the communities of "players who practice the game," the communities that produce the discourse and for whom the discourse is meaningful.

Philosopher of religion Thomas P. Kasulis eloquently emphasizes the importance of beginning with a critical investigation of particular religious communities. In his 1997 article "Intimations of Religious Experience and Interreligious Truth" Kasulis shares some of his strategies when engaging issues in the philosophy of religion.

First, I try to remember that I should bring my analysis to the religious experience in all its richness and complexity. I try not to let the categories of analysis impoverish the nature of the experience. If the experience does not fit my epistemological categories, I try to rethink my epistemology before I let the theory convince me there is something "wrong" or philosophically "suspicious" with the experience.

Second, I try to remember that religion, like most other cultural phenomena, has an intrinsically social or communal dimension. I am continually shocked...at how often philosophers of religion try to analyze a particular religious utterance without first asking who the audience of that utterance is and what practices and assumptions the audience and speaker might share. (1997:39)
Focusing on communities engaged in common praxis enables us to recognize and to begin exploring the plurality of perspectives, the discourse of lights and shadows at play within the diverse spectrum of both scholarly and religious communities. We may find that at times the discourses of scholarly and religious practice seem to share sets of standards or evaluative criteria. However, it is also wise to keep in mind that scholarly and religious discourses frequently have vastly different criteria by which a particular performance or a play of the game is judged a success or a failure.

For example, Diane Goldstein (1995) makes the case that folklorists frequently judge a religious performance by its verbal artistry and drama, but that this often misses how the religious community itself understands the performance. Goldstein finds that folklorists secularize religious performances and focus our attention toward a communicative competence that stresses “form rather than function, art rather than meaning, and structure rather than the beliefs which inform those structures” (1995:24). Secularizing religious performances misses the meaningfulness of religious praxis. In neglecting belief, performance studies miss the criteria of quality of performances arising from the context of belief. The people themselves—as embodied individuals with their own voices and their own judgments on the effectiveness and quality of religious performances arising from the context of their beliefs—are effectively written out of the narrative.
If our analysis is to do religious performance justice, it must come to terms with the spiritual rules and criteria arising from the belief context.

Consciously opening our scholarship to the values and criteria arising out of the belief context, as Goldstein suggests, inevitably exposes us to a diverse and pluralistic world. Kasulis underscores the importance of encountering “other voices,” noting that such “pluralism is not only unavoidable, but also useful to philosophical reflection” (1997:40).

If constructively engaged, the plurality of voices, contexts, and perspectives leads us all to reexamine our most fundamental assumptions. This is especially provocative philosophically when those assumptions have been so deeply embedded in our ways of thinking that if it were not for the other perspectives, we might not even notice them, not to mention question them. (1997:40)

Wittgenstein's conception of ordinary language as a kind of game involving skillful practice will probably not be enough to “resolve” the insider/outsider dilemma in religious studies scholarship, something that, in any case, is far beyond the scope of my particular project. However, his metaphor of language as a “game” does enable us to ask productive questions about what makes a discourse meaningful to those who are engaged in producing the discourse. It foregrounds the assumptions, strategies, categories, and evaluative criteria behind particular discourses. Encounter with “the other” in turn challenges us to uncover and examine philosophically our own assumptions, categories, and evaluative criteria—which would otherwise go unnoticed.
Additionally, borrowing Wittgenstein's metaphor of playing a game skillfully moves attention away from allegiance to skill. It recontextualizes our study at the level of practice. This suggests several lines of inquiry that may help us to access the multiple roles and skill levels of the players. For instance, what is the process by which a person learns how to play a particular game? How does a person progress from "beginner" to "master" of the game? What additional skills must be acquired to teach the game to others, or to form evaluative judgments about how other players play the game? What happens when the game is played unsuccessfully or unskillfully? Can skills be faked? What skills must be mastered in order to explain the game to a non-player? I suspect that these will prove to be particularly relevant lines of inquiry appropriate to the subject of initiation, which in this particular work will refer specifically to the process by which one becomes a Witch. These and similar questions are ones that I shall explore with particular care and ones to which I shall return in future chapters.

Additional sets of questions arise when we talk about moving outside a particular game, or moving between games. Some games or discourses are similar to one another and share a lot of "cognates," while others are more distinct. When the games are similar, a competent player may easily and even fluently move between them with little extra effort or skill, as when a person adapts to different "dialects" of the same language. However, when games share few similarities—or when the games differ from one another in critical ways—even the most competent player needs to acquire additional
or even totally new sets of skills or strategies to "commute," as professor of comparative religions Nancy Falk (1997) calls it, successfully from one game to another.

In fact, the image of a "commuter" may be a particularly productive one to apply to the situation of the scholar-practitioner. In the context of Wittgenstein's games, we might reasonably expect a scholar-practitioner to be possessed of the skills necessary to be relatively fluent in both scholarly and religious discourses and to be able to fluidly commute between the two. Framing our discussion in terms of fluency in and fluidity across particular and multiple discourses emphasizes the extent to which we are all engaged as commuters across multiple boundaries every day. Falk eloquently addresses her own experiences as a commuter across multiple boundaries in her 1997 article "Crossovers and Cross-ups: A Cautionary Tale."

I find it far less helpful to think of myself as insider or outsider than as a perpetual commuter across multiple boundaries. For more than 30 years I have shuttled mentally, and sometimes physically, between India and the United States—born and bred and mostly residing and working in the latter, but constantly steeping myself in experiences—my own and other scholars’—of the former. I have traversed for nearly as long the boundary between two academic disciplines: History of Religions, the discipline of my appointment and academic training, and Women's Studies, which one might call my discipline of existential commitment. Finally, with a life divided for more than two decades between the roles of mom, wife, scholar, and teacher, I move day to day across a kind of experiential boundary between the preoccupations of a very ordinary middle class housewife and the concerns of the academy. (1997:2)
Commuting across such multiple and diverse boundaries is certainly challenging and may at times even be disorienting, producing the feeling of "having no true psychic home" (Falk: 1997:2). Falk notes that the benefits derived from commuting between such multiple realms nevertheless far outweigh its costs.

...Crossing between two cultures has allowed me to mediate between them professionally, interpreting India to students and scholars in the U.S. (and sometimes vice versa). As Miriam Peskowitz has also described in this issue, crossing between Women's Studies and History of Religions has brought me my most important critical insights into both disciplines. And crossing between the world of moms and the world of the academy has helped me connect with students and aid them in making their own crossovers to my disciplines and to India. (1997:2)

I suspect that many of us are, like Falk, commuters across the boundaries of the multiple worlds in which we live.

As commuters, we can begin to encounter and explore the plurality of perspectives within the diverse spectrum of both scholarly and religious communities. If, like myself, we are commuters who are both scholars and practitioners, it is especially important to employ a self-conscious critical reflection or "reflexivity" in order to navigate between the multiplicity of perspectives that we both hold and encounter among others. Folklorist David Hufford, in the "Introduction" to a special issue of Western Folklore dedicated to belief studies, emphasizes the need for a pragmatic and realistic form of reflexivity for all scholars, defining it as "the inclusion of the actor (scholar, author, observer) in the account of the act and/or its outcomes"
(1995:2). In the study of religious discourses, this "necessarily introduces the individual: individual scholars including ourselves as scholars, and individual believers including all scholars, whether their beliefs be positive or negative or agnostic regarding the beliefs in question" [italics in the original] (1995:2).

Hufford underscores reflexivity as a strategy between what he sees as two equally limiting and dogmatic methodological and theoretical extremes: methodolatry, a position of no reflexivity, which tries to capture the "confidence of positivism," and an extreme kind of postmodernism, a position in which reflexivity is all, which abandons reality or objectivity altogether "and treats ethnographic representation as a literary construction that tells about its authors rather than about the world" (1995:2-3). In his article "The Scholarly Voice and the Personal Voice: Reflexivity in Belief Studies," Hufford eloquently summarizes the importance of a responsible reflexivity that is realistic and pragmatic.

We must learn to tolerate uncertainty and ambiguity, while holding the reduction of uncertainty and ambiguity in our knowledge as primary goals (always sought, never completely achieved).... Certainty is a direction, not a goal.... Reflexivity and the strong light that it shines on the importance of viewpoint and perspective urges on us a multiplication of perspectives. We can never have a set of observations made from everywhere anymore than we can have a view from nowhere, but the more views we consider, the more reason we have to be hopeful about our conclusions [italics in the original]. (1995:60)

Reflexivity is not only an important element in correct scholarly praxis, but for the scholar-practitioner, it helps to distinguish between the
requirements of scholarly and religious praxes, between the scholarly and personal voice. As both a scholar and a practitioner, I shall therefore employ a methodological stance of reflexivity or self-conscious positionality throughout the body of this work. In the remainder of this chapter, I shall first briefly note some of the major methodological and professional approaches that have informed this work in order to try to situate myself within the scholarship. Then I shall attempt to position myself as a religious practitioner with an equally brief statement about my religious background and qualifications within the tradition that I practice.

Speaking from personal experience, reflexivity itself can be a rather daunting task. It seems to require a peculiar form of consciousness that is at least peripherally aware of "self" even as it is engaged with "other." I find this experience strikingly similar to, and just as difficult as, watching yourself tie your shoe in a mirror—something I suspect few of us routinely do. Your attention is "divided," you feel awkward, your body "all thumbs" as you try to be critically and self-consciously aware of something that you do all the time without thinking. Upon reflection, as it were, I find this an apt metaphor for trying to explain any particular praxis—scholarly or religious—to those who stand apart from that praxis. Reflexivity entails the development of special skills, the cultivation of a special voice, in order to explain to another what has become deeply ingrained, embodied, and embedded in the psychophysical consciousness.

For instance, I find that the reflexive voice itself requires a delicate sense of balance: too much, and this becomes my autobiography, and we
potentially fall into narcissistic solipsism; too little, and I haven't provided you with the information you need to make sense out of our adventures as commuters across the multiple worlds that I inhabit. And I do want to express this project as an adventure, to allude to and to share the "passion"— as Johannes Fabian (1994) would phrase it—that drives me both as a scholar and as a Priestess. Reflexivity demands taking a risk, revealing and making accessible the person behind both scholarship and religion. Such an act of self-conscious exposure, of intentional vulnerability, demands courage and skill on the part of the writer—a willingness to "engage," to reveal that mixture of "play" and "seriousness" that intertwine in our perspectives on the multiple worlds within which we live. It also demands openness on the part of the reader—a willingness "to be engaged" to both "play" with and to consider seriously that multitude of perspectives.

From personal experience, I suspect many religious studies scholars find the reflexive voice somewhat awkward or uncomfortable to either write or read because it is such a far stretch from the comfortable illusion of objective purity with which we have surrounded our actions for years. It is also easy to do badly. Additionally, it is easy to be awkward at establishing a pattern of reflexivity, of finding exactly that rhythm of voice that distinguishes the Priestess from the scholar—or the personal from the scholarly, in Hufford's (1995) terms—clearly enough so that the audience can follow along. I must therefore caution the reader that my attempt at reflexive and self-conscious positionality is not without its awkward moments. For example, in order to try to keep my multiple perspectives
intelligible to the reader, I have devised a particular, though somewhat awkward, way of speaking in order to try to cue the reader when I am speaking as a scholar and when I am speaking as a Priestess. For example, the reader is almost always included whenever I use the pronoun “we.” With very few exceptions, which I hope are clearly marked, this will help the reader distinguish when I am speaking generally and including the reader in a discussion of scholarship, and when I am speaking specifically about my coven’s actions or practices. This may make my references to the coven or the other Witches seem a bit awkward in phrasing. However, in this particular attempt at reflexivity, I have unfortunately sacrificed grace and flow of expression for what I hope is clarity.

Images in a Mirror: Reflections as a Scholar of Religions

I first became engaged in the process of reflexively thinking about myself as a practitioner of scholarship during a qualifying examination. Specifically, I was asked what my early academic training in philosophy had to do with my approach to the study of religion, especially since my approach is interdisciplinary and included such “disparate elements” as folklore, performance, ritual studies, and women’s studies as my areas of concentration. This was a difficult question, in part because the doctoral degree in religious studies at The Ohio State University is administratively an interdisciplinary one and, as such, is not a degree in folklore, in women’s studies, in ritual studies, in philosophy—or even in “religion.” While obviously not a degree of “specialized” expertise, I reasoned that perhaps the
expertise of this program lies somewhere in the “in-between,” the “inter-” of interdisciplinary, or in the “weaving of disciplines” like threads in a tapestry—in any event, not an altogether promising place to “go looking for philosophy.” The other, and more daunting, task in answering this question was that it requires something very hard to do—reflexivity—that peculiar form of consciousness that consciously engages both “self” and “other,” that consciously engages in both “acting” and “capturing” that acting. Yet perhaps the interdisciplinary nature of my program made such reflection all the more imperative.

So, where is the philosophy in what I do? My early academic training was not as a specialist in philosophy of religion. Initially enrolling at Ohio University determined to follow a career in biochemistry, I had been “captured” by philosophy with my very first course—Plato and Descartes in the first summer term, followed by existentialism in the second. Here were the Great Questions, here were assembled mankind’s [sic] greatest and most brilliant minds [sic] engaged in grappling with the most fundamentally important issues of human life. As a philosopher, I would explore and understand all the great mysteries—what it means to be a human being, how we understand our experiences in the world, what is the nature of God, of reality, what the shape of the universe—in short, nothing less than the very meaning of life itself.

As a student, I was exposed to much of the usual philosophical fare: introductions to Plato, Aristotle, Descartes’ famous cogito ergo sum, existentialism, Marx, Nietzsche, arguments attempting to prove the
existence of God, theodicy, symbolic logic, a smattering of "Eastern religions" presented philosophically, pre-Socratics, medieval philosophers, rationalists, empiricists, pragmatists, phenomenology, epistemology, philosophy of language, and so forth.

I confess that by the time I left Ohio University's graduate school, now many years ago, I was quite frustrated with philosophy. Intoxication had given way to dull hangover. Much of philosophy seemed so detached, so "disembodied," its logics cold and remote from the concerns of real people, its arguments endlessly repetitive, its insights obscuring rather than revealing the mysteries of life. Part of this frustration no doubt lay in what I conceived as the "problem of Western philosophy." It seemed to me then (and still does to some extent today) that philosophy forged itself into a gigantic coin and sent itself flipping off into space and time, our philosophical arguments revolving around whether the coin lands heads or tails on the particular toss. Heads—we have rationalism, idealism, "the mind." Tails—we have empiricism, materialism, "the body." I used to entertain myself by musing about who forged the coin and who set it flipping: Plato, Aristotle, Descartes, Hegel, and Marx, among others, were some of my favorite "suspects." Thus were all our dichotomies forged in the minting and the tossing of the "Big Giant Coin": Mind/Body, Subject/Object, Theory/Practice, God/Nature, Man/Woman, Objective (public) knowledge/Subjective (private) knowledge, Religion/religion, Insider/Outsider. It seemed to me then that something had gone terribly
awry. In the very least, it seemed that new questions must be asked, new challenges posed in order to set the Big Giant Coin spinning on edge.

Ludwig Wittgenstein once said that philosophy was about showing the fly the way out of the fly bottle. And so I was—let out into the "real world" in ways unexpected and complicated by family and life. In the years following, I have walked along many paths, crossed many boundaries, and woven many threads into the tapestry of my life. But Philosophy, constant and sometimes annoying companion, has always walked with me, caught only in a glimpse out of the corner of one eye, just beside my own reflection in a mirror.

Fortunately, I came to this realization not long before this question was posed to me in my exams. I peered closely at the threads of the tapestry that form my life and thought about the life experiences and areas of study that both inform and engage my attention. I could find much that seemed colored "folklore," and lots of multi-colored threads labeled "ritual" that ranged in color from dull to dynamic, audience to performer, and all shades in between. Here was "performance studies." There was "feminism." I could find threads with "anthropology" on them; others that were stamped "narrative" or "story." Gods and Goddesses were woven throughout the design of the life-tapestry. And framing the tapestry along the edges of its borders were the experiences of being a woman from a rural Appalachian, blue-collar industrial, lower working class, Eastern European family.

But where in the tapestry was philosophy? The threads that had formed the "stuff" of philosophy for me at Ohio University had long since
faded from the tapestry. I had not meditated on Descartes for a very long
time, nor were my days filled with construction of symbolic logic proofs.
Arguments for or against the existence of God were nowhere to be found.
Threads colored the "nature of God" were twisted and woven into other
threads instead, eventually losing their original shade. \textit{If God is all powerful, can he make a rock so large he cannot pick it up?} Some threads seem to
have abruptly ended in a frayed knot and been woven around. \textit{If God is both all powerful and all good, how can there be evil?} The idealist threads were
no longer snarling with the materialists. My Big Giant Coin seemed to have
fallen through a hole in my pocket. I was in a panic. Could it be that I don't
do anything called "philosophy" at all?

It was then, out of the corner of my eye, that I glimpsed Philosophy in
the mirror, while my hands were busy weaving the threads of my tapestry.
At that moment I realized that for me, philosophy is not exactly a particular
thing, a discrete disciplinary subject in a course of study at the university.
Rather, philosophy is \textit{itself a doing}, a practice, a temperament, an engaging
of oneself with the world, a way of living in the world, a way of asking
questions, a deep curiosity about the ways we are and why. In some
important way I had never "left" philosophy. Its familiar presence runs
along all of the threads in my tapestry, and in no particular one. Philosophy
was not a thread in the tapestry—\textit{it was the process of weaving itself}.

I discovered that, in terms of an interdisciplinary program, my early
training in philosophy permeates the \textit{how} of what I do—both how I engage
the interdisciplinary process and how I engage my subjects of study. It
establishes a stance, lines of questioning, an organizational frame, a window, standards of articulation and reasoning, a mindset—all of which doubtless simultaneously both enhance and obscure whatever I'm looking at during any given moment. It articulates, evaluates, weighs, organizes, even at times justifies competing practices and understandings of human experience gained from individuals living in the world. Let me give a few examples of how this works within the interdisciplinary nature of my program.

For instance, part of what I think is important in the study of religion today is the collection of information about what it is that people are doing when they "do" religion. In order to collect this "data," it is necessary to do fieldwork, to enter the messy and unpredictable world of human beings and attempt to learn about what they are doing. My training in folklore and ethnography provides me with all sorts of models and maps for the fieldwork process. Through my study of folklore and ethnography, I've learned about the needs and limits of reflexivity and how a good folklorist always treats his or her informants ethically, for instance.

A philosophical stance is never "satisfied" at stopping with the collection of data, but needs to push the reflection further and ask what that data means and how it furthers (or does not further) our understanding of what it is to be human beings experiencing our worlds. How does data obtained in the encounter with "the other" enlarge our human understanding—stretching and remaking its forms and limits? How does each encounter with "the other" alter and stretch our image of "self?" How do our growing encounters with people of different cultures and different faiths force us to
both more courteously and more responsibly reflect on both their and our religious (and scholarly) practices? How can we better use data collected about practices, about acting in the world, about human experiences as “individuals-practicing” to help us understand the myriad fascinating and creative ways in which human beings might engage in, encounter, talk about, and experience what we variously call “the sacred,” “Goddess,” “enlightenment,” and so forth? How can we use the data that we discover to “think with,” to raise new sets of questions and to pose new challenges to our assumptions?

For example, in this particular work, it is my intention to offer a thick ethnographic description of one kind of Wiccan initiation ritual in hopes that any insights gained into this particular form of ritual found within a specific religious community might be used to “think with.” I hope it will enable us to challenge and extend our scholarship on initiation rituals in general, to enable us to pose questions about other religious rituals in other—even vastly different—religious communities, to enable us to think about rituals in general in some new and profitable way.

The feminist critique of androcentrism within the Academy has illuminated several areas within the study of religions in which women’s experiences have not been treated as an integral part of the human norm. One of my life’s projects is to be involved in the “recovery” and exploration of those experiences, in all their rich variety and expressive form. As a Priestess, I delight in that the particular tradition of the religion that I practice has a rich variety of roles for women (and men) that are both
powerful and valuable, roles that carry both private power and public authority. As a scholar, one of my agendas is to recover instances of religious roles that provide women with powerful and authoritative voices. Once again, philosophy enters the project by dealing with the significance of “recovered” women’s experiences and opening up lines of inquiry that it may be profitable to undertake at a future time. Among the many questions that I hope my project raises for further exploration and discussion are the following. How does the integration of women’s experiences change our understanding of the human? What is the best way to accomplish or articulate that integration? Is there such a “thing” as an “intrinsically gendered” perspective? Does worship of a Goddess challenge or alter a certain kind of symbolic understanding of “God” by either replacing that symbol system or at the least understanding it as polysemous? What does it say about our notions of gender and sex when a male religious practitioner identifies with the female body of a Goddess and is “trans-formed” by her symbolic journey through death?

Additional sets of potentially fruitful questions arise from ritual and performance studies: how does the study of performance, the study of rituals, the study of practices change or perhaps even threaten our understanding of what religion is? How do we evaluate our understanding of “religion” when confronted with the “universe of discourses” and “universe of practices” which comprise even a “single” religion? Is there such a thing as “religion,” or are there only religious persons? Must we become more cautious about the removal of religious doctrine from the complex web of its
One thing I discovered in the mirror is that philosophy functions not only as doing, a practice, but also as a kind of "meta" praxis in my work—if I understand correctly that "meta" implies a kind of reflection about what we do. (See Kasulis 1992 for a discussion of philosophy as a metapraxis.) On the one hand, it takes the information gathered from the practice of folklore, from the feminist critique of androcentrism, from performance and ritual studies, and so forth, and runs with it, chews it over, sees what (if anything) the information contributes to our understanding of what it means to be human. On the other hand, philosophy reflects on the other practices of my interdisciplinary program—evaluating, organizing, critiquing, advocating, or justifying one particular practice over another in a particular situation precisely because it yields a more fruitful harvest of understanding, rejecting those practices that are more limiting and less coherent.

Certainly, some of the questions that engage me now are very similar to those that captured my attention when I initially encountered philosophy.
all those years ago. Others are perhaps a bit more modest, if not just as complex—for example, asking about the nature of our experience of reality, rather than the nature of reality itself. I have discovered upon reflection that philosophy is still the driving force throughout all it is that I do, provoking me to grapple with the most “fundamentally important issues of human life” by using the best techniques and devices at hand. I gather the threads for my tapestry in the living of my own life and in the living lives of others; folklore, ritual studies, and the feminist critique of androcentrism are some of the tools I use to spin the fibers, give them colors, plot their thickness and heft, and philosophy weaves them into a pattern that is ideally more coherent, more articulate, more elegant, maybe even more beautiful, than any single tool, than any single grouping of threads can achieve alone.

Clearly, one of my goals as a scholar is for this work to raise questions that will be productive for future philosophical reflection. It is also my intention to do something rather more concrete within the limitations of this particular work: 1) to provide a thick and rich description of one kind of Wiccan initiation ritual, 2) to provide an analysis of the ritual that may gain us some insights into the ways that individuals construct and experience “the sacred.” This will necessarily involve the use of several tools acquired through the pluralistic and interdisciplinary focus of my training: an overall philosophical framework or agenda within which the particular insights and methods of ethnographic folklore studies, somatic theories, feminism, metacommunication theories, and especially a performance approach are
applied to the description and the analysis of a specific ritual performed by a particular religious community. Description and analysis entail awareness and use of "framing" and performance theory. As both a scholar and a practitioner, I will also need to pay particular attention to perspective and positionality, necessitating a reflexive approach to my material. Use of a performance approach in understanding religious rituals ties us to what anthropologists Edward M. Bruner and Victor W. Turner have termed the "anthropology of experience" (1986), which ultimately traces its insights back through such scholars of religion and philosophy as Joachim Wach, Wilhelm Dilthey, William James, James Dewey, and—through folklorist Deborah Kapchan's (1995) invocation of a "phenomenology of performances"—to philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty. The focus on experience, pragmatics, practice, and performance uncovers an embodied process, something upon which I shall continue to reflect throughout the subsequent chapters of this work.

Within these overall approaches there are particular strategies that I find useful or illuminating for this work. For example, Erving Goffman's (1974) notion of "framing," which itself draws on ideas from phenomenological sociology and meta-communication theory, works particularly well in analysis of ritual performance. It provides a device for understanding that performance as marking off actions that are special or different from the ordinary everyday. In her discussion on context, folklorist Mary Hufford speaks of framing as a way of using performance analysis to understand religious ritual. She points out that "the term performance
suggests “staged” behavior, that is, events framed as being of a different expressive order than behaviors outside the frames. We create such events through contextualizing or framing practices that draw attention to the double grounding of an extraordinary world opened up within the ordinary” [italics mine] (1995: 531-2). For more ideas about special framing strategies see also Barbara Babcock (1977) on “metanarrative markers” and William A. “Bert” Wilson (1995) on “markers of belief.”

Because a performance approach extensively frames so much of my analysis of ritual, I do want to briefly revisit and emphasize some of its limitations. The first is the very assumption that the group whose performances you are watching or in which you are participating is a homogeneous one, and that their responses to a particular performance will be uniform. We already touched on this in our discussion of the range of voices concealed by terms such as “insider” and “outsider,” and so I won’t repeat myself here. Another problematic assumption of performance theory is a tendency to impose what we as folklore scholars consider interesting criteria in evaluating religious performances, without taking into consideration what the evaluative criteria of the performers themselves might be. This point is discussed extensively in Goldstein (1995) above, and so I won’t belabor her argument here.

Much along the same lines as Goldstein’s criticism of performance theory, however, is the potential problem of “misrecognition.” This is when scholars and religious practitioners disagree as to the understanding or interpretation of a religious performance, frequently because they have
different perspectives and evaluative criteria. As I noted earlier in this chapter, the tendency within scholarship is not to acknowledge this difference and attempt to uncover the various levels of skill and perspective with which all the evaluators are engaged, but to simply interpret the religious practitioners as misrecognizing what they are "really" doing.

Folklorist Bonnie Blair O'Connor explains this phenomenon well in her 1995 book *Healing Traditions: Alternative Medicine and the Health Professions*.

Some efforts to explain "the other" do so by imposing constructs which have the effect of translating insider (emic) claims and explanations into more professionally familiar and acceptable (etic) terms. The implicit or explicit suggestion is that the trained outside observer (me) is better equipped than the cultural insider (not-me) to decipher what is "really" going on. (1995:41)

O'Connor goes on to give examples of how this works in both functionalist and psychoanalytical interpretations of healing and medicine, even when the folklorist is extremely ethical and sympathetic towards his informants. She points out that "misrecognition" is a general problem in how scholars might approach their informants, rather than a problem specifically confined to performance studies. Kasulis also underscores the need for scholars to keep in mind that religious narratives and performances are aimed at particular audiences, thereby avoiding the mistake of treating as general statements of truth narratives or performances that are actually designed to be meaningful within a specific interpretive framework.
Diane Goldstein notes a difficulty in getting at what "feels like religion" even when scholars attempt to adopt a "neutral" stance toward religious belief in order to avoid accusing religious practitioners of misrecognition.

Today, most ethnographers recognize that from an ethnographic standpoint it is our responsibility to discover the meaning of religious belief for those who hold them without judgment as to truth value. But we still construct our definitions, our metaphors, and our models for analysis in ways which avoid any kind of cognitive or scientific dissonance. Implicitly, and often through a kind of ethnographic sleight of hand, we secularize the study of religious groups, thus making them safe. (1995:25)

Unfortunately, part of the application of a performance approach to religious ritual is this tendency to secularize and evaluate ritual as an act of artistry, a moment of "religious theater." Writing about "text" versus "performance," folklorist Jeff Titon lists things that are gained and lost with a performance approach. Gained is a "more holistic enterprise," the possibility of doing justice to "living process," and an emphasis on "persons instead of things." Exchanged is one set of metaphors belonging to reading and writing for another belonging to theater. The theater metaphor is especially troubling for understanding religious rituals in that "folklorists cannot escape the inauthenticity implied by the staging" of performances (1995:436-437). As someone who is both a scholar and a practitioner, I find it interesting to note that the religious community itself is not unaware of the potential of a religious performance to be "inauthentic," "staged" or "faked" in some way. Rather than simply despairing over the connections
between the term "performance" and "inauthentic event," I suggest that it might be more fruitful to examine the criteria by which a religious community determines the authenticity or inauthenticity of its religious performances.

An interesting and important critique of the performance approach, which I find particularly useful in support of my argument for the legitimacy of the scholar-practitioner, is given by Jose Limon and Jane Young in their 1986 article "Frontiers, Settlements, and Developments in Folklore Studies, 1972-1985." One of their observations is that the performance approach depends on the need for the "observer’s sufficient fluency in the varieties and registers of the linguistic and metalinguistic codes in which emergent folkloric acts are performed" (1986:445), since analysis of performance implies a close face-to-face knowledge of the speaker and the performative act. This is perhaps illustrative of one instance in which a scholar who is also a religious practitioner may be uniquely positioned to describe and interpret the "linguistic and metalinguistic codes in which emergent folkloric acts are performed."

Gender may pose an additional problematic dimension for the scholar engaged in a performance approach, as demonstrated, for example, in the book *Unspoken Worlds* by Nancy Falk and Rita Gross (1989). In our attempt to go after "the best" performances, "the best" performers, or the "star" performers, we may overlook others—often women—who are equally involved in the construction of their religious worlds and equally important to their religious communities. This is demonstrated throughout several works
in the study of women and religion that reveal that levels of androcentrism manifest not only in cultures and religions but in our own scholarship. Such androcentrism may cloud our perception of the processes and activities of women in the construction of religious traditions and rituals. (See for example, Falk and Gross 1989, Goldstein 1995, and Gross, 1996).

Furthermore, complex constructions of complementarity, what Barbara Babcock explains as "differential access to the sacred" (1988:373) are especially poorly understood, if not overlooked entirely, with an androcentric methodology. In cultures in which primarily men perform the "important rituals"—read this as large, public, or flamboyant rituals—the religious performances of women are often missed. Although the particular religious community that I am describing is well endowed with powerful and authoritative roles for women and images of female deity, it is still important to try to capture as many voices as possible—not just the loudest or the most eloquent.

One final point before leaving this section is to note the impossibility of adequately accounting for all of the methods that have influenced the development of my distinctive scholarly voice. Each method that I draw upon both enlarges and limits my field of vision, both increases and decreases my ability to engage with the multiple "others" with whom I come into contact, a scholar-practitioner commuting across multiple boundaries and encountering multiple worlds.
A reflexive methodology demands that I, as a scholar-practitioner, situate or frame myself in terms of my religious practices as well as my scholarly practices. The observant reader may wonder why I seem to be emphasizing the plural, referring to scholarly and religious practices, and referring above to myself as a “practitioner of religions.” Just as I understand my own scholarly style or scholarly voice as being informed by a plurality of scholarly approaches and methodologies, so, too, do I understand my religious or spiritual style and voice as a combination of elements—my “spiritual tapestry” a weaving of many colored threads.

I was not born into a family that practiced Wicca; my introduction to the Craft was actually quite unexpected, even serendipitous. However, I do not consider myself as having “converted” to Wicca, but rather understand the experience of finding the Craft as both a sense of “coming home” and being “rooted” in the practices and experiences of my childhood. My mother was a Serbian Orthodox whose religious practice was anything but. As I was the first born and the only daughter, she taught me the practical techniques of preventing and curing the evil eye [wear lots of jewelry, a teaching I try to follow to this day], that menstrual blood will kill plants [this doesn’t work; in a fit of pique, I tried it once on her African violets], how to light the candles specially blessed by the Priest, how to make offerings to the dead, and how to burn incense to drive out illness and misfortune. After my seventh birthday, during the night of a full moon, she also taught me that
the Virgin Mary was the Moon, Our Mother, and showed me how to blow Her a kiss in tribute and thanks when we pray to Her.

My mother took my brother and me to church whenever she could persuade my father to drive us twenty-five miles to the only Serbian Orthodox Church in the Valley. My earliest recollections of going to church with her swirl in my memory like some confused “kaleidoscope” of competing images, sounds, and smells. There were, of course, the larger-than-life paintings of all the “holy people”: God, Jesus, the Virgin Mary, and saints and heroes my non-Orthodox friends have surely never heard of. Candles burned in every direction, their heat and light a spiritual and physical comfort in winter, but oppressive in summer. They flickered in the haze produced by the heavy smoke of the incense. The walls of the old church rang with singing: the call and response of Priest and Cantor with the voices of the Choir in their loft upstairs. The fact that the entire liturgy was sung in Serbian—a language in which I am not fluent—has certainly never lessened its potency for me.

The Priest, mysterious in robes of black and sometimes of gold thread, disappeared occasionally behind the rich and ornate decorations of the altar doors. I was sure those doors held the key to some secret power because of the way in which the Priest later emerged, transformed and triumphant to the rising voice of the Choir. Obviously, something had happened behind those doors, and I wanted to know what! I suspect that this was my first “theological” question. As a woman, however, I was not allowed entry.
through those particular ornate doors, and so my theological investigations eventually took me through others.

My father was a proud Hungarian agnostic who was convinced that organized religions “only wanted your wallet.” He taught me and my little brother how to look for healing herbs, how to plant by the signs of the moon, what mushrooms were good and what ones poisonous, and how to remove fever from a child by placing a raw potato slice on his forehead to absorb the heat—or cold steel if the fever were particularly stubborn. Although he didn’t practice the Orthodox religion with my mother, he gamely consented every year to being thrown out of the house on Christmas morning, trudging three times around the house in the snow with my little brother tagging along, finally saying the “magic words,” and giving the secret knock that would allow them to enter, symbolically bringing in the light of the newly born Christ child and good luck for the year—traditionally in the form of walnuts that were supposed to be tossed into the corners of the house to bless it, but which we wound up eating.

Thus my mother and father introduced me simultaneously to rich and sensuous worlds of ritual, of folk magic, of healing and herbalism, of religious practices—and introduced me to the hermeneutics of suspicion. This odd combination no doubt helped to make me some of what I am today: an experienced Priestess who practices and creates rituals, a folklorist, a magician, a healer, and an extremely skeptical individual. Whatever I have been and whatever I have become over the years, some part of me remains a skeptical Hungarian and a pagan Serb blowing kisses at the Moon.
My husband is actually responsible for helping me to make the connections between who I was and who I am. It was at my father's funeral. Although my father was a devout agnostic, my brother and I had the services in the Serbian Church, where my mother's funeral services had been held only a couple years before. Afterward, when we were driving back to Athens, my husband commented that he was struck by how similar the Serbian Orthodox rituals were to the ones that I did as a Witch.

“What are you talking about? Are you kidding?” I said, quite astonished that he would seriously make such an observation.

I believe he said something along the lines of: “They wear black robes. You wear black robes. They light candles. You light candles. They use lots of incense; you smoke up the entire house. They have singing. You guys—well, you try to sing.”

I laughed, but he had something there. The connections were probably more noticeable to him because he comes from a mainstream Protestant religious background in which there are few elaborate rituals, in fact, few rituals at all. His observation started me thinking about all the “little rituals,” the “everyday acts of magic,” all the customs and teachings that we might call “folklore,” the way that the body is always “present” in rituals—the spirit “engaged” and enlivened through the actions of the body and the response of the physical senses—and, of course, the way that the Moon became for me an important figure in both practical acts of planting and theological acts of reflection as the embodiment of Our Mother.

He was right.
Stumbling onto the Craft

When I first encountered Wicca, I recall that I was not looking for a religion so much as a few good books on how to do the math necessary in order to cast an astrology chart. It was the summer of 1971, and I was visiting college as a high school junior in a special motivational program for “promising but poor” students. Totally lost in what seemed to me to be a vast college library for the first time, I asked a friendly-looking man at the information counter where I could find books on astrology. While I didn’t get any help with that, I did get an introduction to “some people you might like to meet if you’re interested in those sorts of things.” It was my first time away from home, and although I didn’t really know exactly what “those sorts of things” were, I was game for meeting new and interesting people.

At this point, I must pause momentarily in my description of how I found the Craft to alert the reader to some limitations about what I can say. Wicca, as is practiced by my coven, is a religion of initiates; it is a private and esoteric religious path. I am bound both by personal oaths and by the ethics of fieldwork not to reveal identities without permission to those outside the religion. For this reason, I shall disguise and protect the identities of all coven members as much as possible, giving no specific information about their backgrounds, physical characteristics, or exact places of residence. I shall give neither their correct mundane names nor their “Craft names” even if I have permission to use them. Additionally, the name of my own coven—Az Isteneknek Követői—is one fabricated by me.
with the assistance of Dr. Felicitas Goodman, an anthropologist and linguist who kindly suggested an Hungarian name for the group that translates into something like “The Followers of a Particular Group of Gods.”

I first met Sam—the man I would eventually come to know as my High Priest—a few days after my encounter with the helpful librarian. As I recall, Sam and I got off to a rather rocky start, which no doubt continued in some fashion to color our relationship. Brimming with the overconfidence of the obviously-away-from-home-for-the-first-time, I was determined not to act absolutely dumbfounded when Sam and his sweet fiancée Beth revealed that they were both Witches, followers of The Old Religion. Although I no doubt made a thorough fool of myself, Sam nevertheless introduced me to some members of his coven, including Lauren, who had either already been or was about to be initiated. They were all working on a video on the Craft for a local TV station, complete with taped portions of rituals, long walks in the woods discussing Wiccan philosophy, and a “somewhat to scale” model of Stonehenge used as a stage prop.

I got to help paint Stonehenge. What mere mortal could resist The Old Religion after that experience?

That video remains one of the very best I have ever seen on the Craft, and I dearly wish I had a copy of it for teaching purposes as well as for personal reasons. Between watching the video, talking with Sam and members of his coven, and reading some of the few books then published on the Craft (e.g., Gardner, Murray, Leek, Lethbridge, and Glass), I became determined to study this religion seriously and to ask for initiation. For me
the experience was not so much one of conversion, but one of “coming home.” This was the religion that I had practiced all along without knowing that it had a name.

My course of study would take about three years. I was still in high school and would be returning home at the end of summer for my senior year. Sam told me that I should make the decision to formally study the Craft and ask for initiation only after a thorough period of study and after I had turned eighteen, a legal consideration that my coven still follows. After all, I was still quite young and needed to make such a decision out of mature reflection, rather than youthful enthusiasm. So began my period of screening and being screened for initiation. Sam arranged an introduction to Kevin, who lived near my hometown and was working there to save money to come back to school. I began studying with Kevin, meeting him at the library or at a restaurant, borrowing books, and asking questions.

I have no doubt that my desire to become a member of Sam’s coven figured into my choice for a college. When I arrived at school in the fall, I looked forward to continuing to work with Sam, Beth, Lauren, and some of the other members of the coven I had met while painting Stonehenge. I also got an opportunity to meet and eventually work with others who were interested in becoming initiates of Sam’s group. About the time that a few of us students asked for formal study and initiation, Sam’s coven decided to cap its membership. We continued to study, in limbo for awhile, while things played out behind the scenes. Eventually I learned that Sam had essentially started a new coven in order to initiate us. Some of the members
of the first coven, including Beth, Lauren, and Kevin crossed over to the new one. In keeping with custom at that time, I knew little about the members of the previous coven beyond first names, so I have scant knowledge of what processes or group dynamics were at work or what happened to the members of the previous coven who had decided not to transfer to the second one.

Also in keeping with the tradition of secrecy and protectiveness very much prevalent throughout the Craft at the time, I must confess that I know next to nothing about those who initiated my High Priest or where they in turn were initiated. Sam had apparently traced or been told that our particular tradition of the Craft originally traced itself back to parts of Britain near Wales, but what evidence he had for this quite frankly escaped me. This lack of knowledge about my own coven history in a larger sense is a very practical reason for me to limit my discussion of “lineage” or “tradition” within the Követöi to the more immediate founders and practices of the coven rather than to some distant historical roots.

Lauren and I left the area and eventually founded our own group, Az Isteneknek Követöi, around 1984, after having worked together in Sam’s group for a little over ten years. By now, I have been an initiated and practicing member of the Wiccan clergy for nearly twenty-five years. By way of establishing some of my qualifications for discussing initiation rituals within my lineage, I can tell you that, as a member of my “parent coven,” I assisted my former High Priest with two initiations. Years later, after most of us had left our High Priest’s coven and either drifted away from practice
or started separate groups, I and my co-High Priestess initiated nine others into a coven of our own.

The initiation ritual that I will describe in the coming chapters is very close to one that my own coven performs, but it is also limited by personal oaths and ethical fieldwork practices. In other words, I will not disclose the identities of the ritual's participants, specific details as to gesture and posture, and exact wording of specific narratives. While I will not give the exact details of the ritual, what I cite will be quite close in spirit. In fact, I am helped in these respects by the growing number of books and even videos on the market that have made public some aspects of the Wiccan initiation ceremony and the process of becoming a Witch, including a few "how to" books. Since some basic information about the nature of Wiccan initiation rituals has already been published, I will therefore be revealing no "secrets" in my description of the ceremony. The reader may pursue descriptions of other Wiccan initiation rituals that have been published in books or made available through video, as listed in the bibliography, if so inclined.

An additional factor that limits my description of the ceremony is that part of the element of initiation is "surprise," and to completely disclose all aspects of initiation is, in effect, to "ruin" the performance. Moreover, much of the ceremony is practiced with the body—the importance of which we will examine in later chapters—and my description within this work is necessarily removed and distant from the bodily performance because it must be put into text. With all of this in mind, actual ritual preparations and actions will be described in the order of their occurrence as much as possible.
Finally, my description of the initiation ceremony is meant in some way only to be typical of certain kinds of Wiccan initiations. I must strongly emphasize that my description should by no means be considered "definitive" or "authoritative" in any way because of the extraordinary variety of Wiccan praxis. I shall turn now to a general description of The Old Religion and then to a more specific description of my coven and its practices in order to provide the reader with a more complete context for understanding.
CHAPTER 2
The Craft of the Wise

Mapping an Ever-Changing Landscape

Compared to twenty-five years ago, when I was first initiated into the Craft, there is today a veritable explosion of scholarship devoted to myriad aspects of the practice of Witchcraft in particular and to contemporary Paganism in general (e.g., Lewis 1996, Orion 1995, and Pearson, Roberts, and Samuel 1998). Some works track the historical development of contemporary Paganism (e.g., Hutton 1999) or give a general overview of its major contours (e.g., Carpenter 1996). Others address the significance of “nature religions” in the modern world (e.g., Pearson, Roberts, and Samuel 1998) or categorize various forms of Witchcraft according to their use of power in magical transformation (e.g., Rabinovitch 1996). Although still more research is undoubtedly needed in this area, there are also several interesting—and sometimes conflicting—studies that explore the social demographics of contemporary Paganism and Wicca (e.g., Jorgensen and Russell 1999; Kirkpatrick, Rainey, and Rubi 1986; Carpenter and Fox 1992). Scholars of religions, practitioners, and those who are both are engaging with one another in lively and diverse exploration of one of America’s most recent and complex religious phenomena.
The diversity of today's scholarship on contemporary Pagan religions is matched and exceeded only by the diversity of practices, communities, and individuals found among Witches and other contemporary Pagans. It is therefore extremely difficult to make general statements about the Craft. However, one must have some sort of grounding in "general Wicca" to follow the discussion of ritual initiation that occurs within Az Isteneknek Követői (sometimes simply called "the Követői" in this work). The following brief introduction is meant only to serve this modest purpose and is by no means intended to be considered by the reader to offer a "definitive" statement on Wiccan practice. For more specific information about the larger world of contemporary Pagan practices, the reader is directed to the several books and articles on contemporary Paganism listed in the bibliography, many of which contain quite extensive bibliographies of their own.

The Craft is frequently described by its practitioners as a Western polytheistic nature religion whose roots extend into pre-Christian Europe. In general, Witches worship both Gods and Goddesses, with the emphasis on the plural, although there are covens—often variously self-identified as "feminist Wicca," "Dianic," or "feminist Witchcraft"—who seem primarily to worship only the Goddess and who also may exclude men from their covens. This phenomenon seems to be a result of the "discovery" of Wicca by feminists in the mid to late seventies and does not reflect the Craft as it was introduced to me or as it is practiced by my coven today. As a general rule, both women and men have equal access to the sacred and to the priesthood, at least in the tradition that the Követői practice—something upon which I
shall elaborate further in a moment. Generally speaking, women in the Craft have roles that are both extremely powerful and highly valued\(^3\) and that possess both (private) power and (public) authority.\(^4\)

Practitioners of Wicca usually characterize their religion as a modern-day revival or re-creation of practices rooted in the shamanic techniques and indigenous religious practices of a pre-Christian pagan Europe. Some forms of the Craft strongly emphasize the use of shamanic techniques within their ritual practices, participating in shamanic traditions that are followed throughout many parts of the world. Wicca is sometimes called a part of the “Western Mystery Tradition”\(^5\) because of its emphasis on initiatory processes and because of its perceived similarity to what we know of Greek initiatory or “mystery” religions. For example, journalist and Witch Margot Adler writes:

If...we define the Craft as “the European heritage of Goddess worship,” the connections with the mysteries of Demeter and Kore become clearer. Above and beyond the murky area of historical and geographical connections, the philosophical connections are real. What little we know of the Mysteries seems to indicate that these rites emphasized (as the Craft, at its best, does today) \textit{experience} as opposed to dogma, and \textit{metaphor} and \textit{myth} as opposed to \textit{doctrine}. Both the Mysteries and the Craft emphasize initiatory \textit{processes} that lead to a widening of perceptions. Neither emphasizes theology, belief, or the written word. In both, participants expect to lead normal lives \textit{in} the world as well as attain spiritual enrichment [italics in the original]. (1986, quoted from 1979 edition, p. 389)

While Wiccans may base their practices on a variety of European mythological pantheons, the ones with which I am most familiar have
incorporated much material from Celtic or British pantheons and practices. In fact, the resurgence—some might say creation\(^6\)—of modern day Wicca owes much to the repeal of the last “anti-Witchcraft” or “fortune telling” laws in Britain during the 1950s. This freed Gerald Gardner, a retired British civil servant and writer of occult fiction, to publish *Witchcraft Today* and to proclaim openly the existence of “The Old Religion” as an ancient pre-Christian religion that had been forced underground for several hundred years to avoid persecution.

Although Adler’s point that the Craft emphasizes experience over text is largely true, debate arose almost immediately within both religious and scholarly communities as to how “old” was “The Old Religion.” Did the Craft even exist before Gerald Gardner? How much of the *Book of Shadows*—a collection of ritual manuals, “folk wisdom,” and philosophical writings that might be loosely termed the religion’s “sacred text”—was an invention of a retired civil servant with an excess of leisure time and an overactive imagination? In the early stages of public revival, the Wiccan community placed emphasis on the need for a connection to tradition, to ancient practices traced in “unbroken line,” in order to legitimate the authority of its religious experience. After all, most of Wicca’s experiences had been with religious traditions commonly found in the West, traditions with references to sacred texts whose “historicity” in some sense proved their “validity.” I suspect that many of the arguments about the “historical validity” of the *Book of Shadows* or any other written materials came out of a desire among practitioners of the Craft to have their religion seen as
equally (or more) valid or authoritative because it was older than religions such as Christianity. Seeing texts as static entities having their religious “authentication” within an historical frame is not only a problem for worshippers. While scholars generally employ a more sophisticated understanding of how texts change and how they come into and fall out of the canon, scholars also tend to rely upon decontextualized texts as definitive expressions or statements about religion. This can lead to a failure to recognize the extent to which categories such as “religion” are constructed and often artificially bounded.

Scholars of religions may also have difficulty dealing with oral traditions and practices handed down within communities through praxis. As noted earlier, praxis is understood for the purposes of this work to mean a traditional system of related practices forming a self-disciplinary process that involves the whole person. This disciplinary process is repeated as a way of integrating the self and transforming the way one acts in and thinks about the world. Because praxis is so often emphasized in the Craft over belief, text, or dogma, it is a good candidate for exploring what the recovery of praxis does for our understanding of religions generally. Folklorist and philosopher of religions Leonard Primiano notes in his 1995 article, “Vernacular Religion and the Search for Method in Religious Folklife,” that the recovery of praxis enables us to capture the experiential dimension of religion as it is lived by the people practicing it. This focus on praxis enables us to recontextualize religion at the level of what Primiano terms “the vernacular,” and what I term the level of “individuals-practicing.” It also
helps to undermine one of the prevalent dichotomies in studies of folk belief and religious studies: Religion versus religion or Organized-and-Institutional Religion-administered-in-an-Official-manner-by-Hierarchical-Elites versus "folk" religion. The misnaming of religion as “official” and “unofficial” suggests that “Religion” is a Platonic form existing as a pure element that is in some way transformed, even contaminated, by its exposure to human communities (1995:38-39). Primiano notes that a focus on religions as they are actually lived by human beings helps us to grasp that “official” religion does not, in fact, exist.

There are bodies and agencies of normative, prescriptive religion, but there is no objective existence of practice which expresses “official religion.” No one, no special religious elite or member of an institutional hierarchy, neither the Pope in Rome nor the Dalai Lama of Tibet,...lives an “officially” religious life in a pure unadulterated form...There is always some passive accommodation some intriguing survival, some active creation, some dissenting impulse, some reflection on lived experience that influences how these individuals direct their religious lives. (1995:46)

In fact, philosopher Thomas Kasulis, focusing on the very same issue of praxis, puts it this way: “there is no such thing as religion, only religious people.” With this understanding, it is unwise from a theoretical as well as a practical perspective to try to make a “definitive statement” about Wicca or any other religion if we are to avoid reification and essentialism.

Additionally, a way of understanding religious “tradition” as dynamic, constantly interpreted and framed within the present moment, may help us
all understand authoritative religious praxis in a more fruitful manner. Speaking personally as a practitioner of religions, I have no problem simultaneously understanding my own religious practices as both “modern” or “reconstructed” and “rooted” in a distant pre-Christian past. My investigations into the religious and “folk” practices of my own Slavic and Hungarian ethnic heritage have contributed to an understanding of how practices of worship may often continue under different religious “labels,” theological or symbolic frameworks, and even different names for Gods. (See, for example, Kmietowicz 1976, 1982 and Zimmerman 1986.) These religious practices also change as they are inevitably interpreted and even creatively performed by people in the present. Although some controversy continues within the Wiccan religious community, by now most Wiccans are thoroughly familiar with the nature of the revival and reconstruction of their religion and have come to embrace fully the liberating aspect of a self-authoring and self-authenticating approach to the human religious experience.

The self-consciously constructed and authenticating nature of Wiccan praxis provides a significant departure from religion and ritual as it is normally perceived in the West, providing us an opportunity to rethink our categorizations of both. Many of us are accustomed to thinking of religion as something into which you are born that functions as a label or identity. Ritual, on the other hand, is often perceived as a static or unchanging and repetitive experience provided to us by authority and/or tradition and performed for us or on us. Rituals must therefore be followed; occasionally
they must even be *endured*. Such a general perception concentrates on an exclusively prescriptive, uncreative dimension of religious ritual rather than its dynamic and adaptive dimensions.

Following lines of reasoning suggested by anthropologist Barbara Myerhoff in her work on secular forms of self-generated ritual, we see that significant attitudinal changes occur concerning religion and ritual when people create religious rituals for themselves. By embracing the self-consciously constructed nature of their religious praxis, Wiccans understand religion in general as a creative *activity*, rather than a label, even one consciously chosen. Religion itself becomes a lived process, not a product. It is a *human* creation, a living experience, a performed activity—not merely a body of inherited texts. Human beings constantly reconstruct and reweave their understanding of the sacred, and so the search for the “ultimate origin” or who has the “most ancient” texts or practices is rendered nonsensical or irrelevant. Myerhoff states:

> It requires some suspension of the knowledge that ritual has been made rather than given, and along with it, the realization that we are dealing with interpretations, not mutable, externally provided truths. But given the times in which we live, perhaps it is easier to maintain this paradox than hold out for unqualified, sacred axioms which may so easily slip into someone else’s totalitarian program. An approach which maintains belief alongside critical consciousness is ultimately more imaginative, more responsible. (1982:131)

Although her work deals with secular ritual forms, Myerhoff eloquently provides insight into the significance of understanding religious ritual as
constructed and created affairs. I suspect that Wicca's self-consciously generated religious ritual may provide us material to "think with" and present us with an opportunity to examine and understand other religions as examples of creative activities and lived processes.

Today the Craft has a growing and influential number of national spokespersons (e.g., see Adler 1986, also Harvey and Hardman 1995 for information on Pagan national figures), but there is no central group of "church elders" who establish religious dogma or enforce a regime of standard ritual practices. Witches emphasize personal and individual experience of the sacred, a widening of perception through initiatory processes that create a plurality and state of rich diversity in approach, structure, and ritual. Ultimately, this reinforces an emphasis on local praxis over universal dogma among most Wiccan groups.

**Structure at the Local Level**

The Craft is practiced locally by single individuals known usually as "solitaries" (whose activities and experiences do not figure in this particular work) or in small groups called "covens," which have a great deal of autonomy and which vary widely in composition, size, and structure. I am most familiar with covens that practice initiation ritual as a form of entry into the group. Such initiation typically takes place, as it does in my own coven, after a period of study and mutual screening. In its largest and most inclusive sense then, a coven of this form may consist of all those who are initiated members as well as students who working toward initiation.
Frequently, initiation is understood by these groups as an entrance into the clergy; members are called Priests or Priestesses after initiation and may function as such within the larger Pagan community, for example, performing rituals of marriage, called "handfasting" by Witches, or blessing new babies, called "Wiccaning." Not all Wiccan groups practice initiation, and some of those that do may not require a course of study.

Some groups admit both men and women to the coven, on an equal footing. Others, usually working within what is called a "Dianic tradition," typically consist only of women. More rarely, there are also covens consisting only of men. Certain covens favor a balance between the worship of female and male deities in their rituals; others worship exclusively female deities. Coven organizational and administrative structures range from extremely minimal to highly organized patterns of training and degree advancement. Some covens have an extensive training program and a hierarchical structure based on levels of expertise and experience. A few groups have a rigid, even authoritarian hierarchical structure that may or may not be connected to training. Others have no discernable training, disciplined praxis, or structure, preferring a totally spontaneous and creative approach to worship. Ritual expression takes on a dizzying variety of forms as well, from the elementary to the most sophisticated and from the simplest to the most elaborate and ceremonial patterns of ritual behavior and expression. A single coven may itself practice a wide variety of ritual forms. This diverse range of coven membership, organization, and ritual
styles provide ample choices for the individual looking for a group of "like-minded" persons with whom to worship.

Within a localized context, coven members often speak in terms of the "tradition" or "lineage" of their particular groups. Usually this includes some reference to the background and training of the group's immediate founder(s), or perceived historical founder—as in the Gardnerian covens, which trace their practices back to Gerald Gardner. In this paper, tradition and lineage refer to the training and experience of the immediate founders of a particular coven, rather than a more distant historical figure.

A few additional things might be safely said about Wiccan praxis and worldview despite its great diversity. I remind the reader to view my description of Wicca as always colored and framed by my particular experiences with a particular lineage of the Craft. What I describe shall therefore reflect my own religious practice and the practices of those most closely known to me; it must never be taken as exclusive or somehow definitive of the range of Wiccan practices.

Wicca is a nature religion, although precisely how that term is to be understood is contested both by scholars and Witches themselves. Witches nevertheless draw many insights from the seasonal cycles of nature, which are celebrated in a calendar of eight sabbats or holy days called the Wheel of the Year. (See for example, Farrar and Farrar 1981 or Campanelli 1992.) Each holy day has two dimensions of activities, one of which occurs in the natural world: celebration of the times of year for planting or harvesting crops, for example. The other reflects what is going on in the natural world,
but the natural becomes a metaphor for a field of activity located within the personal lives of Wiccan practitioners. So one may talk of “planting” and “harvesting” as part of the agricultural cycle, but also as an aspect of other human endeavors, such as “sowing” new ideas and habits and “harvesting” the seeds thus planted. In celebrating the sabbats, Witches express and experience the neverending cycle of change, celebrating equally times of planting and harvest, seeing in every ending a new beginning, in every death a rebirth. Given this perspective, it should not be surprising that a belief in reincarnation is often a central teaching of the Craft.

**Deities**

Although certain Wiccan groups focus solely or primarily on female deistic images, Wiccans typically worship both Gods and Goddesses, with the emphasis on the plural. Many covens choose to worship Gods and Goddesses within a particular group or pantheon of related deities, but also feel free to invoke deities outside of those pantheons as required by the circumstances of a particular ritual or need. Goddesses and Gods are generally worshipped within the context of the seasonal cycles of Nature and, through these cycles, are invoked into worshippers’ lives as powerfully transformative catalysts for change and growth.

The Gods and Goddesses of the Witches are conceived of as having “aspects” or “dimensions” directly connected to the annual seasonal cycles of the Solar Wheel of the Year or the monthly Lunar Cycle. These aspects have a correspondence to cycles within human life as well. Although
Witches certainly recognize the existence of Solar Goddesses in many world mythologies (e.g., Japan), the Lunar Goddess is one of the major theistic images for many contemporary Wiccans. Her ever-changing cycles of new/waxing moon, full moon, and waning/dark moon afford both female and male Witches ample opportunities to ritually celebrate the stages of human experience. The Moon’s monthly cycles of waxing and waning provide a visible reminder of the ebb and flow of life’s energies.

The stages of the Moon may be easily and directly keyed to chronological stages in female life, usually visualized as the Triple Goddess in her aspects of Maiden, Mother, or Crone. It would be relatively easy for Witches to create rituals celebrating lifecycle changes using the Triple Goddess in a “literal” way: Maiden Goddesses for young girls and menarche, Mother Goddesses for birth rituals, Crones at menopause, and so forth. In the body of ritual practices inherited from my parent coven—the one into which I was originally initiated and with which I worked for nearly ten years—the Triple Goddess was almost never used in this fashion. There were no rites that specifically addressed either female or male events of literal biological transformation, which may say something about the invisibility of such events within large portions of Western culture.

In fact, a literal understanding both of the Triple Goddess aspects and their relation to human lifecycle experiences would be far from an accurate in terms of how the aspects are generally used by Witches. The Triple Goddess is understood and used symbolically in a very fluid, multivalent fashion by Witches. This enables women and even men of all ages, sexual
orientations, and biological conditions to invoke Her in order to enact
powerfully transformative rites that celebrate the changes in their lives.
For example, any Witch, male or female, of any age, may call upon the
power of the Maiden at the new and waxing moon to ask for Her blessings to
secure the skill and inspiration to launch a new project, to obtain a fresh
start, or to make a new beginning. At the Full Moon, any Witch may turn
to the Mother for the strength and vitality needed to sustain goals, his
projects, and himself. During the Waning and Dark Moon, the Crone gives to
any Witch, regardless of age or gender, the power to destroy in order to
create, to end in order to begin anew.

Male deities, also fully accessible by both male and female Witches,
are often connected to the Sun. They are sometimes understood in terms of
the dual aspects of summer and winter, balancing cycles of growth and
decay, activity and rest, within worshippers' lives. Gods may also be
understood as having a tripartite dimension in the form of solar, vegetative,
and forest/animal aspects worshipped within the Solar Wheel. Following the
solar cycle, Witches celebrate the returning Sun—the spark of life—at
Winter Solstice. This is the time of year when the worshipper rests,
contemplating the success or failure of last year's activities, and plans what
changes she will make in the year to come. As the Sun grows in intensity
until its height at Midsummer, the Witch plans for the coming year, planting
"seeds of change" in the spring, working hard to establish her goals through
the summer, and looking forward to fruitful harvest.
Although it is evident that aspects of deities function as important metaphors within worshippers’ lives, it must be strongly emphasized that the Gods are not merely metaphors, but exist as real members of the spiritual community. A Witch’s relationship with her Gods is primarily experiential; for a Witch, the Gods are present and alive in the world, not removed from it on either a disembodied non-earthly plane or on a purely symbolic or abstract level as a “mental construct.”

Az Isteneknek Követői

At this point, I shall move the focus of our discussion from a broad overview of the Craft to a more specific description of the community whose rituals are the subject of this paper. From this point on, my descriptions or characterizations of activities within the religion should be understood to refer to this particular religious community and its specific traditions. As noted at the end of the previous chapter, Lauren and I were initiated into the same parent coven approximately twenty-five years ago; we ourselves founded Az Isteneknek Követői about twelve years ago. In this particular lineage, a coven is essentially a group of initiated clergy in various stages of training and expertise. Everyone is either a Priest or Priestess, so a clergy/lay dichotomy does not exist within the group. The coven recognizes two basic levels of training and expertise that are celebrated and acknowledged with group ritual. The first level, that of Priest or Priestess, is reached upon initiation. The second level, that of High Priest or High Priestess, is acquired only if the individual chooses to pursue additional
training that would effectively enable her to start and train her own covens.

There is a third level, usually reached after several years as a High Priest or Priestess and after experience leading more than one coven. The "third degree," as it is often called, is assumed without ritual fanfare, and considered a private matter between the Witch and the Gods.

Many members of the Követôi have had occasion to serve within the broader Pagan community in some priestly function: for example, by performing marriage or "handfasting" rites, blessing newborns or babies ("Wiccanings"), practicing divination, performing healing rituals, visiting hospitals to comfort the ill or the dying, performing funeral ceremonies, and so forth. Most of the group is involved in one way or another with the training of new students who are themselves in varying stages of learning. A serious student, or "Dedicant," has to have a high level of self-discipline and a willingness to undertake a rigorous course of study—typically one to three years for this particular group. No money is charged for instruction. Initiation into the coven is both a central religious experience and a crucial mutual screening process for the group. Critical attention is given from the outset to the development of group dynamics, a sense of mutual commitment, respect, and trust. "Perfect love" and "perfect trust" are two requirements for initiation, which is ideally seen as a lifelong commitment to both religious practice and religious community.

The coven whose rituals I shall describe no longer "exists" as a single, coherent practicing group. The Követôi live in various parts of northern and central Ohio and recently divided the coven along geographic lines. Witches
call this practice "hiving off," and it usually occurs when a coven gets too large, becomes too spread out geographically, or develops inter-personal differences that cannot be resolved. In the Követöi’s tradition, a Priest or Priestess of qualified rank—in this case a High Priest or Priestess—assumes leadership of that part of the group that wants to hive off from the larger body. The groups may or may not continue to work together on occasion; often this depends on the reasons for hiving off. The northern division of the Követöi subsequently split into two, one of which keeps to a Wiccan practice, while the other explores American Druidism, which is a similar but distinct Pagan religious path. For the purpose of this article, I will describe the ethnographic characteristics and the practices of the Követöi prior to hiving.

The coven is composed of six Priestesses and three Priests, one of the latter having been initiated after the split. Four of the Priestesses are High Priestesses, including both Lauren and me. The Követöi come from a range of European ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds ranging from middle to working class; all members are white. Ages of the Witches range from the mid-twenties to the mid-forties. Educational backgrounds of members vary a great deal—from high school graduate to Ph.D. level. The following list represents just a few of the labels that the Követöi might use to describe themselves: parent, real estate agent, astrologer, graduate student, secretary, metalsmith, musician, herbalist, farmer, employee of the Clerk of Courts, artist, and factory worker. The Követöi run the gamut politically, from leftist "Deadheads" to moderate Republicans, a fact that makes
conversation around election time very interesting. Until recently, the four
High Priestesses formed the “core” of the group, having practiced and
worked together the longest.

The Kôvetôi’s tradition draws heavily from the mythology and “folk”
traditions found primarily throughout the British Isles, mostly what might
today be popularly considered “Celtic” in a general sense. The deities the
Kôvetôi invoke into the Circle during rituals generally come from Welsh and
Irish pantheons. Although a few, but not all, of the members are ethnically
from the British Isles, none has a problem working with a European
tradition that is not specifically represented in his or her particular ethnic
ancestry.11

It should be observed at this point that the lineage the Kôvetôi
practice is not “feminist Wicca,” understood as the exclusive worship of
“the” Goddess by women only. The Craft into which I was initiated and into
which I initiate others is a dual gendered, polytheistic religion. In terms of
the balance of power between male and female, the members of this coven
worship both Goddesses and Gods, favoring neither over the other. Both
women and men have equal access to the priesthood. There is little, if any,
distinction between the roles of Priest and Priestess within the coven; both
are accorded equal power and value. Each initiate learns how to “cast” the
Circle, or to create the ritual space, and to invoke both Goddesses and Gods.
On a technical level, the rituals could be conducted equally well with only
Priestesses or Priests attending. The Kôvetôi expect each initiate to
contribute to the rites according to his or her training and years of experience. 13

The presence of both female and male images of deity and the power and authority of both women's and men's roles may suggest several intriguing lines of inquiry for a feminist scholar of religions. It is true the roles of women in the Craft have never been institutionalized as ones of passivity and obedience to male religious authority. Yet, based on my experience, the Craft is by no means a "patriarchy free" religious practice, nor can it be considered a kind of "feminist heaven" merely because it contains Goddesses. I suspect some of those who enthusiastically "discovered Wicca" in the late seventies—as scholars or potential members—were either not aware or chose to overlook the fact that this Western religion with Goddesses had an existence and a range of distinctive worldviews and practices predating mid- to late-seventies feminism.

At times, the influx of feminists into the Craft as I know it—as new members with a distinctive and particular political agenda—has not been an unqualified and uncontested success. I suspect, rather, that the impact of the Women's Movement on the Old Religion has had and continues to have both positive and negative effects. 13 On the one hand, the positive effects of this encounter between new and old members have been liberating and invigorating to the Craft, providing new modes of religious discourse and models of ritual expression, new challenges to sometimes rigid hierarchical structures, and an increased sense of political activism among some Witches.
On the other hand, the negative effects of this encounter seem to be rooted in an ignorance of the Craft as a Western religion with a distinctive range of practices and a worldview that is dual gendered, polytheistic, and pluralistic. This is a significant departure from the monotheistic Western Judeo-Christian worldviews more familiar to a large number of Americans. One indication that a Judeo-Christian worldview is being “imported” into the Craft may be found in the emergence of a “monotheistic” Goddess. Exclusive worship of “The” Goddess is seen by many “old timers” as simply the Judeo-Christian god in another sex—a kind of “Jahweh-in-drag.” The fear is that the sense of freedom and the wide accessibility of the sacred within the Craft, which are engendered by a pluralistic and polytheistic worldview, will be lost to dogma and control every bit as crippling and stifling as any under the patriarchy.

This fear has become realized somewhat as some worshippers of “The” Goddess attempt to limit access to the sacred within Wicca to women only, a mirror image of the denial of the priesthood to women in more patriarchal religions. A monotheistic Goddess parallel in form and function to God the Father thus has disturbing ramifications both theologically, as the dual gendered polytheism is lost, and politically, as men are denied access to Wiccan spirituality. Conflict sometimes arose in Wiccan communities as sacred songs, ritual, and liturgies that were created and performed by both women and men for the pleasure and celebration of both Gods and Goddesses were being “appropriated”—rewritten by women for women in a female-only voice in female-only circles for the exclusive worship
of "The" Goddess—and then promulgated as "this is the religion of Wicca." Today, Wicca seems generally to have expanded to include the "feminist newcomers" as another example of its wide diversity. There are still moments of friction and contestation, however, just as I suspect there are in any religious tradition. Differences between "feminist" Wicca and "pre-feminist discovery" Wicca in terms of both theology and praxis may present scholars with potentially interesting lines of inquiry for further reflection at some future time.

Although this is not the proper place for a lengthy discussion of feminist and pre-feminist discovery Wicca, a few brief points of summation are in order before moving on to an examination of ritual structure practiced by the Követöi of the Medicine Shield. My distinction between feminist Wicca and the Craft as practiced within my lineage should serve as a reminder to the reader that Wiccan practice and theology are not monolithic. Like most religious practitioners and scholars, Witches participate in a universe of competing and sometimes conflicting discourses and practices. This distinction also cautions the reader not to conflate feminist Wicca with Witchcraft in its entirety, or to assume that Witchcraft is a religion only of women and Goddesses. The fact that Witchcraft, which has many strong Goddesses, is not "patriarchy free" should encourage us look at religious phenomena in general more carefully and to ask critical questions about how female deistic models are used within particular communities and how the women within those communities may use them or not use them to negotiate for power and authority. An argument and precedent for this kind
of study has been well established by Falk and Gross (1989), Gross (1996), Erndl (1993), and Gold and Raheja (1994). These and other studies call attention to and challenge the presuppositions that may inform our scholarship on women and religion and better enable us to uncover the extensive range of women's religious experiences.

The Ritual Setting

The Kôvetôi generally perform their rituals at night and, whenever possible, outdoors in the midst of nature. However, especially for urban and suburban Witches, it is often difficult to find a suitably private outdoor location. For this reason, indoor ritual spaces are common, taking the form of a spare room or part of a room dedicated and decorated for that purpose with the altar, statues or pictures of Gods and Goddesses, flowers, incense, and other significant objects. In ritual, the Kôvetôi work with “elemental forces,” known symbolically as earth, air, fire, water, and spirit. An important part of the ritual experience is “casting the Circle,” or the creation of the sacred space. Because this act is fundamental to all Wiccan group rituals, I shall elaborate upon it in some detail in the section below. Casting the Circle seals off the ritual area from the mundane world, usually through the symbolic invocation of the four elements earth, air, fire, water, and the “fifth element” spirit. For Witches, the Circle's directions have “correspondences” to elements, seasons, colors, animals, ages of life, and so forth. For example, in this tradition the element of air “corresponds” with
the east, fire the south, water the west, and earth the north, while spirit is associated with the center, from which point the Gods are usually invoked.

The elements are also represented on the altar and in the personal ritual tools of each Witch. The typical altar is a rectangular table about the height of a coffee table and large enough to hold candles for fire, a small bowl of water, incense for the element of air, and a container of salt or earth for the element of earth. More symbolic forms of the elements may also be found on the typical altar in the form of the ritual tools: the chalice or cup for the element of water, the pentacle (a disc or small plate on which a five pointed star is engraved or drawn) for earth, the athame or sword for fire, and the wand for air. The altar is always positioned in the north quadrant of the circle, often decorated with statues of Gods and Goddesses, and usually also decorated according to the season, for example with spring flowers or autumn harvest arrangements of leaves, dried flowers, corn, gourds, and fruits.

The initiates always make an outline of the ritual, determining in advance such questions as who will do what part of the ritual and what chants they will use. Each Witch takes or has already taken a bath of purification and dons her robes before going to the Circle. While some groups work "skyclad" or in the nude, ours works in full-length black cotton robes that are cut along much the same pattern. The robes serve a symbolic as well as practical purpose: their similarity helps create a sense of group identity, and their color is both symbolic and quite practical for working outdoors in the dark if one wishes not to be seen. After the sacred space is
created and blessed with the elements, the purpose of the rite is stated, and
the ritual is begun.

   The invocation of the Gods helps establish the ritual's purpose and
raises the participants' energy levels within the Circle. The Gods are
invoked into the Circle through prayer and song or chanting, often
accompanied by dancing or drumming. Everyone participates within the
Circle. There are no non-participatory observers who stand outside. Guests
who are invited as potential members or as visiting religious specialists from
another path are briefed on what will happen during the ritual and
participate in the Circle's activities to the best of their abilities.

   The Követöi have a patron Goddess and God who are always invoked
and whose names are known only by the initiates, but other Goddesses and
Gods may also be invited to the Circle, depending on Their nature and the
specific activities of the rite. For example, if the Circle involves healing,
Gods and Goddesses particularly known for Their healing powers will be
invited. In the summer, the Követöi invoke the Goddess first, and in the
winter the God first.

   After the invocation, the "work" or purpose of the ritual, such as seed
blessing, healing, celebration of a sabbat, or initiation, is then performed.
When the work has been accomplished, the Követöi sit down on the ground
or floor and relax, sharing their experiences of the ritual with one another,
teaching each other new songs or chants, telling jokes or stories, or maybe
doing some special divination to help with a member's problem. The
ceremony of "cakes and wine" takes place at this time. Served in a
 communal chalice, the wine is blessed with the athame to symbolize the sacred union of the Goddess and the God. The chalice itself represents the female, and the athame the male. The cakes are crescent-shaped oatmeal cookies specially baked by one of the members, whose success or failure with the recipe usually forms the basis for the beginning of the jokes.

If there is no other work to be done at this point, the Kôvetôi begin the process of taking down the Circle. I like to call this "Circle deconstruction," which the rest of the Kôvetôi find amusing. They understand the term as a play on words on both the kinds of scholarship I encounter and talk about—"construction" and "deconstruction" being currently popular terms in the scholarly lexicon—and the process of setting up and taking down the Circle. In "Circle deconstruction," then, whatever has been called or invoked into the Circle must now be released or asked to depart. The Gods and Goddesses who have been invited to the Circle are bid fond farewell and given leave. Any energies raised during the ritual are now either sent on to fulfill their purpose (e.g., healing) or harmlessly grounded. Circle deconstruction is an important step in the ritual process. It not only brings a sense of closure to the event, but also illustrates the degree to which Witches approach ritual as having experiential reality—serious and real physical and psychological effects on our lives—rather than merely as metaphorical abstraction.
**Circles and Rituals**

An individual Witch may perform a simple act of meditation, prayer, or an informal ceremony at any time and in any place. Formal group rituals are always held in a specially prepared space called "the Circle." The space is quite literally round—or as round as possible given the limitations of the room and the number of persons who must be accommodated within the perimeter if created indoors. This circle is often marked off from the space around it by a ring of stones (if outdoors), a ring of red yarn (if indoors), or some other distinctive marking determined by the creativity of the individual Witch. The four directions—north, east, south, and west—are plotted as accurately as possible using a compass and then marked by specially blessed and prepared candles that are used in the ceremony. As noted previously, the word "Circle" is a multi-purpose one: it can refer to the actual consecrated and blessed space in which the ritual takes place; it can be used to refer to the ritual itself—as in "I'm having a Circle tonight," and it can be used in place of the word "coven." When it is used in any of these three ways, the word "Circle" will always be capitalized within this work.

Each Circle is constructed or "cast" in the same manner, and most rituals within the Circle follow a basic structural format. Below, I shall give a fairly straightforward outline and description of the basic construction of the Circle and the structure of a typical ritual. As noted previously, any descriptions of ritual that I give are situated within the limitations of my oaths as a Priestess and will not be exact as to either wording or gesture. Connected with this limitation is the emphasis to the reader that description
of the Circle casting or the ritual structure is not intended as a "how to"
guide for Wiccan ritual, but rather intended to help the reader situate the
ritual activities that will be described and analyzed in subsequent chapters.

Casting the Circle

The first thing that Witches do to cast the Circle is literally clean or
clear the space to be used for the rite. For an indoor Circle, this may mean
shifting furniture, getting out the vacuum, and generally clearing up the
clutter. When doing a Circle outdoors, the Witches usually have to pick up
sticks, gather firewood, clear brush, or otherwise tidy up the ritual space. As
noted above, the Priests and Priestesses who will be working the rite discuss
the ritual, determine parts, and make a brief outline of the rite before the
ceremony begins. All the necessary equipment—candles, wine, cakes, ritual
tools, and so forth—has been gathered and taken to the site. Bodily
cleanliness is also important for ritual work. All Witches must have taken a
ritual bath or shower, usually in the privacy of their own homes and well
before the time of the ritual. On those special occasions when purification or
rededication is the purpose of the ritual, the ritual bath takes on a special
meaning, and the bath water contains specially prepared herbs. The
Witches take turns bathing with freshly made batches of the specially
prepared water before they robe for the ritual; the robes must also have
been cleaned before the rite. Properly cleansed and robed, the Witches
gather at the site to begin the actual process of casting the Circle.
The casting of the Circle and the basic ritual structure may be briefly outlined as follows:

• **Grounding and Centering Visualization**
• **Circle Construction**
  • *Cut the Circle*
  • *Invoke Air*
  • *Invoke Earth and Water*
  • *Consecrate the Circle*
  • *Invoke the Watchtowers*
  • *State the Purpose of the Rite*
• **Group Chant**
• **Decorate the Circle**
• **Invoke the Gods**
• **Work of Specific Ritual**
• **Cakes and Wine**
• **Any Other Ritual Work**
• **Circle Deconstruction**
  • *Bid the Gods Farewell*
  • *Bid the Watchtowers Farewell*
  • *Break the Circle*
Grounding and Centering

The exercise of “grounding and centering” is the first ceremonial act of casting the Circle. All the Witches gather together and form a circle as one Priest or Priestess leads the group in a breathing and visualization exercise. The exercise is designed to accomplish several interconnected purposes. It is a very basic physical and mental relaxation exercise—a somatic praxis—that is fundamental to any form of magic or ceremonial work done by the Witches in the coven. Through this praxis, the cares and concerns of the mundane world are let go and the Witch becomes able to assume the “Craft Personality,” a consciously constructed ritual identity whose personality and attributes are revealed by the Witch’s Craft name. The Craft name is taken upon initiation into the group and is primarily used within the Circle. Grounding and centering is also the first act of establishing community with the other members of the coven in the Circle, with Nature, and with the Gods.

Circle Construction

The actual action of “casting the Circle” begins after the grounding and centering visualization is completed. Casting a Circle is not taken lightly; it is a skill demanding a competent and demonstrable level of somatic practice. The Witch must be totally in tune with each element of the casting process; her body, mind, and spirit must be completely engaged, so engaged in fact, that casting a Circle becomes almost transparent, “second nature,” a deeply embedded part of her sense of self as Witch and Priestess.
New initiates will spend much time working with each element of Circle casting, developing both a mental and somatic attention and sensitivity toward the five elemental forces, the directions, the Watchtowers, the Gods and Goddesses, in short, toward all the dimensions of ritual activity that make the Circle "a fit place for the Gods to enter."

Unless this is specifically a "practice" Circle cast by a newly made initiate, the Követöi will have determined in advance which High Priestess will be primarily responsible for casting the Circle. This High Priestess literally "cuts" the space out of what we might think of as "normal space" by walking around the edge of the Circle three times, using the ritual sword or her personal athame, a sharp black-handled knife that is never used for cutting anything in the physical world, to mark the line of the Circle's edge. Both sword and athame are tools of the element fire, and so it is fire that marks the initial separation of "sacred" space from the everyday. To help her focus, the coven sings a chant while the Priestess is cutting the Circle and visualizes fire flowing out from the sword or the athame.

Cutting the Circle is followed by an invocation of the air element, usually accomplished by any Witch present. He takes the incense burner from the altar, fanning incense around the edge of the circle, and places the incense burner back on the altar. Earth and water are invoked simultaneously in this Circle; the water contains salt, a symbol of earth, and has therefore been consecrated and blessed as both elements. Another Witch takes the consecrated water from the altar, sprinkles it around the edge of the Circle, the Witches in the Circle, and the altar, and places it on
the altar. This movement is done at the same time that another High Priestess stands in the center of the Circle with her athame and charges the Circle, essentially commanding the Circle to be a place of love and truth and a “fit place for the Gods to enter.”

The four Watchtowers are invoked next through physical gesture, prayer, and intonation. They are spirit beings, usually referred to as “Ancient and Mighty Ones,” who guard each direction. These Ancient and Mighty Ones or “Guardians of the Watchtowers,” are called upon to witness the activities of the ritual and to guard the participants of the Circle from harm. They are important figures in Craft ritual practice, as they are the official witnesses for such events as initiation. Since there were four High Priestesses at the height of the Kôvetöi’s membership, each High Priestess would take a direction and invoke the Watchtower of that direction. Just as the Watchtowers are invoked, so, too, are they released or dismissed at the end of the Circle. Finally, the purpose of the rite is stated, usually, but not always, by the person who cut the Circle.

*The Group Chant*

After the purpose of the ritual has been stated, the Witches meet together in the center of the Circle, hold hands, and sing a song that expresses their sense of community. The group experimented with different songs and chants over the years; few of the Kôvetöi are professional singers, and so it was a task getting something that almost anyone could sing. We finally settled on a song overheard by someone somewhere (which is how the
Kôvetôi usually find their songs and chants). The group gave it a simple melody, adjusted the range, and developed the following:

You are my family, and you are healing me
You are my family, and you are healing me
You are my people. We are one.
You are my people. We are one.

This is repeated several times, occasionally with some fancy harmony if anyone is up to it, until all in the Circle “know” that it is time to move on. This kind of silent communication, sense of timing, or group “knowing” is a difficult phenomenon to explain, but it is one that asserts itself increasingly as the members work with one another over time. I suspect that this kind of communication comes with the development of community or group intimacy—what Witches sometimes refer to as “group mind”—and is an essential part of working together successfully within ritual.

After the group chant is finished, it is time to decorate the Circle. This usually means adorning the perimeter of the Circle, the four directions, and the altar with seasonal flowers or other decorative items in order to make it a place of beauty before invoking the Gods. Lauren and I are usually involved in invoking the God and Goddess, and the two of us decide in advance which of us will do what invocation. The group also settles on a chant for each invocation, and the Gods are invoked with a combination of
prayer, song or chant, and rhythmic drumming or rattling. Each Witch present participates in the invocations to the best of her or his ability.

At this point, the major work or purpose of the ritual is done, much as described in the foregoing section. Cakes and wine provide a break between particular ritual works as well as a time for the group to rest and share with one another. Any additional ritual work is done after cakes and wine, and the Witches begin to shut down the Circle. This is as important to a successful ritual as the construction of the Circle. All energies raised in the Circle must be released to their proper purpose (e.g., healing) or safely grounded. The Gods are bid a fond farewell, as are the Guardians of the Watchtowers. Everything that is called is dismissed; everything that is raised is grounded. The High Priestess in charge of the Circle breaks the Circle by crossing over its boundary and checks the perimeter to see if anything is amiss. Should the High Priestess detect any unusual or harmful energy (a highly unlikely event, at least in my twenty-five years as Priestess), she has the responsibility of immediately and quickly recasting the Circle to protect the members present and to banish the offending energy.

After the Circle is done, the ritual gear is packed up and either carted back to the house if the Circle has been outdoors, or cleaned up by the participating members. A celebratory feast commonly follows the ritual. This can be anything from an elaborate and thematic meal prepared in advance, a simple pot of chicken soup, or a pot luck assortment of fruits, cheese, and snacks. The Witches frequently stay up until the wee hours of
the morning, talking, singing, joking, playing music, watching movies, and generally having a good time with one another.

This concludes my description of the basic contours of Wiccan practice, both generally and as observed by Az Isteneknek Követői. With general information about how the Követői worship, the overall pattern of casting a Circle, and the basic structure of ritual, I shall now describe and explore the initiation process: how a person becomes a student and then a Dedicant in my tradition.
CHAPTER 3
The Path Toward the Circle

When I first contemplated this project, my focus was on the initiation ritual itself as a single event framed or marked off as significant by a series of deliberate actions or special activities. These actions or special activities function within the ritual process much as Barbara Babcock's "metanarrative" markers function to "call attention to the problems and processes of narration as an act and provide a frame for interpretation" (1977:73). I understood Wiccan initiation to be rather more complex than and perhaps not as sharply defined in its structural or spatial movements as Arnold van Gennep's (1960) three stage process of separation, liminality, and reincorporation—or any of its subsequent variations (e.g., Turner 1969, 1987)—and wondered if perhaps an examination of the Wiccan ritual could help shed some additional light on the ritual process in general. Certainly part of the reason for my understanding of Wiccan initiation as more nuanced and complex than a three step process comes from being a scholar-practitioner who has been "on both sides of the Circle." Having come to the Circle's edge and crossed over its boundaries, I have been both initiate and initiator. From this dual perspective, I could see that the initiation process as an experience looks quite different depending on which side of the
boundary one stands, a phenomenon that has not been fully explored in our study of initiation rituals due perhaps to the scarcity of analyses by people who are both scholars and practitioners. More importantly, I also realized upon deeper critical reflection that initiation as an experiential process is more extensive than any single event, no matter how nuanced or multifaceted, could adequately encompass, and therefore requires more than a simple structural analysis of a "linear transformation." Initiation is deeply embedded within the total process of finding the Craft, learning about the religion, and "becoming one" with the Craft in practice and in community. In fact, a more adequate understanding of the multidimensional and multidirectional stages of both individual and community transformation seem to require a major theoretical shift away from van Gennep, et. al. Upon such reflection, I also discovered that the reflexive methodology so essential in scholarship is also quite necessary for my understanding and appreciation of my own religion.

When I thought critically about the initiation ritual as a larger learning process, as the acquisition of a set of skills necessary to participate in a certain practice, the very idea of the Circle's edge as a "boundary" became increasingly problematic. The notion of boundary all too easily becomes spatialized in terms of insider and outsider, which can hide the complexity of the range of experiences to be had on both sides of the Circle. Simplistic categories such as insider and outsider do little to illuminate the range and variety of multiple transformative experiences to be had by persons at different stages of "learning how to be a Witch"—from first
encounter, through different stages of study, and finally to initiation and practice. In her article "Insider, Outsider, and Gender Identities in the Religion Classroom," Laurie Patton puts it well:

[Categories such as insider and outsider] are less like categories and more like provisional descriptions of particular moments in the learning process. As such, the spatial metaphors of insider and outsider are content-less in and of themselves, and exist only in relationship to what is being counted as "in" and what is being counted as "out." (1997:12.4:1)

Wiccan initiation ritual still seemed to encompass a wider range of movements and experiences, both structurally and spatially, than had been covered by previous scholarship on such rites of passage. This range was not as neatly linear as a "simple progression" from outsider to insider might suggest, and in fact, seemed rather to depend on a whole set of relationships of perspectives and experiences being considered at specific stages in the learning process. Further reflection revealed the enormous wealth of experiences both inside and outside the Circle's edge, as well as the multitude of transformative steps along the way. In fact, the more that I reflected upon initiation itself, the more certain I was that I needed to go back before the initiation rite, to the point where a prospective Witch makes first contact with a coven and hence to the process wherein one begins to acquire the skills necessary to learning how to be a Witch.

In Chapter 1, Wittgenstein's metaphor of learning how to play a language game proved useful in helping us to understand both religious and scholarly forms of discourse as matters of skill and practice, rather than
mere allegiance. It enabled us to ask potentially fruitful questions about the ways in which sets of evaluative criteria emerge from within the discourses, how the "players" of the game or the practitioners of the discourse learn the rules appropriate to that discourse, and how the players progress through different levels of skill, from beginner to "expert." Wittgenstein's metaphor enabled us to understand discourses as practices and to uncover the process by which a person becomes a skilled practitioner of that discourse. Let us see if a similar device can help us to unpack the levels of skill involved in "learning how to be a Witch."

While I think that Wittgenstein proved quite useful in exploring discourses, his language game metaphor doesn't extend quite far enough to suit my purposes. Religions are seldom, if ever, only about language or discourse, but—at least in Wicca—usually include some level of somatic learning. It seems to me, especially as a scholar-practitioner, that religion in some fashion engages the whole person—body, mind, and spirit—and so we would want a parallel practice that in the least engages both the body and the mind. Wicca in particular foregrounds the body as an active participant in religious praxis, and so I would want an analogous practice that also foregrounds the body as an important learner in the practice. Sports would perhaps be a good candidate, but I don't know enough about sports to make appropriate analogies. Typing is another example of both mental and physical engagement, but typing just doesn't seem to have the same kinds of things "at stake" in success or failure of the practice.
What I would like to suggest for our analogous practice is something that is quite mundane and yet seems to fit all of the criteria: learning how to drive a car. Driving a car is something that many of us do every day—usually without thinking. In fact, for those of us who have been driving for several years, it is something that has become "second nature." Driving, however, engages a fairly complex set of activities: it is something that has a distinctive learning process, one that engages both the mind (learning the rules of the road) and the body (actually getting behind the wheel of a car). Additionally, the mind and body need to work together harmoniously in order to drive successfully. Driving has a range of skill levels from beginner to expert that we might fruitfully use in analogy. Finally, the success or failure of the practice of driving "matters." Throughout this chapter, we will be engaged in exploring the process that a student undergoes in learning how to be a Witch, from moment of initial contact with a coven to the rite of initiation. Upon occasion, we will have need of our parallel practice, the analogy of driving a car, in order to help us better understand the steps involved in the acquisition of skills necessary to successfully become a Witch.

Considering initiation in this wider sense of the acquisition of skills or a learning process has significant implications in two equally important and intertwined directions: 1) the acquisition of knowledge and the development of skillful practice for the individual who is initiated and 2) the construction of a community of practice—the creation of the coven as a coherent group of skilled practitioners. Viewed in this larger sense, initiation is a process that
simultaneously transforms both individual and community. Consequently, I will keep both individual and community dimensions in view as I unpack the initiation process that occurs within this particular coven, beginning at the moment of initial contact between prospective student and coven representative(s) and continuing through the initiation rite itself. Each step along the path toward the Circle involves the acquisition of skills and the complex negotiation of community in order to proceed to the next stage.

Of course, the first step along the path is finding it.

Finding the Path

For those who view initiation as a series of ordeals or challenges, finding a coven may well be the first one. Often a very serious topic of conversation for a coven is deciding to what extent it will engage in public outreach. One drawback to educational or public outreach is its degree of visibility. Witches have made great strides in educating the public about Wicca as a positive spiritual path and a legally recognized religion. Finding a coven is much easier to do today than it was in the early seventies, thanks to the courage and hard work of countless individuals on both a large and small scale and the success of several well organized and national efforts at public education and outreach. For example, national organizations such as Circle Sanctuary and the Covenant of the Goddess (CoG) have mounted extensive educational campaigns aimed at increasing public awareness, tolerance, and respect for a wide variety of Pagan spiritual paths.
As a result of organized educational campaigns, growing numbers of Witches may feel at least somewhat more comfortable being “out of the broom closet” in their communities. Today Pagan festivals and public events occur in almost every region of the country. Although often couched in humor and Halloween stereotypes, local media coverage of these events is also somewhat positive and usually recognizes Paganism and/or Witchcraft as genuine religious paths. A wide range of Pagan publications are available today—from glossy, professional magazines such as Green Egg, Circle Magazine, and PanGaia, that can be found in mainstream bookstores to less expensive, in-house newsletters such as Isian News and The Unicorn, that are mailed to a list of subscribers. Consequently, contacts between prospective students and coven members can now occur almost anywhere: through notes left on bulletin boards in coffeehouses or health food stores, through lectures given at “New Age” shops or Pagan-friendly bookstores, through Pagan student organizations on college campuses, at Pagan festivals scattered throughout the country, or through a wealth of Pagan publications and online listings. Nonetheless, because the coven is a fairly small and close community and because each Witch’s development and religious practice is interdependent on the others in the group, finding the right people to practice with can still be a daunting task.

For the Kôvetôi, embarking on any activity connected to public education and outreach is an occasion for serious reflection on the part of the individual Witch and usually an occasion for discussion on the part of the coven. Most of the Kôvetôi live in somewhat conservative towns or
neighborhoods and are very aware of the potential of religious discrimination. Some have children or work with them professionally. A few are employed in other kinds of "sensitive" occupations or work in companies that don't look kindly upon individual differences or "alternative lifestyles." For all of these reasons it is often a major decision for the Witch who decides if and to what degree to engage in public educational or outreach activities. Several options and combinations are possible. For example, some Wiccans and other Pagans are totally open about their mundane identities and religious commitments and serve the larger community as national spokespersons and contacts for persons wishing information about the Craft or other Pagan religions. Others who serve in education and public outreach efforts may be known only by "Craft names" that function rather as "noms de plume." A few work within the Justice system, aiding local police departments to distinguish alternative religious practices from acts of juvenile vandalism or hate crimes masquerading as "witchcraft." Still another option is to remain fairly well known, but primarily within the Pagan community itself, by working as lecturers or workshop leaders and organizers throughout the "festival circuit."

Weighing the risks of public visibility, Lauren and I are the only two of the original Követöi who have been very active on a public level, including the teaching of introductory classes on Witchcraft at bookstores. Today, she and her husband, a talented ritualist and Pagan performer who was initiated into the Követöi after I hived off, are quite active in public education and outreach, especially on the festival circuit. They choose to be active
under "Craft names." I continue to be active under my mundane name, working primarily with academic organizations and with public education programs about Paganism and Wicca as growing religions. High Priestesses Dot and Sandy work primarily with more advanced students called Dedicants and train initiates.

While the Követöi have never been aggressive in recruiting, the group has employed a variety of strategies in order to help educate the community and to reach out to prospective students over the years. Various members of the group have answered ads in Pagan publications, given interviews to newspapers or spoken on radio and television, presented lectures and workshops at bookstores, college campuses, and Pagan festivals, and taught a series of courses at local magical or metaphysical shops. The coven has also relied upon word of mouth and the same sort of happenstance that allowed me to stumble onto the path. Possible new members to the group are often drawn from those who are not looking for a coven per se, but are more generally interested in "alternative spiritualities." As a group and also individually, the Követöi have become affiliated with the national organization CoG, which, among other things, refers seekers to established member groups or solitary practitioners who might be able to help them. I myself have participated in community outreach and education by giving lectures on college campuses, conducting interviews with the media, and teaching classes on Wicca at local bookstores and on college campuses. I am also an advisor to a Pagan student group at the university.
Having been involved in a number of these activities, I would say that each method of public education and outreach toward prospective students has its advantages and its disadvantages. For example, media interviews can reach a large number of people, but there is the potential for having things taken out of context or for misrepresentation. Although usually there is no face-to-face interaction with the audience, someone will occasionally call the station or newspaper and try to arrange a meeting with "that Witch." It can be risky, however, to meet such a caller sight unseen, something that, as a woman, I tend to be cautious about. Additionally, no matter how careful the Witch is to describe the Craft as a positive religious path, the caller may not have the same understanding of Witchcraft and may be operating under one of the negative stereotypes of "witchcraft" so easily found within popular culture. Lectures bring the Witch into more direct contact with her audience, but their one-time only format limits both the amount of information that can be conveyed and the quality of audience-speaker interaction.

The Követöi have found that in terms of both delivery of material and contact with prospective students, teaching a series of classes over, say, a period of eight to ten weeks, is preferable to either an interview or a lecture. A classroom format enables the Witch to organize and present materials in a coherent fashion, starting with basic definitions of terms, historical background, and explanations about what the religion entails in a general sense and then moving into more detailed study or special areas of interest that may be expressed by the students. It also allows both the teaching
Witch and her students ample time to interact as individuals, building a possible foundation of trust for future work. Teaching a class requires hard work as well as a commitment of time on the part of the Witch. It also demands an appropriate level of skillful practice.

Expert Practice: Teaching the Craft to Others

Throughout the better part of this and subsequent chapters, we will spend a great deal of time focusing on the learning process in which the student is engaged, examining the potential for his success or failure at various stages of the process along the way. I must emphasize that success or failure does not depend only on what the student does: it also depends on the skills and qualifications of his instructor(s). Let us return to the analogy of driving a car. If we wanted to enroll in a driving school or engage a private driving instructor to teach us how to drive, we would want to make certain that the school or the instructor was appropriately qualified. For example, we might check with the Better Business Bureau or some other government agency that could tell us if there had been problems with the driving school, or if the instructor did not have the appropriate certificates or license to teach others.

Unfortunately, it isn't quite that simple to make sure that the Witch and her coven are appropriately qualified to teach, and yet the student's success or failure at least partially depends on their qualifications as "experts." Twenty-five years ago, when I was initiated into the Craft, secrecy was much more the norm among the Wiccan community. Covens
simply did not know much about other covens; sometimes coven members
didn't even know much about their own group's history—true in my own
case. Today, many more groups are at least somewhat open, compared to
the past, and the student may be able to find out about the reputation of a
particular group through "word of mouth."

Additionally, there is a much more concerted effort at what I might
call "self-policing," the attempt to make prospective students aware of
potential problem groups or individuals who have displayed a serious breach
of ethics—for example, coercing students into having sex or extorting money
or other services from them, things that would reasonably be considered a
serious breach of ethics in almost any religion. National groups such as CoG
attempt to "network" prospective students with covens and individuals who
have been screened by CoG representatives. As an Elder in CoG, I myself
have participated in such screenings. This is hardly an exact science, and
such "policing" has to be weighed against the great degree of religious
freedom and local autonomy that covens and other kinds of Pagan groups
prize and enjoy.

Because the role of the "expert" is pivotal to the student's success or
failure, I want to spend at least a little time addressing some of the things
that go into being "the expert" and examine some of the potential problems
that can lead to unsuccessful practice for the Witch and an unsuccessful
learning experience for the student. In the following, I shall draw upon the
experiences of both my parent coven and the Követöi, as well as others well
known to me, in order to identify some of the concerns and some of the
potential problems that might be found at this level of skill. While I will be
drawing upon the actual experiences of those well known to me, my
examples will be quite general. In keeping within the limitations of ethical
fieldwork practices, I will not say anything to identify particular individuals
or attempt to speak "for" others. On occasion, I may give examples from
my own personal experience if warranted.

In terms of embarking on some form of educational outreach, one of
the first things that a coven may discuss might include the issue of whether
a Witch in the group actually has the time to devote to a class. Would
teaching a class on a regular basis interfere with the Witch's family or work
responsibilities? Can the Witch effectively juggle the responsibilities of
family, personal relationships, career, education, personal development, and
the demands of a class? Does teaching an introductory class interfere in
some way with the Witch concentrating on developing her own practice? In
other words, is the Witch "ready" to teach a class?

This last question leads us to a more serious issue, one likely to
involve at least some coven discussion. Notice that this question actually
has two parts. First, is the Witch sufficiently skilled to present material to
new people, to people who don't know much about and perhaps have never
even heard of the religion? Second, is the Witch sufficiently strong in her
practice that teaching introductory students will not distract her from
taking on the more challenging aspects of her own continued training? In
terms of the first question, the coven naturally wants both the religion and
the group to be represented to the public by its most effective, if not its most eloquent, spokespersons.

The idea of skillful practice can help us to understand some of the implications at stake here. Teaching an introductory course or delivering a public lecture can mark a significant step in the individual Witch’s own practice. The ability to competently convey information about a practice to people who do not participate in that practice means acquiring new sets of skills. The player has to advance to a level in game skill at least equivalent to that of Kasulis’ (1997) category of “expert” whether delivering a public lecture or teaching an introductory class. Such an advanced level of skill necessarily includes a degree of reflexivity that enables the Witch to “translate” insight into her own practice of the religion to someone who does not practice the religion. This includes being aware of the cultural baggage typically connected with the word “Witch” and being able to anticipate some of the questions a person outside the Circle would be likely to have.

Using myself as an example, this level of skill comes into play particularly when I lecture in the college classroom as a colleague’s guest speaker on Witchcraft or Paganism, an experience that I have had many times. In this regard, I have found that my training as a scholar and a teacher is actually quite helpful because it enables me to more accurately identify my audience and anticipate the sorts of questions the students are likely to raise. The Witch as “expert” must be intimately and equally connected both to her subject matter and to her audience, fluidly “commuting,” as Falk (1997) would say, between the two.
At the same time, there is also the danger that concentrating too much on teaching others might prevent the Witch from deepening her own practice, a case of avoidance rather than insufficient knowledge or lack of expertise. This is the second part of the question of readiness, and it is usually quite a bit trickier than the first. In this situation, the Witch is actually using her students as an excuse not to work on herself. Because of the interconnectedness of individuals' practice within the coven, this is actually a very important issue, one that caused the Követöi a great deal of serious discussion and concern before the split.

“Avoidance” usually does not present a problem with students at the very earliest learning stage, in which mutual commitment—if it can be said to exist at all—is very minimal. An example of activities at this level might include the general public lecture or introductory class on Wicca at a bookstore. At the next stage in the learning process—with the more advanced students called Dedicants—a higher level of commitment is expected from both student and teacher in the study of the Craft. It is here at this second level of teaching expertise that the Witch may be tempted to sacrifice her own personal study and practice time in favor of “helping” her Dedicants.

Avoidance behavior can be an indication that the Witch has run up against a “wall” in her own practice and has hit an area of deep-seated psychological resistance to working on a critical aspect of her self. Part of the Witch’s own spiritual practice, especially on a more advanced level, is geared toward intensive work on the self. This is extremely difficult and
often means confronting those issues that are deeply embedded in some of our most painful life experiences. These are the issues that hold us back, that keep us from accomplishing our goals, and that can destroy our physical, mental, and emotional health. In this instance, the Witch avoids these painful issues of dealing with herself in order to devote her time and energy toward teaching her students. Often the Witch herself may not realize that she is doing this. This usually happens with a person who is very nurturing and so caring of others that she will often sacrifice her own needs to help other people. Sometimes the Witch can take on a kind of proprietary attitude or even a “parental role” toward her students. In this instance it seems as though other Witches are being harsh or “mean to her students” when they call for more intensive circle practices that are open only to initiates.

I can speak from personal experience in saying that those who are in a more advanced leadership position when this happens have to be able to recognize it for what it is and be willing to deal with the unpleasant consequences that will likely occur when confronting it directly. Of course, the most difficult and delicate thing to deal with is when the Witch enters a state of denial about the problem and refuses to seek help for any of the issues confronting her. Hurt feelings and frustrations are bound to come out in the open over this and need to be dealt with in a firm but balanced way if the coven is to survive. Sometimes this problem can be avoided or mediated by sharing advanced teaching responsibilities more evenly, so that the Witch does not come to think of the Dedicants as “her children” whom she
must protect and nurture. Dedicants may initially feel flattered and respond positively to this treatment, but will eventually come to consider it confining and oppressive, most of them already having their own parents. Circles in which initiates fail to maintain a sufficiently challenging level of practice also tend to disintegrate, and Dedicants who are being "mothered to death" eventually find a less controlling environment in which to practice.

Serious disagreements over the inclusion of student Dedicants in every ritual—which some Witches may view as an inhibition on advancing initiate ritual practice, as well as disagreement over particular students who have been Dedicated, may lead to a coven's disbanding. Over the course of several years, the Követöi spent a great deal of time discussing and occasionally arguing over how best to juggle the demands of student Dedicants versus advancing the practice of initiates. The use of students as a means of avoiding deepening practice was in fact a topic of much discussion before the Követöi split and contributed to the decision of its members, including myself, to hive off into separate groups.

Leading a coven successfully is itself an enormously challenging task that takes an array of highly specialized skills. For example, the ability to mediate between others, the ability to delegate responsibility or to share power, to work competently with coven members on deeply personal psychological or physical issues that are surfacing as a result of their practice—all are quite necessary in the effective management of any group. They are also difficult skills to master, involving a high degree of maturity and dedication. There is often much effort for seemingly little reward.
Certainly, dealing with an often interconnected web of psycho-physical problems can be very difficult for the entire coven, especially for the coven's leaders, who may feel thoroughly overwhelmed by their responsibilities and frustrated in dealing with the intricacies of practice, not only for themselves but for those in the coven.

Unfortunately, unlike some other religious traditions, Witches are usually given very little in the way of explicit professional training in mediation or counseling. This is something that I think would come in quite handy, speaking as a High Priestess. Referring coveners who have problems to a specialist, such as a psychologist, marriage counselor, or even a physician can be rather tricky if being in the Craft is at all connected with the problem or is even likely to come up in conversation. For example if deeply repressed issues are surfacing as a result of meditative practice, it may be difficult to find a psychologist who is "unruffled" by Witchcraft (to put it mildly) and who has some familiarity with meditation or other bodmind practice.

Speaking from personal experience, one of the hardest lessons for a coven leader to learn is that it is impossible to help someone who really doesn't want that help. The problem could be related to physical health, psychological issues, or even something as mundane as helping someone get their living space organized or get into an exercise routine. If the individual does not recognize that there is a problem, does not want the problem to be solved, or more often, does not want help in addressing the problem, there is very little that can be done on the level of magical practice that will "take."
Like all religions, Wicca also has its share of hypocrisy. The negative consequences to the community reveal the problematic double edge to the words “performance,” “practice,” and “play,” with their connections to the theater. As a scholar-practitioner, I distinguish between play in the ludic sense with its invocation of exuberant spontaneity and dynamic creativity and “playing at” or “pretending,” which I understand as a kind of surface appearance without center or real power. Ironically, an examination of the behavior of hypocrisy can sometimes be indicative of the values inherent in the religious practice, as Kasulis (1993b) in his paper “Hypocrisy in the Self-Understanding of Religions” demonstrates. Unfortunately, not much of positive value comes to the community from having coven leaders who engage in hypocritical behavior. At the extreme, initiates are ignored in favor of more exciting and less challenging acquaintances, or even “groupies.” If such a person leads the coven, the core eventually disintegrates and the members leave—a somewhat drastic example of “the negotiation of community.” The dilution of practice to “playing at” or “playing around” occurred within my parent coven and eventually contributed to its dissolution.

Unskillful Practice: Teaching and the Implications of Failure

Let us step back for a moment to reflect upon the skills and levels of expertise needed by Wiccan practitioners to teach others who are interested in joining a coven or who are already part of the extended coven community of initiates and Dedicants. There are several levels at which the Witch may
operate as teacher; each entails the acquisition and employment of a
distinctive combination of skills, such as the ability to “read” an audience
and anticipate their questions. The demands of one set of skills may
occasionally interfere or clash with another, bringing teaching into conflict
with deepening personal practice, much as when teaching and the demands
of students conflict with a scholar’s need for time devoted to research and
writing. Sometimes a conflict between skills can indicate a problem within
the Witch’s own practice.

All of the levels are framed within the larger transformative context
of the initiation process and affect the development of both individual
practice and the coven as a place of community. While skills are not
necessarily grouped according to a “hierarchy of importance,” the
consequences of their success or failure seem to rise in importance as the
level of expertise rises in complexity and in closeness to both practice and
the community. At the introductory level, failures or mistakes are relatively
minor in their implications. For example, becoming flustered while speaking
before an audience or while being interviewed by the media might leave some
questions unanswered or leave listeners confused. At the worst, this may
leave the audience with a slightly different impression of the religious
practice than is desired by the coven. Failure at the next stage of teaching,
however, may damage both the individual Witch’s practice and the beginning
stages of the practice of the Dedicants, possibly affecting the whole
community. At the highest stage of expertise, leading a coven and being
responsible for the training and development of its Priests and Priestesses,
the consequences of failure are the most devastating to both individuals and community.

Wiccan spiritual practice is intimately intertwined with both psychological and physical dimensions of the whole person. The highest and most demanding level of spiritual practice—the most difficult and important magical work—is the Witch transforming herself. This is done through a combination of meditative and somatic exercises, which Witches sometimes speak of as "The Great Work," attaining those qualities that reflect the "true" or "higher" self. This true self represents an integration of mind, body, and spirit, the cultivation of a sacred identity whose personality and abilities are often alluded to by the Witch's Craft name. Daily practice in the form of meditation, ritualized actions involving postures and gestures, and magical practices brings to the surface those issues that need to be addressed in order to achieve the whole self. In the process, this frequently means confronting and overcoming negative habits in all dimensions: improving the physical body and physical health, changing negative "mental tapes" or thought forms to positive affirmations, confronting fear and inhibition, releasing anger, pushing through those barriers that prevent the Witch from becoming a fully realized person. A kind of healing takes place through a type of spiritual practice that engages both the body and the mind in exercises of concentration and meditative action, a practice that eventually integrates the whole person. This is the ultimate "magical transformation."

The physical and psychological patterns of a lifetime are often challenged and transformed in the difficult process of spiritual practice, the
success or failure of which has far reaching implications for the individual Witch and those around her. Yuasa Yasuo in his book *The Body: Toward an Eastern Mind-Body Theory* helps us understand what happens when meditative or other bodymind practice is performed successfully.

“Meditation brings to the surface the complexes and emotions sunk in the unconscious region, freeing them and ultimately dissolving them by slowing the conscious activities connected with the cerebral functions” (1987:207). But when meditative practice fails, is aborted by the fear and avoidance of what rises to that “surface,” the Witch is left in a more distressed situation than before she began spiritual practice, a distressed state that may even effect physical health. What was once “safely buried” and repressed deeply in the body and the unconscious mind is now brought to the surface, to the conscious mind where it can be dealt with and “dissolved.” Conscious awareness of these issues may be so frightening that a state of denial or paralysis sets in.

The Witch in these situations may find any and every excuse not to work on herself, including using the needs of her Dedicants in order to avoid the unpleasantness of facing and healing the injured parts of her self. One thing this tells us about the Witch is that she ultimately does not believe herself to be worthy of healing. This is a truly formidable obstacle to overcome, especially without assistance, and it is an obstacle that may last throughout the entire lifetime of the Witch, manifesting itself in various physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual problems. Moreover, since practice within a coven is a communal affair, the resistance of one Witch to
change and healing winds up affecting the rest of the coven, frustrating and perplexing her fellow coveners and even affecting the success of their practice.

In addition to the observation that Wiccan spiritual practice involves working on the entire person, we have also noted that practice can be faked—to a point, and that Witches can "pretend" or "play at" their practice in a sense much closer to the theatrical than the spiritual. The juxtaposition, however ironic, of these two observations has a point. It is precisely because the stakes are so high in spiritual practice, and the consequences so deeply embedded in the total sense of person, that failure to meet responsibility at the highest levels of communal practice can be devastating. When the coven leader fails to meet responsibilities because of burn out or frustration, lack of experience, or immaturity, the consequences to the leader and to the coven are bad enough. But when the coven leader is only "playing at" practice, he is an "expert" in name only and compounds the consequences of his failure with an ethical dimension.

Let us switch gears for a moment and think through the implications of failed practice using our analogy of driving a car. What are the consequences of failure for a car driver who is an expert in name only? Let us use a "teen rebel" movie as an example. Perhaps we can use a classic of the genre such as Rebel without a Cause or the truly forgettable Rebel Warriors. Such movies usually include one or more "James Dean" type characters engaged in playing a game of chicken with their "souped-up hot rods." The fantasy is that our rebel teen has nerves of steel, "the hot rod
from hell,” never loses at drag racing, and always outruns the police. The reality is, of course, not so impressive, and the lesson from all the “rebel teen” B-movies is that it all must end in tragedy. Using the genre, we can actually make up our own movie. Choose from the following:

*Our “expert”*
- a) loses his nerve
- b) overestimates his ability to handle the situation
- c) blows his engine

*and he*
- a) loses face
- b) the girl
- c) the car
- d) all of the above

*because he*
- a) bails out of the car way before the other guy in the game of chicken
- b) fails to bail out of the car in time because his leathers get caught in the door
- c) gets shot by the police
- d) crashes ineptly into a tree.

Although I’m deliberately making my point quite tongue in cheek, it is nevertheless a serious one. It is fairly easy to see what the consequences are for our “expert” driver gone awry; it is a little more difficult to see what the consequences are for our “expert” Witch playing at the Craft. However, the consequences are just as real—and often just as physical—not only for himself, but also for those closest to him in the community.

In the case of the High Priest or High Priestess who “plays at” practice in the shallow sense, the negative consequences to the coven as a place of community are readily visible, even to the casual observer. The coven usually disbands, often with varying levels of rancor, animosity, and
mistrust. Witches in my lineage believe that such a "flawed practice" also rebounds with negative consequences for the individual practitioner. On a very mundane level, this can show up in gossip, in negative word of mouth or reputation within the larger Wiccan or Pagan community. The community thus implements a kind of informal "policing" of itself, warning its members of those individuals who are merely "playing at" being clergy without the requisite skills necessary to effectively or adequately lead a coven or implement training for their coveners.

On a more spiritual level, one not readily available to the casual observer, failed coven leadership jeopardizes the physical, psychological, and spiritual health of all initiates in that circle. The consequences of hypocrisy or "playing at" Witch invoke an ethical dimension that functions as a kind of "negative karma" affecting the physical and spiritual health of the individual High Priest or High Priestess in this lifetime as well as in lives to come. In fact, it is part of the oath of initiation that the Witch's personal magical tools will turn against him if he transgresses severely against the spirit and practice of the Craft, including its ethical dimensions. In one or more of his future lives, the Witch will be cast into an unfriendly world and reborn among strangers instead of friends and loved ones. He will have difficulty finding the path to the Circle, and may wander adrift and without spiritual practice. If the actions are terribly egregious and harm many, Witches within my tradition believe that the path to the Circle will be lost to that Witch forever.
Becoming a Student: Learning the Rules of the Road

Let us assume for the moment that all of the many concerns noted above about the teaching Witch's expertise and competence have been satisfactorily addressed. It is now time to move our discussion from the levels of expertise needed by the teacher to those needing to be acquired by the student in the learning process. Among all the many strategies the Követöi have employed in reaching out to prospective students, one of the most effective is teaching a series of classes at some "neutral space" such as a bookstore, shop, or even a room in a library. The concept of a neutral space is important for a variety of very practical reasons. One practical consideration is personal safety and confidentiality, not only for the Witch, but for the students as well. The vast majority of Witches worship in their homes, rather than at public and community supported sites such as churches or temples. Some live in the country and have land that is suitably private for use in outdoor worship, but most—certainly most of the Követöi—worship in their living rooms or some other converted indoor space. This means that Witches often have to juggle conflicting space needs between worship and normal home use. At this early stage of initial contact and instruction, a Witch simply doesn't know the students well enough to invite them into her home. The students also don't know her well enough to accept such an invitation, nor to feel comfortable coming to a private home to learn about Witchcraft and magic. While Witches might like to think the best of everyone who signs up for an introductory course on the Craft, it simply isn't sensible or safe to bring total strangers into the home.
This is related to another practical issue—having consideration for those who share the home space. Since worship generally occurs within the home, negotiations over the use of space and the coordination of rituals and other religious activities with personal or family schedules frequently occur not only between coven members, but with the extended families or housemates of members—not all of whom may be participants in the religion. Moreover, for those who are married and/or have families—or even have roommates—inviting a group of strangers into the home can totally disrupt the domestic environment, ranging from merely inconveniencing home members to potentially jeopardizing them. Instruction itself may be disrupted by interruptions from family members or roommates, or by feelings of tension or hostility on the part of housemates who wished to have personal space in which to work, play, or rest rather than be inconvenienced or even “chased out” by a class in progress.

Another practical consideration in deciding upon where to hold an introductory class is the size and arrangement of the space itself. For example, my introductory Craft classes usually have anywhere from fifteen to twenty-five students. None of the Witches in our coven has a home large enough to accommodate that many people in anything remotely comparable to a classroom setting. Teaching may be more easily arranged at a bookstore or shop that has enough folding chairs for everyone to sit on, some small tables at which to write, perhaps a white board, a copier, or even a spare room that can be dedicated for instruction. This makes for a setting
that maximizes potential learning by providing a space for instruction that is comfortable and free of disruptions.

This stage of initial contact between student and Witch begins the process that leads potentially to the transformation of both the individual student and the coven as community. The format of an eight to ten week course held in a neutral space is effective for both maximizing the amount of information that is able to be presented to the student as well as building a sense of trust and respect between teacher and student. Beginning instruction involves the sort of basic education about the Craft that clarifies the misconceptions and cultural baggage that the word "Witch" carries. Most of the student's attention is primarily directed toward very basic and general information about the religion and secondarily toward how this particular coven participates in its practice.

A sample "syllabus" for the course might include the following topics: the historical background of the modern reconstructed Craft and its roots in ancient nature-based primal religious practices; an introduction to some pantheons and mythologies of Gods and Goddesses commonly worshipped by Witches; the reciprocity and respect accorded both female and male deities; the ethics of "magickal" practice; the solar and lunar cycles in daily life; the eight sabbats or holy days of Wiccan worship; the nature of the four elements; the use of herbs, color, and visualization in healing, and so forth.

Whenever I teach an introductory class, I always include an extensive reading list on each topic in order to help interested students find additional information that cannot be covered in one class period. The class format
usually allows ample room for students to ask questions or pursue special topics of interest.

Shifting Paradigms: Gearing up to Practice

In order to more fully grasp this portion of the "learning curve" of the initiatory process, let us return to the analogy of learning how to drive a car. This stage of the process might be favorably compared to that early stage of the drivers' education class in which the student must "learn the rules of the road." Similar to this stage of drivers' education, in which students are learning about driving, most of the instruction in beginning classes on Wicca is geared toward learning about the religion, not practicing it. As noted above, students are given information about the deities, the historical background of the religion, the cycles of the seasons, how sabbats are typically celebrated, and ethics. Students will also begin learning about the nature of Wiccan ritual, and how rituals are constructed in a context of a cultivated practice. Very little attention is paid to somatic practice at this stage. In fact, students in the introductory Wicca class are practicing rituals about as much as drivers' education students are driving cars on their first day of class.

Although the primary mode of instruction at this point is deliberately "book oriented" or informative and intellectual in nature, this does not mean that classes are designed to be entirely intellectual or stuck in the abstract. Students at this stage might do some creative "hands-on" projects working with herbs or candles in order to keep the class enjoyable and participate in
some of the things that Witches do. For example, the class may learn about the element air, its importance and directional position in the Circle, and its correspondence to experiences, herbs, oils, and colors. As a class project, students may design an “air tool” to help them become familiar with the element in a sensory as well as an intellectual capacity.

This immediate (but controlled) exposure to the sensual, tactile dimension of Wiccan religious experience helps to counteract the idea that religion is only or even primarily about “belief systems,” sets of abstract concepts, or texts. It marks the beginning of a kind of “paradigm shift,” moving the student into a frame within which practice—i.e., practice that centrally includes the physical body as the doer of learning—emerges as equally important to belief or intellectual knowledge.

In this respect, the analogy of learning how to drive a car has one immediate and useful advantage over learning how to be a Witch. Driving a car is easily identified as a practice that engages both body and mind. Generally speaking, you don’t believe in cars, you drive them. This is counterintuitive to an understanding of religions in which belief is primary and practices are secondary, if noticed at all. But let us back up for a moment. Perhaps it is my naming of the examples that is faulty. Instead of “learning how to drive a car,” perhaps the more parallel construction should be “learning how to be a driver.” But notice that even if the name of the example is changed, the practice—driving—is still strongly and even primarily implied. Let us try it the other way: change the name of the activity from “learning how to be a Witch” to “learning how to practice
Witchcraft.” That’s somewhat better; at least the word practice explicitly enters the picture. In so doing, we have shifted the focus from noun to verb, from religion as label—Witch—to religion as doing—practice, or “Witching,” if you will.

However, I still don’t think that simply changing the name of the game entirely solves the problem. Religion-as-practice is not as apparent as driving-as-practice. In other words, the Witch practitioner is not as easily perceived as the doer of an activity as the driver is. If the students in my academic courses on world religions are any indication, religion is typically understood as a system or set of beliefs. The problem with this is the way in which the term “belief” is frequently construed. Belief is something that goes on “in the head.” It involves a strictly mental process resulting in a choice or decision that is itself markedly removed from bodily practice or engagement. The idea that religion might be rooted in somatic experiences, that it might be about practices, about things done with the body as well as the mind is often a difficult and apparently troubling concept for my students. For most of them, religion clearly functions as an identifying label rather than a doing. But perhaps there is a way to “restore belief to the body.” In everything from simple prayer and acts of kindness to complicated ceremony and intensive ritual training, people do their religions. By emphasizing the Craft as a practice—especially a practice that engages both the mind and the body as active “doers” of knowing—the teaching Witch may bring about a “paradigm shift” in her students’ understanding of religion as embodied practice.
This paradigm shift begins with small “hands on” projects and progresses to very limited somatic practices. At this point, the teaching Witch will begin to introduce some very simple minor relaxation techniques, visualizations, or guided meditations as the class gets more comfortable with one another and with the teacher. One of the relaxation techniques is likely to include practice with breath control, which is the gateway to all other embodied ritual practices within Wicca, and it is one to which we will return in other sections of the initiation process. Proper breathing must be thoroughly mastered by the practitioner in order to successfully accomplish the visualization and concentration needed for all other ritual work, including invocation, divination, and healing. The first step may be simply to notice the pattern of breathing in order to further accustom the student to the idea that the Craft is about practices, and ones that involve the body. Depending on how that goes, the Witch may decide to introduce trying to control or regulate the pattern—for example, having students breathe in for a count of four, hold the breath in for the same count, breathe out for a count of four, and hold the breath out for the same count. Students learn that trying to control the breath is much more difficult than simply noticing the breath, and they also learn that even beginning Wiccan practices take some work.

These few “simple” somatic exercises, which are not simple at all in practice, are not only the beginnings of the paradigmatic change to practice, but they are also often the beginnings of counteracting a lifetime of ignoring knowledge that is rooted in the body itself. Speaking both personally and as a teacher of the Craft, I have noticed that many of us seem to be shut out of
or alienated from our own bodies. Perhaps from the time we are children, we are taught to ignore or repress the signals of our bodies—its basic needs for rest and sleep, for sex, for exercise, for play—and its warning signals of pain and discomfort. Bodily timetables and schedules must conform to the timetables and schedules of schools and employers. In fact, employers often "reward" their employees for overworking their bodies even to the point of exhaustion. When the unnoticed signals and unmet needs of those bodies erupt into illness, employers "punish" their employees for "falling down on the job" or for seeking compensation for medical bills.

Religion also sometimes teaches us to ignore our bodies as being unworthy of attention and respect. Some religions even reward denigration and punishment of the flesh, casting such practices as "spiritual." The foregrounding of the body in Wiccan religious practice begins to teach the students that their bodies deserve respect and are as much a part of the spiritual endeavor as is their minds. Moreover, students begin to learn that their bodies are not just unimportant containers for spirit, but active participants in the religious process. This is the beginning of the paradigm shift to religion as embodied practice.

I want to linger for a moment on the phrase "embodied practice" because it is of pivotal importance for understanding Wiccan religious practice. The phrase itself consists of two words of equal importance. "Embodied" immediately foregrounds the body. "Practice" suggests training, repetition until "you get it right," disciplined and conscious doing, cultivation. Although Yuasa is writing about Eastern bodymind practices, he helps
illuminate what is at stake here. He writes that “personal cultivation in the East takes on the meaning of a practical project aiming at the enhancement of the personality and the training of the spirit by means of the body” (italics mine) (1987:85). In order to emphasize the engagement in the training of spirit by and through the body, I'm going to make a distinction between simply the “body” and the “body-in-practice” for the purposes of this work. The body-in-practice is not a passive receptacle for spirit, but an active agent through which the spirit is transformed. It is a subject, not an object. It is active, rather than static. The body-in-practice is an achieved state, not a natural one. In other words, the body-in-practice is the body and mind working together to achieve the whole person. Embodied practice is the process—the magic—through which the Witch transforms herself into her most perfect form. Or, as Kasulis puts it in the editor’s introduction to Yuasa’s *The Body*, a spiritual practice that engages both body and mind is a “process by which we can gradually change what we existentially are” [italics mine] (1987:3).

The Craft enables us to regain the body as a “doer of knowledge” through the engagement of the body-in-practice. By beginning to cultivate the body-in-practice, students studying the Craft will learn how to notice their bodies, how to “listen” to their bodies, and how to eventually trust their bodies. These are difficult lessons to master, and I can tell you from my own experience that the body-in-practice is also a difficult concept to get across to students.
One other distinctive and important dimension of the Craft—the creative and consciously constructed nature of its practice, bears some considerable mention here because it can compound the difficulties at this stage of the learning process. We have observed in Chapter 2 that religion functions for many people as a label, albeit perhaps a consciously chosen one. Ritual is quite often seen as a static experience, a repetitive enactment of texts handed down to us by tradition or authority. However, Wiccan religious rituals are not static and repetitive affairs, but consciously constructed and creative acts of worship and magic that may transform our understanding of religious ritual in general. Witches understand both religion and ritual as dynamic and creative human enterprises. Rather than a test of endurance, ritual becomes a joyous expression, a form of self-creation, a path toward transformation, a community-building form of sacred play in which participation and performance are key.

Students seem to grasp the creative and constructed nature of Wiccan ritual much more readily than they do the context in which it occurs—that of embodied practice. Of course, one of the reasons that they do so is that the creative dimension is much more fun than the dimension that consists of hard work and daily practice. Another part of the problem may be that the creative element is often one that is greatly emphasized by popular books on magic and Witchcraft. Many of these books display a kind of collection of spells or "recipe format" (e.g., Buckland 1978, Manning 1972, Morrison 1971). You, too, can impress your friends and frighten your enemies with these few simple spells. Follow these easy directions, read two
pages, add water, stir, and—poof—instant magic! One book promises to reveal, “for the first time in print, the secrets of gaining your own personal desires. Not through hard, time-consuming, constant exercises and gradual development over many months, but through simple, easy-to-do rituals that are a joy to perform” (Buckland 1978:3). Apparently no one who buys these books likes to be told that magic is hard work or involves training and practice of any kind. Additionally, some books seem to employ a kind of “biological feminism” that assures the reader (women only please) that we have a “Goddess-given” right to magic and “Witchiness” by virtue of our ovaries (e.g., Budapest 1989, Stein 1987, 1991, Morgan 1970).

The first kind of popular book reduces an entire religious practice to a collection of simple tricks—similar I suppose to reducing, say, the training of the Catholic or Orthodox priesthood to learning how to light candles and burn incense. The second kind of popular book reduces religious practice to a function of the genitalia, the sort of biological determinism that feminist scholars of religion have always felt to be a suspicious and untenable move. Both types of books fail to situate the creative dimension of Wiccan religious ritual within the context of the body-in-practice. In the first type of popular book, little mention is made of the body and none is made of work or the idea of practice. In the second, the body is foregrounded to some extent, but as a natural and gendered body, as a physical body only, not as a body-in-practice. Both types of books reduce religious practice in a way that would be nearly unthinkable if applied to any other religion and make the Craft into an exotic object that emphasizes the Witch as unfamiliar “other.”
More important than any of the above, failure to situate the creative
dimension of Wiccan ritual within the context of the body-in-practice will
result in the students' failure to successfully learn the rules of the road.4
Perhaps we can return to our analogy of learning how to drive a car in order
to illustrate the importance of a cultivated body, a body-in-practice, rather
than the “natural” body as a context for creative ritualizing. In the
introduction to Yuasa's The Body, Kasulis provides a wonderful illustration of
the body-in-practice that is directly applicable to our driver. He considers
the case of a woman who goes into an “unanticipated but controlled swerve
to avoid hitting a dog” (1987:5) and unpacks the complicated maneuver of
what went into her “reaction” using Yuasa's distinction of bright and dark
consciousness.

In a sense, the act was an impulse, the triggering of a
conditioned response. That is, the specific rationale of what
had to be done and how to do it was dark; it was not something
of which the driver was self-conscious.

... Rather, the motorist's impulse is a learned response,
the result of months of disciplined training and years of
practical experience. The driver's response is conditioned, but
not passively by external social factors. Rather years ago, the
driver self-consciously decided to condition herself. At some
earlier point in her life, the driver had to filter through the
bright consciousness all the knowledge used spontaneously by
the dark consciousness: knowing how animals might behave
along country roads, how to find the brake, how much pressure
to use in stopping, and how to steer the car in a skid so as not
to lose control. ... In the split second when the evasive
maneuver was executed, there was no time to think of
alternatives. There was only the purely responsive act. In a
significant sense, the body, not the mind, decided the action.
(1987:5)
Part of the goal of the cultivation of the body-in-practice is to enable “free movement between the bright and dark consciousness,” which is accomplished by the creation of a “psychophysical path” (1987:6) that enables an integration of the whole person. The drivers’ education student may be tempted to get behind the wheel and take the car for a spin before receiving the license to do so. After all, he has observed people driving most of his life, and it looks so easy. To counteract this, there is likely to be a portion of the drivers’ education class that uses graphic footage of car accidents to illustrate what kinds of things can happen when the driver is unskilled and/or physically impaired by alcohol and nevertheless decides to drive. For the student driver, the consequences of getting behind the wheel of a car without sufficient intellectual and physical preparation are fairly apparent.

Unfortunately, the consequences of ritualizing without a context of embodied practice are not so readily apparent for some of my students. To illustrate the point, one of my favorite anecdotes comes from a time in which I taught a class on divination at one of the local “New Age” bookstores. One student in particular—I’ll call her Joan—and I hit it off very well. She would stay after class and chat about her desire to become a physical therapist, her understanding of spiritual matters, and life in general. In one of the conversations, Joan spoke about how much she “admired” Native American spirituality. “Did you know,” she said to me, “that Medicine Men and Women work hard and study to serve their people from a very young age?” Another
time the topic was Buddhist monks, for whom Joan had an equally strong admiration—understanding that they spent their whole lives in study and prayer, and that they might study “for years before being allowed to do a simple ceremony.”

One day Joan asked me if she could start coming to my coven’s student circle. I was delighted. She really was a very nice person and I thought she would fit in well with some of the other students. I started talking to her about how often the class met, how she would begin her training with a daily journal in which she would record her meditations, how she would alternate readings from the book list with practical projects, how she would learn visualization techniques, how — And then, I noticed that her eyes had started to glaze over. “Is something wrong?” I asked.

“I thought all I had to do was be a woman and bring a drum!” she blurted.

This story illustrates all too well the effect of the popular books on the Craft. Joan was prepared to grant every other religion in the world a period of training, preparation, a time of intense work on the self. But for my religion, “all she had to do was be a woman and bring a drum.” This is the downside of “creative construction of ritual.” Many of our students come into classes with the idea that “creative” ritual practice means that Witchcraft is a religion that you make up as you go along, or a religion that is inherent to female biology. Joan, for instance, was clearly influenced by the “ovarian school of thought.” In training her students, the teaching Witch cannot emphasize often enough that it is a “good idea” to really know what
you are doing before attempting any ritual activity. At this point in training, the teaching Witch will constantly emphasize that creative ritual practice takes place in a context of embodied practice. Embodied practice becomes a point that increases in importance as the students are exposed to more somatic techniques of spiritual work.

The End of the Introductory Class: Coming to the Finish Line

By the end of the introductory class term, the teaching Witch will probably do a full Circle for her students so that they can see what a ritual is actually like. This is not likely to be an intensive Circle in any sense—nor will the students be asked to participate too much—but it will be enough of a ritual to give the students an inkling of whether or not they would like to learn more.

One of the simplest spiritual exercises the teaching Witch can have her students experience is one known as “grounding and centering.” In the coven, this is used as the preliminary or warm-up exercise to more extensive ritual in order to get people in the right frame of mind to do spiritual work. Grounding and centering can also be used as a kind of ritual in itself. It is the first step to building community among ritual participants, especially in a large Circle, or when working with people for the first time, for example at a festival gathering. It is also highly effective in healing, especially when some sort of emotional or mental distress is evident. The grounding and centering exercise always begins with simple breathing and physical relaxation. As a guided meditation, its ritual form may go as follows.
Standing in a circle, the participants join hands and are instructed to begin a breathing pattern. Initially, the breathing pattern consists of slow and deep breaths. The breathing rhythm established, the participants are encouraged to relax their bodies, releasing all the tension and worries of the day. They are then guided to feel themselves growing roots—like large trees—deep into the earth, connecting with the Mother. Maintaining the rhythm of their breaths, they are guided to feel the earth energy rising up through those roots and flowing throughout all parts of the body.

Once overflowing with earth energy, the participants are told to visualize a glowing ball of light, like the Sun, in the sky above their heads. They are instructed to “breathe” the energy of that Sun into their bodies, mingling the sparkling light energy of Father Sky with the energy of Mother Earth. The participants are invited to feel this energy flowing throughout the circle and throughout all of Nature. Still maintaining the breathing rhythm, the participants are told to gradually open their eyes, feeling refreshed, full of life energy, and at once balanced and centered between Earth and Sky, Mother and Father, Female and Male.
The ending to this exercise is pretty similar most of the times that I have performed it, including once for a group of folklorists at an American Folklore Society meeting. People open their eyes and smile at one another, loath to break the Circle. It seems natural to hug the person next to you. The ritual exercise can end here, or go on to a more extensive ritual in which the directions are called, the Gods are invoked, cakes and wine are shared, the Gods are bid farewell, and the Circle is deconstructed—in much the same pattern as described earlier in Chapter 2.

Let us step back and take a look at some of the things that are striking about just this part of the ritual exercise and what they tell us about the Craft as a religious practice. First, the ritual exercise is totally participatory in nature. You have to do in order to be in the ritual at all. Another facet of this ritual is that the body is immediately and necessarily involved in the act. Your attention is, in fact, first focused on the body through breathing, then feeling tension in the body and letting go of that tension. Growing roots down deep into the Earth establishes a necessary connection with the Mother, with She who gives all life. It establishes connection with Nature and invokes the female, who provides strength. The analogy of drinking up Her energy like a tree extends the connection established with the Earth to other life forms in Nature. Bringing in the Sun and the Sky invokes the Father, He who gives us energizing light. Neither male nor female is privileged. Both are invoked; both are necessary; both provide all beings with strength and life. The human being, along with all other life forms, is thus situated as centered between male and female,
Earth and Sky, Mother and Father, connected and part of each end of the polarity.

Without having delivered a speech or a sermon, the teaching Witch has enabled her students to experience a significant part of Wiccan philosophy and worldview through the performance of and participation in this very simple ritual exercise. At every step of the way throughout the ritual, performance and participation are the key elements—from the very first breath drawn in circle to the last hug at the end. The participatory and active nature of Wiccan ritual assures that everyone can feel an integral part of the ritual. Each person is active in connecting with Nature, with the Gods, and with the others there. No one is passively redundant; each is essential for the successful performance of the ritual.

The group’s ritual will likely culminate the introductory class. At this point, students may go on to explore another path, or they may ask to become Dedicants. A two-way screening process that intensifies as the class progresses has been taking place between the Witch and her students since the very first day of class. Students examine not only the information they are presented, but the presenter as well, demonstrating that the coven is not the only body with the power to accept or reject. The Witch, on the other hand, is examining her students and attempting to discover who among them might be good candidates for the kind of practice in which the coven engages. Throughout the class term, the students and teacher have engaged in a gradual process of building trust and getting to know one another as people. Sometimes other coven members may come and visit
the class to see how things are going and to meet the students. Students and teacher are ready for the next step: getting behind the wheel.
CHAPTER 4

The Rite of Dedication: Getting Behind the Wheel

Within the lineage or tradition of Witchcraft that the Követöi practice, the Rite of Dedication is the first formal or ritualized step toward initiation into the coven. This relatively simple ceremony of self-blessing and dedication to study marks a change in the social status of the student from the merely curious to the serious seeker. It also continues to develop and intensify the relationship between the student and teacher begun during the introductory classes. The rite formally blesses and dedicates the student to a path of self-discovery that may lead to the Circle's edge and initiation into the coven. The Rite of Dedication marks a significant step in the acquisition of practice skills for the student and demands an intensified commitment to the learning process on the part of both the student and the teaching Witch.

As noted in Chapter 2, ritual practices and forms vary widely among both individual covens and separate traditions of the Craft. For example, not all Witches practice initiation. In those Craft traditions that do practice a form of initiation, some may not have a stage in the initiatory process that is marked by a formal ceremony of Dedication. Instead, interested students may be initiated somewhat more directly into the coven. Other Craft groups may use a ceremony similar to the Rite of Dedication as a form of either
"self-initiation" or initiation into the group. While the Követöi are certainly quite aware of these alternative practices, the group has never questioned the value of the Dedicant stage within the overall learning process that can culminate in the initiation of a student. Although not as much of a mutual commitment as initiation, the Rite of Dedication is an important part of the screening process for both Witches and students and represents a significant movement toward the incorporation of a potential initiate within the coven community. As such, the Rite of Dedication functions as an important stage within the overall process of constructing a community of practice and carries specific responsibilities for students and teachers as well as the coven at large.

In order to unpack more fully the importance of this stage of the overarching initiatory process, I shall proceed in the following manner. First, I shall describe how a student in an introductory course on Wicca becomes a Dedicant within the Követöi's lineage. A fairly close and straightforward description of the Rite of Dedication will follow, giving us a "working example" of the ceremony for purposes of our discussion. There I will elaborate upon some critical aspects of the actual performance of the rite and their importance both for somatic practice and for the negotiation of trust and power within the circle. Finally, I will situate the Rite of Dedication in the larger context of the initiatory process, examining the implications of the rite in terms of the development of skillful practice for the individual and the continued construction of the coven as a community of practice.
**Asking to be a Dedicant**

Let us return to where we left off in a previous section: with the teaching Witch and her introductory class on Wicca. If the teaching Witch is sufficiently skillful in her delivery of information about the Craft, the students should be able to acquire enough information to clear up cultural baggage connected with the word “Witch” and dispel some of the more common misconceptions about the religion. Additionally, students should be able to come away from the course with the idea that Wicca is a positive religious path. By the end of the introductory class the students should also have acquired sufficient information about the religion and the coven to make a decision. Do they want to go on to further study with this particular Witch and her coven, or do they want to move on to something else?

On this level of interaction, we see that the “screening process” works very much in both directions. The Witch and the coven have power to reject or accept a student, but the student also has power to accept or reject the Witch and the coven. At this point in the learning process, the vast majority of students will move on, and the Witch may never see them again or run into them about town only on a casual basis. There are a great many reasons for students deciding to go on to something else. Some have satisfied their curiosity, deciding that Wicca—or at least this particular practice of Wicca—is not for them. A few of these students may explore a different coven or another kind of Pagan practice. Others will return to religions more familiar to them, or perhaps will leave religious practice entirely.
How does rejection make the Witch feel? Does it hurt her feelings or disappoint her if the majority of her introductory class students never return? Does she feel rejected, or feel that she has failed in some way? While I have certainly discussed this with other members of the Követöi, I can really only answer for myself. In my own understanding of the teaching experience, I find that I tend to situate educational outreach activities as a part of the overall responsibilities I undertook when I became a Priestess. In other words, even if all the students decide to move on to something else, I have fulfilled a primary purpose of outreach by correcting misconceptions about Wicca and, I hope, by increasing public awareness of and tolerance for an alternative religious path.

I haven’t invested enough of myself at this stage to have my feelings hurt when students decide to go their separate ways. In fact, sometimes I am actually relieved, which may have little or nothing to do with the particular students in the course. Organizing and presenting an introductory class takes time and energy—time and energy that I could conceivably spend doing something else. But the time and energy spent on an introductory class is *nothing* compared to the stage that follows. Occasionally I am disappointed when I grow to really like a particular student and think that that individual would make a wonderful Witch and a great addition to the coven. I compare this to the feeling that I imagine some of my professors have when they spot a particularly bright and adept student in one of their courses and wish that person would go on to major in the field. I usually console myself by imagining that I have given that
student a good grounding in the Craft, and that perhaps someday he will return to it.

Usually a few students will want to continue along the path. They know from being told in the introductory classes that any step beyond the introductory stage is something they must deliberately pursue. In other words students must ask to become Dedicants. Specifically, students must ask the teaching Witch, who may be the only person from the coven with whom they have regularly interacted. Moreover, the teaching Witch can say “no.” This places the teaching Witch in a pivotal position, granting her—for the moment—a certain degree of power with respect to both the students and her fellow Witches. What she decides has immediate implications for both the students attempting to learn a practice and the coven at large as a community of practitioners. The “power” the Witch exercises over students asking to be dedicated has to be situated in the context of the increasing degree of intimacy and trust between teacher and student that dedication will require. For example, the location of study itself will probably move from the preferred “neutral” space into the intimacy of the Witch’s own home, and it is quite reasonable that she should be able to exercise some control over who enters the home environment. The Witch’s “power” over the students at this pivotal moment is perhaps mediated by the fact that not many students are turned away for dedication by the Követöi.

The “power” granted to the teaching Witch over the coven at large at this pivotal moment is mediated by the awareness that each Witch has of
the level of commitment that Dedicants will eventually require from the whole group. This is partly because Wicca tends not to be a religion with a distinct, full-time clergy who are paid for their ministry. This is certainly the case with the Követöi, all of whom have jobs and/or family obligations in addition to their duties as Priests and Priestesses of the Craft. Training Dedicants is a time-consuming task, and it is one that not every member of the coven relishes or can easily afford to participate in. Because the outcome of a Rite of Dedication can affect the whole coven—increasing and intensifying the level of responsibility shared by the coven for this student’s training—the Követöi have consistently tended to be considerate of one another by informing each other about prospective students who may ask to be dedicated, usually far in advance of the ceremony.

At this point in our discussion of the Rite of Dedication, it must be emphasized that there is no single, uniform, or homogenous understanding or interpretation of the ceremony among the Követöi. This should hardly surprise us, considering the multitude of perspectives—that playful discourse of lights and shadows noted in the first chapter—that are frequently hidden within the realm of “insider.” Attitudes toward the Rite of Dedication vary among the coven members. Some of the Követöi are fairly cautious or perhaps even conservative about dedicating students, understanding the ceremony as a direct line to possible initiation in the coven. In other words, they see students as dedicating to the coven itself. This is consistent with the understanding that seemed operative within my parent coven. Others, myself included, interpret the Rite of Dedication a bit
more liberally, tending to understand the ceremony as more of a self-blessing, a commitment to a general path of study, rather than a particular coven. Additionally, the attitudes of individual members toward the rite may also change through time. For example, a few of the Kôvetôi have become more conservative in dedicating students because of negative experiences over the years. Unless I note any really serious problems working with a particular student, I will usually participate in blessing and dedicating that person to continued study along the path. This being said, I also have to balance a perception that the ceremony is generally beneficial with the demands that a Dedicant will place on my time and energy. Because of both personal and professional commitments, I tend not to want to spend my time working with students who will not or can not acquire the necessary skills. However, it is usually rather difficult to predict for certain whether students will be successful or not, and so I tend to give them the benefit of the doubt. Whatever the teaching Witch’s personal stance toward the Rite of Dedication, it is ethically important, however, for the Witch to communicate her attitudes and expectations to the students who ask her to be dedicated. This way, students don’t feel as though initiation were somehow a “given” because of the dedication ceremony.

In my own experience as a teaching Witch, I don’t usually have problems at this stage of the learning curve with students whom I must reject because of some incompatibility between them and myself. In the first place, I do not have many students who persist in trying to have me for a teacher when there are serious incompatibilities. In addition, I do not have
a problem telling students that I am not the right teacher for them. In my experience, I feel that it is better to get that observation out in the open as soon as it surfaces. As a Priestess, I feel that it is not only more honest, but also a better use of everyone's time, to send students to someone who would more adequately address their needs. Such students are informed as clearly and as gently as possible that it would be best for them to find another teacher and another group if they want to continue to pursue the Craft.

Now that access to Wiccan groups has become significantly easier through both Pagan festivals and a variety of publications, it is quite unrealistic to think that the Követöi are the only, or even the best, "path to the Circle" for aspiring students. The rejection of students at any point in the course of their study—especially after they have been dedicated for a period of time—is always treated as a serious issue by the coven. In fact, this issue has caused the Követöi intense and sometimes even heated discussion.

Each member of the coven has his or her own way of dealing with the possible rejection of students, relating more often to differences in personal style than theology. When there is disagreement among coven members over how to handle a particular student, the final decision is usually left to the Witch who has worked with that individual most closely. This process of negotiation through discussion is an important feature of the construction of the coven as a place of community, one that we will revisit as our examination of the initiation process continues.

Even though members of the Követöi have varying attitudes and expectations about the Rite of Dedication, all agree that the ceremony
stands in a pivotal place in the initiatory process. It is a rite that has immediate implications for the individual student’s practice and growing implications for the coven as a whole. Because the student must ask to be dedicated, the ceremony represents a deliberate decision to seriously pursue the Craft as a spiritual path. It therefore signals a formal intention on the part of the student. Ideally, neither overt nor covert pressure is ever placed on students to persuade them to take this step. Witches have several sayings used to express this emphasis on religion as a freely chosen path. Commonly heard aphorisms on this subject include the following:

• *The Craft is not a proselytizing religion.*

• *If the Craft is the right path for an individual, then he will find it regardless of the difficulty involved.*

• *The teacher will appear when the student is ready.* (Variant: *The students will appear when the teacher is ready.*)

Although it is true that Witches do not “proselytize” in a missionary or evangelical sense, it is important to avoid understanding the process of acquiring new members as entirely passive, especially when there is an outreach or educational effort connected with a coven. Unless the coven has decided to “close itself” to new members, there is likely to be some set way of identifying and screening potential new members for the group. In fact, some Witches may be fairly aggressive in their search for new members, building somewhat larger-than-average covens or becoming involved
simultaneously with more than one group, as my own High Priest did early in my acquaintance with him. On the whole, it is probably more accurate to say that the organizational structure of the Craft into small, autonomous groups does not lend itself well to large-scale missionary efforts that produce a great many converts at one time.

The idea that the Rite of Dedication represents a choice that is "freely made" by a responsible and mature person is important for reasons connected to the time-consuming nature of Wiccan practice as well as coven organizational structure. While we will turn to the implications for the development of practice in more detail later on, it is important to note from the outset that learning to practice the Craft will require hard work and as well as a high level of maturity on the part of the students. For these reasons, the Követöi formally dedicate no one who is under the age of eighteen into the Craft. In terms of acquisition of skillful practice, the time an individual spends as a Dedicant is a "make or break" period. Unless a student is truly willing to expend the effort, no amount of persuasion or enticement is going to make that person into a practitioner. As a formal declaration of intention, the request for dedication is a signal that the student understands the responsibilities and is willing to take on the specialized training that it takes to become clergy.

And the Answer is...?

When a student from the introductory classes asks to be dedicated, the teaching Witch is usually able to give an immediate response. Often the
Witch is able to anticipate which of those students, if any, will ask. In fact, she has probably already shared her assessment of the students with the other members of the coven and received their feedback on potential Dedicants. The Kôvetõi usually refer to this ability to anticipate the more serious students in terms of having an “intuition” or “feeling” about someone. Using myself as an example, I suspect that my “feelings” in this regard are a complex mixture of “intuition,” a natural or cultivated ability to “read” people, and implicit or subtle forms of communication by which people intimate their intentions to one another.

When a student is accepted, he takes on a set of new activities with his teacher and any other students who are on the same level of instruction and who are preparing for dedication at the same time. For example, a first thing the student must do in preparation for the Rite of Dedication is to make or obtain a proper robe. The Kôvetõi used to make students sew their robes by hand—which is a wonderful way to build anticipation and make a student concentrate on the ceremony he is about to undergo, but a horrible way to get a decent robe. Over the years, the Kôvetõi have sewn their robes by hand, used a sewing machine, and had students who simply went to a costume store and purchased a ready-made robe.

Speaking as a practitioner, I think that I prefer the process of sewing by hand or at the least using a sewing machine to purchasing a ready-made robe. Although it is a lot more trouble, and robes made in this fashion may be less than perfectly constructed, some valuable experiences come out of sharing the “ordeal” of making a ritual garment. For example, reflecting on
my own dedication, I find that some of my fondest memories come from
making the robe—from shopping for fabric together to trying to decipher the
pattern (what exactly is a gusset, anyway?), to the many mild oaths that
escaped my lips every time I pricked my fingers with the needles. All of us
students met together at the High Priest’s home to work on our robes for
hours at a time. Sometimes we students would sew and listen to lectures
from the High Priest on death and reincarnation or the laws of magic. But
not every sewing session was filled with formal instruction. Equally
precious, or maybe more so, to the process of establishing intimacy were the
times that we students sat around together into the wee hours watching
really bad old horror movies and eating freshly made popcorn. Laughing and
eating, sewing and swearing, mixing drops of blood and butter into the fabric
of our robes—all of this made the robe a truly magical garment and made
the connections we students felt to one another and to our High Priest ones
built on warmth and laughter as well as serious study. Saying that a robe
made in this fashion is a "truly magical garment" is much more than a
"metaphorical expression." The act of making the robe "invests" its very
fabric with power and religious meaning. This meaning becomes present, is
made manifest, is *evoked* in the very fabric of the robe itself.

Returning to the present, we find the teaching Witch and her students
engaged in a variety of new activities in order to prepare for the dedication
ceremony. While many of these activities have a very practical focus—i.e.,
obtaining materials necessary for the rite—they also have an important role
in establishing and deepening bonds of community and friendship between
teacher and student. Often a sense of group or community can develop even within the introductory classroom. The closer and more intimate framing of relationship between students and teacher that comes at the stage of preparing for the dedication begins slowly to build the kinds of bonds of trust and mutual commitment that are necessary experiences in preparation for working as a coven. If more than one student is preparing for dedication, their mutual activities also begin to lay a foundation for a new kind of relationship with one another.

Even though the Követői no longer require their students to sew their robes by hand, the students and teaching Witch do other things together that are conducive to the production of intimacy. For example, the Witch and her students may visit bookstores together, shop for crystals or stones at rock and mineral shows, plant an herb garden, or get together “just for fun” in order to establish and deepen the relationship that will eventually become community. These shared experiences are the foundation for the construction of community and form the context within which the ritual experiences of dedication and initiation occur.

In fact, we shall see momentarily that neither the Rite of Dedication nor the initiation itself is an abrupt rending or separation of the student from the intimate context of community. This is somewhat contrary to the classic tripartite description of initiation ritual in particular as “separation, liminality, and reincorporation” that we have inherited from scholars since Arnold van Gennep. For Wiccans who practice a religious tradition similar to that of the Követői, both dedication and initiation ceremonies are framed
within a larger process of learning and embedded within a context of community whose focus moves to establish increasingly more intimate relationships with the coven members, the Gods, and "Nature" as a kind of "person." This both foregrounds the concept of intimacy as an important way of relating or form of communication and extends the concept of "community" beyond simply the Priests and Priestesses of the coven.

Taking Dedication: Getting Behind the Wheel

Occasionally the activities in preparation for the Rite of Dedication can also have the effect of producing feelings of excitement or anticipation on the one hand and a feeling of anxiety on the other. In terms of our analogy of learning to drive a car, these feelings are similar to the emotions some students have at earning their learner's permit after successfully going through the written portion of drivers' education. In other words, the student is simultaneously juggling both anticipation and nervousness at the thought of finally getting behind the wheel. For the student who is about to be dedicated, these emotions are likely to continue building and playing off of one another until they are released during the ceremony itself. The Követöi during the initiation ceremony deliberately use techniques of tension and release, anticipation and anxiety, and so we will revisit this phenomenon in greater detail during our discussion of the initiation ritual itself.

Before we can begin an analysis of the Rite of Dedication, it is necessary to have a working example of the ritual in order to help frame and give focus to our discussion. The example that I will give below is a slightly
altered version of the rite practiced by the Követöi. I will first give a close and fairly straightforward description of the rite, followed by an analysis of some key factors in its performance. Then I will situate the Rite of Dedication within the larger context of the initiatory process, examining the implications of the ceremony in terms of the continuing development of skillful practice for the individual and the continuing construction of the coven as a community of practitioners.

The Ritual

The Rite of Dedication is typically performed at night and during the full moon, although the new/waxing moon would be equally appropriate. The ceremony is conducted in a fully consecrated Circle (as described previously in Chapter 2) and in quiet, secure place—outdoors if possible. This is a rite performed for a single individual. Only the initiates and the person to be dedicated are permitted to be present. Usually the rite is conducted by the teaching Witch alone, although other coven members, if already introduced to the student, may be present. The student who is being dedicated must bring a white candle, a robe, and a bottle of wine for the ceremony. It is also customary to bring an offering of flowers to the circle to decorate the altar.

The Witch who is conducting the ceremony sets up the altar in the usual manner and casts the Circle out of view of the student to be dedicated. Once the Circle is cast and the Gods have been invoked the Witch blesses and consecrates the student's robe and candle and pours some of the wine in the chalice. Cakes (small, crescent-shaped oatmeal cookies) have been
baked by the Witch and are placed on the altar near the chalice of wine. A small bowl is placed on the altar into which the student will pour some water. These items having been prepared, the Witch now calls the student to the circle and asks him to remove his clothes. The Rite of Dedication is the only ritual practiced by the Követöi in which anyone is “skyclad,” or in the nude. Specifically, the Dedicant is the only person who is skyclad during the rite. The student disrobes at the outside of the Circle, enters the Circle, and stands before the altar, facing the north. His teacher gives him the following instructions.

• Light the candle. This is the fire element.

• Spread the salt on the floor or ground and stand on it. This is the earth element.

• Light the incense. This is the air element.

• Pour the water. This is the water element.

The student is now shown the gesture of blessing. With the fingers of the dominant hand in the sign of blessing, the Witch instructs him to anoint with the water the parts of the body that will be mentioned, repeating the following phrases after her.

• Bless me, Mother, for I am Your child.

• Blessed be my eyes that I may see Your path.

• Blessed be my nose that I may breathe Your essence.
• Blessed be my mouth that I may speak of You and utter Your sacred names.
• Blessed be my breasts, formed in beauty and in strength.
• Blessed be my loins that bring forth life even as You have brought forth all life.
• Blessed be my knees that I may kneel before Your sacred altar.
• Blessed be my feet that I may walk Your sacred path.

The Witch instructs the student to kneel before the altar and meditate in the posture called “the position of enfoldment” for as long as the student feels necessary. He is told to stand when finished and shown how to perform the gesture called the “invoking pentagram.” The student performs the sign of the pentagram and says, “Blessed Be!”—a phrase that is always echoed by everyone present in the Circle. At this point, the student is ready to take the Oath of Dedication. He kneels again before the altar, grasps the blade of the Witch’s sword or athame, which is held by the Witch, and repeats the oath. Essentially, the Oath of Dedication asks permission of the Gods to walk Their path, affirms the Dedicant’s connection with all of Nature, and promises to hold in respect and confidence anything entrusted to him by the coven. The “Rite of Enrobement” is performed immediately after the oath. Here the Dedicant puts on his blessed and consecrated robe repeating the words of the rite after the Witch. Ideally, he will remember these words (or at least the gist of them) each time he dons his robe, reminding him that the robe has been blessed and consecrated and reminding him of the
responsibilities inherent in the path he has chosen to pursue. The ceremony of cakes and wine may now follow, as both the Witch and newly made Dedicant sit and relax in the Circle, relating whatever thoughts or experiences about the rite they may wish to share. During this time, the Dedicant may be taught additional postures and gestures, learn the names of the Gods used in the Dedicant Circles, and other appropriate teachings.

After the Witch and the newly-made Dedicant have finished the cakes and wine, it is time to take down or “deconstruct” the Circle. In Circle deconstruction, first the Gods are thanked and bid a fond farewell. Then the spirits of the four directions are thanked for their participation in the rite and bid farewell. Any energy that was raised is “grounded” or otherwise dispersed in a positive way. Finally, the Witch crosses the Circle’s boundary, opening the Circle so that all may leave.

As a Dedicant, the student is now not only able to witness these activities, but is fully expected to begin to participate in them to the best of his abilities. Part of his ongoing training will hereafter consist of learning how to perform effectively within the Circle.

**Analysis**

Using the above description as a “working example” of the ceremony, let us now step back and take a closer look at some of the key elements in the performance of the Rite of Dedication. Following the general order of events in the ceremony, I shall now examine a few of the implications of the
ritual both in terms of the acquisition of skillful practice and in terms of the construction of the coven as a place of community.

Timing and Location of the Ritual

When and where rituals are held has both theological and practical implications for Wiccan praxis. The Követöï attempt to hold this particular ritual at either the nearest full moon or the nearest new/waxing moon after the student has requested the rite. This is provided that the student has managed to obtain or make the materials, such as the robe, that are needed for the ritual. The student has already learned from the introductory classes that "the Moon" is an important symbol in Wiccan theology and is usually identified as "female" and "Goddess." As noted previously, the Lunar Goddess is a tripartite deity whose aspects of Maiden, Mother, and Crone are theologically configured both to aspects or stages of life and to the ever-changing cycles of the moon: the new/waxing moon as Maiden, the full moon as Mother, and the waning/dark moon as Crone. Perhaps more than any other single image, the Moon functions in Wiccan ritual to mark times of change and transformation. Her foregrounding in the timing of the ritual is especially appropriate for the dedication ceremony, which marks the transformation of the student from the merely curious to the dedicated.

What messages or teachings are being imparted to the student by having him wait for the "right time"—i.e., the right cycle of the moon—in order to do the ritual? In addition to chronological stages of life, the student learns that the Triple Aspects of Maiden, Mother, and Crone represent
cycles or stages in the progress of projects and events. He learns first hand that timing rituals to the cycles of the moon can be a significant factor in their successful performance. The Moon as deity is not merely a metaphor, a way to "think about things," but a "time" to do things. In other words, the Lunar Goddess is important not only on a theological or symbolic level, but on a practical level as well. These symbolic dimensions have immediate implications on the practical level, and this is the first of many ritual occasions when that will become evident to the student.

The location of the rite can be equally significant to its successful performance. The Követöi usually attempt to hold this ritual outdoors in nature, as they do most of their Circles. When the ceremony is held outside, the Witch uses the natural environment to "set the stage" for the performance of the ritual. Beyond framing the ceremonial event, however, setting the ritual outdoors foregrounds Nature as an active player—a person—in the rite itself. Although a more usual wording of the phenomenon might be something along the lines of "Nature is personified," I feel that this is inadequate (and even sometimes used dismissively) to capture the level of interaction among Witch, student, and Nature. Nature-as-person "responds" to the ritual through the chill of the night air, the wind sighing through the leaves, the light of the full moon peeking through tree branches, the twinkle of stars—even thunder and roiling clouds. Nature-as-person seems to "comment" on the ritual activities, or at least to punctuate them, through a perception of being alive and present in some special way to the members in the Circle. In a very real sense, Nature-as-person becomes a
“member of the community” with whom the initiates and the student to be dedicated interact in an intimately spiritual manner. The Rite of Dedication is likely to be the first ceremony that a student experiences outdoors, and his ability to respond to Nature-as-person is the beginning of yet another facet of the learning process.

What happens when the Rite of Dedication must be held indoors? This is not the Követöi’s preferred practice, but the ceremony has certainly been done indoors on several occasions. In fact, all of the dedication ceremonies that I have sponsored in my home have necessarily been held indoors, because I do not have access to local outdoor areas that are private enough for religious ritual. Speaking from personal experience, I have found that indoor dedication ceremonies have a tendency to foreground feelings of privacy and intimacy. Nature-as-person is not as easily perceived as an immediate and felt “presence,” but the bonds of closeness and intimacy being forged between student and teaching Witch are more strongly emphasized in a ceremony within a small, private, and secure space.

*Power Dynamics within the Rite*

To this point, I have emphasized the development of a closer and more intimate relationship between the teaching Witch and the students about to be dedicated. The performance of the Rite of Dedication, however, demonstrates an additional dimension to this relationship in terms of a power differential between teacher and student. Two things in particular emphasize the difference in power between student and teacher: 1) what
the student is not permitted either to participate in or to witness at the
beginning of the rite and 2) ritual nudity in which only the student is nude.

The first indication of the power differential between the student and
teacher in the ceremony comes at the very beginning of the rite. The Circle
is cast away from the purview of the student. Additionally, the consecration
and blessing of the student's candle and robe are not done in the student's
presence, representing activities to which the student does not yet have
access. The significance in emphasizing or framing difference in power at the
beginning of the rite arises from the learning process in which the student
and teacher have been engaged. During the introductory classes, the
student has already been present for the casting of a Circle. The casting of
a Circle is not precisely a secret event that he is not permitted to know
anything about. In fact, the teaching Witch will often go out of her way to
make sure that potential Dedicants have the opportunity to witness and
participate in a Circle before they make up their minds to take the Rite of
Dedication. The Kôvetôi consider this an important part of students'
knowing what they are getting into before making a commitment. The
student's inability to participate in the casting of the Circle and to witness
the consecration and blessing of his robe both frames this particular
ceremony as "different," as something outside expectation, and frames the
power and status differential between student and teaching Witch as she
assumes her role as Priestess of the rite.

The second indication of the power differential between Witch and
student comes immediately upon the approach of the student to the Circle's
perimeter. While the Witch is robed, the student is directed to remove his clothes and enter the Circle naked. What are the implications of this act within the tradition practiced by the Kôvetöi?

Although there are Craft groups, such as the Gardenarians, who regularly perform their rituals skyclad or in the nude, the Kôvetöi are a robed coven. This means that ritual robes are worn in all formal ceremonial or religious activities undertaken by the coven as a group. The Rite of Dedication is the only ceremony in the Kôvetöi's tradition in which the participant is skyclad. Moreover, the student to be dedicated is the only person in the Circle who is nude. An occasion of ritual nudity in this context is significant precisely because it is so rare. Ritual nudity in the Rite of Dedication has implications in at least two dimensions: what nudity in the Circle implies about attitudes toward the body, and what nudity in the Circle implies about power and relationship. In this portion of my analysis, I shall direct my remarks to ritual nudity and power dynamics within the Circle.

The fact that the student to be dedicated is nude while the teaching Witch is clothed signifies that the two are unequal in power and status. In some respects, the act of baring the body is tantamount to baring the soul and expresses a condition of vulnerability. The level of trust in the teacher that the student has established over the course of study is immediately challenged and made manifest in the physical act of removing his clothes. To be sure, ritual nudity is not "sprung" on the student as a surprise test of any sort. The teaching Witch describes the basic pattern of the dedication ceremony and informs the student of the need for him to be skyclad well in
advance of the rite. Neither this nor any other part of the dedication ceremony is “open to negotiation” because it may make someone uncomfortable. In fact, the deliberate “discomforting” in the act of disrobing jars the relationship between the student and teacher from any complacency or familiarity that may have developed and challenges the student to at least momentarily question the degree of trust that he has placed in the Witch. To my knowledge, no one has ever refused to take the rite because of ritual nudity, but it is certainly theoretically possible that a student would opt not to become dedicated within the Követői’s tradition if this were a critical issue.

As a practitioner and a teaching Witch, I have experienced the ceremony from both sides and can speak reflexively as one who has been dedicated and one who has also performed the Rite of Dedication for others. I do remember in my own dedication that this was a most uncomfortable moment for me. My experience was very much embedded within a context of “laying bare,” “being exposed,” or “revealing all.” In no way did I at that time or do I today possess anything near the “ideal female body” as represented in American advertising and media. I had not experienced “ritual nudity” of any sort at any time previous to the dedication ceremony. For example, ritual nudity was not a factor in the Serbian Orthodox religious practice in which I had been raised. Pagan festivals were uncommon at the time that I was dedicated, and so I had not experienced those events at which clothing optional rituals are a common occurrence. Additionally, “body acceptance” and “body celebration” were not commonly heard terms.
growing up in Appalachian Ohio. All this combined to make ritual, or even social, nudity an alien and uncomfortable concept to me. At the time of my dedication, I was acutely aware of my vulnerability. I felt that I was placing a great deal of trust in my teacher, who was also my High Priest, not to ridicule me or take advantage of my vulnerability in any way.

Does the Priest or Priestess who is performing the Rite of Dedication feel uncomfortable because of the student's nudity? This question addresses the issue of whether the Witch's "power" is also subtly two-edged or nuanced within a feeling of discomfort or vulnerability. Again, here I can only speak for myself. Although ritual or social nudity hardly fazes me anymore after several experiences of both, I must admit to feeling a bit uncomfortable about nudity when dedicating students, particularly male students. I think that this is because I am aware both of the power dimensions that are being articulated in nudity that is one sided and also of the possibility that the student will misread ritual nudity as sexual nudity. My own experiences lead me to suspect that power is perhaps not always held or perceived comfortably by those who hold it. I shall leave the discussion of ritual nudity and power noting several lines of inquiry for possible exploration at some future time. To what extent is gender itself a factor in the experience of ritual nudity? Specifically, are feelings of vulnerability connected with gender? Do male students undergoing dedication feel uncomfortable or vulnerable in front of female Witches? Do male Witches who are dedicating students feel uncomfortable or vulnerable? Or is this is particularly female experience? To what extent are feelings of vulnerability in occasions of ritual
nudity connected with the commodification of the human body—the creation and “marketing” of the perfectly formed male or female body? Several of these questions illustrate the extent to which nudity is strongly connected to sexuality within American culture, especially American commercial culture in which “sex”—i.e. semi-nude (usually female) bodies—sells. Although the Witch may have several years of experience to the contrary, nudity and sexuality seem to be partners that are not easily separated.

There is one final point about power and relationship illustrated in the performance of the Rite of Dedication that I wish to make before leaving this section. As I have emphasized throughout this chapter, the relationship that the Witch and student are beginning to form is closer and more intimate than that formed in the introductory class. However, the relationship between the Witch and the student is still very much that of teacher and student, which implies a difference in power and authority between the two. In other words, intimacy does not imply equality. This draws a distinction between the kind of relationship that will obtain within the Circle—within the student’s learning process—versus a relationship more similar to our common notion of friendship, which may develop between the teacher and student outside of the learning process. In some instances, we may have a tendency to conflate intimacy with friendship, but the two are really quite different relationships in terms of power. The word “friendship” implies ideally a kind of egalitarian relationship in which both parties are on the same level of power with respect to one another. The intimacy that exists in the relationship between the Witch and her student
is not an egalitarian relationship. In fact, the teacher-student relationship is necessarily one built on a hierarchy of experiential practice, mastery, and authority in which the teacher has the expert knowledge that the student is attempting to acquire.

This process of growing closeness and intimacy will continue to develop throughout the successful student's learning process through and beyond the initiation ceremony. It is, in fact, a necessary part of making the coven an "intimate community." As we continue exploring the initiation process, I shall expand upon the notion of intimacy both in terms of learning a practice and in terms of the development of the coven as community. For now, let us note that the performance of the dedication ceremony as described above clearly establishes power differentials between teacher and student. Additionally, the ongoing relationship between the two will demand an increasing degree of trust on the part of the student.

If we are left feeling a bit uncomfortable at the notion of an intimate, nonegalitarian relationship that demands a great deal of trust, it is probably because we are all too aware of the potential for abuse and the need to be wary or cautious about forming such relationships. That we do so all the time and in contexts other than religion may help place the Wiccan teacher-student relationship into a helpful perspective. For example, it might be instructive to see if our analogy of learning how to drive a car can help us perceive a bit more clearly what is at stake, in terms of practice, in the teacher-student relationship, understood as an unequal and yet "intimate" power relationship.
In the course of learning how to drive a car, the student and driver's education instructor may become friendly with one another. However, successfully learning how to drive a car demands that the authority and judgment of the teacher not be compromised by feelings toward the student. Too much is resting on the successful completion of driving practice for the instructor to overlook the student's mistakes because he is afraid that the student "might not like him anymore." Nor should the student expect or be willing to accept that the instructor will "cut him some slack" because they are pals. The focus must be on a working relationship, one that enables the teacher to impart a practice to the learner effectively. Several things must come together in order for this to occur. On the one hand, the teacher must first of all be certified to teach others how to drive. In other words, he must be competent, an expert, a master. On the other hand, the student must be able and willing to learn. He must embark on a course of instruction that is a mixture of both intellectual and somatic learning. The student must master the material in the intellectual portion of instruction before he is permitted to get behind the wheel and continue his learning experience. He also must trust the authority of the teacher and be able and willing to follow the teacher's instructions, especially once they are engaged in the somatic portion of the instruction. In the case of learning how to drive, we can readily see that the student's life may well depend on the success of that relationship in teaching and learning the practice. Wiccan initiation is about mastery of a practice as well. The student of Wicca must increasingly grow
to trust the teaching Witch as if his life depended on it. And in the initiation ceremony, perhaps it shall.

The Body

The occurrence of ritual nudity at the very beginning of the Rite of Dedication has the effect of immediately foregrounding "the body" as a significant factor in the ceremony. What might the act of ritual nudity be saying about the body itself? Within the Követöi's tradition, the Rite of Dedication is distinct from the initiation ritual. It is the only point in the whole initiation process in which ritual nudity occurs. It may therefore be instructive to examine some literature on nudity and initiation to see if we can shed any light on this question.

Interestingly, much of the scholarship on ritual nudity in initiation seems to focus on the symbolism of the clothing as an indication of status. For example, Victor Turner, in his book The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure, speaks of the removal of "secular clothing" and other signs of status as a feature of the liminal state (1969:95). While this gives us some useful insights into the symbolism of clothing within a process of status reorganization, the body itself is curiously invisible and its significance or importance unknown.

A similar observation might be made of Bruce Lincoln's analysis of women's initiation rituals. In his book Emerging from the Chrysalis: On the Nature of Women's Initiations, Lincoln notes an entirely new symbolism of clothing in women's initiation ceremonies.
The general tendency in women's rites seems to be toward an additive process (clothes put on) rather than a subtractive one (clothes taken off). This serves to express another contrast with male initiations: whereas men (who have a status) must lose their status in order to assume another, women (who have no status) need not do so. (1981:103)

Again, the focus of analysis here is on the symbolism of the *clothing* and not the *body*. Unfortunately, Lincoln's intriguing suggestion about the difference between male and female rites vis a vis the symbolism of clothing gets us no further into understanding the symbolic dimension of this particular portion of the Rite of Dedication. The dedication ceremony is performed for both males and females, so it is neither a "male" rite nor a "female" rite. It is, in Lincoln's terms, both a "subtractive" and an "additive" process. The student (male or female) disrobes upon entry into the Circle and departs robed as a Dedicant. To that extent, clothing subtraction and addition may well be one sign of the change in the student's status from casual student to Dedicant.

I suspect that some things are still lacking in our analysis when we overlook the body itself as the central figure in the rite. What happens to our understanding of this portion of the ceremony when we shift the site of symbolic meaning from the clothing to the body? First, ritual nudity may be saying something significant about the importance of the body in its "natural state." Such an observation would be entirely consistent within the framing context of Wicca as a "nature religion." Returning only briefly to the arena of the symbolism of clothing, we can perceive an additional dimension of meaning: secular clothing as symbols of alienation from the
natural world. In other words, to be clothed in mundane clothing is to be apart from Nature-as-person. Such clothing is also a function of controlling or managing the relationship to "the elements" rather than accepting Nature. In the act of disrobing, the body returns itself to a state of nature, free from the distractions and impositions of the secular world. The brief moment of ceremonial nudity returns the body to its natural state—the body *au naturel*—wherein it ritually blesses itself and then celebrates that blessing with the donning of properly consecrated robes that have (ideally) been made by the Dedicant’s own hands.

Another point about the act of disrobing is the extent to which the body becomes an active subject, rather than a passive object in the act of disrobing. Clothing is not "taken from" the student’s body by the teacher. The body "disrobes itself" and enters into the Circle to perform the act of blessing. The body is an active participant in the rite; it is an *actor*, a *doer* of ritual performance. In terms of ritual performance, the body is necessarily foregrounded as an actor in the very act of blessing that comprises the major activity of the ritual. The Priestess does not bless the student. The student asks for blessing from the Goddess and performs that blessing both with and through his body. In this sense, the body is not merely the recipient of blessing, but a doer of blessing as well.

What else is revealed in the dedication ceremony about the body in performance? Already noted is the degree to which the *body* is the *performer* of the rite from the moment it enters the Circle. What is also revealed is the extent to which the student’s instruction has entered a new phase, one
that emphasizes or foregrounds learning on the somatic level. During the performance of the ceremony, the Priestess gives somatic instructions to the student. Sometimes these instructions are delivered verbally, as when the student is told to light the candle or pour the water. At other times, the instructions must be delivered somatically, as when the Priestess shows the student gestures or postures with her own body that the student must then successfully repeat with his body. The student’s body is not just the actor; in the Rite of Dedication the student’s body has also become the learner.

The location of instruction has moved from being primarily intellectual to being equally (or at times primarily) somatic. The body’s actions in the dedication ceremony are the first of many patterns of behavior and modes of performance that it will learn throughout the time that the student is a Dedicant. They will eventually become “second nature” to the Dedicant.

There is one additional observation that I shall make before leaving this section of the performance analysis. This pertains to Wiccan attitudes about the body that are revealed during the ritual act of blessing. The body blesses itself literally from “head to toe,” including those parts of the body that deal with sexuality and reproduction. While mind and spirit have been privileged in both formal and informal discourse in the West, the body is often perceived as “in fall,” “dirty,” or “threatening.” The nude or semi-nude female body is often both denounced as a symbol of temptation and commodified in advertising and the media. The fully nude male body frequently is considered so taboo or threatening that it must remain “invisible” and is not even available to commodification. The ritual action of
blessing the body emphasizes in a physical and concrete manner, beyond what any merely verbal explanation can impart, the degree to which the body is part of the sacred within the Wiccan worldview. No one part of the body is privileged; no one part of the body is denigrated. All parts of the body are holy and blessed; all participate in the sacred dimension.

The Role of the Goddess

There is at least one facet of the Rite of Dedication that quite frankly perplexes me: why is the presence of the Goddess foregrounded in the ceremony, while the God is not? The Goddess is very much evident as a presence within the rite. She is actively invoked during the student’s blessing, while the God is absent from the actual performance of the blessing. Both the God and Goddess are invoked during the casting of the Circle, which is done by the Priestess outside of the student’s view. However the God is not made “present”—especially to the student—in the same manner as is the Goddess. In fact, the God will not be mentioned by name until the Priestess and Dedicant share cakes and wine in the Circle.

I don’t remember when it was that this question first surfaced, but it has become an increasingly interesting puzzle to me since embarking on this project. I suspect that it is part of a paradigm shift in religious worldview or consciousness that the student’s first ritual action invokes the blessings of a female deity, rather than a male deity. Just as the student is left with little doubt as to the sacrality of his body, he is also left with little doubt as to the importance of the Goddess in Wiccan worship.
Let us explore what else the foregrounding of the Goddess in the performance of the ceremony might signify for the student. For example, in the section on ritual timing, we observed that the student learns an important lesson about the Moon as a time for practice. In the introductory classes on Wicca, the student has learned that the stages of the Moon may be easily and directly keyed to chronological stages in female life, visualized as the Triple Goddess in Her aspects of Maiden, Mother, or Crone. He now learns through the performance of the ritual that the Maiden, Mother, and Crone represent cycles of human life experience, not just female life experience. Although a man, he learns to relate to and identify with the Moon’s cycles in all Her aspects of transformation. He learns to interpret these life cycles in a fluid and flexible manner instead of a literally biological manner. Everyone, male or female, can participate in the Moon’s cycles equally, can share in the life-affirming, transformative powers of the Goddess. No one is left out because she is not a biological mother, or because she is too young to be a Crone or too old to be a Maiden. In fact, no one is left out because the she is actually a he. The range of feminine symbolic experience surpasses biology. Male Witches invoke the power of the Triple Goddess in our coven just as well as do female Witches. The invocation of the feminine divine by men and their subsequent identification with the range of feminine experiences in rituals of transformation is something that I find quite thought provoking and wish to take up in more detail at some future time.
The Oath and the Robe

The Oath of Dedication functions to reassert the power differential between the Priestess and the Dedicant, and this is embodied in the very postures assumed by both. The Priestess, who is robed, stands while the Dedicant, who is skyclad, kneels. Additionally, the Priestess holds the sword or athame, most definitely a symbol of authority within the Circle. The Dedicant is permitted to touch only the blade of the sword or athame as he repeats the words of the oath. The robe and the Rite of Enrobement come after the student takes the oath. Returning to the symbolism of clothing, the robe serves as the symbol of entry into both the group and the mysteries. It is a physical reminder of the student's dedication to a path of study and the only garment ever to be worn in the Circle.

Cakes, Wine, and Circle Deconstruction

The ceremony of cakes and wine is a time of relaxation and sharing between all who are present within the Circle. The Priestess blesses the cakes and wine by invoking the blessings of the God and Goddess into them. This is done in full view of the Dedicant, who watches but does not participate, alluding subtly to the idea that some things are now accessible to him as a Dedicant, and some things remain inaccessible unless he becomes an initiate. The ceremony of cakes and wine serves to reestablish a more relaxed and perhaps more comfortable sense of community. At the same time, it provides an immediate outlet for those present in the Circle to share whatever religious experiences or insights they may have had. This
emphasizes personal experiences of the sacred as an important and natural part of any Wiccan ceremony and provides a safe and secure venue in which to share them.

After the cakes and wine are finished and the conversation has started to wind down, the Priestess and Dedicant prepare to “deconstruct” the Circle. He is now able to witness activities connected with Circle “construction and deconstruction.” This is a further indication of his change in status. The Dedicant absorbs an important lesson of practice through the act of Circle deconstruction. Everything that is invoked into a Circle must be dismissed; energy that is raised during a ritual must be grounded at its end. This is the first of many lessons about Circle work that the Dedicant will learn through somatic practice and repeated action.

Taking it to the Highway

My analysis of the initiatory process is primarily situated within two large and overarching perspectives: the development of individual practice and the construction of the coven as community. Let us now turn to a brief examination of how the Rite of Dedication affects these two dimensions of religious experience. Dedication provides the student access to both another level of instruction and access to increasing contact and interaction with the members of the coven as a whole. I shall first consider some major implications of dedication in terms of the development of the student’s religious practice, indicating to what extent the student’s instruction takes on new dimensions, especially those involving the development of the body-
in-practice. Then I shall briefly examine some implications that dedication of a new member holds for the community of practitioners as a whole.

The dedication ceremony moves the student into a more intense and specialized mode of study that acknowledges his decision to invest serious time and effort into learning what it will take to become an initiate. In terms of the development of the student's religious practice, the ceremony represents a major shift in every interrelated facet of instruction—the what, where, when, and, especially, how of the learning process. In terms of what the student is taught, dedication signals a shift in emphasis from general information about the Craft and related Pagan practices to more specific information about what this particular coven practices. For example, students in the introductory classes learn that Witches generally worship both Gods and Goddesses and that some Craft groups worship the Goddess primarily or even exclusively. What Gods and Goddesses do the Követöi worship? Dedicants are given special names for the deities, along with special prayers to say at morning and at night. In the Rite of Dedication, students are initially exposed to the idea that the symbolic also has a very practical dimension. This process of exposing and sensitizing the student to both the symbolic and practical dimensions of practice now continues. For example, Dedicants now begin to assimilate the vast system of symbolic correspondences that underpinning the magical system and connecting such seemingly disparate things as elements, planets, colors, plants, and directions. They must eventually master these correspondences in order to understand what elements must be combined to do a particular ritual work,
such as a healing. A practical knowledge of herbs and methods of divination are also added to the Dedicant's curriculum.

The location and frequency of the Dedicant's classes change, along with the substance of the classes. In terms of where the student is taught, the instruction now moves from the "neutral" space preferred by the Követöi for introductory classes to the Witch's own home. In part, this move is intended to nurture the sense of community and intimacy between the Witch and Dedicant. There is a second, more practical reason for relocation: the increased amount of ritual work within the Circle that the Dedicant will attempt to learn. The teaching Witch will need to instruct the Dedicant in those behaviors, postures, and gestures used within ritual by casting the Circle within her own home. Circle work also increases the frequency of classes, thereby affecting the when of instruction. Along with their regular weekly class sessions, Dedicants now begin to meet with their teacher and possibly other initiates at least occasionally for new or full moons and possibly the major sabbats.

The most significant changes occurring in instruction concern how the student is taught. The emphasis now shifts gradually to include an ever-increasing dimension of somatic practice along with the "book learning." This was prefigured in the dedication ceremony itself, with its emphasis on the body as the primarily location of ritual performance and practice. Dedication is the stage at which the body is significantly brought into the learning process, and it is this stage of instruction that often proves to be the "make or break" period for the aspiring initiate.
Perhaps the process of learning how to drive a car will again provide some insights into why this is the case. In order to learn how to drive a car successfully, it is absolutely essential at some point in the learning process to get behind the wheel physically and to take to the highway. Actually getting behind the wheel and driving the car represents an enormous jump in the acquisition of skills as well as a significant shift in how the student learns. Let us pick up the driver's education class at the point where it has produced "graduates" who have learned the preliminary "rules of the road" and are now qualified to receive their learner's permits. This means that the students and their instructor are now able to actually drive the car, at first in limited and very controlled situations, and then increasingly in conditions of normal traffic.

This stage of the student driver's learning process necessarily foregrounds learning at the somatic level and is the point at which the body becomes fully engaged as learner. Note that it is not the "natural body," but the body-in-practice—the body and mind working together—that becomes foregrounded as learner in the process of learning how to drive a car. The student has previously and necessarily engaged his mind in the first part of the driver's education course by learning the rules of the road. Through both observation and reading, the student has also started to learn about cars in general: where the gas and brake pedals are located, how the braking system works, what turns the car, how the wheels move when the steering wheel is turned, and so forth. At this point in the learning process, the
student will have to engage his body and his mind in the actual act of driving the car.

While his “mind” has mastered the “theory” of driving sufficiently to warrant the learner’s permit, it is his “body” that must master the “practice” of driving in order to successfully obtain his driver’s license. The body will need to learn how much pressure to put on the gas, how quickly to move the foot from the gas pedal to the brake, how much pressure to apply to the brake and under what circumstances. All of the movements typically associated with driving are engaged by the body-in-practice, the body and mind working together to accomplish a complicated series of tasks. Even a moment of reflection reveals just how wonderfully complex is the process of driving. At first, the body is “all thumbs” in terms of what to do. In driving a standard transmission, for instance, the right hand has to “learn” to operate independently of the left, which must “learn” to steer the car. The feet also have to “learn” how to interact with the car and one another. The right foot must simultaneously exert just enough pressure on the gas while the left is easing up on the clutch. Too little gas, and the car stalls; too much, and the clutch pops. Throw in learning how to move the car forward in traffic from a standing stop on a steeply sloped hill, and you have one of my own personal nightmares about learning how to drive a standard transmission. Yet this kind of complex body-mind learning and maneuvering is something that—if we become successful drivers—we eventually come to learn, to master, and even, perhaps, to enjoy.
In fact, at the levels of mastery and enjoyment, the process that was once so brightly self-conscious, so painfully mind-boggling or even scary becomes totally invisible to our conscious minds. The complex and multi-layered process of driving has become "internalized." In Yuasa's terminology, knowledge that was once so clear in the "bright consciousness" has become "internalized through praxis" into the "dark consciousness" (1987:5). In other words, the process of driving has become part of the "dark consciousness." As accomplished drivers, we now cruise down the highway, mentally checking off what we need at the grocery, waving to friends seen along the sidewalk, enjoying the day—all the while not even noticing what our hands and feet, our bodies-in-practice, are now doing quite automatically. Even this most mundane of examples—driving a car—yields a treasure trove of esoteric knowledge. And it is the body-in-practice that is the key to unlocking its secrets.

The only time we will become consciously attentive toward this process again is if something unusual forces us to re-cognize what has become part of the "dark consciousness." For example, a hurt or sprained ankle or wrist can limit one's ability to drive a standard transmission. The body's "dis-ease" forces us to consciously revisit our psychophysical habits to accommodate the injury. Unusually bad weather or mechanical problems may also recall one's full conscious attention back to the process of driving, suggesting that there are additional skills that may need to be acquired in the driving process, such as knowing how to drive in inclement weather. Finally, we may find ourselves having to function as "experts," much as our
driver's education instructors, if and when we are called upon to help teach someone how to drive. This will not only mean recalling from the dark consciousness all those processes of the body-in-practice that have been internalized and assimilated, but "passing the test" of having a conscious enough grasp of these processes to communicate them to another person. In sum, there are several additional levels of skill and expertise to the larger process of driving a car than suggested even by the "simple" mastery of normal driving.

Returning to the process of learning how to be a Witch, what does the above analysis do to help us understand where the Dedicant is within the overall initiatory process? In driving terms, our Dedicant has passed his preliminary written test and received his "learner's permit." The training that will take place from this point on will be one that engages the body-in-practice to an increasing degree—much in the same way as our student driver. The Dedicant and the Witch now address the practice of the religion itself, at first in limited and very controlled exercises with the body in meditation postures or in simple rituals within the Circle. Eventually the Dedicant will engage in more challenging and creative expressions of religious practice.

At first this somatic portion of the learning process is painfully awkward, similar to the "all thumbs" stage of our driver's education student who is engaging a standard transmission for the first time. The very first thing that the Dedicant must learn is that most esoteric of all Wiccan ritual practices—how to breathe. After twenty-five years of practice and several
years of teaching others to practice, I have come to the conclusion that mastery of breathing in various postures is the foundation of all Wiccan ritual practice. Witches breathe to relax, to “ground and center” at the beginning of each ritual. It is through proper breathing that the Witch sheds the mundane personality and engages her spiritual dimension, the “Craft personality,” which is represented by her Craft name and used primarily within the Circle. It is through the automatic and unconscious mastery of breath that the Witch is able to focus her concentration for divination, magic, healing, and invocation. Mastery of the breath is the foundational somatic practice through which the Witch develops her spiritual being, that total integration of mind, body, and spirit that is the goal of spiritual practice.

Yuasa’s terminology of bright and dark consciousness again helps us understand what is going on during this particular somatic practice. Control of the breath is a “direct route by which the bright consciousness can contact the dark” (1987:6). It is one way in which the bodymind fully engages or the body-in-practice is achieved. At first, breathing exercises are geared toward “simple” relaxation, initially in a prone posture. The student is instructed to breathe in, hold, breathe out, hold, and repeat for, say, an initial count of four. The breathing exercises progress through various postures and various breathing patterns, eventually incorporating complex forms of visualization, concentration, ritual gesture, and other forms of bodymind practices.
The Dedicant's ability to control his breath is one of the most telling signs of whether or not he will be successful in somatic practice. Failure here is akin to the moment of initially getting behind the wheel of a car—and freezing. Some students who have made it through the process of dedication have "frozen" at the prospect of somatic practice. These students likely will not continue toward initiation. They are the equivalent of the driver's education student who has mastered the rules of the road, but can't bring himself to get behind the wheel of a car in order to learn to drive. Like our student driver, the "student Witch" will need to successfully engage the body-in-practice in order to graduate from this portion of the learning process to receive his "license to practice" in the form of the initiation ceremony.

In terms of the dedication's effect on the coven as a place of community, the new Dedicant will increasingly draw on the expertise of other Witches in the coven besides his initial teacher. The presence of a Dedicant in the larger coven community is always an occasion for ongoing conversation among the Witches about the student as a potential initiate, the group dynamics, what new members will do to those dynamics, and so forth. Because of this, the Witches and the new Dedicant will increasingly interact with one another in ritual as well as mundane activities. At first their interaction may take place at new or full moon rituals, often held especially so that this interaction can occur. The Dedicant may also start coming to regular sabbats with the Witches in the coven. Sometimes the Dedicant will have special classes with or projects assigned by the other
Witches in the coven. It is necessary for the Witches not only to get to know their prospective new members as people, but to know them in practice as well. How the Dedicant is coming along in practice can only be ascertained through first-hand observation, especially during ritual events.

Increased interaction between coven and Dedicant serves a number of purposes. It introduces the student to a wider range of pedagogical approaches and fields of expertise than that found only in the teaching Witch. Having other Witches assist with educating the Dedicant will spread the burden around a bit more evenly through the coven. Increased interaction between the Dedicant and the other Witches highlights and further develops the idea of the coven as a close, intimate community.

The increased interaction between the Dedicant and Witches is also part of the mutual screening process. At any time in the Dedicant’s course of study, he may decide to leave the group or he may be asked to leave the group. Both the Dedicant and the coven share power somewhat equally in this respect at this point in the initiatory process. In the future, this power will shift to the coven as the Dedicant approaches the Circle’s edge and the point of asking for initiation into the Craft.
CHAPTER 5
Coming to the Edge of the Circle

We have now come to the final stage in the initiation process, that of initiation itself. As with the dedication ceremony, the Dedicant must formally ask to be initiated in order to proceed to this final stage. Even though he may have been working with the Witches in the group for over a year, nonetheless the Dedicant often sees this as no small task and one that usually involves a great gathering of courage. After all, the Dedicant has invested a lot of time and personal effort working with this group, and they could still reject him. Very few—none, if memory serves me correctly—of those who have asked have been refused. This is probably a reflection of the efficacy of the screening process. Those Dedicants who were ill suited to the group or its practices were either subtly or explicitly encouraged to seek elsewhere, and those who found the Követői unsuitable departed as well.

After making the request to be initiated, or otherwise broaching the subject of initiation, all of the initiates meet together to discuss the Dedicant. They review his progress in practice, discuss what they think his motivations are and whether or not he will make a good Priest. The Követői also prepare a set of questions to ask the Dedicant and decide who will ask what sets of questions on the list. Even newly initiated members may
participate in this activity, especially if they have worked closely with the
candidate for initiation. All of the initiates who can make it then meet with
the Dedicant in a semi-formal setting at someone's home. Here the Witches
question the Dedicant about his or her understanding of the Craft as the
Követöi practice it. The Witches also ask questions about why the Dedicant
wishes to take on the responsibilities of clergy. If the answers are
satisfactory and all of the Witches agree that they can work with this
person, or at least agree that they have no serious problems with the
individual, the Dedicant is accepted for initiation. The actual decision of the
coven is made on a more-or-less collective basis, but I must point out that
the words of those who have the most experience in the group—such as the
High Priestesses—carry quite a bit of weight in the decision-making process.

If the decision is a positive one, preparation for the actual rite of
initiation now begins in earnest. First, the Dedicant must choose a new
name—a Craft name—that will be used only in the Circle and will reflect his
sacred identity. Aside from the actual sewing of a robe by hand for his
dedication, this seems to be one of the most challenging projects a Dedicant
must undertake to prepare for a ceremony.¹ I suspect that its difficulty is a
result of the dual nature of the task. Finding a name that truly represents
one's sacred identity usually means a great deal of intense soul-searching.
Often this is coupled with nerve-wracking research into some body of
meaningful mythology, trying to decipher complex spelling rules and
impossible pronunciation guidelines for names—all to discover that name
that will finally truly “fit.”
In addition to choosing a Craft name, the candidate for initiation is encouraged to begin looking for personal tools, especially the athame, which will be needed almost immediately in ritual practice. The consecration of ritual tools and their charging with power will be one of the first major tasks the Dedicant will learn to perform after initiation. I recall that finding an athame was a particularly difficult task for me twenty-five years ago. It actually involved a field trip with my High Priest one hundred miles out of town to the nearest large city in order to find a store with a selection of appropriate knives. This is partly because the knife has to meet several criteria in order to become an athame; any old black-handled knife will not do. It has to fit the Witch’s hand in a certain way, has to have to right “feel” to the Witch, and must be cleansed of any spiritual impurities before it can ever be used in the Circle. Again, like many ritual objects connected with Wiccan practice—such as the robe—these objects do not function only as metaphors, but are created and assumed to contain real power and real energy that function across both physical and spiritual planes.

As I remember, most of the knives I looked at in that store so long ago were World War II surplus. Since the athame is a knife that never “cuts” anything in the physical plane (although Witches feel that it has “command” over both physical and spiritual planes), finding a “British commando knife” that was actually used in war was not a “plus.” Such a knife would have to be cleansed extensively in order to remove from it energies remaining from actual bloodshed. Today, thankfully, finding appropriate Craft tools has become much easier. There are now several
supply stores that cater to a Pagan clientele and that will make ritual items to order.

In preparing for the ceremony, the Dedicant and the Witches are engaged in new sets of activities and meeting new challenges “together.” Each day brings increased anticipation and heightened levels of excitement and anxiety as the Dedicant approaches the big day. Of course, the Dedicant’s excitement and anxiety are shared with the initiates, who offer their strategies and suggestions, their support and encouragement, having themselves been through it all before. In this manner, pre-ritual preparation brings the Dedicant and the initiates together in a new way, as a heightened sense of community begins to be extended to the Dedicant by all of the Witches in the coven.

The Rite of Initiation

For this study, I will describe the initiation ceremony of “Rita,” the first of the last group of students initiated by the Követöi, and an initiation ceremony that is fairly fresh in my own memory and experience. As with the dedication ceremony, I shall first attempt to give a fairly lengthy and straightforward description of the performance of the rite in the order that the ritual events occur, with as little “explanation” or analysis as possible so that the reader can fully enter the description. In order to convey more fully the “feel” of the ritual performance to the reader, I shall use the present tense in my description, as I did in the description of the dedication ceremony. Additionally, in order to avoid stilted or confusing language that
may disrupt the "flow" of the narrative, I shall speak primarily as a
Priestess throughout this section of the paper, using the pronouns "we" and
"our" to refer to the members of Az Isteneknek Követői and the candidate
for initiation who are assembled at the ritual. After the description of the
initiation ritual is completed and I engage the reader in reflection on some of
the salient features of the ceremony, I shall resume using "we" and "our" as
general pronouns that include the reader.

The ritual is held at night in Lauren's farm home in the country at
some time during the waxing to full moon. Weather permitting, it will be held
outdoors. There are several reasons for holding the initiation ritual outdoors
rather than inside Lauren's home. As noted in the previous chapter, Wiccan
theology foregrounds Nature as a "member" of the spiritual community
whose actual presence at the rite is made apparent and engaged by the
worshippers through outdoor ritual praxis. Students may in fact have
already been exposed to this theological and praxological dimension if they
have had their dedication ceremonies performed outside in Nature. There are
also practical reasons to holding the initiation outdoors: initiations take up a
lot of space, more space than your average "living-room size" Circle.

On the actual day of the ritual, anticipation, excitement, and anxiety
are at a fevered pitch. This is probably at least as true for the initiates who
will take part in the ceremony as it is for the Dedicant. The Követői begin
preparation for the initiation early in the day, checking the site, monitoring
the weather, and preparing the materials needed for the altar. The Dedicant
has been instructed to spend the day in solitude and silence, meditating on
the ritual ahead.

Rita arrives—early, much to our amazement. This alone gives us a
cue as to the level of her anticipation; Rita is never early! We immediately
start to rib her about this amid welcoming hugs. She finds us all in the
kitchen waiting for her. We had been dividing up parts for the ritual before
she came in. Rita is visibly nervous and excited, desperately trying to
maintain her silence—not easy when people are teasing you—and the air
fairly crackles with energy around her.

As part of her duties for the ritual, Rita has had to bring the wine and
bake the moon-shaped cookies that are shared during the “cakes and wine”
part of the ritual. Everybody jokes about her baking, speculating on the
weight of the cookies and whether we’ll be able to eat them without dunking
them in the wine first. We also start to kid her about the “ordeals” ahead
and begin to drop elaborate hints about what’s in store for you now. This
serves the dual and rather contradictory purpose of both relieving her
tension and heightening it, as she starts to wonder just how much is real and
how much exaggeration. I especially enjoy participating in this part of pre-
ritual excitement and anticipation. Rita does not know me as well as some
of the other Witches, and she is more likely to wonder just how much I am
kidding and how much I mean to be taken seriously.

It is now close to sunset. Rita puts her robe on and sprays thoroughly
with mosquito repellent before being taken out back to the pond on the edge
of the farm, which is far from the house and also far enough from the ritual.
site to prevent her from clearly seeing or hearing any of the preparations. Rita is instructed to sit on the ground and meditate on the path she has chosen, with a candle flame as her only light. We leave her in the deepening twilight, watching the stars come out and listening to the sounds of the woods while fireflies dance in the fields. She will be safely “out of the way” until we are ready for her.

Meanwhile, back at the house, we check over all the preparations that we have made one more time. The initiation is one of the very few rituals that the Követöi have in written form—typeset on a computer in fancy print, no less. Most of the time we make only a brief outline on a small scrap of paper as a reminder of who has what parts and a note as to what chants we have decided to do. And most of the time, these notes are fairly unnecessary. However, the initiation is a very complex and very long ceremony, so we feel that it is best to have things written down in order not to forget anything at the last moment. We finish deciding parts and begin to put our robes on and gather our ritual equipment to take back to the Circle in the woods. Right before we are ready to leave we do one final divination, drawing the runes to make sure that we are doing the right thing. The runes are positive, and we leave the house quietly and start back into the woods. Along the way, we have to pass near Rita, but we are careful not to make too much noise to disturb her meditation—or to let her see and hear too clearly what we are doing.

At the Circle, which is set back in a far field and surrounded by a grove of thick-standing trees for privacy, the altar is quickly set up in the
north with the usual ritual equipment, a vase of flowers, and the wine and the cakes. Everything is checked over one more time to make sure that nothing is forgotten. We decide not to have a fire because of the oppressive heat that has been building all day and instead set up candles in the central fire pit and lanterns around the edge of the Circle, in addition to the candles at the quarters. This will make it easier to see in order to find our way around the circumference of the Circle.

Satisfied that we are ready, we gather in the center of the Circle, around the central fire pit, and do a quick and silent meditation to “ground and center” ourselves before the ritual. At this point, we begin to change over into our sacred or magical personas, indicated by the usage of our Craft names within the Circle. Each of us puts the mundane world firmly out of mind—all the hassles of the day, whatever worries or concerns we might have about jobs, cars, bills, or homework—and concentrates only on the ritual that we are about to perform. In some respects, this grounding and centering might be understood as similar to actors “getting into character” before a production. But unlike actors, who often wear roles that are not attractive or desirable to them, our magical personalities and names reflect what we feel to be the most sacred, authentic, and desirable parts of our beings.

As described in Chapter 2, the Circle is then cast by the symbolic invocation of the elements air, fire, water, earth, and spirit, using the appropriate ritual tools, gestures, and songs and/or spoken invocations. The elements are invested with attributes and correspond to particular
directions on the compass: air/east, fire/south, water/west, earth/north, and spirit in the center. The invocation of the air element brings into the Circle wit, quick intelligence, and communication. It is symbolically represented by incense and the wand and is invoked by one of us carrying the incense around the Circle, starting in the east and moving “sunwise” back to the starting point. Most movement in the Circle is sunwise, or deosil. After the elements have been invoked into the Circle, each of us stands at one of the four quarters to call the Guardians of the Watchtowers to come to witness the rite and protect the Circle. The Guardians of the Watchtowers are rulers of the quarters and are related both to mythology and to ancestors or Ancient and Mighty Ones. The Priestess who has called the final quarter formally states the purpose of the rite. We then meet again in the center of the Circle and hold hands to participate in a group chant, which changes into a song of community and solidarity. At this point, the Gods are invoked into the Circle.

The invocation of the Gods is an important step in the construction of any formal ritual that we do. Because the initiation ceremony is designed to bring a new member into the Circle, it is especially important to formally introduce the initiate to the Gods and spirits, and to invoke the transformative powers of the Gods necessary to make that person into a Priestess and a Witch. As noted in Chapter 2, the invocation of the Gods may be understood structurally as the last formal preliminary step to any working which is to be performed within the Circle. All the steps so far have been leading up to the invocation of the Gods: the creation of the sacred
space by the blessing of the Circle with the elements, the sealing and
warding of the Guardians of the Watchtowers, and the formal statement of
ritual purpose.

Usually either Lauren or I invoke the Gods, having already decided on
who is to take what part before we get to the Circle. Tonight Lauren invokes
the Goddess, first with a prayer and then with a wonderful chant that she
sings while standing in the center of the Circle in those postures associated
in our tradition with invocation of the Goddess. Rhythmic drumming or
rattling and dancing usually accompany the chant, with all of us joining in.
The purpose of drumming, dancing, and chanting is to raise the energy level
of the participants in the Circle and to manifest the energy of the Goddess
into the Circle itself and into the initiates who are present in the Circle. At
“her” signal, the invocation stops suddenly and the energy of the Goddess is
brought down into the Circle through the appropriate ritual gestures.

Next, I invoke the God, beginning with a prayer also performed in the
ritual posture associated with His invocation. At some point during my
prayer, Lauren leads the other Witches in the chant behind me, knowing
how much I like the effect of two chants, or a chant and a prayer, going on at
the same time. For me, there is a heightened rush of energy as the chanting
creates swirling circles of sounds around me and I focus my will and energy
on the calling of the God. Again, at “my” signal, there is quick silence, and
everyone concentrates on grounding the energy of the God within the Circle.
The casting of the Circle is now complete.
At this point, we are ready for the night's excitement—the initiation itself. We suspect, and later confirm, that Rita can overhear parts of the Circle being cast. She later tells us that she could hear some of the calls to the quarters, the drumming and rattling, and some of songs and chants, but not clearly enough to make out distinct words. We all like this effect of partial hearing because we feel that it serves both to turn up the level of anticipation and to set the tone for the ritual. Imagine yourself sitting on the earth, surrounded by deep night sky and fields full of fireflies, the sound of frogs croaking and splashing in the pond behind you, anticipating the unknown ritual which you are about to undergo, a squirmy and excited feeling in the pit of your stomach, scared but not scared—and suddenly the breezes come to you with sounds of far-off singing and chanting, drums booming, rattles "snaking," voices raised in harmony. We call it "Magick."

Our written initiation notes are given one final check. Lauren and I remind everyone—but especially Sandy—that the challenges are to be given in a very serious and stern tone of voice. Sandy is very giggly and sweet, and it is hard for her to act stern. Predictably, she giggles and says that she'll do her best to be solemn, and we all joke for a bit about how nice it is to get to be "mean." Our joking around at this point is probably an outlet for relieving our own anxiety and excitement over the ritual we are about to do.

Because Dot has been Rita's closest teacher, she gets to be the guide who goes to the pond to bring Rita back through the woods to the Circle. The first ordeal is getting back to the Circle without a flashlight, as it is by now quite dark and the path is overgrown. Dot is also notoriously night blind, and
this situation causes all of us—including Dot—to break into quiet laughter about whether either one will make it back alive. We soon hear the fumbled sounds of someone thrashing around in the brush, and so Lauren goes out to the edge of the path to make sure they will find it all right. The three of them come back to the Circle together. Lauren hangs back, while Dot moves Rita toward the edge of the Circle.

I, her Death and Challenge, am waiting for her.

The hood of my black robe is pulled down around my face, partially shadowing my eyes, and I stand silent, holding the ritual sword that guards the entrance of the Circle. Death, the Challenger at the Gate is one of my favorite ritual roles. Unlike Sandy, I have absolutely no problem in appearing to be stern, and I am sure that I present a suitably formidable figure: a large woman hooded in a dark robe and cloak and holding a large sword. Not only is this a “juicy role” from a performance standpoint, but it relates mythologically to the Goddess I work with, who I feel claimed me as Hers quite a long time ago. At this moment, I feel Her presence quite strongly within and all about me—made “present” in both my voice and body as the Challenger at the edge of the Circle raises the point of the sword to Rita’s breast.

For Rita, there is now no turning back. In a hard and stern voice I deliver the warning to her that unless she comes with two passwords—“perfect love” and “perfect trust”—she may not enter my realm. I tell her that it would be better for her to throw herself on my sword than to make the attempt with fear or doubt in her heart. She replies with the two
passwords, and I slowly turn my back toward her, seeming to walk away from her. Unexpectedly, I swing my sword rapidly around, dealing Rita the symbolic death stroke. She is then immediately blindfolded and loosely bound, in this case by Lauren and Dot, so that her feet can move freely enough to walk without her falling down. Witches call this state “neither bound nor free,” and we feel it symbolizes the human condition quite nicely.

At this point, Rita is led (or rather propelled) counterclockwise around the outside of the Circle by Dot, who continues to be her guide. A “bonus ordeal” is, of course, the challenge of navigating around the outside edge of the Circle, which is quite grown over with weeds, little trees, and miscellaneous unknown “pricker bushes.” At each quarter Rita is stopped by the Guardian of that Watchtower (played by one of us) and challenged about where she comes from, where she is going, what her intentions are, and so forth. These are all formal questions that have formal answers, whispered in her ear by Dot. Each Guardian denies her entrance to the Circle from that quarter, demanding that she first be purified and consecrated. The Guardian asks who vouches for Rita, and Dot replies that, as the Guide of Souls, she does. The Guardian then delivers a stern warning that if it finds Rita unworthy, its element will destroy her. For example, the earth will open up and swallow her should she be found unworthy by that quarter. This not being normally the case in initiations we have performed so far, the Guardian administers the purification of that element and passes Rita to the next quarter. Each elemental purification is performed on the body of the blinded and bound initiate, engaging the appropriate bodily sense.
For example, the Guardian of the earth element may place a piece of rock salt under Rita’s tongue, that of water may make her drink from a cup, Fire might pass the heat of a flame under her hand, and Air may present Rita’s nose with incense to smell. Each Guardian also performs a gesture known to initiates as the “banishing pentagram” to seal the purification. Rita passes successfully by each challenge around the whole of the Circle until she arrives again at the beginning.

Finally, Rita is given the third password (which she does not know in advance and which will not be revealed here) and is “reborn” into the Circle. Dot, as her guide and mentor, is the one who literally “pushes” Rita over the Circle’s edge. Dot and Lauren position Rita, who is still blindfolded, before the altar. Rita stands while Lauren reads her instructions, commanding her, among other things, to love all things in Nature and to allow no one to suffer by her hands or in her mind. Lauren asks her if she agrees to these conditions. Rita replies in the affirmative. At this point, two of us cleanse Rita with incense and the sound of rattles. One of us sounds a drum three times, signaling that the activity should stop.

Lauren tells Rita that she has passed the test and asks her if she has chosen a new name. Rita gives her Craft name and receives the breath of life from Lauren while we remove her blindfold and untie her bounds. Sandy has Rita swear the Oath of Initiation on the sword, repeating aloud the words said by Sandy. Rita receives gifts from each of the four elements and from spirit, and kneels at the altar while we sing a naming song in her honor. After the song, two of us help Rita rise and one of us gives her the five-fold
blessing, using the wand. The five-fold blessing echoes the blessing ceremony that had been performed by Rita during her Rite of Dedication. While not exact in wording, the five-fold blessing goes something like this:

• Blessed are your feet, which have brought you to our ways.
• Blessed are your knees, which shall kneel at the sacred altar.
• Blessed is your womb/loins, without which we would not be.
• Blessed is your breast, formed in beauty and in strength.
• Blessed are your lips, which shall utter the sacred names of the Gods.

Dot then leads Rita clockwise to each of the Guardians of the Watchtowers, and proclaims her to be a new Priestess and Witch.

After this, the anxiety and tension of the "ordeal of the initiation" immediately deflate, like air out of a balloon, as all of us cheer and rush to Rita for hugs. Everyone settles down as Lauren and I bless the cakes and wine. Now it is time for us to "take a breather" from the intensity of the ritual experience. All of us sit down on the ground to relax and stretch our muscles, a few of us "old timers" groaning at our aches and pains and wondering aloud which of us really had the ordeals. It is very difficult to gauge the passage of time in the Circle, but the growling noises of our stomachs assure us that several hours—at least—have passed. The cakes and wine portion of the ritual affords us an opportunity to really assess the quality of Rita's baking and this usually leads into much kidding and joking as we all pretend to have to dunk the cookies to get them down. Actually,
the cakes are surprisingly good, and Rita knows that we appreciate her baking skills. In fact—we joke—maybe we'll let her make the cakes from now on. Still very much in the ritual glow, we tell Rita that she will now be read an important story. We instruct her to pay close attention, as the story will reveal important things to her that she will come to understand upon reflection in the future. I stand and read the following story to her, using my "best" narrative voice.

*Listen, O Children of Wicca, to the Descent of the Goddess:*

In Ancient Times, Our Lord was, as He still is, the Guardian, the Protector, and the Bringer of Comfort. But mortals knew Him as Death, the Lord of Shadows and Dark Mysteries. In this world, the Goddess is seen in the Moon, the Light that Shines in Darkness, the Rain Bringer, Mover of the Tides, Mistress of Mysteries. And as the Moon waxes and wanes, and spends some of Her cycle in darkness, so, it is said, the Goddess once walked the darkness of the Kingdom of Death.

Now our Lady, the Goddess, would solve all Mysteries, even the Mystery of Death. For in love, She ever seeks Her other Self, and once, in the winter of the year, when He had disappeared from the green earth, She followed Him and came at last to the gates beyond which the living do not go. The Guardian of the Gate challenged Her to relinquish Her clothes and jewels, for nothing may be brought into that land. And She stripped Herself of Her clothing and jewels and was bound, as are all who enter the Realms of Death.
Such was Her beauty that Death Himself knelt upon seeing Her, and laid His sword and crown at Her feet, saying: "Do not return to the living world, but stay here with Me, and have peace, and rest, and comfort in My kingdom."

But She answered: "Why do You cause all things that I love and delight in to wither away and die?"

"Lady," replied Death, "It is fate that all who are born must die. Everything passes; all fades away. I bring comfort and consolation to those who pass the gates, that they may grow young again. But You are My heart's desire. Return not, stay here with Me."

But She answered: "I feel no love for Your cold comfort."

Then said Death: "Since You will not receive My wisdom in the spirit of love, You must suffer the purification of all who come to My kingdom."

"It is better so, to learn what all must learn." And so She received the ordeal of purification—by earth, and water, and fire, and air—and was made wise in the mysteries of Death. Through Her ordeal She attained wisdom and knew love for the Lord of Shadows.

And Death welcomed Her and taught Her all His Mysteries. She took up His crown, which He had laid at Her feet. And it became a circlet that She placed around Her neck, saying: "Here is the Circle of Rebirth. Through You all passes out of life, but through Me all may be born again. Everything
passes; everything changes. Even Death is not eternal. Mine is the mystery of the Womb, which is the Cauldron of Rebirth.

Enter into Me and know Me, and You will be free of all fear. For as life is but a journey into death, so death is but a passage back to life, and in Me the circle is ever turning.

And the Lord of Death and the Great Mother loved and were one and taught each other all the magics. Yet is He known as Lord of Shadows, the Comforter and Consoler, the Opener of the Gates, King of the Land of Youth, the Giver of Peace and Rest. And She is the Gracious Mother of all Life; from Her all things proceed and to Her all return again. In Them is the fulfillment of the great mysteries of death and birth; in Them is the fulfillment of all love.

During my reading of the narrative, Nature Herself seems to punctuate my words with flashes of lightning and rumbling thunder in the distance. While this "enhances" my performance of the text, it also adds a note of emergency and immediacy to the Circle, as all of us realize that we must get on to the rest of the ritual before what promises to be a violent summer storm breaks loose.

After the reading of the text, we formally show Rita the ritual tools of the Craft, explaining the uses of each one, and instructing her in some of "the secrets" of the Craft. These may include such things as the names of the Gods used by initiates in our group, ritual gestures or postures, and prayers. This revelation of things known only to the initiates—the tools and
the "secrets"—is a sign to her that she truly is one of us and that we are pleased to continue to share our knowledge of the Craft with her.

At this point, we all meet again in the center of the Circle, hold hands, and chant a song of community, which everyone—including Rita—knows. Love and warmth reflect all around in our faces and in our happy smiles. The Circle is now "deconstructed," so to speak, beginning with proper farewell to the Gods and the spirits of the elements. At the end of the Circle, the Priestess in the last quarter walks purposefully "over the line," thus formally breaking the Circle, and announces that the rite is over. Everyone again rushes to give one another hugs, and then we all pack up the ritual gear and hurry to the house before the storm.

Cool Down Time

Back at the house, everyone cools down and unwinds. Now it is "time to party"—getting out the wine and cheese, bread, vegetables, fruit—whatever food that everyone brought. We all sit around crammed in Lauren's kitchen to share food and drink, laughter and thoughts, talking mostly about the ritual we just went through. Although the ceremony is "over," we nevertheless consider this period of sharing and eating a necessary and thoroughly enjoyable part of any ritual occasion, but especially so for initiation rituals. We ask Rita a lot of questions: Could you hear us by the pond? What did you think about when you heard us chanting? What were you meditating about? Did you "see" anything or "feel" anything while you were meditating? Did any animal spirits appear to
you? Was it hard to concentrate? How did you feel when this happened? 
How about when that happened? What was its effect on you? What did you 
think about the ordeals? Were you scared? How do you feel now?

Eventually, the conversation leads to other initiations—our own, or 
maybe someone else's that happened a long time ago. Talk turns to the 
initiation of a friend of Laura's and mine: "now she had to walk through a 
literal wall of fire for one of her ordeals!" Next to that, the pricker bushes 
didn't look so bad, after all. Lauren brings up the "old days," stories from the 
parent coven. Lauren says that she knows of someone who was initiated in 
a trailer, left bound and blindfolded with headphones on and music playing 
while the two Witches who initiated him tried to figure out what they were 
going to do for the rite. We laugh and agree that this is definitely a poor way 
to do an initiation, and that rituals certainly have improved within our 
tradition! Someone mentions how lucky we were to have been able to have 
the ceremony outside, in Nature—"wasn't the coming storm beautiful?"

Before everyone returns home or crashes at Lauren's for the night, 
the person who has played Death, the Challenger at the edge of the Circle 
gives Rita one final instruction. I tell her that she must write a paper (the 
"final ordeal?") about her initiation experience for further discussion with 
either Lauren or me, or both of us. Thus the initiation itself is made the first 
formal class that Rita will have as a new Witch. This class will lay the 
groundwork for other assignments that we will all give Rita later on. Rita's 
training as a Witch does not "end" with initiation, but, rather, takes on a new 
beginning, as she enters a new cycle of learning within the Craft.
Analysis

I have managed to sprinkle relatively few analytical comments throughout my description of the initiation, and I hope that these comments were placed so as not to disturb too much the overall flow of my description. At this point, I wish to draw attention to several elements of the ritual in detail, as I did for the Rite of Dedication. I shall address these points in roughly the order that they occurred in the ceremony, grouping them in a fashion that I hope makes sense organizationally. Some of the most prominent elements of the initiation ritual are similar to those found in the dedication ceremony. When that is the case, I will not belabor those elements or repeat them extensively here, but instead simply note their importance and refer the reader to the previous chapter. The dedication ceremony may, in fact, be helpful in a generally comparative sense as we explore the facets of initiation situated within the two large perspectives of development of individual practice and the development of community.

Timing and Location of the Ritual

As in the Rite of Dedication, when and where the initiation ritual is held has both theological and practical implications for Wiccan praxis. Like the dedication, the initiation ceremony occurs during the waxing moon, at any time from new to full. The full moon is ideal for reasons both practical (maximum light at night) and theological (maximum visible presence of the Lunar Goddess). The timing of the rite may also depend on such practical
considerations as whether the Dedicant has completed the preparations necessary for the rite (e.g., having chosen a Craft name, purchased personal tools, and so forth) and the personal schedules of the Dedicant and the Witches who are performing the initiation.

In the previous chapter, I discussed the importance of having Wiccan rituals outdoors in Nature. Again, there are both practical and theological advantages to holding the ritual outdoors. Practically speaking, the initiation ritual in particular tends to take up a lot of space, and at this point no one in the group has a house large enough to contain all the necessary activities. While the theological reasons were discussed in Chapter 4, they are important enough to bear brief repetition here. Let us recall that Wicca is a "nature" religion. As such, it makes great sense to hold the most fundamentally transformative experience of the religion—initiation—outdoors, surrounded by Nature Herself, especially if the student’s dedication ceremony was held indoors. This enhances every aspect of the initiatory experience, beginning with the pre-ritual meditation. For Rita—sitting quietly on the damp, cool ground—every breeze, every star, every cricket or croak of a frog reinforces the sense of communion between person and Nature, made present in and through her body, resonating in harmony with the presence of Nature. This is one of the "essential meanings of the Wiccan religion," and it is vital that Rita learn this meaning, not just intellectually or even emotionally, but with and through the very senses of her body, something to which we shall return momentarily.
In addition to timing and location, spatiality and movement through the landscape play prominent roles in the initiation described, offering to us a rich metaphorical landscape that has implications for how “community” is constructed and understood from different perspectives. Within this landscape, the Követôi use space symbolically and deliberately, beginning with the identification of Lauren’s house as “mundane territory.” The ritual itself takes place away from the house, back at the far edge of the farm, and is surrounded by a thicket of woods. The practical side of this is that the ritual takes place away from mundane distractions, and the woods provide privacy for the ritual activities. The symbolic placement of the Circle away from the house, on the far edge of the farm, and in the “wildness” of the woods reveals its religious liminality. Witches consider the Circle a place “between the worlds.” It is not of this world and not quite of the realm of the Gods, but a sacred place betwixt and between. It is the place of magic and therefore well situated in the wildness of the woods, where the Dark Lady and Her Lord of the Hunt may wander freely and encounter Their children—the Wicca.

The first “spatial action” in the initiation ritual is the placement of the Dedicant at the edge of the pond, equally distant from the mundane house and the ritual Circle. Her location at the pond is again both practical and symbolically meaningful. Practically, placing her at the pond “gets her safely out of the way” as the Priestesses complete their preparations for the ceremony. Symbolically, Rita’s placement at the pond reveals her own
state of liminality—separate and different from those in the mundane world, but not yet an initiate. Distant from the mundane world, she awaits the initiation that will fully incorporate her into the Wiccan religious community. Seen from this perspective, the spatial patterning of the initiation seems to fit with van Gennep (1960) and Turner's (1969) descriptions of initiation as separation, liminality, and reincorporation or communitas, rather than Lincoln’s (1981) model of enclosure, metamorphosis, and emergence.

However, from the perspective of where she is placed—in Nature—a very different understanding is possible. From the perspective of Nature-as-person, Rita is already united “in community” by the time she is placed “safely out of the way” at the pond. Rita is already in communion or harmony with Nature, although she may not realize it fully. In this sense, initiation will not bring her into community with Nature, so much as it will awaken her through the experiences of her body-in-practice to the community that is already there.

Looking now at activities at the Circle site itself, we see that the creation of the sacred space comes before anything else can be done. The Circle is deliberately and ritually marked off from the surrounding area, a physical version of “metanarrative markers” (Babcock 1977), which sets aside particular kinds of speech from surrounding talk. Circle construction may be understood as a form of “meta-spatial” marking, setting aside a particular kind of space—here ritual or sacred space—from the surrounding space. In this sense, Circle construction would constitute in folklorist Mary Hufford’s terms “a contextualizing or framing practice that draws attention.
to the double grounding of an *extraordinary world opened up within the ordinary* [italics mine] (1995:532). Casting the circle is the literal articulation of a "metaphysical" realm, the place "between the worlds," in which Wiccan religious activity takes place.

The concept of "between the worlds" deserves further articulation here. Witches view the consecrated Circle as a place "between" the world of human beings and the world of the Gods. For Witches, this is not a metaphorical place. The place "between the worlds" is not a romanticized and literary allusion to or appropriation of the "fairy realms" of popular childhood and adult fantasy literature. Specially *trained* individuals who cast the Circle in the way that I have described are literally *constructing* a space—not entirely in either world—in which the Gods may manifest and *both* Gods and humans may meet and interact through ritual praxis. As noted earlier and emphasized again here, the Gods and Nature-as-person are not merely metaphorical or symbolic constructs. They exist. They are real. They have their own agency. The Circle so cast becomes an intersubjective field in which the Gods and those persons who have developed the body-in-practice may actually *engage one another* in shared subjectivity or "consubjectivity" (see Csordas 1993, Daniel 1984, Merleau-Ponty 1962, Schutz 1970, and Schwartz-Salant 1987). The place "between the worlds" is the place wherein human beings and Gods mutually interact and affect change in one another. The consecrated Circle—the place "between the worlds"—is therefore particularly significant in initiation as a rite of transformation.
The circular shape of the sacred space is itself meaningful. Every action in the Circle that has a direction has a meaning attached to it: from the counterclockwise direction traveled by the Dedicant at the beginning of her journey to the clockwise direction traveled at the end when she is blessed and named Priestess and Witch. The Dedicant is “unmade” and “remade” through the challenge and purification of death. All actions tend to come “full circle,” including the ordeals of the Dedicant in her journey around the perimeter of the circle. This stresses the idea of the completeness of ritual action, which in turn implies the completeness of the process of transformation.

Furthermore, the circle shape forms an enclosure, a community, into which the Dedicant is petitioning entrance through her ordeals. Interestingly, it is the body of the initiates who seem to display Lincoln’s model of enclosure, metamorphosis, and emergence. The Circle encloses the initiates; the bringing of Rita into the Circle is the metamorphosis, after which point the initiates all emerge changed through the addition of a new Priestess. On the other hand, from Rita’s perspective “enclosure” or communitas within the Circle is a goal, rather than a starting point.

With the correspondences of the directions of the Circle factored in—not only the elements, but ages of life, and mythological realms—Rita’s trek around the Circle takes on added meaning as a journey through space and time. Circle time is both historical—in the sense that directions are attached to stages of life—and ahistorical in that directions are attached to mythic realms, which exist in all historical directions and none. This again
calls attention to the Circle's state of liminality, of being "between the worlds."

It is important to point out that the deliberate structuring of space occurs in much the same way when an initiation cannot be performed outdoors. In this case, areas of the house are marked in much the same manner as are areas of Lauren's farm. My own initiation took place in a very large Victorian house in a small Ohio town. For the pre-ritual meditation, I was placed in an unused room downstairs well away from the ritual area with no mundane distractions and only a candle for light. I could not hear any of the ritual activities except for a distant hum and an occasional creaking floorboard. In this case space was used vertically—the downstairs being closer to the mundane world and the upstairs closer to the realm of the Gods. In other respects, the use of spatiality in the Circle was also part of my initiation experience.

Here I must note another prominent characteristic to the initiation ritual: I can find no clear linear flow within it that begins with separation, leaves separation and enters liminality, leaves liminality and enters reincorporation or communitas. Focusing only on Rita's experiences, it might be said that there is a "kind of linear" flow to parts of it, but I think that misses other interesting facets of the ritual performance—for Rita as well as for the initiates. For one thing, there is actually a great deal of "liminality" of various sorts within the ritual. For another, Rita might be said to begin with a kind of unknown or unrealized "communitas" by being placed in Nature to meditate before the rite, and she might be said to end
with a fully realized communitas within the Circle. Additionally, I don't believe that there is a "true" separation, a rending from the "known" for Rita to start with. Finally, to question a simple linear progression further, even when all the initiates are together in the Circle holding hands and singing at the end of the ceremony, they are still in a sense "separate" from the mundane world.

Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that the themes of separation, liminality, and reincorporation or communitas—or enclosure, metamorphosis, and emergence—that describe the state of "the coven as community" occur and reoccur in various stages of the ritual and change or shift according to perspective as we progress through the ritual performance of initiation. I have absolutely no idea how to graph such a series of shifting transformations, but I suspect that such a graph would certainly not be a straight line. Perhaps groupings of interweaving and shifting circles that change according to perspective might be more to the point.

One final completion of a circle is worth mentioning before leaving this section: the return to the house by the initiates. This marks the return of the initiates to the mundane world, a final "reincorporation" in its own way of the community of Witches within the larger community of humanity. The entire movement of the ritual performance of initiation in this way finds its completion in the return of the practitioners to the safe and warm environment of the house, where the sharing of food and laughter seal the sense of community created by ritual.
“With and Through the Body-in-Practice”

As in the dedication ceremony, the body in the initiation rite becomes foregrounded as an active participant in the ritual. In initiation—as in dedication—the body is an actor, a doer, and a performer of the rite. More importantly, initiation is the means by which the “natural body” is ritually transformed into the body-in-practice. The initiation ceremony effects this transformation by ritually “unmaking” the natural body and then “remaking” it as the body-in-practice. This is accomplished in large part through Rita’s death, her journey around the outside of the Circle, and her encounter with the elements.

Let us begin with the moment of Rita’s “symbolic death”—a sure sign that she is about to be “unmade” in some important fashion. Immediately after the deathblow, Rita is blindfolded and partially bound. While this might be readily perceived as a statement of power differential between the Witches and the candidate for initiation, what is often missed is the ritual “unmaking” of our cultural dependence on “visualism” in the production of knowledge. Johannes Fabian describes visualism thusly:

Vision requires distance from its objects; the eye maintains its “purity” as long as it is not in close contact with “foreign objects.” Visualism, by instituting distance as that which enables us to know, and purity or immateriality as that which characterizes true knowledge, aimed to remove all the other senses and thereby the body from knowledge production (this incidentally, is also a context in which the gender question needs to be raised). Visualism, nonetheless, needed some kind of materialization which it found in signs, symbols, and representation. If it is true, as we have said, that the question of ethnographic objectivity has been displaced by a shift of emphasis in critical thought from production to representation,
then our response should be to *explore again body and embodiment* as involved in objectification and the grounding of objectivity. It is in epistemology more than in, say, economics or even aesthetics, that we need to maintain, or rehabilitate, a materialist position. What is at stake here is whether we can give to intersubjectivity a *more concrete, palpable meaning* than that of an abstract "condition" [italics mine]. (1994:98-9)

In other words, Rita is blindfolded in order to enable her to rely upon her "other senses" more fully—her *body*—in "grasping" the transformation she is undertaking. In so doing, the purification by the elements takes on a "more concrete, palpable meaning," rather than an "abstract" or "metaphorical" one. The death and transformation, the unmaking and remaking of a newly purified and blessed Rita as Priestess is *made real* by her engagement with and through her *body-in-practice*.

Rita will cultivate through the body-in-practice what anthropologist Thomas Csordas calls "somatic modes of attention," defined as "culturally elaborated ways of attending to and with one's body in surroundings that include the embodied presence of others" (1993:138). In this case, the "embodied presence of others" includes not only her fellow Priests and Priestesses in the Circle, but those entities invoked or otherwise called into the Circle, including the Gods—who are *made manifest in and through the bodies-in-practice* of the Priests and Priestesses invoking Them. In other words, when Lauren is invoking the Goddess, She becomes *present with and through* Lauren's body-in-practice. It is at once both Lauren and the Goddess Who signal that the invocation is complete. Rita will learn not only to become increasingly "aware" of or "attentive" to the elements, to the
spirits and Guardians, to the Gods, and to Nature-as-person, but she will learn to engage them through her body-in-practice. Csordas helps us grasp the significance of somatic modes of attention.

Because attention implies both sensory engagement and an object, we must emphasize that our working definition refers both to attending "with" and attending "to" the body. To a certain extent it must be both. To attend to a bodily sensation is not to attend to the body as an isolated object, but to attend to the body's situation in the world. The sensation engages something in the world because the body is "always already in the world." Attention to a bodily sensation can thus become a mode of attending to the intersubjective milieu that give rise to that sensation. Thus, one is paying attention with one's body. Attending with one's eyes is really part of this same phenomenon, but we less often conceptualize visual attention as a "turning toward" than as a disembodied, beam-like gaze. We tend to think of it as a cognitive function rather than as a bodily engagement. A notion of somatic mode of attention broadens the field in which we can look for phenomena of perception and attention, and suggests that attending to one's body can tell us something about the world and others who surround us. (1993:138-9)

Attending to what is perceived by the body-in-practice tells Rita something about the concrete reality of those who inhabit the intersubjective field of the consecrated Circle. The somatic modes of attention cultivated by the body-in-practice represent a significant achievement in the realm of individual practice—one that continues ideally to develop long after the initiation ceremony is over.
Power Dynamics within the Rite

A necessary part of any analysis of initiation ritual is the way in which community and power are negotiated throughout the ceremony. Here, at least, we might expect to discover a fairly straightforward balance of power weighted in the favor of the initiates. And so we do, for the most part. Let us review some of the ways in which the Witches clearly exercise power and control over the Dedicant who is asking for initiation.

First, of course, comes the point at which the Dedicant asks for initiation. Clearly, the Witches hold the power at this moment; they can say no. They further demonstrate this power by gathering together to grill the Dedicant over his or her understanding of the Craft, his or her motivations for wanting to be clergy, the Dedicant’s personal habits, and so forth. This is a rather serious and daunting experience. It is somewhat mitigated later on by the new sets of activities and new feelings of closeness that the Dedicant as a candidate for initiation will experience with the initiates. Shopping for athames, pouring over sources for names, sharing stories of how and where different Witches got their names—all of this makes for positive, and even friendly interaction between the Dedicant and initiate.

On the actual day of initiation, the “ritual kidding” that takes place with the Dedicant upon her arrival at Lauren’s home simultaneously deflates and inflates anxiety levels. The broad hints about “ordeal” to come are delivered with a smile and a wink, but also just enough ambiguity to make Rita nervous—and intentionally so, especially by me. She does not know it at the time, but her ambiguous feelings and the uncertainty that
she has about me in particular, as the Witch least known to her, are about to reach their peak in my performance as Death, the Challenger at the Circle's edge. In other words, I use this device consciously and deliberately to increase the effectiveness of my "performance" as Death and to establish the power of the presence of Death in the Circle at the critical moment of the challenge.

Rita's removal from the scenes of activity to the edge of the pond are simultaneously designed to make her feel her own solitude, her "apart-ness" from us, but also to make her open to the presence of Nature-as-person all around her. In some sense, Rita is already "empowered in communitas" with Nature-as-person, but her power is unavailable to her; it cannot be actualized until her body-in-practice engages the unmaking and remaking of initiation. Additionally, the fact that she can almost, but not quite hear the Circle being cast is also both a statement about her standing in the community within the Circle and a statement about her power; she is not allowed to participate in the casting with the others.

The series of ordeals and physical actions that begin with Rita's being led to the Circle's edge most definitely establish her at a lower level of "power" compared to the initiates. She is symbolically killed—perhaps the ultimate "ritualization" of vulnerability and loss of power—and then ritually "unmade" in her journey around the outside of the Circle. At every quarter of the Circle, Rita is denied access and ordered to pass on. Even once Rita is reborn into the Circle, she still stands blinded and bound, at the mercy of the Gods, the Guardians, and the Witches who continue to test her.
How are we to understand the power dynamics expressed through ritual action? We might expect a fairly straightforward understanding of the initiation ritual as an exercise of “power over” the candidate (Starhawk 1987, Parkin 1992), rather than an example of “power with” or “power from within” (Starhawk 1987). One scholar has suggested that the “hierarchical, power-over styles” of traditional Wiccan ritual are the result of people who come from the more “ceremonial” and “hierarchical” traditional Christian religions and who have an “abusive family background” (Rabinovitch 1996). It is true that abuses of ritual power and authority do occur, and not only among “traditional Wiccans.” Yet a superficial reading of the initiation process as a simple case of “power over” the student fails completely to take into account emic understandings of either the embodied nature of ritual praxis or the development of an intimate community.

First, let us address the embodied nature of ritual praxis. Rita’s initial powerlessness at the beginning of the initiation ritual must be compared and contrasted with her experiences at the end of the series of ordeals. Rita is finally “remade” and transformed by her rebirth into the Circle. As a Priestess and a Witch, she is restored to some semblance of power and even given gifts by the Guardians of the Watchtowers as signs of her total transformation and her empowerment. Rita may now be shown “the secrets” of the Craft, which only initiates know, and may participate in any activity of the Circle from that moment on according to her level of experience and practice.
This, too, is embodied in the performance of the rite. At the point at which Rita passes the final test, she is restored to sight and released from her bonds. However, there is still some limit to her empowerment. As in the Rite of Dedication, Rita must kneel to swear the oath; when she rises, she can do so only with the help of two of the Priestesses. This signifies that even after being reborn and fully admitted into the Circle of initiates, and even after being restored to power, the balance of power is not totally equal. Rita must continue, at least for now, to depend upon the other Witches to help her “stand on her own feet,” perhaps much as a child must depend on its parents and older brothers and sisters for guidance. In other words, initiation is only the beginning of establishing a religious praxis.

Let us use the analogy of the student who is learning how to drive in order to penetrate what is occurring at this point in the learning process. In terms of power dynamics, the driving instructor exercises “power over” the student, from the first class to the final test, unless the student chooses not to continue with the instruction. The two are not equal in their ability to drive the car. Initiation is analogous to the moment at which the drivers' education student successfully passes his test and receives his license to drive a car. For the student driver, the “real learning” is only just beginning. It comes with time spent behind the wheel of the car—engaged in the embodied praxis of driving, deepening and sharpening his skills, learning how to drive under different weather and road conditions, learning how to drive different kinds of vehicles in different circumstances, deepening his proficiency until he becomes an “expert driver.” Our newly-made Witch is
like our newly licensed driver. She is not an “expert Witch” yet; she will need many more years of practice and experience in order to advance to the next stage, which, in the tradition that the Követöi practice, is the second degree.

Again, the analogy of learning how to drive a car has an advantage over learning how to be a Witch: driving a car is easily understood as an embodied practice. We can readily ascertain that the student driver and his instructor do not share in the same level of experience. Moreover, we not only think it is a “good idea” for the student driver to attend classes, take tests or “pass ordeals,” and learn how to practice with an expert driver—we have actually “ritualized” the process by making it part of the legal requirements of driving. The transformation in the student from non-driver to competent driver to expert driver is not a “metaphorical process” in which the instructor is merely asserting his social power over the student in the ritual of drivers’ education, but one that evokes real change and requires the acquisition of real skills.

In the context of the analogy of learning how to drive a car, the relationship of “power with” or “power from within” between driving student and driving instructor exists as a goal; it is an achievement, the end result of years of practice on the part of the student. So, too, with Wiccan ritual praxis. In other words, power with and power from within are ideals to be reached through disciplined communal praxis, not something bestowed upon us naturally by democracy. Like the body-in-practice, they must be cultivated and acquired through work and discipline.
Second, in order to uncover the emic significance of the coven as an “intimate community,” let us consider a puzzling question. How does Rita know not to really be scared when I swing the sword at her neck? How does she know that we will not do anything to really hurt her during the ordeal around the outside of the Circle when she is made fairly helpless by being bound and blindfolded? Of course, one way to understand how Rita copes with her situation is to assume that she knows the challenge is “only metaphorical.” She is in no “real” danger because “everyone knows” the challenge and the death stroke are just meant to be “symbolic.” Thus, the tension in the ritual’s “mock ordeal” between “real and not real,” “scary but not scary” (Ellis 1981) exists only on the metaphorical plane, and the “power” that the Witches are exercising over Rita is meant to be understood as an “empty” social gesture that merely puts Rita in her (lower) place.

This is a tempting way to understand the puzzle, but it does not satisfy me completely. My physical, “embodied” experiences as an initiate and an initiator tell me that there is another dimension to unlocking this puzzle. While the symbolic and metaphorical dimensions no doubt “exist,” it is also necessary to look carefully at the “bodied” and performed dimensions of her experience—the “experiential reality” of the rite as “embodied.” By the rather admittedly odd constructions of those two phrases—experiential reality and embodied—I mean to point our attention to what is going on with the whole person, the body-in-practice at the moment of Rita’s challenge and death. The word “witch” still has negative connotations in popular culture, and everyone at the Circle, including Rita, is fully aware of this (Bauman
1971). This knowledge forms an additional layer of context and meaning for the experience that she is about to undergo. Here she is, at night, in the country, about to join a coven of Witches, and she comes face to face with a large, very stern looking woman—not well known to her—who is robed in black and holding a very large sword that is subsequently raised to her chest. The woman is not friendly. In fact, the woman delivers a threat.

Let us pause for a moment, and ask whether Rita really understands this ordeal as only “metaphorical.” I can assure you that she does not, just as I did not when I was initiated. In fact, in order for a successful ritual initiation to occur, Death must be personified in the body of the Challenger, Death must be made present in the voice of the Challenger, and Death must certainly be made “real” with the swing of the sword that kills and begins the process of rebirth. Rather than understanding this ordeal as a “symbolic” Death, perhaps it might be more fruitful to think of it as a “performed” Death in order to more clearly get at that level of reality that is known with the body-in-practice during the actual performed rite.

I fear that I haven’t solved the puzzle, and in fact I have only made it worse. Perhaps this is a clue to its solution: Rita brings to the Circle two “magic words” that she must give to pass the challenge—“perfect love” and “perfect trust.” In order to even get to the stage of asking for initiation, the Witches and the Dedicant must have already established a close working relationship that is built at least somewhat on “perfect love and perfect trust,” as the passwords imply. Witches in my lineage understand these passwords as pregnant with power—as words of magic—rather than as
“pretty sentiments.” As expressions of power, of magic, the passwords are thought to sustain the Dedicant through the travails of even death itself, their power being completed by the third “password”—which is not a word, but an action that completes the movement of rebirth into the Circle.

Where does the “magic” of the passwords come from? I suspect that their magic is actually rooted in the transformation of the relationship between the Dedicant and the Witches from one of integrity to one of intimacy, as defined by Kasulis (2000) in his manuscript *Intimacy and Integrity: A Cultural Philosophy of Difference*. Kasulis identifies integrity and intimacy as two essentially different forms of relationship that entail “different worldviews, different ways of understanding the self and different ways of constructing value” (2000:Chapter 1). They also entail two different rhetorical or communicative strategies, which are relevant to the changes in relationship that the Dedicant and Witches experience throughout the entire initiatory process. Essentially, the overarching initiation process represents a shift in communicative or rhetorical styles from ones of integrity to ones of intimacy.

According to Kasulis, integrity entails a relationship and a communicative style that is both public and objective, not based on shared experiences, independent, and that contains no affective or somatic components. This is the relationship and communicative style that the teaching Witch and her student begin with during the very first introductory class or lecture. Intimacy, on the other hand, entails a relationship and a communicative style that is both private and objective, based on shared
experiences, interdependent, and that contains an affective and somatic component (2000:Chapter 2). At some point in the middle of the introductory series of classes, the student and the Witch begin to build a relationship and communicative style that is more intimate, that includes, for example, at least hints of somatic practice and shared experiences.

From the moment that the student embarks upon a serious study of the Craft and becomes a Dedicant, that student is engaged in the process of making a paradigm shift from integrity to intimacy, a shift that will affect how he thinks about and experiences the world and the self. Communication between the Dedicant and the Witches becomes increasingly dark, based on a growing number of shared experiences, and constantly building on the somatic knowledge gained through interdependent forms of religious praxis. The Witches and the Dedicant have constructed an “intimate” community.

Rita brings to the Circle the magic words that will get her through the ordeals, words that derive their power from the context of an established intimacy. In other words, by this point in the learning process, Rita simply “knows” that the sword will not kill her; she “knows” that the Witches will not hurt her. This knowledge, very much like the knowledge of our driver, is private, but it is not “subjective.” Rita does not merely “feel” that the Witches will not harm her; she knows. Such knowledge is not “merely metaphorical” but arises out of the context of intimate community. It is “embedded” in her body, in the interdependent sets of practices that she has performed with the members of the coven in Circle after Circle. What seems to be simply a case of the Witches having total “power over” Rita must also
be understood in the context of the intimate community. In other words, the tension of the ordeal lies not on the metaphorical plane but in the embodied presence of Death versus the trust intimated by the community. Rita is indeed made vulnerable, but that vulnerability is mitigated or countered by the embedded certainty of perfect love and perfect trust, the “magic passwords” that enable her to safely pass through the ordeals of initiation, through the very gates of Death itself to ultimate transformation.

*Death and the “Descent of the Goddess”*

I would now like to explore the significance of the narrative that is read to Rita after her initiation. The myth of “The Descent of the Goddess” comes at a time in the ritual when she has just completed her ordeals and has emerged triumphant and transformed as a Priestess and a Witch. The new Priestess, still very much aglow with her experiences, is told that she will now be read a myth, a sacred story. She must pay special attention to the story, as it contains meanings that will become clear upon reflection and experience. The story's very presentation and performance mark it as something important, as it stands out from the more relaxed ritual context of the sharing of wine and cakes. Before Rita hears the story, she is instructed to make connections between the events in the story and the events of her initiation. As a new Witch, Rita must learn to see in the story's events the pattern and the key to her own experience of initiation. This is even clearer in the full and exact wording of the text, which I cannot provide.
The performance of the myth at this point in the ritual is not merely to impress similarity of the experience upon the new Witch, but ultimately to promote *identification* with the Goddess, who has undergone a similar journey, a cosmic transformation, a transformation through Death, a change in status, bestowing in Her, in Lincoln's words, "a defined place in the universe, and a place of importance and dignity" (1981:105). It is significant to note here that both female and male initiates are presented with the same text in the same way. Not only does the Goddess' descent to the Underworld provide a model of cosmic transformation for women, but it does so for *men* as well.

Let us consider for a moment the extent to which Death is emphasized and understood throughout the entire initiation ceremony. From the moment of the challenge at the gateway to initiation, Death is immediately foregrounded in the very first experiences of the new Priestess; its transformative power is manifested in the ritual and impressed upon the Rita as a teaching of central importance. Initiation is quite literally performed as a transformative process of symbolic death and rebirth for the Wiccan practitioner. In order to begin a life as a Priestess of the Craft, Rita must first die to her old life. Death clears the way for the birth of a new being—one who has met the challenge with perfect love and perfect trust, who has passed through the ordeal of initiation, and who is now ready to begin a new life with a new name. Death is performed as a transformative process *in relation* to life, a process of change more fully understood nonlinearly: death and birth in a never ending circle, death understood as an
ending only so that a new beginning can occur, which in its turn will also fulfill its journey to an end and another new beginning.

The "Myth of the Descent of the Goddess" thus derives its religious meaning from its embodied performance during the initiation ritual. The narrative as transformation is "grasped" not as a metaphor, but realized and embodied through the transformation of the body-in-practice. For Rita, her personal transformation from Dedicant to Priestess is intimately and somatically keyed to the transformation of the myth from "just a story" to something that expresses and embodies the most powerful and transformative experience of her life.

_Cool Down Time_

There is one final part of the ceremony that I wish to address very briefly before making my concluding remarks. This is the "cool down" time that occurs in Lauren’s kitchen immediately after the ritual is over and all of the Witches have returned to the mundane world of the house. All the Witches engage in an extensive grilling of Rita about her experiences. In a way, I suspect that this final act expresses a kind of circular completeness, as it takes us at the end where we began at the beginning: questioning Rita.

Rita’s "inquisition" serves many other purposes besides establishing a neat pattern of "circularity," however. First, every one of the Witches gets a chance to show her interest in Rita's reaction to the ritual, and she gets the opportunity to give the initiates important feedback on their performance. This gives the Witches an opportunity to see if the "ordeal"
had their intended effect. It also makes Rita begin the process of reflection about the rite itself, making her think about these and other questions that will eventually enable her to sort out the threads of the experience.

The time that is spent “telling old war stories”—telling stories about old initiations, especially ones which weren’t so well planned—helps to give Rita something to compare hers to and makes the experience of her own initiation something extra special and wonderful. (Of course, it also implies that her fellow Priestesses have their collective acts together—which might be seen as self-serving if done in a negative or self-righteous fashion.) As Witches, sharing our own deeply personal experiences of initiation is both a way to give Rita something to compare her experience to and a way to deepen and solidify the close sense of community and sense of bonding we all feel with one another.

After the rite itself is over, this moment of final closure—this final “circular movement”—enables the new Priestess in the group to be warmly welcomed made to feel a deeply intimate and important part of the coven as a place of community, a place of practice, and a place of “perfect love” and “perfect trust.”
Epilogue: *She Changes Everything She Touches*

“She Changes Everything She Touches” is a refrain from a popular Wiccan chant. Time and the Goddess do indeed bring change, and change has come to Az Isteneknek Követoi. The Követoi no longer exist as a single practicing group. In fact, because some of its members either have already relocated or will relocate so far from one another geographically, it is unlikely that they—that we—will ever practice in the same Circle again in this lifetime. It is for that reason that this project has taken a bittersweet turn for me as it nears its end. In some respects, I must admit that I am almost loath to let the project go—it makes the end of the Követoi that much more real.

The four of us High Priestesses—who I consider the “heart” of our group—met once before the relocation: Dot now lives in the far west, and I will shortly be moving further into the middle of the country. Our final Circle, though “informal,” was powerful and deeply moving: laughter shared through tears of sadness and parting. Somehow it has given me the strength to go on, to complete this project, this turning of the wheel, and to make an ending so that a new beginning may occur. Although our time together in this life has likely come to an end, I have every expectation that someday we will meet and know one another and practice together again. As we Witches say, ‘tis the “Silver Promise.”

“Lauren, Dot, and Sandy”—Merry meet, merry part, and merry meet again. So mote it be.
CHAPTER 6
Concluding Remarks

In keeping with the reflexive methodology I employed throughout this paper, I feel that it is appropriate in my concluding remarks to comment and reflect upon the three primary roles and their agendas that both informed and motivated me. As a scholar, I intended from the beginning to use Wiccan initiation ritual as material "to think with," to challenge the ways that we approach religious ritual and to raise new questions that we might fruitfully explore. In this regard, I have been successful beyond my wildest dreams, raising more questions than anyone could possibly answer in one work. I hoped that, by gaining some insights into the performance of one kind of Wiccan initiation done by a single religious community, we might be able to uncover some of the ways initiation rituals in particular and rituals more generally are constructed and made meaningful to their participants. By focusing on the religious practices of a single community—at that level I term "individuals-practicing"—I also hoped to avoid some of the problems of essentialized and decontextualized discourses about religion and ritual that I had encountered so often in my studies.
As a Priestess of Wicca, I hoped that my work might accomplish several things. First, that it would remind both scholars and members of the Pagan community that Wicca existed—if not from the dawn of time—well before the Women’s Spirituality Movement discovered it. As such, it should present us with unique opportunity to study a Western religious tradition that has both Goddesses and Gods and that provides equal access to the sacred to both women and men. Second, I hoped that my project might contribute to future theological reflection, both on the implications of Wicca as a dual-gendered, polytheistic religion and on the implications of Wiccan religious praxis as an embodied praxis. Third, I hoped that my work might contribute in some small way to making Wicca, a religion that has been both badly maligned and historically marginalized, better understood as a positive religious path, one that is as potentially deserving of respect as any other religion in the world.

Finally, I hoped that my dual perspective as both a scholar and a practitioner would be useful in demonstrating the value that could be gained from having those individuals who are both members of the Academy and members of a religious community participate in scholarly discourse. I hoped to capture new insights and to pose new questions about religious ritual that could only be obtained by having been both critically trained as a scholar and trained as an “expert” in religious practice as well. In the remainder of my concluding remarks, I wish to spend time summarizing a few of my discoveries and insights from this dual perspective.
By first addressing the insider/outsider problem in religious studies scholarship, I hope that I have demonstrated that such dichotomous thinking tends to reduce each end of that binary construction to a uniform monolith that is not reflected in actual experience. The terms "insider" and "outsider" conceal an entire universe of discourse engaged in by a multitude of shifting voices and perspectives in negotiation or even in contestation with one another. Dichotomous thinking obscures both the practices of scholars and the theories of practitioners. It hides the playful, creative, and constructed praxis of knowledge making. A more useful way of thinking might be to examine the range of evaluative criteria that is produced by a particular scholarly or religious practice and to examine the levels of skill involved in both participating in that practice and communicating to those outside of that particular practice.

Approaching the Wiccan religion from the dual perspective of a scholar-practitioner enables us to discover significant emic perspectives that are otherwise not available to scholarly examination. For example, approaching Wicca as an embodied practice that involves different levels of skill and expertise enables us to understand Wiccan initiation ritual as not so much a discreet and single event, but as an entire process that functions ultimately to transform both the individual who is learning how to be a Witch and the coven as a place of community. As both a scholar and a practitioner, it is clear to me that there is a multitude of perspectives embodied throughout different stages of the initiation process. This information enables us to challenge traditional notions of initiation as a
tripartite linear progression with sharply defined movements of separation, liminality, and reincorporation. This etically derived tripartite model employs a unidirectional spatiality and a linear understanding of the process of transformation, usually framed as “an outsider becomes an insider.” However, when approaching the ceremony from the dual perspective of a scholar-practitioner, a linear and spatial analysis proves inadequate to describe particular emic aspects of the ceremony. It is probably more accurate to say that the tripartite “themes” of separation, liminality, and communitas or reincorporation (or enclosure, metamorphosis, and emergence) occur and reoccur in various stages of the ritual and change or shift according to perspective as we progress through the ritual performance of initiation. Thus, initiation offers sets of multidimensional, multi-directional, and multi-spatial experiences to its participants depending on their role at any particular moment in the performance of the rite.

Focusing on the embodied nature of Wiccan praxis as a learned process enables us to capture the body-in-practice and to understand the role of “somatic modes of attention” in successful ritual performance. It also enables us to understand the reality of Wiccan practice, the reality and embodiment of the presence of Nature-as-person and the manifest presence of the Gods within a properly cast Circle. It enables us to capture the way in which the Circle itself is understood to form an intersubjective field in which the Gods and those persons who have developed the body-in-practice may mutually engage one another in “shared” subjectivity.
Finally, the dual perspective of a scholar-practitioner enables us to capture the shifting balance of power within the overarching learning process, seeing moments when that balance of power seems fairly equal between student and teacher and other moments in which it is not. During the initiation ceremony itself, we are able to uncover other dimensions to the Witches' "power over" the candidate, dimensions in addition to those constructed along social and metaphorical lines, dimensions that in fact depend on understanding Wiccan initiation as both a learning process and an embodied praxis, and that depend on understanding the Wiccan community as a paradigm shift from integrity to intimacy.

* * * * *

At the end of this work, I am quite frankly appalled at how much more there is to be said about even this single Wiccan initiation ritual. I hope that my description and analysis of a Wiccan initiation ritual has provided some insights into initiation as a nonlinear process and suggested some interesting implications for initiation as an embodied religious praxis. On the whole, I think that I have been the most successful in raising what I hope are new and challenging questions. The project has been one of discovery and revelation to me, uncovering things about my practice as a scholar and about my practice of my religion that I would not otherwise have noticed.
Introduction

1. Witches use the term “circle” in various ways. It may mean the actual blessed and consecrated ritual space itself, a rite or ceremony that is being held—as in “are you coming to the Circle?”—or the coven itself—as in “she’s part of my Circle.” When Circle is used in any of these three ways, it will be capitalized in this work.

2. When I was initiated into the Craft, all of these terms were used interchangeably, with little or no distinction made between Wiccan and Witch. All of the Witches I met during the course of my study stressed that Wicca or Witchcraft was properly understood as the legitimate practice of a pre-Christian European nature religion that had nothing to do with either the worship of “Satan”—understood as a figure in the Christian pantheon—or the unfortunate and widespread usage of the word “witchcraft” by anthropologists when they mean negative magic or sorcery.

Today there is some discussion within the larger Pagan community (e.g., on the Nature Religions email list of the American Academy of Religion) whether Wicca and Witchcraft refer to the same kinds of religious practices. Some practitioners identify themselves as Witches, but not Wiccans, or vice versa. The distinction seems to be variously understood as referring to differences between the two in terms of origin, organization, formal training, and use of magic, among other things. For the purposes of this paper, I will make no such distinctions between the terms Wicca, Witchcraft, the Craft, or The Old Religion, and will use the terms Wiccan and Witch completely interchangeably.

3. Throughout this work, I will be using the word “praxis” to mean a traditional system of related practices forming a self-disciplinary process that involves the whole person: body, mind, and spirit. This disciplinary process is repeated as a way of integrating the self and transforming the way one acts in and thinks about the world. I think that it is important to emphasize, especially in the context of
the way that I use "religious praxis," that the body is as much involved in transformation as is the mind or spirit.

Chapter 1

1. See, for example, the impressive and diverse collection of articles addressing this issue in McCutcheon (1999). In the General Introduction to the volume, McCutcheon calls the insider/outsider problem "one of the most important issues in the study of human behavior and institutions," a problem "that must be faced by all scholars of the human condition" (1-2).

2. For an extensive and passionate discussion of the perils of crossing boundaries, including that between insider and outsider see Gross (1998), especially Chapter 4 "Passion and Peril: Transgressing Boundaries as a Feminist Buddhist Scholar-Practitioner" (34-48). Gross informs us that not only is it perilous to be an insider in the Academy, but it is also possible to be considered the "wrong kind" of insider, for example, a "white Buddhist" rather than an Asian.

3. Although my experience was closer to the "invisible gender," Debora Kodish (1987) sheds some interesting light on the phenomenon of women as the "silent gender" who are "magically brought to voice" (perhaps brought into sight?) by the attention of the folklorist.


5. What "feels real" is a term from folklorist Margaret Mills, who, like Hufford addresses the dangers inherent in an extreme postmodern abandonment of notions of objectivity altogether in favor of life as "mere literary reflection." Her point is that the pain and suffering of oppression entails real consequences for real people, not just another literary construct. The experience of being the object of stereotyping and marginalization yields a potent reminder of the concrete consequences of essentialist ideas, however socially constructed we see them to be" [italics mine] (1993:185). Getting at what "feels real" is an important step of placing the focus of our attention back in the world of real people, in the context of the study of religion, getting at the level of what I call "individuals-practicing."

6. The Pagan's paper drew on two mythic themes in particular: the "Golden Age of the Goddess" and the "Burning Times." The "Golden Age of the Goddess" describes a prehistoric age in which women and "the" Goddess reigned supreme because of their mysterious fertile wombs, until the coming of the evil male invaders who brought war
and devastation to the peaceful Goddess people. This hypothesis has a large body of scholarship (pro and con) connected with it and also presents scholars with an interesting puzzle on how to "read" material artifacts or understand material culture in ways that might shed light on prehistoric religious life—none of which was even remotely considered in the student's paper. The "Burning Times" theme refers to the Inquisition, in which nine million (mostly women) European witches were allegedly tortured and killed. Both of these themes are prime candidates for an exploration of how myth and rhetoric are used by religious communities, here specifically feminist communities, to construct a narrative of protest. Again, no attempt was made by the student to explore these potentially fascinating and fruitful lines of scholarly inquiry.

7. Too often scholarly discourse about religion takes place on a decontextualized level far removed from the worlds of believers and practitioners. The term "individuals-practicing," while somewhat awkward grammatically is an attempt to move the locus of our studies from the literary—the realm of texts and "fictions"—to the practical—the realm of individual experiences and practices of religion.

8. The "Craft name" is a name specially chosen by a person who is about to be initiated and is meant to represent the person's sacred identity, the truest and most authentic expression of the self.


Chapter 2

1. I am using the term "contemporary Pagan" or simply "Pagan" to refer to modern worshippers of nature religions as opposed those of classical antiquity.

2. See Bado-Fralick 1990 for a discussion about the impact of feminism on the practice of the Craft.

3. This observation grew out of my reflection on a paper given by Nancy Falk at the 1988 Midwest American Academy of Religion conference in Terre Haute, IN. She was making a distinction between two kinds of women's roles in India. Nuns are generally valued by society, but perceived as having very little power. Yoginis
are generally perceived as powerful, but are not openly valued by the culture, which may fear or even scorn them.

4. See Gross 1996 for a discussion of power versus authority.

5. For information about the larger Western mythological and magical tradition, often called the “Western Mystery Tradition” see especially Matthews and Matthews 1985.

6. Aidan Kelly, both a scholar of religions and a Wiccan practitioner, maintains that Gardner literally created the Craft and that all Witches must necessarily trace their practices back to him. His book Crafting the Art of Magic (1991) is infamous in Craft circles not only for challenging the “ancient origins” of the Craft, but—as some see it—for misrepresenting Gardnerian practices and attacking its founder’s sex life. Kelly’s wild speculation about Gardner’s sex life is mostly a distraction from the more serious flaws and leaps of logic in the book. While this is not the place to fully critique Kelly’s work, it may serve to situate the nature of the controversy within a scholarly context. Kelly makes some initially promising moves, demonstrating a sense of reflexivity and stressing that all religion is a dynamic, creative, ongoing process. Despite this initial thrust toward a more fruitful way of understanding the dynamic nature of religious tradition, he quickly becomes bogged down in a text-bound search for origins and actually employs a narrow and static view of tradition throughout his analysis. This becomes an absolute fixation on the written word—if it isn’t written down, it isn’t a tradition—completely ignoring the issues of orality and folk custom, as well as ritual praxis. This, along with the category mistake that ritual and written text are the same thing, ignores the dimension of ritual as dynamic, creative, and even spontaneous performance.

7. Thomas P. Kasulis, personal communication.

8. Patrick B. Mullen, personal communication, for the idea of “dynamic tradition.” See also Handler and Linnekin 1984 for a discussion of tradition as interpreted in the present.

9. Covens break up for a wide variety of reasons, occasionally because of differences in theology or practice. However, groups are even more likely to split up for a variety of perfectly mundane reasons: a job in a new city, graduation, personal dislike of someone’s new spouse or boyfriend, limitations on time as a result of marriage or having children, and so forth.
10. See especially Isaac Bonewits 1996. Bonewits has been a Druid priest for over 25 years and traces the flourishing of Druidry in America to the creation of the Reformed Druids of North America (RDNA) in 1963. He states that most American Druids trace themselves back to the RDNA via his group A' r nDraíocht Féin: A Druid Fellowship, or ADF. The covenors who now explore Druidry are members of ADF.

11. The members of our group who are ethnically Slavic have noted interesting similarities between some old Slavic practices and those that have come to be classed among Wiccans as “Celtic.” Curiously, this seems to reassure those of us who are Slavic that we “really are” following practices that have a basis in our own ethnic ancestry.

12. For a discussion of power, sanctity, and group dynamics within our coven during the early years of its formation, see Bado-Fralick 1989.

13. See Bado-Fralick 1990 for a discussion of the impact of the women's movement on The Old Religion.

14. This was an issue in Craft circles at least as early as 1975, when Morning Glory Zell, a prominent Pagan Priestess, wrote “Mother Hertha spare us from Jahweh in drag!” in Green Egg 8.72 (August 1, 1975):43.

15. Basic ritual tools include the athame, a black handled, double-bladed knife used for symbolic defense, to represent fire, and never used to physically cut anything; a wand for blessing objects and for the element of air; a chalice for water; a pentacle to represent the earth; and a white handled knife used in a practical fashion to cut or chop things, such as herbs for incense. Additionally, Witches acquire a suitable incense burner, candleholders, and so forth. Information on the creation and use of ritual tools can be found in many books on the Craft. See especially Farrar and Farrar 1981, 1984 or Valiente 1987, 1989.

16. The five pointed star, or pentagram, is a sacred symbol to many Witches and is often worn as jewelry or used decoratively on the altar. In symbolic importance, it would be equivalent to a Christian's wearing of the cross. In its “right side up” position, the pentagram represents the cosmos: each point of the star is one of the four elements, with spirit on the top point as the overarching force guiding all. The pentagram’s misuse (sometimes in an upside down position) by media and filmmakers to represent suspicious, “occult” activity, such as Satanism, is deeply offensive to most Witches. Wicca has nothing to do with Satanism, which many Witches see as essentially an “offshoot” of Christianity.
17. The polysemous, but interrelated, use of central religious terms is a common phenomenon in religious tradition. See the discussion of "mantra" in esoteric Buddhism and "Body of Christ" in Kasulis 1992.

Chapter 3

1. Ironically, cases of religious discrimination can sometimes nonetheless increase precisely because the public is more aware of Witches in their communities. Representative Bob Barr's "recent discovery" of Witches in the military is a good case in point. The military has legally recognized the Craft as a religion since the mid-seventies, even including it in their official chaplain's handbook. On May 11, 1999, the Austin-American Statesman newspaper ran a favorable story, complete with photographs, on a Spring Equinox ritual at Fort Hood. The story was picked up by other newspapers throughout the country and internationally.

Although the article generated a great deal of positive press for the Wiccan religion, Representative Bob Barr responded by launching an attack against the religious freedom enjoyed by military Witches for over twenty years. He led with a press release ridiculing the Wiccan religion and demanding an end to Wiccan religious services on military installations. Barr has followed his media attack with a series of legislative moves designed to outlaw the practice of the Craft by military personnel. To date, his attacks have been unsuccessful, but they are continuing. The Fall 1999 issue of Circle Magazine, formerly Circle Network News, a publication of Circle Sanctuary, includes an extensive article about Barr's attempts to garner support to successfully pass anti-Wiccan legislation, responses made by the Pagan community working in cooperation with other religious leaders, and the resulting media coverage (Circle Magazine, Fall 1999:42-43, 44-49).

2. Since its founding in 1974, Circle has been making people aware of religious freedom issues through ongoing columns in its newsletter and magazine and through special mailings. In 1988 Circle founded The Lady Liberty League (LLL) in response to a growing number of calls about religious freedom and maintains a webpage that informs its readers about breaking news events and updates on previous cases of discrimination or religious conflict. CoG and Green Egg, a publication of the Church of All Worlds, have also been instrumental in educating the public about Pagan paths, educating Pagans about their legal rights, and organizing a legal response to the challenges
of discrimination when intolerant portions of the public strike out against "alternative" religions.

For example, the most recent issue of *Green Egg* (1999:31.129) was entirely devoted to Pagans and the law and issues of religious freedom. Sometimes cases of religious discrimination occur alongside examples of religious tolerance, for example, a Wiccan shop in Catskill, New York harassed by one local church congregation but welcomed by another in the same town (*Circle Network News* Fall 1998.60:50). Occasionally the issue is censorship rather than discrimination, for example, a Wisconsin high school that blocked access to Witchcraft sites on the internet to a student researching world religions (*Circle Network News* Fall 1998.60:50). Although this particular problem was resolved, the problem of internet software that blocks such "controversial sites," remains an issue pending federal legislation to require internet filters on pornography and "other controversial sites" such as Witchcraft.

3. The spelling of "Magick" with a "k" is sometimes used by Witches and other Pagans to distinguish "religious" magic from card tricks and other sleight of hand.


Chapter Four

1. For a discussion of the way in which the world becomes "personal," see Driver 1991.

2. For a discussion of power dynamics within a particular Circle as they are connected to the development of practice, see Bado-Fralick 1989. Starhawk 1987 also presents us with a provocative distinction between "power over," "power with," and "power from within" as different modes of power dynamics.

3. See Thomas Csordas 1993 on "somatic modes of attention."

Chapter Five

1. Although the process of finding a Craft name is often filled with anxiety, there are moments of great hilarity as well. I recall in particular when a Dedicant named "Brian" was engaged with other Dedicants in a discussion of naming practices in the coven. Considering myself "thoroughly American" in this regard, I ventured
the opinion that there was far too much pomposity and pretense of nobility in naming oneself "Lord" or "Lady" Such-and-Such—as is the habit of far too many American covens in my opinion. We all got on to a discussion of what constitutes “appropriate” and “inappropriate” names, and we agreed that Brian managed to win the prize for most “revolting” name. He informed us that his Craft name was going to be “Lord Farfull,” inspired by the dog at the end of the old Nestle’s Quick commercials. While this evoked a lot of laughter at the time, I was worried in the back of my mind that he just might take this name upon his actual initiation. Thankfully, he did not, and the Követoi have never had a Lord Farfull on their coven rosters. It took me a long time to forget this. Unfortunately, Brian reminded me of it one day when we were talking about the initiation process over the phone. Sigh. Now I’ll have to work at forgetting this all over again.
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