

Toe-to-Toe

A Forum for Controversy and Opinion



© 2004 arttoday.com

Do we need formal initiation?

Being initiated can't make you a better Witch.

The act of being initiated into a Mystery tradition cannot inherently make you a better Witch. It cannot make you more devoted, more focused, more of anything. Some Witches loudly proclaim their magical ascendency in a group by virtue of having attained a certain "degree" or other credential. This doesn't mean that they can plan a ritual, run a coven, counsel, teach, divine or run juice. Some Witches are, at heart, afraid of being sovereign in their lives, and crave some elder to give them permission to be Witches. In these cases, formal initiation is a red herring, a crutch or a distraction. It doesn't confer any wisdom or skill.

But the importance of initiation itself cannot be underestimated. In our secularized culture, initiation into adulthood is a matter left mostly to kids, often with disastrous consequences. I could spill a bit of ink on the topic of my first cigarette, my first taste of booze, my first time letting a boy "get to second base" — these were things I could never share with my folks, only with my girlfriends who were as clueless as I. In

any youth subculture, initiation rituals evolve as dispossessed kids search for a sense of belonging, of family and of tribe, that their own families or neighborhoods can't give. Many Pagans claim to have felt alienated all their lives, until recognizing a kindred soul somewhere else. That recognition in someone else, that you are worthy, that you are valued, that you belong, is why initiation is important. All of us need to feel that our tribe claims us.

Initiation in a magical context presupposes that the initiate is actively seeking this recognition through study and practice. However, because our faith is so decentralized, there is no standardized curriculum, no central approving committee that all Witches and Pagans adhere to. That's why many degree systems vary widely as to what they require for attaining one degree or another, so there's little consistency in what a certain "level" of Witch can do. As such, degrees are not useful in determining your "power" as a Witch.

In many cases degree systems and the hierarchies that proceed from them, can be disempowering, and even dangerous. The teachers

I trust say that studying magic is about training yourself to think a new way, beyond the limits of consensus reality. You train your students to do this for themselves. "For if that which you seek you find not within yourself, you will never find it without," remember? That's why a self-initiated or non-initiated Witch can be as powerful and wise as any "credentialed" Poobah.

Any working group, regardless of hierarchy, engages in "initiation through action." As time goes on, shared experience and growing intimacy becomes its own revelatory cultus, and those who participated are bonded together in those memories and in the on-going work that keeps a circle running. These shared experiences can be every bit as transcendent as formal ritual. Initiation is a place where human need and divine grace meet. The Mystery is what you find there, and only you can tell whether you've experienced it or not. ▲

— Leni Austine serves the Orisa and practices Transformational magick in Miami. She's a free lance writer, ritualist and mom pursuing a master's degree. She can be reached at leni_belle@yahoo.com.

No

"A self-initiated or non-initiated Witch can be as wise as any credentialed Poobah."

Yes

“The discipline of initiation tends to weed out those who aren’t serious or who are interested in personal power.”

Initiation – A necessary step

I am, in practice, a solitary Witch. The nearest Pagan community is 100 kilometers from me, and it is simply not feasible for me to be regularly involved in their rituals. Give my status as a solitary, one might expect that I would consider initiation to be unnecessary. Such is not the case. I feel that a ceremony of initiation, performed with the presence and assistance of other people in the Craft, is a necessity. I also believe that a single initiation does not suffice for everyone, that initiations into higher degrees are also necessary, and that such initiations need to be recognized outside one’s one specific coven or tradition.

I was raised in a tradition of secrecy, and I use my Craft name only among other Witches. Even then I use only my first-degree name, as I do not know who might or might not be more than first degree. In my tradition, second-degree names are revealed only to other second-degree Witches, and so on.

Here, I think, is where the conflict begins. When I first mentioned this matter of names and degrees to a very young Witch, she asked me if I didn’t think “the whole degree thing” was hierarchical and elitist.

Yes – and no. Yes, it is hierarchical. (So is the school system, which promotes students from one degree – oops, grade – into a higher one.) But, no, it is not elitist. When did hierarchy come to be a bad thing? And when did it automatically imply elitism? Nobody who is thinking clearly would consider that a child in grade five was more important or better than one in grade one. The difference is in learning and ability. The same difference applies to degrees of initiation within the Craft, and a third-degree Witch is no better a person than a first-degree.

Hierarchy has a bad name because it is used to describe an entrenched, often political system, in which those with power exploit those without it. I find that people who dismiss the necessity for initiation are usually starting from a heartfelt and sincere belief that all people should be equal. I have a great deal of sympathy for this sentiment, but I find it too simplistic. Yes, I agree, all people should be treated equally in terms of basic human rights. But if someone has learned something or can do something that others haven’t, that person needs to be recognized so that those skills can be put to use. That’s common sense.

So is initiation nothing more than a seal of approval on a Witch’s abilities? No, I don’t believe so.

Initiation indicates personal commitment. When one is initiated in a group one acquires membership in that group, with all its privileges and responsibilities. Members of the group pledge to support and help the new initiate, welcoming her or him into the coven. The new member also acknowledges a responsibility to coven sisters and brothers, to support and help them as necessary, to be involved in the work of the coven, to keep confidentiality.

Initiation recognizes learning and accomplishment. In modern covens it is usual for new members to be dedicated first and then to spend a certain amount of time learning about worship and magic in the Craft before being initiated. Some groups ask candidates for initiation to demonstrate their accomplishment. This purpose of initiation – to verify knowledge – is one that self-initiation doesn’t provide. The view and opinion of others is valuable to any important endeavor. As any good writer knows, an editor is incredibly useful and usually improves the writing!

Initiation really does move the initiate from one level of magic to another, higher level. This can physically manifest during the ceremony as dizziness or faintness in the initiate – another good reason to do so in a group. No matter what precautions one has taken, initiation, like swimming in deep water, shouldn’t be undertaken alone.

I have no problem with hierarchy that is based on experience and genuine knowledge. In traditions in which I have practiced, a Witch who has attained the third degree is considered experienced enough to start her own coven. This rule ensures that a new coven begins with at least one experienced and knowledgeable member, someone who has answers to a lot of basic questions and is able to guide new Witches in their studies. Someone who has done a lot of structured magical work is better able to help others understand and work with magic and better able to give real help in case of trouble.

The discipline of initiation tends to weed out those who aren’t serious, or who are interested in personal power. While I have run across one or two bad apples, most of those I have met who have passed through initiation have grown beyond the thrill-and-power-seeking stage. Let me say in closing that I would not presume to question the standing of any Witch who told me his or her level of initiation; nor do I dismiss the standing of anyone who says that she or he is self-initiated. Perhaps I am merely a product of my magical upbringing, a Pagan fuddy-duddy if you will, but I see initiation within a coven or working group as a necessity for a grounded and rounded practice of the Craft. ▲

– Elizabeth Creith is a witch, writer, artist, and shepherd living in the wilds of Northern Ontario.

“True initiation comes, not from other humans, but from the Spirits, the Goddess, the God, and the Earth.”

No

Grandmother's Wisdom

My maternal grandmother was a wise woman. No one called her that, of course. She was a member of the Methodist church, sang in the choir and earned a living as a seamstress. She teased me that fairies lived in her lush cottage garden, which had a small ring of white stones and a tiny pond in its midst. Her kitchen smelled of the herbs she grew and pinched into her cooking. She burned candles in colors that didn't match the purple-accent décor in her small house. It bothered my mother, who told me more than once that her mother had “different notions.” I just knew that I loved being around her.

Grandmother also read vintage fortune-telling cards but she claimed not to remember how long she'd had them. Family members could not recall a time when she did not read them for entertainment, but many people jokingly attested to her accuracy. I grew up believing she had certain powers, subtle distinctions from others. By the early 1970s, I was in my twenties and my grandmother was growing senile. I couldn't ask her the questions that had suddenly become important, but it didn't stop me from seeking answers through metaphysical material. The pull was irresistible, and my family showed little surprise when reading fortune-telling cards came as easily to me as it had for her.

Through the years no connections surfaced for me to a Pagan community or a coven, yet I steadily walked the path, and I did it through continuing study and practice. It's doubtful my grandmother declared herself a witch, let alone a priestess; she would likely have been offended, possibly horrified, if someone had even suggested it. Given the

changing environment of the late 20th century though, it was inevitable that I would declare myself as both, first as a solitary, then finally publically.

But even if I hadn't taken the path to group work, I would still consider myself a priestess because I could lead and teach if I so chose. Formal traditions have my respect, but it doesn't mean I need one to validate my years of self-education. And if a coven-trained priestess or priest scoffed at my “lack” of credentials, I'd smile. I don't believe the Goddess has the issues that mortals have.

Before traditions, covens, groups, priests, priestesses, secrecy, rituals and degrees our ancestors acknowledged and honored the divine presence in the sky and the earth. As dedicated individuals we can still effectively recognize the same presence, self-train, declare ourselves “wise,” and initiate ourselves in the Pagan path we follow. ▲

— Joan Robinson-Blumit is publisher of *The Wheel*, a quarterly magazine featuring Pagan fiction and poetry. Contact her at www.rowanpress.com.

Spirituality Comes from the Goddess

My spirituality springs from my connection to Goddess. It is between She and I, and no human had best come between us. I do not take well to folks who are part of a “tradition” pointing their fingers at me and saying, “You're not initiated, so you can't be a real Witch/Pagan/Gaian/Whatever.” Such behavior is rude, obnoxious, and divisive.

This isn't to say that I don't think that initiation rituals can serve a spiritual purpose. They can weld together members of a coven, working circle, or grove in a way that other

rites cannot. They can also serve as a dedication ceremony for a solitary practitioner who wants others to celebrate her achievement in the eyes of humanity and the Goddess.

But, they are not a necessity. If that were the case, I would never have become a Witch. There was a dearth of Witches in West Virginia to initiate me twenty years ago, but the Goddess was slumming around my hometown when I was fifteen, and she looked me over and said, “Hey, kid, check this out. Feels kinda right, doesn't it, being a Witch? Let's talk.” Of course I did. And more importantly, I listened. What I learned was that I was Hers, and She was mine, and it was all good.

Even though I had never heard of a self-dedication ceremony, I found myself full of longing one full moon night. So I sat at my window of my bedroom with candles lit and gave myself over to the Goddess of the Moon and the Earth, the Sun and the Sea, the Spirit and the Flesh, with the simple words, “I'm yours.”

A sweet feeling of acceptance, peace, and love filled me: that was my initiation. Since that remarkable night I have resisted being initiated by a human priest/ess. I feel no need for it; I know who I am, and need no one else to tell me. I feel that I don't need any initiatory experience other than being held in the Goddess' hands.

True initiation comes not from other humans, but from the Spirits, the Goddess, the God, and the Earth. It comes when we are touched by a piece of the Divine, and a fire is lit in our heads, and we reach out to spread the flame among others. ▲

— Barbara Fisher has been a Witch for twenty-one years, a chef for the past five years, and a writer her entire life. She lives in central Ohio with her husband, artist/writer/musician Zak

In Praise of Lineage

Witches are taught that we can only find our Goddess within ourselves; Twelve-steppers believe that the Goddess has no grandchildren; Quakers speak of the Inner Light that shines within everyone. These are different ways of expressing the same insight: that every human being has their own direct, primary, and unmediated relationship with Deity. Whoever is conscious of this relationship needs no hierarchy or lineage to connect them with the Sacred. Pagans, who take pride in being free spirits, even rebels, exult in this knowledge.

Yet Traditional Witchcraft is organized into lineages, and functions through an elder-to-younger hierarchy. This seems contradictory, even hypocritical, until we distinguish between two different, but equally essential, kinds of relationships.

Relationships *within* lineage are not indirect relationships with Deity. Sacred contact does not trickle down through a series of graded steps. That's just not what lineage is for.

Lineage is a pattern of voluntary relationships with humans: a chosen and willed family. The familiar branching diagram of lineage looks exactly like the pyramidal drawings of military and corporate organizations; the structure is the same. That's because we can only really connect with a small number of others. When we try to relate, as an autonomous individual to the rest, the result is a mass or mob, not a true community. But neither are authoritarian hierarchies true communities.

The difference is in the nature of the linkages. Authoritarian hierarchies are held together by command and control. Family trees are held together by love and trust; no one keeps us in them by force.

Paradoxically, it is our very freedom that makes lineage relation-

ships necessary. We are a religion without dogma or scripture. We rely instead on a certain continuity of formative experience. Elders guide students through a sequence of events that elicit psycho-spiritual changes. Common experience gives us a common vocabulary, and with it, the ability to support one another in our quest for further spiritual and magical development.

Living, oral traditions are much more flexible than those that are book-bound, more able to adapt to circumstances. Lineage allows us to check in with our own elders before making adaptations in what we transmit to our students, so we can keep our teachings and practices relevant to current values and needs without losing the precious thread of continuity.

Elders are the lore-keepers and givers, making sure that we share a knowledge base. But elders are just people who started sooner. As each of us becomes an elder, we come to share responsibility for developing and refining that body of lore.

Formal initiation cannot create a connection with the Gods. All any ritual can do is awaken us to that connection. Rites of passage follow a basic pattern: separation, transformation, re-integration. During the transformation phase, the initiate must be completely out of control of the process, otherwise, the transformation remains superficial. So self-initiation is impossible; but the Gods are quite capable of providing transformative experiences without any human contrivance. So spontaneous initiation directly from the Gods is entirely possible.

However, connection with the group mind, the "egregore," a particular nexus within the human collective unconscious, requires formal initiation. Only one who is already a member of the group, and autho-

rized to do so, can bring another member in. So, although it is possible — and usual — to awaken Sacred contact and establish contact with the group mind during the same ritual, it is equally possible to do either one alone. The two functions are compatible, but also separable. We have confused ourselves by assuming that they are necessarily co-variant.

Our elders, wise, learned and skilled though they be, are not gatekeepers for the Gods. But neither have we any way to assess the validity of another person's inner experience. It's easy to lie — or even to be sincerely self-deluded — about something that is essentially non-verbal. Yet, when we work with people in the intimacy of a magic Circle, we expose our own deepest vulnerabilities to them. Trust is not just desirable in Circle, it is essential: without deep trust, we're just going through the motions.

Our elders are gatekeepers for the community. When a seeker has been nurtured and challenged within a lineage, taken through a formative sequence by an elder we know and trust, we can feel more secure that their connection with both our deities and our *egregore* is robust. The elder's approval is a basis for extending trust. The person's ongoing behavior is the only basis for continuing or deepening that trust, for letting it develop into love.

Lineage allows us to preserve, adapt and transmit lore, tonurture and assess people. It is a skeleton that supports, not a cage that confines. It keeps our traditions healthy.

▲

— *Judy Harrow is High Priestess of Proteus Coven, and author of Wicca Covens and Spiritual Mentoring: a Pagan Guide. You can visit the Proteus Coven Website at www.draknet.com/proteus.*

“Lineage allows us to preserve, adapt and transmit lore; it is a skeleton that supports, not a cage that confines.”

Yes