

# Point of View

Perspectives from our Readers

## Dumb Supper: Sharing a Fire with an Old Friend

I sit back and watch the fire catch hold of the ash wood in the brazier in front of me. The sun has already gone down past the back fence and the shadows are stretching out towards each other. The moon is peeking up over the trees. I've sung the four directions and Spirit, then walked a circle three times around the area, my unbound hair swinging to the movement of my bare feet as I went.

This personal ritual to honor what happened to my country and I on September 11 might make some folk a little uneasy; tonight I'm doing a kind of necromancy, a calling of the dead. It's easy for me to do on the anniversary of this date since I have a specific ghost to concentrate on.

My way doesn't use sinister thunderstorms and labs, or elaborate magic rituals. It's a quiet thing of suggestion and a comfortable place, hospitality and a fire in the night. I want to touch base with the part of my friend Elm that is now a part of me. I want to remind myself, and him, that I haven't forgotten the important things.

I set the family brazier under the lilac arch and fill it with oak and ash wood, then put two chairs with a little table between them near it. One chair is set up as one of my standard nests of wool blankets and sheepskins. The other sits to the right of it, and has a black-dyed sheepskin and an old purple skirt of mine draped across the seat. There's a drum set before it and a gnarled stick leaning casually against one arm. Draped across the back is a stethoscope.

I begin.

It's dark now; the chair to the right of me sits far enough from the

fire that it and its accoutrements are flickering in and out of the shadows in the firelight. I reach into the leather bag beside me and pull out an ornately carved, blue-glazed ceramic cup and a bottle of Irish whiskey and set them on the table beside me. I open the bottle, pour the cup full and toast the empty chair beside me, spilling a little on the ground for the Norse god he followed.

"Frey, old grower and giant lover, I hope you don't mind if one of your own comes to visit a friend who is a gardener and a lover of giants herself. You, also, are welcome in my garden," I say. I drink deep of the cup, the whisky filling my mouth and sinuses with heat and an after-taste like clean wood smoke. I set the whiskey down on the table and take a twig from the fire to light the green candle sitting on a stone beside the brazier. I meditate a little, until the world feels still again around me.

I pick up the whiskey cup and sip it slowly, calling the names I knew him by with every sip, repeating them until the cup is half empty. Then I set it aside. "Come in peace, if you are coming. There is food and fire and a friend here. Come alone and be welcome in my circle."

My whole body warms with the alcohol. This is the last time I plan on talking out loud until I'm done. This is a variation on the old Appalachian and Neo-Pagan "Dumb Supper" ritual, where the dead are invited to share an actual feast with the living to grant peace to both.

I was taught that the loved dead speak inside the heart, in silence. If you want a ghost to leave, just address it directly, aloud.

I take up a little drum that has been beside me on the ground. She's called "Whisper," and I use her for private ritual because her tone is resonant enough to reach me but she doesn't go beyond a few feet. She was made in Nigeria, from a small, pit-fired clay bowl that has had two pieces of goatskin stretched around it and sewn tightly together. I lean back in the chair until I'm comfortable, then move the drum so that my jaw gently presses against the drum's side so the sound vibrations will go through the skin and bone into my head. I cup my hands around the drum and start softly tapping out a heartbeat rhythm with the tips of my forefingers. I hum along with the tapping, directing the sound through the drum-head so that the bowl inside will catch it and reflect it back into me.

The sounds and rhythm combine with the alcohol and time doesn't exist as my perceptions blur in the trance I've induced in myself. At some point I set the drum down and meditate into the fire, thinking of a brown, weedy, muscular young man, a little taller than myself, with a mop of longish, sienna brown hair and amber eyes that sometimes shone green. In the corner of my right eye in the chair beside me there's a flash of purple as the wood falls in on itself and the fire flares for a moment. It dies back but the shadow remains, a suggestion of a lean form in a draped lava-lava, bent forward pensively towards the fire, elbows on its knees.

I pick up the cup and sip a little, still staring into the fire. "Blessed be, and welcome, Elm. Come have some of my whiskey if you want." I tip the

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cup in the shade's direction and spill a good swallow onto the ground between us.

There's a light wind and the leaves on the lilac stir overhead with a sound like someone shifting slightly in his seat, "Whatever happened to 'Yah t'ay! Park it and don't hog the fire or steal all the hooch?"<sup>1</sup>

I laugh into the cup, for even here, he is who he is. "Under the circumstances I figured to at least give a nod to formality," I reply.

The darkness beyond the fire and the circle feels heavy and crowded. He and I brought a lot of company to this meeting. I raise my head a little, bending over to pick up the bottle and refill the cup. I want to be careful not to break the trance but it's time to insist on some boundaries. When I straighten I say aloud to the muttering presences, "I'm sorry, but I called and welcomed but one soul here. Go in peace." The garden grows quiet again.

I set the cup down on the table between us, as I did at camp fires when he was alive, so he could "steal" my drink without my worrying about his dropping my cup or knocking the bottle over. It was a running joke between us. Then I dig in my bag and pull out a bag of home-baked yam chips and some fresh herb bread. A handful of chips and a broken-off piece of bread go into the fire and smoke for a little while. I take a bite of bread and a few of the chips and eat them, then lay the rest on the table. Elm used to love hard-baked yam chips and rosemary bread.

"Don't forget to take in something besides the usual," I tell him, the way I'd do whenever I'd offer him a snack during a drumfire or a night at camp. "And you don't forget to drink your water tonight or they'll hear your brain sizzling all the way to Bear's place in the morning." He never did let me forget the infamous mead tasting party I went to one festival, and the one and only capital "H" hangover I experienced. I won't forget, either. I've got a jug of water sitting by my feet. It's going to be awhile and I'm working with some-

thing stronger than mead tonight.

Neither one of us have ever been comfortable with serious things. We talk, two old friends who miss each other, about small things we both loved: drumming, ritual, gossip about some of the sillier things our people have gotten up to. I tell stories about mutual friends and what has happened in their lives, he replies in memories of old wisecracks and comments. He teases me about taking things too seriously, like he always did.

As we talk in silence I pull out a small piece of *lignum vitae* that I've already mostly carved out and use a small riffler, or curved shaping file, to finish it. I'm deliberately using the same regular rhythm of movement with the file as I did with the drum. From time to time I put a little wood on the fire to keep it going, but I never look in the direction of the chair until the light has died back to coals again.

When I drink from the cup sometimes, I taste salt from the tears that run freely down my face and into my mouth. It's not a painful kind of crying, just water, washing down as I sip, put down the cup, and start scraping the file gently over the wood again.

The moon moves overhead and I can see the piece I'm smoothing more clearly, even in the state I'm in. It's a stylized sun pendant with a raised silhouette of a Thor's hammer. Elm had always made do with the regular Asatru Thor's hammer as his personal symbol because most of the specific Freyr symbols available on the Pagan market were not discreet enough to be wearing on the job as an EMT in Manhattan. It looks almost done. I smooth the Hammer with sandpaper from out of the bag until it gleams in the firelight against the rougher sun background. Then I thread a leather thong through the hole I bored into the top when I shaped it the night before.

"That's a hell of a Frey symbol, Wolf."

"I thought it might turn out like that. Do you like it?"

Silence. The sounds of fire and wind in the leaves and distant cars.

Silence gives assent. I rub my thumb across the pendant's face and toss it into the fire. The ironwood lies dark against the coals for awhile until the natural oils in the wood start to burn. I take a stick and poke the coals until they blaze, then put on a larger log.

I lean back in my nest and take up the cup, this time turning to look directly at the chair and the shade that I see so clearly in my heart. Something is glittering silver in the firelight – the stethoscope shining, or do ghosts cry as well? I salute him and speak aloud this time. "When you died at the Towers, I made you a promise to do my bit to keep my corner of the universe safe, and I'm still keeping it to the best of my ability. I'll try not to forget the drum, the cup and laughter while I'm doing it, too, Elm Freyson. You take care going home, now. Merry meet, and merry part, and merry meet again."

The chair is again just an empty metal garden chair draped with a sheepskin, an old skirt and a stethoscope.

I drink the cup empty and stand up to put a lid on the fire to keep it safe for the night. Frey's candle will burn safely where it's at until it dies. Then I pick up the bag, the cup and the drums and head indoors. It's going to be a dry night and I'll handle the rest in the morning.

## References

<sup>1</sup>*Yah t'ay* is a Navajo greeting that I picked up from a friend. It means "Very Good!"

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— *WolfDancing* is a Wiccan initiate who practices an eclectic form of shamanism. She lives in Michigan, and is a 43-year-old transplanted Appalachian wood carver who specializes in *Lignum Vitae*.