

Dark Moon Rising:
Pagan BDSM And The Ordeal Path

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Ragan BDM
And The Ordeal Path

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Dedicated to all those who came to me,
trusting their bodies and spirits into my hands,
and all those yet to come,
and of course my beloved boy Joshua.

With my gratitude to all who contributed to
making this book all that it could be:
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to Bridgett Harrington, who donated so many
works of art to this book.

May the Dark Gods bless you all.



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Part I:
Introduction
and
Definitions

The Ordeal Path: Introduction to Neo-Pagan BDSM

In the last ten years or so, people in the BDSM community have begun to realize that dramatic, intense, and even dangerous sexual practices can be used as spiritual tools for a variety of purposes. Sometimes this realization comes about by looking into the SM-like practices of older cultures, which mostly have to do with their religious beliefs. Sometimes it comes about more radically and personally, in the middle of a scene that was just supposed to be kinky sex, but suddenly became something much deeper and older and more connected to the Divine. Sometimes, after one clears one's head and comes down from the experience, one starts to say things like, "That was closer to God/the Gods than I've ever been before. How do I get there again?"

Primitive cultures have used physical and emotional and sexual ordeals in order to achieve altered states a lot more often than we modern westerners would like to admit. We can utilize some of their techniques, but their contexts are often opaque to us, as we weren't raised in their cultures. We need to create our own set of ordeal rituals that resound with our experiences and yet do not partake of the negative materialism in our society. Indeed, they should ideally be an antidote to it.

We can see a beginning of this yearning for physical ordeal rituals in the wave of modern primitivism sweeping the country, with its attendant practices of piercing, tattooing, and other temporary and permanent body modification. The fact that teens flock to it in droves speaks not only of the enduring

problem of peer pressure, but of the driving need for rites of passage that feel real, that feel as if one has actually survived something worth doing. Those who go on past the point of belly button rings and Mickey Mouse tattoos may find themselves hanging from hooks on a suspension rack, seeking—and possibly finding—oneness with the Divine Force through their own flesh and brain chemicals. They may not realize that this is what they are unconsciously seeking until it comes and gets them, however, and this is why the folks who oversee such things should be well versed in ritual and magic as well as simply where to stick hooks and needles.

The neo-pagan community has, in general, been more than a bit suspicious of the BDSM and body modification phenomenon that is slowly gaining momentum across its demographic. Their objections are many. Radical pagan feminists may still be wrapped up in the political concept that all painful sex or sexual power dynamics are, or will inevitably become, abusive. People who just don't like pain may see its deliberate infliction as abusive, and the desire for that infliction as sick and codependent. The black-leather-and-studs urban aesthetic that soaks so much of BDSM may seem to clash dissonantly with the bucolic fantasy aesthetic of neo-pagans, whose priest/esses all too often dress like Galadriel or an escapee from the 1960s hippie movement. Its other aesthetic, that of its primitive tribal roots, may discomfort idealistic pagans who would prefer to ignore the darker or more painful aspects of the "natural" primitivism that they idealize. Straight pagans may see BDSM as something that queers in leather bars do, and queer pagans may see it as an infection from 1950's marital power dynamics. No one seems to want it anywhere that children might see it, and perhaps be swayed from a fruit-and-flowers ideal of "normal" sex. And, finally, most don't see how it could possibly be sacred.

All acts of love and pleasure are Her rituals, says the old maxim from "Aradia", and it has been taken as gospel by most pagans. However, people tend to be extremely subjective about what looks like an act of love or pleasure to them, and they tend to judge it on their own desire for that act, not

whether someone else might find it just the ticket for a hot Saturday night. All too often, if it isn't something they want to do, then it must be bad. One can almost sense that desperation covering up for a sense of guilt... if that sort of thing is acceptable, someone might ask me to do it, and I'd have to say no, and I'd feel guilty. So it's easier for me if it's simply unacceptable and no one would ever dream of asking it, or if they did, I could act horrified or superior instead of risking rejection. Maybe that's not most people's reasons for acting like that, but sometimes I wonder.

Let's make this personal instead of theoretical. I was asked by a fellow author, busily writing a book on pagan sexual practices, to talk about how sacred sexuality worked in my life. I put the request on my desktop, thinking that this would be the easiest thing in the world—after all, I believe that sex is sacred, right? I do ritual sex on a regular basis. This questionnaire ought to be a piece of cake.

Except that it wasn't. It sat there for weeks, and every once in a while I'd pick it up and look at it, and put it down again. Finally I got angry with my Self, and demanded to know what the problem was. Thus cornered, Self admitted that there was indeed a problem, and it was one of Self-censorship. I'd been assuming that I ought to write something sweet and New Age about sexuality being sacred, and the body being sacred, and we should all just find new ways to love each other, and all that.

Screw that. That's not what my sex life is about. I decided to be honest instead.

I'm a pervert. I'm a sick fuck. By that I mean that I am incapable of getting it up for anything which doesn't contain some sort of BDSM. In order to be sexually satisfied, I have to have some sort of real violence or pain or domination going on—if only in fantasy. My sexual fantasies are all incredibly violent and grotesque, and so is my porn collection. I am a serious sexual sadist, and I've got a decent masochistic streak in there as well. For Hel's sake, I own a slave. And I do mean *own*, we're not playing about it. I like blood and knives and

vicious beatings and scaring the shit out of someone. No human being is ever more attractive to me than when they are so frightened and turned on that they don't know whether to piss themselves in terror or come really, really hard. Even among BDSM aficionados, I'm one of the edge-players, the folks who the "ordinary" leather folk look at funny and talk about behind one's back. This is the way I've always been. I can't change that. I'm wired this way.

And how can that possibly be sacred?

Because I am also a shaman, I have died and come back (literally, had a near-death experience, a series of divine visitations, and a sex change, and that's about as severe as a shamanic rebirth gets in our modern culture) and everything I do must be channeled towards the sacred. I am as much as slave as my boy is, and my Mistress, my dominatrix, She Who Owns My Ass, is Hela the goddess of Death. And She is one mean top. If I don't do what She wants, She will kick my ass from here to Niflheim. And She makes sure that I stay ethical, and in spiritual service to my people and my tribe.

(Who are my tribe? They are many and scattered. They are my family and my religious group. They are my transgendered brothers and sisters. They are my queer and perverted brothers and sisters. They are whatever pagans come to me and need my help. I am one of the few shamans who serves these groups with a whole heart.)

I'll try to break it down. I've found that spiritual BDSM can be broken down into three major areas. I work with all three. They are:

- 1) Using carefully applied pain in a specific ritual context in order to bring the bottom into an altered state by using their own endorphins, and thus bring them closer to Spirit. Human beings have been doing this for eons. Traditional examples of this are the Lakota Sun Dance, the Hindu Kavandi ceremony and ball dances, the Catholic flagellatory orders, and so on. It's the Ordeal Path, one of the Eightfold Path of altered states, and it's easier than doing drugs.

To give someone this experience, the top (BDSM term for “the person running the interaction”) has to be skilled, knowledgeable, respectful, and compassionate, and intensely love making someone hurt real bad. It’s the Initiator path. I know it well, and I do it for people—sometimes as a service, sometimes (with my own lovers) because I choose to take them down that road for their good and mine. As a sexual sadist, I crave hurting people. To do this work makes it not only ethical (through consent) but sacred, and gives them a gift of an intense ordeal that they will not forget, and that will help them work with their own limits around pain and fear and endurance.

2) Using intense psychological theater in a ritual context to create a personally-tailored emotional ordeal for the bottom, whereby they travel to the dark places in themselves and come out safely, and having learned useful things in the process. This is the archetypal Journey To The Underworld, and the top has to be both the psychopomp who gets them in and out, and the stand-in for the implacable Death Gods who inhabit that dark place. Pagan myths have many contexts for formally ritualizing such an experience—the descent to the various Underworlds of Inanna, or Psyche, or Persephone, or Hermod; the sacrifice of the Sacred Corn King in all his guises; the Wild Hunt of Herne; the dismembering of Dionysos; and many others. Or, alternately, the ritual context can come from the private symbolism of the bottom in question, which can be even more powerful as a tool of catharsis.

To do this job, the top has to be dramatic, confident, perceptive, skilled at reading people’s bodily reactions and emotional moods, good at creating intensely moving ritual structure, and utterly ruthless. We have to channel the Underworld forces through ourselves, and we cannot chicken out or we cheat the seeker. Whether it’s the rape or molestation victim who needs to reenact her issue to get a better handle on it, or the seeker perched on the edge of a major transition who needs a rite of passage to remember, or the phobic person who needs to face a fear head-on, or the grieving one who needs to be forced to cry... it is our sacred

task as priest/esses of the Underworld to take them all the way in, and get them back out alive and better than they were. As a psychic vampire, I crave fear and pain and anger and sex. This is the way I've found to get it that is not only merely ethical—which is a zero-sum game—but is sacred as well, doing far more good than harm.

3) Using full-time serious D/s as a spiritual path. This is rare even among perverts. My boy and I practice an extremely serious level of dominance-submission work (I don't call it play, because there is nothing playful about the way we do it) which means, in essence, that he has sworn his life to serve me. To him, it is a path of sacred service that is very much like being a monk or nun; he's referred to being owned as "the monasticism of BDSM". Neo-paganism rejects monasticism and spiritual discipline, which I think is a big mistake. On my part, I have always had a strong psychological need to own someone completely, and he has always had a similar need to be completely owned. This has gotten us both in trouble with unsuitable partners, before we could quite figure out what it was that we needed.

At any rate, for me this amazing gift of his service is a test that will last the rest of my life, a lesson in using power ethically and wisely. I have great power over another human being, of the sort that most people are convinced will inevitably result in corruption and abuse... and yet I don't have the option of being less than rigidly ethical about it. I can't abuse him, or Hela will come down with Her spiked boots and kick my ass. Using power wisely is a lesson that is to be driven home to me in this lifetime, and I can neither screw up nor refuse the gift. So we have a very elaborate contract as to what I may and may not do to him, and what he is required to do for me, and I have a lot less power than most "fantasy" tops, by my own choice. He is the king's servant, the priest's monk, the master's padawan. I must respect and aid his spiritual path of service, which means I have to get mine right.

I would say that the theme of the point where my sexuality and my spirituality cross is one of redemption. The monster in my psychic basement is awesome. Turning his every tainted desire and drive and need into something useful, something that serves others, something that serves the Spirit, and yet gets that monster's needs met adequately, that's the challenge that drives and structures my entire life, not just my sex life. I live by spiritual discipline, because it's the only safe choice—for myself and for others. Somehow, Hela needs a sick fuck vampire sadist to get this job done. She finds me useful as I am. I'm not arguing with Her.

The main ethical rede of the neo-pagan community is "An it harm none, do as thou wilt." How, people ask, can it be anything but harm when someone stumbles out of a scene with bruises and welts? When their blood runs in trails down their body? When they weep and scream and are trodden under someone's heavy boot? When they sign their life over to someone else that they will call Sir or Lady for however long their agreement lasts? Or, alternately, when they put themselves in a place where they could become a tyrant, a monster, a serial killer? Where one slip could start them down the slippery slope that ends with bodies being buried in the back yard?

Look into our eyes. By our desires ye shall know us. We who are changelings of the Dark Moon, whose wiring is built for this sort of thing, we are not happy with the fruit-and-flowers sex of the upper world and its sunny gods. We are like Inanna, who walked willingly into the realm of Death, who was stripped of her name and her power, who was hung on a hook over the throne of the Queen of Death, who had to be ransomed back by those who turn gender on its head and who are willing to weep. She did it because there was no other way to touch the deep wisdom that she sought, no way but to stumble along dark paths to the katabasis point, and trust in all the wisdom of the Underworld that you may one day emerge triumphant.

Look into our eyes. When we return with those bruises, do we walk taller and stronger? When we touch our cuts, are we

more serene? When we give up our power, do we grow more sure of ourselves? When we accept power over another, do we learn more compassion? Do we return from the Underworld better for the journey? That's how you know, those of you who are worried, whether we're doing it right.

Look into our eyes. If you see darkness reflected there, is it the darkness of roots, of ocean depths, of the night sky and the sickle moon, of the graves of the Ancestors? Is it sacred darkness? Does it smell of Herne's thick woods, of Kali's cremation ground, of the hem of the robe of the Crone? Is it the burning ground of resurrection and rebirth? Does it frighten you? It doesn't frighten us. We've been there. Its ashes are smeared on our foreheads. Come follow us down, even a little way.

They say that once people had walked into the cave of the Eleusinian Mysteries, had seen the sacred rites of which nothing true can be spoken, that they no longer feared Death. We are struggling to recreate our own versions of those mysteries, and the one thing we know better than all others is that they cannot be easy. There is nothing easy about the Ordeal Path, but then again, nothing worthwhile ever turned out to be easy anyway.

Take the roses into your hands, and squeeze the thorns until your hands bleed, even as you smell the scent of Aphrodite. When you can understand why there is no contradiction there, the first step of the path will be open to you.

Words Of Power: BDSM Definitions For Pagans

Scene: This term usually refers to a single interaction of BDSM, be it a fifteen-minute flogging or a week-long staged psychodrama. It is also, confusingly, used in the BDSM community to mean the entire community and its activities, as in “So, are you into the Scene?” (The latter definition is sometimes, but not always, capitalized.) In this book, it will be used only to refer to its first definition, in order to avoid confusion. A scene, like a ritual, generally has a beginning where the atmosphere is set, and an ending where people are brought back to “normal” space, or whatever is normal for them. It’s important to work out these boundaries so that both parties know what they are, and will be able to respond appropriately. If putting a collar around the bottom’s neck is a sign of changing over to an active D/s headspace for a dominant, and the submissive they’re playing with thinks that it’s just a fun fashion accessory, some wires can get crossed.

Please also keep in mind that closure is just as important as clear openings, assuming that the people in question are not in a full-time 24/7 relationship. Just as you wouldn’t walk away from a cast circle without bothering to take it down, dismiss elements, close doors, thank deities, or whatever else you do in your tradition, you shouldn’t leave a ritual scene to trail off uncertainly. If nothing else, you can firmly say that the rite is over and then go do some mundane thing, separately or together. I find that taking care of bodily needs and eating ice cream is my favorite sort of scene closure.

Top/bottom: These are catchall terms referring to who is in charge of any given BDSM interaction. Simply put, the top makes the rules and does the active directing of the encounter; the bottom sets the limits and responds to the top's direction. These terms are job-oriented, in that they refer only to who is doing what for a specific encounter. That encounter could last for half an hour, or years, depending on the individuals in question.

Often, the power dynamics of who is topping and who's bottoming are more subtle than obvious. For example, one person could be flat on their back receiving sensation, and the other one could be on top of them, actively working to give them that sensation. Who's the top or the bottom? It depends on who is actually leading and controlling the action. It might be the active partner, while the passive partner just lays back and enjoys it... or the passive partner might be directly or indirectly giving the active partner orders as to what would please him/her, while the active partner is just doing what they are told. It's best not to assume that all topping is active, or all bottoming is passive.

Among non-BDSM gay men, the terms top and bottom refer to anal sex—the top is traditionally the one doing the penetrating, and the bottom the one receiving penetration. I always found this to be a bit awkward as a definition, and not just because it can make for confusion when people from different communities try to negotiate. It's also that fucking isn't so easily divided in this way... when one person is laying passively while the other one has pounced on them and is vigorously humping their cock and using them as a live dildo, the assumption that the top is the inserter and the bottom is the insertee doesn't quite hold up. But be warned that you may run into these clashing definitions on your travels.

In terms of ritual sex, it's more often the bottom who sets the main goal and theme for the scene. This is because more often than not, the bottom's journey to and from whatever dark place in their psyche they are visiting is the point of the exercise. The majority of ritual sex scenes, although both top

and bottom should agree and collude on the goal and methods used, generally have the psychodrama structured around getting the bottom to where they need to go, and getting them back safely. Tops often end up as a sort of sacred stage director and production manager. This can be a very fulfilling role, or it can feel restrictive, especially if the symbols used are ones that are meaningful only to the bottom, and feel empty to the top. However, structuring a ritual scene for the top's spiritual needs requires a very experienced and trusting bottom, and a lot of negotiation. A top can "surprise" a bottom during a ritual scene (and there may be times when this is necessary for the proper psychological effect), but a bottom has to be very careful with adding unscripted elements into a scene staged for their top, unless they know them very well.

Dominant/submissive: This refers to psychological states of mind, and activities that stem from those states. The dominant is the person who is psychologically in charge of the scene, and the submissive is the person who is psychologically submitting in the scene. A scene need not have a dominant and submissive to work; for example, in some scenes, the top is merely a technician and does not claim any psychological power over the bottom.

Dominance is the act of gaining emotional pleasure by being in control of another human being, for however long and to whatever extent. Domination can be nurturing, or strictly disciplined, or even cruel if that is what both parties agree is desirable. In most cases, it is not about being "bossy" or "all-powerful"; rather it is receiving the gift of loyalty and complete trust and faith in your ability to "use" the submissive partner in a way that is satisfying to both parties. A long-term D/s relationship requires a dominant to take responsibility for the submissive's well-being and growth as a person.

Submission is the act of gaining emotional pleasure and satisfaction from turning one's will over to another person. It is an act of deep trust, whether it is for an hour, a weekend, or a lifetime. It is not about being a "doormat" or "codependent";

ideally, a submissive is a strong person who carefully chooses a trustworthy partner to submit to, and uses good judgment and a great deal of negotiation in order to ensure their safety before jumping in.

There are many different contexts and roles used in dominant/submissive pairings, limited only to the imagination of the couple in question. Some of these are listed in the chapter on D/s archetypes; there are enough of them that people ought to be able to figure out what suits them best without having to resort to ill-fitting stereotypes.

In a service-oriented relationship, the focus is on how the submissive can contribute resources to the dominant partner, provide for some of their needs, or advance their goals. These relationships may or may not also include romantic feelings. Some service-oriented submissives need their service to be ensconced in a romantic relationship; others are fine with being the houseboy or maid of a dominant with whom they are neither partnered nor emotionally involved, and sometimes not even sexually involved. In these cases, the relationship is a vehicle for them to perfect their path of service. In a non-service-oriented relationship, the dominant tends to do more for the submissive than the reverse, while gaining satisfaction from controlling them.

Most D/s situations are short-term, and/or highly restricted. A small number of folks settle into full-time dominant-submissive relationships, but these are rare and not easy to maintain. Some go even further and become master/slave relationships, where one partner has consensually agreed to be fully owned and controlled by the other. Unlike the frequency of this dynamic in BDSM pornography, however, these are rare cases and most of the people in any given BDSM community keep their D/s play much more limited. Many, if not most, of the “slaves” in any BDSM demographic are being “slaves” for the night, or the weekend.

Dominance and submission are controversial subjects in the Pagan community, with its emphasis on freedom. Some people are troubled by the very idea of it, even if it is

completely negotiated and consensual on the part of each person. If you know little about it, it can be easy to cast the dominant as a selfish, controlling, abusive individual (or even a crazed psychopath), and the submissive as a brainwashed, codependent victim being blindly used for harmful purposes. This has led to a great deal of argument from people who object to the concept that anyone could freely and intelligently agree to such a thing. D/s practitioners who defend their choices are often dismissed as deluded, especially when they are the submissive partner.

The argument seems to go like this: "I find the idea of being in such a relationship to be horrifying. Therefore, I can't imagine why any sane person would do it. Therefore, anyone who does it must be insane by definition. Therefore, anything they say to explain or defend it must be a product of delusion and cannot be trusted." It's a circular, and rather insulting, argument that intelligent and open-minded people shouldn't be tempted into embracing through their own subjective biases. After all, real freedom ought to mean the right and ability to choose any sort of consensual lifestyle, whether it is the sort of thing that most people might want or not.

Another issue that some folk have with D/s is the fear that justifying such a relationship between people who have consented to it might eventually be used as ammunition to justify forcing nonconsenting people into such relationships as well. This is especially worrisome to women, who fear that it may be used to make them second-class citizens. While I can't assuage anyone's subjective fears, I can point out that the activities of a small minority of perverts is unlikely to ever be reflected in widespread legislation. I might also point out that nearly all active BDSM community members are fiercely in favor of any individual's right to choose their own sexual and romantic activities, and are not the sort to push for forcing any one path on innocent bystanders.

Switch: Someone who enjoys both sides of any of the top/bottom, or dominant/submissive, or sadist/masochist pairings. An individual could switch between scenes, or

between lovers, or even do both at once within a multiple-person scene with a hierarchical power structure.

Safeword: This is any out-of-context word used to stop a scene. It might be anything from “dishwasher” to “vanilla” to “mercy”. Some people use a series of three safewords—“red”, “yellow”, and “green”—for levels of discomfort ranging from “slow up on that sensation” to “stop everything right now”. There are good reasons for having specific words for making the action stop; the traditional one cited, of course, is that the bottom may want to play with being able to yell “No!” or “Stop!” as part of the drama of the scene, without actually meaning it, and so there needs to be a separate word to stop things for real. Another good point about safewords is that the bottom actually has to think about them in order to say them, so stopping the scene is more likely to be a conscious act and less likely to be accidental and reflexive.

Using a safeword is sometimes spoken of in verb form, as in “She safed when I did that” or “I had to safe”. At some public scene parties, the house rules may state that the default safeword is “safeword” or “safe”. Tops also have (or ought to have) safewords; I don’t know how many tops I’ve known who threw out their back or cut themselves in the middle of a scene, and needed to stop everything. Although they don’t like to admit it, things can get psychologically intense for a top as well, and they need to learn to be all right with their own need to slow down.

Sadist/Masochist: This pairing is about the giving and taking of pain. The sadist is someone who enjoys inflicting pain on someone. Usually, the word is used specifically about someone who becomes sexually aroused from inflicting physical pain and (sometimes) emotional suffering on another human being. The opposing term, masochist, is about someone who has the ability and desire to get pleasure—ideally but not necessarily sexual arousal—from having pain applied to their body (or in some cases from emotional suffering).

There is a lot of talk among SM players about endorphins and their role in SM practice, but endorphins are by no means the only explanation for why masochists find intense sensation to be desirable. While we deal with this more thoroughly in the chapter on Sacred Pain, let it be said that there are many different kinds of pain, and many different places to go with it. Some want the endorphin rush that sweeps them away. Some want pain that shocks them, keeps them awake, makes them feel alive and inhabiting their bodies. Some want pain because they've eroticized certain kinds and it makes them hard or wet, from a bite on the neck to a thorough spanking. The idea is that after your senses have been on overload for a while, strong sensations blend together, and pleasure and pain intermix. But it's really something that has to be experienced properly; we can talk all day until we're blue in the face and it still can't be understood through words.

Sadism is more tricky, and less savory to most people. It seems to be basically a fetish, in the sense of something that you have become conditioned to find sexually arousing. Despite popular ideas, sadism does not make you evil or crazy. If you've got it in you, though, you have hard choices to make about what it is ethical to allow yourself. A sane, reasonable, conscious sadist will simply go look for a consenting (and ideally enthusiastic) partner, and otherwise control themselves. The sadist who lets loose in nonconsensual ways on random people is not being reasonable and conscious, to say the least. However, as any masochist will tell you, it's far more satisfying to receive pain from someone who is honestly enjoying it than from someone who is merely indulging you. Sadists are necessary and vital, to some people's practices, anyway.

Play: Some folks in the BDSM community will refer to what they do with each other as "play", regardless of how serious it is. Some will refer to it as "work", no matter how much fun it is. Some will differentiate between purely recreational BDSM and serious ritual or emotionally cathartic scenes by referring to the first as "play" and the second as

“work”. As of this moment, it’s impossible to discern immediately which sort of individual you’ve got, so asking further questions is probably a good idea for better communication.

Ritual: This word varies depending on what community uses it. For Pagans, it’s a (sometimes repetitive) set of symbolic actions that are done with deliberate and conscious spiritual purpose. For people in the BDSM community, it usually means some sexual or fetishistic act that is done over and over again the same way. For those in the body modification community, a “ritual” cutting or piercing or other bodily change is something done for the purpose of experiencing the process of doing it, not permanently modifying the body. For those who straddle communities, it can have any combination of these meanings. For purposes of this book, I use the first meaning.

Fetish, Fetishism: In anthropology, a fetish is an object to which magical powers are attributed; when the term is extended to sexuality, it indicates any object besides a complete human body that causes sexual arousal for some people. The best known object fetishes are for items of clothing, especially those made out of particular materials like fur, leather and rubber, boots and shoes, or specific parts of the body such as breasts or feet. One can also have a fetish for certain kinds of activities.

From an animistic Pagan point of view, it’s useful to compare the original meaning of the word “fetish” to its current sexual meaning. The truth is that a sexual fetish can indeed be used as a magical practice, and a sexually fetishized item can be imbued with specific energy from regular usage. For instance, imagine a female-bodied but male-identified individual who continually wears and frequently uses a favorite strap-on dildo for solo and partnered sex, and who uses that cock as a way to “shapeshift” and envision herself as male-bodied. In this case, a sexual fetish has become a magical

fetish, an object that, when carried or used, bestows magical powers on the bearer.

Fisting, Fistfucking, Handballing: A form of advanced sexual yoga in which the whole hand is carefully worked into the vagina or anus. This technique requires experience, patience, and a lot of care and lubricant. Usually the participants work up to it over a period of time which can take as long as several months. This is an advanced “opening” technique that can be used as an ordeal, or as a magical working to psychically “open” someone. See the chapter on Sacred Penetration for more information.

Bondage: The use of confinement or restrictive movement to control a bottom/sub with the intent of heightening awareness and receptivity to pleasure, or to make them feel more psychologically “captured” or “trapped”. Can be done with ropes, chains, straps, or all sorts of other things. There are plenty of good books out there on how to do bondage correctly, although learning live in an apprenticeship situation is the best way to go about it.

SSC: Acronym for Safe, Sane, and Consensual, which is the current social credo of the mainstream BDSM community. The idea of SSC is that all responsible adults participating in any form of BDSM ensure that the encounters are physically, emotionally, and psychologically safe, that they stay within the limits of what is reasonable/sane activity, and that all parties involved have given their full consent to the activities.

Some individuals in the BDSM community feel that there are problems with the credo of SSC. Their objections lie around the concepts that nothing is entirely safe and that those who choose to engage in risky activities together have the right to do so; that what is “sane” and “insane” is sometimes judged subjectively and unfairly by a viewer with biases, and that consensually agreeing to give up consent for a period of time is not tantamount to forced abuse. “Risk-Aware Consensual Kink”, or RACK, is a term that was coined in

reaction to this dissatisfaction regarding the political issues surrounding the SSC ethos. Specifically, RACK is intended to embrace edgeplay and play that is engaged in without safewords.

Edgeplay: Play that is seen as more unusually risky than the majority of BDSM play in the scene community. It can refer to emotionally volatile play as well as physically dangerous activities. The problem with this word is that what is edgeplay to one person is every Tuesday night's fun activity to another; it can be (and unfortunately tends to be) used very subjectively, as in "if I don't like it, and the idea of doing it makes me uncomfortable, it's edgeplay".

24/7: A term for people who live in full-time D/s relationships.

Squick: A slang term for a reaction of disgust, distaste, or distress, as in, "That squicked me! Ick!" when something goes beyond the borders of someone's emotional comfort.

Protocol: The system of formal, structured responses that a submissive learns in order to know what is appropriate for them to do in any given circumstance. Protocol can range from high ("Sir, how may this slave serve you, Sir?") to low ("Umm, Mistress, honey, your skirt is tucked into your waistband; let me get that for you...") and it can also range from fetishy and blatantly sexual (such as having a submissive stand or move or speak always in a way that reinforces the sexual servitude of their position) to completely reserved and asexual (such as might be required of a high-class valet or waiter).

Protocols vary from couple to couple, and from local subgroup to local subgroup. There is really no general agreement on a single sort of protocol for dominants and submissives, and many wars have been fought over that fact. The best protocol, of course, is the one that works most comfortably for the individuals in question.





Part II:
Sacred Rain

Sacred Pain: S/M as Spiritual Connection

Most people spend their entire lives attempting to avoid pain. It's seen as the ultimate evil, or at the very least proof of its presence. To a healer, pain is the body's way of telling you that something is wrong, and should be corrected. Those of us who use pain as a tool may seem crazy or harmful or self-destructive to most people, because they don't understand what it's good for, and they can't imagine any effect that would be worth enduring it. However, the Ordeal Path is as old as mankind, and our ancestors have worked out quite a few ways of using it as a tool. It's not a question of whether we *should* use it; we already are, and we had better get good at it.

On its simplest level, many masochists use the phenomenon of "runner's high" to explain their hobby to outsiders. Runners and other athletes have long extolled the agony point to which they push their bodies, where it feels like "hitting the wall", and they can go no further. If they manage to keep going beyond this, the body's supply of natural morphine—endorphins—kicks in, putting the subject in an altered state where they feel serene, detached, somewhat ecstatic, and feeling no pain. It's the same bodily phenomenon that is exploited by folk in India who shove spikes through their cheeks as part of religious ceremony; it's a perfectly valid way of creating a spiritual altered state, at least as useful as taking entheogens or meditating for five hours.

Of course, since we so often do this in the context of sexual play, people tend to give us the hairy eyeball over it. Athletes

in their Spandex shorts are healthy and clean-cut, and idolized as American icons; even ethnic people doing their various public rituals can have a National Geographic-style acceptance—"well, it's ethnocentric to deny them their ancient rites, so I suppose it's all right... for them." But in this sex-phobic culture, the fact that we mix pain with sex seems to give it a seedy, sleazy, and even abusive flavor.

At the same time, sex is one of the few places where many modern Westerners, in our cushy padded lives, actually brave discomfort and don't run from it. Unless we are the unlucky ones with chronic illnesses, we generally don't suffer through pain very patiently. But in the throes of sexual passion, we endure bites on the neck, vigorous thrusting, and other rough activities that would be uncomfortable without the buffering energy (and brain-chemicals raised by sexual arousal) of a sexual encounter. Many people can relate to the idea that sexual arousal helps the human body endure pain, if they can get around their phobia of sex in general, and as a tool of magic in particular.

On the other hand, not all—or even most—variations on the Ordeal Path also combine their energies with the Path of Sex Magic. While ordeals that involve sexual activities get the most press—largely because the public finds them horrifyingly titillating—there are just as many people who seek out pain ordeals that are entirely nonsexual. There is a strong streak of this in the slowly growing modern primitive movement, with their emphasis on (often painful) body modification, and borrowed tribal techniques such as hook suspension.

There is also that the growing emphasis on public play parties in the BDSM community—private places where invited guests can get together to perform scenes in front of each other—has led to the phenomenon of people getting together for spur-of-the-moment nonsexual painplay. Some play parties have rules prohibiting genital contact for various legal reasons; some parties have rules of agreed-upon sexual monogamy that do not consider nonsexual painplay to be

infidelitous. Twenty years ago, play parties were much more explicitly sexual. Today, while there are still plenty of lovers who do clearly sexual activities at parties, there are also just as many who will request a nonsexual whipping for reasons entirely unrelated to their genitals. When spiritual ritual is brought into the situation, the proliferation of nonsexual rites rises dramatically. Most ordeal masters—priest/esses who will facilitate and preside over someone's personal ritual—prefer not to be all that sexual with their clients, for various reasons discussed in the chapter on Ordeal Masters. This has brought sacred pain out of the bedroom and into the circle in ways that do not violate people's bonds of intimacy. In some Pagan circles, it is beginning to be accepted as a viable and legitimate technique of magic, worship, and self-transformation.

Pain, as a magical/ritual technique, can be generally sorted into the following categories:

1. Pain to achieve an altered state, via brain chemistry, in which one can connect with the universe, or do some kind of magical work such as directing energy for a spell. In this technique, which can of course also be done alone, the bottom is the primary magician and the goal of the scene is to get them "there", wherever "there" is, so that they can do "something". The top's magical job is to get them to that point.
2. Pain to create energy for the top to work with. When the body is in pain, it gives off a great deal of energy, which is accessible to many magic-workers. In this case, the top is the primary magician, and the bottom becomes one of their tools.
3. Pain to bring people back in touch with their bodies. This is an especially good technique for those who go into trance easily (and likely don't need pain to do it), but have trouble reconnecting with the physical.
4. Pain as a sacrifice, usually to a divine power who appreciates such things.

5. Pain as a strength ordeal, to build courage and self-worth by enduring agonizing things.
6. Pain as an emotional catharsis, in order to tap into deep negative feelings and expunge them. In this case, the pain is used as a trigger to unearth issues that need to be brought out into the light for healing.
7. Pain as a way to please a partner who is a sadist.

Coils of rope surround him like an extension of his lover's hands, immobilizing him. At the same time, he feels something like a fly caught in the web of a great spider, some huge bloodsucking predator that is coming to take him. At any moment now, he will feel its bite...

...and there it is. The first blow of the whip makes his body recoil against the bondage in a reflexive arc. The weal burns red-hot on his shoulder, like a line of fire. But that was just a warning shot, the call to pay attention. The next blow is softer, the first in a long line of rhythmic dancing up and down his back and buttocks. He breathes, out with the blow, in again with the poised space between them. In and out. The rhythm is like an extension of the web, spiraling around him. His hands grip the ropes over his head, palms slippery against the smooth coils that bind his wrists. The ropes against his hands and the growing heat of his back are all he is aware of. The rest of his body is slowly falling away.

A pause, then a harder whip. The pain increases, the rhythm quickens and he can no longer keep breathing with it. In and out are now each laced with the sharp redness of blows. It's hard now, not the easy waltz, but a violent dance with a partner who drags him stumbling around a dance floor of spikes. I can't bear it, he thinks, I can't take this, but somehow he does, and then it happens. His arms stretch against the ropes like wings opening to fly, and then he is lifted out of his flesh. Ecstasy pours through him; the blows are still there, still strong, but now they are like the hoofbeats of a running horse that he rides, its muscles bunching as it thunders beneath him. The pain is not longer his enemy, but his mount to bear him. Stars spiral around his head, the web of the universe spinning, woven into the ropes that hold him, and there is nothing in the world more important than this.

The kind of pain that works best as a tool of altered states is not the sort that is necessarily best for killing someone, or immobilizing an enemy. To work properly, it should be able to be sustained at the same level for a long period of time, or be adjustable as needed. It should not cause too much in the way of physical damage, because that might make you pass out and miss the entire experience. It's carefully controlled, carefully orchestrated pain, not random flailing, and the best way to work with it is to do it slowly and with attention to the reaction of one's body. This isn't just about safety; there are plenty of books and people to teach you how to do S/M without injuring the bottom. It's that if things go wrong, you will lose the thread of altered consciousness that takes you There, wherever There is.

Cultures all over the world have explored ways to use the power of pain as a spiritual tool. After all, it's cheap, it doesn't require rare plants prepared a certain way, the dosage is more adjustable, you can get dramatic effects quicker than with meditation, and all you really need is your own body. The Lakota tribe of the western plains of America pioneered the Sun Dance, where people suspended themselves from piercings behind their pectoral muscles, or pulled against piercings through the skin of their chests, until they saw visions. In the Hindu Kavandi ceremony, worshipers carry huge shrines in parades borne by masses of large steel needles through their flesh, and others dance in the street with fruit and bells attached to their skin with sharp hooks. In parts of Indonesia and Malaysia, spirit-possessed folk put spikes through the skin of their cheeks as part of inducing a trance deep enough to allow the spirits to enter. The technique of applied pain is probably older than that of psychoactive substances. It's been around as long as our brains have been sophisticated enough to consider using our bodies in more than instinctive ways.

Most people prefer to utilize altered-state pain by starting slowly and working up the pain level bit by bit. Like joggers, there's usually a point where one "hits the wall", and feels as though one can't go any further. It's getting beyond that point

that induces the body to create the right chemicals. However, a few folks have found that a quick escalation of severe but non-injurious pain works better for their own biological triggers.

I should also put in a disclaimer that not everyone can use this method. Some people just don't make many endorphins, or their bodies are so slow in making them that the damage would have to be injurious before it would happen. As with anything, people's unique neurochemical makeup should be respected. On the other hand, most people are far more resilient than they believe.

She is spread-eagled on the ground, her wrists and ankles tied, her face pressed into the grass. Even with the hot summer night and the sweat forming in the crevices of her body, she shivers a little as she hears her mistress give the invocation, right over her head. Heavy leather boots straddle her body, pressing into her ribs on each side; boots that she has lovingly tended with her tongue on other nights, but not tonight. Tonight she is a tool for a purpose, willingly offering herself on the altar of need.

She hears her mistress's strong voice calling out to the spirits of the elements, but the words flow over her like the tide and do not penetrate her ears. She moves against the restraints and the tide flows between her legs, ebbing and throbbing. The voice goes silent, then a heavy form drops onto her from above. She can feel bare breasts against her back, and the zippers of a leather jacket like cold streaks on her shoulder blades. Warm lips kiss the back of her neck. "Are you ready?" asks the husky voice above her.

"I am ready," she whispers. Permission given. The weight and warmth of her mistress's body is suddenly gone, and she shivers again, feeling naked and exposed, before more than just her lover's eyes. Then the first line of the next invocation rings out into the air above her, and a screaming line of fire rips across her buttocks. The cane, she realizes as a high wail tears itself from her lips. Another string of words from above, and then the strike again, and this time a full-bodied scream as the marks cross each other.

Her fingers dig into the grass and soil as she sobs. This will not be a slow build-up; her mistress needs maximum pain to work with.

A dear friend and lover of theirs has been in an accident; they are not sure if she will live. This is an emergency situation, and it calls for heavy magic. As the blows fall, between the agony, she wills the red cloud of pain to move upwards, into the hands of the woman she knows stands above her, giving her the red sparking haze to work with, to weave a spell that will turn back Death.

The long strings of words resolve into a simple three-word sentence, one she can understand. "She will live!" calls out the voice above her, urgent, desperate, forceful. The cane falls again, and her body shakes like a leaf.

"She will live," she whispers into the grass, the soil beneath her lips, echoing back the magic words. Mother Earth, hear us, and do not take your daughter into you so soon. We drive back the darkness with fire, she thinks, as the fire falls on her one final time, like a lightning strike from the sky.

Pain is an extremely intense pattern of energy, and it can be used either by the recipient or by the inflictor. For the recipient to use it, they must be clear-headed and experienced enough to keep focusing energy even through the haze of agony. This method is often stumbled upon by solitary practitioners of magic, usually via the sacrificial method. On the other hand, someone who is experienced in moving the energy of other people around can utilize the pain of a sexual or magical partner and direct it where it needs to go. This method is often used by magicians who happen to be tops, and who have bottoms who are willing to lend their bodies to the effort.

Sex magic in general teaches the use of sexual energy, and especially orgasm, as tools for working one's will. Generally, the arousal energy builds up, and then the spell is released during orgasm. However, orgasm itself only lasts a few seconds. Pain, skillfully applied, can have the same intensity-level as an orgasm, but it can go on for a much longer time. This gives the magician in question a greater period of time to work with that peak-energy. Pain is also a lot easier to guarantee than orgasm, and a lot harder to become distracted from.

When the top is using the bottom's pain for magical purposes, it works best if they are strongly linked into the bottom's astral body and energy system; in other words, the technique works best with people who have worked together before and are very familiar with each others' reactions. The top needs to know how to draw the pain-energy out of the bottom and utilize it, and it helps if the bottom can push the pain towards the top as well.

Yesterday, he sat in trance for four hours, journeying out of his body. It was a quest for a client, the woman who sat weeping before him, who was missing a piece of herself. He found it, tracking down the long lines of her pain and sorrow, through the Otherworlds where it had fluttered away. He had captured it, put it into a jug of energy-charged tea which she drank, letting it reenter her body. She was purified, blessed, and sent home.

Last night he had done the usual things, grounding and centering and pulling energy up from the earth. He had eaten well, and slept, but today he still found it difficult to focus. His awareness was diffuse, spread beyond his body. His astral self was still finding it hard to stay confined within flesh. If he did not remedy the matter, he might wake up somewhere he did not intend to go.

Fetching his whip of skins with pastern bones braided in, he sent for his assistant. Wordlessly, he held it out; there was no need for explanation. His assistant had been with him for a long time, and knew what was needed. He knelt in prayer for a moment, then removed his clothing and stretched out naked on the bed, face down. When the first blow fell, he allowed himself to cry out. The voice sounded like it belonged to someone else, like it came from far away. The blows kept falling, with no rhythm, no pattern; there was no way to take this sensation and use it for any kind of mind-alteration. It was pure hell, and it brought him sharply back into his flesh. After a while, it was no longer a stranger's voice crying out from a distance, it was his own voice, wailing from a dry throat. He was thirsty, and hungry, and hurting, and he could feel every fiber of the blanket under him.

His assistant pounced on him, biting with fierce jaws, leaving a trail of pain down his throat and side. Sharp nails dug into his

biceps, gouged down his chest. Later, those same hands would apply healing ointments and repair the body that he had won back once again.

Some magical practitioners don't use pain as a road to altered states, but for the exact opposite reason: to come back *into* their bodies. If you're the sort for whom trance states are easy and almost natural, and you spend a good deal of time out of "normal consciousness", you can end up spacy and dissociative. Experienced trancework practitioners have discovered that, after a while, getting back into the body and staying there—and really connecting to it, not just reluctantly inhabiting the top eight inches—can be as difficult of a problem as getting out once was. For some of them, applied noninjurious pain is a useful tool in this way.

Generally, people who use pain as a way to trance out are not the same folks who use it as a way to come back; it seems to appeal to tranceworkers with very different wiring. There are a few, however, who are able to use pain for both purposes. Applied pain for forcing someone back into their body is different in nature than pain used for leaving; it should be intense and almost random, with no rhythm or slow buildup. The intent is to make the subject completely unable to tune out and disassociate themselves from their body's feelings and responses. This may be emotionally difficult, especially for those who are various degrees of ambivalent about having to be in a body at all (and may have taken up trancework in order to get away from the disliked flesh existence). It is, however, an extremely valuable service.

Some people also find pain very focusing, and emotionally useful, in that it drives out everything else, at least temporarily. Many self-cutters have discovered that pain silences the myriad of angry voices in one's head like nothing else will. Some folks with neurological disorders, such as certain forms of autism, describe the strong and specifically applied sensation of SM play as a way to drown out all unwanted and unblockable random sensory input. They

reported that it left them calmer, more centered, and more able to deal with life.

She sits before the altar, centering herself. It is the night when the veils between the worlds are thinnest, and it is time for her to pay a debt.

She had asked a bargain of a dark goddess, a Lady of Death, and Power. She had cried it out in her need and desperation, promising an offering of her own pain if only she could be healed of this one thing. She had not truly believed that it would work, but somehow a miracle occurred and her wish was granted. Now she sat before the altar she had hastily built, ready to make an offering of gratitude.

The altar is set with candles, salt, a chalice of well water, a goddess figurine. There is also a sterile scalpel blade, alcohol wipes, tweezers, and a rubber strap that has been cleaned with bleach. She breathes, sings, chants, then opens the scalpel package and carefully inserts the blade into the handle. She breathes again, steadies her hand, and then lifts her left forearm. On its back, on the opposite side from all the delicate tendons and veins, she has drawn a sigil in marker. She opens an alcohol wipe and goes over the area, purifying it mentally as well as physically. Carefully, with utmost concentration, she draws the scalpel with a feather-light touch along the black lines, watching them seep with tiny red drops.

First blood, then pain. The scalpel is good for drawing blood skillfully, but it hardly hurts, and there needs to be more for this offering. She lays down the scalpel on the east side of her altar – the side of Air, and blades – and picks up the rubber strap. Steeling herself, she smacks the cutting with the strap, and her breath catches in her throat. For a moment, she is stopped, bent over and cradling her forearm, and then she forces herself to sit up and do it again, and again. Once for each of the names of the dark goddess whose gift this is.

The blood is welling forth, now, brought to the surface by the smacks. She grabs more wipes and wipes it off, cleaning the shallow cuts. Taking the red-stained wipes in the grip of her tweezers, she holds them to the candle flame. They flare up blue and high, and then slowly darken and crumble to ash. The gift is accepted.

Pain as a sacrifice is nothing new, either. When you cut yourself and offer your pain and blood to a particular deity, what you are actually offering is the intense energy of your effort. Some deities, of course, would prefer a different sort of sacrifice. Nurturing mother goddesses would likely prefer that you do some good deed in their name. On the other hand, some deities of death and war will hardly look at you unless there's some blood and pain in the mix. It makes you completely focused, for that one moment, and they like that total focus; it makes you more likely to be able to hear them over a mind that isn't burbling with constant thought.

While many people think of the word "sacrifice" as negative, it can be positive as well. Pain can be given as an offering in a joyful and ecstatic context as well; one woman that I know dedicates the pain of every BDSM scene, ritual or not, to one or the other of her patron deities. It can also be a gift received as well as given. Pain can be seen as a gift from a Creator deity who gave you your flesh, or from a Destroyer deity who teaches you your limits.

He's leaning up against the wall, bracing himself. No ropes, no handcuffs, no restraints. Part of this trial will be his refusal to run away, even when there is nothing stopping him...except for his own honor. He glares at his hands, willing them to be glued to the wall. You will not move, he tells them. I will not move.

He hears the snap of the belt behind him, and flinches at the sound in spite of himself. "Are you ready, boy?" the man's voice asks, deep and foreboding, but with a curious gentleness behind it.

He adjusts his stance, stares down at his boots. You are rooted here, he tells his feet. I am a tree. You are roots, and you will not move. I will not move. "I'm ready, sir," he says, praying that his voice will not break and shame him.

There is a rattle, as the stone runes are shaken in their wooden cup, then silence, and he knows that the man with the belt in his hand is drawing a rune. "Tyr," says the man's voice. The youth nods; he knows that it is the warrior's rune. "That's number seventeen," the man says, and he nods again. Each rune has a

number of strokes that they have agreed on; it is the Gods who decide what his test of strength will be.

"I'm ready, sir," he says again, more softly. Then he waits.

He expects that the blows would start on his back; when the first strike of the wide leather belt comes across his bare buttocks, he cries out and jumps. The pain comes so swiftly that it nearly knocks the breath out of him. Gritting his teeth, he readjusts his stance and once again wills his feet not to move. The man behind waits patiently, letting him collect himself. "One," he gasps, and then lowers his head to wait for the next one. Warriors are strong enough to take whatever Life, Death, or their representative in flesh can dish out, and still survive.

Using pain as an ordeal to build strength and endurance is warrior work, the classic initiatory ordeal. This tradition is often found in puberty rites in tribal cultures, as a way to gauge whether the child is ready to become an adult, with all the physical and emotional hardship that will entail. It is also one reason why body modification and hook suspension is becoming popular among young people in modern Western cultures; there seems to be a driving need among many adolescents to prove their competence and courage to themselves by enduring a pain ordeal. Even for those beyond adolescence, this usage of pain can be tempering and exhilarating. These are the folks in the BDSM scene who proudly show off their bruises and welts the way warriors show off their scars. *I survived this*, they say, with or without words. *I survived this*, and so I can survive that business meeting tomorrow, that dentist appointment, this divorce, this impending illness. It proves that I'm tougher than I look.

"You're going to cry for me," he tells her through gritted teeth. "It'll be good for you. You need it. You know you do."

I'll die first, she says silently, glaring at him over the gag. For a moment he is just like her parents, who beat her throughout her childhood. They, too, wanted her to cry, and wouldn't stop until they saw tears. So she refused to cry, even though it meant a longer beating, until they lost interest or gave up or got distracted by

another sibling. It was the only way to win, to close down into a small hard angry knot and never open up again... except that's no way to live your life.

He slaps her, hard, again and again until her ears ring. Then he grabs her nipple and twists it until she gasps behind the gag. "I'm not your mother and father," he says to her, in an urgent tone of voice that she knows means he is willing her to believe it. "I love you. I care about you. I know that you need to get your tears back. And I'm not going to stop until you safe or cry. I can do that, you know. I can hold out longer than you."

I know you can, says another silent voice inside her head. That's why I asked you to do this. Hurt me. Please. Hurt me more than I can take, break through that wall, free the thousand years of rushing water that lies behind it, walk me down to the Underworld and bring me back safe... She gasps again as he grabs her and wrestles her onto his lap, face down. He grabs her bound wrists and hikes them up out of the way as his other hand begins to smack her ass, hard. She screams, muffled, and writhes on his knees, fighting him. "This is only the beginning," he says. "We're going to get there, you and me. You're not the bottomless pit that they say. I know where that bottom is. I'm going to find it."

She is thrown down again, like a rag doll onto the sheet of plastic covering the carpet. He sits on her, his heavy weight holding her down. A scarf blindfolds her eyes, and then she hears the sound of latex gloves being snapped on, the click of plastic bottles, the tearing of paper. Cold wetness bathes her breasts, and then his deft fingers pinch up the skin. A shaft of heat and pain lances through the fold of her breast, and she moans. As he lets go, she feels the needle twist in her skin.

"That's one," he says. "I have a hundred more. Let's see how far we can go."

In conjunction with the proper context and theater, pain can be used as a trigger to get through emotional problems and create catharsis. When we are in pain, many of our usual coping mechanisms can go offline. We can be temporarily thrown off balance, stripped of our usual defenses against our internal darknesses, and we can be forced to face them. In this

case, pain becomes the tool that breaks down the walls, and the rest of the scene or ritual needs to take into account what will be done afterwards to work with what lies inside. Keep in mind that this type of situation will need a great deal of aftercare, perhaps as much as the whole next day.

Using pain mainly as a mental catharsis can be frighteningly effective, but needs careful handling. Sometimes the best work of this kind is done when the submissive approaches or even exceeds their limits, and this needs mindful negotiation. This can also become one of the situations where the bottom is too paralyzed by internal turmoil to communicate effectively with the top about his or her physical state, so this needs to be talked about and taken into account. Playing with the edges of someone's physical and psychological stamina can have an amazing transformative effect, but if done badly it can make things worse. As much communication and planning as possible beforehand, and keeping the communication channels open as long as possible during the scene, is the best way to head off problems. It should also be stressed to the bottom that, especially in this kind of scene, there is no shame in using a safeword.

He is kneeling with his head on the ground and his ass in the air, arms bound behind him and secured to a hook in the ceiling. His ankles are secured to the floor, and a large rubber buttplug stretches his asshole wide open. Below it, his cock and balls hang defenseless, exposed. The leather hood over his head prevents him from seeing, but he can hear her soft footfalls as she pads over the cabinet to get another implement to use on his body. He is grateful for the respite; it means that he can slow his breathing down and get ready to receive another round of pain. His ass is already burning from the lashes that she has laid across it, and he has a good idea what part of him will be tortured next.

He's not a masochist, but he understands her needs, and he loves her, and he meant it when he promised to serve her. The collar locked around his neck is not a fetish item for him; it's the chain he willingly took on, the boundary of his universe. In a way, it's not

even love for his mistress so much as it is his honor. This is part of what she needs; it's his job to give it to her, and that's just the way it is. It is a sacred calling; he is John Barleycorn to her Hag With The Sickles, Sacred King to her Earth Mother, Ing to her Nerthus, Adonis to her Aphrodite. He is sacrificed, again and again, to the Goddess within her, and this is as it should be. And no true sacrifice was ever supposed to be easy.

She's back, seating herself on the floor between his spread legs. He feels her adjust herself, humming happily, and in spite of the pain he smiles under his hood and around the gag in his mouth; he has pleased her. Her small, quick fingers loop cord around his hanging cock and balls, and then the loops draw tight. He whimpers; that sensation always feels like he is about to be castrated. He reminds himself that Ing is often castrated before he is killed and thrown into the swamp. It is the order of things. First the unmanning, taking away the defenses, then the death, then floating in the swamp of tears. At the end, she'll take off his hood to make sure he is crying. Tears make her happy.

"You are my cup," she says softly, her hand cupping his stretched balls. "I shall drink from you. You are my meat; I shall consume you. You are my nourishment, for which I give thanks to the Gods... for their gift of you."

Her hands gently work him until he is hard, even in the constricting bindings, and now the blood can't flow the other direction and he will remain hard, no matter what happens. She picks up whatever it is that she's chosen – he can hear it brush the carpet – and then pain lances down onto his swollen cock, onto his bound, protruding ballsack. He keens behind his gag, and sobs, and waits for the next strike. After the unmanning, the death, or what feels like it. It is the way of things, in ancient times and now.

For people in dominant-submissive relationships, where the main thrust is not about painplay or any given activity but the ongoing psychological dynamic of hierarchy, pain is often used by the submissive as a way to show their surrender to the dominant partner. There is little that is a more blatant show of submission than the implicit or explicit statement, "My body is yours to hurt as you will." This is especially true if the

dominant partner is a sadist, and the submissive wants to please them by offering their body up to satisfy this need. Some such couples use pain as an agreed-upon punishment technique for perceived errors on the part of the submissive; others prefer to save it for pleasing the dominant partner without any “taint” of punishment.

Different people have different pain tolerances. It’s been noted by folks who play with pain that people who are already in chronic pain, or who grew up with chronic painful illnesses or disabilities, tend to make fewer endorphins and have a higher pain tolerance. Many of them learned young to dissociate themselves from their bodies in order to ignore pain, and had to relearn how to pay attention to it. One such individual reported that years of ignoring her body due to its chronic pain had led to her neglecting other health issues such as simple hunger and fatigue, and that it was SM that taught her to listen to her body again. Another individual, enduring lifelong chronic pain from a severe accident, spoke of how SM was a way to create pain that temporarily overrode the daily nonconsensual pain. He talked about how creating that pain deliberately gave a sense of power that could stand up against the helplessness engendered by his “ordinary” experience of agony.

On the other hand, one woman told of how she took up SM during a heroin addiction, and used it to help herself get clean. However, once clean, she discovered that her body was oversensitive to pain after years of chemical numbness and she had to work herself back up slowly over a period of years. Another individual who had been a heavy masochistic bottom in the BDSM scene for many years finally came to terms with the fact that he had been dissociating from his body the entire time due to chronic body hatred. When he came to terms with his body and worked on actually being present in it, he discovered that he could no longer endure the kind of pain that had been his play staple before.

There’s also that someone who can take an hour of hard “thuddy” sensation can be reduced to tears in minutes by sharp “stingy” sensation, or vice versa. As I’ve often said,

there is no such thing as a bottom with no limits. No matter how many whiplashes they can take, clamps on their genitals may undo them. No matter how much their back or ass can put up with, caning the inside of their thighs with a six-inch child's ruler may drive them to a safeword. These things need to be checked, and possibly explored if they are unfamiliar territory, well before elaborate ritual scenes where a safeword early on will have repercussions.

He stretches his arms to the sky; he is flying on the winged horse whose hoofbeats are the thudding of the whip, the beating of his heart. The swish of the thongs through the air is the sound of the wings, the wind that flies past him. This feeling has always left him cleansed, more purified than any prayer or meditation. When he comes down, it will feel as if the wind could blow right through him.

He will be laughing, and praising his Gods. Let me never forget that the flesh is sacred, he tells himself, the mantra that he sings to the pain. Let me never forget the gift of my body, that can do such feats of transformation, of pain into ecstasy. Let me never forget that the truth of the Gateway lies within.



An Intimate Look at Ritual Pain

by Mistress Damiana

(First printing in *Widdershins*: www.widdershins.org)

"A person can't be creative and conformist at the same time."
—J.A. Meyer, "Brick Wall"

The night is dark when we set out, with a cool silver moon the only illumination. I am blindfolded and bound as soon as we begin. I wonder where we are going, for one of the rules is that I must not know until after (and if) I endure the ordeal. It is a cold clear evening, and I can think of nothing but the knot in my stomach and the shaking of my knees.

We arrive at the appointed site; it smells slightly of hay, cows perhaps. It is frigid and crisp, and I am beginning to chill; I should have dressed more warmly. We enter some type of building; the blindfold is scratchy on my face, and I can't see, but it is warmer, and I sense other people. I hear the crackling of a fire. My bonds are removed, and my coat and gloves come off; the others are silent except for the terse instructions, "Take off your clothes!" I am wishing I were anywhere but here right at this moment. I am freezing, and they want me naked? I vaguely remember them telling me this ritual was skyclad, but I'd forgotten.

I am naked now, and warmer, but still feel as though I can't get warm enough. I kneel on the floor, which seems to be made of hard and uneven boards. My knees hurt, my shins hurt, my arms hurt, and there is a pain in my back that gets

worse as the seconds fly by. I am cold and colder, and the hair on my arms and the back of my neck stands up like a dog's hackles. I sense movement as they come for me.

I am afraid. I am inclined to say *forget it, I don't really want this*. I have no idea what to expect, and all of my worst fears flash before my eyes as someone helps me to my feet. My stiff legs protest with loud cracks and pops as I attempt to put my weight on them. I hope that I have used good judgment; all of my father's warnings come back to me, scenes from Rosemary's Baby and all of the stories about "Satanists" fly before my eyes. Can I trust these people? Do I know them well enough? I guess at this point I really have no choice. So I follow where they lead, carefully instructing me on where to step and when to stop.

I am in the circle now... no, not yet, I am only nearby. I can feel the proximity of maybe a dozen people. I can feel their breathing, their excitement. I am still frightened, fidgeting and shaking like a leaf. I hear the priestess's voice; it is familiar, and it comforts me. I hear her ask me if I wish to continue. I pause, then answer feebly "Yes," and I am brought in. I can tell I have entered the circle because it's so much warmer, and I feel it close around me. I feel momentarily safe; then I remember what I'm here for.

The ritual continues. Some parts are familiar, and I pass each test. I say the right things by some miracle of my memory or subconscious, and then the time arrives for the ordeal. I am asked to kneel again on the hard uneven floor. My hands are bound behind me; I am bent over in supplication when I feel the lash of the whip.

The whip goes up with a whooshing sound and comes down with a crack that slices the skin on my back as if it were butter, and it feels as if I am bleeding. I feel the pain, and the pain from my childhood comes up with it, up from deep inside of me. It comes bubbling to the surface as I count the lashes and hope each is the last. I feel tears squeezing out through my clenched eyelids under the rough blindfold. A thought about whether they will see me cry passes though my mind just as another lash follows on its heels chasing it away. I

allow the tears to come. I let the feelings surface, and I wail with the sound of an animal, a cat. I growl, and I resist moving away even as I feel my body grow warmer and warmer still. I think that blood must be running out of me at this point, and I pray to the Goddess that they will stop, as each of them lashes me with the cruel whip. I feel myself beginning to slip out of my body, and I hear my priestess say, "Stay with us, dear one, it is all for naught if you go away." So I try to focus my energy as I shift my weight on my knees, and the lash continues.

I don't know how many times I was lashed that night. I do know I was really surprised that there was no blood at the end; it felt so strongly as if the whip was cutting me. There were only some welts that went away in a day or two; I wore them like a badge of courage. Maybe it was the fear that made it seem so bad, or maybe something more happened that night than I can explain.

When this ritual took place, I was very young and full of myself, and I thought I knew everything. I didn't, of course, and the important thing is that this initiation served to point that fact out to me. I had begun in the Craft not taking it very seriously, and after the ritual I felt charged, changed; I was a different person from the girl who set out that night. I knew I had endured, and my childhood pain had been spent like so many coins as payment for my innocence.

Humans have utilized, and continue to utilize, pain in ritual to accomplish different goals: as a ceremony of purification, as a means to an altered state of mind, as a technique to travel astrally, as a healing for past pain and as an ordeal to suffer and endure before being allowed to move from one level to another, as in my first initiation. Why do we use pain in this fashion? As Doreen Valiente said, "The reason we use the scourge is that it works!" Pain stands as a proven technique for reaching the subconscious, raising energy and achieving altered states.

Pain is used as a marker for rites of passage. "The Olmec, Mesoamerica's oldest civilization, provides the earliest, and one of the most graphic illustrations of genital sacrifice,"

according to Wes Christensen. "A remarkable mural found inside a cave in the modern Mexican state of Guerrero, shows a crouching jaguar, symbol of the priest-king in later times, emerging from the stylized jaws of a serpent whose body, in turn, reveals itself to be the greatly enlarged penis of a human figure. The obligation of ritual blood sacrifice was one the Maya later shared with the other cultures that inherited Olmec patterns of ceremonialism."

A similar rite of passage that continues today, circumcision is a religious ritual that has been practiced in both ancient and modern times to mark the transition from boyhood to manhood. Circumcision is practiced today in Jewish culture as the religious ceremony it is. Modern-day mainstream medical circumcision is one example of how society can embrace a religious ritual and change it into a medical procedure. E. Royston Pike states: "Circumcision was practiced by the ancient Egyptians as far back as the Fourth Dynasty, or 3000 B.C., and probably long before that. The ceremony is clearly portrayed on a temple at Thebes. Circumcision is to be regarded as a ritual tribal mark or badge."

Tribal or "gang" tattoos are popular with young people as a mark of their allegiance; they also use pain as a ritual to enter into the gang. Called being "jumped in," the gang challenges and beats the initiate till they either give up, or until they can't move. Some people die as a result of this initiation. It shows their level of commitment to the gang, as well as how tough they are. They wear the tattoos of the gang proudly, to show who they are.

The body's ability to override the sensation of pain is incredible; when we are in pain, we manufacture natural substances much more powerful than most drugs. Some people get almost addicted to pain and body modification, as if it were a drug. Fakir Musafar is one of the most extreme body players that I have seen; he has been experimenting with all manner of body modification and ritual since the '50s. At one point, he whittled his waist to a mere 14 inches in a reenactment of the rituals of the Ibitoe from New Guinea, who use the *itiburi* (wide waist belt) as a sign of manhood. Fakir

says he "became an Ibitoe to see what it was like, and fell in love with the practice... The tight waist training of the Ibitoe teaches them that you are not your body, you just live in it." He adds, "Times have changed, people have changed. The way I see it is, people need these rituals so desperately; that's why piercing and tattooing have blossomed. People need physical rituals, tribalism... They've got to have it, one way or another."

The majority of the rituals Fakir does are reconstructions of tribal rituals that have been acted out for hundreds of years, like those of the Indian sadhus who sew coconuts all over their bodies, stitch fruit with chains to their backs or hang by hooks from their backs. Fakir hangs weights from hooks in his skin, puts clothespins all over himself, dangles a large weight from his penis and lies on a bed of razor-sharp blades. He has accomplished numerous enactments of these practices, which he has documented with pictures. When asked why he would want to do these extreme things, Fakir says, "We're suffering from a lot of repressive conditioning, which you can't undo in just a mental way. Most of it has to do with sexuality and sexual energy. If you get into any practices of other cultures, you're bound to be involved with a lot of sexuality in other states and guises that aren't even acknowledged as being in existence in this culture. And a good shamanistic answer to why do these things is because it's fun!... I mean, what's wrong with that? Is there a law against having fun?"

Fakir is also one of only a few white men who have performed the O-Kee-Pa Sundance ceremony, wherein the person pierces the flesh on his chest and puts claws, horns or hooks through it and hangs from the Sundance tree till the skin rips and he falls down, the duration of which may be many hours. This ceremony was illegal and relatively unknown to the white man until the film *A Man Called Horse*; then Fakir and famous body piercer Jim Ward made the film *Dances Sacred and Profane* in 1985, in which they included an O-Kee-Pa ceremony.

George Caitlin in *O-Kee-Pa: A Religious Ceremony, and Other Customs of the Mandans*, published in 1867, writes; "An inch or

more of the flesh on each shoulder, or each breast, was taken up between thumb and finger by the man who held the knife, and the knife had been hacked and notched to make it produce as much pain as possible, was forced through the flesh below the fingers, and was followed by a skewer which the other attendant forced through the wounds (underneath the muscles, to keep them from being torn out), as they were hacked. There were two cords lowered from the top of the lodge, which were fastened to these skewers, and they immediately began to haul him up. He was thus raised until his body was just suspended from the ground... The fortitude with which every one of them bore this part of the torture surpassed credulity." The ceremony used to be illegal; the government tried to outlaw the Indians' rights to their religious rituals. Some of those rights were not regained in court until 1967.

The assemblage is held each year at the summer gathering or Sun Dance to take part in the ritual; you must be Native American to participate, and every year they change the location where it is held. I have spoken about the Sun Dance with several people who have performed it, and I have seen the cruel scars the skewers leave where they tear the skin. The scarification is a badge worn by those who do the sacred rituals, a reminder of the experience, a medal of courage, an imprint in their skin of the climacteric of their life.

When I questioned Bear-Dreamer why he does the Sun Dance ceremony, he related his experience: "Our selves are the only thing we have to sacrifice. Everything else we offer to the gods has come from the earth; this is a way to give back to the Mother something which we did not get from Her. This way you spill your blood and endure the pain as your offering to Her."

Everything comes back around; there is nothing new under the sun. In many cultures, we find people inflicting pain on themselves and others; with sadomasochism (SM) recently become a cultural phenomenon, this sexual/sensual practice seems to have reevolved. It has even progressed into a bizarre

fad in the last 10 years. In the '70s and '80s, you had to really search for fetish clothing; these days, Madonna has made it a mainstream fashion statement. Studded black leather and chains appear on the runways of French clothing designers almost as often as in some gay bars. If it were merely a vogue, I wouldn't be all that interested, but SM has grown as a sexual penchant for people from the hip to the middle class.

No matter what class or educational background you hail from, enduring pain can give you an incredible feeling of power: power over your own body, power over your circumstances. If you can refuse to react to the pain, you can control your life.

There is an exchange of power that happens in SM that I have yet to find in many other places. Some SM activity may be understood as a ritual "sacrifice," with the person being tortured sacrificing their power, pain or blood to the person doing the beating, cutting or piercing. Some people are in SM for the endorphin "high" produced by the person on the bottom (the one being beaten or whatever), which is "empathed" by the top, who then gets a contact high. (This may also be true for many others in situations where people are inflicting pain, like phlebotomists, physical therapists and so forth.)

What is the enchantment of pain? Why are young people nowadays piercing everything visible as well as many of the unmentionable parts? What about tattoos? Talk about pain! I am also a tattoo artist, and I get wonderfully high from the pain I visit on my customers with the tattoo machine it's unavoidable. I ride their energy, their endorphins, for as long as they want to or can take it. It is a lot of fun, a harmless way to experience that high, and they gain something from it too. It's far superior to drugs; I actually get paid for it, and it's desirable all of a sudden, in a kinky sort of way! A tattoo as a rite of passage marker is a wonderful experience, as you may suffer from real pain as an ordeal, which is not unbearable, and it leaves a beautiful reminder of your process and transition.

The Craft has its own interpretation of pain in ritual; there are a number of traditions that employ flagellation. Doreen Valiente said, "Rumors and allegations have been frequent that present day witches make use of ritual flagellation in their ceremonies. The truth is that some covens do make use of this, and others do not. Those which do, however, have the warrant of a good deal of antiquity behind them; the truth of which has hitherto been obscured by the difficulties encountered by anthropologists and students of comparative religion, in the frank discussion of this subject. The reason for this seems to be that while strict moralists have no objection—indeed all are in favour—of flagellation being used for penance and punishment and to inflict pain and suffering; nevertheless, the idea of this very ancient folk rite being used in a magical way, not to inflict pain but as part of a fertility ritual, for some reason upsets them very much."

To learn, you must suffer and be purified. Are you willing to suffer to learn?

The Encyclopedia of Witches and Witchcraft states that "Religious mystics have used flagellation for centuries. In witchcraft, it is ideally light, slow and steady. Not all (witchcraft) traditions use scourging. Its use in those that do has declined since the 1960s." The reason the scourging is ideally slow and steady is that it should build energy. It begins slowly and softly, in my experience, and builds over time in rhythm and intensity, so as to mount the neophyte's rapture. Think of a musical piece that starts soft and slow and builds into a crescendo of power. It feels something like that.

In traditional Gardnerian and Alexandrian rituals, the scourge is employed quite readily to raise energy; there are numerous examples of this in diverse types of rites where this is apropos, for example during a third degree initiation. Gardner's Great Rite includes three sequential scourgings. Some observe that he was a bit too taken with the ritual asceticism and hint that he was "kinky".

Doreen Valiente replied to this, "What old Gerald had described is a very practical way of making magick. I speak from experience when I say that it does what he claimed it to

do, and I don't care about what anyone says about being 'kinky' or whatever. Perhaps it has become associated with 'kinky' sexual matters, but long before that it was part of a very ancient mystical and magickal practice. You can find mention of it in ancient Egypt and from ancient Greece; and no doubt you are familiar with the famous scene from the Villa of the Mysteries in Pompeii which shows a new initiate being scourged—a point which Gerald referred to in *Witchcraft Today*." Doreen added, "I disliked the elements of flagellation and bondage in the rituals at first, but I came to accept it for one good reason: it worked. It genuinely raised a cone of power and enabled one to have flashes of clairvoyant vision."

In my tradition, Sylvan, we used to practice ritual scourging as a suasion to dance the circle round, faster and faster. The high priest and priestess would stand bordering the circle of dancers and flail us with cats o' nine, to make us step in a more frenzied manner, so as to elevate the energy. We were then a skylad tradition, and when the dance climaxed, the priestess would motion and we would all fall to the floor as she funneled the cone of power. We don't perform skylad very frequently any more, and we don't dance the frenzied circle as we once did. We do continue to use various methods involving pain as tools to an end, such as an ordeal in an initiation.

I find it fascinating that more and more people are finding the tool of pain an appropriate one to use, whether they be modern primitives, Native Americans, SM dykes or witches. We, as a national culture, seem to be attempting to reclaim our lost rituals. Humankind is beginning to reinvent many rites and customs, some including pain.

Pain can act as a doorway to other realms; it can take you places you have never been. It is one thing that can definitely move you from one place inside yourself to another; in the initiation I related, it moved me from my childhood to being a true believer. It has moved me in many ways at other times in other places; if you can endure, you can triumph. I have used pain as a tool for growth, for sensory overload, to achieve states of bliss, as a tool for illumination, for achieving astral

travel, for inner exploration, as a tool for dramatic personal growth and for reliving and healing my past. These ceremonies have existed since the beginning; humans have a deep need for them, and to deny them is to deny our gods.

In the center of the circle stands a man; he has been challenged, has made the promises. He is asked if he desires the purification and the mark. He says "Yes," solidly, assuredly. People approach from three sides; a man and a woman go behind and beside him, to sustain him, to support him.

"By the fire that gives you strength, by the water that quenches your thirst, by the earth that holds the secrets of being, by the air that inspires you, by the fey that share their magic, the last stage of your purification has arrived... You must call upon your strength to help you attain the center."

The third woman stands before him with a glowing scarlet firebrand; the star blazes for a moment before she presses it to his chest. The smell of burning hair, a whiff of melting flesh, and it's over. He does not cry out. He is transported; you can see it; he has a foolish smile smudged across his face that he can't wipe off. He is positively in the center now, of the gods. It is a night he will remember always, and particularly any time he notices the star-shaped scar the brand left over his heart.

For a moment, in pain, he was one with the gods. If pain can assist you in attaining the center, why not use it? I say it can't hurt!

Dark Ecstasy: Dancing With The Shadows Of Our Future

by Morning Glory Zell

Several years ago, I decided that it was important to find out why all these Kinky-Looking Pagans In Fetish Gear were running around with whips and chains, sporting oddly dyed hair, weird tattoos, and (horror of horrors) shiny metal jewelry sticking out of very delicate and sensitive parts of their anatomy. Why did it seem that there were more of them at every Pagan festival I went to? Sometimes they were people that I knew and loved who seemed to have gone stark raving mad on some self-destructive course, rather like a Pagan version of Eugene Ionesco's play *Rhinoceros*, in which the protagonist watches in terror while everyone around him inexorably turns into rhinoceri while life goes on as though nothing unusual is happening.

By dealing with this phenomenon head-on, we can hopefully explore our bewilderment in a constructive way. For one thing, I think it's sometimes easier to read about things that bring up very intense feelings than to talk face-to-face with people who are waving your worst nightmares in your face and enjoying it. Certainly it can provide a little perspective; more light, less heat. The second important thing is that it provides a safe forum for all the kinky people to be able to explain what and why they do all this stuff, without having to worry that people might freak out and do hurtful

things to them nonconsensually. One of my beloved mentors in this area, Jay Wiseman, once offered me the following distinction: "I am erotically adventurous, you are kinky, he/she is a pervert."

Since I've started becoming more visibly kinky myself, a number of interesting things have happened to me (other than sexually). First, various "good Pagan folk" began treating me as if I had a contagious disease, and rumors of whether my private sexual practices rendered me "unfit to be a Priestess" began circulating behind my back. Next, various other "good Pagan folk" began approaching me nervously, saying, "Oh, good! You're one too, so I must not be that awful after all."

As painful as that was, I took it in stride because I figured that it was just my karma. I used to be outrageously intolerant of the whole BDSM scene myself. I had even done my level best to get someone banned from Church of All Worlds festivals because of their practices... a bad influence on the Children, don't you know. So my previous membership in the Hemlock League of Concerned Pagans entitled me to be tolerant of others' intolerance. Man, does the Dark Goddess demand some psychological contortionism at times, or what?

What happened to make me change my mind? The details of my personal transformation are deeply emotional, and I'd prefer only to share them privately and with the consent of my initiators, so I will only say that the Gods sent me the right person at the right time. And even though finding the right person to unlock an erotic mystery for you is a somewhat offensive cliché, it is nevertheless often true. Suffice it to say that I am grateful for being brought to my senses, and most of all for that First Time.

Once past the veil, the view is always clearer from the other side. People have always wanted to journey beyond this veil. They have used many different vehicles to achieve "ecstasy"—out of the ordinary states of consciousness. I shouldn't have to explain to a bunch of Witches and shamans why people would want to do this, right? But why Pain, you ask? The answer is as complex as each individual, but it really has to do with forming a relationship with pain that makes

sense. The “how” of this lies in the body chemistry and neuro-imprinting; the key ingredient is endorphins, although there is a Witch’s brew of other biochemical and hormonal elixirs released in the prolonged sensual states that can be achieved through BDSM, piercing rituals, and other so-called kinky practices, not all of which are sexual in nature. These biochemical boosters enable us to set the stage and power up the organism to achieve massive breakthrough experiences that are not accessible for many people by any other means.

The point is that if you can get there by these means, it is one’s Goddess-given right to do so... provided that it is consensual. Consent is what makes the difference between use and abuse. It is the cornerstone of the safe, sane, and consensual explorer of these practices. Consent is one of the most precious tools in establishing boundaries and maintaining them. Another key cornerstone is Knowledge; another is Power, and another is Freedom. These are the building blocks that house the Temple of our True Will. As Pagans of whatever tradition, we are dedicated to putting ourselves on the path of our own True Will and respecting the right of others to worship at the temple of their own, no matter how weird it looks or what color it’s painted.

I had a vision about a year ago while I was in a post-orgasmic altered state. I lay deeply immersed in the dark soupy biochemical Shadow Mantle of Gaea, free-floating in primordial time. I watched Her strange evolutionary processes transforming species, changing scales to feathers and fins to feet, and then my inner sight shifted to a scene at my favorite nightclub in San Francisco, the Bondage-A-Go-Go. I watched the eighteen-to-twenty-something set gyrating wildly to industrial, punk, and gothic blasts of visceral sounds, or flogging each other ecstatically while indulging in various gender-bending costumes and behaviors that displayed their exotic piercings. I asked Gaea what evolutionary force could be afoot in this most artificial and urban of environments, and the Voice of the Goddess spoke to me with a sound as invisible and inexorable as the wind. She told me that what I was seeing here was nothing less than Her own generational

experiment with the domestication of sexual violence in the human species.

By focusing on sexually imprinting an influential sector of the young of this species, the Dream Gaea is trying to turn our inevitable violent biological impulses from deadly abuse to a stylized, playful form of courtship behavior, the way birds and some mammalian species have modified aggressive fighting postures into dance movements. More animals survive this “mock violence”, and can pass on their genetic proclivities to such modified behavior. This courtship tactic is part of a very large strategy that encompasses martial arts, fencing, and organized non-lethal gladiatorial sports like football, and many other ways in which we can turn our raw animal violence into forms of Art or Play. Repressed, primordial reflexes rarely remain there; denying that they exist doesn’t make them go away. Back in the 1960s, the eminent animal behaviorist Konrad Lorenz wrote a book called *On Aggression*, which postulated that our species was in fact attempting to evolve beyond warfare by evolving stylized social behaviors such as bowing, shaking hands, and organized sports. I believe he was correct, but just did not go far enough.

Recently, my beloved Sister-Wife-to-be made an observation in a conversation with some other Church of All Worlds clergy. As she has spent most of her teens as one of our PNGs (Pagan Next Generation) with a strong Gothic bent, she said that games of dominance and submission give young people who experience them with each other an advantage of perspective. They can see through adult political posturing and find it, and us, amusing. The preciousness and survival value of such emotional X-ray vision are not likely to be easily surrendered because of mere adult disapproval, any more than the ‘60s generation cut our hair and stopped taking mind-altering substances just because our parents disapproved. BDSM and piercing are the doors of perception for many in this generation, just as LSD and marijuana were for mine.

The parental shock and horror are equally predictable and sometimes quite hypocritical; perhaps we are afraid of what ego games will be revealed about us when viewed through

this lens, and the last people we want to have access to us with our pants down is our kids! We always used to joke about what our kids would come up with to shock our liberated sensibilities... so welcome to the breaking of the Last Taboo in the new millennium.

Does this mean that all the kids (or anyone else) you see wearing black lipstick and leather are practicing BDSM? Probably no more than all the paisley-clad flower children were doing acid, but the odds are good that modern primitive knowledge is being transferred one way or another. Whether it's bondage, piercing, tattooing, or moshing in the pit, the style is not the substance, but it is still about vibrating on a collective wavelength. And it is within these wavelengths in the Collective Id that Gaea stirs Her cauldron of social change foreshadowing evolutionary metamorphosis.

The next time you see any of us denizens of iniquity flaunting our stylized wickedness, playing at being menacing villains and cringing pleasure slaves, or sporting steel in our tender flesh, remember *O Tempora, O Mores*—yes, these are just some times and customs that might not be as bad as we fear.



The Many Paths of Earthly Bondage: Bondage as a Tool Towards Spiritual Release

by Bridgett Harrington

I began my path towards bondage as an energetic tool at the age of six. In a household that I longed to run from, my baby Basque feet itchy and ready for the road, I wrapped my body in layers of electrical cording and big fuzzy blankets and created a cocoon. Inside my shell I was safe, protected. I created a psychic wall against the world by using my bonds as a tool to focus that protective energy, and that wall was never penetrated.

In religious writings, bondage is often referred to in the darkest of light—the bondage of the soul, the bonds that tie us to earth instead of leading us to Nirvana, bondage of earthly form. But bondage as an act, not as a state of being, has been antithetical to the vision of bondage of the spirit in my own journey. Bondage of the body can be a tool for release, a tool for strength, a tool for divination, connection, vitality, vision quests, meditation, and so much more.

Bondage as Connection

I only have two arms to hold you. Let my ropes be an extension of my form, let me wrap my love around you and keep you held in my arms longer and stronger than my old

limbs ever could. As I hold this length of hemp line in my hand, let me lock eyes with you as it passes from my will to yours, and brings us into a shared space, a sacred space, outside of our other worries. Let us dwell in each others' presence.

Let this line create a barrier between the outside world and our intent. Let us bond between the lines, let us read between the lines of our intent, let us find the truths buried in each others' eyes. Are not our eyes the window to the soul? If so, let those windows open wide as I wrap my loving about you, wrap my will about you, and bring out your secrets before me. Open those windows wide and expose those secrets to me between the parting lips that form the sweetest moans.

Struggle against my ropes, and know that I will give you safe harbor in these troubled times. In these times of pain and desperation, I offer up this as a safe space to be the true you that you cannot show to the outside world. Cry and show me your tears. Laugh and open up the songs of your heart. Let these chains that hold down your body give you a chance to hold nothing away from me. Open up your soul and let me peer in. In this do I contract to you, in this space before the Gods, that I shall give you safety while you struggle before me, that in giving up your freedom of the body I give you in return the freedom to fly.

Bondage as Divine Connection

Three lengths of rope coiled before me—natural and undyed for the Maiden, bloody red and meaty for the Mother, black and sooty for the Crone. There are three skeins for three phases, three skeins for three turns, three skeins to begin my ritual that evening.

I wrap the natural cord around my torso, binding up my heart in a reminder of times of youth, the possibilities of childhood. As the scent of grass fills the air, I am taken outside, beyond my concrete jungle, through each line that passes about my form. I can feel the warmth of spring light on

my skin flickering between the candle flames, and I know I am safe.

As I pick up the rich crimson and unfold the skein between my fingertips, I remember the possibilities of creation. I can feel my heartbeat and blood in my veins and am reminded of my creative potential—but my creative potential has been bogging me down, so the line needs another home—my ankles. I sit cross-legged on the floor and wrap the line three times around, breathing in with each wrap and feel the tension on my chest already present. I am grounding down. I am letting go of the outside world. I am opening up for the divine. I am opening up for Her. I am opening up for Him. I pull the line from my ankles up through my chest harness and pull down, forcing myself to bow before Their will as I let out my air and begin the journey with refreshed lungs.

Black and sooty in my hands, I can feel Her weight as I hold it in my hands. Bowed before Them I am open and exposed, but I am still dwelling too much on the now. I am counting time, and time has no place for those who forged the world with their fingertips. I double the line and begin to wrap it around my face. Beginning on my brow, I work my way down with each wrap, turning towards the sun then returning widdershins at the next road. I weave a path from my mind towards my heart, obscuring my eyes, my mouth, and filling my nose with the scent of the earth.

Bowed and prostrate, I am Theirs. I fold my hands before me, tucked beneath the lines of red, and begin my chants. Inside I open up my heart and expose all, my body no longer a concern. It's not going anywhere.

Five minutes pass, and my reluctant soul, that part of me trained into the instant gratification of Camp Fire Girl Cookies and Instant Messengers, emails and downloadable music, begins to fidget. I want a revelation now! I want to have it all laid before me on a golden platter. I want the answers spelled out as easy as "42" pronounced on high... and as I think these thoughts my body squirms and I feel the ropes around me. I am reminded that we are in a space between spaces. Gods do not work on our time schedule. This is not just about me.

I let go. I meditate. Time passes and my body fades away. My human limitations creep up on me in the form of a back cramp and I unwind the black, take back the shadow of darkness just enough to free my hands, loosen my crimson bonds, lay flat on the ground breathing in another full lung of air. Blindfolded, I retie my red, loop back into the black, and trance on. I wait.

I wait.

I see.

Nihilomancy: Bondage as Divination and Vision Quest

I have used bondage as a form of divination for many years. My favorite form of divination is what I call Nihilomancy, literally “divination from nothingness,” divination by sensory deprivation. Sensory Deprivation includes a wide category of activities, ranging from simple forms like blindfolds and earphones to complicated mummifications, enclosed tank systems, and more. By blocking out the world, the opportunity for bringing up wisdom from the depth of the soul through evocations is enabled. For others, blocking out outer stimuli can lead to an opening awareness towards the world beyond our own body and the astral journey ahead. Still others use sensory deprivation as a way to force the personal spirit down and allow their body to be ridden by a variety of god-forms or other universal truths.

When using Nihilomancy as a form of divination, I enter my altered state with a specific question in mind. Which path do I take? Where do I go from here? Which choice is meant to be mine? I then lay out my devices as part of my invocation—I *call upon thee, wisdom in darkness, truths of the soul, those who know the answers, hear my cry*. I invoke their will while laying out the tools for my journey—a spandex or leather hood, a blindfold, heavy sound-reducing earphones, scented oils or incense to take away outer scents of the world, shackles, rope

or cling film to take away my body movements. I hold that question in my heart with each tool applied, then walk into the darkness.

Sensory Deprivation and bondage can also be used as ritual tools in astral journeys. Purge the body ahead of time of fluids that could interfere with the journey, eat or fast as your journey dictates, and lay out the tools of your journey. Placing sigils or sacred items inside one's bondage, such as inside of a mummification wrap or straightjacket, reminds us of our journey towards wisdom and the gates of death. We place reminders on our body of the journey we seek, and with each layer and tool we take one step closer towards that path.

I strongly recommend that for in-depth astral journeys—especially using tools such as mummification—to find a team of one to three understanding practitioners to help you in your journey. The reason for this is fourfold.

1. The ritual of preparation using a group of individuals can often add to the determination of your own spirit to journey forth.
2. Having spotters or guides are useful to watch out for your body when you are gone—sometimes the spirit may not be aware that the body is in danger or that the body has been out of use for four hours and needs to see to bodily functions.
3. Your party may think of things you did not—water, dropcloths in case of bodily function issues, making sure your in-laws don't walk in.
4. Most importantly, guides can help you find your way back to your body after long journeys, wake your body slowly, and help you find the gate back into your flesh from astral realms.

I have also seen suspension bondage used as an important tool in astral journeys: The Hanged Man. Odin hung from the tree of life. Inanna left to hang over Erishkigal's Throne. Chest hangings to replicate the sensations of the O-Kee-Pa.

There is something magical about suspension bondage—being removed from the earth that we are so bound to in our day-to-day life; being held aloft by the skill of the person hanging us; the trust involved in being taken there. It can also be a very intoxicating tool for astral journeys and vision quests. Our bodies are literally removed from the earth, thrusting us into the unknown. All forms of suspension bondage require dedication and time to learn the techniques that can remove our bodies from the earth without harm, and allow the spirit to quest.

Bondage as Meditation and Yoga

Ropes and straps have been a tool in enforcing Yogasana poses for a very long time. Attaching a rope to a wall to increase the backbend in Cobra Pose (Bhujangasana) is very useful. Using short straps between the hands to stretch out one's shoulders to achieve Cow Face Pose (Gokukhasana) is fairly common. Taking the use of ropes and straps to the next level, using them to bind the body into a specific pose, is not an extreme jump. Modern practitioners of Yoga seem to forget that Yoga was not designed just as a tool for maintaining body form and flexibility—it is also about flexibility and form of the spirit through connection with our own soul and that of the Divine.

Common poses that I have seen used in conjunction with rope bondage include Anjali Mudra (Salutation Seal), Balasana (Child's Pose), Dhanurasana (Bow Pose—beware back issues), Gomukhasana (Cow Face Pose), Natarajasana (Lord of the Dance Pose—only in conjunction with overhead points), Padmasana (Lotus Pose), Paschimottanasana (Seated Forward Bend), Savasana (Corpse Pose—especially done when tied out to 4 points on a bed), Supta Baddha Konasana (Reclining Bound Angle Pose), Ustrasana (Camel Pose—beware back issues), Uttanasana (Standing Forward Bend), Virasana (Hero Pose), and Vrksasana (Tree Pose—only in conjunction with overhead points).

Does that mean that only if you do formal yoga poses can you meditate in conjunction with rope bondage? Not at all. Do what feels right. Work solo or in tandem with other practitioners. It is just another tool for purging the mind of thought so as to make way for revelation.

Bondage as Strength or Ordeal

Stickman is an old and dear friend of mine from Seattle, and I tell this tale for him. He has been a magical aide on more than a few journeys, and this is a tale of his journey at my side.

A traditional Kata (or style/technique) in Japanese Rope Bondage (also known as Shibari Do—the way of rope, or Kinbaku—to tie) is known as Aosagi, or Heron Pose. With a snug chest harness tied around the upper torso and arms, the torso is tied up to an overhead point as a safety line. A second set of lines is wrapped around one leg, usually at the middle thigh, and pulled upward, forcing the bound individual up onto the toes of one foot. This Kata is a reminder of the grace and style of the heron, who stands proud and is ever vigilant in her gaze and posture against those who would enter her domain.

For many individuals, this pose is exactly that—a graceful pose built to display the human form, expose the genitals for play, leave the person proud and beautiful while objectifying their vulnerability. For five to fifteen minutes, it is possible to stand, balanced on tiptoe, maintaining this grace and vulnerability... but my tale is not of that Aosagi. Mine is of Heron as the vigilant hunter—she who stands poised at the river's edge, and when the time is right, strikes down upon the unsuspecting creatures beneath her with a serrated bill. She who is proud and strong in her cruelty. She was who visited me that night and reminded me just how human I was, and how much I can endure and still stand strong.

In the Aosagi pose, the first complaint from the bound individual is usually that the leg that is on the ground is starting to cramp up. There are two choices in that situation:

fall forward and allow your chest harness to take all of your body weight, knocking the breath out of you and potentially bruising your ribs, or push up onto your bound thigh and suspend your entire body weight off of your compressed leg. It is possible to balance between the three, distributing the weight of your form evenly—but most humans do not have that level of balance to keep the weight distributed when a muscle cramps up.

My leg cramped up somewhere fifteen to twenty minutes after he bound me into that pose. I felt the fire starting down in my toes and at the base of my knee, creeping from each end of my calf to meet in the middle. I bit back a groan as the cramp built up from numbness into pain, and finally my singular right leg gave up and kicked backwards against my will. My body went limp for a moment and came fully aware again a quarter of a second later as my full body weight landed on the front of my ribcage and I let out a howl of pain audible three rooms down from where we had begun our dance. Stickman watched on, but I was oblivious, trying desperately to right my body once more, to fill my lungs again instead of gasping empty under the pressure.

I threw my head back, long hair that had been pulled up flinging out of its confines and flying wild as I used the strength in my neck to pull me upright again and balance on my free right leg. I gasped for air, but felt the cramp coming again, and tried to preempt it by leaning to my left and balance all of my weight on my left thigh. This lasted for some time, but I realized I was losing circulation in my left foot from all the pressure, and with the realization came a pause in my awareness until yet again I found myself landing on my own chest and howling in pain.

My guide stepped in at this point and asked if it was time to end the ordeal. He knew as well as I did that this was no longer about beauty, grace or sexuality. This was about being stronger than our bodies. This was about being stronger than the world. This was Phoenix needing to be burned to cinders to be born anew. Between the tears, I shook my head, long

auburn strands clinging to my wet cheeks as he stepped back and let my dance with Heron continue.

I have no awareness of time beyond this. I have been told that I danced with Heron for an hour and a half. All I know is that somewhere near the end of my dance, gasping for breath but unable to give in, I gave in, and Stickman lowered me to the ground still bound up in his hemp. I wore Heron's bruises as a badge of honor, and for months afterwards, and to this day, I am reminded that we are so much stronger than these bones of ours would have us believe.

Make Bondage Your Own

Bondage can be anything you want it to be. It is a tool, just as an athame, a scourge, chants and incense are all tools. I use bondage for meditation, ordeals, vision quests, divination, sexual play, a direct way to open myself up to the divine, a tool to connect with friends and lovers, an artistic tool for weaving art around someone, and so much more. Not all tools are right for everyone, but bondage is a wide category of activities, and a powerful tool for sacred work if used by an enthusiastic practitioner.

Perfecting rope bondage, or any other form of bondage, is a lifelong journey, just as perfecting musical training, writing, crafting, or any other skill. Does that mean you have to be an expert to enjoy bondage as a tool for your own enlightenment or personal exploration? Of course not. Start simple—a strap to stretch out your limbs in a yoga pose or a blindfold and sound-blocking earphones on your next inner quest.

Bondage of the body, not of the soul. Make bondage your own, and let your spirit take flight.

With My Ankles In The Air

by Bridgett Harrington

You joked
as you kissed me on the cheek
and promised me I'd get high tonight

You stripped me
out of my defenses
and replaced each layer of armor with rough cord

Hands thrown back
you held me in place
in my place in your arms

I let out a whimper
as you pulled me up from the days work
and into my potential

The sounds of world outside
died away
as something inside me was born anew
You joked
as you wrapped my eyes in silk
in your soft hands

Stop joking my heart cried out
and with that request
you yanked my fears away

Somewhere
between heaven and soil
you spun me like the moon

You stripped me
out of my defenses
and replaced each layer with rough cord

And I flew
hair wild below me
with my ankles in the air

High on your power
on my potential
on the air that kept me aloft

Aloft in your ropes
your lines
your spells of protection

Lowered to the ground
you joked that I was still flying
and I whispered out a simple plea

Just shut up
and let me fly
let me stay high
with one ankle in the air

Between Earth And Sky: The Ritual Art of Suspension

I know that I hung on that windy Tree
Nine whole days and nights,
Stabbed with a spear, offered to Odin,
Myself to mine own self given,
High on that Tree of which none hath heard
From what roots it rises to heaven.
None refreshed me ever with food or drink,
I stared right down in the depths;
Screaming, I seized the Runes
And then fell back to Earth...

– Havamal, from the ancient Norse

“Suspension has so many different reasons for me to do it.
Magic. Sensuality. Adventure. Trust. Sexuality. Ordeal.
Artistic Creation. Divine Calling. Flight...”

– Bridgett Harrington

“Sometimes...just sometimes, the presence of pain opens you
like a flower, exposing you to a very bright light that makes it
hard to hide.”

– Lydia Helasdottir

To be hung between Earth and Sky, to be suspended in midair, with nothing beneath your feet, and yet not fall...this is to be in sacred liminal space, the in-between. In many cultures, there World Tree holds the worlds suspended in its branches, with the dragon of Earth at the bottom and the eagle of Sky at the top. The Norse shaman-king-god Odin hung on the World Tree as an act of self-sacrifice to open the Cosmos and gain wisdom. In Irish mythos, the insane but god-touched poet Mad Sweeney lived in the trees, unable to come down. There is something about that space that is freeing, terrifying, and opens one to all that is Both And Neither.

Rope suspension is probably the simplest and safest version; it does require some training and technique in order to keep the person aloft without too much pressure on delicate nerves and blood vessels, but it is safer than flesh-hook suspension. Flesh suspension figures in myths and traditions all over the world. The most famous version in America is the Lakota Sun Dance, which was made famous in the movie "A Man Called Horse" and then popularized further by Fakir Musafar. In the past couple of decades, it has been quietly practiced by a slowly growing number of aficionados, who see it as a rite of passage, a test of endurance, a ritual of altered state, and many other things.

One bondage and rope-suspension top that I know specializes in making people feel safe while aloft. He uses elaborate webs of rope, and sometimes large rope nets, to keep his fliers both immobilized and completely supported. Unlike our dreams of flight, where we are active and perhaps move our body parts to help us in going, rope suspension is passive. The limbs are not free to move as one will, and there needs to be a strong sense of trust or panic will ensue. Most of my friend's fliers, however, report the experience to be highly meditative. Cradled in rope bonds, they swing gently with the mind and their smallest movements. Not having to worry about anything except the feeling of hanging in space, they often retreat inward and touch an inner sense of peace. When he brings them down, he tells them to be aware of the solidity of the Earth as their feet first touch the ground; to imagine that

this is the first time they have touched the Earth mindfully in a long, long time.

For all of the suspensions, both hook and rope, that I have done, on each one I spend time breathing and grounding beforehand, reminding myself what my goal is in the day, what journeys I need to go on, and what lies ahead. I clear my mind, take off my shoes, and let my feet root down into the ground knowing that soon enough I won't be attached to that earth soon enough. I stretch, bend, and relax my body into the now and out of the stress of day-to-day life.

Beyond that, the rituals and preparations change for each hang. For hooks, I have breathed in time with piercers, done fasting or feasting ahead of time, or done formal god-form work. For ropes I have created ordeal rituals for myself, done invocation work, or simply let out a good belly laugh or prepped and lay out the lines that would be holding my weight. It really varies from hang to hang. Something as simple as breathing and grounding is so important- but each person is different. I've tied ropes on dance floors for ecstatic dancers, pierced while chanting, or hung folks in the air while they held their lover's hands. Each person comes to the desire to do a hang for a different reason, and their rituals should be as personalized as the journeys they seek out.

I have done rope suspensions as offerings before, or as tools for invocative work, on both sides of the rope. So far my hook work has been more cathartic, artistic, overcoming fears or finding the self... or has been about helping others on vision quests... but who knows where it will go in the future?

—Bridgett Harrington

The big difference between rope suspension and hook suspension is the immediacy of the pain. Rope suspension can be painful, although usually it is designed to be as painless as possible. Hooks through the flesh, however, are their own

kind of ordeal well before the individual's weight is hung from them. Beginners are usually encouraged to start with the flesh pull; the hooks are placed through the skin (commonly through the chest or back, both places with plenty of muscle and fewer nerves) and tied to a point on the wall or ceiling. They can then pull on them at their own pace, whether that's hardly at all or enough to stretch the skin out quite a ways. Since there are no issues with gravity, they have much more control regarding the length of the experience. It can go on for ten minutes or hours. Sometimes partners will get mirroring sets of chest hooks and have them tied together; the pulling then becomes a dance of mutual back-and-forth, sharing pain and endorphin-pleasure, focused entirely on each other's every gasp for breath.

Another ordeal-rite which can be seen as preparatory to flesh-hook suspension is the ball dance. Based on ceremonial festival dances of India, where small round fruits and bells are hooked into the flesh of dancers, modern Western ball dances are more often done with small sterile hooks or sutures. What is hung on them varies from rubber balls to jangling bells; one then dances with the bouncing weights in one's flesh until an altered state comes on.

Pain can be an important part of the experience, but for my own journey, it is the place beyond the pain that is more important. This is the place between worlds and experiences. Some use drugs to reach that place, some fast, some pray, some dance, some chant — pain is just another tool to find the place between places where we can face ourselves, our demons, our desires. The place between is where we can open up and find what needs to be found, be it Gods and Goddesses, universal truths or our own howling mind.

Pain Ordeals that leave a mark, for me, are far more important for marking a turning point in my life, or when done as a reminder of things I must do in the future. Just like a string tied around the finger, a scar, tattoo, wound or other mark is a physical reminder of the path that you have chosen or that has been chosen for you. Whenever I look at the

brands on my legs I am reminded of my gender and role choices. When I see the ink on the small of my back it is a reminder of my sexual paths, worship of the divine and healing after abuse. Any time I see the eyes etched upon my back I am reminded that I am not alone in the dangers of this world. The black circles at my ankles remind me to keep open spaces for the universe to fill in, and that pain is a necessary tool for many to learn what is theirs to learn. The dots from the holes of my hang that lie across my back remind me of the dances with death, desire and desperation I undertake on a daily basis. Dots down my back from my pierced corset mark the lessons of that period of my life, a line between beauty and personal identity, a quest to where I must go.

Ordeals that leave no mark on the body are only remembered if the memory holds strong. We take marks to remind us of choices and ordeals, paths and perils we have endured... for marks can take us back to the moment when those marks were birthed. Ordeals with no marks are better in my own life for transitory periods, or for those who remember far better than my battered brain ever could. We all need to be reminded of where we have been, lest in forgetting our history we repeat our own mistakes.

— Bridgett Harrington

Hook-dancers all agree that there is no place for arrogance in this work. If nothing else, the pain alone will strip that from you. One suspension-technician commented about seeing arrogant youngsters going up in order to prove how tough they were, and instantly being reduced to undignified sobbing. This act can humble you, if that is what you need in order to get to where you are supposed to go. Even if your first few suspensions go wonderfully, the next one can suddenly drag you to a dark place—especially if you’ve started to become complacent about it. The practice of piercing the body, in general, has been referred to as a way of letting light into it. Added to suspension—putting someone in the

sky, the air, the place of light—and things could get lit up that you might have preferred stay in darkness.

Rituals can provide a framework of mindfulness that may help prepare one for the experience. They can be something elaborate like the question-and-answer ritual to follow in this book, or something as simple as my friend's process before a hook pull. He walked across the floor several times slowly, "walking to the right place," as he put it, and then afterwards walked the same rounds in reverse, walking himself back to his regular state of mind.

It is not uncommon for flesh-hook rituals to bring up recent (or not-so-recent) traumas that seem to have absolutely nothing to do with the situation. The letting-in-light process can light up anything, even demons that you forgot were there, or hadn't yet become aware of. It can be another tool—albeit a drastic one—in the discipline of self-awareness, a path to coming to terms with pain and suffering and being less afraid of it.

This does not imply a new refuge for comfort! The walk towards the abyss may become familiar and the place you find the challenge may lie a little deeper, but it is always there. There is always Confrontation, or the price is not being paid and the offering is no longer real. While there is life, there is no final destination in this journey.

—Lydia Helasdottir

This gate must be approached with humility; to treat it as a fun wild ride is to court danger. It can be used as a rite to build strength and courage, as long as one understands that there is no guarantee that you will win, and loss must be an acceptable possible outcome. Many have come down from their first hook suspension saying, "I thought I was tough, but I didn't know anything." There are three options, at that point: decide to run in fear, decide that this is not your path (but be careful and self-aware when doing it that you are not just trying to justify the last option), and going back to do it again,

perhaps with more realistic planning and context. Be prepared for it to be nothing like you expect.

It is also important to be aware of the context—is this a place conducive to the kind of complete focus this rite deserves and requires? Are there distractions that are only mildly annoying now, but with your brain on sensory overload will become maddening? Most important, do you trust the people who will be your technicians on this flight? Are you aware of their credentials? Have you spoken with anyone they've suspended before? Does the situation seem physically safe? Are they happy to answer your questions about sharpness, cleanliness, antisepsis, and other safety issues? If you don't feel completely comfortable with them or with the situation, bow out. Don't succumb to pressure. No one should pressure anyone into a suspension, and anyone who tries should be viewed with suspicion.

I did my first hang on hooks in December 2004. Between 2000 and 2004 I had done facial piercings, cheek skewers, and other extreme body piercing as a form of ecstatic ritual as well as for photographic endeavors as an artist (I identify first and foremost as an Artist before any other labels). The event was being photographed by my friend Circle23, one of the best known body modification photographers on the West Coast, who I'd aided with a number of hangs as an assistant. The main piercer for the event was Dana, who had thrown my septum ring and clitoral triangle, as well as helped me soar with my cheek skewers. I was ready to tough it out on film...

...but I freaked out. The event was December 11th, a date that for 7 years had been a yearly gather of NorthWest Piercers to focus on hook hangs. These folks were and are some of the best of the best. I'd been shooting the day as a photographer, and I was ready to go up. The plan had been to throw 6 hooks in a staggered pattern known as an Archangel. We got one in and I clenched up. The second went in and I was balling up. I suddenly found myself

riding through waves of grief over deaths in my family, striking me from left field. The third hook went in and I could no longer speak. Fifteen minutes later they talked me into one more hook, and I acquiesced.

I locked myself in the storage closet and cried, having tied the hooks off to cords that I attached to a point on the wall and pulled against. Time flew by and two hours later I came out of the closet and asked Dana if we could clear the small side room. He did, and I told my partner Adam, Dana and Jason, Circle23 and his partner BlackDove that they could come in. No one else. I couldn't take the crowds, the lights, the cameras. I was in pink yoga pants and still crying as Jason tied me off to the overhead point and put tension on the lines. I asked him to raise the point as I danced in tears beneath the point. *Higher*. I danced on. *Higher*. *Higher*...

...and then I flew. I was only up for a few minutes, but it was intense, magical, and overwhelming.

December 10th, 2005 I went up again for my second hang, and this time I braved the cameras. I wore the corset and skirt from my wedding dress, my head bald and painted white, and this time again 4 hooks in my back. But I learned a valuable lesson: I freak out less with two piercers working on me simultaneously. I still froze up, but my lead piercer, Daif, paused and said, "The first time I don't freak out when someone tries to throw an 8-gauge hook through my flesh will be the last time I hang." I breathed in and took my hooks between panic attacks...and flew.

I am now learning how to throw hooks, and continue to do less extreme body piercing (temporary and permanent) on both sides of the needle... and look forward to seeing what adventures the next hang holds.

— Bridgett Harrington

Why do it? It's about power and sex; it's about death. Power gained by an entirely raw, explicitly sexual encounter with your surroundings. It is about penetration and yielding; death of old habit and restriction. Destruction of

societally programmed limitations and encrustations built up to the point of numbness. It's about flaying all that away and becoming one live nerve-ending. It's about coming back to the natural state, of awe and wonder. Just look into the eyes of a person suspending for the first time and see the gaze of a newborn babe.

You can talk about connection to the divine, about opening and stimulating the energy gates of the body, about purification, offering and devotion – but in the end it all comes down to the War against Comfort. All growth is painful; comfort is stagnation. Our scars trace an alphabet of freedom and self-determination. The price of entry is non-negotiable. There's no pretending to suspend, no cheats or liars here. But remember that Power is only Power when it is used for a Purpose. Without Purpose, Power is Sterile. Power is in the creative act, and that is why the hunt for it is ultimately a sexual experience. Such intimacy leaves us very open and tender, our eyes soft and knowing. Surrender is the victory.

As for me, I've been using the Ordeal Path for more than 20 years to enter a variety of shamanic states. Offering makes space for the Divine. Purity can be achieved, and it's harder to fool yourself when you're hanging by hooks. The results have been bliss, simplification, removal of fear, lessening the hold of horrors, recapitulating the past. Learning how to guide others all the way to the Hells and bring them safely back out is key to that progress also. A person older and wiser than I once wrote "I myself am the offering on the altar of sacrifice."

— Lydia Helasdottir

Suspension Ritual

(For going up on flesh hooks)

One individual has to be the Challenger and take on the priestly role. Ideally, it should not be whoever is doing the actual piercing, because both parties need unbroken concentration. The Seeker stands naked before the Challenger and the instruments of pain.

Challenger: I am Death, and Pain, and Suffering, and Loss. I am the bottom point of the abyss that you are teetering over at this moment. I am the Guardian of the point beyond which few have the courage to endure. Know me, and fear me. You seek to enter My realm, and I rule here.

Answer me—Who owns your body? Your flesh that will tear, your blood that will spill, your bones that can break, your nerves that can be tortured, your heart that can be stopped, your brain that can be destroyed? Who owns your body?

Seeker: You do.

Challenger: Who can bring you screaming in agony to that dark place within you, suspended between past and future, nothingness and communion, whether you will it or not? Who is stronger than pride or ego or fantasy or reputation or experience or hope?

Seeker: You are.

Challenger: And who is stronger than me?

Seeker: I am.

Challenger: Will you surrender, for this time, to My path? Will you ride with me into the dark places, to discover both your helplessness and your power? Will you embrace pain

and weakness in order to discover your strength? Will you rise up and fly in order to fall in to the deep places? Will you follow me down, and find your way up and out?

Seeker: I will.

Challenger: The place where you stand is holy ground. Those who watch over you, who will guide you through the depths and into the heights, deserve the gift of your suffering. Will you dedicate some part of your pain as an offering to Them?

Seeker: I will.

Challenger: Come forward, then, and enter into My realm.

The Seeker comes forward, is washed down with antiseptic, and flesh hooks are placed into them by the suspension professionals in the manner previously negotiated. After the ride is over, the Seeker should be brought slowly back to the world with gentle touch (if they want it), water, food (if they want it), soft drumming, and blankets to keep them warm. Let them take their time coming back. Listen if they want to talk, but don't pressure them to put their experience directly into words. They should sit on the earth if possible

Chain of Command Part I

by Lydia Helasdottir

Waiting, I yearn for You.

Oh Thou Beast, how I ache with the longing for this excruciating offering; my spine flowers with it. I am prostrate before you in all my nakedness and filth, encrusted with the stains of banality and despair.

I am stung and bursting with the shattering knowledge that You have chosen me as the burden for Your works, the Vessel for our terrible alchemy. I have howled to you from blasted heaths and forlorn mountain tops. My blood has stained your desert sands, and bitter are the tears I have shed on seeing the fruits of your harvest. You have awaked my bloodlust and I have delighted to slay, for you have made me your Dying God, sacrificed for Life.

You have ravished me in sullen groves and I have felt your stony wand, smelled the animal lust on your breath. The dust-slick lips of the crumbling dead have been my lovers, and we have delved for passion in pools of filth. Dull lust has burned through my eyes while all else crumbled around me. Yes, you have demanded much and I have given it. Oh, friend and companion of the Night, look favorably upon my sacrifice. You who scour the fields of battle, who bring the dread ice from the skies, Lady of Pestilence and Plague, hear me and accept me into your arms.

Already I bear many marks of this trade, kissed by the harsh vacuums we move in, twisted by the forces of desire and the eternal struggle. Your knives have cut deep, your

burning lashes torn the mutable skin, you have penetrated and ripped, branded, cut and rent. My breath is by your Grace; from your lips alone I drink. Suffering and straining, I have clung to your hips in vain. Never is there any mercy, and I convulse with this grateful certainty.

But in my mind the demons of doubt writhe in wormy desperation, their torture dull and oozing. I know you will carve away these scabs, reduce me, purify my shroud. You will open me, scenting the rot with the sweetness, and to you there will be no difference. How can this be, that you would choose one so unworthy as myself? Yet I cannot deny your choice—the world can read it in mark and brand and other signs. As for me, there is no choice here. Once I had a moment to turn away, but I flung myself upon you, and all other choices vanished.

The first move, as always, must be mine to make, Now I gather myself to reach for you. Dread fills my heart and swells my eyes. In awe, I step once again onto the grey path and lift my eyes to you. Bound and burning, my body groans somewhere far away as I open the gates. The horror of open space racks me. It roars through me, mouths lunging open in every pore. Loathing spills forth, slicking my skin, doubt seeks my rotten core, the festering stench of wounds picked at and worried, my own weakness, but by now I am overcome. I fall towards you to be flayed.

At the first gate I had been made to kneel. What is this? It is the law of the underworld, that I must give. And so I was stripped, jeweled weights dropping to my sides. Garlands of office, emblems and signs, burdens of care, marks of authority and duty and rank, one by one were taken. Finally I crawled before you, torn.

Your hands come onto the nape of my neck and I shudder with the dread thrill as you part my hair with your nails, bending my head down. So easily I go down with the whisper of your breath there, everything turning to liquid inside as the gold pours over my spine. Your teeth touch and breath is no longer my own. My world is forgotten, flushed in this longing,

nameless awe. Now your intention flares, bares my throat in mute mammal rapture. Deliver me, oh my Lady. Flash over me like the dawn. There is no other salvation from my disease.

You catch my arms behind me, my back arching and straining for you. Drawn up for examination, I am encased, aching already. The acid terror of disclosure rises in my throat. Now you will see me. Now you will see all the weakness, all the failure, all the loathing.

Tears stain with the shame I have no way to hide. You press open my legs and I cringe ever deeper, knowing this reminder should not have been needed—I know how you like me to stand. Oh, self-absorbed wretch, even in Your presence I fail.

You open my mouth and examine my teeth, exposing the telltale grooves of the falseness I have spoken. I gag and choke on your probing fingers, all rotten gums and bleeding lips. Your fingers move over the muscles of my neck and shoulders, feeling the knots of loads I have accepted that were not mine to carry, that have ruined me for your burdens. My paps sag, empty, evidence of the nourishment I have refused to bestow, even though I have gorged myself on your divine sweetness. You pinch up nipples that trail only the venom of jealousy and greed.

Nails tear towards my heart in great bleeding crescent moons. Oh, my heart, a dry and shrunken husk, twisted by my treacheries. How I have distanced myself from you, My Lady. Where once was living pain there is nothing now, numbed and stone-dry, and this secret is known to You alone. My belly swells with resentment and repression, power wilted on the vine. Your hands smooth over the turgid greenish flesh, passing over purple stains and lines of weeping scars.

I sweat and hate as you part the veil of my lips, flaying me wide open with the nails of your thumbs, but no life or joy can issue forth from this grim cave. All that comes from here is stillborn and hideous; misshapen demons that shrill before dying in the poisoned air. Yet incredibly you smooth back the folds and press inside this vacancy, testing, kindling a distant flame. Finally the dread invasion, unwanted, resisted to my

core. I am overflowing with shame and rejection. I am this hole, this passage of vileness and filth. How can it be that even these depths open themselves to you? Torn between desire to obey and revulsion with myself, the rings-pass-not cannot press you out. There is no turning back.

Finally the examination is done. You already knew what must be, the purpose served was for me to understand. I am prepared.

Now I am fastened into angles. Your hands trail over me in an incomprehensible caress, then the thudding begins, a beat of reassurance and determination, easing me away from the hatred. Small grunts shaken from my lungs in time become cries. The crust is creaking but holding, and I float away from the urgency of the flesh so easily, forgetting. This I can comprehend, here I can avoid the tearing, here my thoughts can be hidden, my precious poison remain. I breathe and maintain, smugly hanging. I have cheated you of your prize. Nothing can touch me here. Not even you.

I hardly even notice the absence at first, floating in my veils of avoidance, but slowly I come to realize the rhythm is missing, and my anchors fail. I crane to find you in the darkness, to divine your intention, all reassurance flown. The barest sound warns me before lightning strikes, a streak of heat sends me screaming into the bonds.

Again, it flashes over my skin, leaves a trail of rawness, slicing. This time I hear the crack. My head dips between my arms in reflexive terror. A crack and I scream but no sensation; I am caught in an agony of cowardice. Now the smugness is tearing, the crust breaking. I twist and turn away to avoid the blows, discordant and jangling between sound and fear and searing tearing flashes. Pinpoint blasts as the tip explodes onto my skin, valleys cloven into muscle and vein with the flick of your wrist. Kisses rain in unbearable sweetness. There is no mercy here, and my world is quaking.

You drive me into the dusty corners of my mind; out through tunnels of muscle and sinew you pursue me. I flee for my life, howling down these streets of my youth and through

the horrors of this city of my shame. I am wild with fear and desperation, flinging myself skittering down sodden alleys, flashing oily streetlights reflecting in the rains of my sins. The lighting strikes without warning, over and over again, leaving me breathless and screaming. The dogs are closing in. Oh Gods, I can feel their breath on my heels, their howling and their panting and their teeth clicking and their smell. Oh Gods, I can smell them.

Finally, inevitably, I falter, stumbling and they are upon me in seconds, tearing my flesh, seeking out my throat. Oh Gods, they are tearing out my throat... And I scream as fluids erupt through my mouth, water dripping gently from my lips as you quench me. But I have screamed too much, my throat hoarse and cracking. Your tongue feels like acid over the weeping flesh, as you taste and decide.

Then the scratching starts. Your nails trail the terrible tracks of rawness you have woven around me, a net to hold me, fractures in the crust. You swoop over smooth untouched pastures, your fingers a shadow of delight flashing over my nerves, crashing onto boundaries of tortured earth, then passing swiftly again into the cream of touch.

Then they are coming, pecking and pinching. They are black and shiny and they flit in through the mounds of swirling delight to taunt and strike, and soon their clacking beaks and flutterings are drowning out the smoothing peace and they clamp on to me. Biting and holding, picking and tearing, my whole body is under siege. I twitch and jerk in all directions, grunting and squealing as they clatter in, as they latch onto my nipples and belly. The webs of my fingers are pinched and twisted, and yet others are tearing strips from my ribs. They are sucking onto my neck, diving at the blood blooming beneath, rasping tongues seeking the life. I am laden with them, wave upon wave, clawing each other as I scream, desperately trying to dislodge the horrible mouths. Finally with a clattering screech the flock arrives.

My stomach turns as the cloud scours past me, patterning my face with their wings. With quiet certainly, I know what they want. They will have my eyes. I press down my lids in

ferocious desperation, but here, even here they pinch and nip. Oh, my Lady, I am lost. There is no place to hide. There is no panic now, just sorrow. Oh the lost days, the empty joys, the desolation. My heart breaks as their beaks tear away my sodden eyelids and sear into my sight... never to see you again... bending over me with the light burning my eyes as you pull away the last of the tiny horrors of metal clips, before laying me down, now strained and stiff, the marks of your sucking kisses bright over my breasts and belly.

Now cool chain drizzles onto me. I shiver and recoil, but the touch soothes my flesh as I am wound into your armour. This is certainty; here there is no maybe, no stretching, just cool hard knowing. Bright and blessed, freedom from choice. Soon I am no longer able to move, my flesh bulging between the fences of your fields. I linger in this cool oasis, the surface yielding. There is only peace as my boundaries expand onto the steel, warming on my skin. You regard me with soft eyes, and disappear from my view as the darkness returns. I float, safe in your lands. My broken heart is aching and softening even as the folds of my body ease into the hardness.

How I do yearn for you, seeking the sun in my darkness, my source of life and joy. My thoughts are flooded with you. In this peace I track your motions in the heavens, marveling. In awe, my loins flush for you, the chains pulsing against the swelling flesh. A touch, a cool drop of you into the furnace of my heat. You linger over my lips, and withdrawing, elicit a crazed rush as I seek your trace.

Then the miracle occurs. Fingers slide down my belly into the shimmering valleys and peel me open, a fiery plum; there is unbearable tension as you slide the bud between your fingers. A blossom bursts into flame in my belly, where once loomed only cold halls. Flame rushes over my skin and licks the rot, warming, cleansing. My body wakes and swells, rocking with waves of longing, alive with the burning of a thousand suns. I am struggling to rise in mute agony, my heart bursting, everything a mass of boiling gas rising to touch its creator, yearning and struggling for the Sun. If only I could Reach! With a supreme arching jerk I break through a fine

membrane and surge upward, but I am washed away as the Sun comes down upon me in a liquid searing flood.

The Sun spills upon me in great splashes of hot skin. These cool and form in the alien space. How this overwhelms me, the splashing and trickles of Sun dripping on my flesh, slow and fast, covering me with a new skin. Armor from the Sun, pure and fine. Slowly my skin is renewed, hot and sharp in the delicate folds, wide and slick and tight over the expanses. All the while cooling and hardening, until I can no longer tell the difference. One skin, One Sun.

Then you leave me... I drift wanly and dream of the Sun, unmoving in my chrysalis of skin and wax and steel. Comforting at first, but slowly becoming claustrophobic, suffocating, seething. I rise to stretch the itch, but no release can come of this. It is an agony of itching and pulling as the scabs ready themselves for release of new pink skin.

Then hard steel is poised, reaching under the edges of my scales, releasing the skin to breathe again. Oh, new pinkness, as air caresses my nerves. Old crust peels off in sweet delight, leaving me soft and renewed. This blade I know; it has traveled along my thighs before, has shaved my history from me, has left delicate lines of blood in my flesh, has penetrated deeply and so gently sliced away the rot, always moving slowly and with dread inevitability. Now it peels and draws like an old friend. I open my eyes and I am drenched in the full visual effect of its black steel over my skin. Oh, this is a delight, comforting and known, deep satisfaction.

Without warning the blade draws away and comes flashing down, a killing stroke. Now time stands still, surely you will stay your hand. I've been so good, I've been cleaned. You cleaned me, you did that. Have I finally gone too far? Have I become too poisoned to live? Surely you will turn that blade aside, laughing at my fear. But the edge does not deviate from its deadly path, slicing towards my belly. Your eyes bore into me as I prepare to receive your command. Strangely calm, I give up my life to you, closing my eyes as the steel comes down to lance my center. I wonder if it will be sweet and hot, membranes bulging against the pressure then yielding before

the point, splaying open in a wet embrace. Will I be able to feel the organs parting, will there be fullness?

The pressure comes onto my belly now and I breathe out a great sigh, praying I will somehow be able to encompass this, that I will die with the grace I have failed to show in life. I wait for the pain, but none comes; instead the blade is turned by your net of chain, forgotten under the wax and the delight of new skin.

I drag in the deep jagged breath, screaming as you batter me with the blade. The chains turn all these lethal blows, razor's edge striking chips out of my new metal hide. My skin tightens and squirms under the onslaught but the armor holds; now you lunge at me, now slice, ever the steel meets steel. My screaming never ends. With each movement I flinch and with each clash something is changing. At length I am exhausted, flaccid, the rain of steel receding. My armor is chinked and battered but it has held, and no more than a muscle-memory of the deadly impacts remain.

You bend over me with a long kiss, and slowly move your hands down my flesh, so soft and pliant now, secure, finally sure. Then you lift the first links of chain away and I am destroyed. I have pressed outward all my armoring into the chains, extended my carapace onto the indestructible steel, and as you lift this away I have nothing left. Not even tears remain to me as I am spread before you.

Like a dream, pinpricks of needles press into my skin, flooding me with electric fire, impossible precision. My spine rushes with each invasion. Time slows and spins out. Pressure, pin flash of light, connection, ...a deep electric ache takes up the rhythm, pressing outward on the fibres of my nerves, attaining the chi. Networks are building, tracing, seeking, imprinting. Nothing left now but circuitry and the flicker of connection, now floating deep and soft in a web of light. I am here for a long, long time, breathing through the surges, fluxing, glowing, integrated. Deeper.

Finally a gentle tugging seeks my attention; a needle is moving away from under the skin. I feel the tip slip out from under the flesh followed by a merest hint of something... a

tender sliver, a moment before flesh closes around void and this delicious slipping away of the steel as it releases its hold. But this elusive fraction, what was that? As another needle moves I concentrate all my attention—tip moves away from the exit under the skin—there it is again, a tiny moment before the flesh responds, there is Void under my skin! Void inside my body, the tiniest thread of Deep Space—ephemeral but real.

Oh, to know that every needle has this secret hidden joy! Too subtle to be real, but there every time. The needles pass from me in a wave of revelations, leaving me in tearful exhilaration. I have felt the Void. Sweet emptiness has been inside me. I have been a Vessel for this dissolution. Even this fleeting glimpse has me reeling, a new Awe.

Now the time is coming to begin the preparations. I must be recast, clothed once more in matter, kindled with the spark of life for your servant to move among the living. You bring me back to the flesh with a smooth invasion. Building from the foundation, you press outwards and the rings open for you, now ready to receive...but you withdraw, requiring more. I get to my knees and present myself to you. There is no mistaking the intention of this posture. *In the ass, Mistress, I like it in the ass*, I whisper, then groan as you fill me. This is real, this hardness, this movement, this is here and now. You have predatory intent, rocking me onto you, thrusting. *Oh, in the Ass, Mistress, I like It in the Ass, I like You in my Ass. Hard and fast*. You know this, and my need to say it, and you know that I will orgasm groaning and clenching.

Later, You will dress me in my emblems and staves, in the sigils of the task you have chosen for me. I will be prepared for my function. I will don boots and leather, armor myself out of reach. I will take up the whips and ropes, the blades, rods, and cocks. I will tug on the chains I hold and bring fresh fire from the skies. I will perpetrate this sweet divinity upon my flock. Priestess of Pain, Sister of Dragons, Power-Exchange Technician. I am a Walker between the Worlds, and I have obligations to fulfill.

* * * * *

But what does it mean?

It means that I—like everyone who shoulders the burden of Dominance, like every stealer of the Heavenly Fire, like every Conduit—that I do partake of Divinity in as far as I am able to embody that Office. A manifestation of the God and Goddess on earth, here but ever otherworldly. A fleshly incarnation of the Divine.

Oh yes, ladies and gentlemen—We salute the Office, not the person. The Office of the Adored One, the Feared One, the Purifying One. Guide, Cleanser and Confessor. Hierophant and Demi-God. Psychophant and Tempstress. Relentless Predator and Infinite Abuser, worthy of our abasement and terror.

In here, we replay our incompetent horrors in magnificent detail. We renew, relive, reclaim and own our fears. In every invasion we invite, we shed a bit of the crust that separates us from our own Divinity. We come a little further toward knowing our reptile brains, working up from the foundations, re-integrating, renewing and repairing. In adoring the Officer of the Blasted One, we reach a little closer ourselves. Having received, having been blessed, touched and filled with the Divine, then it is the Law that we must now Bestow.

To Receive in Order to Bestow – This is the lesson. Motion is Life.

We cannot force our Divine Fire upon the Vessels. In order to Bestow, request to receive must come first. They must offer themselves, and only then can we flash down upon them in devastating fierceness and bring the onslaught they somehow know they must have, these Vessels. Vessels which leak and crack but get stronger and sounder with each cleansing wave. Vessels that serve their own purpose better for being whole.

In order to fulfill the obligations of such an Office, we have to stretch, to be worthy of this Awe, to act in firm correctness and with terrible truth, with unbending intent and exacting

skill, with impeccable ethics and relentless courage. We must reach far beyond our own banality to slip on these emblems of Grace. By this burden we grow, we are healed, annealed. We assume the Office of God-form and the God-force enters us for a time. The miracle with which each drop of the Divine Nectar falls from our lips into the mouths of our wards remains with us in a tiny fraction after all is done. Drip by drip, we are becoming who we are.

Thus we are obliged to engage in a pact far more terrible than those limited contracts our subjects make with us. All they need to do is persist and yield. We must bare our selves, our skills, our actions, our intentions and our hearts to the judgments of the Gods to whom we are uniquely responsible for those in our care. We must abandon all numbness and attachment.

We must mobilize and extend our most inhuman and oppressed instincts to rend and tear and predate. We are obliged and challenged to awaken and integrate these horrors. It is not enough to chain our own Demons, we must press them into exquisite and agonizing service to the Divine.

This is the Chain of Command.

As for me, I have been tasked to stride the boundaries of the alien wastes, even as I am propelled toward annihilation in the places beyond Light and Dark. And did I mention that I really like to hurt girls...?



Silence

by Lydia Helasdottir

For thou canst not woo Her...but in your silence She may yet hear your pleas...

Silence has been a groundstay of the journey towards enlightenment since the records of our worldwide traditions began. Thousands of people in every conceivable culture spend significant parts of their time just sitting in silence – trying to achieve this stillness.

Still the action, still the emotions, still the words, still the mind – in the silence you may hear the murmurs of the Beloved.

In many traditions, oaths of silence are commonplace and initiates pass many months, or even the rest of their lives without uttering a word. In the Western Mystery Tradition one may speak of the powers of the Sphinx as the foundation of all spiritual attainment: To Dare, To Will, To Know, To Keep Silent.

With all these things in mind, a 3/0 silk suture was taken up and passed though my left upper lip.

There are practices of speech that are used to become mindful of the habits we affect, and then master them. Try going for a week, or a day, without uttering the word “I”, for example.

The feeling was tight and high, a rising note as the thread vibrated through the membranes of my mouth, themselves delicate and tuned with the sounds of the years.

General Semantics teaches us that our entire experience of the world is determined by our speech. The World is structured and interpreted exactly in the patterns of words that we impose upon it. Words are tyrants and potent tools for changes in state and changes in mind. Words are used to manipulate, cajole, and encourage, to love and destroy. Words bring us into the world and words are our final farewells.

Mouth—source of joy and hurt. Gate of nourishment for breath and water, food and joy. Mouth—the font of words, the harbingers of so much peace and war. My tongue and mouth are sensuous together. Old playmates in games of pleasure, now discovering this shrill movement of silk against flesh, now transfixed by this new chord... Then the movement stops and the tune softens but remains, a single string, high and pure. The sustained note surprises me a little, but I must move on, must now take up this blade myself and bow these notes.

Yet we do so poorly at controlling our spoken words, let alone the ranting monologue of what the Tibetan Buddhists call our “Monkey Mind”. Just try sitting for a few minutes without having a running commentary of words tumbling through your mind.

Passing from the inside out, now the left lower lip. I do this thing myself, a single singing note, overarching the first voice. It must be done decisively, this fingering. A hesitant note can strangle the harmony.

The second string takes up the solo, in a slightly lower voice. The lower lip, thicker, more mobile, surges out along the thread. It is long, this note, for there are more voices still to add. A soft chorus now of two, soon to be joined by a higher third.

There are Lords of Silence who can be powerfully invoked to assist in the cause of stillness. The Lord Muruga is worshipped by certain of the Hindu faithful, invoked by the practice of piercing the cheeks with a Vel or short spear. This is done in demonstration of the practices of control of speech and mind that He requires. Hoor Paar Kraat, the Babe in the Egg, is shown with His finger pressed against His lips in the classic Sign of Silence. This image is now widely adopted in the Mysteries. It is said to be a potent weapon against the ravages of Chaos that haunt the seeker after the Light.

Directly under the nose, I press the bow through the flesh, and the whole body trills with this. We have struck the Governing Vessel—the central meridian in the system of Chinese acupuncture.

Tears come to my eyes as the nervous system and emotions respond, and the harmony begins to crowd out the chatter of my noisy monkey mind. I don't really notice, lost in the focus on precision and placement.

In modern ordeals of Sacred Sexuality, we bind and gag our animal selves to catch a glimpse of what could be. Potent urges surface and rage against our armored shores, providing insight and experience. However the silence is achieved, the hunt for the secret center, the still-point in the midst of the Maelstrom is universal and potent.

The lower middle lip adds a mellow counterpoint, soothing the tone. Then a wild swing as I fail to act with sufficient deliberation and the outer skin of my right upper lip stretches away from the point, sharply bending the strings, threatening discord. Persisting, I feel the skin yield and the chord pops into place, sighing back down the scale. Now there are five voices in my music of the spheres. The ensemble is loose and joyous, but still the chord is hungry and the tongue plays in the gaps between the notes.

In the end, after all the analysis and construction of ritual, tradition and religion are done, after all the pantheons are

built and shattered, after the offerings are made and paeans raised to the ever changing Godhead, there will always be, at the heart of every Master, that core of silence which is the necessary essence of every direct experience of the Ineffable.

The sixth, the lower lip base tone finally encircles and fills out these spaces. The chord bulges, no longer playful and generous. As the last sounds are squeezed into place, crowding out movement, and dampening all vibration, the chord dulls and then all falls eerily and deafeningly silent.

After a while I notice, astonished, that for a time, there was nothing else.

Sacred Toys, Holy Tools

Most BDSM folk refer to their tools as “toys”, just as they refer to some very serious sensation work as “play”, largely because they want to minimize the “scary” aspect of these practices, and make them seem light and fun, so that outsiders will not be frightened. Most Neo-Pagans refer to their various magical tchotchkas as “tools”, even when they don’t actually use them for any purpose except decoration and showing off. Personally, I’d like to see people in both communities being a lot more clear about what’s a toy and what’s a tool. Certainly those of us who cross both have no excuse.

Like any magical or spiritual tools, BDSM tools can be (and should be, if you are using them in ritual) charged with energy and intent. You can charge them before use, or you can use them as a way of charging them. Don’t think that people on the other end of those tools can’t tell; many’s the time where a casual play partner who didn’t know anything about magic or spirits gravitated straight to my most charged toys, or remarked on my charged whip, saying something like, “When you hit me with that, it really feels like you’re using your hands!”

The most powerful and magical toys are the ones that you make yourself. However, if you just aren’t crafty at all, the next best thing is a toy that was given to you as a gift by someone you actually care about and respect. It doesn’t have to be a gift from a lover; in fact, sex toys from disgruntled ex-lovers often have the ambivalent mental association of the breakup turmoil. Of course, even something that you bought

at a flea market can become laden with energy and intent over time.

East Quarter: Tools of Air

In West African drumming tradition, different kinds of rhythm instruments are associated with different elements. Large, booming drums that are used for keeping a beat are Earth; smaller finger drums that play complex rhythms are Fire. Bells and metal strikers are Air, and rattles or shakers are Water. One can easily think of hitting the body in a rhythmic pattern as very similar to drumming, and both can be used for purposes of religious ritual and creating altered states. In fact, when I've been lucky enough to have a scene by a campfire to actual live drumming, I've discovered that synchronizing the blows to the drumbeat in some way was very good for the person that I was hitting.

Similarly, different striking objects can have different elemental similarities. Single-tail whips are associated with the element of Air, and they can be used in any spell, with or without a BDSM context, that calls upon the spirits of Air. Cracking a bullwhip over graves was a legendary technique used by Haitian sorcerers to raise the dead into obedient zombies; at that time and culture, a bullwhip had a long-standing association with slavery and being forced to do someone's bidding.

Other air striking implements are thin, whippy canes and crops. (The more it whistles through the air, the more likely it is to partake of the symbolic nature of that element.) Thin canes are especially good for making sigils in the air with long hissing strokes, perhaps to ward and purify a space.

Whip Invocation

May the spear of my breath flow through you,
May the blade of my thought flow through you,
May the arrow on my intent flow through you,
May you part air and stroke skin
And bring the gasp of indrawn breath
And bring renewed knowledge of the flesh
As relentless as the hurricane
That rips us out of our lives
And teaches us to value being alive.

As the athame is the classic tool of the East, so knives are also Air—its cutting edge, its ability to separate things as the mind analyzes. The most obvious use of knives is for doing cuttings and bloodplay, and even disposable razor blades can be consecrated and serve as symbolic tools of the East. However, many if not most tops don't do actual cuttings; many simply keep the knife around as a safety tool for cuttings ropes in emergencies, or for running up and down the body of the bottom and threatening them for a psychological scare, or at most making small cat-scratches that don't actually bleed.

One caveat: Knives, when consecrated and “ensouled”, may have a tendency to bloodthirstiness. This may especially be true if the knife was ritually consecrated by being used to draw a few drops of blood, which is the quickest and most potent way to charge any blade—pure life force combined with pure intent. Some knives are merely content to be tools; others will subtly communicate their desire for blood to the top while in use, or even when only being held. If the top is not aware of what's going on, that communication might affect their judgment, and what started out as a cat-scratch might become a bit more serious, with or without prior negotiation. Be sure that you get to know the temperament of

each blade that you use, and be fully aware of what that blade wants.

One lesbian D/s couple that I know consecrates their blades by inserting them into the vagina of the bottom during a ritual scene. The top says, “Blunter ones can go in bare-bladed, usually after a heavy fucking or fisting scene so that her cunt is open and relaxed. Really sharp ones, or ones where I don’t want the bodily fluids to actually mess up the blade, go in with a sheath on. If the sheath is leather, I wrap it in Saran Wrap to protect it. The vagina itself is a form of sheath for a blade of flesh, and it’s that energy that goes into the knife and awakens it. And by doing it this way, no blood is shed.” I would add that you could do the same thing with an anus, but only with a blade in a smooth, well-wrapped sheath—the sphincter muscle is too tricky and spasmodic to risk peritonitis with even a blunt knife blade.

Once consecrated, knives should be kept clean and sheathed for protection. Letting a ritual knife get rusty and dinged-up is bad juju. If you do end up with a bloodthirsty one, and your partner is not willing to engage in bloodplay (or the two of you can’t do it for body fluid reasons) then you’d better keep it happy by occasionally giving it your own blood, or finding it a new home where folks engage in those practices.

Knife Blessing

Steel from the nerve center of the Earth,
Cutting edge of my mind,
Be partnered with my hand!
By the power of Fire that forged you, I give you spirit!
(Run the blade quickly through a flame from a candle or lighter.)
By the power of Breath that cooled you, I give you spirit!
(Run the blade through incense, or just breathe onto it.)
By the power of Earth from whence you were torn,
I give you spirit!

*(Hold the blade against your bare flesh for a moment,
giving it warmth.)*

By the power of all the Waters of the world,
I give you spirit!

*(Here you can dip it in water, or give it a few drops
of your blood, or place it into your own or your
lover's orifice, or what you will.)*

By the power of the Dawning Light, be one with my will!

(Hold the blade up to the light, so you can see it flash.

Kiss it, and sheathe it, and put it away.)

North Quarter: Tools of Earth

Dildoes are the single sex toy that it's easiest to enchant... although if they're made of rubber or silicone, they will hold a charge only for a short time. Natural materials hold magical charges longer; the best long-term ritual phalli that don't have to be periodically recharged are made of polished wood, bone, horn, or leather stuffed with some organic material. The problem with the first three is that they're expensive to get or have made, and can be limited in size due to materials (especially with horn). The first three materials are also very hard and don't "give" like rubber; some folks manage by getting one of the realistic soft rubber "penis sleeves" that go over dildoes, and covering the charged cock with it.

Leather is softer, but much more difficult to keep clean, and may degrade over time with moisture and rough use. Leather cocks can be works of art if done properly, but make sure you sew it together very firmly, because leather rots first at the seams. It will also rot if metal rivets or snaps are attached to it and then allowed to get moist and rust. Clean it with saddle soap, not bleach. Use condoms with it if it's going into or on someone whose body fluids you are not sharing. If you do choose to use leather, however, you can fill it with things like hair clippings from the people using it, magical herbs and spices (patchouli and pine are sacred to the Horned God), or pieces of towel or rag with body fluids on them. One

butch dyke that I know who kept a spinning flock filled her leather cock with cashmere hair from a Kashmir stud billy goat who was particularly handsome and virile.

You'll notice by now that all the materials used for dildoes, including ancient historical ones (clay, stone, glass, leather) show that these tools are dedicated to the element of Earth. Even silicone is made from a mineral extracted from sand, as is glass; rubber is from a tree, and leather and horn are from animals. Dildoes are earthy, whether we are talking about someone's favorite and much-used latex toy, a chrome-and-glass phallic sculpture, a Maypole, or the great stone obelisks built by the ancient Egyptians as penises for Geb, the earth god, to be able to penetrate his wife Nuit, the starry-bellied sky goddess. If you place your sex toys on an altar, they go in the north, or whatever direction you associate with Earth. One witch that I know actually digs a hole and thrusts her (cleanable) phalluses into it, to bless them with that grounded, root chakra sexual vibration.

If you do use man-made materials, they will still charge; you'll just have to keep redoing it regularly. (Oh, such a chore!) The best way to charge them, of course, is to have sex with them, even if only masturbatory sex. Before and during the sex, the person using it should visualize their astral cock filling the dildo. (If you don't have an astral cock, don't do ritual fucking with a strap-on until you can pull that cock energy out of your astral body and create one, at least temporarily. Non-ritual fucking can help with practice.) The wearer should stroke it, play with it, think of it as theirs. Even if they can't feel it, they can pull their energy into it. Then, if at all possible, the phallus should go into a flesh hole, your own or someone else's, and sexual energy should be raised, and ideally orgasm should happen. When all is said and done, the best way to charge a cock is by fucking with it.

Another tool of Earth is bondage equipment, such as ropes and chains. Earth is the most stationary element, and the closer to Earth a being is, the less it moves. Trees have more Earth energy than animals, and stones more than trees.

Bondage is a way of making someone move less, bringing them closer to being a tree or a stone. As such, one very good way to charge ropes or chains or other restraints is to literally tie or fasten them around tree trunks, tree branches, or standing stones.

If you want to charge the ropes or chains with specific energies, it's relatively simple to pull them through your hands, sending energy out through your palms. Just visualize yourself impregnating them with a particular "flavor", such as "safety" or "sensuality" or "hard and unyielding", which is particularly good for soft ropes used on someone who can't physically deal with heavy bondage, but who wants to feel secure.

One of the most common magical folk spells is the knot spell, and bondage is a great way to use knot spells on a human body. One of the ones that I like is the traditional nine-knot spell, which can be done by tying ropes around the bottom that end with exactly nine knots. Ideally, once the energy of the spell has been gathered and tied up around them, this should be followed by either pain or sexual release or both, in order to feed the spell. Then the knots are untied in the reverse order that they were made, and the spell is free to work or not, as the Universe decrees.

Nine-Knot Spell

By knot of one, the spell's begun.
By knot of two, I make it true.
By knot of three, so mote it be.
By knot of four, the open door.
By knot of five, the spell's alive.
By knot of six, the spell is fixed.
By knot of seven, the earth and heaven.
By knot of eight, the stroke of fate.
By knot of nine, the thing is mine.

Regardless of how many knots you make, the idea is that intent is tied into every one. Another way to run this is to make the knots symbolize obstacles, and as they are untied the bottom concentrates on feeling freed from these restraints. This is reminiscent of the ancient practice of untying everything in the house when a pregnant woman's labor stalled, so as to spread unbinding energy throughout the area and facilitate the baby's birth. For this sort of spell, each obstacle should be named aloud, by top or bottom, as the knot is untied. As an alternative to this practice—and one that is good for couples where the bottom is the bondage aficionado and the top can barely do a square knot—the bottom can create a “web” of rope, tying the symbolic obstacles into it, perhaps with actual small objects knotted in. The top then wraps them up in the web and ties the final knots, trapping them. They can then take a knife and cut them out of the web, freeing them from the ensnarement.

Bondage can be used for suspension as well as restraint. One friend of mine who is an accomplished bondage top has one ritual which people ask for over and over. It consists of tying them up and then suspending them in a rope net from a tree, between heaven and earth, to meditate. When they come down, they are told to feel the first step of their foot on the earth as if it is the first time, binding them closer to the planet that they live on.

Bondage Invocation

I bind your feet, as the tree is bound to the Earth,
So firmly that even the hurricane cannot move it.
May you always remember what it is to be rooted.

I bind your knees, that you may know humility,
And the life of the animals who are your brothers.
May you always remember not to ignore
what is beneath you.

I bind your thighs, taking you from the walking world,
As the serpent crawls upon the belly of the Earth Mother.
May you always remember what it is
to be close to Her body.

I bind your genitals, givers of joy and desire,
For desire is coupled with choice and responsibility.
May you always judge well
when to say yes or no to that joy.

I bind your belly, center of your survival,
For neither gorging nor starving
does honor to your nourishment.
May you find balance between judgment and appetite.

I bind your hands, makers and doers in the world,
With the hope that they shall do only good work.
May you always remember the power in these tools.

I bind your arms, which reach for the heavens,
For limitation is part of the nature of Life.
May you always see your own limits with open eyes.

I bind your breast, formed in strength and beauty,
For the passions of the heart
cannot go completely unchained.
May you learn loyalty in your commitments of love.

I bind your shoulders, which bear your burdens for you,
And I take from them all burdens, for the moment.
May these bonds bear you up in safety and lightness.

I bind your eyes, casting you into darkness,
The place of fears and pain,
and of rebirth and regeneration.
May you never fear the touch of the shadows.

I bind your head, the center of your thought,

And in doing so I cast your thought inward,
Like the caterpillar bound in its cocoon.
May you dream in safety and in comfort
Until the time when I release you again into Life.

Gags are an Earth item, stopping the flow of words and the breath (Air). A gag can be used magically to symbolize the necessity of silence, or as part of magic to prevent someone from saying something unwise. One bottom that I know had trouble saying certain things, even when it meant that she didn't get what she wanted. Her top had her write them on piece of paper, crumpled them up and stuffed them into a hollow rubber gag, which was then stuffed into her mouth. It had a straw in the middle to drink liquid through, so that she could take in food and water, but until she decided to spit out the gag herself—and thus magically commit herself to always saying what needed to be said—she was robbed of all speech. It took her two days to nerve herself up to making the commitment. As soon as she removed the gag, she and her top sat down and had a processing session about the issues she had kept to herself.

Gags are also extremely useful for painplay, when the bottom needs something hard to bite down on. In this case, the gag can be inscribed with a rune or sigil of strength and endurance (my own personal choice would be a bind rune of the Futhorc runes Ur and Ac) so that it might be transferred into their body as they grit their teeth on it.

Gag Invocation

I take away your speech,
That you may understand silence.
I take away your words,
That you may understand that which cannot be spoken.
I take away that which most makes you human,
That you may learn to listen to your animal flesh,
And speak with your animal flesh,

And understand that which is older
Than any human blood.

Paddles, sticks, and other solid, short thuddy striking implements are also associated with Earth. When they hit you, it's like a rock, and you know you've been hit. The flat side of any paddle can be carved with a sigil and charged, and then used to "push" the energy of that sigil into the flesh of the bottom. (If you carve it in a distinct enough relief, and hit them in a nice cushiony place such as the buttocks, it can leave the sigil welted into their skin for a while as well, which helps to carry the magic.)

West Quarter: Tools of Water

One obvious sensation tool that is linked to the element of Water is ice. This can be used as a sensation tool for binding or "freeze" spells, where the bottom wants to force themselves to stop doing a certain activity. It's usually set up as an ordeal; have them lie as still as possible while ice is run over their body, and have the top say things like, "At first it's going to be this uncomfortable to stop, but slowly, slowly, the urge to do it will cool, and then you'll get used to it...just like you're getting used to this ice."

One form of purification that is linked to the element of Water is enema usage. This is especially good as a ritual cleansing before any kind of sex magic that involves anal play, but it can also be used as a ritual purification by itself. One couple that we know turns off the lights in the bathroom, lights a lot of candles, and incenses the room first. Then the one undergoing the enema kneels in the tub and prays for a few moments, and the one administering it asks a series of ritual questions, which are answered. The enema goes in, accompanied with some manual sexual stimulation to make it more pleasurable, and then when the recipient goes to the toilet, they visualize all their worries and confusions exiting

their body, leaving them empty and clean and ready for spiritual work.

You can add a cup of herbal brew to the hot water in the enema bag in order to encourage a certain effect. Be very careful to strain it through a coffee filter or fine cloth first; there should be no particulate matter in the liquid that you add to the bag. Remember, also, that you don't want a very strong tea, and you don't want any herb that you couldn't safely consume orally in large quantities. The lining of the colon absorbs things a lot better and faster than the mouth, so be careful what you put into it. Here are a few recipes for different sorts of teas:

Love Tea

2 parts rose hips

1 part basil

1 part coriander

1 part bee balm

Bonding Tea

2 parts lemon balm

1 part yarrow

1 part calendula flowers

1 part thyme

Psychic Opening Tea

1 part rosemary

1 part anise seed

1 part chicory root

The tool of "water" that is most frequently used—and generally ignored—is sexual lubricant. More aware lovers may make an effort to find lube that is safe for latex, or non-allergenic, or less likely to unbalance inner flora, but few think about the spiritual qualities of what you're stuffing into yourself. The bowl of lubricant is the equivalent of the symbolic chalice of water on the altar, that which smooths the way of connection between two people.

Magical Lubricant Recipes

If you're going to be using this lube with latex, use a water-based lubricant as a base. If you're only going to use it with bare flesh or with non-latex gloves, you can use vegetable shortening. I'm allergic to soy, so I don't use Crisco; I buy palm kernel oil shortening, which has a nicer consistency anyway. Warm it just enough to mix the essential oils through. (Don't use a lot of any essential oil, and don't use any essential oil that it isn't safe to eat, such as pennyroyal oil. Check aromatherapy books to find out what is safe for bodily consumption.) For each quart of base material, use the following amounts of essential oils:

Love Lube

- 2 drops rose oil (try to find the real thing)
- 1 drop apple blossom oil
- 1 drop violet oil
- 1 drop ylang-ylang oil

Pleasure Lube

- 1 drop lemon oil
- 1 drop orange oil
- 1 drop bergamot oil

Sex Magic Lube

- 2 drops musk oil
- 1 drop ambergris oil
- 1 drop patchouli oil

Psychic Opening Lube

- 2 drops rosemary oil
- 1 drop cypress oil
- 1 drop sandalwood oil

Ordeal By Torture Lube

1 drop cinnamon oil
1 drop peppermint oil
Sprinkle of cayenne powder

Lubricant Blessing Invocation

Blessed be this fluid
Which will mingle with the sexual fluids
Of this our sacred flesh.
Blessed be the grease
Upon the wheel of the universe,
Upon the wheel of time,
Blessed be the shaft in the hub
And the spinning rim
Upon which we turn in turn.
Blessed be our sacred flesh
That shall bring forth rivers of ecstasy
With the aid of this sacred spring.

South Quarter: Tools of Fire

Many-tailed whips are referred to as “cats” in the BDSM community, after the infamous cat o’nine tails. Real cats are traditionally associated with the element of Fire, and tool cats can resemble a flickering, flying torch, so this is a Fire tool. I’ve found that the best way to charge a cat with Fire energy is to swing it, a lot. You can light a flame, and hold your hand close to it, just close enough for discomfort but not enough for injury. Let the flame’s energy pour into your hand, through your body, and out your other hand into the cat as you swing it (in the opposite direction from the flame, please).

Cat Invocation

May my hand lay fire to your body
That the flame inside you may leap high.
May my hand lay fire to your ass
That you may rise and reach for the sky.
May my hand lay fire to your shoulders
That you may grow red wings and fly.

The most common form of fire play is wax-play, and every Pagan has candles sitting around, and probably uses them for most rituals. Make absolutely sure that you use stearin candles for SM-play and not beeswax, which melts at a higher temperature and will severely burn human skin. Stearin candles may create some light pink sunburn-like areas if the candle is held very close to the body; pouring from a height lets the wax cool on the way down, and creates enough heat to startle but not enough for serious pain. Still, some people may find even slightly cooled wax fairly intense, and may have pinkened skin from the heat. It goes without saying that this should be experimented with outside of scene, as should all fire play. Fire is dangerous stuff, and the top does not dare to screw up with these tools.

The article “Masters of the Underworld” describes a ritual for using fire in the four directions, which can be done with pillar candles in four different colors. Pillar candles, in general, are the best sort to use for this kind of play because they create a nice little pond of melted wax to be splashed on, rather than taper candles which can only drip one drop at a time. They can also be carved with symbols for magical use, and/or charged with symbolic essential oils or someone’s bodily fluids. If you use the kind in glass jars, make sure that the flame doesn’t lean too much against the rim of the jar, or the edge may crack. Also, don’t touch the bottom’s body (or the top’s hand) with hot glass.

Methyl alcohol—rubbing alcohol—is sometimes used as a scene toy by some folks as a safe form of fire play. It’s a technique that should be practiced carefully, and preferably

taught to you by another human being. Pure methyl alcohol burns with a (comparatively) cool blue flame that won't damage skin too much, although it will singe off body hair, and it goes without saying that flames should stay away from the face and all mucous membranes (which includes genitalia). Magically, one could draw a symbol of some obstacle on the body in alcohol, and then set it aflame and "burn it out". One could also use a symbol of something that is useful, and "burn it in".

Fire Play Invocation

From my heart to my hand,
Fire flow through me.
From my hand to the flame,
Fire flow through me.
From the flame to your body,
Fire flow through you.
From your body to my hand,
Fire flow again.

The Invisible Toybox: Incorporating Energy Work Into BDSM

Many folks in the various segments of the Neo-Pagan community move energy around for various purposes—healing, spellwork, nourishment. It's one of the basic things we are taught when we first come to these paths. Yet most people don't think about incorporating magic and energy work in their S/M practice, perhaps because it seems dangerous. This chapter will discuss uses for energy work that are reasonably safe, or at least can be made so. After all, if we have it, why waste it?

The drawback to these techniques is that they are really the top's job, like learning to wield a whip or a cane. While there are techniques for bottoms to learn that help them to achieve certain states of mind, these are generally things done to themselves, and not skills used between two people. If anyone knows differently, they should let me know. That disclaimer aside, these techniques have been beta-tested for effectiveness by many tops and found to be very useful.

Chi Whip

Some folks have a great eye, terrific reflexes, and awesome spatial skills. They can wield a cat or a single-tail like nobody's business, with nary a miss. (Years of practice don't hurt,

either.) However, some of us have lousy spatial skills, and are clumsy to boot. Hitting a target right is a best-three-out-of-four proposition. Rather than give up flailing instruments altogether, there are ways to compensate for this, for those who can work with energy. (I'm using the Chinese term *chi* to describe the energy within all of us; it is also called *ki* in Japan, *prana* in India, *huna* in Hawaii, and by many other names. Take your pick.)

Start by concentrating on pulling energy out of your fingers, and drawing it through the whip or cat. Hold the handle in your dominant hand, and with your other hand take long strokes from your fingers to the end of the whip. As you do this, visualize pulling the energy out from your fingertips so that it fills the whip strands, making the whip another part of your body, an auxiliary limb. Practice doing this for a while. (One way in which you'll know it's working is that if you put the whip down, you'll feel immediately uncomfortable, as if part of your hand had dropped off, and you'll feel the need to have it back in your hand again.)

Now practice swinging it at a target. For this exercise, we strongly suggest a nonliving target, like a pillow or a wall. As you begin, focus on feeling the whip end as the extended tips of your fingers; your brain tells them to hit *there*, and they do. You may need to stop periodically and do your chi-stroking again if you begin to get clumsy and lose the feeling. When you're tired of practicing, sit down and stroke the other way, working the energy back into your hand, removing it from the whip. (If you skip this step, your chi will dangle and feel funny for a while unless you're experienced enough to just make it zip back up into you like a tape measure. Even if you can't do that, it will eventually retract, and be fine.)

Like all things, this takes practice. I've found that by extending my chi into the whip, I can compensate wonderfully for my spatial dyslexia. However, there is another reason to extend your chi into the instrument...or rather, there's a side effect that can become a reason unto itself. Chi can be a weapon by itself; just ask any experienced martial artist. Being hit with an implement that is full of someone's extended chi

hurts a lot more. That's because while the implement strikes the physical body, the chi strikes the astral body and wounds it. "You hit harder than you hit" has been an accusation leveled at me before I realized that my aiming technique was having repercussions.

When I was a teenager, I was initiated into a traditional British-style Gardnerian Wiccan coven with very strict energy-working guidelines. As an advanced technique, I learned "soulsword", which is basically creating a sword out of chi that could then be used to fill any long object—a shinai, a broomstick, a tire iron—or even just be used by itself, a noncorporeal sword. The technique was used for dispatching noncorporeal creatures; the physical objects one could attach it to were more for the use of focus. Certainly it was never meant to be used on human beings, or at least my teachers didn't bring that up.

However, after being drilled in this technique month after month, I found that the "soulsword" would pop out every time I picked up a long thing and swung it. This didn't matter much when I was chopping wood, but when I began taking a cane to a bottom, problems arose. I found that heavy masochists who could take thirty strokes from another top would crumble and safe after three or four strokes from me. They would bruise more spectacularly, and take longer to heal. Rather than being something to brag about, this usually turned out to be a bad thing. Scenes were over in short order, bottoms were accusing me of being too rough, and I couldn't seem to "work anyone up" from a small amount of pain. It took an very energy-aware bottom to point out what I was doing, and then the light dawned.

So this is something to be warned about if you fill an implement with chi. The person on the receiving end will feel a lot more pain than they expected. Marks may be worse, depending on the energy level of the bottom, and they will need healing aftercare on two levels: physical and spiritual. If you aren't an energy healer—and being at least something of an energy healer is a useful thing for a top—then you might want to send them to a Reiki or Ch'i Gong practitioner

afterwards. Remember that the physical implement will strike the skin, but the extended energy may keep going well into the astral body, and the astral wounds may go deep. Since astral wounds can take longer to heal, they can also retard the fading of bruises and dissipation of pain in the physical counterpart.

One good thing to keep in mind is that when you extend your chi into the implement, give it a “blunt” or “thuddy” flavor in your mind. If you’re working with fine whip strands, perhaps giving it a fine or silken feel that won’t actually do any injury may be appropriate. Part of my problem was that I’d been trained in visualizing my extended energy as a sharp thing that could slice through a human body, which isn’t what you want to be doing to any bottom. If you don’t want to make it hurt extra, keep your chi “soft”. On the other hand, if you’re a top without much arm strength and you’re working on a bottom who’s a pain-sink, deliberate use of this technique can keep you from tiring your arm out.

Sticky Hands

This is one way to get a submissive to stay up against the wall when there’s no bondage in sight. Have them hold out their hands, palm up. Stroke their palms, visualizing smearing energy onto them that is as sticky as rubber cement. As you do this, let flow a trickle of energy onto their palms that feels “sticky” to you. (Tell them what you’re doing as you’re doing it; they need to know what’s going on with their astral body.) When their palms are good and “coated”, put them flat against the wall. Tell them that their hands are now stuck to the wall and they won’t be able to move them.

How well this works will depend on a lot of things: how good the top is at energy work, how much the bottom wants to fight it. A well-trained, obedient bottom, of course, will simply put their hands against the wall and stay where they are told, and testing it won’t even be an issue...but it’s a rare bottom who can refrain from testing it just a little. Physically

there's nothing there to prevent them from removing their hands, but if you've done this right, then when they pull their hands away just a little, it will feel disturbingly "wrong" to move them from where they've been placed. This isn't just suggestion, it's a pulling on their astral hands. They can do it; they can actually rip them away if they try, but it will feel "icky" to try.

You will need to clean the sticky energy off, if it doesn't wear off by the end of the scene. I do it by licking their palms and reabsorbing it. You can just wipe it back into yourself, or you can energize some water with "clean" energy and rinse them off.

Invisible Needles

Play piercings can be a way to physically "sink" a spell into another human being, directly into the inner part of their aura. To do this, take the needle and energize it so as to give it an astral "twin". This second needle of energy is then filled with some kind of "intent" towards a particular goal, and then put under the skin of the bottom. Then the top carefully separated the two and draws out the physical needle, leaving the energy twin in place. At this point, you can go one of two ways: you can rub the energy needle in and deliberately blur its boundaries, which is a good thing if it's going to be permanent, because otherwise, having that astral needle in there can give shooting pains for days or weeks afterwards until it's absorbed properly.

Another option is to make the spell temporary. In this case, just wait a couple of days, insert a needle into the same place, meld the two, and pull the whole shebang out. If you can't find it, if it's "sunk in" and become one with your submissive's astral body, that likely means that there was something about that spell that they really needed or at least deeply desired on some level, and their deep mind took it in and made it permanent.

Psychic Leash

This is a fun one for a dominant-submissive pair who are both fairly energy-aware to play with. The dominant stretches a piece of their energy out from their own body, and attaches it to the astral body of the submissive. This is different from the strong cord created by a couple who do sex magic together, as the psychic leash is temporary and can be removed. (However, if a couple does have a strong psychic cord between them, it can be used as a “carrier” of the psychic leash and it is especially effective.)

You will probably want to start with an actual leash, running from the dominant’s body to the submissive’s body. Although some dominants may object to the idea, it’s best to tie it onto both people while the exercise is being set up. The dominant should run the energy down the leash and twine it into some chakra of the bottom’s. I suggest the lower two chakras for those who are playing casually. The third chakra works well for people in a full-time D/s relationship, as it deals with the will. The heart chakra should only be used if the couple is also emotionally and romantically involved as well as physically. Don’t use the throat chakra, as it causes strangling feelings, or the head chakra which can cause headaches.

Once the leash is “attached”, the physical leash is removed from it, and the bond is there. From this point on, the bottom will have to stay within a certain physical proximity of the top, or they will begin to feel uncomfortable. Using the lower three chakras often gives a feeling of vague nausea, or “butterflies in the stomach”, or “belly-dropping worry” if the top gets out of their sight. Using the heart chakra will create flutterings and palpitations. The bottom, of course, needs to be completely informed of what is happening, and be able to give consent.

Where a psychic leash is useful is generally at crowded parties, where a real leash would tangle around other people and become an obstacle. People can pass through the psychic leash without much of a problem, although someone standing directly in its path for an extended period of time will trigger

the feelings of discomfort. I've found it useful to keep my (rather distractible) boy in check at an event where he's supposed to be my attaché, and I'm moving quickly from one person or activity to the next, and I don't have time to keep track of him. With the psychic leash firmly attached, if I move on, he will too, and I know he'll always be within visual distance, and just taking a few steps will bring his attention right back to me.

I can imagine the sadistic tops who are thinking, right now, about how wonderfully horrid it would be to restrain a bottom and then leave the room, putting uncomfortable pressure on the leash and making them almost sick for want of the top's presence. All I can say is that such things should be negotiated out first, so that the bottom has an idea of what they're getting into. There's also that doing this can snap the leash.

After you're done, the top should deliberately remove the leash from the bottom's chakras. Don't leave this as a permanent thing; even if you live together 24/7, you may not always want to be joined at the hip. You may want to go to the bathroom alone, for example, or leave to go to your job. Leaving a psychic leash attached for too long can "set" it, resulting in a panic attack for the bottom when it comes off. At the very least, remove it before falling asleep, so it won't get "set".

As with all things, energy work on bottoms should be done only with informed consent. That means that they should be aware of the possible problems, so that they can let the top know if something's going wrong. Informed consent also implies not doing it on people who don't believe in all this energy stuff, but will nod their head and smile in order to please the dom. This is a problem when magicians play with non-magicians, or at least with people who don't share the same world view. Please be ethical and be safe. Doing energy work on someone who doesn't really understand what's going on can make them think that they're crazy, and this is not the way to treat someone who is willing to be vulnerable to you.

I will suggest, again, that tops should look into learning some sort of energy healing in order to do better aftercare on their bottoms. Also, bottoms who are in service relationships (or want to be) should look into such things as well, as it appeals to tops who are tired and sore and just want a rubdown and some Reiki. Being trained in ways to make someone feel better can make you a lot more valuable as a BDSM commodity, to put it in the language of the marketplace. It can also help if you ever screw up with these techniques, so I strongly recommend it if you're the sort who can manage it. Not everyone is "wired" for healing, but if you are, it's a useful skill.

Some tops who use energy work like to work directly on the body of the bottom, diverting the flow of sexual energy temporarily to give greater pleasure. When the flow of energy is diverted away from the genitals, at least partially, it delays orgasm. This can be used as a kind of sexual-frustration torture, keeping the bottom at a peak of pleasure for a longer time, and perhaps finally allowing them to come... after an extended period of begging. Working with energy on this level, however, takes a good deal of talent and training, more than the scope of this book can offer.

Remember that anything you do to change the energy flow of someone's body should be dealt with afterwards, just like you'd clean up physical wounds. Sticky should be scraped off of hands, leashes detached, and astral cuts massaged and filled. What you inflict, you are responsible for. Don't forget that.

Opening Up: Penetration as Psychic Yoga

“Fuck you.”

There's, it's said. But why? When sex is used as an expletive, as something derogatory, it's not just any kind of sex. It's specifically penetrative sex, with the penetration as the obscene part. To be penetrated, in the anti-sex mindset, is to be violated, and possibly degraded. It is the basis for the practice of raping captured enemies and their families, and for gangraping out of anger, or to “take someone down”. Leaving aside that nonconsensual penetration is very likely to be physically painful and perhaps even injurious, it is assumed that it will also “break” something emotionally in the person to whom it happens... generally because it reduces them to being a woman, if they are male, or to being merely an object if they are female.

Of course, some of this is pure sexism. Women routinely get penetrated as part of ordinary procreative sex, so penetration is seen as a “female” thing, and for a man to be penetrated is to cast an aspersion on his manhood, for those who see femaleness as inherently inferior to maleness. It's also seen as a “gay” thing, because gay men are often far less resistant to exploring penetration with each other, but the basis of that is still sexism—gay men are “less” because their sexual practices might be more “feminine”.

There's another layer, too; a deeper one. To be penetrated, for most people—especially ones who haven't done it before, or don't do it often, requires a great deal of relaxation and

openness, and that requires a certain amount of vulnerability, and a whole lot of trust. To touch, to embrace, to share the same space, is to mingle auras and personal energy. To place some part of your body inside another person's flesh is far more than that; it is to experience their astral body within yours, different but merging. It is an incredibly deep intimacy. Some people—especially men—may go their entire lives without ever experiencing it.

Penetration has not always been seen as a duality of penetrator/violator, penetrated/violated, though. In ancient Tantric Hindu writings, the female is spoken of as “devouring” and the male as “giving forth”, trustingly placing his vulnerable organ into the raw mouth of Death and risking never getting it back. While this can also be seen as another form of male fear of women, the two versions are wildly different. In the first version, the penetrator may be seen as gloriously conquering, or brutally raping. In the second, the “penetratee” may be seen as powerfully enveloping, or castrating. There is power on each end, power which can be used in different ways. Being penetrated while in a dominant mode can be used to build up the dominant's sexual energy, but it seems to be done almost in a masturbatory way, by reducing the penetrator to an object to be used as a tool for the dominant.

A cunt can be the classic “vagina dentata”, toothed and hungry, clamping down and devouring. One submissive spoke of his partner's vagina in that way; it would clamp down so hard on his hand while he was fistfucking them that it would feel like it was “chewing” him, and he would sometimes cry from the pain of it while doing the fucking. (This, of course, would greatly amuse the sadist on the other end of that vagina.) To penetrate in this space is to experience the energy of Kali, the Devouring Mother, the predator cunt. I've occasionally heard of people who are able to do this with their anus as well; one described picturing his anus as the end of the Great Two-Headed Serpent.

On the other hand, separate from the poles of Violating Rapist Fuck (which can be a good deal of fun when done between two people who both enjoy that scenario) and Devouring Beast-Mouth (ditto), there is the sexual yoga of Opening. This discipline can be used as a form of sex magic for such things as divining, prophecy, preparation for magic or shamanic work, spirit-possession, or any energy work where an open channel must be created for something else to flow through you. This kind of sacred penetration requires patience on the part of both individuals, and is generally not done as part of a scene, because that would be distracting. Its “secular” base is less the energy of the SM scene and more the energy of the handballing club.

It’s said that it was gay male underground subculture who first discovered the art of fisting. Actually, there is some evidence that women have been doing vaginal fisting with each other, and with men, for some time, but when it comes to anal fisting it was certainly pioneered by gay men in the bathhouse culture of anonymous sex. Fisting in general is a form of sexual yoga that works beautifully as a combination of the Path of Sex Magic and the Ordeal Path, and with ritual penetration in general. If done in the right way, it can create an altered psychic state that can only be described as utterly opened up. (We’ll discuss the “right way” to achieve this end in a moment.)

Penetration by someone’s genitals is a wonderful thing, and there’s nothing like it for fertility rites (where the penis in the hole is a living embodiment of the Green Man’s fertility-bringing Maypole) or for procreative magic, or for the live-action version of the Great Rite. However, it has two major drawbacks when it comes to certain forms of ritual sex. First, it can only be utilized by someone with a normally-sized live penis, which leaves out a sizeable percentage of the population. Second, the penis-wielder has to put a great deal of attention and energy into maintaining an erection for as long as possible, without either orgasming too soon or losing focus and subsequently the erection itself. It’s not hard at all

for the penis to end up taking attention that ought to be paid to the energy-raising, or the partner.

One way around this is a charged strap-on dildo. If the dildo-wielder is experienced, energy-aware, and good at astral shapeshifting, they can extrude an “astral cock” into the dildo, which then performs the all-important role of bringing some part of one person’s astral body into another’s. However, this method also has its drawbacks. While the phallus certainly doesn’t go limp, it’s blunter and less discerning than fingers. Also, most men have very little practice in separating their astral cock from their actual flesh one, and many find the idea too uncomfortable to even work with.

On the other hand, those of us who learned to move and sense energy probably did it first through our hands and fingers. The hand is a sensory organ par excellence, both physically and psychically. It’s more flexible than any phallus, flesh or otherwise, and can change shape during the fuck, which penises can’t do. It can feel resistance and yielding better than any penis, flesh or otherwise, and can work around them. It can pry open in all directions, shrink and narrow down, and is generally the best possible tool for this work. The only contraindications are that the fister must be reasonably experienced, and not have severe carpal tunnel syndrome. If your penetrating partner is inexperienced and you want to use this practice as a magical tool, practice in nonritual space first, frequently, until it goes smoothly.

Another problem with all these methods is that they require another person to be there. There’s a reason for this. For some reason—don’t ask me why—it seems that part of the requirement for this kind of ritual Opening is that one be penetrated with something that has someone else’s energy in it. It doesn’t seem to matter whether it’s a penis, hand, charged dildo, or something else, but it needs to have foreign mojo there or it doesn’t seem to trigger things properly. If one is entirely alone and required such penetration, using a dildo that someone else has thoroughly charged can work, but it has to be a very serious charge. (For some folks who have no partner to help them, making a connection with a deity and

having that deity bless and charge the phallus can work as well, but be warned that this can lead to a much closer relationship with said deity.)

One example of using a charged phallus was done when I was away on a trip for several days, doing shamanic work by myself. My boy arrived every day to drop off food and supplies for me. I left him a note saying that I needed him to charge me a phallus for something I was doing that night. In order to charge it, he strapped it on, put his astral penis into it, and ritually “cut it off”, allowing it to stay in the phallus. Then he delivered it to me with a note saying what he had done, and that he had every confidence that I would be able to figure out how to “put it back”. (I did manage to get it reattached to him again when I came home, although my initial reaction was one of “You did *what?*!” But the point is that it worked extremely well for the purpose involved.)

Another reason that it’s better to do this with a partner is the other requirement of this kind of ritual sex: it has to be at least a little beyond one’s comfort zone. In order for this to work, it has to be at least a bit of an ordeal; the penetrating thing must be somewhat larger than one can take easily. You have to be able to relax and allow it to stretch you wider than it is easy for you to adjust to. For some folk, it may require a struggle to be seriously stretched before it works. This is very difficult to do by yourself, although it is not impossible. It’s much easier for the one being Opened to just lay back and concentrate on relaxing and Opening, and let someone else do the actual work.

How much you take seems to be irrelevant as a group statistic. You just need to take more than you would take comfortably for a session of recreational penetration. For those who don’t do any recreational penetration at all, something “normal-sized” might be enough. For those who play with penetration regularly, it may require resorting to something extra-large, like a hand or a very large toy or series of toys. This kind of Opening is meant to take a good long time to work in whatever is going in; if it goes right in, it won’t do the trick.

An enema is generally routine for anal fisting, although some people don't bother with it. The physical benefits are that it cleans out the colon, removing solid matter that might get in the way, and liquid slurry that makes a very poor (and often abrasive) lubricant. In the rare event of an internal tear (all Gods forbid!), having a clean colon means more time to get to the hospital before peritonitis sets in. Ritually, it is the best purification ritual that you can do before engaging in this particular act of opening. While the best pre-fisting enema is simple warm water, if you want to add something, a weak herbal tea added to the water won't hurt anything, as long as it's made with herbs that you could drink a lot of and have no problems. Check the chapter on Toys and Tools to find a good enema potion.

The most important tool of all is lubricant. There is no such thing as too much lube when it comes to fisting any orifice. If the person being fisted thinks that maybe they need a little more, then they need more, now. Lubricant coats the folds of flesh for slipperiness, and it also softens them for more give. Since with this sort of penetration you will be using a great deal of lube, it's best to create a large amount of single-use ritual lube made of a base ingredient (and whatever additives, such as oils, that you like) that will not irritate you in any way. Poor lube choices can create distractions and ruin the process. Likewise, if you use barrier gloves, make sure that they aren't the "craft gloves" with the bumpy finger surfaces for gripping small things, and that they are made of a material that does not irritate the penetratee's tissues.

Some people who enjoy anal penetration have worried out loud as to whether continual stretching of the anal sphincter could get to the point of permanent damage, where they could no longer hold their defecation. While this situation is the source of a good deal of humiliation pornography, in real life I've never actually seen or heard of it happening. The anal sphincter is designed to open and close. It does loosen up after regular assplay over the course of months or years, but not very much. Leaving it alone for any significant length of time will cause it to go back to its original state. The reports of

people who do serious anal stretching on a regular basis assure us that there is no functional change in one's ability to defecate. Even the folks who manage, over a period of hours, to get their ass open to extreme widths of several inches report that after three or four hours it's all back to what it was.

While most of the above is specific to anal penetration, this technique can be used with vaginal penetration as well. From discussing this method with women who use it, it seems that it works best with women who do not do vaginal penetration too regularly, or at least not every time that they have sex. The anecdotal information seems to suggest that getting vaginally fucked every time you have sex—especially if you're having sex daily or at least a few times a week—somehow “toughens up” the energy of the astral vagina in a way that prevents Opening. That doesn't mean that women shouldn't be having daily vaginal sex—hey, if it makes you happy, go for it and bless you!—but if a woman wants to use this form of Opening with her cunt, it might be useful to abstain from penetration and utilize alternative sexual practices for a couple of weeks first, in order to “resensitize” the orifice. Or, alternatively (like many women who use this practice), she can keep her vagina for recreational sex and practice Opening with her anus, which works just as well with women as with men.

So far we have no equivalent warnings on regular recreational anal sex; this may be because the anus is not designed by evolution for regular penetration the way that the vagina is. However, we have some anecdotes suggesting that repeated recreational anal sex that is disrespectful to one's body—in other words, that it is done too roughly and carelessly, deliberately ignoring the body's messages of pain and damage—can create a condition where the astral anus/root chakra refuses to Open. It should go without saying that while the act of Opening can involve some discomfort—even repeated discomfort over a long period of time—that actual pain should not be involved here. If you are having serious pain with anal use, you are injuring yourself. The

asshole is a diva and must be seduced, not forced, or you'll be sorry later.

At any rate, here is the way that ritual Opening should ideally go: First, sacred space is created, with no distractions. The receiver (which is the word I will now use for the one-about-to-be-penetrated) should calm and ground and center themselves by whatever means they find most effective. Some find it useful to have a quiet call-and-response verbal ritual with their helping partner. An enema is administered (if this is anal penetration) and the receiver visualizes it as purifying and cleansing, and may literally repeat it until they feel cleansed psychically as well as physically (although, again, listen to the body and don't overdo it). The receiver lays down and concentrates on relaxing while the helper begins to lube them up and start the physical Opening.

At this point, I find that I feel the Opening beginning at the back of my head. It's as if a doorway—or to be more blatantly specific, a sphincter—is slowly opening there, and I always think that I can see stars through it. Stars or no, I get the strong feeling that on the other side of that orifice is the Cosmos, the web of all things, and when it gets wide enough I can just reach through and grab what information I want, or at least let it pour into me. From the helper's perspective, the Opening should go slowly, rhythmically, with them testing the resistance, pushing a little, retreating, and repeating. The job of the receiver is to relax, concentrate, and feel that hole in the back of your head expand with your lower hole. It should be both pleasurable and challenging, a combination which many people are not used to dealing with.

For some, having an orgasm as part of this process is a distraction; for others it's a necessity. I'm in the latter category. I find that a good strong orgasm will temporarily "fix open" the hole in my head, so that it takes a longer time to start closing down. Otherwise, it will begin to close down immediately. Of course, this means that orgasm should be delayed until the Opening is wide enough, which requires some self-control.

I've found that this is an excellent preparation for serious divining, of the sort that requires clear answers from Gods or spirits, or going straight into someone's Akashic records. It creates the kind of headspace where one can simply deal the cards or runes or whatever, and just hold one's hand over them, and channel out whatever comes. It is very good for prophecy, or being an oracle in general. It is useful in preparation for channeling spirits or ritual god-possession, and excellent in preparation for a group ritual where you will be the focus of several people's projected energy, and your job is to bring it all together and send it out to a specific goal. It can be used as preparation for journeying, pathwalking, or anything that requires sending out part of your astral body; you just go out through that nice door that's Opened up in your head.

The effects of Opening last a few hours, but little more; the effect is strongest during the first hour and then slowly dissipates as you close down astrally to your normal state. If you must eat something during this time, simple cold raw food is best (I am hypoglycemic and I eat raw dairy for the protein), as hot and/or cooked and/or complex foods tend to ground you and shut you down quickly. They should be saved for when you're done and need to ground completely; that's when you eat the big hot meal. Doing something absolutely mundane afterwards is a great help with grounding—for me, watching DVDs and eating Chinese food while curled up with a partner is a good way to create "mundane space".

Sex during an Opened state is an intensely empathic experience, but at the same time it is somewhat distant; you feel their feelings, but you care about it less. Being touched by people can be good or bad depending on how comfortable you are with their energy; by definition you are psychically unshielded in this state. It goes without saying that you need to be very careful about where you are and who you're around while Open.

Above all, what this process needs is patience, on the part of both people. It may take months of attempting before one actually gets it right. Sometimes it may be too great a temptation to quit before the Opening is achieved, because the discomfort is too difficult. (This may be the body telling you “Not today, dude.” Always listen to your body when it comes to these things.) Sometimes it may simply degenerate into recreational fucking (which I take as a sign from the Universe that the time is not cosmically right for this sort of thing). Sometimes it may take months of hit-or-miss before this can be used on demand as a reliable tool. Patience is essential. There’s also the fact that not everyone responds to this form of shamanic sex yoga; some people may not be “wired” for it, as it were. If it just doesn’t ever seem to work, try one of the other gazillion ways of getting into an altered state.

One of the things that I personally think is wonderful about this method (besides the obvious perks; I’d far rather have ritual sex than take drugs that give you nausea and vomiting, or drum for six hours, or dance until I drop) is that doing Opening via anal fisting or charged phalluses is entirely gender-neutral. It can be done by any combination of people with any combination of genitals. Especially in the case of anal fisting, it’s so far away from any kind of “normal” and therefore role-bound sexual activity that it can push people out of their ordinary gender roles, and this is a side effect that has an excellent effect on Opening. In fact, it seems that the more bound up a sexual activity is with one’s gender roles, the less useful it is for this kind of thing. That’s because being forced out of your gender role is a requirement for regular Walking Between Worlds, and it’s why third gender people were traditionally seen as having an automatic advantage when it came to shamanic work. It’s because it’s true.

That’s one reason why penetration seeming like a “feminine” thing isn’t such a bad idea for men who are using penetration magically... as long as they can get over the idea that “feminine” equals “degrading” or “lessening”. In reverse, some women see anal penetration as a “male” thing because gay men do it—the idea being that a “real” woman would

always use her vagina, because she has one—and that has helped them to move out of their gender role during ritually mind-altering sex. (Some women, however, find it impossible to use penetration at all in this way, as it's too bound up with their ordinary female sex life, and have to use other forms of sex to achieve this state.) In general, if the Opening is going properly, you move entirely beyond gender roles and even a gendered body while it's happening. It's the magic of Walking Between Worlds, using only the amazing and multipurpose tool of your own sexual body.



Part III:
Journey
to the
Underworld

Journey to the Underworld: Ritual Catharsis

While the infliction of pain is the most publicly unacceptable—and therefore most fascinating—of BDSM techniques, it's hardly universal. The other major tool is entirely nonphysical, and it is the use of ritual techniques to create an altered state wherein someone will be especially susceptible to change and catharsis. In other words, it's about headgames. Playing with psychological dynamite will always be a part of BDSM, whether or not people approve. That's because, as the old witches' saying goes, where there's fear, there's power.

One of the wonderful things about so much of BDSM play is that it is rich sexual theater. Of course, not all scenes (or all players) are theatrical types; some don't even bother with the roles of dominant or submissive, but simply do sensation play with each other. There's nothing wrong with that, and this chapter is in no way meant to downplay those who would rather have simple streamlined play, but for many of the people who get into BDSM, it's the sexual theater that appeals the most, rather than any particular activity. It's why we love it...we can have sex as something other than our ordinary selves, and learn something in the process.

In the realm of sexual theater, context is everything. In some cases, it's just a fun way to learn new things about ways of being...what is it like to have sex as someone of a different gender, or a different social class, or a different personality? Inevitably, though, we begin to be drawn to the darker things,

because we were the children who loved the haunted house as a kid. What would it be like, we wonder, to have sex with a monster, or as a monster? What would it be like to have sex that you might not survive? What would it be like to have sex that provokes an immense emotional reaction in you, that forces you to confront painful things? BDSM provides a safe space to do this. Creating a ritual context around that space can underline and emphasize its goals, as well as helping to shut off the critical internal voice that keeps you from committing to the experience.

The problem with some of these catharsis points is that they cannot be made entirely safe. (That's how we know they're sacred, by the way. The sacred is, by definition, not safe. Our ancestors knew all about that; their words for holy and for dangerously taboo were one and the same.) Various therapists have expressed their worry to me that playing games with this psychological dynamite will do people more harm than good. My feeling on the matter is that for those of us who respond to this path, we will find ways to do it anyway. Our subconsciouses will create the circumstances for us to challenge ourselves, and so we'd better to learn to do it consciously and deliberately.

There's also that I know for myself that nothing works like direct contact with the enemy. All the therapy in the world didn't heal my abusive parent issues one bit. I could talk about it until I was blue in the face and come away no different. After a year of playing "evil daddy" to a willing "boy" who physically resembled me in many ways, I found that 90% of those issues had quietly, organically healed. There was no way that would ever have happened without my hand contacting the ass of someone who cried and moaned, "Please, Papa, stop!" and knowing that I could stop, that I had not inherited the lack of control of the damaged humans who raised me. There was no way that could happen in a therapist's office.

Even those of us who don't plan to play with their psychic dynamite sometimes find it happening. I don't know how many times I've heard people tell me about the scene that suddenly triggered something, and they made the choice

either to run in fear, or go with it and have an intense and rewarding experience...or perhaps go with it and be damaged further. We walk the dark side of sexuality, and far too many of those paths lead to the Underworld, whether we like it or not. It's not a matter of whether you are going to pursue this, it's a matter of what you will do when it comes and gets you.

No, they can't be made entirely safe... which is why we should approach them with reverence, and ritual. It reminds us that this is nothing to be trifled with. It reminds us that it is good to set clear boundaries, to plan for specific effects, to have emotional and spiritual prep-time and aftercare. It reminds us that no one goes down to the Underworld for casual reasons, and no one comes out unchanged.

She's strapped down, and it's a good thing. The needles glint in the hand of the woman standing over her, like glittering insects ready to swarm and bite. She hates needles. Years of childhood hospitalization, years of needles stabbing into her body, over and over; these have given her a fear so hysterical that she cannot keep from moaning as she sees them glint in the bright light. She knows, though, that she can't go on this way. Someday she might need a tetanus shot, or some other lifesaving liquid pumped into her flesh. Besides, it would be nice to be able to get her ears pierced.

She tests the bonds, more to reassure herself than out of worry that her very competent top might not have fastened them properly. Her lover has backed out of her line of vision for a moment, but now she steps back in. Instead of the leather jacket that she usually wears for scenes, she's donned a white lab coat. Her hair is severely tied back, and she is in the process of snapping rubber gloves on her hands. "Do you know who I am?" she asks, looming over the bound victim. Light glints off her glasses, obscuring her familiar brown eyes. Her voice is cold.

The bound figure can only shake her head. The woman in the white coat smiles, a little, still coldly. "I am the disciple of Aesclepias," she says, knowing that the bound figure will understand the reference to the ancient Greek god of physicians. "I hold the wisdom of Athena. I hold a thousand years of hard-won knowledge, and one of those things is that what is outside you can go

into you, with pain but little blood." She holds up her hand, and fine needles glint there, flanking a thin hypodermic. "I intend to inject you with courage," she says. "Will you take this from me, as a gift?"

She's paralyzed. It feels like it is taking a million years to unstick her suddenly dry lips under the hawk's gaze of the eyes behind the glasses. She realizes suddenly that she isn't breathing, takes a deep breath – eyes still glued to the shining silver threads of metal – and croaks out, "Yes, ma'am." She is chagrined to hear how faint is the voice produced by all that effort of breathing.

The cold smile again. "Good. We'll begin immediately." The white-coated woman turns away, and proceeds to dig undignifiedly, incongruously, under her shirt. She turns back with a vial of saline solution in her hand, still wrapped in its sterile container. "This is water, mixed with salt like the sea, like blood, and purified in heat like fire. I've carried this with me all day," she says, placing it on the naked belly laid before her. It is still warm. "I've carried it next to my third chakra, my hara, the point of courage and will. I've tried to put some of my courage into it for you. After this, you won't be scared of these things." She sounds confident; her victim is less sure, but nods slowly.

The vial comes out of its wrapper, and is snapped onto the needle. Coldness lands on her hip, and the scent of alcohol rises. "Now hold still," commands the white-coated priestess, and then the needle is plunged into her exposed buttock. She screams, throws her head back, nearly wets herself, but somehow manages to remain still. The needle vanishes, leaving only a sore spot, and she lies panting, weeping, trying with some small coherent part of her mind to imagine the saline as liquid courage, soon to be coursing through her.

The cold sensation comes down on the delicate lips of her labia, and she whimpers again. Too soon, too soon! Not finished crying yet. The fine needles are there in the woman's hand again, like a fan of cards held by a stage magician. Below her, the other woman moans in terror, but manages to set her jaw and breathe deeply.

"Courage," says her tormentor, and a shift of the light allows her to see the compassion behind the glasses.

"Courage," she whispers back. "Courage."

Emotional catharsis scenes can be loosely sorted into four types, although most scenes will partake of more than one of these, and many will cover all four. When they are sorted this way, the four types of triggers correspond to the four elements. I have chosen to call them the Gates to the Underworld. Actually, the various underworlds often have many gates, but here are four to start with.

We begin with the Gate of Fire, which is the Gate of Fear. This is the first and hardest one, because fear is so strong in us. Just getting to the point in a catharsis ritual where you are standing, trembling, at the doorway is a huge leap of courage. There are a million things that you can say to yourself in order to convince yourself that you don't really need this ritual. What if it hurts, and I can't take it? What if it triggers something that makes me go insane? What if it just makes me miserable, and I hate the whole thing? What if I run away in the middle? What if I go through the entire mess and it just feels empty and stupid and I gain nothing?

It's also true that fears are the most popular things to work with in these ritual scenes... fear of losing control, fear of pain, fear of discomfort, fear of being subjected to the whims of someone fallible and perhaps not entirely benign, fear of the dark, fear of one's memories, fear of insects, fear of electricity... the list is endless. The idea in each case is not to become fearless, but to be in a safe place to allow oneself to utterly and completely wallow in that fear, and still keep going... or to chicken out with no blame, because you can always try again another day. The idea is to make the fear familiar—and perhaps even, in some cases, to eroticize it—because that is the equivalent of giving you tools with which to pick it up and examine it more closely.

Some fears are fascinations found in all of us—the fear of death, for example, or assault. Others are deeply personal, like the fear of belts left over from childhood punishments. Facing any fear gives one a rush of intense power, and many “adrenalin junkies” come to find that ecstatic rush of mastery a goal in and of itself.

He kneels naked on the rough grass, the sun beating down on his back. The strap around his neck is no fancy collar; it's just unattractive brightly-colored ribbed strapping, the sort you'd tie up an animal with, attached to a peg in the grass. The rope is too short for him to sit up straight; he can lie down or sit up hunched-over, but nothing more. He's been here for two hours, waiting.

The only garments on his body are a pair of heavy leather mittens, buckled onto his wrists and holding his hands in tight fists, and a brightly-colored ribbon tied around his testicles like the decoration on a show animal. He minds the ribbon less than the mittens; they are clumsy and reduce his hands to paws. He can't gracefully wipe his nose, much less masturbate. It's amazing what taking away a human being's dexterous fingers and opposable thumbs can do, he thinks grimly. As someone whose hands were valuable, working tools and keyboards and musical instruments, removing them was like taking away everything that made him worth being part of the human race.

He turns his head as she approaches; from his vantage point on the ground she seems so much taller than when he stands and looks down at her. "Hello, puppy," she says, patting him on the head. He flinches, and looks away, but she is relentless. Pushing his head against her knee as if he was an affectionate dog, she scratches his scalp. It feels good, and he has to resist rubbing himself against her hand; with an effort, he grits his teeth stubbornly. "How are you feeling, puppy?" she asks cheerfully.

"I have to piss," he says through gritted teeth. It's true; his bladder has been full for the last hour.

"So what's stopping you?" she laughs, and he flinches. "Oh, you're afraid that I'd be upset with you for peeing in the field? Well, it's no problem as long as you dig a hole first and cover it up afterwards." She steps back, and the affectionate hand left his hair. "Start digging," she said, and her tone was steely.

He stares at the ground, and at his mittened hands. "They'll get dirty," he says, and is ashamed to hear the faint whine in his tone.

"They'll get dirty anyway," she says cheerfully. "What do you think you're going to be wiping your ass with? Since you can't get your tongue down there, that is."

He tries to dig with his mittened fists, and finally ends up using his feet, since his toes work better. Then, blushing furiously, he squats over the hole, knowing that she is watching him with amusement, and pisses. He prays that he won't have to shit as well, but in his squatting position his bowels decide that this is would also be a good time to evacuate. For a moment he panics – I can't, I can't shit here in the field in front of her – and then he can't hold it and it happens anyway.

"Stay," she commands, and he freezes in place, bare filthy ass poised over the hole, trying not to cry with humiliation. Her footsteps leave and then return, and then he is caught by surprise as a jet of cold water from a hose catches his rump. He yelps and jumps, and she repeats her command, more forcefully, and he finds himself obeying automatically, not thinking about it. She hoses off his rear end and then tells him to fill in the hole, which he does again with his feet.

She comes up to him, releases the rope from the stake, leans his head against her knee once more, and this time he doesn't resist, although it means that his tears stain her jeans. "Good boy," she says, stroking his head like one would calm a frightened animal, and somehow it works. "Your name," she says. "Alan. Do you know where it comes from? No, of course you don't, you never crack a history book. You're named after the Alani, the men who called themselves the hounds of Brigid, the fire goddess. They were wild men, living in the woods; they inspired the word brigand, and the Robin Hood legends. You were named to be the hound of a powerful woman, and that's how I knew what to do with you."

He shivers, and her hand tightens on the rope. "You're going to be my dog for the next few days, my hound," she says. "Ever wonder what it's like to shift shape? Well, that's what you're going to do. You're going to learn all about what it's like to be a hound. Not a human puppy, but a real puppy. And the first rule is that dogs don't speak. Ever. You can make all the dog noises you want, although if you howl too much you'll sleep tied up outside." She goes back to caressing his head. "We'll go hunting together, and you'll fetch the dead birds that I shoot, in your mouth. And if you're really good, I'll find a bitch for you to breed with. You'd like that, wouldn't you?" She scratches him behind the ears and in spite of himself, the thought

makes him hard—two naked leather-pawed bodies rolling in the mud, him trying to get the bitch by the back of the neck and get his penis into her, his mistress looking on in amusement. Then she laughs, and he flushes again. She takes a bit of beef jerky out of her pocket, and holds it over his head.

“Good dog,” she says. “Good Alan. Now sit up and beg.”

The Gate of Water is the Gate of Shame. Humiliation is next to straight-up fear in most people’s Least Wanted Lists, especially public humiliation. No matter how brave you are, there’s something that can reduce you to wanting to die and sink through the floor, because we are social human beings and shame is one of our built-in social control mechanisms. Although many people are made uncomfortable by the idea of humiliation as any kind of positive spiritual tool, ordinary BDSM scenes are rife with it, and not just because it turns all the tops on, either. There are plenty of bottoms who find themselves strongly drawn to humiliation, because it takes you beyond yourself and your interfering pride.

A classic shame-ritual from ancient Sumeria is the myth of Inanna, the Queen of Heaven who goes down to the underworld in order to find wisdom. On her way through the gates of the underworld she is stripped of her crown (signifying temporal power), her jewels (signifying wealth), her breastplate (signifying sexual power), her wand (signifying intellect) and finally her own name. As a nameless corpse, she is hung on the wall as a decoration for her sister Ereshkigal, the Queen of the Dead. When she is finally rescued, she has learned the wisdom of the depths.

This kind of myth is more common than we, with our “self-actualizing” Western culture, would like to believe. It has echoes in military boot camp, where identity is shaved off with hair and individualized clothing, and everyone is tormented together as one of a harshly-treated hive mind. Monastic orders do the same thing, with identical clothing, new names, denuded hair, and strict discipline. It’s part of the truth that says: You never know who you really are until everything you have is taken away.

Too many of us identify entirely with our jobs, our social status, our family, our race, our gender, our sexual preferences, our intellect, our knowledge, our spirit guides, our magical power, and all the other labels that we use to answer the question "What are you?" Ritual humiliation is a stripping-down of the soul; it asks the question, What are you when all this is taken away? Who are you now? The idea here is to find some part of yourself that does not leave when all these labels are temporarily rendered meaningless. This is the spiritual use of such unlikely techniques as forced-feminization (or forced-masculinization), verbal abuse, messiness, setting someone up for failure, public shaming, and generally being forced to do stupid things for the entertainment of a ridiculing audience. The treatment can strip a person down to their essential core, where they remind themselves that they are not all these labels, but something both less and more than that.

It's been three days since they came and took him from his living room, away from the woman who was playing his mother. It wasn't his real mother; she'd never agree to this, and wouldn't have when he was a boy and needed it, so a friend had agreed to weep and moan, to cling to him, to tell them that he wasn't ready, he was only a little boy. The men tore him from her smothering arms and dragged him, half-resisting, into the pickup truck, which rattled up the mountain trail to the summer cabin.

The first day he'd dug a hole, ten feet deep and three feet across. That was all they had him do, dig the hole. They threw him water and food, berated him when he was too slow. He'd slept in the hole, under a blanket they threw him, and got up the next morning to dig again where he'd fallen. When the hole was seven feet deep, they'd rigged a bucket on a rope and crankshaft to haul up the dirt. At nine feet, when the water began to seep in, they called encouragement down the hole, telling him not to stop, to keep working until the water reached his waist. At ten feet they hauled him up with the rest of the buckets, muddy and exhausted. Then came a forced march down the other side of the mountain to the lake, where they threw him in naked.

He slept for an hour on the sand, and then was dragged off again to learn to chop down trees, to haul firewood, and to pass out again beside the fire. Existence was compressed into an act of will; he must not fail, he must not stop. Do what is in front of you and think of nothing more. Somehow, he had made it to the age of twenty-six and still felt like he wasn't really a man. That was what had led to this weekend. Now, on the third day, he standing with his face pressed into the rough bark of an oak – oak for strength, the men told him – hanging onto its branches for dear life while the tattoo needle traveled over it. Six hours of tattooing, he'd been told. Never once falling down, only touching the earth with his feet. "Ground and center," they'd told him, pressing him against the tree. "Bring the strength of the earth up through your feet. Pull the strength of the oak in through your body." Men's bodies, in flannel and denim, and one worn leather jacket, had pressed against him in an embrace, and then they had withdrawn, leaving him to the tattoo needle and the pain.

It's been two hours now, and already his knees are shaking, but he feels a determination that he has never felt before. I will die before I fail, he thinks. Is this what it means to be an adult, finally?

The Gate of Earth is the Gate of Endurance. This is the Warrior's Gate, the place of suffering and striving to gain strength. This is the place where you learn to say, "I can take that and live." This is the place where you learn about the deep core of strength in yourself that cannot be broken. It is the classic ritual of the Ordeal Path, but there is a subtle catch: it only counts if you go through something that actually has at least an even chance of reducing you to jello. If you're pretty sure you can manage it, it doesn't count.

Far too often, I've seen people put together ordeal rituals that they knew they could get through, perhaps with some discomfort, but not with any real fear of failing. This seems to be designed less for building their sense of stability and more for building their ego. Eventually, it may even be counter-productive; some part of you knows that you're cutting yourself too much slack, and making a big deal out of something less than immense, and it will make you feel less,

not more, competent. To do this right, you have to have an even chance of failure, and you have to be all right with that, as do your aides and assistants. You have to be willing to try again if you lose, too.

In a proper Gate Of Endurance ritual, you fight, hard. You fight because that's the only way you will win. It may not be physical fighting; perhaps the fight is against your own thoughts, in your own head. These rituals often utilize repetition—how many times can I endure this terrible thing? They may also be more bottom-directed, especially if the bottom is actively testing themselves. The bottom has to guard against screening out all unexpected phenomena, though, because it is often in those moments that one finds one's true worth.

They call it mummification, she had laughed at him, but it's nothing like real mummification. The Egyptians had a whole ritual around that; it took days. We don't recreate that, not with a box of Saran Wrap.

I could, he said to her. I could recreate it, pretty darn close, besides the being dead part. She'd laughed again and tossed it off, but then remembered it two years later when her life fell apart and she plunged into depression. I'm dead now, she told him over the phone, or close to it. I feel dead, anyway. I feel like the only way I'll come back to life is if I acknowledge that, and rebirth myself in a more concrete way.

So here she is, wrapped tightly in layer after layer of bandages, having been gently bathed and cleansed first in salt water and rubbed with oils. Her bowels have been emptied and cleaned while he chanted the prayers for removing and preserving the organs. She is catheterized for the night, the tube extruding from the bandages. She is absolutely immobilized, blindfolded, her ears stopped. The mask over her face is made to look like an Egyptian queen's death mask, but it is built over a breathing apparatus that forces tubes into her mouth and nose, effectively gagging her. The dead have no voice.

The night passes, and she alternates between hysteric terror and floating peace. She sleeps, she wakes, and nothing has changed. The next day passes the same as the first. The only sensation is his hands

removing the mask, speaking the words for the Opening of the Mouth ceremony, placing a feeding tube between her lips, and pumping in some nutritious fluid. This happens every few hours, she doesn't know how often. Then the mask goes back on, and she is alone again in the void. Her life passes before her, several times, different each time. She weeps, and the bandages absorb the tears. She is terrified that he will keep her here, that he will forget her, that she will die for real here in the night and he won't notice until her stiffening corpse is unwrapped the next day. I must trust him, she thinks. I must let go and trust. If I can't trust the process, I can never be reborn.

The next morning, the mask is removed, but instead of a feeding tube, he tilts her upright and lifts her limp mummified form from the coffin, carrying her across the room. She hears his voice in her ear, chanting the Opening of the Mouth, telling her to come back to life, that it is morning and she must awaken. She feels herself set like a baby in the lap of someone large and soft, and something soft and warm is thrust into her mouth. It is a woman's nipple. "The Mother feeds you, and brings you back to life," she hears him say, and she sucks on that nipple as if she could ingest the life force of the warm, pulsing being behind it, could drink the warmth of the Mother and warm her own cold flesh. She feels sunlight on her cheeks, the only part of her not wrapped in gauze, and feels her hands and feet slowly come back from numbness.

"Be ready to arise," she hears him say. "Be ready to arise and go forth by day."

The Gate of Air is the Gate of Letting Go. This is the leap off the cliff into Nothingness, to complete trust. It is the situation where you turn over everything to the hands of someone who embodies Deity in some way to you; who is worthy of carrying that kind of trust. You turn over your judgment, your body, your will, and you let whatever happens, happen. This is an important gate for us control freaks. It's also the one that can be the most purely psychological.

For some people, this gate is crossed through ageplay, becoming children in the hands of a parent once again. For

others, it's about complete trusting submission, not just service. It is surrender, at least for a time, but it has to be without one's fingers crossed, without the voice that continually grades the top's performance and worthiness in one's head. This means that the vetting of the top has to be done thoroughly beforehand, when all the judgment is on line. The Gate of Letting Go requires a huge amount of trust, and should never be done with someone who doesn't inspire that kind of trust.

This has its similarities with the kind of letting-go-and-merging-with-the-Divine that is practiced by mystics and monastics of many faiths. For some, it takes something as severe as full-body bondage or a long period of forced control by someone that they trust to help them come even somewhat close to that point of letting go to a deeper power. Some people need to start out by submitting to another human being before they can conceive of submitting to the Divine Will, or to learn to trust a fellow human completely—if only for an hour—before they can trust in the Universe's plan for them.

One important difference about a rite through this gate is that the recipient really can't be the one in charge of planning it. By definition, letting go involves walking into the unknown, allowing oneself to trust fully. When the recipient plans the ritual in any way, there can be too much temptation to orchestrate it for emotional safety and familiarity. This means that the top needs to know the bottom well enough to put together a scene that is custom-built for efficacy, and the bottom needs to know the top well enough to trust them to do this.

"Mistress," he says, carefully, trying not to give offense, "please, may I know what it is that you will be expecting of me during this ritual?"

She looks at him. "No," she says. "I am not going to tell you anything, until it's time for you to do it. My plans for you are none of your business." Her gaze is cold. "That may be a difficult concept for you to understand, but you need to accept it. Either you trust me completely, or you don't, yes?"

He is silent for a moment. Does he trust this woman completely? Actually, he doesn't think that anyone has ever earned his complete trust. They always fail in some way. Then it strikes him, like a blow to the stomach. He has to choose to trust her, whether or not she has earned it according to his – likely ridiculous – standards. He has to choose this, or he has to get up and leave.

He realizes that he is bent over, his head almost touching the ground. He hears her voice above him, coldly amused. "I don't hear you giving me an answer," she says.

For three more seconds, the voices war within him, and then he decides that if he chickens out now, he will regret it forever. "Yes, Mistress," he whispers. "I trust you." I choose to trust you. I will myself to trust you.

As can be seen by the examples in this chapter, ritual catharsis doesn't necessarily have to be about sex, although sex is such a loaded thing for us that it often ends up happening anyway. It can be something done by people who are not lovers, as a service. Some BDSM tops find that they get asked to create and inflict these sorts of cathartic drama for people, whether it be in an obvious ritual context or not, so often that it becomes a spiritual service that they do for the community.

We as a community—whether we are referring to the BDSM community, the neo-pagan community, or the general public at large, are terribly deficient when it comes to rites of passage. We all crave dramatic and meaningful rites that help us acknowledge great changes and commitments in our lives—that's why weddings are such a million-dollar business—but we're also taught that such rites are silly and melodramatic and embarrassing, and our craving for them is somehow childlike. In the first two communities that I mentioned, people have begun to address this need for rituals of transition, commitment, and self-discovery, and have begun to fumble toward a liturgy of cathartic sacred theater.

Those of us who cross both communities are in an especially fortunate place to begin this work. We know who we are; we're the ones that people approach timidly when

they need to do a ritual to commemorate X, or to help them face Y. Perhaps we discuss it with them, and come up with a framework, and then they have to go away for a year or more and think about it before they can work themselves up to actually doing something about it. That's all right; it's what we're there for. What we are willing to bring to the ritual will differ with each of our gifts and limitations; some can offer drama but not pain, or a whipping but not sex, or sex but not pretending to be Daddy for you.

I'd like to see those of us who do this work for people acknowledged; not for our own egos, but so that other searchers can find us. I'd like to see the work itself valued; sometimes it's hard for someone to say, "What I really need is someone who can be ruthless and not let me off the hook when I start to cry or act scared," and have the other person nod calmly and say, "Don't worry; when I'm being the Goddess of Death, nothing that you say will move me," and when they take comfort in that, they need not to be told they're wrong in the head. I'd like to see people valuing spiritual psychodrama, which has too long been jealously kept as the sole territory of mental health professionals, doled out sparingly by them for reasons of being "for our own good". I'd like to see it back in the hands of its original owners—and creators—who were the priests and priestesses of the Underworld forces.

In order for our community (and I mean the larger community here as well) to be whole and healthy, it must get over its unhealthy relationship to death, grieving, and pain. That requires spiritual professionals who are willing to take on the job of creating sacred space for people to let their noses get rubbed in those difficult things, because it's good for them... and for all the rest of us, too. Remember, it's not a matter of if... it's a matter of when, and when it happens for someone, let's be ready with a context and a willing hand. That's what rites of passage are all about.

Staging Sacredness: The Practical Considerations of BDSM Ritual

One of the things that both BDSM practice and pagan ritual have in common is the feeling of sacred theater akin to both. In ancient Greece, the patron of the theater was the god Dionysos, who was also the patron of wine, drugs, orgiastic sex, and shamanic altered states. There is something very powerful about well-done, subtly staged theatrical production; its effect is literally to put you into an altered state of some kind, or at the least to force you into a specific emotional experience. When we use certain tones of voice, certain body language, certain Words Of Power (meaning that they have the power of millennia of built-up connotation), something in our audience responds. Blood races, hearts beat faster, pupils dilate or shrink, breathing changes, body tenses or relaxes. We are riveted to what is happening before us, and the rest of the world recedes away to inconsequential background. If the experience ends too soon, or is abruptly cut off, we feel as though we were suddenly dropped ignominiously to the ground, and we react accordingly.

In a ritual of catharsis, especially where there is sex involved, the thread of attention is even more fragile and difficult to maintain. Lots of things can go wrong, from a calf-muscle cramp to a malfunctioning tool to a ringing phone or doorbell. When we're dealing with the delicate balance of intense sensation (sexual and non-sexual) and strong,

deliberately induced emotion, the whole applecart can be upset by an annoying and inconsequential detail. We all know how easily people can be made limp or dry by being poked in the wrong place, or by hearing their mother's voice on the answering machine in the hall. Some of the best catharsis rituals in my experience have been spontaneous ones, but this requires a lot of luck to pull off properly. More often than not, spontaneity has achieved varied results, from "well, that was pretty cool" to "aah, forget it, I can't get back into the mood after the cat jumped on my face!"

The best way to deal with this is preparation. Treat it as you would a formal ritual. Usually this falls to the top, unfortunately, although how much the bottom shares in the chores of preparation has a lot to do with how much both parties feel that a sense of surprise is integral to his/her experience. If the bottom has been the major planner of the scene and knows exactly what to expect, and the focus is less on how they will deal with the unexpected and more on how they will deal with dread and known pain, then they can be given the lion's share of the prepwork.

It will probably even aid in their psychic preparations. There's something about doing certain kinds of pre-ritual preparations that can help to bring one out of a mundane headspace and into a calmer and more sacred place. This is especially true when the preparations involve cleaning, which can be extended mentally into a personal purification, as in: "as I clean this room, so I purify and prepare my self," or "as I cleanse my bowels with this enema bag, I release my doubts and panic," or "as I lay out these tools for my partner, I lay out my fears nakedly and honestly for his/her examination and use." Careful, monotonous chores that require patience, repetition, and attention to detail are good for this sort of thing too; one dominant that I know starts the prepwork for each scene by giving his submissive all the tangled ropes and cords from their last scene to unsnarl and coil. As his bottom unknots and smoothes and makes them neat, he visualizes undoing all the knots of tension and doubt that daily participation in the rat race has given him, and as each rope is

carefully laid out in neat coils, it becomes a calming meditation that allows him to enter the scene fully prepared.

Even if the bottom is doing most of the work, I firmly believe that the top should also engage in some kind of pre-ritual psychic preparation around the scene. Two things that have worked well for me are bonding with my tools, and patrolling the boundaries of the space. Marking and protecting the boundaries around the vulnerable bottom is part of the top's job anyway, so it follows naturally that this should be their assignment as well. To make the space safe, try using this checklist of potential problems:

1. Check for privacy. All windows should be covered, including spaces such as hallways that you might march a naked, bound bottom through from one room to another. You may think that the scene will only happen in one room, but I've seen them overflow into other rooms, especially bathrooms; excited scene planners often forget about potential calls of nature. Remember to cover small windows in doors. The neighbors don't need to see this, and your bottom doesn't need to worry about whether anyone is watching. If you're not sure, go outside the building and skulk about, checking for gaps in the drapes. Have your bottom call something out in a loud voice (not scream!) to check for what the neighbors can hear. If it's too easy to hear screaming, it's time to break out the gags.

2. Lock all doors, as long as they can be unlocked from your side, and make sure that you both have the keys nearby. If for some reason you can't lock a door, hang loud jingly bells on the doorknob so that you'll at least have a second of warning when it opens. Press doorbell buttons in and put tape over them to prevent them from being pressed. Put up a Not Home or Do Not Disturb sign on outer doors.

3. If you are outside, make sure that you have permission to be wherever you are. It's a real pain to have the cops break up a scene in the woods because you were trespassing and someone dialed the authorities. Remember that to accidental onlookers, this can look like their worst nightmare of rape and

assault—or if it has the trappings of ritual, like some kind of bizarre sex-abuse cult. Remember also that police tend to assume the worst until proven otherwise, being as they’ve seen so much nastiness in their time. Don’t invite trouble by trespassing or using public land. If you’re on your own or a friend’s private land, go well beyond all the boundaries of the ritual space and make sure that no one can see anything without seriously trespassing themselves. (Do bother to ask your host if that’s ever a problem to their knowledge—neighborhood kids can range pretty far afield on some of their adventures.) I like to walk the boundary with a sword, drawing a line of energy to safely enclose us away from the world and turn all eyes away. Have your bottom call out to you, so you can figure out how far sound carries and whether gags are needed.

4. If there are other people who live in your home, make sure that they are all warned, and will preferably be elsewhere. Even if you like and trust them, sometimes the presence of someone foraging loudly through the refrigerator or whistling in the shower will distract you both from what you’re trying to accomplish. Work out beforehand where they’ll go, and when they’ll be back. Work out what they’ll do if their first plans fall through. It’s often good to do something nice for them later, to make up for the inconvenience.

5. Make sure that the ringer is turned off on the phone. Do not unplug the actual phone. If there is an emergency, you’ll want it plugged in. If there is an answering machine that can actually be heard in the area, find its volume and turn it all the way down, or if that can’t be done, cover it in many blankets or sofa cushions.

6. Check the climate of the room. If it’s warm now, a scene with all that sweating and heavy breathing will make it worse. On the other hand, some bottoms have better circulation than others, and not all of them warm up well from painplay. If there are fans going, have them well away from the area of swinging toys, tossed bodies, and flying hair.

7. Confine all pets. Cats especially love to jump on bound, helpless bodies and start doing the happy-feet kneading thing.

Make sure they have water and a place to eliminate, but keep them out of the space.

8. It should go without saying that all children should not have access to the area either; find them sitters, preferably in another building. Yells and screaming can scare them, especially when the adults are refusing to explain what's happening. (Note: if you are the person caretaking small kids, and they hear SM practitioners yelling in another area of the house, the best thing to do is to refrain from acting worried, suspicious, disapproving, or otherwise tense. Cheerily tell the child(ren) that so-and-so are playing a pretend game, where one of them is being a monster and the other is pretending to be scared of the monster. *You've played that, right? Have you ever pretended to be lions, or bears, or monsters? Let's all make monster noises right now! OK, now I'll be the monster and you all pretend to be scared of me! How loud can you scream...* Kids understand pretend games a lot better than you think, and it's good for them to know that grownups play these games too, with each other. Couching it in terms they'll get will defuse any potential fear they might have around adults they know getting hurt. It's also OK to set limits by saying that when grownups play pretend games with each other, they're just for grownups, and kids aren't allowed until they're older.)

9. Make sure that the floor is reasonably clear of clutter that could be stepped on by a barefoot participant. If the bottom is a submissive, crawling around cleaning the floor can be an appropriate task to assign them, and the top can merely inspect for safety.

Another good checklist to have is tools, toys and props. This can be taken care of by either party, although the top needs to inspect the layout of his/her toys so as to know whether they have been placed easily to hand. There's nothing more annoying than realizing in the middle of a heavy ritual that you need X, and you have to go hunting around the house for wherever it was put after the last time we used it. I find that nothing makes me lose my dominant/priest space quicker than a sudden undignified hunt under beds and couches for a

missing tool with one's bottom waiting to find out why you just disappeared. Start going through this list a day or so in advance, in case some things need to be acquired, or re-acquired because you've run out.

1. First, never use any toy or tool for ritual BDSM that you've never used before, or that you are not skilled with. The place for trying that sort of thing out is casual BDSM, where mistakes aren't as much of a big deal. It may not even be a question of skill; new toys could have shoddy workmanship that isn't apparent until the first use, when things pull apart or snap, and it's better to find that out during casual sex than when the bottom is halfway to the Underworld.

2. Check over all old, friendly toys for problem, cracked, or loose bits. Clean anything that needs cleaning. Make sure that you have a place to lay things out that isn't underfoot or easily knocked over. Racks on the wall are good for that.

3. Make sure that there is water on hand for both participants, in a place that is easy to reach but unlikely to get knocked over. If you don't want to take your bottom out of bondage if they merely have to urinate, make sure that there is a container you can hold under their urethra to collect it, and a place to put that container where it won't spill. If either player is hypoglycemic, keep a quick and easy-to-down protein thing around. I like yogurt drinks for this kind of thing. Blood sugar in general should be accounted for, especially if either party is likely to be too excited to eat first.

4. Make sure that there is a well-stocked first aid kit on hand. Make sure that you've got boltcutters in case something metal freezes up on you, which I've had clippings do to me. Make sure that any handcuffs or locking things have more than one key, kept in different places in the same area. One should ideally be kept on the body of the top.

5. If you are using lit candles indoors, have a fire extinguisher handy. I mean it. I've had friends lose their houses to ritual candle-fires. No candle should be left unattended in a room, or on a rickety shelf, or anywhere within range of the aforementioned swinging toys, tossed

bodies, or flying hair. If you are using candle wax on someone as painplay, make sure that you have stearin candles and not the beeswax type, and check to make sure that no one is sensitive to any candle perfume. Have plastic ready to put underneath the recipient of the wax, don't count on not getting any on the carpet. Large trash bags cut open and laid flat work well, and can be bundled up quickly afterwards. If any candle-wax participants have long hair, have hair ties ready just in case. If you use incense, make sure the room is well-ventilated and nobody is allergic to the variety.

6. Make sure that you have plenty of lube. I prefer to pour some into a bowl rather than have a squeaky lube bottle if we're doing high ritual. If you're worried about bugs getting into it, cover it with an easily flicked-off cloth rather than a hard lid that may fall or need struggling with. Remember to treat an open lube bowl like any other thing that will touch someone's bodily fluids multiple times and possibly cross-contaminate. If you're going to go back and forth between two non-fluid-bonded people, it might be wise to have more than one bowl.

7. Even if you're fluid-bonded, it may be wise for the top to have latex or PVC gloves on hand to do sticky things with. I've found that when the bottom's wrist starts to spasm and they need to get down from that bondage *right now*, it's useful to be able to whip off your gloves and have dry hands to fumble with those cliplinks and locks and ropes. Trying to undo bondage with your hands slippery with lube and body fluids can make you want to scream, especially when you're in a hurry due to the wrong kind of pain. It goes without saying that if you're using safe sex, have plenty of latex, or Saran Wrap, or whatever you use, ready to go. Running out of condoms or gloves in the middle of a scene is frustrating.

8. Have a stack of body fluid rags around to wipe hands, thighs, sticky genitals, mop sweaty brows, etc. Paper towels are rough and hurt (unless that's the idea) and tissues shred on wet skin. I use old clean T-shirts rather than linty towels. Don't underestimate how many of them you'll need,

especially if people's fluids are not supposed to touch each other.

9. If there are to be grand ritual gestures, or even the waving of large toys, make sure that there is actually room for this. Practice it beforehand, keeping in mind how much smaller a space gets when there are props and multiple bodies around. Be aware of overhead light fixtures!

A subtler issue is the problem of verbalizing articulately in the midst of an intense scene. If this ritual is going to require lots of talking during (not just before) the scene, and especially if it is going to require memorized lines, be sure that the bottom is actually capable of handling this, and have a Plan B on hand mentally if they can't. I've had even the most articulate and poetic people go confused and non-verbal as part of a scene. While some tops simply move into punishment mode for forgetting one's lines, that might not be a dynamic that you want to work with in a ritual scenario.

If you're the top, and it's time for the bottom to say X, and the bottom has clearly gone beyond the ability to remember anything more complicated than three short Anglo-Saxon words strung together, you have a number of useful options. You can skip it and go on the next phase. You can word their part into a question that you ask them, so that they only have to choke out a yes or no. You can stroke them and calm them down until they have regained enough rational ability to say their lines, although the danger with this is that it might lose the intense energy of the ritual. You can find things to say to cue them. You can call-and-response it, walking them through the lines by repeating your words. (This may sound counterproductive if part of the impact of them speaking is to willingly accept or agree to something, but hearing one's voice faintly repeating the resounding words of a dom/me that are still ringing in one's ears can be a pretty powerful experience.)

If the top has a lot of lines, remember that they too might space it when those hormones rip through the brain. Practice saying the same thing in different ways, so that one of them might stick. Reading off of a paper is pretty undignified under

such circumstances; it's better to wing it if you forget it. Unless the bottom is an awful picky detail-queen, they'll be too nervous and excited to notice much. Cut each other lots of slack with regard to ceremonial details, as long as the action of the ritual is not damaged to the point of uselessness.

Remember that if a BDSM ritual didn't work for technical problems, you don't have to throw the entire idea away. Do give it some time to percolate before trying again; I'd suggest a minimum of a month to a maximum of a year—but do try it again, perhaps with an entirely rewritten script and better preparations. Sometimes the stars just aren't right for these things, and it's better to try again at a more propitious time. Whatever you do, try to avoid blaming each other for things that go wrong. If it clearly was someone's fault, perhaps it might be better to quietly find a different partner to do this with, instead of flinging waves of recriminations.

As a final note, spiritual aftercare is an important part of this work. Deities who were involved should be thanked, sacred space should be devoked, and sacred objects returned to their places. This may well involve dragging yourself out of the cuddling phase when you'd really rather just roll over and sleep, but it's necessary. It's a matter of respect for these forces that we work with, that are such grand gifts of the Universe. Like any gift, they shouldn't be left lying around uncared-for. The discipline of spiritual clean-up may be inconvenient, but it reminds us—top and bottom alike—of our actual place in the Grand Scheme Of Things, and that we should be grateful. Don't just thank your partner; if the Gods are still listening in, thank them as well for sending him/her to you. Remember that a little gratitude goes a long way when kneeling before any altar. The Gods, like us, want to be loved and appreciated for who and what they are.

Master of the Underworld: Sex Magick from the Top Perspective

(This piece was written a very long time ago, when I was just discovering my path, both the BDSM part of it and the spirit-worker part. Since then I've come so long a way that this seems like a moment frozen long ago in time, a time when I was groping for what I was to become...and yet I think it still has usefulness for those who read it. Take this offering of my youth, then, and see if you find a reflection in your eyes.)

7 p.m., April 14, fifteen years ago. My living room.

One hour before the circle is cast, I sit cross-legged in front of a large mirror with my greasepaint kit and breathe deeply. I let my spine straighten and relax, center myself. Make myself empty, ready to be filled with a deeper presence. It isn't exactly true that I don't bottom. I just don't bottom to anything human.

I begin to make up one-half of my face; white paint, black deeply etched around one eye, the skull's teeth drawn onto my lips. I find this is a good way to bring down whatever deity of death and darkness needs to come through me. Other times I might use costume alone, or just open my flesh and let him/her come through without aid of props. I like the props, though. They provide a transition between the everyday

reality of life and religious space. I've always enjoyed the aspect of SM that is sacred theater.

Tonight I'm channeling Her, the Lady of Death, and so I put on the long black robe that swirls around me, girding on the knife and the elaborately braided whips that my current lover made for me. I can hear her in the next room, chanting something, doing her own preparations; she will be naked and ready when I come in, ready to descend to the depths. I don't know exactly when the moment is that I stop being just me and become Her (or Him, more usually) as well; it's like slipping underwater without thinking and then realizing you can breathe there.

I've been sworn to the Dark Goddess and the Lord of the Dead since I was four years old, possibly since before I was born. I do remember Her, though; coming to me as a child in a dream/vision and informing me very clearly that I belonged to her for this lifetime, that much of what I would go through would be training me to be a worthy tool for Her. In the years that followed I fought, ran from, suffered through, and finally accepted this calling; now it seems natural, like a second skin beneath the first one. Being a sadist, a top, is just one of the many ways that She has sharpened and honed me for her use.

There has been a lot of good discussion lately in the leather-SM community as to the spiritual intensities experienced while bottoming. Research has sprung up, linking SM with shamanic practices such as the Sun Dance, the Hindu Kavandi ceremony, and other altered-state-through-ordeal rituals of older traditions. As I am pagan clergy, and as I'm a devout practitioner of SM (especially in the context of sex magick), I'm excited by this trend. It mirrors connections that have been fundamental to me since the first time I picked up a whip and my lover knelt to it.

There has also been a small but vocal backlash that sees the "spiritualizing" of SM as a plea for social legitimacy, and a capitulation to the antisexual mores of the wider society, giving us an "excuse" to do something we really do only to get off. Although I don't necessarily agree, I can see the inherent danger in trying to emphasize those things that might be more

acceptable to the “new agers” and downplaying the socially unacceptable, the sex and darkness and dissolution and fear. These are part of what make us what we are, and all the rainbow plastic floggers and cool-looking tribal tattoos in the world will not hide it from the Outsiders. It may, however, obscure the real path for us if we’re not careful.

I think we should all just start admitting that there are at least two reasons why anyone does SM—sex and catharsis. Both are good, and deserve respect. There’s nothing wrong with doing it to get off. Doing it for catharsis isn’t something you’d be able to manage every night anyway. You’d exhaust yourself emotionally inside of a week, and burn out. It’s something to be saved, like my grandmother’s Sunday dress, for special. And special it is.

But if you read descriptions of “spiritual” SM experiences, you’ll notice they’re all from the point of view of the bottom. (So is most SM porn for that matter.) Why? Where did the unspoken assumption come from that the bottom’s experience is what’s *really* happening, and the Top is...well, what is the Top supposed to be in these circumstances? An impersonal avatar of doom? A technician who humbly assists the bottom in achieving their endorphin-enhanced psychic gyrations? Why is everyone so reluctant to talk about this? When I get a bunch of Tops together and ask about how a bottom can help them to achieve a catharsis—and what that catharsis feels like, anyway—I get a lot of hemming and hawing and sidelong glances. If it’s so hard to talk about, it must be something terribly powerful. Something that might even rend the fabric of our realities.

I enter the circle my lover has cast with slow, measured footsteps; her collar lies in my hand. Skulls stare from the four corners of the room. Far more than cheap art, they are reminders of her mortality, of the impermanence of the flesh. A multitude of candles burn—in high places, well away from the range of my whips—and incense smokes in the air. “Are you ready to begin the descent, Walker Between Worlds?” I/She asks her.

She looks at me, and she knows who she speaks with. I can see it in her eyes, which she quickly lowers. "I am," she says clearly.

"Are you willing to suffer to learn?" She assents, and is collared. "This is to show whom you serve, whose tool you are," I tell her. She, too, has a calling, and was claimed in a vision by Her. She is a healer and a nurturer, not an easy task, and these periodic visits to the underworld within keep her from straying too far into a morass of everyday details and worries... not to mention revealing her fears to her in such a way that she cannot repress them.

We will enter by the South Gate tonight. She is hooded and bound with red cords, her long hair braided out of the way, her wrists secured overhead. Her legs are spread and fastened to a stretcher bar because I know she feels so much more vulnerable to me that way. She requests a gag, something to sink her teeth into, and it is granted. I raise a thick yellow candle above her. "What is the first mystery of fire?" I ask her, knowing she cannot reply. "The first mystery of fire comes from the East," the goddess within me speaks, "and it is the lightning strike." Hot wax splashes across her naked breasts, and she gives a muffled scream. "The call to awakensess," I tell her.

The next candle is red and even larger. "The second mystery of fire comes from the south, and it is anger, the righteous wrath that burns." Red wax splashes across her genitalia. She doesn't like being hurt there, although it isn't specifically disallowed, and I watch her struggle with a flash of rage and then allow the pain to take her, giving in to it.

The third candle is blue and narrow; I move around to her back and let the wax run in little trickles like rivers down her shoulder blades. "The third mystery of fire," I tell her, "comes from the west, and it is steam, humidity, the sweat of your body, the waiting and discomfort that seems like a forever agony but which will fuel and direct your energy." She is crying by the time I am done, making little sobbing noises.

The fourth candle is green and I splash it onto the back of her thighs, her calves, her ass. "The fourth mystery of fire

comes from the north, and it is the hearthfire, the warmth of tribe and family." I blow out the candle and press myself against her, letting her feel another kind of warmth, while chips of multicolored wax rain down. "You'll remember this," I whisper into her ear.

If you get experienced players into a discussion of the top's spiritual practices, you'll usually get folks suggesting two possible paths out of this dilemma. One is to switch periodically in order to get one's cathartic experience. This is a great option if you're a switch. If, however, bottoming doesn't do anything for you—and libidos are such persnickety things that we rarely have any say over what does or doesn't do anything for us—then this isn't an option. In my area—the East Coast scene—not only is switching acceptable, but it seems that the majority of scene players are switches to one extent or another. (In fact, the very first play party I went to I was informed loftily by one couple that switches are "more evolved" than polarized Tops and bottoms.) I've found that when I bring up the issue of how to make a scene as spiritually cathartic for a Top as it is for a bottom, I'm advised to switch since that's the shaman's path, the way to get in touch with "real" transformation.

Some players will also make vague references to tops "going along on the bottom's trip with them" or having the bottom "transform the scene for the top". My questions usually are: transformed into what? How would a bottom do this, and where can they learn to do so? Classes and discussions about "how to do SM" seem to be mostly techniques for the Top to use on the bottom. It's assumed that you don't have to know how to do anything to be a bottom, and that being "experienced" as a bottom means little more than being able to take a lot of pain, kneel when ordered, and maybe give good head. No one takes bottoms aside and discusses with them how to transform a scene for a Top.

The Scene is a place where inner monsters are honored. That doesn't mean that they are allowed to run rampant, but they are acknowledged, respected, and offerings are made to

them. A bottom's monster may be the part of them that wants someone else to make the decisions, that wants to be small and protected and grovel on the floor at the feet of a greater power. Top monsters are fetishized even more than bottom monsters, often into archetypes too rigid and inhuman for the actual flesh-and-blood Tops to imitate without arduous effort. Yet fetishizing a Top doesn't get them there... that mysterious "there" that no one seems to be able to map the way to, but you always know when you've been to it.

What does the bottom have to do for the Top? The answer is scary. They have to not only respect the Top's inner monsters but deify them, see them as gods that they serve. Is anybody out there squirming uncomfortably yet? No, don't speak. It's true. The Top's spiritual path is to become, for one small time out of time and space out of space, a deity. So how does this happen?

8 p.m., November 8. Ten years ago.

Tonight I am Him. I wear the mask with the great upcurving goat's horns and the long fringes tied with bone beads. I don my leather jacket, animal skins to suggest our animal roots, black because this aspect of Him is the Lord of the Underworld—Hades, Arawn, Yama, Baphomet, Valraven, the dark side of Pan. In place of my leather chaps I wear leggings of fur that end in goat's cloven hooves. Where She is solemn, He smiles at me from the mirror—a terrifying smile.

When I transitioned from female to male, taking hormones and getting surgery, I found that She receded to a further position (although She still takes me sometimes) and Her consort takes me more and more. I was born medically intersex and raised female, but even though I now have a beard and a flat chest and I'm sirred on the street, I do not forget that I am what I am—both at once. Nothing, no surgeries or hormones from either direction, no political polemic or intellectually chosen "identity" will ever change that basic fact. My lover is also bigendered; raised male, she has lived as a woman for fourteen years. No one we know is

quite sure of our sexual preference, but we know who we are—and we can be anyone we need to be in the theater of sacred sex.

My chest bears a great scar, going from scapula to scapula, three-quarters of the way around my chest. It is the scar from my bilateral mastectomy, and to me it is a mark of pride, not of mutilation. When I awoke on the operating table with a hundred and four stitches and lighter by eighteen pounds, I'd never had anything stronger than an ibuprofen in my life. I discovered later that evening that I don't respond to painkillers—neither codeine, nor Percoset, nor Demerol did anything for the terrible pain. The medical staff didn't know what to do for me, but my wife did. Helping me to breathe regularly, she walked me through the process of responding to pain, learning to ride it and go with it. I'd bottomed before, occasionally, but never very hard, and this level of pain was all new to me. And there would be no safeword, no way to stop it until the healing had gone far enough for the severed nerves to calm down.

The next three days were the greatest physical ordeal I have ever gone through, before or since. It was a three-day Sun Dance: I cried, I breathed, I sang, I beat a drum, I screamed my pain, I had visions, I spoke to gods, I breathed some more. She, who I had guided so many times, guided me now. I came out the other side remembering the experience not as a trip to hell but as a trip to Hel... but only because we were both experienced in ritual SM and its techniques.

My gaze moves from my scars to lower down. At my groin is a harness handmade of leather and hung like a loincloth with soft furs; a tail dangles down behind it. Mounted on the front is a phallus my wife has lovingly carved from an elk antler. It belongs to Him; I stroke it, with his permission, and then, like a gift, it becomes mine for the night as well. I am Guide and Guardian, delver into the wealth of the depths and psychopomp of the endorphins. Those whom I love, says Baphomet, I chastise with many rods...

The first step belongs to the Top, and it could be considered the prepwork. First you have to convince yourself

that you deserve to be a god, if only for an hour. That you'd be a great one, a worthy one. In some religious traditions, such as the African Yoruba religions and certain European pagan traditions like my own, some spirit-workers are "ridden" by the Gods. But usually they are chosen; they don't choose it themselves. This isn't quite that depth of experience. An easier and more accessible route is simply to deify yourself. Don't try to be the deity Athena, or Hades, or Thor. You're trying to picture what you'd be like if you, just you, were divine. Why do you think the ancient bards roared things like "I am a stag of seven tines! I am a hawk on a cliff!" and so on? Think up titles for yourself—Mistress of Discipline, Giver of Pain and Mercy, Master of Ordeals, or whatever is personal to you. Of course, being a deity, if only for an hour, gives you all the terrifying responsibility of a deity as well.

The next steps are not things that the Top can do alone, and this is an unspoken sore point for many Tops. We are encouraged, by many bottoms and by the culture at large, to never show a vulnerability, but in stating one's needs one shows what could be perceived as a weak point. And yet, if you don't state your needs, they don't get met. It's a nasty catch-22 we're in, if we fall for the standard Top script. It's also somewhat embarrassing to admit how dependent we are on bottoms, and the way they perceive and define us. "We bottoms get defined by what Tops say we are in a scene," said a friend of mine once. "If you call me a slut, I'm more likely to be one." Bottoms define Tops in the same way, whether the Tops like to believe it or not. Actively working with your perception of someone, while engaged in an act requiring as much intimacy as SM, has far-reaching results. A Top can only become a god when their bottom worships them as the god/dess they are.

Note that I said *the god/dess they are*, not the deity the bottom might like to see them as or what stern archetype is floating around inside their heads. Fetishizing or objectifying a Top is certain to sabotage their path to transcendence. Not that it isn't fun to be objectified now and again, but in order for the Top to be deified, they must be truly seen by the bottom to

some extent. This requires that the Tops unbend and open up enough to actually show the bottoms something of themselves, which is a difficult thing for some stiff-necked Tops to manage. The bottom must be present, truly present and reactive, during the part of the scene that is structured for the Top's path. (This may entail that parts of the scene where the bottom is going off on his/her own trip in an endorphin-aided journey to the underworld be taken care of first, or saved until afterwards.) The bottom must make it clear to the Top that he/she sees the top clearly, including—and especially—their monster, and finds that unique creature worthy of worship.

By worship I do not mean mindless drooling over bits of anatomy. I mean the act of turning over one's self and will for that moment to your God/dess, to do what they will with it. I mean sacrifice, offered up to your deity. It may require the bottom to endure things they dislike, or that are difficult for them, since if it's easy to give it's not a sacrifice. The greatest gift you can give a Top is the struggle that you make with yourself at the edge of some limit. We Tops like to push our own limits too, and those limits often revolve around greed and consensuality; to push the bottom, force them, or to let them struggle with it themselves. Tempting and playing with that self-control in ourselves, riding the narrow edge of danger, is exhilarating to us. It is like riding a storm, or surfing a tsunami, and it produces its own kind of (adrenalin-inspired? Who knows?) chemical high. In order to get it, we need bottoms who are able to go to their own limits, because we can't hit ours until they hit theirs first.

A relatively empathic Top may never voice this need, this fact to a bottom that they care about, because it's such a hard thing to ask of someone. Well, it's spoken now and the cat is out of the bag. No one said that this path would be easy.

The eastern gate, Gate of the Winds, is usually easy for her, but today she's struggling with it. The handmade cat in my hands moves in a figure-eight, delivering a steady rain of blows to her shoulders and ass, spreading hot redness across

her skin. I won't let up until she safes or gets through the struggle, and I know she needs this from me, needs me to be just ruthless enough to allow her to really challenge herself. Sometimes the Gate of the Winds is whips, sometimes it's mild strangulation play, making her very aware of her own breath.

I watch her, and my cock is hard in my other hand from seeing her suffering. Sadism is a weird thing. It seems to have to cause or reason, which makes me wonder if it's as hard-wired as any other sexual preference. It isn't just about dominance; that's a separate, more psychological pleasure for me. Seeing someone suffer physically in a sexual situation goes right to the groin for me, bypassing the rational in a white-hot lightning strike. I don't even have to be in control sometimes to make it happen. Tie me up and I'll be bored and annoyed. Tie me up and stand over me and cut yourself with a knife and I'll be a lot more interested. Hammer a nail through your genitalia and I might just come from watching you. It's a fetish. When used properly, it can also be a useful tool.

She's found the door now, and she's through it. I can tell because her body changes, relaxes; she thrusts her ass out for the blows instead of pulling away. A few minutes of endorphins, of pleasure, and then it's time to move to another gate, one even more challenging. I ungag her and let her drink some water out of the chalice, telling her quietly that we are moving to the west gate, Gate of the Holy Waters. She groans, but does not protest. This is the hardest one for her; it contains such much that she doesn't like but will take for me. First, the ice; she hates cold things. I hold freezer-cold chains to her sensitive parts and she screams; she'd rather be beaten. Then the knife. The moment she feels it against her throat she whimpers and goes completely still.

She's terrified of knives. She was attacked, once, by a man with a knife, and once a stabbing victim ran down the street bleeding and collapsed on our doorstep. It's not that she isn't consenting to do this—I own several beautiful blades for this very purpose that she gave me herself—but it's very, very hard for her. It took months to train her to be still and not jerk away in her terror. Now she stays carefully in one place, but

her voice raises to a high wail as I trace her breast, her nipple, down her thigh, across the back of her knees and her taut hamstrings, over her genitals.

"You can feel your blood pounding in your veins, can't you?" I whisper to her. She sobs, trying desperately to control the heaving of her chest as I bring the blade higher again. "You contain all the holy waters of the world within you. What if I were to spill them?" My knife poises against the hollow of her throat and she is frozen in time, breathing heavily. She knows what I want, knows that I won't take it unless she asks me to, wants it herself with some part of her being.

"Yes," she says, her voice breaking in the middle of the word. It's what I want to hear. I move to her back and make the small cut on her upper shoulder, drink of her, taking my nourishment from her body. It's almost a sort of orgasm for me, taking her energy in with her life's fluids. The cut is tiny and I only get a drop or two, but my rational mind does not want to harm her. The monster within me wants exactly that—to slice her open, gut her like a fish, wallow in her Holy Waters, take her down to death with me. The God Within is poised in a trinity between the two, knowing and appreciating Death and yet understanding that it does not have to be physical to be powerful and transformative.

After He has feasted on the communion of her blood, I take her down and clean her up, putting antiseptic on the cut. It is time for the North Gate, which I usually save for last because it is easy for both of us, being a good hard fucking.

The Top's path is also much more context-dependent than the bottom's. Not that bottoms don't need mood and context, but due to the nature of the hard physical stimulation that comes up in a scene, it's possible for a masochist to get "there" only on sensation, assuming they have a skilled technician/Top. It's not so easy for the opposite number. Tops have to learn to be honest about the context they need, and what kind of sacred theatre the bottom can assist them with. A good Top learns to be alert to bodily clues, sensing how things

are going with the bottom long before the safeword comes. This is necessary for the bottom's physical safety, of course. In my opinion, far too few bottoms have applied themselves as equally to the "reading" of their Tops, nor worked out a system of responses to ascertain, without breaking the context/theatre, if there is some need the Top is not articulating for whatever reason.

I also find that Tops starve themselves for physical contact during a scene, sometimes out of fear of vulnerability, sometimes out of preoccupation with the technical aspects—whips and ropes and checking the bottom's welts, etc. Periodic physical contact will keep a Top from distancing themselves and getting caught up in a mire of distracting thoughts, which will eventually pull them off the path. A bottom can remember this and take it to heart: When you beg to be touched, and it is granted, it is not only you who benefits.

A bottom needs to split their consciousness somewhat in order to do this properly. The left brain needs to be aware but in reserve, holding safe words, issue of consent, and knowledge of limits at the ready. The right brain needs to get into a state where what is foremost in their consciousness is that consent is irrelevant. They obey their God/dess not because they have chosen to do so, but because to do otherwise would be unthinkable, inconceivable, because it is the most natural thing in the world to do. They must be both deeply into one state and able to pop into the other at need. A difficult thing, to be sure, and again, something Tops may be reluctant even to articulate as a need.

A possible paradigm for this state of being may be seen in the way that some modern Pagans worship. When some people kneel before their altars and invoke a deity, they may or may not believe such a being exists. They may tell themselves that it is merely an archetype in the back of their own minds. (If they are polytheists like me, of course, they will believe literally in the reality of the Gods, but I'm aware that not all Pagans follow this path.) Yet they will learn that if they pray for strength while keeping skepticism in the front of their thoughts, it won't come. Our brains aren't structured that way.

We try to be rational creatures, but underneath it all we are still children, gaping at the wonder of the universe. If they don't suspend their disbelief to some extent, at least temporarily, the strength or whatever else they are asking for simply won't happen.

The same sort of attitude must be practiced by the bottom who is interested in helping a Top achieve catharsis sex rather than "getting off" sex. Your actions, energy, and especially your body must reflect an utter surrender, with no defenses left against your beloved God/dess. At the same time, some part of you has to be aware and waiting to keep you and your boundaries safe. Tops must realize that needs are sacred, holy. Needs feed you. Needs held within feed on you. Needs spoken become a work of magick. Speak them, and then afterwards, say aloud, "I have spoken," as if you'd just created the earth and everything in it. It will be the first step on a path of dark glory. And maybe, if we all get together and start talking about that path, we'll soon be able to feel our way out to the point where we can map it. You never know.

Her garden the graveyard, her passion the storm,
Her love is as deep as the void without form,
Her kiss is the taste of sweet blood on the knife,
For out of the darkness comes life...

—Raven Kaldera, "Hymn to the Dark Goddess"

Divine Intervention

(originally published in "Bitch Goddesses" by Greenery Press)

Monday. Sophia sits cross-legged in her den, silk cloth spread out before her. The phone call she's just answered is from a man who needs her help. He doesn't know how much of her help he needs; he thinks that what he needs is someone to top him, to tie him up and give him a little fantasy. Sophia knows better.

Before her on the silk cloth is a pack of cards. Not Tarot cards; these were drawn and painted especially for her by a friend. Each has a vision of a Goddess on it, and the cards will tell her who she will be in order to give her friend what he doesn't yet know he needs. She takes a deep breath, shuffles, cuts, and selects the card, turning it over slowly. On it, a majestic woman is enthroned in rich robes of purple and crimson and gold, wearing a crown on her head that is shaped like a walled city. Her throne is flanked by twin lionesses.

Sophia draws in her breath, smiling, and her hand brushes lightly between her legs. Cybele is the Lady she served first, as a galla, the Lady she Sacrificed her past life to on the Day of Blood. With a little chuckle, she remembers how bewildered the surgeon was on her absolute insistence that her Sacrifice be performed on the Sanguinaria, the Day of Blood in March. "I don't do Fridays," he had protested, but Sophia had remained adamant. It would be done in a sterile operating room, not on the steps of the temple of Cybele in full view of the populace as in Roman times, and the altered state would be created by

an anesthetic rather than being flogged with whips laced with the pastern bones of sheep. The knives would be sharp and sure, not a pottery shard to cut away manhood and create a vessel for the Goddess, but the date, at least, would not be tampered with. Nor the intent, Sophia had willed.

Cybele, Cybele, Lady of the Lions, Protectress of Cities. I drank from the cymbal, I ate from the drum. The foolish Romans thought that the gallae did what they did to become Attis, Cybele's slain lover, but those who knew, knew better. They did it to become Cybele herself.

He kneels, bound, on the floor. He has been here for almost half an hour and his knees are becoming sore, but he knows better than to lift his gaze from the carpet he kneels on. It is printed with images of lions. Then the click comes, the sound of footsteps—his ears strain to hear, and he is mildly disappointed not to hear high heels—and She brushes through the door in a whirl of purple and crimson. He looks up, just a glance, unable to resist, and a whip of a hundred knotted silk cords slashes him in the face. Recoiling, he hides his face against his knees as best he can while She seats herself.

"You may raise your eyes," She says to him, Her voice low and melodic. No, no high heels, just low sandals that wrap around Her ankles. Her diaphanous robes flow like sunrise-colored waterfalls around Her, spilling from Her high breasts between which gleam a gilded lion's head, and Her long dark hair is held in a ramparted metal crown. "While you are here," She says, "you will address me as Lady. Do you understand?"

He blinks, unsure. This is not in his fantasy. "Not Mistress?" he asks in confusion.

Again the whip, this time across the crotch. He shrieks and almost tries to squirm away across the carpet, but She is out of Her chair and towering over him, six feet of queenly wrath. "I am not your mistress, little man," She says. "*I am your god.*" And then he is hauled to his feet by the thick collar around his neck and slammed against the wall.

"Do you know why you are here?" She demands, and he wonders how She can make her voice sound as if it is coming

from a regal distance when She's inches away from him. "You are not here," She says, "for your petty little fetishes, feeding your interminable erections. You are here to learn how to worship the essence of woman, and that essence is, *Goddess!*"

He is hurled back to the floor in front of Her throne, and She resumes her seat. "Do you understand?" She thunders, and for the first time in a long while, he is really frightened. Not for his life. For his soul, which he is not sure he owns.

"Yes... Lady," he whispers. And then, more truthfully, "No, Lady."

"At least you're honest," She says, Her voice rich with irony. The silk whip is put down, and a heavier one of knotted purple suede finds its way to Her hand. "Unworthy little fool," She says scathingly. "You think that worship is about drooling over someone's toes. You think that the essence of femininity is about cunts and fluff and delicacy, about the willingness to cater to your desires." The whip whistles down through the air. "And I intend to show you just how very wrong you are."

Friday. Her hand hovers over the cards, waiting, as she takes ten long breaths. The woman who is coming to play with her today is not sure she wants to be here. She wants to be challenged, and there was a challenge in Sophia's eye, but her gaze roved nervously over Sophia's six feet of high femme as if not quite able to believe she was admitting to her own desire. This will be very different from the last few clients, Sophia thinks to herself. Dykes rarely come to my temple. How may I serve her, Lady?

The card is turned over to reveal a woman dressed in leather armor, a quarterstaff gripped in her two hands. Her hair is cropped short and she seems to be speaking to the viewer as a flurry of snowflakes fall around her. "Ah," Sophia says to herself, understanding now. "Scatha. She must be unsure of her own strength, then."

Scatha, the teacher of warriors on the sacred isle of Skye. "I'd better fetch my armor," Sophia murmurs, "and clear out the back yard."

Looking up from the grass onto which she has just fallen, the woman swears to herself that Sophia is at least ten feet tall. The figure that stands over her wears gleaming steel armor over soft white rabbit furs, a steel helm decorated with a black horsetail, and knee-high sandals studded with spikes. Her black hair falls in two long braids tipped with bone beads. She has just tripped her victim with the quarterstaff in Her hands, tripped her as she came wandering innocently into the yard looking for the domme who had invited her over.

The apparition takes a step back. "Get up," She says in a harsh voice, and the woman hastens to obey. "You don't pay attention," She says. "You need to be more alert. That's the first thing we'll work on."

"Wha-a-" Her guest looks bewildered. Sophia/Scatha feints at her with the quarterstaff and she barely jumps out of the way.

"That's better." The goddess in ice and armor reaches toward a rack on the shed wall, takes down two shinai and tosses one to the stunned woman. "Now. Don't look away from my eyes, no matter what my sword point does. Understand?" She lunges, is barely parried, lunges again and scores on the woman's thigh. Her supplicant yelps and backs away. "Come on!" Sophia/Scatha challenges her. "Do you have the courage, or not?"

Something in the woman's jaw sets, and she lifts her shinai again, settling her feet more firmly on the ground. She swallows hard, and waits for the next attack. The goddess of the isle of Skye smiles grimly, pleased with the change in her. Honing the courage of young warriors is never an easy task. This young one will have to prove her worth with a few bruises and a lot of hard work before she is allowed the privilege of hanging from an ash tree carved with runes.

Sophia denied the Goddess for twenty-eight years before she gave in to her demands. Her shrink thinks that her visions of the Lady are the sign of an unsteady mind. Sophia, on the other hand, knows that nothing the Goddess asks of her is

even remotely like the horror her life was without Her. Now her body has been sculpted into a worthy vessel, easing the pain of nearly three decades of dysphoria, and she is priestess and instrument of a great purpose, greater than she can see.

"Why, Lady?" she asked the first time she knelt before the Goddess in awe and not denial. "What use would You have for a transsexual dominatrix? How could I possibly do Your work?" And then it had unfolded in her mind, and she understood. The work is a holy one, a work of service underlying the facade of oppression. She could beat the demons of her clients at their own game, becoming them, letting them have her face and form and bringing them through their denial of Her. The Goddess flows through her in many forms: Athena, Artemis, Lilith, the Morrigan, and many other names...

Saturday. The underground chamber is cold and chill, and the slender woman standing naked in the doorway wraps her arms around herself and shivers. Seated on the throne in front of her is a tall figure robed in black, Her face painted like a skull. In one hand She holds a single-tailed whip, and mounted on the wall above the throne are many hooks. The slender woman eyes them and shivers again, knowing, fearing, desiring what is to come. Behind her, in the hallway, guardians of seven gates have stripped her of all her clothing, her jewelry, brought her naked to this room. She looks imploringly at the Queen of the Underworld.

"Greetings, Inanna," says Ereshkigal to the shivering Queen of Heaven. "Welcome to my Realm."



The Way Of The Ordeal Master

Being a top can be fun, moving, romantic, exciting, cathartic, flattering, and possibly entirely selfish. It's limited only by the consent of your partners, and can take on a million forms. Still, when push comes to shove, it's about gratification, just like bottoming for the same reasons. And just like bottoming because it gives you a great endorphin high, or because it really enhances that orgasm, is just fine, so is recreational topping.

However, sometimes bottoms come to see the journey as something other than recreational. It starts to become part of their spiritual path, perhaps something that they do because they feel compelled to, rather something that they do for fun. This is the path of the Ordeal Dancer, who comes to this path as a way to hunt for power, or to heal old wounds, or to descend into the Underworld and return. Similarly, tops can find themselves moving into a different space than they had expected. Perhaps they might find themselves becoming vessels for something larger, something that comes through them and turns a scene into a ritual, and a catharsis into something that touches the soul.

Being an Ordeal Master is, in many ways, a form of service. While service topping in all its forms may be put down by tops who aren't into it (and it certainly isn't for everyone) because they feel it might as well be bottoming or at least being topped from the bottom, it is in essence a form of priestcraft. Bring a priest/ess is a service position, period. You are there to aid the people who come to you in achieving some

form of divine communion, however that needs to happen. It isn't about you, and that's the major difference between Ordeal Master work and recreational topping. (Just to disclaimer: I use the term "Ordeal Master" as a non-gendered title. The term "Master" here is not "male owner of slaves" but "one who has mastered a certain skill or path", like someone who is a master of the violin, or a master of five martial arts.)

The other big difference is that the bulk of Ordeal Master work does not take place between people who are lovers, or even in a relationship. While an Ordeal Master can offer their services to their lover, in general they will be working with people that they do not know well; clients rather than playmates. It is not unusual for some professional dominatrixes with strong spiritual paths to find themselves sliding sideways into Ordeal Mastery, and they may have the advantage of already being skilled at keeping an emotional distance from the people that they work with.

The issue of emotional involvement is a tricky one in this work. Most Ordeal Masters prefer to keep a good distance from their clients, generally for the reason that emotional involvement can cloud their judgment, move the purpose away from the client's needs, and create a fertile field for projection. Some caution that this work is not a good choice for tops who fall in love easily with the people that they play with. Lydia Helasdottir points out that: "One problem that happens is when they do transference—you're being the deity for them, and they fall in love with you instead of the deity, and stalk you or whatever. That happens. I have been known to warn them: 'This is going to happen. In about two days' time after this scene, you're going to feel this, this, and this. Don't be fooled. This is not in any way about me, this is about you and this deity.'"

The emotional-intimacy problem is the main reason why most (though not all) Ordeal Masters limit sexual contact with their clients. Some refuse to bring anyone's genitals into the ritual, their own or the clients'; some will deal with the clients' genitals but not drop their own pants; a very few will be willing to bring sex into the situation if, for example, it is

agreed by both parties that cathartic (and perhaps brutal) sex is necessary to the goal. Shekere Hawk comments: "Bringing sex into rituals for clients takes the situation into the realm of the sacred prostitute, rather than just the Ordeal Master. While I have the greatest respect for real sacred prostitutes, I'm not one of them, and most of the ritual tops I know aren't either—we tend to be too selfish for that kind of a selfless path, even if we're drawn to spiritual service. I will sometimes work with the clients' private parts if it's an important part of the rite, but if I involved my own, it would be too easy to forget that it's not about me or my pleasure. Besides, it makes the legal issue of prostitution irrelevant."

What sort of person is best suited to this work? Don Kleeman, a gay male Ordeal Master from Ontario, writes: "This is simultaneously a very flattering and a very humbling job. First, you need to have absolute self-confidence, and second, you need to be able to put it aside. If your ego isn't solid enough, if you still have dozens of tiny insecurities—especially if they're around your ability to take charge and inspire trust—you won't be able to put it aside. It will keep popping up, demanding reassurance and getting in the way. You need to be so secure that you can center the ritual around them and not feel as if you've been made unimportant. That's why I advise ordeal masters to have lovers who aren't their clients—you have to put the selfishness somewhere."

He adds that: "It also requires great compassion, and terrible ruthlessness. The client may need to use you as an immovable object to fling themselves against, and they need to know that you won't bend or break no matter how pathetic they look. Usually, the last thing they want is pity. They want you to embody the ruthless Universe, the black maw that eats its children—but they also want you to be able to figure out when they've really had enough, and bring them down gently. You need to be implacable, up until the very moment when it's time to stop and be compassionate. If you bend too soon, you cheat them. If you bend too late, you break them. Neither is acceptable. This is precision work—psychologically and

spiritually as well as physically. That's why it's so difficult—and so important."

Sometimes the ordeal-dancer themselves is completely running the show and your job is nothing more than that of a technician, or "the rigger", as one ordeal-master in training referred to their position. In this case, your attitude should be respectful and supportive, not overtly dominant. Eda Torake, a professional dominatrix who retired and became a full-time Ordeal Master, wrote me: "There is no greater honor than to walk someone down to the Underworld and back. But it can't be focused on your ego, because in becoming the avatar of the Gods, you have to be able to open to them. I've found myself in the middle of a ritual scene with someone begging me to stop—well before our agreed-upon goal—and I had to decide what to do. The currently-acceptable safe thing, of course, is to stop immediately. But I felt that the individual in question was just having a panicky moment, and needed me to push them through it and out the other side. Still, that could be my ego talking, and if I made a mistake on that count, it would be inexcusable. So I prayed for a few seconds for guidance, did a fast divination with my set of crystals, and it said yes, go with it. So I did, and they got through. But in order to be a channel for Those Who Know Better Than You, you must be open enough to hear them over your own desires...and that's a place of humility."

Lydia Helasdottir gave me many wise words on being an Ordeal Master, including advice on trusting Deity when in scene:

First, I believe that you have to have been there. That's controversial, but for me you have to have been there. Not necessarily the technique that you're doing to them, but the particular flavor of fear and discomfort that goes with it. You're sending someone into a place that's frightening and lonely, and you need to be able to go there and pick them up. At the end of that tunnel, you need to be there with your arms open to receive them, and they have to know that you know that tunnel. I also think that it helps to be at least

partially horsing a deity—if you can do that sort of thing—either your patron or a patron of these arts, while you’re doing it. It makes you more courageous than you normally would be, and more intelligent about the act.

I have an example of this where we were working with a young lad who’d come to our house and been possessed by a quite vicious creature. We got it out of him and into me, and we were working on banishing it, which involved me getting whipped with a signal whip until I bled, which is quite harsh and a lot of hitting, since my back is pretty rough and doesn’t tend to bleed easily. It was dark, which made it very difficult; it’s usually not good to be using a signal whip in the dark because you can’t see. My partner was worrying that he might take off an ear or catch round an eye or something, but as he flicked the singletail back, winding up for the next blow, just the very tip of the cracker missed his open eyeball, and he knew that everything was going to be fine. It was as if the Gods just gave him a kiss with the whip. Someone else was there looking after us, and it worked. Sometimes the Gods can do things that we can’t, and they certainly do things that we daren’t.

To do this properly, you need a hookup to the Gods. That’s why I say that it shouldn’t get done by people who are not experienced—not just at topping skills, which goes without saying, but at touching the Gods. You need to be hooked up to a manifestation of the Divine, all the time. Usually Underworld deities; they’re all about that. That’s what they do.

You need a clear vision of what you’re doing, why you’re doing it, what the intended outcome is. Sometimes you need to be willing to take things into your own hands and go beyond what the person thinks that they can manage, so most of the time if it’s ritual stuff, they don’t get to safeword. If you’re going to have this as ritual, then you can’t be in control; you’ll just have to trust me. If they can’t let go, then they’re not ready to do the ritual. If they can’t trust me, then I’m not the right top for the job.

It puts a big burden on the top, because you can fuck up in an ordinary scene, but you cannot fuck up in one of these things. You can have some failsafes built in—for example, during the scene where we were casting out the possessing creature, I had a certain number of nails that I could drop when the beating got too much. That would give me a break for a moment, but that was all. There's no backing out of these things. But the point is that when I was on my last nail, and I really was at the end of my tether, I dropped the nail and he didn't stop. And it was in that moment of desperation and pain, there at the end, that provided the power to actually deal with and capture the thing. If he hadn't been willing to overrun that boundary, it wouldn't have worked, but it was his connection with the Gods that told him it would be OK, and even necessary, to run over that boundary.

Your partner can be used as ground crew—as many times as I've been suspended, I've been ground crew. When I do a BDSM ritual, I am a representative of the divine, and they can make their atonements to me, or hear what the Gods have to say to them through me, or whatever. It's like service topping, but it's service topping plus. It's not just that you're doing the technique at them and they're sorting out their thing, it's that they're sorting it out with you as a representation of the Gods, which is another reason why you have to have achieved a certain level of spiritual attainment before you do that kind of work. You have to have the divine indwelling permanently at the heart level, otherwise it's just a huge ego trip, and there's not enough power to do the thing that you actually need to do.

To do this work, it's also good to have someone to go to in order to put you down and keep you humble. Sometimes that also works as a kind of Stop—it's all gotten too crazy in daily life, and you just need to be brought up short. That's where the takedown-type rituals work best. It's like you're running around like a headless chicken, and it just puts a stop to it. "Stop! Down on the floor!" And you get to find out what the hell you're doing here. Takedowns and

interrogations are good for that. Actually, I find interrogation scenes more frightening and worrying to do as a top than more physically painful scenes. It's much more difficult. You don't want to make things worse, to put the person in hospital, but you have to get far enough into their head to make it worthwhile.

And there's danger for the top, too—everybody's consenting to everything on Saturday night, but even if you're not drunk and everyone's doing the right stuff, come Monday morning, the impact of what's happened to them comes as they drive to work, and they freak out and call the cops and you're busted. You have to actually guard against that, because all the disclaimers in the world won't help you, and in some ways it's actually more dangerous to have a signed disclaimer, because that indicates your intention to do something like that to them. That's why we don't have disclaimers when we do suspensions.

Raven's Ordeal Master Tool Kit

I would like to emphasize, before talking about my tool kit, that I am not a professional piercer, tattooer, or brander. These are skills that should be learned by apprenticing to a professional, and when people ask me for these services, I refer them to said professionals. I have a list of Pagan folk who do these things, and will help someone do them in ritual space if necessary. It's good to have such a list of people to cover what you can't do. Similarly, if the ritual is going to require more sexual contact than I am comfortable with, I call upon friends who are sacred prostitutes by calling.

On the other hand, I have learned how to do play-piercings, temporary suturing, and cuttings, including the art of rubbing fresh ash into the cutting in order to mark it. While this last technique seems counterintuitive—rubbing dirty ash into a fresh wound!—freshly burnt ashes are quite sterile, and I've never had any problem with them healing. Sometimes the body will push the ash out and it will simply be a cutting-scar,

but usually there is a fine grey line. The wonderful thing about his procedure is that you can burn specific herbs that reflect the magic of the intent—mugwort for purification, agrimony and rosemary for protection, yarrow and rue for the blessing of dark goddesses, lemon balm for sweetness, etc.—and literally put a link to that plant's spirit into the person's body permanently.

Before shedding anyone's blood, I recommend doing a CBT (clotting blood time, not cock and ball torture) test on them. With a diabetic sticker, stab them in any fleshy area. The stick should be deep enough that the person's own blood pressure creates a trickle of blood; you should not have to press it in order to get any. Hold a bit of tissue just under (not on) the wound, and let the blood seep onto it. Someone with ordinary blood clotting should stop trickling in about 30 seconds. If the bleeding continues for a significant length of time afterwards, they have a clotting problem and you probably shouldn't be breaking their skin again.

My Kit

1. Latex gloves
2. Nitril gloves (for people who are allergic to latex; make sure you ask)
3. Packaged alcohol swabs
4. Packaged gauze bandages, in many sizes
5. Packaged clear plastic bandages, large-sized — good for putting over cuttings
6. Medical tape
7. Fine-point permanent marker, for marking out designs on skin for cuttings (do this *before* you sterilize the skin!)
8. Lighter and small incense bowl for burning herbs to ash
9. Disposable sterile scalpel blades with handle. Practice on tomatoes to get the hang of the feather-light touch. Remember that this can lay people open. There are different types, each with a number. I use #10s. Some, like

- #12, are curved and inappropriately dangerous for cuttings. Make sure that you get the right ones.
10. Packaged sterile sutures, for sewing bells or balls on people for bell-dances
 11. Hemostats, to pull the sutures through
 12. Packets of Surgilube, without which sutures are terrible to pull through
 13. Tiny paper cups, to squeeze tiny dollops of lube into – one cup per person, no sharing
 14. Diabetic finger-stickers, for small easy ritual bloodletting
 15. Techni-Care or some other medical field-dressing antiseptic
 16. Needles, gauge 22-26, for sticking shallowly through a fold of skin
 17. Sterile packaged drapes, for laying over an area to work
 18. Paper towels and plastic bags, for cleaning up afterwards
 19. Tissues, for people to wipe their eyes and noses
 20. A headlamp – a flashlight on a headband. Sounds unromantic, but when you're in the woods in the dark, trying to deal with scalpels and alcohol pads over some person's back, holding a flashlight steady is the last thing you want to have to deal with. Use your head and not your hands; a headlamp will shine where you want it to with a small motion of your neck.
 21. A whip, preferably a simple cat with broad tails and a good handle that fits your hand. It should be soft enough that you can flog someone lightly, and sturdy enough that you can hit them hard if they need that.
 22. A knife. Can be fancy or plain, large or small, because it's not going to be used to cut people with. Many people will want to be cut with your (or their own) cool-looking but dirty and unsanitary knife instead of a sterile but unromantic scalpel blade. This is where you have to take control and say no. You can compromise by marking out the cutting first with the knife, using a light cat-scratch. You can also hold both together in your hand, but do the actual cutting with the scalpel blade.

Obviously, many of the things we are talking about here have a certain amount of risk, both physically and emotionally. The physical risks can be limited by being careful, and being well-trained by someone who knows what they are doing. The emotional risks are a matter of good judgment. When someone asks you for a ritual ordeal, the first thing you should do is a divination (from yourself or a friendly diviner) as to whether you're the person for the job, and what the Universe thinks you should know about the situation in order to do it right. If the reading doesn't look good, refer the person to someone else, or perhaps tell them that they need to think about it for a while longer. Don't give in to ego and think that you can "save" someone.

Don't be afraid to stop things if you feel that it's getting out of control somehow. When you're planning the ritual, come up with ways to gracefully wind down to a halt in an emergency. Make sure that you don't blame the person for having to stop, and try to encourage them not to blame themselves, either. Sometimes we fail, and we have to do things more than once, or a different way. Life is risk, and ordeals doubly so.

Also, remember that you as an ordeal master may require as much aftercare as the subject. I recall one ordeal that our group did that had no physical contact at all. The ordeal-dancer was dealing with keeping a cool head when his rage buttons were being pushed; he stood in a small circle while three women approached, one at a time, and verbally tormented him about personal issues that he had written down for them in advance—an act which took great courage. Each of his tormentors have been chosen because they also held the particular insecurity for which they were being the embodied voice, and knew how it felt intimately. If he moved out of the circle in anger, it was over and he had lost. He managed to make it through with struggle and triumph, and then went off to celebrate. Afterwards, though, the women realized that by acting out the evil voices in his head (and theirs), they felt rather awful, and needed a period of emotional aftercare to get themselves back on track.

I've had to oversee ordeals where I found my own issues (and hungers, and desires) being triggered, and had to push them aside so that they wouldn't interfere with the ordeal-dancer's goal. Generally I found that it was good to have a friend or lover on hand afterwards, so that I could do to them all the things I wanted to do to the ordeal-dancer but couldn't (often because they involved unsafe body fluid exchange), or at least to spend time with me and bring me down from a state of tension and frustration. Don't shortchange yourself; you may be striving to channel divine energy, but after it's over you're just an exhausted human being like any other. Actually, I find that it's good for me to have another person around to do the aftercare for the ordeal-dancer as well, because sometimes I'm not in a space where I can go from topping them to being nurturing, or I'm just too tired to pay them any more attention. This can create some problems if they think I'm abandoning them, so I explain beforehand that I may not be the one doing any aftercare.

Our culture, as a whole, is lacking in rites of passage. Yet humans need such rites, not only to mark biological events such as puberty, or sociological events such as marriage, but deeply personal events such as a transition from one sort of life to another, or from being one sort of person to being a different one. While many people will want simpler rituals, perhaps even just some social acknowledgment, others may want something that will gouge a mark into their memory. They want a marker that will leave a scar, something that they can look at decades later and say, "Yes, I survived that...and so I can survive this now." It is a measure of ultimate trust for any Ordeal Master to be given someone's flesh or soul or both to make a mark on...and as you honor them, so you will be honored in turn by the Gods.



Dark Tantra: A Surrender Ceremony

by Morning Glory Zell

This is a ritual of submission wherein a strong and powerful woman places her power into the hands of a man whom she totally trusts and loves. This rite was originally done as a major healing-from-male-abuse process that I found to be utterly transformational. I had a history of paternal abuse that handicapped my partnership with even the most loving, caring, and Goddess-conscious men, and it was only after enacting this ceremony with a loving “perfect master” that I was able to let go of enough suspicion, paranoia, and rage to lower my shields and allow a man to be in control of a situation when it was necessary or appropriate. I thank that Gods for sending me someone strong enough to enact this rite and free me from my prison of mistrust, and my anti-social need to control everyone and everything all the time.

The abbreviations “D” for Dominant and “s” for submissive are used for the names of the Priest and Priestess. However, this could easily be adapted for a male submissive to surrender to a female dominant, either as an individual act, or as a two-part ceremony in which the Priest and Priestess switched roles. It was originally designed as a weekend intensive I which two different rites were done; each person got to be the focus in turn and have their shadow issues enacted in ritual drama. The partners involved were in a body-fluid bond at the time; however, other methods of erotic exploration could be adapted to suit the needs of partners not bonded in this way.

The circle is cast thrice by blade, by scourge, and by bonds.
The four quarters are invoked twice, first for the Outer Worlds

and second for the Worlds Within – the Breath of Life, the Fire of Passion, the Moisture of Union, and the Earth of Being. The Goddess is invoked as Kali Ma, She who binds and She who must be bound. The God is invoked as Shiva, He who manifests as both male and female, the Dancer and the Danced Upon. The declaration of intent is made by both partners that this is to be a ceremony of personal growth for each other, manifested in the form of erotic surrender.

D faces s, barely touching heart to heart, lip to lip. S offers the fealty of her senses to him as his bound handmaid. D binds s with cord, and also with blindfold and earplugs (which will muffle but not totally exclude all sound), and leaves her alone on the bed for a suitable time for sensory deprivation. D signals his approach by the crack of the scourge cutting the air, and by the feel of his breath alone on some exposed part of her body.

S offers the gift of her pride that she may learn humility. D questions her on the meaning of pride, and why it needs to be surrendered sometimes. Then he offers to hold her pride for her, tying a knot in the black satin cord he wears around his waist in this part of the rite. In return for her offering, s humbly asks that D grant her the sight of his face. D teases her a little and asks her what she expects to see: the face of a God, or the face of a man? Finally he removes the blindfold, making and holding eye contact with s.

S thanks him, and asks to surrender her will that she may learn the value of obedience. D questions the offering of will, and makes her speak on how it had come to be misused. Then D ties her will into a second knot in the black cord. S thanks him and humbly asks D to grant her the gift of the clarity of his voice that she may learn to hear and obey his commands. D teases her a little about how she might try to twist his words to mean more than they actually mean, but he removes her earplugs. He speaks to s about will and obedience, and the power of command. Then D gives s some erotic command of his own fancy, and she complies with his demand, whatever that might be.

S asks that D accept the offering of her human spirit, that she may discover union with her animal nature. D ties her human spirit into the third knot in the cord, and he may also choose to fasten a collar of obedience around her neck, with the words: "You are Mine!" S thanks D and humbly asks for the gift of his scent so she can recognize the smell of her master. D teases her a little about whether she would be able to recognize him in a crowd if she were blindfolded. D then moves very close, but not quite touching, so that s can smell his musk. D commands s to touch herself and arouse her animal passions for his delight, and this is ideally followed by a somewhat steamy hiatus. D calls a halt when he senses s is close to orgasm.

S asks D to accept the sovereignty of her body to use as he wills, as the Land submits to the King, so that she may finally learn about total trust. D seriously asks s about what the sovereignty of a woman's body means to her, and at what terrible cost she has gained it, and at what extreme need she is offering it into his keeping. D reluctantly accepts the gift of the sovereignty of her body, tying it into the fourth knot in the cord. S thanks him and begs for the gift of his touch. D then uses his touch as he wills to arouse her to orgasm.

When s can breathe and speak again, she offers D her powers of independent speech that she may journey through eloquence into silence. D compels s to meditate in silence for as long as he thinks it beneficial, then grants s permission to speak again, briefly. S begs D to reward her with the gift of his taste. D takes her head in his hands and kisses her, and then orders her to give him a tongue bath until he chooses to come however he pleases, finally permitting her to lick his seed from his fingers.

In the quiet of afterglow, D enumerates to s the gifts she has given him, and the gifts of the senses he has given her in return. He confirms that they have a contract for her to practice her vows until the time they have previously agreed upon is over, when they will hold a simple ceremony of Unbinding. At that time, the knots in D's sash will be untied

one by one and each gift returned to s, who agrees to reclaim the burden of Power that D is holding for her at that time.

For now, D unbinds her hands and ties the five-knotted cord around her waist in token of the vows of bondage. S will wear this the entire time of her servitude, be that an hour or a day or a week. D formally accepts her servitude with the words "So be it." S acknowledges with the words "So mote it be!"

The Gods and Goddesses are thanked for Their presence, and are released to become observers of Their vessels and to partake in their pleasure if they so desire, but are asked to continue Their guidance that these rites may still retain their sacred touch, even if the vessels are to be left on their own. The four outer quarters are dismissed, but the four inner quarters are left in place so that the Breath of Life, the Fire of Passion, the Moisture of Union, and the Earth of Being will still lend their powers to these vessels. The circle is opened so that the vessels may come and go as they need to, but a Dark Faery Thread should remain in place to guide and guard this space, as it is still in use for the practice of sacred vows.

D and s are now empowered to practice the Master/slave relationship for their agreed-upon time, to be erotically creative, and to push their limits in the Yoga of dominance and submission. Together they may choose to explore this darkest bond, and perhaps they can succeed in passing all the way through it and out the other side.

When they are finished with their practice, they hold the ceremony of Unbinding, in which D gives s back her powers one by one and s tells D the lessons she has learned. They rebalance their powers into equality, or perhaps they switch places and he surrenders to her. The God and Goddess, elements and circle are thanked and dismissed. (Another option is that some portion of the circle and quarters are left in place to be renewed if the roles are reversed and the Priest gives his power to the Priestess in the next evening's ceremony of surrender.)

Even though this may seem to be a simple scene in the eyes of advanced BDSM practitioners, when done in a ritual manner this ceremony has extreme power both to bond the D and the s to each other and to liberate them both from the need to always be in charge. Good dominants cherish and nurture their submissives, using the intuitive empathic powers channeled through them by the Gods, to heal and transform both themselves and their submissives. The best ritual BDSM is carefully negotiated, and limits may be pushed but always respected. The motto of the BDSM priest or priestess is “safe, sane, consensual, and *sacred*”.

Q-Moon's Ordeal Path Ritual

This ritual was developed by Q-Moon, a queer Pagan ritual group in Boston. We had been doing a series of sex-magic-oriented ceremonies, and we had worked very hard to make sure that the context was such that everyone would feel completely comfortable and not pressured to do or view anything they didn't wish to. However, those of us who take part in S/M wanted strongly to have our sexuality—and its sanctity—validated. We knew that not everyone would want to take part in or even see this ritual, and we let everyone know that there would be some explicit pain infliction, although like all the other rituals there was no genital contact. About a quarter of the group actually ended up coming, and of those, over half chose simply to watch.

The ritual was held in the finished basement of one Q-Mooner. We decorated it with trees and leaves to simulate being outside in the woods, and spread rough rugs and mats on the floor for people to sit on. We knew that the “heavy metal” spike-heels-and-chains aesthetic of modern S/M, although a valid fetish for many, might turn some people off; so instead we (the priest/esses) dressed in furs and wool tartan, dangling bones and feathers, leather in ragged tunics rather than biker jackets; a “dark ages barbarian” effect. We four ritualizers, so attired, ranged ourselves at the four points of the compass.

The Leather Ritual started with us welcoming everyone in and telling them that we were The Tribe, a nonspecific tribe that might have been any of their ancestors. We told them that

they were here to watch the initiation of young warriors, to honor their strength and courage. One individual had already volunteered ahead of time to be a “young warrior”, and s/he entered naked and painted with blue spirals. Another volunteered on the spot! Each warrior was led first to the position of Earth, where the hooded, cloaked Earth priestess lay them on a mat, massaged their backs, and laid semiprecious stones on them to do a cleansing before they would begin the ordeal. Thus fortified, they were sent to the Water corner, where the priest of Water, naked save for loincloth and blue body paint, fastened their wrists to the ceiling and proceeded to run ice up and down their bodies, telling them how the water was strength, and would teach them to endure discomfort and hardship.

Then they were sent to the Fire corner, where the priestess of Fire had her cauldron burning over several candles, and her mortar and pestle. She was dressed in a long sleeveless tunic of tartan wool and wore much barbaric jewelry. Hanging from the rope in her corner, they were treated to a barrage of candle wax, in counterpoint to the ice that they had previously endured “Fire purifies,” she informed them. The final initiator, the priest of the Air, wore a mask of feathers and stag’s horns, and layer upon layer of whirling black leather fringe. He hung them up yet again and whipped them with a bone-handled whip (actually not a very brutal one, only made of horsehair) while they took deep breaths and cried out, “I can fly!” over and over again.

Afterwards the warriors were hailed and congratulated, hugged by all and told that they were brave and fine, and they did obeisance to the initiators in gratitude. Feedback on the ritual was overwhelmingly positive; people who came not knowing what to expect found it was “much cooler” than they thought it would be. Its success shows that people can accept almost anything if it’s put in the right context.

The Dark Moon Rising Mabon Ritual

On the night of the autumnal equinox, we gathered to honor all that dies so that we may live. This was not an open public ritual. It was created as part of a yearly weekend retreat during Mabon weekend, run by the Order of the Dark Moon Rising, and attended only by invitation. We designed it around the theme of the sacred Hunt. Participants were either hounds, prey, or onlookers. Three of us decided afterwards to write separate accounts of how the ritual felt for us.

Master of the Hunt — Raven

This ritual was especially important to me because I'm a farmer, and I raise and butcher my own livestock. I am keenly aware that actual living animals die so that I can eat and live, and it's vitally important that I honor their spirits by making an offering to the Hunter. I do this by allowing Him, once a year, to borrow my body and accept a symbolic offering.

Herne, Kern, Kernunnos, Master of the Hunt... He has many names, and is found in every culture. He may well be the oldest god of all, surpassed only by the Great Mother. He was revered by our oldest Paleolithic ancestors as they hunted with their spears. Neanderthals stacked the skulls of cave bears in his honor. He may even be pre-human; there is something of the Hunter in every predator that leaps and kills in order to live.

In his modern Celtic incarnation, Herne, I have found Him to be an honorable god. When He rides my body, he does not push it past its physical limits. He allows me to watch, and be aware, to some extent. He is stern and implacable, but not lacking in compassion. He understands both hunter and prey, and this is one of his mysteries. In order to hunt, you must become one, mentally, with the creature that you are tracking. You must be so close to them that when they go down, some part of you dies with them. This is why the god of wolves and bears wears the horns of the prey animal. He knows all too well about the moment that they are one.

For this ritual, we had two people who had volunteered to be Prey, and four Hounds. Joshua, my new boyfriend, was one of our prey animals; Allyson was the other. Natalie, Maureen, Vinnie, and my wife Bella were my Hounds, ready to hunt and capture them. We had erected a sturdy archway out of felled trees, with chains hanging from the corners, and put together a cage out of wrought-iron fencing.

As I walked down the path towards our ritual field, I silently opened myself and let Herne enter like water filling me. I'd prepared myself earlier by marking His name on my body with Ogham letters. With each step deeper into the woods, I imagined myself going deeper into Herne's realm. I paused at the field kitchen and threw on my costume—my loincloth of raccoon and fawn skins, my leather shoulder armor with the rabbit and coyote skins (predator and prey), the mismatched leather gloves (one shaped like a hoof, one clawed), my rough woolen mantle, and then my reindeer-horned mask with the hanging beads and leather fringes. As it slid over my head, He moved into me with a peculiar skillful gentleness, and then I was in the back seat, watching through my eyes as if over his shoulder, while he moved my body.

He cried out to His hounds and prey, and I watched as Joshua and Allyson went to the center of the circle and crouched there together. Joshua had chosen to be naked except for his sturdy boots; Allyson wasn't comfortable with nudity on that night, so she wore a body stocking under a camouflage-tinted shirt and shorts. I remember seeing their

pale faces looking at us as if from a long distance away. Meanwhile, Herne called to His hounds, gathering them about him for a howl. The moment that they began howling, our prey creatures bolted from the field and ran into the woods.

We howled in triumph, a long howl that rose and fell and rose again. I could see Herne's presence marking each of them, thinking, My good hounds, My fine pack. Natalie, the most aggressive, the leader of the pack through sheer energy and teeth, raring to go and chase some helpless thing. Maureen, in animal-print spandex, quieter but still focused, tireless and fast. Bella, sturdy and laughing in her leathers, the trickster of the pack but dependable and solid. Vinnie, the youngest and newest, still not sure of himself, experiencing for the first time the power of the howl and the scent. I/He cried out, "Go, my hounds!" and they leaped off like an arrow from a bow and shot, still howling, into the woods.

And I waited, with Herne. It didn't take too long. Natalie and Vinnie ran the he-prey down and captured him, dragging him back and tossing him bodily into the iron cage. They snarled at him as he crouched, warily, behind the bars. Natalie complimented Vinnie on his nose; apparently the littlest pack member had scented out the male prey. A few minutes later Maureen and Bella brought back the she-doe, slung over Maureen's shoulder, and threw her down under the archway.

Allyson had requested that she be killed in the position of a butchered animal, hung upside down from her heels. It was the position that I hang my dead goats and sheep in when I butcher them. All four snarling Hounds collaborated in lifting her off the ground and chaining her booted ankles to the arch; she hung with her hands trailing the ground, and Maureen knelt and propped her with her body so that the strain was not entirely on her feet. Then I/Herne stepped in, and He raised my kukri knife and swung it in a perfect arc that missed her throat by only a quarter inch. One Hound poured half a bottle of red wine over her, spilling over her torso and throat, and another caught it in a large silver chalice as if it were her spilled blood.

I heard Herne say, "Lay the carcass over there," and her limp form was pulled down and dragged to the side. Then they fetched Joshua from the cage. We weren't as fancy with him; the Hounds merely bent him over backwards, exposing his throat, and Herne swung the blade again. I watched the whole thing as if it was very far away, trusting Herne to do the right thing... but it seemed that He was not satisfied with only an offering of wine. The blade, in that perfect swing that I, with my merely human reflexes, could never have managed, grazed Joshua's throat just a tiny bit. When we poured the wine over him and caught it in the chalice, a single drop of his blood went with it. I didn't see it happen, but Bella did (and of course Joshua noticed it), and they told me about it afterwards, and I immediately dropped and prayed my thanks, trembling with gratitude that Herne did not see fit to make more than the tiniest cut. He is, after all, an honorable god.

With the two sacrifices dead on the ground, Herne lifted the chalice and thanked their spirits, and drank. As He drank, I could feel Him slip away again. He had accepted His offering, and the next part of the ritual would be up to me... as Herne is not a god who gives Life, but Death. Myself again, I took off the horned mask and led everyone there in a long sustained note to ceremonially bring the limp bodies back to life. They stirred and rose, and we hugged them and cheered them, and broke the ritual to go do other things together.

Ritual and Reality – Joshua

I walk down the path to the ritual field with my lover. His rituals are always fun, but I've really been looking forward to this one. Running around in the field, pretending to be hunting hounds and wild prey, furs and horns... I could get used to celebrating holidays this way... How long ago was it that I was happily agnostic? A few months? I'm still adjusting to all this Pagan stuff. Trying to reconcile my mundane world

with his world. I wrestle with it sometimes. It is so hard to believe it is real, but then it is impossible not to.

My sweet lover and I are at the field kitchen now. I look at him. No. That is not my lover. It feels like looking at something painfully bright. I can hardly breathe. That is not the man whose hair I brush and whose flesh I grab and who tells me sweet twisted stories when we are in bed together. I can feel Him, coldly looking at me through my lover's eyes. I find out later His name is Herne. I am about to drop to my knees and bow my head. Not in submission to my lover, but in reverence of Him. No! What am I doing? Don't be so foolish! This is all just theatrics. Playing out archetypes as a way of focusing our minds on...?...something... I can't even keep it straight now. My head is swimming. In any case, it isn't real. It's just roleplay. Religious roleplay, to honor abstract concepts. Archetypes. Symbols. Theatrics.

Still, I keep my eyes lowered. I can't shake off this feeling, but I push it aside.

The other "prey" and I are sent off to the center of the field. She's in some skimpy camo-print thing. Cute. I'm naked except for my boots. *This wild thing and I are alone here. We huddle together, crouched low. There is something out there, after us.*

There is a signal and we run. I'd taken off my glasses so they wouldn't get broken. Bad idea. All I can see is vague shapes in the dark. I'm vividly aware of being small and frightened and having something much stronger and faster coming after me.

I am prey. I have to hide. Into the woods, off of this path. Down low by that tree, in the brush. Maybe they won't see you... They are coming closer – lights, voices. barking? Shh... I must stay very very still. If they hear a noise they will look, and if they look they will see me. I am pale white in the dark brown of the woods. I cannot conceal myself. If they catch me they will kill me. I cannot defend myself. They are close now. Have they seen me? Should I chance running, giving my position away, or wait and let them get even closer?

I hear Vinnie's voice call out. He sees me. Vinnie! It hits me that I am a naked boy in the woods and the thing out there chasing me is Vinnie. It isn't real. It is just a game.

It rushes forward. It is not anything called 'Vinnie'. It is a barking dog with sharp teeth, and another one not far behind. I am running for my life. Back out to the path. I can't see enough to maneuver in the woods. I'm well ahead of them! I can make it to safety. It is all a blur but the path should curve right about here, and then I'm... No! Trees! I'm caught up against the edge of the woods and the dogs are right on top of me. The big one grabs me by the neck and pulls me off my feet.

Natalie. Natalie grabs me. She is not a hound, and I am not a jackrabbit. But she is still much stronger than I am. She drags me off to the fire, where the rest of the folks are gathered and throws me into the cage. The panic of being a wild thing subsides. I am just me, and over there are Vinnie and Natalie. Vinnie playfully growls at me and I snarl back and we laugh. It really is just a game.

They've caught Allyson and are hanging her upside down from a frame. I watch Bella fiddle with the ankle restraints and it brings me clear into mundane reality. Allyson is not a wild thing either. She is not a doe about to be killed. This is a just a ritual. She is a half naked woman being put in restraints, and she will not be harmed. And then I see Him, and it's real again. *He slits the doe's throat and there is blood. The blood fills a chalice and pours all over the ground, and I am a scared wild thing again. They all drink of the doe's blood and I know I am in this cage because I am His next sacrifice. I am dragged out of the cage and thrown before His feet. He raises the knife high, and brings it down fast. My throat is laid open, and it is my blood that fills the cup.*

As I fall to the ground I'm aware that the knife did break the skin. The cut stings from the wine they poured over me. I half hear words about harvest and death and rebirth. There is some indication that I should get up now. My legs have gone to sleep under me, and I am dazed.

The night goes on and I remind myself it was just a game. It wasn't real. How could it have been real? Archetypes. Symbols. Theatrics. ...

But it was real. Entirely real. That was Herne I saw looking at me through my lover's eyes. Not an archetype or a symbol,

but a real being. And I was a wild thing caught by Herne's hounds. I was sacrificed and reborn.

It is all entirely real.

Being Prey – Allyson

I stand in the embracing darkness and gaze up at the full face of the moon. The howl of the hounds pierces my heart and I know, tonight, they are coming for me.

I am the promise of Oestra, the pride of the Green Man, and the treasure of the Ivy King. I am the doe, flashing white like the moon and brown like the earth. I entice the predators to the hunt. I coquettishly court my death.

The predator is a lover whose teeth and tongue, hands and fingers long to explore my muscles and sinews, bite my flesh, taste my blood, and take my last breath from my mouth. In conquering my will and extinguishing my light, it adds my strength to its own.

I run, though I know it to be futile. I tremble and I know that I am the sacrifice to the waning day and the growing night. The predators' limbs and jaws become the darkness embracing me. On their shoulders, they carry me into the glow of the firelight.

Their god, the Hunter, looks down at me. He wears the skins and the horns of my sacrificed ancestors whose blood and flesh have nourished the predators who have come before. I am frozen by my fear like the land will be frozen by the coming winter. His blade is the winter wind. My spilling blood is the waning light. I give up my life and I am made whole in union with my ancestors and my fate.

Drink and my blood will warm you. Taste and my flesh will nourish you. Break my will and take my life and you will be sustained in the cold and the darkness. I trust your teeth and knives to remake me and give numinous power to my gift to you. Honor the Hunter with my skin and my horns for he is the keeper and guardian of our troth.

Baphomet and Babalon Rite of Acceptance and Celebration

(Originally published in "Hermaphrodeities: The Transgender Spirituality Workbook")

This ritual was developed at an SM play party. It may take a long time, and everyone needs to be thoroughly briefed well ahead of time in order to make it work properly. We did not demand that everyone who participated take a turn in the center of the circle, as there is a perfectly acceptable role for people who want to applaud, cheer, drum, shake rattles, or whatever.

You Will Need:

1. A safe, secure space where no intruders can interrupt and that is comfortable for everyone to have a good deal of room in. (Some people's fetishes take up space.)
2. Items for the four directions of the room. These can come from your imagination. We placed a whip and a lacy fan in the East, a candle and a pair of high heels in the South, a vibrating "yoni" and a glass cup filled with lube in the West, and a collection of dildoes wreathed with leaves in the North. Everyone should take part in decorating these "altars", contributing whatever it is they feel might be appropriate.
3. One bowl of M&Ms or other small candies.

The rest is provided by the people in the ritual. Ask everyone to think of some activity that turns them on and that they don't feel is exactly socially acceptable. they can bring props to demonstrate activities, or just speak about them.

Four people are chosen to delineate the circle by acknowledging the four directions, and create sacred space. Then the priest/esses step up. In our ritual, Baphomet was invoked by a butch dyke leather top who wore a horned mask, a large phallus on a furred, tailed harness, and fur leggings that ended in leather "hooves". S/he carried a riding crop in hir hand. Although the individual who invokes Baphomet does not need to have such an elaborate costume, they should at least have breasts and double genitalia (none of which need to be made of flesh), and a commanding, confident attitude is a plus. The other priest/ess played Babalon, the Sacred Whore. Babalon should present as "femme" and wear red; anything else is up to the priest/ess performing the role. the pair do represent a kind of "butch-femme" paradigm, but the actual sexes of the individuals can be whatever they like within those borders. Our Babalon was a pre-op M2F who wore scarlet belly dancing gear.

Baphomet (optionally) recites the "Hymn to Baphomet" (from "Hermaphrodeities: The Transgender Spirituality Workbook", Xlibris Press). Then Babalon says the following:

The body's truth lies in the rivers of energy
 That rise up from our roots,
 And this (*takes hold of genitals*) is our roots.
 We know our own truth from these messages,
 For they are truly come from the God/desses of love
 Using our own flesh to speak to us.
 And anything that causes the rivers of energy
 To rise with joy and ecstasy
 Is sacred, no matter what it is,
 No matter what anyone may say.
 For all acts of love and pleasure
 Are Our rituals.

One at a time, each person gets up and has the center of the circle to themselves. When we did this, some people spoke about their fetishes (often telling salacious stories or reading hot poetry), some read aloud erotica, some showed off their fetish gear in a fashion show, and some performed theirs on the spot, alone or with help. The most important part of this ritual, however, is this: After presenting their sacred perversion, each should then speak about what it has taught them about themselves and the world. For example, cross-dressers might speak about what playing with gender has done for the way they see men and women, SM players might recount what they have learned about power and altered states, etc.

The tone of this ritual must be completely nonjudgmental. Even if someone talks about a fetish that they cannot perform because it might be harmful or unsafe to themselves or someone else, and therefore it must be kept in fantasy only, their courage and self-discipline must be applauded and appreciated. Lots of clapping, cheering, drumming, and music playing during performances is encouraged. Those who take part should be made to feel proud of themselves, not shameful in any way. Do not challenge or question anyone's preferences and what they have or have not learned.

As the final part of the ritual, each person goes up to the bowl of M&Ms, which should be in front of wherever Baphomet and Babalon are enthroned. Each person selects a piece of candy and names it with a judgmental attitude that they are better off without, e.g. "I thought that (whatever) was terrible and that the people who did it were all sick, but I see now that this isn't the case at all," or "I've been ashamed of myself for liking (whatever), but now I refuse to carry that shame any longer." They then present the candy as an offering to Baphomet and Babalon, who eat it and promise to excrete the "bad attitude" transformed into something else.

Sacred space is opened, and all feast, make merry, continue to celebrate their perversions, or whatever.



Piercing the Veil: A Body Modification Ritual

by Del

Sacred Mark Sanctuary is a Body Spirituality group that does ritual tattoos, piercings, and other body modifications at various festivals throughout the year. For the last two years, they have also offered their own Samhain ritual, referred to as Piercing the Veil.

This year, I was a member of the ritual writing and production team. Our theme centered around the Greek myth of Persephone's kidnapping and being held in the Underworld by Hades. I was aspecting Demeter, Persephone's mother.

This is my experience.

I stood on the stage, letting the words flow from my mouth as we enacted a ritual theater piece. Zeus made a flimsy deal with Hades that "when she was old enough" he could have Persephone as a wife. Hades, in turn, decided she was old enough *now*, and decided to try to woo her away from the Earth to come be the Queen of the Underworld.

There was my daughter, Persephone, allowing herself to be romanced away by our modern-day Hades (bedecked in studded leather), and I was left to grieve her departure. I circled the rest of the ritual participants and led them on a search. We were stopped by Helios, the Sun, who told us that she was being held in the Underworld. It was a dangerous journey and everyone who went had to be sure that they were

prepared to enter the land of the dead. It gave the participants one last chance to back out if they were getting too nervous, or didn't want to participate after all.

When we arrived, I as Demeter was greeted by Hades, who threw me onto a table and pierced my "heart" (chest skin) with two hooks. Upon these hooks he placed strings, so that he could cause me even more "pain" by pulling on them. I wore the marks of my sacrifice as I led the rest of the participants into deep meditative chambers so that they, too, could prepare for their entry. Meanwhile, Hades sewed six bells onto Persephone—one for each month she would be his wife.

As people were welcomed into the Underworld, I hung from my altar by the two hooks attached to the wall, there to symbolize that which is outside of our control, that we must learn to accept. People came and meditated at the altar, some pulling on the strings, some attaching their own pulls to the same wall and pulling with me.

As for the biochemical feeling of the pull, this was my third time with hooks, and it was almost calming. I was able to lean back and put the majority of my (not small) weight on the hooks, and allow them to support me. It brought me to a different state of consciousness, very similar to hallucinogens. I felt detached and yet very present. There were times that I felt I had reached a point where the hooks were "gone", in that I was going to fall if I continued to rely upon them for support. It's a feeling I plan to revisit the next time I do an energy pull—I was part of the ritual team this time, so I wouldn't let myself go that deep a meditative trance.

I don't find hooks painful at all. Once I get over the initial insertion, the endorphins take off and I don't feel much of anything but a general sense of euphoria. But it is scary, each and every time I lay down to get those hooks inserted under my skin! It's as if your genetic heritage is saying "Run away!"

There were several others who received hooks or bells that day. It was gratifying to see my friend with hooks in her back, pulling away from a wall as though she were flying. Another strong memory was finding people going back into the

meditation chambers on their own, hooking into the walls and hanging there to be alone with their own souls..

There was a lot of symbolic communication at this level—at one point, Persephone was the one who came and led me by my hooks, showing that she was independent of her mother's whim. Another time, it was Hades, showing me off like a trophy. After we were "released" from the Underworld, we went back to Earth where they were removing the piercings. Here was a place of ecstatic dance and joyousness at the earth's renewal. I danced while my friend held and pulled on my hooks even more, and the rush was amazing. I have found that I enjoy the experience so much more in that kind of atmosphere, rather than a quiet meditative one. We danced and chanted and released lots of ritual energy into the cosmos until, finally, I was the last one to have her hooks removed.

The ritual was over, and I was all the better for it.

It was an incredible experience.



Ordeal-Ritual of Dedication to Lilith

by Lilith Cherev

This is an ordeal that travels not to the Underworld but to the Waste Land – not to the place that every man goes, but the place where no man does. It is emphatically not a group ritual, and the primary reason it involves two people rather than one is to provide for the Initiate's safety should she overextend herself. The Initiate will take on Lilith's mantle for the ritual, and her Celebrant stands in for the Lightbringer, Lilith's lover and ally in exile.

The setting for this ritual is a barren and remote place, hostile to human life; a desert is, of course, ideal, but other "difficult" natural landscapes could be substituted with a little creativity. The place should be as private and as lonely as possible: when Lilith left the Garden, she walked alone for many years. The Initiate's journey serves to remind her of Lilith's suffering, and as such it is suggested that she fast for the entire day of the ritual. If she does not find this physically or emotionally possible, then the food she eats during the ordeal should be bland and unappealing, for the desert is barren.

At sunrise, the Initiate leaves home for the ritual ground – this should be a journey taking some time, and accomplished at least partly on foot. She prays to Lilith as she departs:

Initiate: O my Mother, when the world was young, You left
paradise in search of freedom. You found Your power in

the desert, and lived there unafraid. Help me now, as I enter the wilderness, to find my power as You found Yours, and to accept the hard work of freedom rather than a comfortable slavery.

The Celebrant may travel with the Initiate to the ritual site, or may meet her there. During the course of the day, the Initiate should reflect on her reasons for inviting Lilith into her life, on the difficulties of that path, and on the nature of her "barren" surroundings. The Celebrant discusses these things with her, questioning whatever assumptions she has and not allowing her any easy answers. She should experience the nature of the chosen place, and her body's reaction to it, as intimately as possible; she may do this through whatever methods seem most effective, including prayer, meditation, drumming, chanting, and possibly hiking or climbing if the environment is suitable. (Note that Lilith despises craven submission, and as such prayers to her should take the form of requests for advice rather than supplications.) The Celebrant encourages her contemplation, and maintains a watch on her physical health.

After sunset the formal liturgy begins. The Initiate should be naked, or as near to it as is practical; the Celebrant may wish to wear white or flame colors to represent the Morningstar.

Initiate: Lilith, Dark Mother, Your daughter calls You! First Woman, Queen of Temptation, Freedom-Spirit, Your daughter calls You! Lady of the Sandstorm, Lover to the Morningstar, Your daughter calls You! I come to this desert, to Your holy place, to give myself to You and ask Your blessing. I would walk in Your path, Lilith, and be free and suffer, rather than serve in paradise. Mark me as Your child this night, and teach me Your mysteries.

Celebrant: If you take this mark, you will be outcast. The sons of Adam will mistrust you, and your friends will be few. Your path will be thorny and winding. The easy road will

not open to you. Will you wear Lilith's mark, knowing what it is she offers?

Initiate: I will wear Her mark, and I will walk Her path.

Celebrant: Then wear it bravely, and may She give you strength.

Slowly and deliberately, the Celebrant then marks the Initiate's flesh in a manner they have previously chosen. This should, ideally, leave the Initiate with a scar to remind her of her vows (and perhaps to symbolize some of the powers she hopes to gain from this act of dedication). The Initiate will recite these lines as a mantra, during the process:

Initiate:

Ahi hay Lilitu!
In suffering is strength.
Ahi hay Lilitu!
In exile is freedom.

When the marking is complete, the Celebrant addresses the Initiate as the goddess, saying...

Celebrant: Welcome, Lilith, to this flesh and this heart. By Your power does the barren waste provide sustenance; by Your pride does the sufferer triumph; by Your love does the exile find companions. Hail, desert goddess - the Lightbringer salutes you.

The Initiate replies, as Lilith.

Initiate: Hail, Son of the Morning, Prince of the East—you who have known my power and not feared it! I am Lilith! I am the first woman, the strongest woman! I am she who chose freedom over comfort, suffering over submission! I am she who walked from the garden to the desert, not ashamed, but proud of my defiance! I am mother to ten thousand children, the nightwalking Lilim, the spirits of desire! I am the dragon, the serpent bringing temptation

and knowledge! I lived at the dawn of the world, and I live now through this flesh, and I will live always in souls that resist tyranny! For I am Lilith, and I cannot be tamed!

At this point, if the spirit so moves them, Initiate and Celebrant may choose to consummate Lilith and Sammael's passion, bearing in mind that Lilith's first act of defiance was her refusal to lie beneath Adam.

Depending on the Initiate's physical condition and personal preference, she may now do one of two things: 1) sleep, before ending the ritual, in hopes of receiving dream-visions from Lilith; or 2) proceed to the ritual's conclusion. When the ritual continues, the Celebrant hands Initiate clean, new clothing, ideally a white robe.

Celebrant: You have gone naked into the wilderness.

Initiate: And the wilderness has sheltered me.

The Celebrant produces food, fruit (ideally including dates or figs) and honey cakes.

Celebrant: You have gone hungry into the desert.

Initiate: And the desert has fed me.

The Celebrant kisses her forehead in blessing.

Celebrant: You have gone lonely into the barren land.

Initiate: And the barren land has comforted me.

Celebrant: Blessed art thou, daughter of Lilith, sandstorm dancer. May your Mother always guide you, and your strength never fail.

Initiate: Blessed are all the beloved of Lilith. May we always be true to our passion, celebrate our suffering, and be free.

The Initiate and Celebrant then share the food, and with the feast the ritual is concluded.

Lilith

by Corbie Petulengro

if I were a sandstorm
 whirling like a dervish with a thousand whips
 to flay you
would you walk unprotected into the desert?

if I were an incubus
 crouched outside your window with a fatal kiss
 to drink of your soul
would you open the panes to my sliding fingers?

if I were a demon
 rubbing you raw with my hairy thighs
 and sharp hooves
 would you fight me
as I threw you to the meadow's grass?

if I were to demand
 that you lie always beneath me in Eden, when I slake,
 once again, my insatiable lusts
would you acquiesce to my demands?

if I were to ask you the hard questions
 of what you really think of when you fantasize
 of what you really want
would you kneel before me and speak of submission?

And I don't really know what you dream of
so I just watch your lithe form across the office
out of the corner of my eye
and imagine that you are bound to a huluppu tree
and I
am a scirocco...



The Descent Of Inanna Ritual

The Descent of Inanna ritual is based on the original ancient texts from the Enuma Elish and other similar texts. It is a mystery play that includes actual S/M play. It is meant to be read by two narrators, one of whom reads the original lines—printed in bold type—and one who reads the modern commentary - printed in normal type. The characters mime the action described and the sections that are written in italics. The parts should be chosen wisely, especially that of Inanna; to star in this ritual is to call the myth of Inanna into your life. The part of Inanna should be played by someone who is willing to honor the descent into the darkness, and understands what it entails.

Performance notes: The individuals who play the parts of Inanna, Dumuzi, and Geshtinanna should have a certain amount of say in who plays the Annunaki and Ereshkigal. They should be reasonably comfortable with being topped by each of them, and should ideally work out beforehand with these eight tops what will be done to them, even if only for two minutes. The dialog is written to be spoken by the narrators, but could also be spoken by the players if they are able to memorize and recite lines under stress. Key dialog can be given to the players, for added effect. Good choices are the lines at each of the gates (“What is this?” “Quiet, Inanna, the ways of the Underworld are perfect; they may not be questioned”), Dumuzi’s “You! What are you doing here?”, and the demons’ “He can never escape us.” Repeated lines

("Yet it must be done.", "Hunt him! Hunt Him!", "His doom is upon him.") can be spoken in unison by those watching.

All penetration is written to be done with strap-on dildoes, but it can be done with live genitalia if the individuals in question are comfortable with that. While we chose the activities that we thought would be the most appropriate for each gate, this too can be altered and redesigned by participants. The first time that we did this ritual, the last three Annunaki were all lovers of the woman who played Inanna, and so the genital contact did actually occur.

The Characters

Two Narrators

Inanna, the Queen of Heaven: Female. Should have a strong, proud presence but will willing to be stripped, humiliated, tormented, and beaten. Keep in mind that the character of Inanna is not a submissive, but a powerful, dominant woman who chooses to submit in order to gain wisdom. It is useful for the Inanna participant to be a masochist, or at least to be able to endure periods of pain without a safeword. This ritual should not be interrupted by safewords except for extreme, injurious accidental emergencies. Inanna should start with a blue gown covered in stars, which she shucks at the beginning of the play in order to don her "power" garb.

Ereshkigal, the Queen of the Underworld: Female domme. Should also have great presence, and be able to wield some kind of beating implement. She should wear black robes/clothing, revealing or not, fetishy or not, as works for the situation.

Ninshubur, Inanna's maidservant: A warrior woman, very devoted to Inanna. This is a good part for a female submissive who is nonetheless an independent and strong person, and who puts that strength squarely in the service

of another, or would like to. Ninshubur is personal assistant, bodyservant, and bodyguard. Ninshubur should wear red or orange, as befits a warrior; she should have short hair or wear a head-wrap, and carry a knife at her belt.

Dumuzi, Inanna's husband: Male. He is beaten and tormented for at least five to ten minutes during the course of the ritual, and should be enough of a masochist to deal with that.

Geshtinanna, Dumuzi's sister: Female. She is beaten and tormented for at least five to ten minutes during the course of the ritual, and should be enough of a masochist to endure this.

The Annunaki/The Galla: Seven tops, of varying genders. These seven people will play first the Annunaki, the judges and gate-guardians of the Underworld who torment and humiliate Inanna, and then the Galla, demons who follow Inanna up from the Underworld and torture Dumuzi and Geshtinanna. Should be competent at topping, and should be trusted by the three people that they will have to top for a few minutes each. One of them should be Neti, the keeper of the first gate, referred to as male in the texts, and he will have an extra miming part.

Enlil, the Sun God: Miming part only, no sexplay. Wears a sun mask.

Nanna, the Moon God: Miming part only, no sexplay. Wears a moon mask.

Enki, the Inventor God: Miming part only, no sexplay, but a good deal of acting.

The Kurgarra and Galatur: Two transgendered individuals, one male-to-female and one female-to-male. Miming part only.

The Ritual

Drumbeats. Inanna sits on her throne, on the opposite side of the area from where Ereshkigal's throne lies behind a dark-colored curtain. As the first lines are read, she stands as if listening to something, and then wanders back and forth looking more and more dissatisfied. She slowly comes down into the front area, where a table is set up with her ritual garb on it.

From the Great Above

She opened her ear to the Great Below.

Inanna, the Queen of Heaven, had everything.

From the Great Above

The goddess opened her ear to the Great Below.

She was powerful. She was beautiful.

She ruled over love, war, and fertility.

From the Great Above

Inanna opened her ear to the Great Below.

All men and women bowed before her...

And yet something was missing from her life.

The Lady abandoned heaven and earth

To descend to the underworld.

All was light in her life. There was no darkness...

And no depth.

Inanna abandoned heaven and earth

To descend to the underworld.

Inanna heard the call of the dark places.

In Uruk she abandoned her temple

To descend to the underworld.

For the dark called her, seductively, compellingly.

In Badtibira she abandoned her temple

To descend to the underworld.

For the dark called her like the voice of a lover.

In Zabalam she abandoned her temple

To descend to the underworld.

For the dark called her in a terrifying voice.

In Adab she abandoned her temple

To descend to the underworld.

For the dark whispered to her in her dreams.
In Nippur she abandoned her temple
To descend to the underworld.
 For the dark touched her
 With hands as light as a ghost.
In Kish she abandoned her temple
To descend to the underworld.
 For the dark sang to her in the wind through her hair.
In Akkad she abandoned her temple
To descend to the underworld.
 For the Call of the Darkness will not be denied.
To the Land of No Return she was determined to go.
 For when the Darkness calls, finally, you come.
To the dark house, dwelling of Irkalla's goddess,
 You go down to the dark place, one way or another.
To the house which those who enter cannot leave,
 Perhaps you go unwillingly,
 Like a rape, like a violation.
On the road where traveling is one-way only,
 Perhaps you go with screams and weeping.
To the house where those who enter are deprived of light,
 Would it not be better to go willingly,
 As if to your wedding day?
Where dust is their food, clay their bread.
 Who lives in the darkness that you fear?
They see no light, they dwell in darkness,
 Yet the dark does not stop their vision.
They are clothed like birds, with feathers.
 For they have lightened themselves
 Of the pain they carry.
Over the door and the bolt, dust has settled.
 For few are brave enough to take this path.

Inanna stands before the table, and removes her garment. She is naked beneath it, with her back to the audience. As the next lines are read, she methodically dresses herself in the following garments: a silver crown with a large many-pointed star on it, a long strand of blue beads that goes around her neck twice, a lightweight cloak of blue studded with stars that ties around her neck, a belt of links set

with stones, eye makeup – have her already made up and just mime putting a little more on – and a metallic gold strapless bra or corset, and a large gold bracelet. A blue rod, like a sceptre, should be there for her to pick up and take with her. As soon as she walks away, the table is removed.

She gathered together the seven me.

She gathered together

All the worldly powers she had won.

She took them into her hands.

With the me in her possession, she prepared herself:

She placed the shugurra,

The crown of the steppe, on her head.

For she would go down to the Underworld

As the queen that she was.

She arranged the locks of hair across her forehead.

For she would have none see her as less than perfect.

She tied the lapis beads around her neck.

Let the double strand of beads fall to her breast,

For all the wealth of Heaven was hers.

And wrapped the royal robe around her body.

For she held the mysteries of womanhood within her.

She hung the girdle of birthstones about her hips.

For she was proud to be the Jewel of the Sky.

She daubed her eyes with the ointment called

'Let him come, let him come.'

For her beauty had gained her entrance

To many a narrow place.

Bound the breast plate called 'Come, man, come!'

Around her chest,

For she was justly proud of the loveliness of her body.

Slipped the gold ring over her wrist,

For she would be reminded of her husband

And her marriage.

And took the lapis measuring rod and line in her hand.

For she was used to measuring and judging

All she saw.

And Inanna set out for the underworld.

Inanna walks toward the first Gate of the Underworld, which can be an archway, or just a space where Neti, the Gatekeeper, stands. During the next lines, she takes Ninshubur by the shoulders and mimes speaking to her earnestly.

Ninshubur, her faithful servant, went with her.

Inanna spoke to her, saying:

‘Ninshubur, my constant support,

My sukkal who gives me wise advice,

My warrior who fights by my side,

I am descending to the Kur, to the underworld.

If I do not return,

Set up a lament for me by the ruins.

If I do not return in three days, get help.

Get help any way that you can.

Beat the drum for me in the assembly places.

Circle the houses of the gods.

Do not let them forget me.

Tear at your eyes, at your mouth, at your thighs.

Dress yourself in a single garment like a beggar.

My life may depend on your aid.

Go to Nippur, to the temple of Enlil.

When you enter his holy shrine, cry out:

“Oh, Father Enlil, do not let your daughter

Be put to death in the underworld.”

If Enlil will not help you,

Go to Ur, to the temple of Nanna.

Weep before Father Nanna.

If Nanna will not help you,

Go to Eridu, to the temple of Enki.

Weep before Father Enki.

Father Enki, the God Of Wisdom, knows the food of life,

He knows the water of life;

Knows the secret of life.

Surely he will not let me die.’

Inanna turns and walks toward the First Gate. Ninshubur stands straight, but is clearly afraid for her. The following lines are said with decreasing volume and certainty.

Surely someone can save me.
Surely someone can save me.
Surely someone can save me.

Inanna continued on her way to the underworld.

Inanna stops and looks back one more time, and gestures to Ninshubur.

**Then she stopped and said: 'Go now Ninshubur—
Do not forget the words I have commanded you.'**

For my life rests on the turn of a blade
For my life rests on the touch of a feather
For my life is no longer my own.

Inanna approaches the First Gate, and mimes knocking. Drumbeats sound for her knocks. She gestures with her arms as she makes the threats to Neti.

**When Inanna arrived at the outer gates of the underworld,
She knocked loudly.**

For who among us can resist a show of courage
At the door of Death?

**She cried out in a fierce voice: "Open the door, gatekeeper!
Open the door, Neti! I alone would enter!"**

**If you do not open the gate for me to come in,
I shall smash the door and shatter the bolt,
I shall smash the doorpost and overturn the doors,
I shall raise up the dead and they shall eat the living:
The dead shall outnumber the living!"**

The Dead already outnumber the living, Inanna,
And they cannot be moved by your words.

Neti stands forward with his spear and thumps it into the ground, looking forbidding. He and Inanna gesture at each other during this conversation.

Neti, the chief gatekeeper of the kur, asked: "Who are you?"

**She answered: "I am Inanna, Queen of Heaven,
On my way to the East."**

**Neti said: "If you are truly Inanna, Queen of Heaven,
On your way to the East,**

**Why has your heart led you on the road
From which no traveler returns?"**

If you are the Queen of Heaven,
Then you are truly in the wrong place.
Why are you really here?

Inanna turns her head as if in thought, and wraps her mantle closer about her. For the first time, she seems unsure of herself.

**Inanna answered: "Because... of my older sister Erishkigal,
Her husband, Gugalanna, the Bull of Heaven, has died.**

I have come to witness the funeral rites.

Let the beer of his funeral rites be poured into the cup.

Let it be done."

Inanna bows her head.

I have come to witness a funeral,
Although I fear it will be my own.
Let it be done.
Let it be done.
Let it be done.

**Neti spoke: "Stay here Inanna, I will speak to my queen.
I will give her your message."**

I will tell her of your pride,
And of your hubris.

Neti turns and goes toward the curtain, which opens. Ereshkigal is seated on her throne. He kneels before her; she touches the head of her loyal servant.

**Neti, the chief gatekeeper of the Kur,
Entered the palace of Erishkigal, the Queen of the
Underworld, and said:**

**"My Queen, a maiden
As tall as heaven, as wide as the earth,
As strong as the foundations of the city wall,
Waits outside the palace gates.**

The smell of Life is upon her
Like a summer breeze over the warm fields.

**She has gathered together the seven me.
She has taken them in her hands.**

With the me in her possession, she has prepared herself:

She wears her power like a glimmering mantle.

On her head she wears the shurgarra,

The crown of the steppe.

She speaks as if she is used to being obeyed.

Across her forehead her dark locks of hair

Are carefully arranged.

She looks as if many hands toiled for her loveliness.

Around her neck she wears the double strand of lapis beads.

She glitters with the wealth of the Land Above.

Around her hips hangs the girdle of birthstones.

She glitters with the stars of the night sky.

Her body is wrapped in the royal robe.

All who look upon her know that she is a queen.

Her eyes are daubed with the ointment

'Let him come, let him come.'

She carries herself as if she knows her own beauty.

Around her chest she wears the breast plate called

'Come, man, come!'

She carries herself as if her beauty

Is her greatest power.

On her wrist she wears the gold ring.

You can be sure that she does not sleep alone.

In her hand she carries the lapis measuring rod and line."

She looks upon our dusty gate

And judges us with her eyes.

During the next lines, Ereshkigal mimes her anger, from resentment to outright rage. She stands up and stalks back and forth across the area, slapping various things with her sceptre, which can be a riding crop or something like it. She shakes her fist and gestures to the words.

When Erishkigal heard this,

She slapped her thigh and bit her lip.

She took the matter into her heart and dwelt on it.

Inanna appeared like a vision of all that she was not.

Her face grew livid as cut tamarisk,

She has beauty and grace.

Her lips grew dark as the rim of a kuninu-vessel.

She has the morning and evening sky.
"What brings her to me? What has incited her against me?"
 She has the wealth of the storehouse.
Surely not because I drink water with the Anunnaki,
 She wears a golden crown on her head.
I eat clay for bread, I drink river-mud for beer!
 She has the love and reverence of all people.
I have to weep for young men
Forced to abandon their sweethearts.
 She has a living husband.
I have to weep for girls wrenched from their lover's laps.
 No one weeps when Death weeps.
For the infant child I have to weep, expelled before its time."
 If she wants the Great Below, I will give it to her.

Ereshkigal turns and points imperiously at Neti.

Then she spoke: "Come, Neti,
My chief gatekeeper of the Kur,
Heed my words:
Bolt the seven gates of the underworld.
Then, one by one, open each gate a crack.
Let Inanna enter.
As she enters, remove her royal garments.
Let the holy priestess of heaven enter bowed low."
 Let her learn what secrets the darkness truly holds.

Neti heeded the words of his queen.

Neti turns and goes back to the gate, where Inanna has stood motionless.

He bolted the seven gates of the underworld.

The six other Annunaki come forth and stand beyond Neti, each a good distance away from each other. One at a time, they hold out staffs or wands horizontally as if to bar the way, in time to loud single drumbeats, symbolizing the locking of the gates.

Then he opened the outer gate.

He said to the maiden: "Come, Inanna, enter."

Neti puts his spear aside and bows, gesturing her to come through. She starts forward.

**When she entered the first gate,
From her head, the shugurra, the crown of the steppe,
Was removed.**

Neti reaches out and snatches the crown from her head. He tosses it to the side.

Inanna asked: "What is this?"

She was told: "Quiet, Inanna,

The ways of the underworld are perfect.

They may not be questioned."

Neti seizes her by her hair and slams her up against the gate, slaps her on the "Quiet, Inanna" line, and does some terribly painful thing to her for about two minutes.

For your power in the upper world

Means nothing here.

Your crown is dust and your legions are nothing.

And without them, who are you?

The second Annunaki steps forward next to the gate. Neti goes to stand beside Ereshkigal's throne. Inanna attempts to enter the gate again. The second Annunaki grabs her by the necklace and yanks it off her throat. Then the second Annunaki takes her by the throat, slaps her on the "Quiet, Inanna" line, and does something painful to her for about two minutes.

**When she entered the second gate,
From her neck the double strand of lapis beads
Were removed.**

Inanna asked: "What is this?"

She was told: "Quiet, Inanna,

The ways of the underworld are perfect.

They may not be questioned."

For your precious possessions mean nothing here.

The things you love to touch are dust

And your hands are empty.

And without them, who are you?

The third Annunaki steps forward next to the gate. The second Annunaki goes to stand beside Ereshkigal's throne. Inanna passes through the gate a third time. The third Annunaki tears the girdle from her hips, strikes her on the "Quiet, Inanna" line, and beats her ass for about two minutes.

**When she entered the third gate,
From her hips the girdle of birthstones was removed.
Inanna asked: "What is this?"
She was told: "Quiet, Inanna,
The ways of the underworld are perfect,
They may not be questioned."**

For your wealth means nothing here.
Your money is dust and you cannot buy your way out.
And without that, who are you?

The fourth Annunaki steps forward next to the gate. The third Annunaki goes to stand beside Ereshkigal's throne. Inanna passes through the gate a fourth time. The fourth Annunaki removes the bra/corset from her torso, strikes her on the "Quiet, Inanna" line, and does something painful to her breasts for about two minutes.

**When she entered the fourth gate,
From her chest the breast plate called "Come, man, come!"
was removed.
Inanna asked: "What is this?"
She was told, "Quiet, Inanna,
The ways of the underworld are perfect.
They may not be questioned."**

For your beauty means nothing here.
Your sexual power is useless
and no one will look on you with desire.
And without that, who are you?

The fifth Annunaki steps forward next to the gate. The fourth Annunaki goes to stand beside Ereshkigal's throne. Inanna passes through the gate a fifth time. The fifth Annunaki takes the bracelet from her wrist, strikes her on the "Quiet, Inanna" line, buckles cuffs onto her wrists, and does something painful to her for about two minutes.

**When she entered the fifth gate,
 From her wrist the gold ring was removed.
 Inanna asked: "What is this?"
 She was told: "Quiet, Inanna,
 The ways of the underworld are perfect.
 They may not be questioned."**

For your relationships with others mean nothing here.
 You are alone
 Without any other soul to come at your call.
 And without them, who are you?

The sixth Annunaki steps forward next to the gate. The fifth Annunaki goes to stand beside Ereshkigal's throne. Inanna passes through the gate a sixth time, clearly stumbling, still clutching the rod. The sixth Annunaki takes it away from her, strikes her on the "Quiet, Inanna" line, and does something painful to her for about two minutes, probably with the rod, ideally breaking it in two in the process.

**When she entered the sixth gate,
 From her hand the lapis measuring rod and line was removed.
 Inanna asked: "What is this?"
 She was told: "Quiet, Inanna,
 The ways of the underworld are perfect.
 They may not be questioned."**

For your mind and your intellect mean nothing here.
 The ways in which you judge things,
 Your values and your scales,
 They are all useless in this place,
 And without them, who are you?

The seventh Annunaki steps forward next to the gate. The sixth Annunaki goes to stand beside Ereshkigal's throne. Inanna crawls through the gate and is seized by the seventh Annunaki, who rips off her mantle, leaving her naked, strikes her on the "Quiet, Inanna" line, and then throws her down and roughly penetrates her (or mimes penetrating her) with a large strap-on dildo.

**When she entered the seventh gate,
 From her body the royal robe was removed.
 Inanna asked: "What is this?"
 She was told: "Quiet, Inanna,
 The ways of the underworld are perfect.
 They may not be questioned."**

For your womanhood means nothing here.
 The rules you live by are dust,
 The role you lived is nothing,
 For gender and roles mean nothing to the Dead.
 And without that, who are you?

*The seventh Annunaki drags her by her hair before the throne of
 Ereshkigal. The others converge on her, and she is strung up facing
 the audience. All seven strike her to pass judgment.*

**Naked and bowed low, Inanna entered the throne room.
 Erishkigal rose from her throne.
 Inanna started toward the throne.
 The Annunaki, the judges of the underworld,
 Surrounded her.**

They passed judgment against her.
*Ereshkigal steps down from her throne. She takes up an implement
 and beats Inanna for about two minutes. Inanna sinks down in her
 bonds as if beaten down in spirit.*

**Then Erishkigal fastened on Inanna the eye of death.
 She spoke against her the word of wrath.
 She uttered against her the cry of guilt.
 She struck her.**

**Inanna was turned into a corpse,
 A piece of rotting meat,
 And was hung from a hook on the wall.**
*The Annunaki hoist her up behind the throne and hang her. This
 should be well-practiced beforehand in order to be able to do it
 quickly; we did it with an EMT's body-board.*

**When, after three days and three nights,
 Inanna had not returned,
 Ninshubur set up a lament for her by the ruins.**

Ninshubur runs about frantically. She goes from person to person in the audience, shakes them, gestures wildly, bangs on walls as if they are doors, generally mimes making a ruckus.

She beat the drum for her in the assembled places.

She circled the houses of the gods.

She tore at her eyes; she tore at her mouth;

She tore at her thighs.

She dressed herself in a single garment like a beggar.

Alone, she set out for Nippur and the temple of Enlil.

Ninshubur falls to her knees before Enlil's corner.

When she entered the holy shrine,

She cried out: "O Enlil, do not let your daughter

Be put to death in the underworld.

Yet it must be done.

Do not let your bright silver

Be covered with dust of the underworld.

Yet it must be done.

Do not let your precious lapis

Be broken into stone for the stoneworker.

Yet it must be done.

Do not let your fragrant boxwood

Be cut into wood for the woodworker.

Yet it must be done.

Do not let the holy priestess of heaven

Be put to death in the underworld."

Yet it must be done.

Enlil gestures imperiously and finally turns his back on her.

Enlil answered angrily: "My daughter had the Great Above.

But Inanna craved the Great Below.

She who receives the me of the underworld does not return.

She who goes to the Dark City stays there."

Enlil would not help.

Ninshubur runs to the other side of the area and flings herself on her knees in Nanna's corner.

Ninshubur went to Ur and the temple of Nanna.

When she entered the holy shrine,

She cried out:

**"Oh Nanna, do not let your daughter
Be put to death in the underworld.**

Yet it must be done.

**Do not let your bright silver
Be covered with dust of the underworld.**

Yet it must be done.

**Do not let your precious lapis
Be broken into stone for the stoneworker.**

Yet it must be done.

**Do not let your fragrant boxwood
Be cut into wood for the woodworker.**

Yet it must be done.

**Do not let the holy priestess of heaven
Be put to death in the underworld."**

Yet it must be done.

Nanna gestures imperiously at her and then finally turns his back on her.

Nanna answered angrily:

"My daughter had the Great Above.

But Inanna craved the Great Below.

She who receives the me of the underworld does not return.

She who goes to the Dark City stays there."

Nanna would not help.

Ninshubur runs to Enki's corner. Enki is just coming forward, reading a scroll, oblivious to her. Ninshubur throws herself at his feet and wraps her arms around his knees, pleading.

Ninshubur went to Eridu and the temple of Enki.

When she entered the holy shrine,

**She cried out: "O Father Enki, do not let your daughter
Be put to death in the underworld.**

Yet it must be done.

**Do not let your bright silver
Be covered with dust of the underworld.**

Yet it must be done.

**Do not let your precious lapis
Be broken into stone for the stoneworker.**

Yet it must be done.

**Do not let your fragrant boxwood
Be cut into wood for the woodworker.**

Yet it must be done.

**Do not let the holy priestess of heaven
Be put to death in the underworld."**

Yet it must be done.

Enki acts surprised, then gently disengages Ninshubur.

Father Enki said;

"What has happened?

What has my daughter done?

Inanna, Queen of All the Lands! Holy Priestess of Heaven!

What has happened? I am troubled, I am grieved."

For no man nor woman

Can enter the Underworld and live,

No man nor woman, and not even I, Enki,

The great god of Invention,

But I know who can!

Enki makes magical gestures, waving first one hand and then the other. From where they have been crouched under rough brown blankets, being part of the earth, the Kurgarra and Galatur arise. They wear only simple white tunics.

From under his fingernail Father Enki brought forth dirt.

He fashioned the dirt into a Kurgarra,

A creature neither male nor female.

From under the fingernail of his other hand

He brought forth dirt.

He fashioned the dirt into a Galatur,

A creature neither male nor female.

Enki hands the water of life to one and the food of life to the other. During these lines, he mimes instructing them, and meanwhile Ereshkigal can be seen pacing back and forth in front of her throne, moaning, holding her belly, weeping, beating on things, and generally acting anguished.

He gave the food of life to the Kurgarra.

He gave the water of life to the Galatur, saying:

"Go to the underworld,

Enter the doors like flies,

**Erishkigal, the Queen of the Underworld, is moaning
 With the cries of a woman about to give birth.
 No linen is spread on her body.
 Her breasts are uncovered.
 Her hair swirls about her head like leeks.**

For no one knows how terrible it is to be Death.
 All curse Death, and no one loves Her,
 And no one shows her compassion.
 She takes all the Dead into her womb,
 And rebirths them again,
 With no mate, no midwife, no aid,
 No loving hands to see her through,
 And all we do is curse Her yet again.

Weep for her.

**The queen will be pleased. She will offer you a gift.
 Ask her only for the corpse
 That hangs from the hook on the wall.
 One of you will sprinkle the food of life on it.
 The other will sprinkle the water of life.
 Inanna will arise."**

And remember this mystery, ye who stand before us:
 Remember it well:
 That when you are trapped in the land of Death,
 That the food of life and the water of life
 Lie in the hands of those who lie
 Between man and woman.

The Kurgarra and Galatur walk toward the Underworld gates. Their way is blocked by the seven Annunaki, holding their rods horizontally. As they approach, the Annunaki step out of the way one by one.

**The Kurgarra and the Galatur heeded Enki's words.
 They set out for the underworld.
 Like flies, they slipped through the cracks of the gates.**

They come into Ereshkigal's presence, where she has taken to her throne and is rocking back and forth, her arms wrapped around herself, miming weeping. She has torn half of her clothing off and is disheveled.

**They entered the throne room
Of the Queen of the Underworld.
No linen was spread on her body.
Her breasts were uncovered.
Her hair swirled around her head like leeks.**

Will no one ever have compassion for Death?
Shame on you all, who stand here now!
Can you not reach beyond your own small lives?

The Kurgarra and Galatur kneel before her throne. As she moans and rocks, they mime compassionate gestures and weep for her.

Erishkigal was moaning: "Oh! Oh! My inside!"

They moaned: "Oh! Oh! Your inside!"

She moaned: "Oh! Oh! My outside!"

They moaned: "Oh! Oh! Your outside!"

She groaned: "Oh! Oh! My belly!"

They groaned: "Oh! Oh! Your belly!"

She groaned: "Oh! Oh! My back!"

They groaned: "Oh! Oh! Your back!"

She sighed: "Ah! Ah! My heart!"

They sighed: "Ah! Ah! Your heart!"

She sighed: "Ah! Ahhhh! My liver!"

They sighed: "Ah! Ahhhh! Your liver!"

And they wept for her, with the first tears that had ever
been shed at her throne out of compassion and not
fear. They wept, and for once Death was astonished.

Ereshkigal stops, rises, and walks over to them. She offers them a chalice of water; they refuse. She offers them a sheaf of grain; they refuse.

Erishkigal stopped. She looked at them.

She asked: "Who are you,

Moaning – groaning – sighing with me?

If you are gods, I will bless you.

If you are mortals, I will give you a gift.

I will give you the water-gift, the river in its fullness."

The Kurgarra and Galatur answered: "We do not wish it."

For we carry the water of life in our hands,
The source of all waters.

**Erishkigal said: "I will give you the grain gift,
The fields in harvest."**

The Kurgarra and Galatur said: "We do not wish it."

For we carry the food of life in our hands,
The source of all nourishment.

Erishkigal said: "Speak then! What do you wish?"

They point to where Inanna hangs limply.

**They answered: "We wish only for the corpse
That hangs from the hook on the wall."**

Ereshkigal turns and walks over to where Inanna hangs. She appears to be studying the situation.

Erishkigal said: "That corpse belongs to Inanna."

**They said: "Whether it belongs to our queen,
Whether it belongs to our king,**

That is what we wish."

Ereshkigal gestures and the Annunaki take Inanna down. She is motionless and limp, and they arrange her naked on the floor.

And so the Queen of Heaven

Was ransomed from Death

By the gift of tears,

Given to one who most think does not deserve them.

Remember this, ye who stand here before us,

Remember this when you are someday

Trapped in the Underworld.

Remember the gift of tears,

And ask who is undeserving?

The corpse was given to them.

The Kurgarra and Galatur sprinkle the food and water of life on Inanna. She slowly comes to life and rises, with accompanying fast drumbeats. They clothe her in a simple white robe, of the same fabric as their own simple white tunics.

The kurgarra sprinkled the food of life on the corpse.

The galatur sprinkled the water of life on the corpse.

Inanna rose...

But there is always a price.

No one walks away from Death for free.

The Annunaki seize Inanna's arms and do not let her follow the Kurgarra and Galatur.

**Inanna was about to ascend from the underworld
 When the Annunaki,
 The judges of the underworld, seized her.
 They said: "No one ascends from the underworld unmarked.
 If Inanna wishes to return from the underworld,
 She must provide someone in her place."**

They let go of Inanna, but remain surrounding her. At this point, the participants shift from being the Annunaki to being the galla, the demons of the Underworld. They may don horrible masks at this point, and/or large artificial phalli.

**As Inanna ascended from the underworld,
 The galla, the demons of the underworld, clung to her side.
 Inanna walks forth in triumphal procession, flanked by the Kurgarra
 and the Galatur, and followed by the horde of demons.
 The galla were demons who know no food,
 Who know no drink,
 Who eat no offerings, who drink no libations,
 Who accept no gifts.
 They enjoy no lovemaking.
 They have no sweet children to kiss.**

For is it not so that this is what we find
 When we enter the Underworld?
 We carry these demons with us,
 They cling to our sides, and we cannot defeat them
 Except with sacrifice.

**They tear the wife from the husband's arms,
 They tear the child from the father's knees,
 They steal the bride from her marriage home.
 They come between us and everything we love.**

The procession circles the room three times.

**The demons clung to Inanna.
 The small galla who accompanied Inanna
 Were like reeds the size of low picket fences.
 The large galla who accompanied Inanna
 Were like reeds the size of large picket fences.
 The one who walked in front of Inanna was not a minister,
 Yet he carried a sceptre.**

**The one who walked behind her was not a warrior,
Yet he carried a mace.**

Ninshubur comes forth as Inanna and her procession reach the center of the area again. She throws herself at Inanna's feet. The demons make as if to take her, but Inanna holds onto Ninshubur and protects her, standing proudly against the demons.

Ninshubur waited outside the palace gates.

When she saw Inanna

Surrounded by the galla

She threw herself in the dust at Inanna's feet.

The galla said: "Walk on, Inanna,

We shall take Ninshubur in your place."

Inanna cried:

"No! Ninshubur is my constant support.

She is my sukkal who gives me wise advice.

She is my warrior who fights by my side.

She did not forget my words.

She set up a lament for my by the ruins.

She beat the drum for me at the assembly places.

She circled the houses of the gods.

She tore at her eyes, at her mouth, at her thighs.

She dressed herself in a single garment like a beggar.

Alone she set out for Nippur and the temple of Enlil.

She went to Ur and the temple of Nanna.

She went to Eridu and the temple of Enki.

Because of her, my life was saved.

I will never give Ninshubur to you."

They walk on. Ninshubur runs ahead through the audience, crying out, "Welcome the Queen of Heaven! Welcome the Queen of Heaven!" She encourages people to bow to Inanna as she walks by. Dumuzi ascends Inanna's throne, which has been empty up until now. He places a crown on his head. When she approaches the throne, he acts surprised.

The galla said: "Walk on to your city, Inanna.

We will go with you to the big apple tree in Uruk."

In Uruk, by the big apple tree,

Dumuzi, the husband of Inanna,

Was dressed in his shining garments.

He sat on his magnificent throne.

And when he looked upon her,
 She whom he had been told was dead,
 Whom he had been told was lost to the Underworld,
 Whose throne he had taken for himself
 And was beginning to like that very much,
 All he could think of to say was:
 "You! What are you doing here?"

Inanna sees Dumuzi's reaction and becomes enraged.

Inanna fastened on Dumuzi the eye of death.

I come back from death,
 And you do not greet me with joy and love?

She spoke against him the word of wrath.

I crawl back from torment in the Underworld,
 And you do not care?

She uttered against him the cry of guilt.

"Take him away! Take Dumuzi away!"

My love, how could you do this to me!

The demons rush over and seize Dumuzi. They drag him off the throne and throw him down, and slap him around. They bind his wrists and pull his tunic up over his head. They whip him, and torture his genitals.

Inanna handed over Dumuzi to them

In exchange for herself.

For the wrath of a lover scorned will shake the world.

They cried, "We will put his feet in foot stocks!

We will put his hands in hand stocks,

We will put his neck in neck stocks!"

For his lack of compassion, he was bound.

The galla, who know no food, who know no drink,

Who eat no offerings, who drink no libations,

Who accept no gifts, seized Dumuzi.

They sharpened their large copper axes.

They gashed him with axes.

Copper pins, nails and pokers were raised to his face.

For his lack of love, he was the meat of demons.

They made him stand up, they made him sit down.
 They bound his arms, they did evil to him.
 They covered his face with his own garment.
 They seized him by the thighs.
 They beat the husband of Inanna.
 They poured milk out of his seven churns.
 They broke the reed pipe which the shepherd was playing.
 For his numbness to the pain of others, he suffered.

Dumuzi let out a wail.
 He raised his hands to heaven to Utu, the God of Justice,
 And beseeched him:
 "O Utu, you are my brother-in-law,
 I am the husband of your sister.
 I brought cream to your mother's house,
 I brought milk to Ningal's house.
 I am the one who carried food to the holy shrine.
 I am the one who brought wedding gifts to Uruk
 I am the one who danced on the holy knees,
 The knees of Inanna.
 Utu, you who are a just god, a merciful god,
 Change my hands into the hands of a snake.
 Change my feet into the feet of a snake.
 Let me escape from my demons;
 Do not let them hold me
 Like a sajkal snake
 That slithers across the meadows and mountains,
 Let me escape alive
 To the dwelling of my sister Geshtinanna!"
 Geshtinanna will protect me.
 More than anyone, she has always protected me.
 She will suffer for me
 So that I will not have to suffer for Inanna.

Dumuzi slips out of the bonds and away from the demons, and runs through the audience. The demons run after him, but cannot find him. Geshtinanna comes forward while the demons are busy in the audience, and they meet in the center and embrace.

**The merciful Utu accepted Dumuzi's tears.
He changed the hands of Dumuzi into snake hands.
He changed the feet of Dumuzi into snake feet.
Dumuzi escaped from his demons.**

Hunt him! Hunt him!

**Then like a sajkal snake
That slithers across the meadows and mountains,
Hunt him! Hunt him!
Like a soaring falcon that can swoop down on a bird,
Hunt him! Hunt him!
Dumuzi escaped alive
To the dwelling of his sister Geshtinanna.
Geshtinanna looked at her brother and wept for him.**

Oh my brother, what have you done?

Oh, my foolish brother,

You have all the demons of the Dead behind you.

Oh my foolish brother, I will save you anyway,

Even though you do not deserve it.

The demons mime searching for Dumuzi, then one steps forth and gestures, and they clap their hands and go toward Geshtinanna. She motions for Dumuzi to run away, and he hides in the audience.

The demons went hither and thither searching for Dumuzi.

The small demons said to the big demons:

"Who has ever seen a man, without a family,

All alone, escape with his life?

Let us go to the dwelling of Geshtinanna, his sister."

The demons clapped their hands and began to seek him out.

He will never escape us.

He will never escape us.

He will never escape us.

Geshtinanna had barely finished her lament

When the demons arrived at her dwelling.

"Show us where your brother is," they said to her.

The demons rush in and seize Geshtinanna, flinging her to the ground on her hands and knees. They slap her around a bit.

He can never escape us.

But she spoke not a word to them.

They afflicted her loins with a disease,

The demons mime raping her.

He can never escape us.

But she spoke not a word to them.

They scratched her face with their nails,

The demons scratch at her and slap her around some more.

He can never escape us.

But she spoke not a word to them.

They whipped the skin of her buttocks,

The demons whip her ass.

He can never escape us.

But she spoke not a word to them.

They poured tar in her lap,

The demons pour candle wax over her.

He can never escape us.

But she spoke not a word to them.

So they could not find Dumuzi at the house of Geshtinanna.

The demons throw her down in disgust and walk away.

He can never escape us.

The small demons said to the big demons:

"Come, let's go to the holy sheepfold!"

The demons rush around through the audience, hunting. Dumuzi hides behind audience members.

He can never escape us.

There at the holy sheepfold they caught Dumuzi.

One of the demons points at him, and waves to the others.

He can never escape us.

They went hither and thither until they caught him.

The demons surround him with weapons held high.

He can never escape us.

They searched for him until he was seen.

He can never escape us.

The axe was wielded against the lad

Who had no longer any family.

He can never escape us.

The demons close in, slowly, about to smash him.

They sharpened their daggers, they smashed his hut.

His doom is upon him.

His doom is upon him.

His doom is upon him.

Geshtinanna runs toward the place where the demons have converged on Dumuzi.

His sister wandered about the city like a bird

Because of her brother:

"My brother, let me take the great misfortune,

Come, let me take this on for you!"

Geshtinanna flings herself in front of him.

Wait!

One offers her life for his!

The demons freeze, spears and axes lifted. Dumuzi falls to the ground. Inanna comes forward, and both she and Geshtinanna kneel beside him.

Inanna and Geshtinanna went to the edges of the steppe.

They found Dumuzi weeping.

Inanna took Dumuzi by the hand and said:

"You will go to the underworld half the year.

Your sister, since she has asked, will go the other half.

On the day you are called,

That day you will be taken.

On that day Geshtinanna is called,

That day you will be set free.

Half a life for half a life.

Half a life lived in the light,

Half a life lived in the darkness.

Inanna raises Dumuzi to his feet.

Inanna placed Dumuzi in the hands of the eternal.

Inanna leads him to the demons and hands him over. He obeys limply, as if exhausted.

And Death comes for him.

The demons leap upon him and he falls. They mime killing him with various blows. During the next lines, they slowly lift his body up and carry it off into the darkness as if to a funeral pyre. Geshtinanna drops to her knees and touches her forehead to the earth. Inanna

stands, looking after him until he is gone, then turns and leads the procession out. All fall in behind her except for the narrators, who continue reading until the end. Everyone who walks out hums a note, like a wordless chant.

**On the day when Dumuzi arises again,
And the lapis pipe and the carnelian ring come up with him,
When all the mourners weep for him,
The dead shall come up and smell the smoke offering.**

For all of us, in our own time,
Must descend to the Underworld and arise.
Perhaps we go willing, perhaps unwilling,
But in the end it is the same place.

**Hail the Queen of Heaven, for she has arisen from the dark!
Hail the Queen of Heaven!**

**And hail also those who take her place,
Hail all who descend to the darkness!**

Hail all who descend to the darkness!
Hail all who descend to the darkness!
Hail all who descend to the darkness!

Silence descends, except for the booming of the drum.



John Barleycorn Lammas Rite

This is a sacrificial ordeal rite honoring the Corn King, who is the embodiment of all that is cut down that we may live. He is Frey, Ing, Lugh, Tammuz, Dumuzi, Adonis, and many other names; John Barleycorn is found everywhere that people grow and cut grain for their survival. The ritual is designed to fall at or around Lammas, although the date may be shifted to allow for climate; it should be done during the grain harvest, whenever that is for your area. Like the Inanna ritual, this ritual has a profound effect on whoever plays the main character and offers themselves up for sacrifice for the greater good. We are not speaking of a psychological effect, either, although that too is certainly likely. We are speaking of the effect that it will have on the life and the Wyrd of your John Barleycorn. Old karmic debts will catch up, unnecessary things will fall by the wayside, and great changes will be wrought. For the next year, sacrifices will be asked, in order that he might more fully live his path. In many ways, this is a death and rebirth. He should be aware of the dangers before he signs up for the task.

Characters

(Many of these parts may be played by the same people.)

A priest or priestess, to speak the main invocations.

Several folk with wooden bowls bearing different sorts of grains.

A man in black who bears a scythe. A woman in black who bears a sickle. They will be the ones who bring Death to John Barleycorn. The woman should also bear a pricker of some kind (a diabetic sticker would do) and a glove with which to smear blood.

Three who are dressed as farmers, either ancient or traditional or modern. What they do will depend on how the ritual will be run; this is discussed below when it comes to their parts.

A few folk—a minimum of five, for this was the traditional number—whom John Barleycorn trusts to inflict pain upon him. They can be men or women, and dress as they will, although ancient or traditional peasant garb is best. They should each carry a whip. The whips should be as follows: A long wooden handle, about two feet, with a swivel joint at the end, and then broad leather tails the same length as the handle. The idea is to make a cat which mimics a threshing flail.

Lastly, all the staff and as many of those watching as possible should know the traditional song “John Barleycorn”, and there should be drummers who can keep a beat throughout much of the ritual.

John Barleycorn

John Barleycorn, for this rite, should be prepared in the following manner:

1) He must be male, and potent. Ideally, he should have long hair, although this is not as necessary.

2) He must be chosen by lot from a group of men who have all agreed to the possibility of taking this role. The choosing by lot is important; it is the way that the Gods chose their sacred kings in the long-ago past, and the Gods wish to have such choice again.

3) A wreath of wheatstalks and red poppies should be crafted, and placed on his head, and attached in such a manner that it will not come off. We suggest tying it in place with his hair.

4) Bunches of wheat should be bound to his arms and legs, and placed in his hands. One bunch should be tied over his genitals, and attached to it should be a large phallus crafted of straw, which should be bound to his waist to point upwards. An ejaculatory spray of grain should protrude from the end. In one playing of the rite, the phallus was bound around the man's actual penis, but thrust out many inches beyond it.

5) A cloth bag should be placed in his mouth. It should be just large enough to fill his mouth and cheeks wholly when filled with grains, yet not suffocate him. The open end, lightly tied with string, should hang out of his mouth. Test the size of the bag beforehand, to make sure that it is well-sized, by placing it empty in the man's mouth empty and then filling it slowly with grain, working it into his cheeks, until he can bear no more without suffocating.

The Ritual

An altar should be set up, with the wooden bowls of grain, a jug and cup of beer, and a bowl of the red petals of the corn poppy. Straw corn dollies should decorate the altar, as many as possible. Two pitchforks stand beside it. On the center of the altar, in the place of honor, should be a beautifully braided handmade loaf of bread, golden and perfect, a baker's masterpiece.

As John Barleycorn is being prepared for the rite, again place the empty bag into his mouth as he kneels or lies supine, and each of the preparers shall come forth and pour a small amount of whole grain into the bag. The grains should be chosen with care for their meanings, and set about in wooden bowls. There should be enough of them to fill his mouth with some of each and still have plenty to scatter about on the ground afterwards. As each comes forward with a different grain and places it into his mouth, they should say the following:

For maize: **"Feed us with words of life."**

For barley: **"Feed us with words of sacrifice."**

For amaranth: **"Feed us with words of the Sun."**

For quinoa: **"Feed us with words of the mountain."**

For rice: **"Feed us with words of wealth."**

For millet: **"Feed us with words of survival."**

For rye: **"Feed us with words of endurance."**

For buckwheat: **"Feed us with words of love."**

For wheat: **"Feed us with the words of the Gods."**

Each places a small amount of grain in the bag in his mouth, and then the remainder is added from the bag of wheat until it is full, and the neck of the bag tied up. John Barleycorn is then lain facedown in the middle of the field and covered with a brown cloth. If possible, it should be a grainfield, or at least a patch of grain; for those who have no access to this, pots of grain can be grown beforehand and set about his feet in imitation of a grainfield. Indeed, this is a good way to tell when the proper time has come to do this rite.

The one who is acting as priest/ess stands forth and says:

**Our ancestors got up at dawn,
Slaved in the dirt,
Sweated in the sun,
Chilled in the cold,
Numbed in the snow,
Scattering each seed with a prayer:
Pray that there be enough,
That no one starve this winter.
Pray that no bird nor beast
Steal the food I have struggled for.
And most of all,
Pray that each seed I save
Of this harvest
Shall next year
Bring forth a hundred more.**

**We live today
Because they worked
Because they sowed
Because they harvested
Because they prayed.**

Each of the participants with bowls of grain stands forth and scatters the grain on the ground, until there is a great circle of grain around everyone. As they do so, they each speak one of the following verses:

**I sing the praises of Wheat,
First grain of the wagon people of Europe,
You who make the bread rise high,
You who make the soft white dough,
You who are sweet
And can last a thousand years
And still blossom forth in the Earth.
I sing the praises of Wheat.**

I sing the praises of Rye,
Grain of the cold north,
Grain who needs little to prosper,
Grain who feeds those with the worst land,
Tallest of the waving heads,
Dark flour of nourishment,
I sing the praises of Rye.

I sing the praises of Barley,
Growing in the footsteps of Frey
Cut down in the body of Ing
Brewed to make the drink
That makes hearts high
And warms the family circle
Grain of companionship,
Grain of Rune of Sacrifice,
I sing the praises of Barley.

I sing the praises of Buckwheat,
Grain of high Tibet,
Field of leaves like hearts
And delicate white flowers,
Grain shaped like the pyramids,
Beloved of bees,
I sing the praises of Buckwheat.

I sing the praises of Rice,
Great grain of Asia,
Fruit of a million paddies,
Life of a billion people,
Grain of the rat god Daikoku,
Giver of prosperity,
I sing the praises of Rice.

I sing the praises of Millet,
Great grain of Africa,
Planted in the hot fields
Among the yams and melons

Grain of the warmest sun
Yin to buckwheat's yang
I sing the praises of Millet.

I sing the praises of Maize,
Great corn of the North Continent,
Yellow, white, red, blue, and black,
Colors of the four directions
And the center of spirit,
Whose name means "Life" –
I sing the praises of Maize.

I sing the praises of Amaranth,
Great grain of the Mexican desert,
Sacred grain growing taller than a man
Yet with the smallest seed of all,
Abundance in the dry time
Savior in a drought,
I sing the praises of Amaranth.

I sing the praises of Quinoa,
Great grain of the high mountains,
Nourishment of the south continent,
Reaching closest to the sky,
Porridge and cleanser,
Ground under the gleam of gold,
I sing the praises of Quinoa.

The high priest/ess steps forward again and says:
I sing the praises of grain,
That which sustained our foremothers
That which strengthened our foremothers
That which fed all children's hungry mouths
That which multiplies from the earth,
Giving back more than we give in turn.
I sing the praises of the sacrifice
That is cut down
That we may live.

The drum begins to beat the rhythm of the song "John Barleycorn". The way it is sung is thus: Each verse is sung, and then five verses worth of song is hummed or sung in an "aaahhh", to give the action time to occur, then another verse is sung. If it is clear that the action needs to go further, the high priest/ess should signal for the onlookers to keep humming. S/he is who they look to for cues, so this is a very important role and should be given out carefully to one with good presence and their wits about them. When other participants need to speak, the high priest/ess should signal the onlookers to hum very quietly.

The onlookers sing the first verse of "John Barleycorn":

There were three men come out of the West

Their fortunes for to try

And these three men made a solemn vow

John Barleycorn must die.

They ploughed, they sowed, they harrowed him in

Threw clods all on his head

And these three men made a solemn vow

John Barleycorn was Dead.

During the hummed part of this song, the three farmers come forth. What they do will depend on how the group wishes to run the ritual, and what John Barleycorn is comfortable with. For an ideal ritual sacrifice, the three men should each uncover his buttocks and plow his rear hole, the "earth hole", with their own members, and give him their seed. We realize that in this day and age, ideals may not be able to be achieved. It has been done the following ways, however:

1) Three men pull back the cloth from his buttocks and plow his rear hole, wearing condoms. (If one is the man's lover and body fluid exchange is acceptable, that one can be done bareback, otherwise condoms are necessary for safety.) The men empty their condoms onto the earth beside him and cover their seed with dirt. For this option, and the next one, it would

be well for him to be well-greased beforehand, and perhaps loosened up some by a lover before the ritual.

2) Three men plow his rear hole with a carved wooden phallus that has been dedicated to this purpose. This means that one of the men can be a woman dressed in men's clothing, or a transgendered man without a full-sized phallus, with no problems of anatomy.

3) For an entirely nonpenetrative plowing, the wooden phallus can merely be thrust between his buttocks and thighs. However, if he can bear to be actually plowed, he should endure it. Afterwards, seed of any kind is sprinkled upon him.

John Barleycorn is then harrowed. For this, the farmers use a tool made to look like a small harrow, a handle with many curved tines. We use a sawed-off "garden claw". It is drawn down his back, scratching him. In rows. He is then covered again with the brown cloth and clods of (not too wet) earth are thrown upon it by the three farmers.

The onlookers sing the second verse of "John Barleycorn":

They've left him in the ground for a very long time

Till the rains from heaven did fall

Then little Sir John's sprung up his head

And so amazed them all.

They've left him in the ground till Midsummer

Till he's grown both pale and wan

Then little Sir John's grown a long, long beard

And so become a man.

As this verse is sung, John Barleycorn slowly rises to his feet and casts off the brown cloth with the clods. He lifts his arms to the sky, holding the grain. During the hummed verses, the man with the scythe and the woman with the sickle come forth.

The man with the scythe steps forward and says:
**I sing the song of the scythe,
Swinging through the air,
Sharpness and keenness its breath,
Rhythm its walk,
The tooth of the Moon,
The razor of the Sun.
For sharpness means that we shall eat this winter,
For keenness means that there shall be enough.
May those of us who find ourselves to be blades
Recall that our cutting edge
Is best used for the nourishment of all.**

The woman with the sickle steps forward and says:
**I sing the song of the sickle,
Curved as the crescent moon,
Shining as the reflection on the water,
Sharp as the winter winds
That threaten our well-fed sleep.
I am the shedder of blood,
The harbinger of Dire Necessity,
The one who holds the bowl
As the life force from all the sacrificed beasts
Soaks into the Earth. I am She who accepts
All that you have to give, and more.
Will you give yourself to me,
Willingly, joyously, like a bridegroom
Going to the bed of his lover?**

She steps before John Barleycorn and opens her dress to expose her breasts to him. He accepts her offer by nodding and then lowering his head. She dons her glove, pricks his flesh, and smears the rune Ing on his forehead with his own blood, marking him. She kisses him, over the heart. Then she begins to cut off his bunches of grain with her sickle. First the ones in his hands—he can drop the chaff as soon as the grain is threshed. (While she cuts, the man gathers the cut grain and places it in a basket.) Then the bunches bound to his arms and

legs, and the chaff is pulled out of the ropes and scattered. Then she says:

**Today, sweet golden king,
My hand belongs to Her
As does your body.
I thank you for your gift of life
And I promise you rebirth next year
With this my very same hand.
And in your turn
Since someday my body will be Hers as well
Promise me
The same hope;
Rebirth me in joy everlasting.**

Finally, she cuts the bunch at his groin, pulling off the phallus with the same stroke. At this point, the man should be standing behind John Barleycorn, scythe again in hand, and he makes a great sweeping swing that touches but does not harm John Barleycorn's neck. (This should be practiced beforehand with a blunt scythe, for safety.) John Barleycorn falls to the ground, face down again.

The onlookers sing the third verse of "John Barleycorn":
**They hired men with their scythes so sharp
To cut him off at the knee.
They've bound him and tied him around the waist
Serving him most barb'rously.
They hired men with their sharp pitchforks
To prick him to the heart
But the drover he served him worse than that
For he's bound him to the cart.**

The man and woman take long ropes and quickly bind the fallen with criss-crosses—Ing-runes, like a sheaf—from shoulders to ankles. They each take a pitchfork from beside the altar and mime jabbing him in the heart.

The onlookers sing the fourth verse of "John Barleycorn":
They've rolled him around and around the field
Till they came unto a barn
And there they made a solemn mow
Of Little John Barleycorn
They've hired men with their crab-tree sticks
To strip him skin from bone
But the miller, he served him worse than that,
For he's ground him between two stones.

The people with whip-flails come forth. During the next few verses, they whip him in time to the music, all together, thus: First, a light stroke (not enough to damage) with the butt end of the flail, and then they reverse it and give a hard stroke with the whip, and back and forth. They should grunt or make a guttural noise with each strike. These should all be well-trained whip tops who know where it is safe to hit and where not to.

When they come to the last hummed verse, they should lift the butt-ends of their whips and touch them, forming a wheel. Then they walk around the fallen figure, miming pushing the mill-wheel hard.

The onlookers go ahead and sing the last verse:
Here's Little Sir John in the nut-brown bowl
And brandy in the glass
But Little Sir John in the nut-brown bowl's
Proved the stronger man at last
For the huntsman he can't hunt the fox
Nor so loudly blow his horn
And the tinker can't mend his kettles nor pots
Without a little of the Barleycorn.
Without a little of the Barleycorn.
Without a little of the Barleycorn.

During this verse, some staff folk fetch the bread and beer from the altar and place them on his prone body, blessing them. Then they walk among the people, offering the bread and beer, and saying, "Taste sacrifice, that we may live."

While they do this, one or more of the people with whips lift John Barleycorn's head and turn him over, untie the knot in the bag in his mouth, and shake his head, sending grain spraying everywhere. Those who wish to be blessed come forth and hold their hands under his face, catching the grain, until he is emptied of it. Ideally, if it is possible and he has agreed, at this point, another one takes his member and works it until it gives forth seed, while the other seed comes forth from his mouth. If it is not appropriate for this audience, it can be skipped, but the seed should pour forth only upon the earth, and be covered immediately with earth.

The high priest/ess steps forward and says:

It is the nature of sacrifice

To be difficult.

If it was easy to throw away,

It was no sacrifice.

If it was did not miss it

It was no sacrifice.

If it was not the best you could give

It was no sacrifice.

If it was not agonizing to choose,

It was no sacrifice.

If it did not make you waver at least once in your choice,

It was no sacrifice.

If it did not make you weep,

It was no sacrifice.

As s/he says this, the last piece of bread is placed in the basket of cut grain and left out as a sacrifice. The jug of beer is poured out upon the earth as a libation by the priest/ess. One handful is caught from the libation, and the sacrifice is allowed to drink it from the hand that caught it. John Barleycorn is covered again with the brown cloth and all process away, except for one set to stay with him as a vigil. He stays, bound and covered, to meditate for a while on what has become of his life. Then, when he feels that he must arise, the watcher cuts his bonds, wraps him in a cloak of brown or grey,

and brings him to the feast-table where others have been celebrating. He is hailed and toasted, and the feast goes on.

All food that he is fed of the feast, though, should come directly from the fingers of the feasters, and they should hold cups to his lips when he wishes it. He should touch no food or drink with his hands; as he has fed them, so they shall feed him in turn, and this is the magic of feeding the fallow earth that it might be fertile again next year.

He shall wear his title for one year, Lammas to Lammas, and during that time he shall be John Barleycorn for the entire community, and if his life be difficult, they shall be there to aid him, for he takes this too upon him that they may be spared. Unless he go from among them and take his leave of them, they are honor-bound to care for him in times of extremity, until the following Lammas when another shall take on the mantle of gold, and he shall bring the first sheaf of wheat to them for the binding, and the passing-on.

Shadow Play and Monster Work: Hunting For The Inner Beast

Yes, he's still down there.

In the basement, where he belongs.

We all have one down there, don't we? Some of us have more than one. I'm not talking about submissives in your private dungeon. I'm talking about the Beast. The creature who can't be allowed to run the body, because he'd do something stupid or destructive or embarrassing or perhaps even evil. The part of yourself that you'd like to pretend doesn't exist. Perhaps you even manage to convince yourself that he—or she—isn't there. Perhaps you manage to ignore the banging and clanking going on down there...until they saw through the floor and hijack you, if only for a moment.

We've all been there, too—"Why the hell did I do that? Where did that come from?" The truth is that the more that you ignore them, the more vulnerable you are to them. It's when you turn your back that they get you.

Some monsters are dangerous. If they were let loose, they would wreak all sorts of havoc on all sorts of random targets. People would get hurt, maybe killed. Property would not be respected. They would end up head-to-head with the monsters of others, and it would go badly. That's why we teach self-control, and rules, and boundaries. Anarchy, sooner or later, means that the people with the meanest monsters win.

Some monsters are pathetic. They are limp and clingy and the want to be taken care of, much to the embarrassment of

their keepers. They don't want to take responsibility for their lives. They are needy and weak and little problems are too much for them. They may let themselves be doormats, but there's a streak of self-satisfied martyrdom in it, or perhaps just a paralyzed limpness. It's not altruism, it's screwed up.

All monsters are selfish. They want what they want, and they want it now. They want to run your life, and they usually have lousy judgment. They can't be allowed into the driver's seat. Yet you have to live with them, because they are there, and they won't go away no matter how hard you ignore them.

These are the Rules of Monster Work. They are Rules that I've learned from long experience in wrestling with my monster, and with helping other people with theirs. They have always shown themselves to be true and useful, even if they are not politically correct or particularly pleasant.

Rule 1) Keeping your monster locked up and pretending that they aren't there never works. They will bang and clank their chains, they will slam against the bars, they will keep you up all night, they will shout awful things at you at the worst possible moment. In order to block them out entirely, you must go about in such a state of blindness, deafness, and denial that you will constantly miss things, a dissociating emotional zombie. You will also miss it when they saw through the floor and break out, long enough to make you say or do something you will regret later, before the internal guards lock them back up. You won't see them coming, and that's even worse...because then you have to make excuses for them and clean up their messes.

Rule 2) Given that this never works—even though most people have to try it anyway, usually for years and years—it means that sooner or later you have to haul your ass down there to the dark place and face them through the bars. Just finding the door may be difficult. Finding where you hid the key to the door may take even longer. Making your way, step by step, down that dark stairway when you'd rather be almost anywhere else, that can be interminable. Still, it's better than being suddenly transported there without your consent, via

depression or madness or pain or some other horrible happenstance. Go there on your own, while you're still healthy. It will be better in the long run.

Rule 3) Monsters that you throw into the same locked closet together often fuse. At the very least, they rub off on each other. That means that the things you are afraid of or disgusted by or angry about start to get linked together, often in weird ways. There's little hope of untangling them, at least not at the point where your monster is pissed at you.

Rule 4) This is an important point, so listen closely. *You cannot decide to heal your monster.* Let's say that again: You cannot decide to heal your monster. It won't work. While some people do manage to get their monsters to change, if you go down there with any hint of an agenda of changing them, they'll smell it. (After all, they do know you, they do live in your head.) They'll notice that you don't love them as is, warts and all, and they'll rebel and say "Fuck you." You'll get no cooperation out of them then.

Rule 5) That brings us to the most important rule of the lot: You must learn to love them as they are, horrid and dangerous and shameful and all. You must find it in your heart to love them, without ever hoping to change them. And no, you can't keep a tiny corner of your mind hopeful that by loving them as they are, they will eventually heal and change. First of all, they'll hear that, and they won't like it. Second, it might not happen. What if you were to go to your grave with them this way, still embarrassing and awful? You'd better find a way to be OK with that. The point of this is to get a better relationship with them, not to change them.

It's likely that this rule will be the hardest of all. It may take years for you to learn to love them, but it's necessary. It's the only way they will cooperate with you. Even if you wrestle them down, if they don't think that you value them as they are, they will fight you every moment your back is turned.

Rule 6) That said, sometimes you do have to wrestle them down. It's hard to do this in a spirit of love, but try to think of yourself as the alpha in the little pack of needs in your head, and when members of your tribe act uppity, you knock them

back down and make them show throat to you. You don't hate them for it; you consider it part of the deal of being alpha. They're testing your strength, to make sure that you are strong enough to be trustworthy. And once you have wrestled your monster down, and he obeys—if only temporarily—he is no longer your enemy. He is now your dependent, and you must hunt for him and feed him. Taking care of his needs is now your responsibility. You can decide which things he can have, and which are just not going to happen, period, but starving him is irresponsible behavior towards someone you want to trust you. He needs something to believe that you really value him.

Rule 7) When it comes time for negotiations, a starving monster will demand the Moon with ketchup on top. They are used to being denied, and they don't really believe that they're going to get fed this time—not after all the disappointments and denial and ignoring—so they come up with a truly ridiculous list of demands and claim that they won't be satisfied with anything less. Don't be fooled. Don't give up hope and go away in disgust, no matter how tempting it might be. Start small. Give your inner Beast some little thing that they want, or a mild version thereof. Yes, they'll want more, but you are the one in control. Give them as much as you can safely give them, then set the boundary. Over time, when they see that they are getting at least some of their needs fed, they will scale back on the demands. They'll still want those out-of-reach things, but they won't be constantly screaming for them. There are ways to compromise, but you have to make your way to the middle first.

Those are the Rules, this is the Game. In hunting for and feeding your inner Beast, you may find that one of the things he (or she) wants is a playmate, another Beast who will appreciate their Beastliness. This is where, for many of us, BDSM comes in. If you can find a Beast who wants to play the same game that your Beast likes, you can help to keep them happy. Building them a lovely pen is a good thing, because

then they're less likely to try escaping to the park down the street. Playmates are part of that.

Implicit in this statement is the idea that someone else's Beast may well be better able to unconditionally love and appreciate your Beast with more ease than you can. Of course, they don't have to live with it every day, but it may be that seen through the eyes of someone a little more objective—or conversely, through eyes just as Beastly—might give it a little of the acceptance that it wants.

Another way in which we deal with the Beast through BDSM, besides just indulging it and giving it a short holiday, is through ritual catharsis. This can be particularly useful for dragging one's reluctant psyche through the hard parts of Rules 5 and 6. If you are really too terrified to go down there yourself, it helps, sometimes, to set up a situation where you have the support of others in doing it. You might even need someone to ruthlessly drag you down there, kicking and screaming if necessary. You might need someone to play the part of your inner Beast, so that you can start by seeing what is valuable in them, the projected Beast, and eventually transfer it to yourself. You might need someone to play a role that brings out your inner Beast so strongly that you cannot deny or repress them, in a safe space so that you can be brought back to yourself again afterwards.

Be honest, though, if this is what you want. No play partner can adequately give you what you need if you're not honest about it. It's hard to say, "I need this," knowing that you might be denied, and for some the denial seems so painful that they would rather go without than risk the rejection... but this is just the fear talking. If you ask the Universe to send you a safe place to work with the Beast, they might just oblige. However, if you don't, it's certain that they will send you on the Persephone ride there, which can feel like a rape.

Those of us who deal with the Darkness know this well: if you don't deal with what lives in your basement, it will deal with you. The predator that you chain and starve then has only your mind to prey upon, and he will. He will. Believe it.

Time to go down there with a steak, OK?



Chaining Fenris: A Ritual for the Inner Beast

This ritual is best done directly after a workshop or discussion on monster work, or working with the Beast Within. There should also be some discussion of the myth of Fenris, or people may not really understand the symbolism, although the priest/ess will be explaining some of it in the opening invocation.

You Will Need:

A skein of yarn, cut into many lengths

(we used silk, handspun "with intent")

Many squares of black fabric, about 6" across

A fire or candle flame

A cup of something slimy

A particularly ugly baby doll

A skull with gold coins in its mouth

Crushed and powdered granite,

preferably mined out of the earth

Beard shavings from anyone who lives full-time as female

(Hit up your transgendered friends for this one,

and if you don't have any, make some!)

Bird spittle

(For this, find someone with a large pet bird and put things in its

beak, then take them out – make sure to reward the bird for this!)

Cat footprints

(We dipped our kitty's feet in flour and let her walk on cloth)

Water from a pond or stream with fishes in it
A well-used teddy bear

Before the ritual, build a fire or light the candle. Around it, put the cup of slimy material, the ugly baby doll, and the skull with gold coins. Inform people that they represent four common types of monsters, and encourage people to add more if they can think of any items. Instruct them to spend time before the ritual dealing with the item(s) that represent familiar monsters to them. The reason that this is better done on one's own time, before the ritual, is that people are less likely to stand up in the middle of the ritual and talk about their monster in front of everyone, but they may be more willing to quietly go and commune with it beforehand.

1. The Raging Beast. Whether this is the creature full of anger and ready to strike, or just the sadistic one who likes to see pain, this predator is the most showy of all the monsters. He gets romanticized a lot, but there's nothing romantic about restraining an anger management problem that threatens to devour your life and your loved ones. It's actually pretty grubby and difficult. This monster jumps and strikes without warning and often without good reason; he may batter or verbally abuse others, and he may gleefully enjoy every minute of it. The fire represents this monster, and people should actually touch some part of it in order to connect with the burning nature of this beast. Have a first aid kit on hand for minor burns. Dripping hot stearin wax works well too.

2. The Sleazy One. This monster, when panicked, forgets their morals and will say or do anything to anyone in order to stay afloat. When they feel that their survival is threatened—and that is a very subjective thing, which could include losing an argument, looking bad in public, or not having enough money to keep up your profligate lifestyle—they will lie to their family, steal from their friends, cheat customers, and ruthlessly use anyone in range...and then justify it because "it was necessary". The pot of slimy substance represents this monster, and people should stick their hands in it...and not wash it off for a while, either.

3. The Pathetic One. This monster doesn't want to stand on its own two feet. It wants to be taken care of, paid attention to, be told what to do, be nurtured, be childish, and generally never take responsibility for anything in its life. This monster whines, weeps, blubbers, moans, curls into a limp, miserable fetal ball, or just sits paralyzed and pitifully helpless. People who have to deal with this monster should spend time with the ugly, pathetic-looking baby doll, carrying it around and attempting to like it.

4. The Gloating One. This monster is secretly (or not-so-secretly) sure that it is better than everyone else, and it spends a lot of time thinking about how lame other people are, and how superior it is in various ways. It is very insecure and requires a lot of reassurance, which is only really effective in the form of comparisons. It doesn't want to be told, "You're good at that"; it wants to be told, "You're so much better at that than Joe and Bob and Meriwether; see how lousy they are?" Without direct comparisons that denigrate other people, it has no basis for believing any compliment, and besides, it loves to gloat. People with this monster should spend time taking the jewels and gold out of the mouth of the skull (and it should be a really nasty skull, preferably still with some rotting flesh and fur on it) and carrying them around. "This is what your values are really worth in the long run," says the dead animal head.

The other items are for the chaining ritual, and they represent the ingredients of Fenris's chain: mountain's roots, the beard of a woman, the spittle of a bird, the footfall of a cat, the breath of a fish, and the sensitivity of a bear. The yarn represents the chain itself that is used to bind the monster.

After everyone has had a chance to amble over and pick a monster (or not; some may not be ready to deal with this), everyone gathers around a central area. Squares of the black fabric are given to everyone; this will be used to make a mojo bag. The priest/ess displays the six objects that are associated with Fenris's chain, and says the following invocation (which

can be altered by the individual priest/ess to be spoken more comfortably):

Behold the six impossible things, gathered by the magicians of the duergar, to chain the beast who could not be tamed! Yet we know that they are not impossible, simply difficult...and within them are found the keys to binding this Beast.

Yet first we must ask ourselves: It is a terrible thing to be a prisoner. If one must be so imprisoned, for the good of all, what can we offer them in return? What will you offer your monster in exchange for its binding? What gift, however meager, can you give in return?

People take turns speaking, saying what they will give their monster as gifts – doing fun things with it, buying it toys, finding it friends to play with, whatever.

Then here we make the chain of the six impossible things. They are called impossible, but we know that they are not so impossible. They are simply hard to come by.

The first thing on our list is the roots of mountains. In the depths of mountains, there are caves and tunnels and dark places. There is also bedrock, that which supports the rest of our lives. There is also the upheaval of early times, shaping those mountains from underneath. In order to work with our inner monsters, we have to be willing to go down to those places, to search the depths and scour the bedrock, to see what is deep inside. Sometimes we may even have to strip-mine the layers away, to expose the underground darkness to the light.

This is granite, crushed to a powder. This is what the mountains of this area are made of. Take it with you and remember.

The second thing on the list is the beard of a woman. This is tossed off as if it is impossible, yet we all know that it is not so. There are women who grow beards, and there are people who have beards who are women inside. This tells us that part of dealing with a monster is to find your inner balance between male and female, not to allow yourself to settle unquestioning into one or the other. That inner finding of

balance helps you to maintain perspective. These are the shavings of a woman's beard; take them with you and remember.

The third thing on the list is the spittle of a bird. Regardless of what the myths say, birds have spittle... and so do you. This sacred energy of a bird's mouth says that you should talk, should speak, should tell stories about your monster. Even if you cannot allow it to use your mouth, you can tell its tales, and show that it is appreciated. This thread has bird spittle on it, of a very talkative bird. Take it with you and remember.

The fourth thing on the list is the footfall of a cat. Everyone who has had cats will tell you that although they can be very quiet, they can also be very loud. They are only quiet when it is their will to do so. They have the ability to step gently or to step hard, and this is something that you must learn in dealing with your monster. Sometimes they will need you to go gentle. Sometimes you must be rough with them, remind them that you are the alpha in this body, make them submit and show throat... or they will never respect you. The cat understands the control needed to go from gentle to rough. These are the footprints of a cat in flour on cloth; take them with you and remember.

The fifth thing on the list is the breath of a fish. This, obviously, is water. Water symbolizes the feelings, the emotions that we must constantly check and be aware of. Sometimes, this is the only way to take notice of a chained monster who is becoming restless and needs attention. Watch the water levels in your life. This is water from a fishpond; take it and remember.

The sixth thing on the list is the nerves—or sensitivity—of a bear. While we couldn't bring in a real bear and skin it, we bring here a well-used teddy bear to pass around. Hug him, hold him, and remember that love and nurturing is necessary for all beings—even monsters. Perhaps they prefer their love and nurturing in a somewhat different manner—let them tell you what that is. Take a thread from the bear and keep it. Remember that part of your job, as the alpha in your body, is

to protect them, feed them, and care for them. They are no longer your enemy. They are your dependent. You are the leader of the pack. Remember this.

Now we bind your things with this silken cord, as fine as the chain that bound Fenris. We bind it with nine knots, and then we bind it to you. Take it with you and remember.

Afterwards, the rite is closed silently, with all dispersing into the night to meditate on what has been done, and then meet again in a neutral place to talk about it.





Part IV:
The Path of
Service and
Mastery

The Path of Service and Mastery: Spiritual Dominance and Submission

In this day and age, and especially in this country that I live in, there is a great deal of ambivalent and conflicted feeling about one human being serving another in a formal and negotiated submissive role. Most of us claim to hate the idea of having our right to do whatever we want restricted. We may complain about or even rebel against authority, perhaps even reflexively, simply because it's there. Most service jobs, from housemaid to waiter to social worker, are low-paid and socially devalued. Especially when it comes to personal service jobs, such as the aforementioned waiter or housemaid, we tend to assume that no one could actually enjoy such a job, and everyone in such jobs are merely biding their time until they can get "better" jobs. Those would be the ones where you are on the ordering side of the lunch counter, rather than being on the side where they cook the fries. Actually doing the order-taking is seen as degrading by definition. We encourage this attitude in every new generation, and then we wonder why they are surly to us from behind the counter, forget our ketchup, steal from our houses as they clean the floors, laugh at the idea of community service, and eventually grow up to hire desperate illegal immigrants to do the work that they found so belittling.

Attitudes toward service weren't always this way, historically. While there was plenty about medieval European

society that was psychologically unhealthy, they did have a healthier and more practical ideal of service than we do. Service was not limited merely to a class of rich folk who never served others and a class of poor folk who were never served themselves. Since everyone lived as part of a hierarchy, everyone (except the very top and the very bottom) was expected to experience both serving and being served. If the Duke came to visit the earl, the earl or his son might serve the Duke supper with his own hands, to show him honor. The Duke himself might have served the King a week ago, and so on up and down the chain. Beyond this, there were clerics and monastics who—ideally, anyway—served God, often by serving the people, for spiritual reasons.

While a medieval hierarchy is impractical in today's modern and complicated social world, we modern Americans could certainly use some reeducation in the value of service, whether towards people who are paying you, people who have no money and need aid, or one specific person. To put oneself—even temporarily—in a selfless position for the sake of making others happier and more comfortable has always been a worthy goal. For it to be a spiritual goal, however, the rewards have to come not in the form of obligations and favors owed or returned by those you sacrifice for, but in the form of intangibles—pleasure at making others happy, pride in doing a good job, and/or positive feelings from being part of a larger goal of making even a small part of the world easier rather than harder.

There are many places in society, past and present, where people have willingly given up certain of their rights in order to lead a simplified life of discipline and focused purpose. One of these is the military; another is monastic orders of all sorts, from abbeys to ashrams. In each of these cases, the entire lives of the individuals involved are heavily controlled, up to and including their sexuality, their clothing and hairstyles, the possessions that they are allowed to own, and their daily work. If no one was ever drawn to a path of willingly giving up certain freedoms in exchange for a greater reward in the end, no one would ever join these organizations.

Still, the questions arise...why are some people drawn to a much more intense and personal form of service? Why choose to serve a single, flawed human being rather than serving humanity impersonally, or—for the more religiously inclined—serving Deity directly, with no human middleman? That's the question that makes many critics of spiritual D/s turn up their noses. Surely the world would be a better place, the voice points out, if you dedicated yourself to feeding the hungry instead of slavishly cooking dinner for one individual?

Reverence for and obedience to deity in whatever form you see it is generally part of the religious experience, but some people need a more concrete representation. Perhaps the voice of deity is indistinguishable from their own internal monologue. Perhaps they need someone more physically present and watchful in their lives to guide them, and give them head-pats and ass-kicking when necessary. Perhaps they need structure and discipline, and they need it in a personal one-on-one way rather than from an impersonal group. Perhaps their religion doesn't have a monastic order, they are not fit for the military, and they don't wish to join a cult. Perhaps they are highly sexual and want that incorporated into their gift of service, which is more safely done with a partner than doing the sacred prostitute archetype indiscriminately in this society.

Doing a life of simplicity and spiritual discipline can involve a certain amount of depersonalizing the self, which some people do better than others. Those who are prone to doing it badly—or shallowly, only on a surface level—may do better with the constant scrutiny of a one-on-one D/s relationship, where they are not allowed to get away with superficial submission. Those for whom it is important to retain some measure of their uniqueness might find impersonal service a hard road; with a D/s relationship you may be an object, but at least you are (or ought to be) an individual and valued object. Or it may be that annihilation of the individual self is just not their job this time around, and they need stimulation, people, and personal love. Whatever the reasons, some people simply find personal service to one

human being more valuable to their own spiritual growth than any amount of abstract impersonal love.

Character and Choices

When people practice dominance and submission in a BDSM context, they might be doing it for any number of reasons—because it turns them on, because it's fun and comforting to be helpless in a completely safe space, because it's fun to be in charge, because it's a way to build trust (in each other and in general). However, if people feel a strong need to bring a spiritual slant into it, it's generally because this resonates with their core personality on a deep level, and they want to use and honor that. Many modern individuals, and especially many Pagans (some of whom may be veterans of the feminist, or civil rights, or peace movements) may also be uncomfortable with the idea that some people might have dominance or submission not just as a fun persona, or a personality trait, but as a core part of their being. This seems to fly in the face of all the equal rights that we have fought for. If some people would rather just be submissive for serious stretches of their life, what does that say about our ideals of equality? Beyond that, what does it say about consent, and how one's being can affect the ability to consent?

The issue, of course, is that one has to be able to say No in order for one's Yes to be worth something. The sacrifice of giving up certain of one's rights for a greater goal is no sacrifice if you were never allowed those rights in the first place. Similarly, no submissive can truly know that they are saying Yes to something unless they know that they are capable of saying No.

What it comes down to is that the prize that our foreparents fought for was our ability to choose our paths, and to give up those things that we choose to release. After all, any life path comes with sacrifices and things we'll never be; we can only live one life at a time. When someone chooses to be submissive to someone else, and to turn over their choices and

decisions to that person, it's a choice that their initial freedom allows them to make...and in most cases, if it all goes wrong, they can unchoose it and walk away. Similarly, someone who chooses to accept the responsibility of running someone else's life for them has to be able to unchoose that if it turns out to be too much, or unsuitable for other reasons.

What about the other side? If the submissive has the problem of being seen as codependent, the dominant has even more monstrous stereotypes to live down. All too often, the focus seems to be around the mental health and safety of the vulnerable submissive, with little attention paid to the mental health and ideal path of the dominant. In BDSM pornography, dominants are all too often seen as two-dimensional sinister characters, often with motivations that are either entirely concealed or clearly sociopathic. Even in erotica that extols the ideal of pure service for its own sake, the dominants are often made out to be merely a necessary prop for the bottom to serve. This role can certainly serve certain useful psychological purposes – for example, if you have an innate desire to control someone that just won't seem to go away no matter what you do, a willing submissive can feed and honor that part of you. However, this kind of shallow role is not enough to build a spiritual path upon.

To take on the role of dominant in a sacred manner is to practice a role of honorable authority. In this society, we often have a love-hate relationship with authority. We fear it and resent it when it limits us, yet we call upon it in need, and resent it again for not being authoritarian enough when it does not set the limits on others that we think it should. We have all been raised with the idea that “power corrupts, and total power corrupts totally”. Using dominance as a spiritual discipline gives the lie to this old myth. (If it were true, only powerless people would be good people, and that would be a terrible thing.) To take on this path is to make a commitment to being an authority in the world—if only over one willing person—in a way that explores what it is to be ethical, honorable, and responsive in the power that you wield. It requires that you question and perhaps rework your

preconceptions of the nature of leadership and authority. It requires that you make decisions thoughtfully and not blindly, and that you delve into yourself to find the unconscious triggers that can trick you into doing things for the wrong reasons. To be a spiritual dominant is to do a great deal of soul-searching, and a great deal of scrutinizing models (both real and mythical) for the subtle directions in how to do this right.

Most D/s relationships are short-lived, in the sense that they are confined within the boundaries of a single scene, which may be no more than a few hours. For some people, even the act of giving up control over a few aspects of their life for a couple of hours is a huge act of trust. There's nothing wrong with this; dominance and submission is a ritual psychodrama tool like any other, and it can be taken up and left behind like any other tool when its usefulness is ended. And it must be said that for a non-submissive person, submitting and trusting another flawed human being for a couple of hours can be as difficult—and as rewarding—as a lifetime slave commitment from a more naturally submissive individual. Similarly, a couple of hours of wielding responsibility by someone who is not a dominant can be as nerve-wracking—and as educational and confidence-building—as the dom/me who must take responsibility for another adult human every day.

To approach dominance and submission as a spiritual path is to approach it very consciously and attentively, without guilt or shame. It becomes a tool, and the only sacrilege is to use it wrongly. I'd define "wrongly" as doing it in any way that leaves shame and guilt, that discourages self-knowledge and mindfulness, that encourages self-destructive behavior, or forces the participants into molds that are not authentic to their core selves. Doing it "rightly", however, that's a little more complicated. Ideally, it should be designed so that it brings one or both or all or the participants a little closer to exploring their souls, their place in the cosmos, and their relationship to the Divine Will. That takes a lot of honesty,

creativity, and the willingness to be introspective and to challenge yourself.

What are the criteria for a spiritually-focused D/s relationship? First of all, both people have to be strongly dedicated to their spiritual path, and they have to be willing to use the D/s relationship to improve themselves as human beings. Although it can be done with two people whose spiritual practices are different, that will require a lot of negotiation on both their parts, and the top must take care not to interfere with the bottom's practices, or attempt to pressure them into converting. Each should not only respect but appreciate the other's path, and be willing to understand it in depth even if they don't choose to practice it, or they will not be able to aid and assist one another properly. This dynamic does seem to work best when both top and bottom are following the same religious practice, however, as there is a stronger understanding between them of what to strive for. It is also important that both top and bottom have similar ideas about the spiritual responsibilities of their respective positions, and how those work together.

Second, this has to be done mainly for reasons other than sexual ones. While sexuality is a sacred thing, if the relationship is about nothing but your hard-on, by definition it does not have a spiritual component to it. While a D/s relationship might start out with solely sexual motivations, one needs to be open to bringing it beyond that. If, in the course of things, you discover that the relationship has gone into a spiritual region, this needs to be accepted and honored. Once this happens, the relationship is no longer casual, regardless of structure. It can, however, be anonymous and impersonal; the people involved might have a stronger connection to their roles and/or archetypes than to each other *per se*.

By framing the relationship in a spiritual way, you are creating something more powerful than your hard-on. For example, if Joe falls for Mistress X, and suddenly finds in himself the urge to worship her as a form of the Goddess, even

if the sexual attraction goes away, the spiritual component of the relationship does not. As Pagans, we are here to live our spirituality, not just to think of it as a nice thing. It can happen independently of our wayward feelings, and we need to understand and respect that.

Two people in a spiritual D/s relationship have some basic responsibilities to each other. When this is a bond between two individuals and not just to roles and archetypes, it is a serious commitment—not necessarily till death do us part, but at least until it has run its course. This is not something that you walk away from until it has given you all that it can give, and you have given to it all that you can give. You can't just pick up and drop it at will. It needs to be treated like the sacred tool that it is, although that does not rule out a breakup when the dynamic is clearly no longer useful to either party.

The Conundrum of Consensual Slavery

"It's impossible to be a slave, because slavery isn't legal." That's one of the comebacks that my slave and I get when we speak up about our unusual relationship style, and it's usually said in a rather smug tone of voice. It's literally true, in the sense that I have no legal way to force Joshua to obey any order of mine. It's also utterly irrelevant, as the binding agent between us is not the law of the Land, but of the Gods.

I've put it this way: if you are strongly religious, and you get married in front of your Gods and your priest/ess and your spiritual community, you don't then hold to those vows because you happen to have a certificate that says that the state considers you married. You do it because you made that commitment in front of the Powers That Be, and you know that They heard your promise. You'd do it even if you couldn't get legally married for whatever reason. That's the spirit in which Joshua and I signed a contract of formal full-time dominance and submission. He submits to me because he agreed to, in front of witnesses both incarnated and otherwise.

Another response, which is more complicated to refute, is the worry that being in a position of dominance and of submission for more than short recreational periods of time is psychologically bad for people. After all, centuries of political work have been spent making sure that no one is socially required to be completely subservient to anyone else outside of childhood, prison and the military, or to submit simply because they were born into a certain race, class, or gender. This is important work, and it flies in the face of many cultures in the world where slavery is quite legal and/or large portions of the population are lawfully forced to be subservient to other portions. The idea that someone would willingly give up the rights that have been fought for and won, or that someone else would knowingly and thoughtfully aid and abet them in doing so, might seem to be a product of delusion or sociopathy to confused onlookers. To want to be a slave can seem crazy, and to enjoy being one can seem brainwashed, and to want to own one somehow evil, or at least terribly selfish.

It needs to be said that there is a continuum of D/s: never doing it, doing it once in a while, doing it part-time with many limits, doing it full-time with limits, doing it full-time with few or no limits, and various points in between. The far end is not a "goal"; being a full-time slave-and-master pair is not the "best" or most "desirable" form of D/s, any more than being a nun is the best and most desirable form of Catholicism, and the one to which all Catholics should rightly aspire. All points on that continuum are right and correct, if they are authentic to the people involved. The presence of a relationship whose power dynamic is more severe than yours is neither an affront nor a reproach. It is simply some people with different needs from your own.

In opposition to the idea that full-time submission is unhealthy or politically incorrect, the other problematic attitude is that of idealizing it, usually in a sexually fetishistic way. "If only I could find the right slave/Master/Mistress," the inner voice sighs, "then my whole life would be one long sexual fantasy." Many of these types are horrified by the

presence of people with nonsexual D/s relationships; why do this if not to assuage your deep sexual needs? The reality of the situation is that a full-time D/s relationship is just that... the dynamic stands even through the 99% of the day or week or month where you're not having any kind of sex, or even exchanging sexual tension.

If the heat for the full-time D/s relationship comes from sexual energy, it will burn out in short order. No hard-on or wet-on is so strong that it will sustain you through the periods of unsexy hard work. If your primary attraction to the idea of being in a master-slave relationship is that it is sexy, don't do it full-time. Do it for short periods of time, say a weekend, and don't try to fool yourselves that you could make that spark and heat pull through month after month, year after year. Doing it for love, especially on the bottom's part, doesn't work either; nor does the motivation of running away from the real world.

Who are the sort of people who are right for such a thing? The bottom has to be extremely service-oriented, the sort of person who might under other circumstances be attracted to a monastery or abbey, or the military, or a career as a full-time professional caretaker or some such thing. Service, in and of itself, has to be an extreme psychological and hopefully spiritual reward for them, regardless of their sexuality. They have to be enthusiastic about serving the top even if s/he ends up in a wheelchair and can no longer act all dominant at them. If they can't feel like a slave when the top isn't being explicitly dominant, then they aren't really a slave and they should quit. The power dynamic should be implicit, not necessarily explicit most of the time.

For the top...well, that's a trickier thing. I am continually disappointed by the mainstream BDSM ideal of the two-dimensional top who is always distant, hard, and in control. Being a cartoon top is psychologically depriving, and bottoms who expect that of tops shouldn't be in 24/7 relationships. You have to be a human being, and be able to cry, or break down, or get sick, or screw up and apologize. What makes a good top for a 24/7 situation? Honesty, self-confidence,

extreme trustworthiness. a strong moral code that emphasizes taking responsibility for your life and that of your dependents, the ability to listen to and observe them, the ability to set an example. I use the ideal of “noblesse oblige”, the idea that if I’m really the superior person here, I have an obligation to behave well. Having a slave is not an excuse to be a selfish asshole. It’s the opposite. This person is giving their life to you; you had better be worthy of the gift.

In a spiritual full-time BDSM relationship, the slave or servant (they are different things; a slave is owned and a servant is not) should be asking themselves, “How can I perfect this discipline of service so that it improves me, not diminishes me, as a person, and serves the Divine Will through serving this one person?” The master should be deeply involved in helping them constantly work toward this goal. In fact, it’s part of the master’s responsibility to be asking critical questions like, “Does the work that I am giving this servant make good use of their abilities, or does it waste their talents and force them into work they are not well suited for? Does this work help them to become more polished in their service? Is this work set into a context that makes it easier for them to make it into a spiritual discipline? Am I respectful of their spirituality, or do I shove it aside when it inconveniences me?”

The master should also be asking themselves, “Now that I have the privilege of this person’s service, what greater work am I freed up to do that serves the Divine Power, and ideally the world? How can I use the discipline of ethical mastery to improve myself as a person, rather than merely letting it make me lazier? At the end of the day, what have I done to make my slave—and the Powers That Be who gave me the privilege of having that slave—believe that they are better off serving me than channeling those energies elsewhere?” At the same time, the slave’s responsibility is to always be thinking, “What practical things can I do that really make my master’s life easier, and free them up to do more valuable work, rather than just doing those services that make me feel particularly sexy or

slavery?" It's a conscious collusion between both people involved.

Ideally, of course, the top should have a strong relationship with some Power or at least a spiritual code that keeps them ethically in check; they should understand that if there is a hierarchy here, they are not at the top of it. The Powers That Be have that place, and the top serves Them as the bottom serves the top. It's also good for the top to have something in their lives that keeps them humble, because in a relationship like this, they often end up as the bottom's spiritual mentor, which is always a tricky position between people who are sexually involved with each other.

Does this sound like a lot of work, and not terribly sexy? Yeah, it does, and it is. When we wrote our master-and-slave contract, we had a very hard time finding any realistic models. There were plenty of contracts around, but they were all very fetishy in nature, with long lists of the sexual activities that the slave in question would provide (including directions in how to sit and stand and what sort of clothing items would or would not be worn), and lists of what sort of torture the dominant would inflict on them. Frankly, it looked more like these contracts were written as titillation for the parties involved, rather than as a thoughtful and practical guide to how to do this on a day-to-day basis.

We both felt that this was utterly beside the point of what we were trying to do, and we finally ended up writing our own over a period of months. It seemed to me that listing any specific activities that we would or would not do was irrelevant. After all, I might change my mind as to what sort of activities that I wanted, or make up new ones. If I was really the one in charge, then I could ask for—and get—*anything* I wanted within the limits that we set out. It seemed more sensible to draw up the limits, and figure that the activities would take care of themselves. That's how we ended up with a slave contract with no mention of whips, chains, fetish gear, collars, or kinky sex in general.

In my contract with Joshua, there are a lot of things that I could probably live without, although I wouldn't like it, and still feel as if this power dynamic was real and not just a fantasy game. There's one item, however, that for me at least is the absolute deal-breaking clincher: that he has no right to privacy from me. Everything that he thinks, or knows, or hears, is mine to have at my demand. He can neither lie to me nor hide anything from me; if I say, "Is there anything you've been thinking that you hope you won't have to tell me?" he has to speak up fully and truthfully. This also means that if someone says, "This is just between you and me, but..." he has to stop them, and explain that if they don't want me to hear it too, they shouldn't go telling him.

Somehow, access to as much of Joshua's mind as I could get seemed more important than anything else in really feeling like I owned him. To completely take his body, I would have to get hold of his mind first. A short time later, I read the accounts of other D/s relationships that seemed to be real and not just fetish-oriented, and noticed that so many stressed the importance of constant truthful communication about how the slave is doing. At that point, I realized that my instincts had been right: in order to create the proper context for the slave to best do their thing, the master must have full access to their ongoing thoughts and reactions. My ability to do my job depended on my ability to raid the inside of his head for information.

It was also important to both of us to use a discipline of radical honesty as part of our communication efforts. Part of this was being able to hear hard things from each other. I'm always made terribly uncomfortable by rules for full-time slaves that never allow the slave to point out that the master is wrong, and that they must always phrase things to suggest that they truly believe that the master never makes a mistake and is always right. To me, this says that the slave is coddling the master's fragile ego; that their mastery would be irreparably damaged, and their response correspondingly irrational, if the slave was allowed to point out an error. While I can see the value in the slave avoiding being disrespectful, as

a matter of discipline and mindfulness, I'm not that fragile. If I'm a real dominant, I can hear my submissive respectfully criticize me, or point out a perceived error in my thinking, without feeling crushed or acting like a spurned teenager.

(For dynamics with a great deal of distance and no emotional intimacy, refraining from criticism can be appropriate, because it is not part of the submissive's negotiated job to do so. One example, of course, is the Master/Apprentice archetype; the apprentice is generally expected to keep their mouth shut and not criticize the master, whose knowledge they ought to respect, or they wouldn't be studying under them in the first place.)

There's also that if you don't respect any of this person's opinions or perspectives on anything, are they really the sort of individual that you'd want to be spending so much of your time with? As the person who is closest to the master's most intimate functions on a day-to-day level, the servant often has a perspective that can be valuable, and anyway if they're that close to you they'll probably already notice every single time you screw up anyway. So don't go trying to hide your lack of omniscience and omnipotence from them. Instead, use them to help you be better at it in the rest of the world. If I'm walking out the door with my zipper down (physically or metaphorically), and my slave gently points it out, rather than being nettled that he allowed me to know that he had noticed that I was imperfect, I figure that it's his job to help me hide that imperfection from less loyal eyes, and he's only doing what I have charged him to do.

Part of our discipline is mindfulness. While we don't always get it right, the ideal is that we are aware of and scrutinize everything that we do. If Joshua is doing something, I have the right to demand that he tell me what he is doing, and why he thinks it's a good idea. I also have the right to veto his action, but as part of our discipline of mindfulness, it's a better thing if I simply challenge him to rethink his idea, with the addition of any information provided by my perspective. If he holds to his idea, I disagree, and I veto him, he is required to do as I ask. Then, if it turns out to be a bad idea,

it's on me...and while I have the right to tell him to shut up and not point it out to me, it's better for my personal evolution for him to respectfully ask that we rethink *my* perspective. On the other hand, if I am doing something and he challenges me on it, I have the right to tell him that it is none of his concern... but as soon as I do that, I am then honor-bound to make sure that my ideas are really well thought through and sound. As a master, although I have the right to leave him entirely out of my decision, I have the responsibility to make that decision with extra care and thought, since he is being forced to trust me entirely.

It's painfully true that a willing submissive can be made into a yes-man, but that's the worst possible thing for a dominant's evolution. Although it may be their job to make you more physically and emotionally comfortable, it's not their job to make you too spiritually comfortable. Nobody should ever be too spiritually comfortable, because it signifies stagnation and a lack of growth. If you're the dom, it's on you to force yourself not to give in to the temptation of spiritual laziness while you're being pampered by the presence of your submissive.

Part of a dominant's discipline should be a strict code of honor. While there is leeway in creating your code of honor, it should be scrutinized carefully to make sure that it is designed to force you to be ethical to those around you, not to protect your pride from the pain of having to question your motives. Your submissive should be able to trust you with their life, their body, their soul, and their sanity, and know that you treat them with their well-being in mind, even while you ask them to sacrifice some amount of comfort and convenience for you. Thought should be given to what will happen if some external damage renders you unable to treat them safely and ethically. If they are a bound, committed slave, thought should also be given to what will happen to them if you should die.

The word "master" (and here I include it as a gender-neutral term) is also a verb. To "master" someone or something is far more than just being able to control them; it is being able to bring them to the highest possible expression

that they are capable of. "Mastering" a slave may start out like "mastering" a wild horse, but the spiritual expression of that mastery should be more like "mastering" the violin, which is a process that takes years of work and patience, and learning to work with the instrument rather than merely attempting to violently coerce it.

As the master becomes like the *maestro*, so the slave becomes the instrument to be played. In doing so, they strip away the trappings of their lives and selves that are distractions to the focused life, and discover what lies nakedly underneath. It is a lifetime commitment to service and self-knowledge, and that can seem overly absolute and irrevocable to many in our freedom-loving, uncommitted culture. For most consensual slaves, however, the finality and permanence of a commitment to the right master and the right situation is a comfort rather than a chafing chain; just as some people go straight into a monastery or ashram and never come out again. There is a great deal of spiritual comfort in knowing exactly what it is that you are supposed to do with your life, and simply getting on with the doing of it.

As a final word on the spirituality of being a bound slave, I will quote some words that my own slave found inspiring. The famous monastic Thomas Merton, when asked to write a message from the contemplative's perspective to the "man of the world", began with the following:

Let us suppose the message of a so-called contemplative to a so-called man of the world to be something like this:

My dear Brother, first of all, I apologize for addressing you when you have not addressed me and have not really asked me anything. And I apologize for being behind a high wall which you do not understand. The high wall is to you a problem, and perhaps it is also a problem to me. Perhaps you ask me why I stay behind it, out of obedience? Perhaps you are no longer satisfied with the reply that if I stay behind this wall I have quiet, recollection, tranquility of heart. It is true that when I came to this monastery where I am, I came in revolt against the meaningless confusion of a life in which there was so much activity, so much useless talk, so much superficial and needless stimulation, that I could not remember who I was. But the fact remains that my flight from the world is not a reproach to you who remain in the world, and I have no right to repudiate the world in a purely negative fashion, because if I do that, my flight will have taken me not to truth and to God, but to a private, though doubtless pious, illusion.

Sacred Masks: BDSM Archetypes

Whether or not we have any conscious spiritual component to our BDSM scenes, we often end up acting out certain archetypal roles during them, especially if they are particularly dramatic. Sometimes we merely play out roles, but all too often—especially with roles that we fall into again and again because they suit us psychologically—we end up taking on something far deeper. We fall into the archetypal grooves, and it can be hard to climb out.

For the record, an archetype is much more than just a role, or even a link to the “collective unconscious”. An archetype is like the shadow cast by a particular deity or spirit. When we become subsumed into the archetype—when we lose ourselves in it, if only for a moment—we touch the bare hem of their garments, so to speak. We do not become Athena, or Kwan Yin, or Dionysos, or Odhinn. We get pulled into their shadow, which covers and colors us. Working with archetypes can be amazingly magical if you’re doing it consciously and mindfully, or it can be quite dangerous if you’re in denial about how you’re handling it.

Another metaphor that we’ve often used is referring to an archetype as a “hat”, as in “she’s putting on the sacred prostitute hat”, or “he was wearing the king hat, that’s why everyone listened to him”. This is generally used to refer to a conscious use of that archetype, deliberately stepping into it in a way that lets it temporarily permeate you. Wearing one of these sacred “hats”, if only for a little while, prompts people to

respond to you as they would to that archetype. However, whether it's conscious or not, the hat can get stuck, and that can be a problem. Ideally, one ought to be able to find ways to take any given hat off, or it will eat your life, shrinking you to the bounds of that archetype. And as archetypes are less three-dimensional than the full complexity of a human being—a persona is not as big as a person—this can severely limit your life and your expression.

In the BDSM community where I occasionally hang out, there are repeated references made to “top’s disease” and “bottom’s disease”. These refer to the problem when people who are ensconced in D/s relationships find the power dynamic leaking over into the rest of their lives, in inappropriate ways. Bottoms with this disease may let anyone walk on them, even co-workers who have no negotiated right to do so. Tops with this disease may act arrogant with everyone, yell at waiters, become impatient in lines, and generally feel vaguely as if the whole world ought to treat them as if they were special. One way to look at this is to see these banes of the BDSM community as people simply getting sucked unconsciously into very powerful archetypes. As with all such experiences, once you’ve identified the archetype that is attempting to eat your life, it’s easier to get out from under it.

Predator/Prey

This is the archetypal pair sacred to the Hunter God in all His forms, including those where She is a goddess. Be it Herne, Ogoun, Artemis, Orion, or Skadi, or something far older, the Hunter goes back beyond our fur-wearing ancestors who painted the sacred hunt on the walls of their caves and reenacted it around the bonfire. Herne is older than that. He lives in every creature that runs for its life, or pursues another in order to survive. There are very few animals on this earth that do not take part in the predator/prey relationship to some extent, and that includes human beings.

The predator half of this couple is easy to find in SM story, and that's because he is so primal and so atavistic. Our hindbrains remember what it is like to kill our food with our own hands, and to do so because to do otherwise will result in our deaths. The predator hunts down those that he needs to feed his desires; at bottom, his prey is not actually his mate but his food.

He seeks to devour them on some level, and will not be satisfied until he has done so. Predators abound in such classic roles as vampire, stalker, serial killer, and so forth. He is fiery and hot on the chase, and then he goes completely cold when he strikes. Indeed, the chase may mean more to him than actually keeping the prey. After all, archetypally, prey is disposable, and there will be other prey tomorrow.

He is territorial, not jealous, and there's a definite difference between the two. Jealousy is based on insecurity and fear of loss; it's an emotional response. Territoriality comes out of the pre-human responses; it's the part of the brain that is programmed for survival at all costs, and remembers that being driven off of your territory will result in starvation and death. It's an instinctive response, in the same category as fight-or-flight, and thus it is both more difficult to invoke and more difficult to get rid of. Unlike jealousy, becoming more secure, strong, and confident may worsen a territoriality response in someone buried deeply in this archetype.

Predators vary in their subtlety, just as predatory animals vary in their choice of attack. She may slink up like a big cat, or hypnotize you like a cobra, or snarl and pounce like a wolf, or swoop down from a great height and seize you up like a hawk. You've probably seen predatory types who've utilized all of those attacks. Most people can somehow sense when someone has a strong predator within them, even when it's held tightly in check and they seem simply polite and outwardly benign. Somehow it leaks through, and people are vaguely uncomfortable, or vaguely respectful...or, if they are aggressive sorts themselves, they may want to challenge them for dominance. Someone with a prey archetype at work in

them, however, will sense it strongly and immediately, and respond either with an urge to flee or an urge to fling themselves at the predator's feet. If the predator is also an "alpha" type, this can enhance the urgency of the response.

The clearest mark of the Prey archetype is that prey does not fight back or challenge a predator. It may lash out if cornered or fight defensively, but at that point its survival is unlikely. Evading capture is its primary, and in some cases only, defense. It's rather like the scene in the book *Watership Down*, where the Creator tells El-Ahraidah, the rabbit god, "If they catch you, they will kill you, but first they must catch you." Some prey-types may feel a strong urge to act in an atavistically submissive way in aggressive situations—even when the aggression is not directed at them—by literally playing dead or showing throat, although most have enough self-control not to act on these impulses.

Particularly bold prey can appear flirtatious toward the predator, inviting them and dodging them several times before its eventual capture or escape. Prey may take pride in skillfully evading unskilled predators. This pairing holds for any archetypal combination of human and animal predator and prey, although there are differences between the four combinations. When both predator and prey feel closer to animal, the chase is deadly serious; it may feel like a matter of survival on some level for the predator, and of submission to some greater force of sacrifice to the prey-creature. When the stalking predator feels "animal" but the prey feels "human", the predator may still be acting from a survival mode, but the prey may feel more confused, caught in an alien situation that they do not fully understand, and perhaps pained on some level by being "reduced" by a more "bestial" conqueror.

On the other hand, when the predator is archetypally human, the chase can be more about sport than survival. Certainly ancient human hunters tracked prey animals out of survival, and this pairing can have that sense of urgent desperation on both parts, but it can also be more about sport, especially for predators who were raised in this age of

recreational hunting. When both sides are human, it's rarely about anything but sport.

Master/Servant

This is another of the classic pairs. In general, the master is someone who is comfortable being in charge and supervising things, and the servant is someone who gets a great deal of satisfaction from rendering competent service to others. The word "master" (and its female counterpart "mistress") is thrown around a lot by various people in the leather community, as if all one had to do to become one was to don the name and a superior attitude. However, to do this as a spiritual path, one has to remember that the word "mastery" isn't just about power, but skill.

The master archetype, flatly, is about skillfully using other person(s) as tools. At its best, it gives the ability to discern what sort of a tool someone is—are they a sword or a scalpel, or even a hammer? What are their skills and talents, including potential ones still untapped? What are areas in which they could improve with training, and what would they be wasted in attempting to do? How can this person be put to useful work that hones their edges, honors their talents, and betters both them and their environment? A poor utilization of the Master archetype will assign their underlings tasks regardless of whether they are suited for them, and then become angry when the result is not up to par. Good masters see their servants as resources, and a wise master does not waste resources.

One of the drawbacks of the Master archetype is that the Master does not love the servant. This doesn't mean that individual masters can't love their servants, only that in its purest form, there is only respect and perhaps some liking coming from the top direction. In order to sustain a love relationship with the bottom, a top will have to draw on another archetype as well. (Fortunately, most power-dynamic couples utilize multiple archetypal patterns in their

interactions.) It is interesting to compare the somewhat detached and distant nature of the pure Master archetype with the Predator archetype, who is quite capable of loving their prey passionately — perhaps even obsessively — and still ripping them apart and killing them, without seeing that as a contradiction.

The servant role at its most classic is also not an archetype that lends itself strongly to being in love. Indeed, when two people get into a D/s relationship without romantic feelings for each other (and in some cases, without even sexual feelings) this is the most common archetype for them to fall into. There's a sense of this being a "professional" relationship, more than an intimate one.

A servant functions as a seamless extension of their master's will, assisting them in doing whatever it is they do, but making it better and easier. After assigning specific tasks or areas of responsibility, the master expects things to be accomplished promptly, efficiently, and to the desired standard without reminder or supervision. Specific instruction may be limited or sporadic, and the servant may need to rely heavily on their own judgment. For example, a gardener may only be told to "take care of the garden", along with the occasional instruction like "I saw the loveliest hedges at Mrs. So-and-So's place. I'd love some of those around the patio." The gardener would find out what those hedges were and where to get them (probably by asking Mrs. So-and-So's gardener), plan a pleasing layout that works with the rest of the landscaping, and either supervise their planting and care or do it entirely themselves.

Unlike the apprentice, the servant is not here for education, although they may receive education at their master's discretion. Ideally, they would know how to do their job before they arrive. The master may not have the time or inclination to train them, and may not know a thing about the servant's skillset beyond the basic results they expect. You don't need to know anything about cooking to hire a cook, for example, and you ought to be able to tell your cook to modify their dishes to suit your preference, making it more or less

rich, more or less spicy, etc. even if it goes against their previous training or they don't think it tastes right that way. As an alternate example, a master or mistress may expect a servant to drive them places and maintain their car, and not care to know anything about the car so long as it looks nice and gets them where they want to go.

A servant is loyal to their master, but not so emotionally attached that they could not work elsewhere. A good servant is not emotionally invested in doing things in one particular way, and can readily adapt to different circumstances or methods. They genuinely like and respect their master, and this respect is evident in their behavior. They are not oblivious to their master's flaws, but may gracefully assist the master in ways that minimize their negative effect. In no way do they expect the master to change in order to suit them, or to live up to their ideal for them. A good servant does not leave without very good reason, and does everything in their power to find and train a replacement before they go.

Master/Apprentice

The word "Master" is also used to cover an entirely different archetype: that of honored teacher on a path. This lack of appropriate words has caused some people to revert instead to martial-arts terms like "sensei" or even Star Wars terms like "padawan" to describe the nature of this relationship and differentiate it from the Master of Servants discussed above. This is a student-teacher relationship first and foremost, and one of the biggest differences from the last archetypal pairing is that both are on the same path, and ideally the apprentice will one day graduate to the Master's position. In that sense, it has something of an ephemeral quality to it; the goal is to eventually get the apprentice up to being the equal, and even potentially the superior, of the teacher.

This relationship is found directly and indirectly in the BDSM scene. Some tops will take on beginning would-be tops

as apprentices, which might mean first serving as a bottom to get an idea of what it's like, and then as an intermediate subservient slave-handler or majordomo, and finally as a dominant themselves. This allows them to experience all parts of the chain of command, so that they will be both more competent at mastering and more compassionate to those under their direction. Also, some dominants have a direct teacher/pupil relationship with their bottoms, teaching them to be better people, or more competent at handling life skills, or guiding them through mind-expanding experiences.

One example of this might be the Daddy who teaches his "boy" how to change the oil in the car; another might be the master who regresses a female submissive back to being a schoolgirl in order to learn patience and discipline. It's not uncommon for the master/apprentice roles to be used in a context of ageplay, although that's not always necessary either.

The apprentice applies themselves to whatever tasks the master assigns, even if the immediate application to the discipline is not obvious. ("Wax on, wax off.") In some cases the relevance may become obvious after further training, and in others the apprentice may simply be doing their share of the necessary scut-work in exchange for their training. In many cases, the apprentice is expected to do tasks that reinforce their subservient position to the master, and show a very high level of respect and deference in exchange for their training. Generally, the master will discourage any attempt to skip ahead to more advanced lessons, even if the apprentice does not feel sufficiently challenged by the current lessons. Training may include study of the texts of the discipline, seemingly endless drill, or forcing the student into situations they do not feel ready to handle and expecting them to learn as they go.

In some cases, the master may be teaching the apprentice in methods of their own devising, and some may be passing on a lineage. The latter teach their apprentice what they learned themselves as an apprentice, both in respect of their own master's methods and in acknowledgment of their effectiveness.

Owner/Slave

I've chosen to pair the word "owner" with the word "slave", to differentiate them both from the master/servant pair. While masters can theoretically have slaves, the big difference between the slave and the servant is that the servant is not an owned being. He/she serves for reasons of honor; the slave serves because he/she has given up all choice to do otherwise. Being an owner is different from being a master, and not only in degree. To have sole and complete responsibility for the body, mind, heart, and soul of another competent adult is amazing and terrifying. It's not like children who will (ideally) grow up and leave, or a mentally disabled adult who would do so if it were possible. It is a level of possessiveness that can be intoxicating, and must be handled carefully.

As an archetype, the Owner hat pulls us to see our human property as things. How someone will respond to the Owner hat can often be determined by their attitude toward their other non-living possessions. Do they hoard roomfuls, or are they uncomfortable with having too many? Do they take enjoyment in owning beautiful or valuable things, or do they prefer cheap and disposable, so that they don't care when the thing breaks? Do they use their things hard, or polish and condition them, or stick them on the shelves to gather cobwebs? How quickly do they tire of a new toy?

Having a relationship with a dominant who is primarily using the Owner archetype can be intimate or not, depending on their attitude towards possessions and possessing. You can see the traces of this archetype in the way that a dominant interacts physically with their submissive; do they touch them in a proprietary manner that says, "This is my thing, and I'm enjoying the fact that it's mine to touch and use as I will"? Or does their touch instead say, "This is a valuable thing that has been entrusted to me, and I'd better be terribly careful and handle it with kid gloves, or it might vanish"? Or, perhaps, "This is mine for the moment, but it's temporary, and I'm assuming it's sturdy and can take some knocking around"?

Again, most dominants combine this with other archetypes, which affect the ways in which they feel about ownership. In particular, the Predator archetype can have an attitude about territory that may or may not mesh with the Owner's attitude about possessions.

Unlike the servant, the slave need not necessarily *do* anything but be owned. Some slaves are kept like pets, with little responsibility to the owner but to provide companionship and affection, and perhaps to gaze adoringly at them. Others may be expected to fill one or more other roles as well, and the ownership become an underlying assumption rather than the focus of the relationship.

Slaves can often love their owners, even if the owner does not return the feeling. More often, though, the feelings of the archetypal slave are more about adoration than love. While real love is a matter of seeing the beloved clearly and loving them in spite of their flaws, adoration is more about idealizing the beloved and ignoring their flaws. Someone who is totally ensconced in the slave archetype may try very hard to be oblivious to the flaws of their owner, as seeing them might ruin the perfect and all-powerful image of their master. In order to be able to love rather than merely adore their owner, the slave needs to have other archetypes playing as well.

The slave, as we touch on in the chapter "On Being Owned", can sometimes get into a mental situation where they find themselves so thoroughly owned that they can no longer leave. This can be a conscious collusion between the owner and slave, or it can come upon the slave entirely unawares. One day they may wake up and find that the idea of leaving is unthinkable. Obviously, if this was unexpected, it can be a shock (or not; some slaves simply settle contentedly into their permanent place). If it is unwelcome, one solution might be to formally and ritually reject the slave archetype, and hope that knocks you out of the cosmic groove. Of course, one would also hope that you would find yourself enslaved to an ethical master who would sympathize with your not

wanting to be owned, and would help in getting that hat off your head, as it were.

Trainer/Slave

The Trainer differs from the Owner in that there's a (covert or overt) assumption that the Trainer's care of the slave is temporary; that the slave is being prepared to serve someone else, generally another Owner. In some cases, a dominant may play both roles, training their own slave, but there's usually some thought somewhere that eventually the slave will be fully trained and the trainer archetype will no longer be needed in that interaction. Sometimes a D/s couple who are just starting out don't tend to look that far ahead; what happens when a trainer has done all he can with a submissive? He could sell/trade/give the slave to another Owner who doesn't utilize the Trainer archetype. She could give up on being a trainer, or turn her attentions to another slave, using the fully trained one as a model and aide, perhaps sending the "graduate" slave to a different trainer for more polish.

In fact, when a lifetime submissive ends up suddenly doing dominance work with another person, it's more likely to be in the role of Trainer than any other of these archetypes. This is because, in many ways, the role of Trainer is so much more service-oriented than other dominant roles. While they are unquestionably in charge, their entire attention is focused on the slave, creating a curriculum that will best bring out the slave's good qualities and polish their flaws. (The Trainer-top is a favorite dream of many submissives for that reason; the archetype promises not only self-improvement but lots of attention.) Many tops whose only dominant role is that of Trainer tend to be bottoms in their personal lives, and see their Trainer role as a service, perfecting and turning out new and better slaves for the consumption of others. In fact, it's been said that the most demanding and rigorous Trainers are the submissives who've already been through the curriculum.

The Trainer/slave Pairing also has some qualities in common with the Master/apprentice pairing, in that the role is teacher/student. In the former case, however, the apprentice is ideally going to graduate to being a Master someday, whereas the slave is being trained to be a product, not a Trainer (if it were otherwise, it would simply *be* a Master/apprentice pairing). There is no pretense of future equality between the two.

Affection and romance between the two parties will vary depending on whether the Trainer is also the owner. If not, then they may not feel comfortable becoming emotionally attached to a slave who will eventually move on to someone else. In some cases, the submissive finds that emotional attachment gets in the way of their polish and their vocation, and prefers to keep the relationship at an emotional distance. Trainers also usually prefer not to fall in love with temporary property that they will eventually pass on to someone else.

The slave in this coupling is technically the same as the one in the Owner/slave coupling, but s/he responds differently to a trainer than to an owner. First of all, the slave is fully aware that the relationship is more about them than about the trainer's needs. Although they may be required to serve selflessly, even that service is centered on them in some way, as it is designed to teach them about better service. Ideally, the training will prepare them to go from a situation where "they do it all for you" to one where they are no longer the center of attention, except at the mistress's whim.

The slave also tends to have a steeper "learning curve" here, as more and more new things are thrown at them. A master/slave couple can get comfortable; the trainer is bound to keep the trainee on their toes. If the trainer is also the owner, they often go back and forth between the two until the slave has gone as far as the master can take them. Masters who find the trainer archetype very strong in them may have the problem of losing interest when this happens.

Parent/Child

While ageplay is one of the more controversial contexts in D/s theater, its enduring pervasiveness and its legions of fans prove that it is far more popular than anyone likes to admit. After all, everyone started out as a child, and none of us are without strong baggage and preconceptions formed at that age. It's not surprising that many people want to work with a state that they spent a decade and a half enmeshed within. It's also not surprising for some tops to want to fill the role of the first powerful people that they knew—parents—if only for a short time, with another competent adult.

To play with the archetypes of Parent and child, one needs to walk a fine line between the teacher or mentor model and the owner. Parents have a lot more authority over their children than any adult has over any other competent adult, yet they don't own them, exactly. They are responsible for teaching them many life skills, but they aren't a formal teacher. They nurture their children, and are more physically affectionate with them, than the average master or mistress figure. Although they can punish and discipline, they also need to be a lap and a shoulder when times get tough... unless they are deliberately playing with the Bad Daddy or the Evil Stepmother, which are much more specific and two-dimensional bogeyman figures. Most importantly, they spend a lot more time caring for and doing for their charges than any other top archetype.

To be the child in this dynamic, considering that we're talking about adults here, is to allow yourself to temporarily regress to a younger and less sophisticated age. It's about letting yourself express your emotions more, recapturing your sense of wonder and spontaneity, and putting your trust in someone who has promised to take care of you. It's about letting go of all that adult dignity, and remembering a time when it didn't matter at all, when you thought a lot less about what people thought of you.

One of the big problems with this dynamic is that everyone has parental issues, no matter how great your

parents were, and it's damn near impossible not to bring these over into this kind of relationship. The real gift, however, is that it's a great place to work out those issues, if the people involved are conscious, aware, careful, and communicative.

There is also that people have very different ideas about the proper role of a parent. Someone who had a fairly emotionally distant parent (or someone who felt smothered by a parent's insistence on emotional closeness) may want or expect the parent figure to practice "tough love" with the child figure. Someone who raised their own children in a very easygoing manner may not understand their partner's desire for a very strict parent figure. They may have very different ideas about what responsibilities and expectations are appropriate for both parties, or even what interactions feel "parental" or "childlike". Some people who want to take on a child role may want to be the child they were or wish they could have been, and some may want to be a very different child with a radically different temperament or life experience. Some may desire a parent figure very much like their own, or one very much the opposite their own, or one like the parent they wish they'd had, or one like the parent they'd someday like to be.

Priestess/Handmaiden

This archetypal pairing might also be called Priest/Monk, or some other situation where two people who share the same religious context are in a service relationship together. Generally, one of them serves the Gods and/or the religious community, and the other serves the first one as an assistant. The Priest, or Priestess, or Shaman, or Mystic, or other individual with heavy spiritual responsibilities, requires their assistant to do a good deal of the practical scut-work of their job for them. This might be setting up altars, maintaining and fetching religious equipment, interfacing with the public, and making sure that the Priestess has whatever they need.

One of the interesting things about this archetypal pairing is that it is extremely high-protocol. It tends to make both parties, while they are fully engaged in it, react in a very formal manner. Generally this protocol is not anything like classic BDSM protocol, but is dictated by the religious context. Both are involved in ritual, and as such these archetypes have a weightiness to them that is different from more playful masks. (This role, from the bottom's perspective, is wonderfully explored in Joshua's chapter, "Shaman's Boy: Serving A Greater Path".)

Initiator/Ordeal Dancer

This pairing is very similar to the one above, in that it is two people working to get one into whatever altered state they require for their spiritual work. The difference is that here the bottom is the mystic who goes through the spiritual gyrations, and the top is there to help them do that, generally by torturing them and forcing them (consensually) through ordeals until they come to the altered state that is their goal. In a sense, it's rather like having an implacable spiritual personal trainer.

One example of this is a couple we heard of where the top kept the bottom chained in a basement for weeks at a time, feeding her cold boiled lentils and only visiting her daily for impersonal sex and hosing her down. The trick was that the bottom had asked for this treatment, in order to get into a spiritual headspace that took her beyond her body and herself. The isolation, simplicity, meditateness, and objectification allowed her this reach of consciousness. Another example is a couple where the bottom finds a great deal of spiritual fulfillment in extreme public humiliation; watching a scene with her and her top is like seeing Inanna walk into the underworld, where she was stripped and reduced to meat on a hook before being reborn. Her top has had to learn ways to implement this properly in order to satisfy her needs for this

state of abject not-self. Yet another couple practices “forced” hook suspensions as part of ritual.

In this pairing, the top serves the bottom as much as, and in some cases more than, the bottom serves the top. After all, you don’t get much work out of a bottom that’s locked in the basement, and you have to make their cold boiled lentils. However, this archetype is vitally important, especially for many kinds of ritual S/M. If what you need to get to an altered state is an ordeal, whether of pain or isolation or some other thing, and you cannot (like an Indian fakir) inflict it on yourself, you need someone there to force you through it. Often the most important job of the Initiator top is simply to push (or pull or drag or force) the bottom through any bout of weak-willedness to the goal that they seek. To be the top in this pair is to be the psychopomp of the Underworld, who is often a fierce or cruel figure.

Deity/Hierodule

This archetype is almost the reverse of the last one, in the sense that here, the priest is the bottom. (Paradoxically, though, both can be used at once in the context of ritual BDSM.) Of course, the only thing higher is the deity that they serve, and in this pairing the top takes on that role. It’s both a terrifying and an intoxicating place to be in. Here the focus is on actually worshipping the top as a stand-in, a walking symbol, a living embodiment of Deity in whatever form the bottom has agreed to worship. One classic example of this is the dominatrix who demands to be worshipped as a goddess, so that the (usually male) bottom gets used to the idea of doing homage to a female rather than a male figure of Deity.

In Paganism, we often say that we revere the aspect of deity that we see within our lovers, but we are rarely comfortable with doing them the kind of worship that we might do for an actual noncorporeal deity. It might seem strange, or even wrong somehow, to let a mere human stand in for an actual god in a way that requires one to actually treat

them that way. There is a general discomfort in the Pagan community about showing deep submission to the presence of an actual deity, let alone a human who is representing them. This seems to come from people who have had bad experiences with being brought up in religions that emphasized unthinking submission to deity with little or no actual contact with the divine forces. They may prefer to think of the Gods as friends and helpers, especially if the divine contact that they have experienced is more subtle and less intense, and may be very uncomfortable with the idea of kneeling to anyone.

However, in some pagan groups (including some Wiccan traditions) the person invoking and/or symbolizing the god or goddess is addressed as and treated as the god or goddess, at least nominally. Many pagans are perfectly comfortable directing their worship at a non-living representation of the deity, whether a human-like statue, an altar, a sacred place, or a sacred object. If the top needs a dose of humility to balance out the intoxication of receiving such worship, they can keep in mind that they are little more than a walking, talking sacred object.

Sometimes, in this situation, the top is an actual hierodule—a slave and vessel of the Gods themselves. They may find that deities speak through them, or that they become physically possessed by the deity. In this case, the line between worshipping the human being and worshipping the actual deity can become thin and blurry, a situation that doesn't happen with most religions (although the Afro-Caribbean faiths do regular god-possession, and we could learn a lot from them).

For the bottom who is drawn to a physical, fleshly manifestation of the divine, the human top may be their permanent focus and their only connection to deity, or they may have an active connection to deity through other means or other tops. Some of these bottoms may need to learn reverence to a higher power in a very concrete way, by allowing a human to embody that higher power, rather than honoring what can be a fairly abstract and unresponsive idea

of deity. Not everyone gets to talk directly to the Gods...or rather, the Gods do not speak clearly and directly to all people equally, for reasons that none of us understand fully. It may be that the individual needs a god/goddess who can give them direction, pats on the head, and ass-kickings, but none are stepping up to the plate personally. Often they are most drawn to tops whose personality and behavioral qualities reflect those of the deity whom they admire the most; the best top for this job is someone who can let themselves become a (even temporary) avatar of that divine archetype, and let their bottom bask in Kali energy, or Artemis energy, or Zeus energy, or Herne energy, or what-have-you.

Magician/Enchanted Object

This archetypal pair is similar to, and often interwoven with, the Trainer/Slave pair, but generally it occurs between permanent partners rather than a temporary training situation. This is usually because the amount of energy needed to magically “enchant” someone is more than most tops want to waste on something that they’re going to get rid of, and besides, this work tends to create strong energy bonds between people. What’s generally going on with this archetypal pairing is that the couple is doing training with hypnotic, subliminal, and/or energy-work techniques. (For more information on energy-work techniques, see the chapter “The Invisible Toybox”.) They may work with Tantra, or sex magic, or other forms of sexual energy-play. The Magician top may use the bottom as a source of energy for other magical work, or the magical work may be concentrated on changing the bottom. For the bottom, these techniques can seem magical, in the sense that it’s a way to play with their brain and consciousness, and get them to do things that they never thought they’d do.

One example of this was a top who decided to put his submissive in diapers, for no other reason than to demonstrate his power over her. He had her wearing diapers for every

hour of the day except when she was working a job, and wouldn't let her use the toilet during that time. At the same time, he told her repeatedly that while she was in diapers, she wouldn't be able to control her bladder and bowels. After a while, the repeated suggestion took hold, and she discovered that she had become unable to control her bladder and bowels while the diapers were on, although her control magically returned as soon as they were off.

Another example might be a bottom who has trouble achieving orgasm, and a top who subtly trains them first to come easily, then to come with other stimulation, then to come on command. The "enchantment" part of this comes in if the early stages were subtle enough that the bottom doesn't notice how deeply he is being changed, only that things are somehow transforming in ways he had never imagined that they might.

Tops who fall into the Magician archetype may see their bottoms as objects to enchant, but they are wonderful and valuable objects, perhaps the Magician's most precious possessions, and the top may feel strongly protective and possessive of them, and unlikely to want to let them go. While there is a certain amount of objectification going on here, there can also be a lot of genuine love. Indeed, one of the most common "enchantments" for the Magician to lay on his property is the equivalent of a love spell (or a real love spell, if this is someone who does actual magic). Since that sort of magical work tends to act like electricity running back and forth along a wire, it affects both parties whether the Magician expects it to or not, and can create intense bonds between a couple who work with these archetypes.



Being The Mirror: Sacred Service

by Raven's Boy, Joshua

The subject of this writing is one that may seem contradictory to you. It is a paper in praise of Service; in praise of obedience and discipline and structure. There is a great deal of talking about freedom these days, but right now I want to speak of slavery, and living your life entirely under the rule of another. They say that there are two ways to spread light: being the candle, or being the mirror that reflects it. I want to talk about being the mirror.

I am a slave. By this, I mean that I have voluntarily given my life entirely over to another person, and I am owned by him. Obviously, this is not legally binding, but it is a serious lifelong religious commitment. It isn't a path I simply chose. It was assigned to me by the Gods, and I accepted. It is very easy for even a sympathetic outsider to see this path as simple abuse of power, or misguided sexual perversion masquerading as something spiritual, so I will attempt here to set up a framework and provide a context for a life of Service as a valuable spiritual discipline, and a legitimate path.

Not everyone is suitable for a life of serious service, and it should never be forced onto anyone; nor should they be pressured into it. However, some people just seem to be "wired" for service; for them—for me—it provides a great deal of emotional and spiritual fulfillment. In the BDSM demographic, people like me are usually referred to as "service bottoms", and they are both valued and devalued. On

the one hand, many tops bemoan the lack of “real service bottoms”; on the other hand, we are often treated badly and taken advantage of by those who see our urge to serve another as something that degrades us and makes us lesser beings. However, lifetime service was not always seen in this light.

There are many ways one can live in service to another, with models that exist within cultural contexts or that are created from old and timeless archetypes. Any serious master-apprentice relationship, for example, can provide a path for honorable service. The martial arts often make this highly formalized relationship part of their spiritual discipline. For me, the archetype with the most resonance, with the most to teach me about the spiritual discipline of service and obedience, is that of the monk. Monastic life is a very narrow path, and in some ways can be very similar to a life of D/s service. As a monk, the simplest personal freedoms are stripped away. You do not choose what you eat, what you wear, what time you rise in the morning, and little consideration is given to what you feel like doing at any given time. You have given control of all aspects of your life over to your Order, and through them, to your gods.

The purpose of the restrictions is not to cause suffering but to provide focus. Although I am a devout pagan, I have found a great deal of inspiration in the Benedictine Rule, where St. Benedict lays out a framework for Christian monastic life. He explains his intent in the prologue: “We are, therefore, about to found a school of the Lord’s service, in which we hope to introduce nothing harsh or burdensome. But even if, to correct vices or to preserve charity, sound reason dictateth anything that turneth out somewhat stringent, do not at once fly in dismay from the way of salvation, the beginning of which cannot but be narrow.”

Any path of service is a narrow path, as it must be. It is sacrificing breadth of experience for depth of experience. Well-known monk and writer Thomas Merton said monastic life was no different from any other; it was simply living life fully and directly, living life so it got under your skin. A life of service can provide a spiritually meaningful “narrow path” for

someone who is drawn to monasticism but not suited for a more traditional monastic life, or whose religion or personal spiritual beliefs do not currently have a monastic framework to step into. Just as in monastic life, the restrictions needn't be intentionally "harsh or burdensome"; they merely lay out the boundaries for a simple life focused on a simple goal. In lifestyle D/s, this goal is to render honorable service to your master. Anything that doesn't support this can be stripped away.

When you see full-time submission as a spiritual discipline, even the most fetishy protocol can aid in developing mindfulness, whether done as part of a scene or integrated into daily life. Anyone who has tried to speak in some variant of formal "slave" protocol quickly realizes that it isn't just remembering to tack a "Sir" onto the beginning and end of each statement, or mechanically replacing "I" with "this slave". For this to flow gracefully, you need to substantially modify your way of speaking, and through that, your way of thinking about yourself. It becomes a tool for focusing your attention. Simply crawling about on the floor or not being able to use your hands or sit on furniture or a time shifts your perspective on how you interact with the world and the objects around you. Buddhist monastic precepts prohibit use of high beds and all but the simplest furniture, so don't be quick to dismiss certain restrictions as unspiritual. Whether your particular D/s situation is subtle or obviously fetishy, the fact that you must think of someone else's needs and desires before your own continually refocuses you on your path.

A life of service can be a path towards destruction of the "self" as primary identity and getting past the petty demands of the ego, a concept which other paths also embrace through asceticism and meditation. If there is a freedom in slavery, it is this: We live in a highly pleasure-seeking consumer culture, where individuality and freedom are too often about image and possessions rather than being able to truly define yourself as a unique individual with a meaningful life path. Freedom is often seen as the freedom to act wholly for your own convenience and shallow pleasure while meaningful choices

are systematically denied to you. One can reject that empty concept of freedom by choosing a simple path of obedience and discipline, allowing all of the superficial markers of individuality and freedom to be removed. Who are “you” without your stuff, your job, your social status, even your name? How can you find joy and fulfillment in doing another’s will? By living this life, you *are* your unique path, the path assigned to you by the Powers That Be. In becoming this path, you render service not only to your master, but to the gods.

Life under the rule of another, whether Abbot or Master, teaches obedience. It puts the focus of one’s life on something external to the self, putting your personal comfort and convenience aside. In his book “Monastery: Prayer, Work, Community” Cistercian monk M. Basil Pennington writes “Only if one leaves aside ambition—the quest for status, position, and power—can one be free to seek the will of another, to seek to walk in the way of obedience.” Obedience to a master can parallel and model obedience to their Higher Power, as one provides inspiration and perspective for the other.

Of course, as in any aspect of life, I believe the way in which you treat those whom you have power over is noted by those who have power over you. For a master to treat his servant with petty meanness is to invite that same treatment from the Gods, especially if the master is sworn in service to a particular patron deity. When the service relationship is taken on as an explicitly spiritual path, this is even more apparent: it brings into focus a chain of command, and the master is not at the top of it.

St. Benedict gives a clear picture of this in his Rule: “The Abbot who is worthy to be over a monastery ought always to be mindful of what he is called, and make his works square with his name of Superior. For he is believed to hold the place of Christ in the monastery, when he is called by his name, according to the saying of the Apostle: ‘You have received the spirit of adoption of sons, whereby we cry Abba (Father)’ ... Let the Abbot always bear in mind that he must give an

account in the dread judgment of God of both his own teaching and of the obedience of his disciples. And let the Abbot know that whatever lack of profit the master of the house shall find in the sheep, will be laid to the blame of the shepherd. ... The Abbot ought always to remember what he is and what he is called, and to know that to whom much hath been entrusted, from him much will be required; and let him understand what a difficult and arduous task he assumeth in governing souls."

That last phrase continues to ring with me. In a spiritual service relationship, you do not simply give over control of your body and mind. You offer up your soul into your master's hands. An intimate personal service relationship can develop an amazing level of honesty and trust and insight. To give all of yourself over to another person is to let them in deeper than you might be willing to go yourself. The mindfulness required to do this right is so much more than what most of us are used to, and the simple act of living that mindfully (regardless of the situation) will profoundly change you.

This change may come about in many ways, but with it comes a reassessment of values. Not only are you releasing the outer-world ideals you may have been striving for, but shifting your assessment of what is important in day-to-day life. For example, a D/s servant generally does the work that is devalued by society. Regardless of their gender, they may fill a traditional housewife role or they may function as some variety of personal secretary or assistant. D/s service can teach one about finding honor in simple labor, and doing one's best at whatever task is assigned. Some people have strong ideas about what sort of work is "beneath" them, generally manual labor or tasks that involve getting dirty, but also tasks which are not sufficiently challenging or mentally stimulating. This is nonsense. Any fair work that needs doing is honorable work and can be deeply satisfying.

Similarly, any repetitive "mind-numbing" labor can be in itself meditative. There is no practical spiritual difference between raking sand in a Zen rock garden and vacuuming the

living room, except in the mind of the person doing it. Someone interested in spiritual service may wish to study one of the many Japanese meditative arts to find inspiration for making their daily acts of service into something beautiful and spiritually meaningful.

Sexual service is almost always part of a D/s service arrangement, and can also be made into a spiritually meaningful act. Sex is commonly seen as antithetical to spiritual development and there are few paid jobs with less prestige than sex worker, but under the archetype of the Sacred Prostitute this can be a powerful and spiritual offering of your self and your body to another. Coming from the BDSM community, some sort of sadomasochistic or fetishistic sex play is common, but this in no way makes the act less spiritual. In the proper mindset, acts commonly seen as degrading or humiliating are simply another way of providing service, no more humiliating than washing dishes and often much more enjoyable.

There is some danger in a service relationship of the servant's concept of perfect service being mistaken for the will of the master, especially with an inexperienced master. If the servant believes it is proper for them to sleep on the floor and wake at dawn to clean the house, but the master prefers someone to cuddle with in the morning, it is the servant who is mistaken. If the master finds formal slave protocol irritating or simply a waste of time, the servant has no place insisting on it. If the servant cannot find fulfillment in providing the type of service desired by the master, both need to reassess whether they are a suitable pair.

Another other danger is the pitfall of confusing humility with self-loathing. To be happy in service is to accept that it is fitting and proper for you to do this work, but not because you are incapable of anything "more important". It is vital to find honor and joy in service, and to know that this role allows you to perform to your fullest capacity. A good servant finds that competent service gives them more self-esteem, not less. When my master tells me that I am his good, useful, resourceful boy,

it makes me hold my head up higher and feel better about myself.

In whatever you do, it is important that it be done with a whole heart. St. Benedict writes that "...obedience, however, will be acceptable to God and agreeable to men then only if what is commanded is done without hesitation, delay, lukewarmness, grumbling, or complaint, because the obedience which is rendered to Superiors is rendered to God. ... For if the disciple obeyeth with an ill will, and murmurs, not only with lips but also in his heart, even though he fulfill the command, it will not be acceptable to God, who regardeth the heart of the murmurer." It isn't enough to simply obey, or even to obey without complaint. One must obey without resentment. This doesn't mean you have to enjoy every task (few people really *enjoy* changing the cat box, for example), but you must always try to serve without bitterness or complaint, and find what happiness in the work that you can. You must always strive to serve with an open heart, from a place of love for yourself and your master, and contentment with your role.

When entering in to a service relationship, I did a lot of thinking on what makes someone worthy of service. For a time I had fallen heavily into the "Marketplace novel" model of pure service, where the concept of a worthy master is entirely absent. The only criteria seemed to be wealth (or at least the financial means to purchase and support a slave) and slaves are supposed to find fulfillment in the act of pure service itself, even if it is in serving unpleasant, immoral, and nasty people. On the other hand, in most other BDSM porn, if there is a notion of a worthy master, it is based on their ability to maintain unfailing control through their constant displays of strength or superiority. I've heard folks in D/s relationships worry about what ought to be done if the master becomes ill and can no longer keep his slave "in line". This is entirely contrary to my idea of service. In this life, you provide service in times of strength and of weakness. You are serving a fallible, human master. If you cannot care for your master after

his stroke, push his wheelchair, and consider him no less your master, you have utterly failed him and failed yourself.

I have come to believe that a worthy master is someone whose ethics and character you admire, whose path in life is one you can wholeheartedly support, and who will be invested in your ability to build your service commitment to them into a fulfilling spiritual as well as emotional path. After all, the servant is offering themselves as a tool for their master's use with the faith that the master will use them wisely. To waste or abuse them, or to change them in a way that makes them less able to follow their path, is to be unworthy of the gift of their service.

There is a great satisfaction in allowing yourself, even for a brief time, to be a channel for the will of another. It is a certain purity of consciousness that is both intoxicating and terrifying. Becoming the perfect instrument to manifest another's will is an ideal that we can never achieve, but we continue to strive for it, because the striving is the point. For those with this calling, your service is the greatest gift you can offer, and by doing service joyfully, honorably and with a whole heart, you honor that which created you, that which called you to this path, and that which guides you along your way. I'll close with a prayer my master wrote for me. It is a prayer for a slave, whether servant to man or to the gods.

I offer myself to your will,
To better serve your needs.
I offer myself as your tool,
For my path is one of usefulness.
I offer myself to be used,
For to be used is to be valued.
I offer myself to be honed
To give a finer edge.
I offer myself to be changed,
That I may become a vessel,
A manifestation of your will.

Don't Break The Spirit: Slave Training in an Animistic Pagan World

(Disclaimer: In this article, it is taken as obvious that the "slave" in question has agreed to this relationship of their own free will, and that it makes them happy and fulfilled to be owned. After reading the last few chapters, this ought to be self-evident, but you never know.)

I've read a lot of articles on how full-time slaves ought to be trained, and they all make me vaguely uncomfortable. While it's true that every slave is different, and every master has different needs, I had problems with the overly-detailed procedures designed to rob a slave—someone who you, hopefully anyway, chose because you liked them as a person—and take away everything that they are, clearing them like a blank slate to be written across. Somehow this seemed wrong to me, and not just ethically wrong but full of wasted effort, like burning down a house rather than renovating it.

After a while, I realized what the root problem was. These trainers were working out of the mechanistic worldview that has bedeviled our culture for the past two centuries. In this worldview, of which B.F. Skinner's theories were one extreme example, everything is a machine. Every part of the universe, including the human psyche, is a collection of bits and parts that can be disassembled and reassembled if one only has the Chilton's manual and the right tools. Nothing has a soul,

because there are no such things. We are all just machines to be “fixed” and “rebuilt”, and when it comes to slave training, it’s machining on a grand scale.

This kind of mechanistic worldview is also evident in military basic training and certain forms of cult brainwashing. It’s the idea that a human being is a computer to be programmed, and all you need are the right codes... but first you have to reduce them to a brainless, soulless thing. It’s rather like the way that they are trying to design robots in robotics labs. First you build a dumb robot, then a slightly smarter one, and then a still smarter one. Each one has more lines of code, more rules to program in. In order to program a human being this way, you first have to reduce them to a dumb robot and start from there.

Except that I’m not convinced that this is the best way to go about building a robot, much less changing the behavior of a human being. I recently watched a show on robotics and saw a rogue tech who was working on the concept of neural networks rather than programming every function; he’d made some simple insectoid bots who didn’t do much except crawl about, but they were able to learn simple things on their own and adjust their own behavior accordingly. He played with them and called them by name, and was affectionate with them, because their “life-mimicking” behavior inspired his human nature to do so. To me, he was in the process of giving them souls.

Then it clicked for me. The sort of paganism that I practice is strongly bound up with animism—the idea that inanimate objects can have souls, can have a spirit and a character of their own. In the mechanistic worldview, everything is a little less than fully alive. In my worldview—compared to the “ordinary” one—everything has, as my boy Joshua has pointed out, “an extra level of being alive”. Certainly I don’t feel spirit in everything I touch—some pieces of plastic, for example, are just inert—but I do sense it in a lot more things than the average person will ever admit. It’s most obvious in objects from the natural world, such as water, or fire, or rocks. Rocks definitely have spirit, although it’s long and slow and

for them to speak a single sentence takes a century, so it's hard for us to communicate with them. But big rocks have a strong spirit, and mountains (the biggest rocks of all) even more so.

The land beneath my feet, of course, most definitely has a spirit. I talk frequently to my land-wight, and I've made some rather heavy deals with it—it runs the wards on my land in return for attention and certain services. But it's a little different with man-made things. Most machined things don't have much of a spirit. Items lovingly made by hand are more likely to, because the maker dropped energy and soul into them. But the most soul-full things of all are valued, loved, much-used tools. My guitar has a spirit, one that is mellow and cooperative and very feminine—I named her *Madrigal*, and she loves me. I can tell every time I play her. My knives have spirits. My car has a spirit. My big old-fashioned Victorian wood cookstove, *Esmeralda*, already had a spirit when we bought her and moved her into the kitchen.

My wife summed it up in talking about her .22 rifle. It was basically “empty” when she brought it home, but she pointed out that it developed a spirit over a period of time through regular use, respect, a feeling of being valued, and most of all, special rituals for its care that one did over and over again. In the case of her rifle, it was cleaning it, carefully trigger-locking it and putting it away, and having the proper signs and sigils (the FID and the registration paperwork) ready to hand.

This way of working with valued tools is what I think a pagan master ought to base “slave training” on. After all, as a pagan animist I expect my most valuable and useful property to have spirit. Why would I want less from my human property, which would arguably be the most valuable treasure of all? Instead of trying to reduce them to a drone and then programming them from the ground up, wouldn't it be more appropriate to use the kind of techniques that an animist uses to create spirit in and bond with their precious tools?

This was driven home by a comparison I made mentally with a line from the Oath of Service that I wrote, where the master refers to the servant as being an “extension of his hands”. This idea was echoed in one of the “slave training”

articles that I read, but in a very different way. For the author of that article, to be an extension of the master's hands was to be a mindless robot who would obey strict orders very literally, and never try to anticipate anything or use critical thinking skills. I was taken aback, as I saw the line in my Oath very differently. To use a modern example, if I had a couple of extra hands hanging off me, and I cut them loose to go places and do things that I couldn't, I wouldn't be thinking of them as programmed robotic hands. I'd be thinking of them as becoming rather like Thing, the disembodied-hand servant of the Addams Family, who definitely has a mind and a spirit (and a gender) of his own. He is utterly devoted to the Addamses, and especially Gomez, but he can do all sorts of intelligent things in order to make life better for them. He has character. He has Soul.

I was reminded of my (now decommissioned) 1972 Dodge van, named Lurch for his personality—large, strong, and devoted in a grouchy way. A car once cut us off in dangerous traffic, and we would have had a fatal collision except that the steering wheel wrenched itself out of my wife's hands, and the van made a neat and perfect switch to the next lane between two other cars. We were both stunned. We also took Lurch home and gave him an oil change in gratitude. That's the kind of servant I want to have around—human or nonhuman.

So if the paradigm of slave training for the mechanistic world is programming a computer, then what's the paradigm for the animistic world? Why, magic, of course. It would be a matter of using the same magical techniques on your slave that you would use to bond with a valuable tool and make it into a devoted and soul-full servant. To do this, there are several points to remember.

The first point is that you can't choose the kind of spirit that is going to come into your tool. You don't place the soul into it so much as call the soul into it, and maintain that soul with bits of your own energy. Object spirits come in many different forms. Madrigal is sweet and a little wistful; Esmeralda is cheerful and warm and a little stuffy and old-

fashioned. I had a knife with a spirit so nasty that people were constantly cutting themselves on it. Could I change its nature? No. I had to put a binding spell on it, and feed it a little of my own blood regularly. (It eventually disappeared...probably off to newer hunting grounds.) You have to work with the character of the individual tool's spirit, and this goes for human slaves especially. Changing the person's basic nature is not only wrong but an exercise in futility. All you can succeed in doing is implanting behavior so alien to their natures that the dissonance will cause them to slowly suffocate.

Sometimes it may be important to implant a little alien behavior or energy—one example of where this might be useful in the non-D/s world is a Reiki attunement, where the Reiki master “scoops out” a bit of your energy and replaces it with an astral body modification to aid you in doing Reiki. However, this is something to be used very sparingly, and it must never be extensive enough that it blocks the slave's own personality from coming out.

The second point is that the training must be a 50/50 partnership all the way. This is not something that the dominant inflicts upon the helpless submissive. The two parties must be in collusion with regard to the goals of the training. I am made profoundly uncomfortable with the idea that a dominant should do Jedi mind tricks on a submissive and not tell them about it. Aside from the fact that it's really sleazy ethics, the dominant may miss valuable feedback from the slave that would make the exercise more effective, or on the other extreme, keep it from being mentally harmful.

I try to keep all my Jedi mind tricks open and aboveboard. If there's a behavior that I want changed or implanted, first I tell my slave about it. Then I give reasons for my desires, and I try to make them good ones, as this is not something that should be done on a whim. (That's not done to impress him, but for the benefit of my own honor.) Then I explain how we are going to go about changing this part of him, and why I think that this method will work effectively. This is especially important with a slave who is past the point of consent; i.e. has consensually given up the ability to consent. If I have taken

that away from him, then I at least owe him the clear knowledge of what is being done to him.

Then it's up to the slave to actively collude with me on the project. This might mean that we would brainstorm the most effective context and tools together, or that he would work with me on getting into a slightly (or not so slightly) altered state where he would be more open to suggestion. It might also mean that he might voice objections based on our agreed-upon ethical code, or that he might point out information I had missed. Even a dominant with excellent judgment can screw up based on insufficient information. If you work a spell with incorrect information about the situation, it often simply doesn't work, or it might manifest in a way that you didn't expect and don't particularly like. This is no different.

The tools that we use are the same ones that are used in magic energy work with objects. They include, but are not limited to:

1) Words Of Power. In spellwork, we might speak a particular word or phrase that embodies the idea we want to put across to the nonverbal part of our brain, which is the part that handles all magic work, connects with the Universe, and most drastically affects behavior. If a word, it is usually a connotatively "loaded" word; if a phrase, it is short, pithy, succinct, and perhaps rhythmic or poetic. It is spoken in a tone of voice that conveys power and certainty. I use the same "command voice" to utter a spell that I use to tell my slave that from now on, he will do X, and that's the way it's going to be. I think as carefully about my phrasing in these delicate proceedings as I do when doing a magic working where I ask the Universe to send me something. Words count drastically in these situations. There shouldn't be too many of them, and they should all be loaded with visual and "feeling" content, and be memorable... because your slave is going to commit them to heart, at least subconsciously.

2) Touch. This is the medium by which we usually pass energy into our tools, especially ritual tools. In some traditions, one marks the ritual tools with one's own bodily fluids, such as blood, sweat, saliva, urine, or sexual fluids. As

you smear them on, you impress the intent into the tool through the fluid medium, which holds a great deal of your energy. For some spells, you write your intent in letters, or perhaps use runes, or symbols. Adapting this for the body of a slave is obvious, especially if you remember that skin is absorbent.

Just touching the tool, not once but repeatedly (and in the same ritualized manner) over a long period of time is probably the most common method of invoking soul into it. We often have the urge to stroke and touch our ensouled property; it's a way of maintaining its energy and bond with us. A blind former lover pointed out to me that when people say, "Let me see that," they hold out their hand to take it, because you can't fully see something with only your eyes. You can "see" many things with your sense of touch that may elude your eyes.

Regular touch is good for building intimacy anyway, but for purposes of magically inducing changes of behavior, body contact and gentle stroking is extremely useful. It's what you'd do to an object that you were "charging", and you can "charge" the submissive in the same way, releasing a little of your own will into them as a way to "set" a command. When I thought hard about the sort of touch that I use, especially during those verbal commands that are meant to change significant behavior, I realized that I tended to touch my slave in two different places depending on the command. For commands that required a great deal of trust, I would lay my hand over his heart chakra; on some level I wanted him to "take this to heart". For commands that were to slip under the conscious mind and become mental conditioning, I'd put my hand on the back of his neck and head, where the brain stem is. (It's important to tell your slave that you're attempting to send a command in under her conscious "radar"; if your bond is good enough, it will go in regardless of her skeptical "Yeah, sure," and she'll find herself following it anyway, to her surprise. If you neglect to let her know what you're doing, she will have no clear basis for her sudden change of behavior, and it may be upsetting to her. Making her doubt her sanity is not a useful outcome.)

3) Rituals. This could be seen as the sort of thing that comes under the name of “protocol”, except that it feels a little different when it’s structured as ritual. The non-spiritual meaning of “ritual” is something that is done deliberately the same way every time. This certainly resembles “traditional D/s protocol”, if you will; rules are agreed upon that boundary many aspects of the slave’s life (and that vary widely from mistress to master to mistress, I might point out), and the slave repeats them day in and day out. There’s a lot about BDSM play that is similar in tone to a pagan ritual, in that it is theatrical and uses lots of props. The difference between “traditional” D/s ritual and the adaptation of pagan ritual to train a slave is that a skilled witch/magician/energy worker will be a lot more cognizant of what they are raising, and where to put it.

If the couple practices painplay, this can be used to raise energy which can then be funneled into the slave, along with a command. Another approach might be for the slave to strive to see the everyday work of their path as a sacred ritual in and of itself, like a tea ceremony, or a sacred dance. A slave’s path, when done in a mindful and not a mindless manner, can give a great deal of psychological and spiritual satisfaction in proper and graceful service. Unfortunately, training by the book of the mechanistic worldview tends to create mindlessness instead of mindfulness. A soul-oriented approach would seek primarily for parts of the service path that are nourishing to the spirit, and would use these as the basis of the training. It’s a great deal more than simply making the slave want it. It’s showing them how to learn to need it as part of their spiritual path.

I’d like to say that, for the record, although this may work most intensely when the individuals involved are in love with each other (those love drugs add a level of passion and vehemence to the energy), it can work quite well where “being in love” is not present. It does, however, require at least mutual respect, liking, and affection. If you didn’t like a tool, or didn’t think much of it, you wouldn’t use it very often, and

you'd get a better one as quickly as you could. When you did use it, you wouldn't be filling it with anything very nice. If a master doesn't at least have warm feelings for their slave, then for Gods' sake send them somewhere they'll be more appreciated.

There's one other point to make that is uniquely pagan in worldview. Each spirit that gets called into a man-made object is a tiny reflection, a snapshot, a splinter, an avatar of a much greater spirit. For example, my guitar's spirit is a tiny reflection of the much greater Spirit Of Music. The spirit in my wife's .22 is an avatar of a much greater Warrior's Weapon Spirit. In invoking these spirits into the items, we make them sacred in some sense. Through them, we can contact the greater spirit that they are linked to. When someone takes on the archetype of the Owned Slave, they allow into themselves a piece of the greater spirit that is All That Is Sacrificed That We May Live. This Spirit has many faces and names—the Sacred King, John Barleycorn, Iphigenia, Persephone, the Sacrificed Maiden, the Prey Animal, the Bull God and Goat God, Lugh, Baldur, the Corn Dollie, the Wicker Man, and so forth. It appears in every ancient culture, because our ancestors deeply revered the life that gave itself for our survival.

To become an owned slave is to become an object, to some extent, but a cult object, a sacred thing, a living altar piece. Through them we touch the life of that particular divine force, the one that is present in every sheaf of wheat at the moment it is cut down, and every steer at the moment that it is butchered, and every deer at the moment that it gives itself to the wolf pack. Their presence invokes into us dominants the archetypal spirit of the Gods who accept the sacrifice, who are usually the implacable deities of Death. Through them, we become divine.

However, we are also human. The proper response of a human being to John Barleycorn the Sacrificed God is gratitude. We as tops need to balance those two spirits within us, and remember when to be the Gods of Death and when to just be quietly, humanly grateful for our good fortune in

having this tender soul to serve us. Conversely, the slave is also a human being, and the proper response of a human being to the Gods of Death is a respectful distance, whereas John Barleycorn hurtles willingly and with abandon into the dark embrace of the Death Goddess, with all the self-destructive urges of a bridegroom fly going to the bed of his spider bride. The submissive's task is to balance the urge to immolate themselves and all vestiges of their individuality upon the altar of our desire, and to keep enough of them respectfully distant from the cutting edge of our darkness that they will still retain the ability to do that active colluding. To do this is to base D/s protocol on the protocols of pagan worship, and as such it keeps a mutual respect in place between partners.

This kind of work is long and slow and takes a lot of patience. It's not good for people who want instant gratification. You're slowly shaping what's already there, not tearing down and starting from nothing. It's less radical treatment, but it gets the same results without the same levels of confusion and trauma, and most of all, it's more permanent. The kinds of changes made in mechanistic world-view slave training force the individual's spirit down into a box, where it sits until it is released. It may never be released, but it's still there, waiting, and getting more and more cramped. Eventually, if the slave is let loose, it will reassert itself, perhaps in a damaged way due to its devaluing and ill treatment.

Using magical and animistic ritual means that you are changing the spirit itself. What's done is done, and it's much harder to undo. This can be good or bad, depending on the situation. However, by tying slave training into a spiritual path, if something goes wrong and the slave is abandoned by his/her owner or is forced to leave, they can always fall back on the Gods, at least temporarily, for comfort, consolation, and the promise of a more appropriate venue in which to follow their path.

Shaman's Boy: Serving A Greater Path

by Raven's Boy, Joshua

Some time back, an article was posted to an online discussion group for spiritual BDSM discussing in detail one couple's conservative heterosexual Christian D/s practices. It was followed by a cry that such exclusive writing might make folks of minority faiths uncomfortable. To the moderator's surprise, one of the few active members of a minority faith responded enthusiastically to the article, appreciative of such a clear portrayal of how D/s fit into a very specific spiritual framework, and asked the group to discuss other individual religious practices rather than restricting conversation to vague nondenominational spirituality. In response to this I decided to give a description of what my life looked like that week, as it was an clear and specific example of serving the Gods through my service to another human being.

My master was off "pathwalking" during this conversation. He is a shaman in the traditional sense, and does a specific sort of walking between the worlds that requires a large piece of depopulated land to roam while in a self-guided trance. At the time of the discussion, he had been in the woods behind our farmhouse for eight straight days. He could have almost no contact with people during this time, and slept in a small treehouse, bundled up against the autumn cold.

In the months before he left, I helped him to prepare his ritual items. Everything he takes with him on these trips has to be carefully prepared and magically charged in order to

function properly and have presence in the otherworlds. Much of his gear, including his clothing and his notebook, was handmade, and the rest was modified to suit his purposes. I spent many hours carefully decorating the simple items he would need, such as his hairbrush, bowl and socks, with the embroidered and wood-burned runes and symbols he had specified.

Most of my time during the trip was spent ritually preparing specific food for him, to be left on the steps of his treehouse, and running errands for him as requested in the notes he left for me. During the trip, my orders were to make sure he had clean ritual clothing each day, a lantern at night and hot water in the morning. I also bought or prepared certain items for offerings (frequently fruit and alcohol for libations), obtained tools and other gear he hadn't realized he would need, and kept our friends posted on how he was doing, as well as doing both our shares of the farm chores. He had asked that none of us interact with him or distract him while he was pathwalking, or he might get thrown off and have to start over, so I had no communication with him besides the notes left with his dishes. If he ran across me or walked by while I was delivering things, I would step aside and lower my eyes, and try to put out a vibe of "I am inconsequential and unobtrusive. There is no reason to notice me."

This might sound like somewhat bizarre slave protocol, but it was what needed to be done. He has orders from the gods to do certain things in a certain way, and for him to do his job properly, it's my job to take care of his needs in a very specific manner. Dealing directly with spirits and otherworlds brings with it strange non-negotiable requirements and taboos. None of it was about what gets either of us hard, or what we think is proper slave behavior. It was not even done out of love for him, or a desire to submit to him. In fact, this part of our D/s relationship is entirely unrelated to sex, fetish, and our romantic relationship. Some of it was for his comfort, but I consider his continued comfort to be vital to his ability to focus and do his job at his highest capacity.

For instance, I suppose he could have carried food prepared beforehand with him, but have you ever tried carrying nine days worth of food that won't go bad that you'll still want to eat on day seven? Many people doing this fast for the duration, but my master's health wouldn't allow it. This is all hard enough without starving or living on goat jerky and trail mix, and when you've been outside in the cold rain all night talking to spirits, it really helps to have some scrambled eggs and a basin of hot water for washing appear on your doorstep when you wake up.

To be effective in my part of this, I needed to learn a great deal about my master's spiritual practices and gain familiarity not only with the symbol sets and cosmology, but with some of the very basic ritual/magical techniques. For example, I was asked mid-trip to find a certain pair of boots, mark them with runes, and send them down. He didn't specify what to mark on them, so I prayed for help on the matter that night. I woke up at four in the morning with a short poem running through my head, which I wrote immediately on the boots with a permanent marker. To do this, I needed to not only be able to read and write in the Norse and Anglo-Saxon runic alphabets, but be clear-headed enough to ask what the appropriate inscription would be, and know enough of the cosmology to be able to make some sense of the reply. On a daily basis, I needed the knowledge of what different offerings are appropriate for Jotun, Duergar, Alfar, or whatever he would be encountering, and have something of the skill to put a specific kind of energy into each one before bringing it down.

My point of telling this is that it was all extremely fulfilling for me as a submissive, something which he did not expect. It allowed me to focus entirely on service for most of my day, under unambiguous protocol. Knowing that my work made his job even a little easier was amazingly satisfying. My master is very much a hierodule, a god-slave, and his Masters are harsher with him than he could ever be with me, so I was glad for every comfort I could provide. Our D/s relationship provides a clear structure for these duties, and it makes his journeys run much more smoothly than they might otherwise.

He can be sure that I will do exactly as I am told to the best of my ability, in the exact way he asks, without question or argument.

All of this is training entirely unrelated to conventional D/s protocol, or for that matter, anything that any other D/s servant would need to know, and it is nothing I was prepared for. In order to be his boy, I've had to learn such things as Reiki, energy work, astrology, runes, mythology, and a little bit of linguistics (in addition to cooking, housecleaning, farm work, and formal table manners) ... I'm still adding to that training, and will be for years. Even the parts that look from a distance like fetishy activities ... aren't. When you are doing this in a religious context, the religion does tend to overshadow the fetish element to an extent.

For example, when my master has clients, he has to do a few hours of preparation beforehand. Besides meditating and praying, he uses certain sexual activities done in a ritual context as a way to open himself to the spirits, and it's my job to make sure that it gets done properly, with the right attitude on my part. We don't do this because it is our particular kink, and we certainly don't feel the need to use ritual as an excuse for any sexual practice, no matter how unusual. He does it because it works, and I do it because he needs it done. Thinking that we are "just doing our job" for these sex acts could seem terribly unromantic at times, or at least not very sexy, but it is greatly fulfilling in its own way. There's a great deal of contentment in knowing that you are doing exactly what the Powers That Be intend. The sexy and romantic parts can happen at other times, when the spirits aren't knocking.

In the most basic form of the spiritual D/s relationship—the master-student dynamic—the master is simply the focus for the servant's work. They are teacher and guide; they help the servant develop grace and perfection in their service. This sort of discipline has a monastic quality to it that is very comforting and natural to me. Executed perfectly, it is the spiritual equivalent of raking sand in one of those Zen rock

gardens. It is taking a blade and honing it to an fine edge. It is a beautiful thing, striving for an ideal of perfection.

I am learning, though, that there is a deeper sort of sacred service: the experience of serving someone who has a calling, an Assignment. Something that eats their life; something to which they have given themselves over entirely. Something inherent in them that differentiates them from the common world. The easiest secular example for this is the artist or musician or writer whose talent so consumes them that they are often little more than a channel for it, or the political activist who is consumed entirely by their dreams and goals. For these people, there is nothing (or nearly nothing) in their life but their Work. All too often, they need a friend, lover, or assistant to support them and take care of their mundane needs, a servant to be an interface with the rest of the world.

I call this role in all of its forms the "Shaman's Boy", as it speaks to a larger archetype. The image is of the shaman's calm, polite assistant explaining the wild-eyed shaman's strange behavior to the client or anthropologist, as best he can. He is translator and receptionist. He tells the client, "This is what is happening. Sit here. Drink this. Do not be afraid." He does the aftercare for the client, but more importantly, he does the aftercare for the shaman. People on the outside don't see that part, but that is his most important function.

Image: The shaman is god-possessed and throws himself into the icy river, spinning wildly, communicating with the heavens in a language which is no language. That sort of thing is hard on the body, and the boy's job is to care for the body, to care for what remains of the human the gods have taken and so thoroughly changed for their purposes. The boy is there afterwards with a warm blanket and some hot tea and a little something to eat, in the same way as one serves the writer who shuts himself in his room for days at a time, occasionally absently eating the sandwiches left at the door.

This is the job of this sort of sacred servant: being the one who makes their sandwiches and draws their bath and brings their tea. He is the one who quietly supports them when they rail against the Universe, and helps to pick up the pieces

afterwards. It isn't about providing luxury services, but rather the simple the comforts that help them continue to do their job. The relationship isn't about the servant being used, because the master is being used harder than most people can possibly imagine. The focus is entirely on the master.

In my last essay, I compared the master and servant to the candle that produces light and the mirror that reflects it. In this kind of relationship, being the "keeper" who tends to the "chosen" one, it's usually true that the reason the servant stays and does this task is because this particular candle burns so fiercely bright, with such great impact. In being the support system to this flame, you do more than serve one person; you support a much greater goal that serves many others. There's a particularly satisfying feeling to knowing that you are part of something that much larger than you. There's also the fact that the brightest candles tend to burn themselves out, and it's your job to prevent that from happening.

In this job, the sacred servant is not raking sand in a Zen garden so much as hoeing potatoes. It is a rougher archetype; using the blade rather than honing the edge. There is less precision and polish; less concern with the details and protocol except as they must be perfect in order to sustain the master's path. It's not about the proper way to serve tea; the tea is not served as a meditative act or a demonstration of perfect grace in service, although these are beautiful and valuable things. It is done to get some nice hot tea into someone who needs it, and for them, that is enough.

Where the protocol comes in is on the religious side of things. Whenever you have a really successful mystic in myth or history, generally they have a support staff of servants who both take care of their physical needs and set things up ritually for them. If what they need to protect themselves is a circle of red chalk and owl feathers, then that's what must be prepared for them. If they need someone to sit and drum for five hours, then it must be done. If all their food needs to be ritually cleansed or charged or simply carefully and mindfully prepared without taboo ingredients, then it's the job of the religious servant to do it. In ancient temples, these folks were

often low-ranking priests themselves; one is also reminded of medieval monks and lower priests whose job it was to tend the shrine of a specific saint. In these cases, although the saint may have been just a statue, it was treated as if it was a living being, and its clothes were changed and offerings managed in the same way.

There have always been mystics who were cared for by a staff of servants, from the Pythian Oracle at Delphi to the Catholic Hildegarde of Bingen. In some cases, part of the service was not only to take care of their bodily needs and mediate between them and the world, but to discreetly protect them from authorities who might hear any divinely-inspired controversial words. The archetype of the "handmaiden" also fits here, in the woman who is "at hand" when the female mystic needs some kind of aid. It is a position of service both to a human being and to the higher spirituality that the master or mistress serves; you are clearly in a hierarchy, and there is nothing human at the top of it. This can be comforting, especially when it means that there are built-in safeguards in the doctrine as to how badly you can be treated, and the rules and protocol are followed not out of the goodness of the master's heart, but because they are part of his or her spiritual path.

Part of being a good servant is taking pride in doing things correctly, and that includes one's spiritual path. Those of us who serve in spiritual hierarchies are doing so not out of mindless obedience, but out of mindful love. We may not be the ones out front, but we know that our efforts are worthy and useful, and it can be a wonderful thing to know that you are doing exactly what the Universe intends for you.



Dedication to Sacred Service

The following is a self-dedication for a pagan who wishes to embark upon the journey of being a submissive – sexually, emotionally, and in day-to-day relationship. Real submission is put down as degrading by many individuals, and preyed upon by others. To be submissive – especially when you do not yet have an appropriate relationship – is dangerous. You must be ready to open yourself wide to a dominant's will, yet always be watchful in the early stages to make sure that your trust is not being taken advantage of. You must go down neither to shame nor to despair nor to codependence. This self-dedication can be undertaken at any time during your journey. Ideally it should be done alone, in the privacy of your home, but it can also be performed in front of an audience.

If you are alone, be naked for this ritual. Don't even put on fetish gear, or collars, or anything like that, unless it is an item that you are obligated to wear due to current commitments and promises. The idea is to be as naked as possible, without the aid of props and costumes to shield you from the force of your own need. If you are in public in a space where nudity is not appropriate, dress as simply as possible, without fancy accoutrements. You will need a sharp blade, a cup of water, a candle, and a bowl with a handful of grain or coarse flour or dried beans or peas. First, face the east, kneel, breathe deeply, and place the blade against your forehead.

Odhinn All-Father, crucified one of the sacred Ordeal,
Mithras whose blade cut open the heart of the bull,
Persephone, Queen of the Dead
Who was once Kore, innocent maiden of spring,

I am at the mercy of this great need to submit.
It overruns me, and it will not let me rest
Until it is satisfied.
So by this blade I hold I swear
To undertake the path of sacred service,
To find no shame in my nature and my need,
And to follow the path that the Gods have set before me,
Inscribed into the depths of my mind.
Help me to see clearly and sharply
Whom I should trust and from whom guard myself.
Let my judgment always be keen and honest,
Even when I am following that of another.
May this blade seek my blood
And all the breath run from my body
If I lose my courage and betray myself
To fear and denial and self-loathing.

Face the south, kneel, light the candle, breathe deeply, and drip a bit of its wax in the palm of your hand, and elsewhere if you like.

Ninshubur, warrior servant of the Queen of Heaven,
Tyr, soldier bound by honor,
Hestia, quiet guardian of the hearth and pantry,
This need burns within me like a buried star.
Teach me to submit the fire of my will
To discipline, to obedience, to the chains of my own honor,
And let those chains be strong and unyielding,
Bearing me up against the blows of the world.
Help me to face fear, and weariness, and any pain
This path may send to me, willing or unexpected,
With the courage and strength of steel.
By Your will, O Gods, may all the blows
And fire and heat be but the hammer
That shapes me to be a new and finer tool
To better walk this two-edged path.

Face the west, kneel, breathe deeply, and pour a libation from the cup between your thighs.

Ganymede, cupbearer of Zeus,
Aphrodite, Goddess of Love,
Inanna, Queen of Heaven who knows the Dark,
You whose priest/esses gave their bodies
In honored service to the Force of Love,
Giving the lonely masses a taste
Of Your skilled hands,
I feel within me the need
To be open and vulnerable,
To lay my heart wide to another's need.
Guard and protect me in that moment, O Gods,
Help me to be like the ocean's water,
Which, when struck, does not strike back,
But yields, and is unhurt, and flows to fill again all space.
Let me be an unending fountain
To slake the thirst of those who drink from me.
Help me to learn the skills I need
To bring ecstasy of the body
To whomever I serve.

Face the north, kneel, breathe deeply, touch your forehead to the earth, and then sit up and pour the grain or beans between your cupped hands.

John Barleycorn, golden son of autumn,
Ing, corn god of the fields,
Dumuzi, running prey whose blood is spilled for us,
You who are sacrificed
That others may have one more day,
One more month, one more year of life,
Help me to understand the true nature of Sacrifice,
That it is hard and painful,
That it will make you weep,
That it takes all your effort,
That it must be the very best you have,
That it is sacred and honored,
That it should always be greatly valued

And never taken for granted;
That it is the source of Life,
That it is the way of Rebirth.
Let my body feed the needs of those I serve
As willingly as You feed all the earth.

Stand in the center, close your eyes, and turn your face upward.
O Gods who guard the cycle of Life
Guide my feet upon this path
As I walk blindfolded and trusting into my own destiny
With open hands
With open mind
With open heart.

Dedication to Sacred Mastery

The following is a self-dedication for a pagan who wishes to embark upon the journey of being a dominant, master, or mistress – sexually, emotionally, and in day-to-day relationship. Dominance can be a dangerous thing. If you aren't careful, it can run away with you, and that can hurt people. If you aren't careful in the other direction, you can armor yourself so tightly that you lose contact with human energy, and can no longer ask for help when you need it. To be the keeper of another person's soul is to walk a very narrow path, and you must be bound by honor and rules and human kindness. This self-dedication can be undertaken at any time during your journey, in public or in private.

You will need a blade of some sort, from knife to sword size; a candle, a cup of water, and a stone small enough to lift easily yet large enough that you cannot close your fingers about it. To begin, stand facing the east and salute the Spirits with your blade.

Hail, breath of Life, sharp and clean!
I come before you seeking wisdom
And strength to take on a path
Of awesome responsibility.
Zeus, Master of Olympus, far-seeing eagle's eye,
Give me confidence in my own authority
So strong that I do not feel the need to prove it
With unnecessary displays of force.
Oya, Lady of the Wind and Rain, whose fingers
Hail down like the beat of a thousand whips,
Sweep me clean of old angers and resentments,

That nothing foul shall taint or corrupt this Work.
Hermes who guides souls to and from the Underworld,
I will soon be bringing trembling souls
Along that dark path, into their deepest places;
Teach me to bring them safely back
Made better for the journeying,
And help me to always be one step ahead.

Turn to face the south and raise the candle like a torch.

Hail, fire of the Spirit, path of Power!
I come before you burning with the need
To master another soul and make them do my Will,
Yet well I know that if this Will be let
To burn unchecked like the Sun,
It will destroy everything it touches.
Apollo Lord of Brightness, chariot-driver,
You who hold your horses to a chosen path
And never swerve, show me the straight road of Honor
That I may not fall from grace
Into needless, wanton cruelty.
Heimdall, Guardian of the Gates of Valhalla,
Help me to understand and respect boundaries,
And to always protect
That which lies vulnerable in my keeping.
Artemis, Wolf-Goddess, you who protect your pack
While insisting that they show throat to you,
Who never slays for sport,
Teach me to restrain the Beast Within,
Bringing it only forth on a heavy chain
Where it can do only good
And where it will be loved as well as feared.

Turn to the west and hold the chalice to your heart.

Hail, water of the heart, which ebbs and flows like the tide!
I come to you thirsty for a willing soul
To be my chalice, and let me drink of them,

Let me penetrate to their intimate depths,
Let me fish for the delicate threads of pain and joy.
Great Mother Goddess who nurtures all the world,
Teach me to remember to care
Remind me to be kind when it is needed.
Ereshkigal, Lady of the Darkness,
You who hung the Queen of Heaven above your throne
Yet released her for the price of tears of compassion,
Let me never lose that compassion
Lest I come to devalue the gift of submission.
Baphomet, Lord of Perversion,
Teach me well the skill of responsive mastery
That I may read my power
Written in lines of joy
In the face of those who serve me.

Turn to the north and kneel, holding the stone in your hands.

Hail, Powers of Earth, keepers of my flesh and blood!
As I will own the flesh of another,
So you own my flesh,
And can take it back whenever you choose.
I am grateful for my life,
And will extend that gratitude onto this path.
Herne, hunter and tracker of ancient trails,
Teach me to track the responses of a writhing body,
Knowing exactly when to pounce and when to stop,
Never missing a step or passing by a chance.
Hades, Lord of the Dead, you who set the final limit,
You who rule the dark places into which
We will journey together,
Remind me that you are Comforter and Counselor
As well as the grim, implacable giver of Death.
And finally, Kali Ma, Goddess of Destruction,
You who eat your children, you who trample
Great Shiva the Destroyer beneath your feet,
You who bring rebirth through your black womb,
Lady of Dire Necessity, to you I kneel this moment.

Dark Lady, make sure that I never forget
That I am subject to a Deeper Power,
That I am watched, and judged,
That the Lords of Karma will deal with me
As I have dealt with the privilege of power
That is the gift of willing service to my Will.

Stand in the center and lift your arms to the sky.

Let me always remember
That the word Mastery
Means not only Power but Skill.
Be with me as I walk the narrow edge
Of this ecstatic razor blade.

Oath of Service of the Traditions of the Realm of Asphodel

This oath is one that is used by those wishing to enter into a service-oriented D/s relationship in our religious group. It can be modified as people see fit. We found that all too many "collaring" rituals or the like spend too much time on describing fetishy activities and not enough on describing what will actually be given over, and what the expectations of the recipient ought to be. This oath was written in an attempt to fill that void.

Servant:

By this oath, I swear to abide in the service of my Lord/Lady _____.

I hereby give into his/her hands this Word of my Oath and Breath, and all my words and thoughts hereafter. I swear that I will place my trust in my Lord's/Lady's judgment regarding all things, but that I will not also abandon my own.

I hereby give into his/her hands my will and spirit, to burn for him/her alone. I swear always to be honest with him/her, and to behave honorably in all my dealings with him/her. I understand that should I act in a dishonorable manner, my Lord/Lady has the right to dismiss me from service.

I hereby give into his/her hands my heart and all my needs, flowing forth without walls or defenses. I swear to value the well-being of my Lord/Lady _____ above all

others on this Earth, and to show this value with respect, obedience, and devotion to his/her happiness and ease of living.

I hereby give into his/her hands my flesh, my blood, and the work of my hands at his/her disposal. I swear that I shall strive always for excellence in my service to him/her. I shall perform whatever commands he/she wishes with alacrity and obedience, so long as these commands do not place me in physical, legal, or ethical jeopardy, or conflict with the edicts of my Gods.

I hereby give into his/her hands the responsibility and fulfillment for my own sacred path of service. I swear to honor my Lord/Lady _____ as the living sacred embodiment of He/She That Receives All Sacrifice, and my service to him/her as a manifestation of the Will of the Gods. I will aid him/her on his/her path of Sacred Mastery in any way that I can.

I swear that I will abide by this oath until my Lord/Lady chooses to release me from it, or I die, or the world ends. May all the Gods witness my oath.

Lord/Lady:

By this oath, I accept the gift of _____, and accept him/her into my service.

I honor his/her gift of rulership over Mind and Breath. I swear to always use my best judgment regarding my treatment of him/her and his/her needs, and to listen as well as command. I will strive for insight into that which beats like caged wings in my hands.

I honor his/her gift of rulership over Will and Spirit. I swear always to be honest with him/her, to behave honorably in all my dealings with him/her, and to be a model of that honor. I understand that should I act in a dishonorable manner, he/she has the right to leave my service, for one cannot honorably serve a dishonorable master. I will strive to be worthy of that which burns in my hands.

I honor his/her gift of Heart and Need. I swear to make this path of service a tool with which he/she can perfect

himself/herself and not a weapon to beat him/her down with. I will be gentle with that which lies vulnerable in my hands.

I honor his/her gift of flesh, blood, and all abilities that go with them. I swear to reward excellence with appreciation, loyalty with love, and failure with useful response. I will never give any command which places him/her in physical, legal, or ethical jeopardy, or stands between him/her and the edicts of his/her gods. I will honor with meaningful work that which is to be the extension of my hands.

I honor his/her gift of his/her path of sacred service. I swear to honor him/her as the living sacred embodiment of All That Is Willingly Sacrificed In The Service Of The Life Force, and his/her service to me as an embodiment of the Will of the Gods. I will strive always to rule with justice and mercy, and to make that which is placed into my hands a tool for my own betterment, on my own path of Sacred Mastery and Rulership.

I swear that I will abide by this oath until my servant chooses to ask for his/her release, or until I die, or until the world ends. May all the Gods witness my oath.



Part V:
Guardians
of the Gate

Guardians of the Gate: Patron Deities

I thought I was done with this book, and then the Goddess showed up and told me otherwise.

I'd written and collected so many pieces about pain, and power, and service, and all the things that human beings can do to one another in the name of the Gods. What I'd forgotten, apparently, was the Gods themselves... and She, my patron deity, my Owner, my Dominatrix, reminded me sharply of that. Done? Do you hear that thumping noise? That's my head banging repeatedly against the wall.

To be in relationship with a Deity, even from afar, is to partake in an irrevocable power dynamic. No matter how well They treat you, at the end of the day They are Gods and we are Not. It is a relationship in which we have little or no control, in which we feel awe and love and resentment and all manner of ambivalent things, in which we kneel, in which we are humbled, in which we connect with something greater than ourselves and learn about what extends beyond mortal boundaries. We are all submissive in the presence of the Divine Will, and anyone who thinks otherwise hasn't had to deal with Divine Will up close and personal, day in and day out.

Most Neo-Pagans do not have intimate relationships with their Deities. They honor them, they revere them, they celebrate them, they ask favors of them, they pray to them. Maybe they get an answer sometimes, or a visitation, or an inspiration. Maybe a Deity shows up when they're most in

need of a helping hand or a boot to the head, but they mostly live their lives without constant divine interference. That's all right. Most human beings live like that, and that's the way it should be.

This does mean that when someone has a sudden up-close experience with Deity, they often do not expect the feelings that happen when we touch the Gods. They may be frightened by them, or resent them, or feel as if this humbling is not right, a trespassing on their dignity and inviolability. They may not like being automatically forced into the submissive role, especially if they are control-freak types. They may run away, or fall into denial. There's not much that can be done about that. If the Gods are really invested enough in someone, they are capable of making their presence impossible to ignore. That those individuals can run away or be in denial for long means that they are being allowed that choice.

However, there have always been the god-bothered, throughout time. If we study ancient history—and specifically the history and anthropology of Europe and central/western Asia—we find a very different attitude toward the Gods and spirits than modern Pagans embrace. Certain classes of priests, priestesses, and other religious workers were said to have been “chosen” by their patron deity, and it was generally accepted that for the rare few who were chosen, there was no refusing the call. To do so would merely anger the deities in question, which could be fatal. In many tribal shamanic traditions, especially in the aforementioned areas, shamans were often chosen nonconsensually by the spirits, and if they refused to take up the job, they were stricken with insanity and/or death.

Being a spirit-worker, especially in certain European-based traditions, is very different from being a priest or priestess, or a witch, or anything like that. In some traditions, it is very much like being a slave of the deity in question. The ancient Greeks had a word for that—*hierodule*, god-slave. Similarly, if one reads the census tablets in ancient Crete, one sees tallies for freemen and for slaves; freemen all had certain rights that slaves did not. However, there was another category referred

to as “doera”, or slaves of the Gods; they had all the rights of freemen, but were listed in the census as slaves. I have a strong feeling that I know what that category looks like in the modern world.

In fact, one of the things in the back of my head that pushed me to look into BDSM was the fact that the older I got, and the further down this path I was dragged, the more it felt to me like I was the slave of a *domme* far more powerful than myself, with no safe words and no chance of leaving. On some level, I thought I’d better look at these people who were doing it consensually, to each other, in a fulfilling way. I hoped that maybe it would give me a clue, somehow.

While the BDSM community did a lot for me in other areas—trained me to top safely, helped me immensely with leftover guilt about wanting to do these kinky things, and helped me to create a venue where I could design and offer some of my ritual ordeal work—it was difficult to look at the experiences of most consensual human slaves and relate them to my own situation. Relating it to nonconsensual slavery, historically or elsewhere in the world, was even more difficult; as far as I knew, those slaves were supposed to be wishing that their situation would vanish. What it did do, though, was to show me how much I wanted to be on the other end of that dynamic. I’m a natural alpha, and to lead others has always been part of my makeup. Some part of me felt like it ought to have servants, no matter how many times I would remind it that I was an egalitarian American living in the modern era (and with no money, to boot).

When I finally got the submissive servant who was right for me, I was moved by how he spoke about personal service to others. My own service has been directed at humanity, at groups of people; I do not have the right psychological makeup to serve under another. I continually found myself in the odd position of being grateful both that he was so content to serve another flawed human being, and that I wasn’t required to. In a very real sense, no human being would be good enough for me. That’s when the first light bulb went on: it’s a good thing that my top isn’t human, then, isn’t it?

It's especially difficult to be a dominant personality who has been made a god-slave. I don't come easily to the role at all. I rebel, I bitch, I struggle, I resent, I refuse to trust. But for some reason, many if not most of the hierodules that I know are dominant, willful people who constantly struggle with the regular submission required of them in their relationships with their patrons. It seems that much of the work that we are required to do would crush gentler souls, so they pick combative ones and bring us to heel. Certainly I fought for years, for all the good it did me. She'd just crush me again, until I did what I was supposed to do. There was no malice in it at all; Death isn't malicious. Just a sense of "I don't have time for this. Do the job already. Don't make me force you. Fine, have it your way then; I'll enforce that order."

I'm a top, a dom, a slave-owner without a submissive bone in my body. Yet I was chosen, grabbed up, and thoroughly enslaved by the Death Goddess of my ancestors, Hela. She tore me apart, killed me, brought me back, and installed a cosmic shock collar on me. She also opened me to the Cosmos and the Gods. I have gone through many stages of anger and resentment, feeling violated and used, and finally – mostly – moving past it. Now that I've come far enough to see that Her goals are good, and Her advice about what I should do has never yet been proven to be wrong, I trust Her more. I'm still resentful over the lack of free will, but I am learning that there is a certain comfort in knowing that you are doing exactly what it is that you're meant to do with your life, and that you are the tool of something greater than yourself, used to make an impact on the world. It's just that the "used" part is hard. I know that eventually that will mean "used up".

When I fish for the big cosmic reasons – why me, why not someone else? – what comes to me vaguely, over and over, are the twin concepts of Dire Necessity and Lawful Prey. I know that those labels are confusing, but they are the best that I can do to explain such fuzzy concepts, ideas that seem too big to be contained in my head. I suppose I should first start out by saying that the Gods are not above the laws of the Universe; they are bound by rules just as we are. Consequence happens

to them, too. Therefore, the taking of god-slaves cannot be done frivolously or to no purpose. The first principle—that of Dire Necessity—seems to indicate that it can be done only when there is some hole to be filled, some job to be done, that would benefit the greater good in a manner so as to outweigh (at least in a larger cosmic sense) the needs of the individual.

The second concept is even more difficult to explain in words. It just seems that some people are the Lawful Prey of the Gods for some reason, and others are not. Freely offering your oath to a deity, having the deity accept, having them offer at least once to free you, and your subsequent refusal, makes you Lawful Prey and they are allowed to take away your rights and choices. Also, a small number of us seem to be Lawful Prey without our consent, perhaps due to karmic debts or other reasons, about which I'm not certain. However it goes, I was Hela's Lawful Prey from the moment of my birth, while my sister, for example, was not.

Maybe it's because I'm just stubborn and cussed, and this was the only thing that would really work on me. Certainly, from what I remember of my past lives, I was not a nice person. Actually, from what I know of who I am now, I am not a nice person. It is quite possible that the world is better off with me on a short leash. Perhaps I need a top who is bigger and meaner—and less humanly flawed—than any flesh person could be, to keep me in line.

It was hard enough to have to take all her orders and do them, a process that entirely changed my life, my body, my relationships, everything I am and do. The hardest of all, though, was being turned into a Horse. This is a term that we neo-Pagans have borrowed from the Yoruba religions—Voudoun, Santeria, Umbanda, Candomble, and Palo-Mayombe, all of whom practice the rite of god-possession. In this practice, part of the deity's consciousness comes down and inhabits the body of a human being, using it to walk about and interact with others. The mind of the human being in question may be completely unconscious, or in a vague,

faraway state unable to move the body. It is referred to as being ridden, and thus the body-lender is known as a Horse.

The horsing began in my early twenties, and frightened me. I took refuge for a few months with an Umbanda house, and they taught me what was going on, and how to handle it. Unlike the neo-Pagans I was simultaneously dealing with—who neither understood how much deeper horsing is than simply Drawing Down The Moon or channeling, and who understood the nonconsensual nature of it even less—the Umbandistas were not in the least fazed. They didn't know who these spirits were, but they could answer my questions about what was happening. From them, I learned to negotiate time and space and setting. I also learned that simply refusing out of hand led to the Gods choosing when and where, and that was worse than simply making an appointment and showing up. It seemed to be an important thing for Hela to “rent” me out to other deities as a horse, although She had a strict list of who could ride and what they were allowed to do. Due to Her attention, I have never felt unsafe or at risk of injury during horsing. That's not the scary part.

Horsing is an frighteningly submissive activity. Horses who are comfortable with submission have even referred to it as somewhat erotic. I hated it. Being the control freak that I am, it felt like a terrible violation. Giving over your body to a human top, even for a short while, doesn't take away your volition. You may be bound, but you can still feel your body. You're still present, at least if they're playing even somewhat safely. To be a horse is to give over your flesh to a greater Power that will use it, walk around in it, experience whatever food and drink it wills (which is why I'm glad I have a Boss to set limits on that), and perhaps even have sex in it, as some of the European deities expect.

During this time, maybe you're in the equivalent of the passenger seat, giving advice on driving your vehicle. This, however, is rare. More likely you're in the back seat behind safety glass, and even more likely you're unconscious and locked in the trunk, as it is. When it's over, you feel like you've been run over by a truck. If you don't do it in a safe context

where people know what's going on, you may be at risk for getting flak from the actions of the deity—after all, why should people believe any of this? It's a frightening act of submission and trust.

Some god-slaves have permissive owners who let them do whatever they want with their lives as long as certain activities get done. Some are terribly strict, leveling taboos on food, clothing, sexual activity, jobs, possessions, living quarters, and all manner of other things. I have restrictions on what food and chemicals I put into my body, what fibers my clothing may be made from, where I may live, and what I may accept as payment for shamanic work. I have two divinely arranged relationships, and I am not allowed to leave or divorce them. I am not allowed to hold any job that can't be interrupted on demand by my shamanic work, which means no regular job.

Some god-slaves are also god-wives, god-concubines, or otherwise erotically involved with their owners. I know of more than a few who are married to their deity, and many (not all) are monogamous with their divine spouse, which entails virtual celibacy in human relationships. My relationship with Lady Death, however, had always been structured more along a mother-child relationship, so when she finally came to me in an erotic guise, I rejected her and ran away. That, I couldn't bring myself to face. *Anything else you may demand of me, Lady, but please, please not that.* I was confused at what role I might be expected to play, and I could not see myself, the third-gender shaman that I had become, being possibly forced into a heterosexual role with a female goddess of any kind. Not to mention that I was just stubborn and cussed, and if there was one thing that I could withhold, it was that.

Surprisingly, for the first and only time, She shrugged and let me off. (Did I sense a little twinge of hurt from Her corner? No, that was impossible, Lady Death could not possibly feel hurt by the likes of me. I must have been imagining things.) *Fine*, She seemed to say. *If you will not let me have at your sexuality, I'll send over someone else.* She had lent me temporarily to other gods for training, so there was precedent. She had even done it across pantheons (according to Her, I had to be

cognizant of many different traditions, in order to better understand the people who came to me) so I shouldn't have been surprised when Baphomet showed up...but I was.

He came to me at a Pagan sex gathering like an oncoming hurricane, forcing his way into my body with a ride that felt like a rape... and running my poor flesh up and down hills as if I didn't have bad knees and ankles and back. A slightly-male-of-center androgyne, unashamed and blatantly sexual, with a keen nose for sniffing out people's secret fears and issues, he took the time while in my head to restructure my sexuality a good deal. To this day I'm still stumbling over things that he did for me, with Lady Death's approval.

For instance, I cannot enter a currently-in-use temple to the Love Goddesses, nor approach a sacred prostitute while they are "on duty". At first I saw this as some sort of punishment. Then I discovered that the reason I wasn't supposed to come in contact with the sacred prostitutes was that I would knock them out of their Temple headspace, which they required to do their job well. Then I discovered that after they were done doing their job, they would come to me to come back to themselves, so that the job didn't eat them...and what had seemed like a punishment turned out to be just another service, another way in which I had become a useful tool.

My sadism was harnessed; it was after he first rode me that I suddenly became obsessed with framing BDSM as a spiritual path. (In a very real sense, he is the godfather of this book.) Before Baphomet, people approached me as a top and asked me to hurt them for fun. Maybe I acquiesced, maybe I wasn't in the mood. After Baphomet, people came to me as a priest, asking for rites of passage, or spiritual ordeals, and I found that I couldn't say no to them. It had become my Job. I did keep a few close friends with whom I could play recreationally, but little by little I found myself herded from play-top to Ordeal Master.

I learned to look at someone and see their demons, to talk to them in ways that coaxed those demons to the surface. I learned to design rituals for those demons. I learned to use energy on people in ways that would horrify the average Reiki

master or bodyworker. Yet always, always, while wielding this power, I would remember that I was a slave, more even than the person cowering at my feet. If I forgot for a moment, one of Them would be there, reminding me.

Later, I would meet other god-slaves who were madly in love with their owners, and I would ask my Boss "Why didn't you just make me love you madly, and then I would have done anything for you?" The answer came vaguely, like a grumble, and it reminded me that Love was not something that Death goddesses could bestow. "Besides," she said, "I know that you'll do all sorts of stupid things for Love. You need to learn to do them because they are Right Doing, not because of any emotions you may or may not be feeling for someone." Ah. Right.

Right Doing. I am Shiva, Destroyer of Worlds. I take someone's comfortable, stale, rotted little world and rip it apart, at their request. And Shiva must always have a Kali to knock him down, to rip out his guts, to wipe the floor with him, to remind him of the reason why he does all those asceticisms. A Lady Death to keep him in line, because that kind of power will change you. In order to wield it properly, I need to be incredibly arrogant, amazingly sure of myself. If I falter, those who depend on me lose trust. In order to keep that arrogance from eating me, I need Her. I don't think there's a human dom/me in existence who could make me admit that they were better than me and that I ought to submit one fingertip to them, but Lady Death herself... You can't argue with that one. This is a Goddess who makes everyone but Fate back down. One rebellious mortal is hardly difficult for her, even though I try my cussed best not to make it easy.

My name is Raven Brangwyn Kaldera. That was not the name that I was born with. It was the name She gave me, suddenly, one day. You have to understand that this was not done like a traditional ritual naming, where the name is given and you recognize it, or try to grow into it. It was more like a split-second brainwashing. One moment I had the perfectly good name that my parents had given me, and the next one, that name was no longer mine. It wasn't even a name that I

could connect with my past. It had no more connection to me than the name of a character in a book, or a rock star I'd heard of. It sounded unfamiliar. This new name was my name, it always had been, even though it hadn't existed in my head a moment ago. I was not unaware of this. It was maddening. It still is, when I stumble across some piece of subtle divine brainwashing, some thing that I am now compelled to do or not do, that came seemingly out of nowhere. I shake my fist and curse Her, and then I do as I'm told, because I can't do otherwise.

People think that my name is cool, or even pretentious. Raven, that's the bird of death and oracle and magic, traditionally the messenger-bird of dark deities. Brangwyn is a family name, meaning "white raven"...the repetition bothered me a bit, but I could accept it on the grounds of ancestry. Kaldera is another ancestral name, from the Romany Kalderash, borrowed from the Spanish "caldera" —cauldron— and meaning potmaker. Sounds spooky and Pagan, yes? Read it differently, like it really is. Carrion-eating messenger-boy potslave. That's my name. That's who I am now, for her. As for the repetition of the first and middle name...well, a lover figured it out one day. "Your name is a taxonomy!" she said. "Raven, species white—you are blond—variety, ah... uh... volcanic?"

"Potslave," I said, thinking of Gwion Bach who minded Cerridwen's cauldron and ended up the great bard Taliesin, but not until he got eaten first. But it pushed the message home—I'm a thing, according to my name. A taxonomy by Her very precise science, neatly labeled...or a job title. It reminded me of real-life D/s dom/mes who named their slaves things like Boymeat or Piglet or Chew-Toy or Boobs or Boy 1, Boy 2, and Boy 3. Cool and spooky indeed. Right. Sure.

As this process continues, She shapes my soul and astral body more and more, and each time it is a little less of the human being I once was, and more of something else. Her tool. At first I liked it, because I didn't like being human. Being human sucks, in many ways. I would rail at her: "If you're going to take away pieces of my humanity, why don't you

take away the ones I don't like? Why don't you remove that imperfection, or that difficulty, or that scar?"

And She, being Death who never wastes anything—not even the fingernails of corpses—said, "Those parts are useful to me. Besides, eventually you'll be glad of them."

And, as so often happens, it turned out to be true. As more and more "normality" of human functions left my life, I shifted into panic. I did a complete turnabout and begged her not to take all of me away, not to leave me with no part of the human being I had been originally, even if that human being was flawed. (Lucky for me, Lady Death has no malice and never laughs at you when you finally, humiliatingly, come around.) I am grateful for every part She left me, even the flaws. Especially the ability to personally (rather than impersonally, transpersonally) love other flawed human beings. I used to think that Love was a big pain in the ass, maybe even too much trouble to be worth it. Boy, was I an idiot. Now, it's how I measure how much of Me is still left to me.

Her latest great gift to me was the gift of my own boy, my own slave. (I can only imagine what deals She made with the Love Goddesses, whom I laughingly refer to as Divine HR, to get me someone so perfectly custom-built for my needs literally dumped on my doorstep.) Even this served multiple purposes for Her. It got me the help I needed to do my work properly—a devoted assistant who would take even strange, archaic orders without arguing, who would help me with odd rites where more than one pair of hands was needed. It got me a source of life force I could draw off of. It got me someone to care for me as my health has slowly failed. It got me someone who would believe in me, no matter what. It got me all the sex I could possibly have the time for. It kept me grateful—and it gave me a living, walking example of how a good slave acts, an example I value greatly. There's always a stick in there among the carrots, but it's a stick I can't refuse.

Perhaps, eventually, my own human property will be able to teach this lousy god-slave how to do it right. I can only be awed by such a gentle, caring, loving delivery of the lesson,

especially coming from such a cold, implacable Goddess. Would I go back? Considering that this would mean giving up everything that goes with it, and becoming an average person with no Gods in their life, screaming into the void and wondering if anyone heard them... no. Not for a minute. As much as I resent not having been allowed to choose, I have paradoxically come to a point where if it was offered to me again, I would choose it for myself. Say it: no pain, no gain. We may laugh, but it's one of the Laws of the Universe, which does manage to be loving and implacable at the same time.

Kind of like a really good Dom/me. You know. Like that.

—*Raven Kaldera, Helgrenze*

God as Dominant:

My Journey

by Jennifer Hunter

Growing up, I understood the mainstream idea of God as a sort of stern grandfatherly figure up in heaven who watched us and made sure we stayed in line. But I never believed in him. It just didn't seem plausible. And when you don't believe in a God, it's irrelevant what that God may want from you. I knew there were people who said that God wanted me to follow Jesus, or God wanted me to keep kosher, but I always figured until he told me himself what he wanted, I wouldn't give a shit. It seemed to me that all that talk about God's will was based on textual analysis, faith, politics, and guesswork. And anyone who said he heard the voice of God was obviously loony.

Well, I started hearing the voice of Deity around age 16...and this experience of Deity was so different from the cranky old guy in the sky that it seemed wrong to describe it with the same word. I was a social outcast, smart, creative, and gifted with some amount of psychic ability. When I started a Wiccan practice, I realized that the Goddess was immediately accessible to me, when I reached out to her with my quieted mind. I can't say whether she was a truly independent and conscious being, an aspect of a unified Divine, or the voice of my higher/older self. It didn't really matter, and I didn't try too hard to figure it out; she gave me what I needed. I didn't hear the Lady's voice with my ears, but rather with my mind, as thoughts and phrases that weren't my own. My mother,

atheist that she is, thought I was schizophrenic. I stopped telling her about it and she stopped worrying.

Although my version of Wicca was gender-balanced theologically, I turned more towards the Goddess at that time, searching for a mother figure who would be more capable of caring for me than my own mother, who was single, unsupported, and depressed. But I was an adolescent; I didn't want one more being telling me what to do. So the Goddess was mostly a guide, and a gentle source of unconditional acceptance. I know now that the Divine is much more than that—it can be commanding and limiting, frightening, chaotic, and dark. I don't know whether she was speaking to me in a way I could accept, or whether I was only letting certain bits in.

In college, as I needed less of a mother figure, I began to relate more to the God, the Horned One, but not as his daughter—as his lover. I hung out with a lot of feminist women's studies majors, and I kept feeling like something of an oddball because I was so much more powerfully drawn to masculine energy than feminine. I began to experiment with sex magic and the Great Rite, as I allowed the Goddess to enter me and make love to her consort through my partner. At the same time, I was also discovering my submissive side, enjoying pleasing my lovers and preferring it when they took control. So I craved a dominant partner, yet my relationship with the Gods was fairly egalitarian (at least as much as it can be, between mortal and immortal).

Following the form of British Traditional Wicca (and certainly also society's messages), I spent my young adulthood searching for a partner to complete me. From adolescence, I wanted a Pagan partner, someone to walk the path with me. In my late twenties I realized I wanted a sexually dominant partner, someone who could give me what I needed in bed. Yet all along, I would settle: My partners would be Pagan but not sexually dominant, or dominant but not Pagan. My last significant relationship was with a partner who suited me perfectly, except that he was an atheist. So when that relationship ended, I swore that my next partner would be

both sexually dominant and Pagan, if it took me my whole life to find him. And I realized that these two qualities I sought could be related; I realized that what I wanted was a Pagan partner who would also embody the Horned One for me and allow me to worship him through his body.

It's been a very difficult time, two years so far. I've had family, friends, and indeed complete strangers telling me that I'm being too picky. I've had to question how important it is to me to share my spirituality with a partner, and how important it is to me to have a partner who can play the dominant role. I've wondered if this is all just an excuse to avoid intimacy and getting hurt. I regularly have to assure myself that—whether or not I absolutely *need* a Pagan and dominant partner—I deserve to get what I want.

Yet all along there has been a deep and powerful truth gliding beside me like a lifeboat: I already have a dominant who walks my path. In fact, he *is* my path. He is the Horned God himself.

It's interesting that for years, although I would willingly and joyfully surrender control to another human being, I could never imagine surrendering control to a deity. "Islam" means "submission", and like the other Abrahamic religions, it espouses the idea that we'd better follow God's rules as seen in his holy book, or else. We submit to God because we have to. This isn't submission as I understand it—it's slavery. But after many years of exploring erotic submission, I have begun to understand the release and relief that comes with the *choice* of letting go, and letting someone else be in charge—it's a kind of freedom, paradoxically. And this changed the way I see the Divine.

I believe that God is the source of all, also known as YHWH, the Tao, the Divine, the consciousness of all existence. I also believe that it's incomprehensible, except in fleeting ecstatic moments for the mystically adept. I believe that this force is like a river, with direction and purpose. And I began to realize that in the same way that we can't experience true intimacy with a partner unless we open up and trust, so we can't truly get close to the Divine unless we choose to give up

some control and move with the river rather than swimming against it.

Of course the Horned One is not the same as the Source of All, but I believe that he, like all Gods, is a path leading to that Source. And he's my favorite path.

I was at a Pagan festival a couple of years ago when I realized my relationship was ending. I wondered if I would ever find my consort, my magical partner. Walking through the ritual field, I stopped alone at the maypole. I intended to say a brief hello to the God, the Horned One, as the sacred phallus, fertile force of nature. As I placed my hands on the sides of the pole, it was as if I had plugged myself into an electric current. My body was filled with vibrant sexual energy from cunt to mouth. He was present, within me, real, alive. And I realized that whether or not I had a physical consort, that the Horned One was there as my permanent partner, any time I wanted to call on him. He wants me as his priestess.

The skeptical side of me calls the Horned One my animus, my superego, my higher self, and at the most pessimistic times, a complete fabrication. But when I allow myself to quiet and listen, the presence I feel and the words I hear in my mind are powerful enough that I don't care where they come from, and I allow myself to believe in them.

I know many Pagans who have a special relationship with a particular God or Goddess, but I imagine it differs to what extent they see themselves as the servant of that deity. I imagine it also depends on the deity, since some are more suited to giving direction and control than others. Since the Wiccan Horned God is an amalgam of several different deities (Pan, Cernunnos, Herne, Ba'al), he's something of a modern construct. Because of this, I'm not as restricted to historical accuracy when I imagine his qualities as someone would be who works with a specific historical deity.

I haven't yet fully explored the possibilities of this relationship. I have difficulty setting aside time for offerings, worship, meditation, and so on. I'm grateful that he has not been very demanding, instead patiently waiting until I am ready to serve him properly. I'd also like to do more research

into the various specific Horned Gods to learn more about their personalities and preferences. (Greedy slut that I am, as far as I'm concerned, the more doms the better.)

I've been a polytheist for many years, always believing in the many Gods that humanity has imagined/discovered. But I feel that my knee-jerk reaction against submission to a deity prevented me from really getting close to any of them. Yet I've found that service and submission are a mighty effective way to let them *into* us. The fringe benefits are serenity and contentment. I'm grateful that I found this path, it's only too bad that it took me so many years to figure it out.



Chain of Command Part II

by Lydia Helasdottir

When I say that Hela, my Goddess, owns me, I mean it. I am her slave, her tool, her lover, her thing. I am madly in love with her, and she controls my heart. She ripped it out once, and replaced it differently, and from that time on, when she's angry with me, I feel her skeletal fingers constrict around it.

I am shunned in many communities. I've been shunned by the Pagan community for doing BDSM. I've been shunned by the BDSM community for doing hook-sports, and for dragging Pagan religion in all the time. I've been shunned by the hook-sports community for trying to make it into Pagan ritual, and for doing dominance and submission. Not that I really care, but bridging these small communities has been difficult.

I entitled my other essay "Chain of Command", because that's how I see my relationship to her. I have come to grasp that human beings carry a spark of Source, but it's packaged and layered with tons of matter. I see that Source stuff as white, because it has all the colors. We humans are tiny carriers of that, but we are only carriers. To me, Deity is a very pure and strong manifestation of one of the colors, or a mix of the colors—sort of like specialist version of the white stuff. So if we were to see a Deity as, let's say, green—or in Hela's case, deep purple or aubergine—Hela manifests aubergine fully, one hundred per cent, but it's only aubergine. My white stuff has got aubergine in there, in a minuscule amount clothed in many layers of non-divine stuff. If I were to fully ascend to a higher level and be one with the Source, I would outrank her,

but if I went there, at that point there would be no more Me. I would no longer exist as myself.

In order to exist individually as myself, I have to agree to serve, learn from, and submit to Gods, who are the pure, specialist forms of the colors. So when I serve Deity, I do it as a human being. Her job, then, is to force me—because I tend to have to be forced—up the evolutionary ladder. She is the closest thing I have to a pure manifestation of the Source that I can reach and interact with, because the Source itself won't talk to you directly as a human being.

And so she is absolutely my Top, and I do as she tells me, but I do that because both of us are manifested from the same Source, and that Source in the end has the final say. It's the natural order of things that until your soul has reached that state of purity, you need a manifestation that you can grab onto in order to get you there. Her job is to purify me in order to help me grow and ascend, and to be my point of reference, my connection for interaction with the divine. My job, among others, is to be a point of connection for people who cannot yet directly interface with a God or Goddess, just as She is my connection because I cannot directly interface with the Source.

So when I do her work, I strive to be Her embodied. The people I work with may need something done to their bodies or their energy systems that she finds it hard to do from up there. And because I have that spark in me, and they have it in them, She can work through me on them, if I let her do it. If my own problems don't get in the way.

That's the most difficult part for me, in being both a human top and a god-slave—you want to take the glory for what you've done to someone, and it just isn't about you. When I get egotistical about it, she kicks my ass. Actually, the practice that I find most useful for staying humble is to get something big inserted into my ass. That sounds crazy, but it works. All my complaints and prevarications—I don't want to be doing this job, my life sucks, I'm tired, my house is messy, it's raining—it all goes away when you get something big enough stuck up your ass. It reminds you which end of the

stick you're on, and that's important, because we god-slaves can't go thinking that it's all about us.

The other thing that she forces on me is the running. I'm an ultramarathon runner, and that's one of the disciplines that she puts me through. Even if it's uncomfortable, I have to be able to run a long distance at any time. I have to be able to go 70 hours without sleep, so that I can run for days if necessary, and I have to be able to use it to put myself in an altered state and meditate. It's a warrior discipline, as I've been a warrior-slave for many years.

However, I've just recently started to graduate to the Queen level, after being first a hunter and then a warrior, and that's even harder. There's way more responsibility. If you're a warrior and you do something dumb and get killed, well, after the bodies are cleaned up the tribe carries on. But if you fail as a ruler, the land fails. The Earth fails. Children aren't born properly. Crops don't grow. Fish are born deformed. There are far-reaching disasters. I have to manifest a Queen-level responsibility for everything that I do. Soldiers can say, "I'm just taking orders," and warriors can refuse to fight, but the Queen cannot refuse to give audience to the people. A warrior can just walk off the field if it gets too hard for them, but a ruler is never off duty. Graduating to Queen or King in her service means that she gives you a job where you will be making a lot of decisions yourself, and that you are required to always get it right.

It means that when I travel, or I'm in a business meeting, there is a particular protocol of interaction at the beginning, which is necessary. After that, we can all be loose and friendly, but until it's done, these are Regents talking, and the handshake is necessary. This means that I have to call people on their dishonesty and their disrespect, even in a corporate boardroom—and I have to do in a way that will actually be effective, not one that will just get me dismissed. I have to take responsibility for everything around me, which is a big deal. When people come to my house, there's protocol. When I go to theirs, I adhere to protocol. My home is my court. That means that I tend not to get much sleep, especially when visiting

places where there's no Regent, no powerful personality who runs things, because people want to ask questions of the Queen.

Hela seems to have many different training programs for different people, but if you go all the way to the final stage—and most don't get there—it's the King or Queen level. Why? She isn't a deity that one would associate strongly with rulers, in most of the lore... but if you look for it, you can find traces of it. I see it in the French Gothic romanticization of Death, the stories of the Pale Rider, the Knight on the Black Horse, in the Death and the Maiden tales. You see it in stories—it's Death Herself who comes for the nobles in person. Everyone else has to get out there and walk the Hel road on foot.

But the real mystery lies in her appearance. She is a Goddess of rot and decay, half beautiful and half horrifyingly ugly...and as such she represents the rot and decay that lies in the bosom of royalty. The work of the peasants revolves around Life, but the Queen or King lives a cycle connected to the land, and one that includes Death, so they must embody the Death part as well. Warriors cause death to people because they have to, but the Kings and Queens symbolize Death as part of the natural cycle of the year. Thus royalty—and dominants—are Her manifested hand, inflicting pain and fear and "little deaths" because it has to be done.

On the other hand, one of Her tools is humiliation, bringing down the powerful. My Goddess seems to prefer to seize up strong, dominant people as Her slaves, and then bring them to heel. She has an unbelievable ability to cause humility in the most proud. And, really, if you are King or Queen, at the top of the food chain and wielding great power, you need that. If there is any deity that I can think of who is most needful, especially in Western cultures, to take charge of important and powerful people and keep them in line, it is the Goddess of Death and Fear and Pain and Humility. Queen Elizabeth I, the Virgin of England, embodied that well. So does the cycle of Shiva and Kali—Shiva's dance can destroy the world, so he must submit to Kali.

Part of leadership is coldly seeing people as a tool, and doing right by them by finding them the right job to serve in. To do that right, you have to be very aware of yourself as a tool, wielded and sharpened and honed by someone greater—and colder—than yourself, to do the work that you do best. Hela keeps me in line, keeps me humble, keeps me remembering what it is to be used, so when I use others, I will do it right.

The Bread Of Life

by Skian McGuire

I am not submissive. I do not believe in God. Nevertheless, She is my Femme Bitch Top. I have bound myself to do whatever She bids me. I pray and whine and sing Her praises, doing as I'm told only reluctantly, in a manner that can only be called half-assed. I am a poor tool, and I deserve the back of Her hand, which I receive not nearly as often as I receive Her blessings.

I spread my legs for Her, too. Every orgasm I have is dedicated to Her, like a smarmy love song on a late night country-western radio show. She's turned me into Her cross-dressed butch-ass Patsy Cline, *Crazy* for Her. She knows my cheatin' heart, but it's not like She's ever been faithful to me. She's as loose as a honky-tonk angel, and I'm as passionately in love with Her as I was with the woman who stood in Her place, when last I had a human mistress. I don't know if I'll ever have another. She's a jealous cunt, my Femme Bitch Top. I ought to throw Her over. I ought to walk away and not look back, but I can't. She's all there is.

I am a monotheist, if I believe in God at all. My God is the God of Light, who created Light and let it shine forth on the formless dark, who became the Light of the World. I knelt to Her in my Catholic childhood, but I called Her Jesus, then. Now I sometimes think Her name is Brigid, which I have learned is not a name at all, but means something like, "Exalted One." Once, when I had determined that the only thing that would do to straighten out my life would be to do a

ritual giving myself to Her, I asked Her what name She wanted, since up to that point I had only ever called Her my Lady. She answered, with amusement, "All of them."

So She is Sekhmet, Ishtar, Artemis and Aphrodite, Pele, Amaterasu; She is Mut and Gaia and Devi; She is Parvati and Demeter and Kwan-Yin. All these, a thousandfold and a thousand-thousand, maiden, mother and crone, sun and moon, earth, heaven and the deep, life and death, and I am one poor human without all the time in the world. She had to be content with the names that were in the stories I loved and in my own Irish blood: Anu and Danu and Medb and Badb and Macha, Eriu and Banba and Fódla and Boann and the Cailleach, and of course, Brighid. Brighid whose name tolls like a bell more distant than the church bells of my Catholic childhood, but just as lovely and more fearful. Brighid who was the Lady of the Shore, the Goddess of the In-Between Places.

If She is Brighid, She's the feminine God of fire, and of smithcraft, and healing, and poetry, patron of the poet-seers called *filidh*, who were bards and more than bards. She was once the patron of midwives, also, as Her namesake Saint Brigid is, now, of whom it is said that she was the midwife and foster mother of Jesus, in the loopy dreamtime that the Celtic Christians invented for themselves so as not to set their old gods too far aside and leave them lonely. But my God is nobody's nurturing mother. No, for me She has a hammer in Her hand and sparks are flying. Though it might be said that, as She casts me into Her fire and beats me into a new shape, She is the midwife of my transformation, while I leave the life of a woman behind me to become, as best I can, a man.

My life seems to be all about the body, these days – my own body, which is a strange and uncomfortable thing for me, in spite of the fact that the life of the body is nearly all I have ever written about. I learned at an early age to block out the suffering of injury and illness, and I have spent the rest of my existence ignoring pain, ignoring fatigue and hunger, going untouched by another human for weeks and months on end. When I write about sex and pain and my experience of nature,

and the utterly physical, utterly homely love of dogs, I find myself trying to make words of something I don't understand in the way that people do, who have always been at home in their bodies. Now here I am at the beginning of a drastic physical change, paying minute attention to details of my physical being in a way that I would have dismissed, sneeringly, as narcissism before. Has my face grown a few more whiskers? Am I getting more muscular? Is my voice a bit lower today than it was yesterday? The process of sex reassignment is so completely grounded in the body and the senses, that I can't live a disembodied life anymore, even by default. It seems almost paradoxical now, that I have never been able to believe in anything except what I could touch and smell, while at the same time I discarded every aspect of my bodily existence that I had no time or space for.

Attraction and repulsion: my love of nature and my fascination with the alchemy of porn, where words on the page become the body's breath and sweat and juice and racing heart, versus the rejection of my own needs and pleasures and refusal to allow any mere physical deficiency to interfere with my ego's agenda. I have always believed that integrity - being one person only, whole and true - depended solely on the intellectual virtue of saying and doing and being only one thing, without hypocrisy or self-delusion. Now I see that having integrity - being only one person - means being one person in my body, too. That, after all, is the explicit purpose of gender transition: to make one's outer physical being congruent with the gendered self inside. I have to become one with the body I always hated not only because its needs were inconvenient and there was no comfort to be had for its suffering, but because it was a sex I didn't feel myself to be. I can't help but wonder, now, if this path I find myself herded along like cattle down a chute, is not just for God's purpose of making me into a tool more suitable to Her use, but also that I might be reunited with the body She gave me as a gift, which has been battered and broken and largely ignored, but hardly ever loved. I can't live a disembodied life anymore, and I cannot worship a disembodied God.

Sex has always been a gateway for me to a deeper life; so sex was the opening to the more particular embodiment of the God I know as She, my harridan lover and Femme Bitch Top, the jealous thing who wants my ass and won't take no for an answer. I didn't intend anything but to bottom again, after many years absence. While I'd always avoided femme tops for fear of calling up the ghost of my abusive mother, I knew how limited the selection of butch tops was, being one of the few myself, and I thought I'd better try to be flexible. That's all. I needed to bottom again. Needed it, okay?

Nothing happens by accident; or then again, maybe everything does. All I know is, that just as my female hormones hung a hard left into Crazyville, I found myself collared to someone who ripped the gateway of my soul off its hinges. I was a masochist who had never been particularly submissive before, and if I'd been looking for a dominant I could hardly have chosen one less suitable - a femme nearly 20 years younger than me, who could not (as it turned out) keep her own life in hand, never mind be responsible for the part of me that I in my besotted state gave her on a platter. Oh, but when I saw her I could not look at her for the shimmering of Presence she gave off, and then we were lovers. It felt to both of us like riding the roof of a freight car: not a trip I would have booked myself. Educational, they call such things. And who do you learn the most from, but someone as different from you as night is from day?

It could be called a miracle, or maybe a disaster; I finally came to the place from which I could not go on without undertaking transformation. My heart was ripped to pieces by grief and broken trust and the unmet needs my Mistress had opened my eyes to at last, and Light flooded in. I began the process of sex reassignment that I had thought about for years, and with no resources to fall back on, I turned my face toward God and let Her messages seep into my consciousness without words, as if they'd always been there.

Where my human Mistress had been the Goddess to me, I had no one but God Herself now. She told me to have patience, to trust my visions (which are Her gifts), to follow

my path of change. These were the easy things to accept, however difficult to put into practice. I don't have much patience unless there is an actual task at hand, and then I am absolutely dogged in my perseverance. Now I had nothing to do but wait, and I'd just failed at that rather miserably. I would rather trust a rabid dog - literally - than my own madness, which is what visions seem to me. And the path of change? I have a horrible feeling She doesn't mean just my body. And what is the way in which I am supposed to change? What is the example this Bitch Goddess set so painfully, demanding, bewilderingly, irritatingly, unmistakably in front of me? Ah, only a woman so completely involved in her descent into illness that she had nothing to spare for anyone but herself, even when it would have served her own healing to do so. I was in the grip of such passion that she might as well have been heroin; so I loved her and could not turn away. And she, this human mistress of mine? She said she loved me, but what she did was love herself. Zealously. Infuriatingly. Relentlessly.

Self-love is not something I have ever felt comfortable about. In other people, well, how could I tell someone they shouldn't love themselves? Though I'd rather they didn't do it to extreme, which, of course, I am the sole arbiter of, based on my own standards of how much is enough. And for myself - I can settle for acceptance. That's good enough. I've never really hated myself, after all - just the stupid female body I was stuck with. (And the irritating little voice whispers, *Isn't that your self, too?*)

Furthermore, it is clear that we humans are not here for our own individual happiness, or well-being even, since that would doom most of us to failure by no fault of our own (think plague and poverty and plain bad luck; really, how many of us get to be nice white middle-class Euro-Americans, after all?). There is no getting around the fact that the Goddess of Life is a profligate, spendthrift wastrel who couldn't care less about the fate of one individual *anything*, never mind us pathetic, clawless, toothless, hairless humans with an unfailing tendency to treat each other like cockroaches and the entire

world as our cesspool. And on a strictly ethical level, considering that we humans are nevertheless social animals designed to survive by participating in the larger group and to sacrifice ourselves when necessary for the good of that group, there is more intrinsic value in a selfless path than in one that harnesses the ego to service.

Isn't there?

Shut up. Shut up. Shut up!

And if it all weren't crystal clear on an intellectual level, there is the simple practical fact that you can't harness anything that isn't made for the job. An ego that's up to pulling any weight has to be started in childhood, or so it seems, like those Chinese basketball prodigies, or all the American Presidents who were cherished momma's boys. Me? Thanks to *my* mother, not a day in my life was allowed to pass without the idea that I was a mistake. That I was just like my father, who was a monster. That I ruined my mother's life. I was smart, yes; no doubt about that. My fine intellectual capacities had value. And as for my body: the broken ribs, the broken nose, the dislocated shoulder, the whatever-the-hell caused those wicked facial scars still visible after forty years – none of that happened. Whatever else my parents did or said that hurt so badly I can't remember it now – it didn't exist. But I got by. I had a sister who loved me, and dogs, and the old ladies in the neighborhood, and my own very fine mind, and I was tough. Nurture? What's that? Believing that you are worthy of nurture is not something that can come out of a clear blue sky at the age of 47.

Still: *Change*, She says. *Change*. *Change!* She tells me all kinds of things I don't want to hear, this Bitch Goddess of mine, the whispering voice that is not a voice, that might not be anything but my own Daemon of Self, not dead yet no matter how hard I try. Whoever She is, She plays some fucking dirty tricks. Like giving me a lover who made me aware of needs I never knew I had and then setting me up for a bad, bad fall. And now I have no one to give me what I need, and my stupid heart can't even begin to look for anyone who could, pathetically, disgustingly needy as I am. I want Her to

take away the ridiculous and painful feelings I can't get rid of on my own, so absolutely useless and pointless and hopeless, and She answers with riddles: *Does a tree ask the wind to stop blowing through it? Does the earth ask the rain not to fall?* Grudgingly, I admit: there is no fruitfulness without these things. Fruitfulness is what I am here for, to make art of the raw material life gives me, and sing Her praises with every line I write. But sometimes, I whine, the wind breaks the tree beyond repair, sometimes the rain washes the fertile earth away. *Oh, come on now*, She says. And I can't fool her. I'm tough.

But I must take care of myself. She tells me so. It's not just a fond exhortation, given in parting: "Take care of yourself!" "You too!" It's not, take *better* care of myself, since She knows that taking care of myself is not something I usually do at all. It is my Lady's command: *Take care of yourself*. And She means it: *Or else*.

I try. I have been cooking real meals for myself, such as I can: meatloaf and real mashed potatoes and a vegetable. Breakfast, every day. In the supermarket, I resolved to make myself a nice meat sauce to have with spaghetti and a salad, and thinking I've selected the organic version of jar sauce to do it with, feel ever so virtuous. When I get home, I find it's actually the chunky Primavera variety, which I would never pick – loaded with vegetables! I'd swear the Bitch is laughing up Her sleeve. Whining, reluctant, I do what She tells me.

It would be easier, if I at least had some example to look to, some reinforcement other than the arrogant and abusive people in my life who served themselves not because they loved themselves, but because they didn't know how to love anyone else. It would be easier if I could have a clue as to what She has in store, with this guitar playing (why the amp, Lady, and You know I can't sing?) and these ego exercises. It would be easier if I had a woman to love me, to actually desire the parts of me I don't want to own, someone who could be the Goddess incarnate to me, to touch and taste and smell. After all, it's my Lady of Changes Who gave me such a thing to need, isn't it? And I do need it, enough that if I ever have the

chance again I will not hold back by submitting only as much as I feel capable of. For this is another thing She has given me to know: we are called to do what we are called to do, whether we are capable or not. But I don't know that I will ever have any of these things! She tells me to wait, but how can I if I don't even know what I'm waiting for? She tells me She will take care of me, but no one has ever taken care of me, except catch-as-catch-can, just a little taste of it so as to know what I've been missing, and how can I believe when I don't even know if She exists?

I have no one to take care of me but me. I have no one to be the Goddess for me. *No one*, that horrible little voice whispers, *but me*.

What? Paradox and paradox; how can I be the Goddess for myself – that most feminine aspect of the Deity – when even now I am called to leave my womanhood behind, such as it was? I am the Goddess' consort, I am Her Hound, I am as masculine as my soul, as masculine as my body is not. Yes, I am called to make my transformation and become a man in the world as much as genetics and surgery and exogenous testosterone can make me. How can I be the Goddess to my own self?

It's like a drum beat pounded into my mind, silently, relentlessly. The body, this body, my body. My body. *My* body. Not just that impersonal, hated female thing, the body. My body. My body is the way in, the path to the heart of the riddle. I must love myself. It's no coincidence that the first undeniable effect of medical transition isn't the beard I long for or the tenor voice I've always wanted or the flat chest I can't afford to buy for some years yet. No, what I get first after waiting all these years is a humongous clit and such a major sex drive that all I want to do is masturbate three or four times a day. Self love? If there is a God, She must be laughing Her ass off.

It's embarrassing. It's ludicrous. It looks just like a passionate love affair, I realized after spending a good bit of my workday fantasizing about fucking myself when I got home. I buy myself little presents. I hardly leave the house.

Truth be told, I don't really have eyes for anyone else. Nobody else knows how to do me like I do. And Goddess, *how* I do.

I race home from work, aching for release, crazy to get something in my ass, get fingers on my clit, to fuck myself and come hard. I've never been so hot for any lover, never needed sex so badly. Partly, it's the simple physiological effect of the testosterone, of course. But beyond the drive of the hormone, I think my libido has been set loose by not needing to satisfy anyone else's expectations of how they might turn me on. All my adult life, I've worried that my sexual needs would be too much work for someone else, that I would tire a lover out or be boring. Sometimes I've even – well, not exactly *faked* orgasm – allowed a small climax to pass for something larger, just to be done with a lover's need to please me. I'm free of all that now.

Now I spend hours imagining just exactly how I want to be fucked, with what, how hard, oh God, yes. It's how She wants it. How She wants me. I am no more handsome or exciting or attractive than I ever was, but I feel that way now, amazed at this revelation, because in the end, it's the Goddess Herself who wants me. I drop my pants as soon as I walk in the door (*She* rips my pants off). I lube up my biggest cock, and it slides in my ass with hardly any effort at all (I am so open for Her). The dogs can wait for their dinner a little while longer; first I am going to fuck myself silly. I come like thunder on my own cock pounding into my ass. I am so hot for myself, I am so hot for Her, my Femme Bitch Top. I am so hot.

Afterward, I cook myself dinner, enjoying the just-fucked feeling as I move around the kitchen. It doesn't matter that I have only been fucked by myself. This is my spiritual practice, now: I pray with my body. I do Her service, and every orgasm is Hers. Through myself, I give Her the offerings of good food, good sex, a good night's sleep. Sometimes it's very precise orders She gives me. She wants me to play the guitar instead of working on a piece of writing, because I love it and She wants me to take a break. She wants me to read fun stuff! She wants me to take care of my fingernails so I can play guitar

better. She wants me to put a hot pack on my sore neck and take some ibuprofen, not just ignore the pain. She wants me stop having sex with people just because they want me to have sex with them. She wants me to take care of my *Self*: in fact, She insists.

That is what She is like as a top, demanding and insistent and not to be denied. I choose to submit to Her, willing to be whatever servile helpless thing She makes of me. *Really?* She asks, with ominous glee. I certainly can't trust Her, the capricious Bitch, but I put myself in Her hands, nonetheless. I'm crazy in love with Her, and instead of letting me have a real live lover by whom I may worship Her, She's given me only me. Everything, I have often said, is both a curse and a blessing, everything is both a blessing and a curse.

I gave Her a ritual to seal myself to Her, but those were only novice vows. She'd already shown me how to make the deal permanent, though I hadn't known at the time it was a vision. I thought it was a sex fantasy with no sex in it, gleaming numinous in my mind's eye. Still, the means to do it are not available to me. No matter. She let me know what I could give Her instead, which is, myself, all for Her. So I've made Her the vow She asked for, that from Imbolc to Imbolc, or until She releases me in some unequivocal way, I will be stone to all others. I may give others pleasure. I may have the catharsis of pain, and I may give my pain as a gift to the one who inflicts it, but my own sexual pleasure will be Hers alone. I will only be penetrated – invaded, opened up, turned inside out – by my own hand. For Her.

She is my only lover now. She says She will take care of me, but the how of that is something I can't presume. Maybe I will even wear a collar again someday, if She allows it. First I must wear Her collar and serve only Her, faithful to Her like any guitar-pickin' country boy who knows what's good for him.

Thanks to the Quakers with whom I sit in worship every Sunday, I know that being faithful is not just about belief; it is something you do, an action you take to make yourself more congruent with God. It must be taken by the body I have,

which is all She gave me. Sex is the gift She gave all of us to effect Her own ecstatic reunion. Ecstatic – what an irony. Oh, She is all about irony, my Femme Bitch Top, irony and contradiction. Man does not live by bread alone, the saying goes, but neither does he live without it, and I cannot feed anyone else while I am starving. I submit myself to Her demands, which are my own ordinary physical needs, including sexual release. Sex to Her is a sacrament, and in that regard I am wholly Pagan. My own body is the Bread of Life, which I give back to Her as a gift, and by which my spirit is nurtured.

God-Slave

by Galina Krasskova

(Throughout this article, I utilize the word 'godatheow,' an Anglo-Saxon word meaning 'god-slave' to define my relationship with Woden.)

I belong to Woden. I belong without reservation to this God who gifts His *godatheow* with both ecstasy and pain. He pours Himself into me and takes everything in return, including at times my humanity. He does not ask permission nor apologize for the pain it often brings and that is fine. These things were willingly gifted to Him long ago. No collar could bind me more fully to this God than the marks I bear upon my flesh and the modifications He has made to my spirit. I am what suits Him best and I alter myself accordingly. My flesh is His adornment when He wishes and His property when He does not. I am bound to Him through the breath-cord by which He imbued this form with life, by the aching hunger the barest touch of His presence arouses in me, His bride, and by the icy rage – His gift when I serve as His valkyrie bearing gifts of death, pain, sacrifice and initiation. I am bound to Him in a thousand, thousand little ways and I treasure the pain He gives as much as the pleasure. He burns inside my skin. He is my addiction and my greatest joy. In all things, He is my Master. It has taken me many years to grow comfortable speaking that truth aloud: Liege and Master, Husband, Owner, Ancestor, Patron, Teacher and Lord. But most of all Master. I am here to be an extension of His will and to feed

Him from whatever is within me how and when He desires. To do that and do it well is *my* will.

I've been a priest of the Old Man for years. That is essentially how I first set my feet upon this particular path. I was generic pagan when I first encountered Him over a decade ago. I had a good relationship with His blood brother Loki and it was really Loki who first introduced me to Odin (or Woden—I tend to use His by-names interchangeably). At first, Woden was simply my teacher. I learned the runes from Him and later how to galdr. Slowly though, and without my being consciously aware of it, He began to pattern my mind and heart to His own ends. He first began by giving me a spirit-song and through that song, shifting my energies around until He could utilize me as His horse. He slipped into me quite early on, possessing me and allowing me to share physical body-space with a God. It was a heady experience and I came to Him readily after that, thinking only that He was my teacher and Patron God—my *fulltrui* or special friend among the Gods as Heathens might say.

That first year with Him was quite intense. He taught me to journey to Yggdrasil, the Tree of Sacrifice upon which He hung for nine nights of agony in His quest for the runes. He taught me to utilize the Tree as my *stang*, through which I could journey to the other eight worlds. He taught me to see and pluck and read and eventually to alter the threads of wyrd themselves. He also taught me about sacrifice, both personal and actual.

It wasn't long before I realized that I belonged to Him in a far more direct way than the average votary-God relationship. I had his mark, the valknot, a symbol composed of three interlocking triangles tattooed on my body. It was the first outward sign scribed on my flesh that consciously marked me as being uniquely His. The valknot is the mark of one who has been chosen by this God as a living sacrifice. It is a symbol of His claim on His devotees as well as their acceptance that He may take their lives at any time. Over the next few years, my experiences with Him deepened and grew ever more intense. He would help me with teaching and counseling others often

speaking directly through me. Eventually I was told quite directly of the nature of His claim to me. I didn't know the word "god-slave" then, but I instinctively understood that by accepting His outright ownership of me, everything in my life would be irrevocably altered. Woden did court me, as strange as that may seem. I fell in love with Him over the course of several years. By the time He actually claimed me as His bride, I was utterly besotted. Our relationship had moved from God/votary, Teacher/student to something far more intimate.

Five years ago, shortly before the Summer Solstice, during a devotional rite to Woden, He possessed one of His women (a Woden priest who happened to be visiting for the weekend and who also practiced possessory work) and through her, told me quite clearly that He wished me to become His bride. He also named me, gifting me with a name that spoke of my warrior nature and my intense desire to be of service to Him. On the Solstice, my kindred held a wedding ritual and feast wherein I ritually wed the Old Man. He again possessed a (rather unwilling) priest who was present and bound me to Him and to His family as His wife. His presence then and for months after was utterly intoxicating to me. It was akin to a drunkenness that only just left me able to navigate the treacherous waters of Midgard (i.e. job, friends, teaching responsibilities).

From the moment of our wedding, He was always with me. All I needed to do was reach out and I would find His consciousness enveloping me. I would bask in the sensation of His love for me, which I could also palpably experience. The dominance He established over me from the very beginning of our relationship was subtle and at times immensely gentle. In many ways, He trained me as a skilled horse-trainer might a thoroughbred, easing me past my self-imposed limits and compelling me through affection to explore those studies, skills and behaviors in which He wished me to gain competence, slowly laying the groundwork for areas of practice, such as ordeal work, that He has now requested I explore.

I really don't think that any aspect of my life has remained unchanged by this relationship. Of course, its most glaring effects have been on my spirituality and sexuality. My Master has marked me. It goes far beyond having celebrated a sacred marriage to Him. No one touches me without His permission and should He choose not to give it, I am, save for Him, celibate. The converse of that is that should Woden ever decide upon a human mate for me, I would be expected to comply. (There aren't too many men that meet with Woden's approval in any venue, let alone this one; however, fortunately, He knows me so well that any man He chose would be a man I could love). He was the first to value me as a woman, and the first to value the rage-beast that lies hidden within. Mine has always been a warrior's path, but deep within I know that at my core, I am a berserker. The rage that rides in my blood, a gift from the strands of Jotun blood I bear has haunted me my entire life. It was only through Woden's training that I came to understand it as a gift, albeit a problematic one, and another unique way of serving Him. He celebrates that part of me, and has required that I learn to hone it to His advantage. Most of all, I trust Him utterly. I trust Odin to be Odin. This alone has placed me in a rather unusual category amongst my fellow Heathens.

Heathenry is not a religion possessed of a great comfort level with the mystical. Most Heathens would be openly repelled by the submissive nature of my relationship with Woden. What they do not see, and lack the capacity to comprehend, is the immense fulfillment such a relationship brings. Woden has mastered me. No one else, no other God owns this warrior. He alone has claimed me and together, we are well matched. He arouses my blood and pushes me to my limits in every way—sometimes gently, sometimes not so gently. Woden is all about danger and dominance. There are times He is possessed of an eroticism so overwhelming that it becomes its own unique kind of ordeal/torture.

I suspect that it was initially through His overwhelming eroticism that He first started guiding me toward ordeal work, for recently that has become yet another aspect of my

relationship with Him. Of every way in which my bond with Him has evolved, I think this was the most surprising to me on a personal level. Looking back over the course of my relationship with Him, I can see vestiges of ordeal-consciousness in His early training of me. Often, He would require that I fast completely for nine days and nights, recalling His willing sacrifice on Yggdrasil. Early on, He taught me the skill of using my own consciously drawn blood for magical work. When I consider my past, I also realize that He has been changing and shaping me for a very long time, far longer than I realized. In the beginning and for the first few years, His modifications were made through the guise of training. I never recognized them until recently to be energy, spirit, emotional modifications but now, when He wishes to do something to me, change something, alter and shape me to better serve His will, He simply tells me and does it. Usually He gives me fair warning, and often a certain degree of body modification on my part will be requested as a conduit for His work on me—a tattoo, a cutting, a brand. I never thought of these things as ‘ordeal work’ until I had to undergo an ordeal at the hands of another spirit-worker for cleansing.

Shamanic work is dangerous. I knew this when Woden first began training me, but never realized how devastating certain injuries might become. Three years ago, I sustained an injury in the course of my work caused by what is commonly known as elfshot. It is a psychic poison that corrodes from within, winding its way through joints and nerve endings like a fractal or tenacious web of rot; a form of shrapnel that is quite resistant to removal. When I was shot, the effects nearly crippled me. It damaged my back, caused constant and severe pain and an inability to ground, and essentially cut me off from life energy. It was brilliant work and I was unable to remove it, even with the assistance of a number of healers. It also cut off my ability to function as a spirit-worker and blocked me off enough that it impaired my perception of my relationship with Woden. That was worse than the physical pain.

When I attended a shamanic retreat in the autumn of 2005, there were several ordeal masters present. Before I attended the retreat, Woden had indicated that if I worked four sigils into my skin, it would destroy the shot. One of the ordeal masters offered to do this for me in a ritual setting the second night of the retreat. That night, around a bonfire, with a dozen mystics, shamans, spirit-workers, healers, God-spouses, and God-slaves present, I bared my back, straddled a chair and allowed one of them to restrain my arms. I began to chant and pray to Woden, offering this to Him partly in cleansing and partly to reaffirm my devotion to Him.

I was soon pretty tranced from the chanting and drumming and general collected power of the group. I can't say it was pleasant when the cutting began, but the sight and sense of the elfshot leaving me was palpable. Woden came into me at one point and began to laugh as He did something that sent it all back to the one that injured me in the first place. He left me but hovered and I remained silent until the very end when I was told to *gald*, which I did. Once the cuttings were done, the physical difference was palpable. While there was residual tissue damage from the shot, the shot itself was gone and I was cleaned and free of the taint. He told me then that I was to learn to do this thing, that I was now required to serve as His valkyrie. A human valkyrie is one who brings the darker gifts of her Master: pain, terror, ordeal, sacrifice, initiation and death. In elder times I suspect that they brought the latter to people quite literally, although today it is done symbolically to the human psyche. To do these rites, He temporarily removes His valkyries' humanity, while utilizing them as living extensions of His will. Through the vessel of death the valkyrie becomes, He drinks deeply of the human world.

It was not a surprise. Months before I had stood at crossroads within a darkened forest in Maryland, with two young men, one a Woden votary and one soon to become one, participating in what was truly my first ordeal. That was when Woden introduced me to ordeal by pain and terror, demanding that I cut His symbol (the valknot) on the young

man, singing the man out of his skin, and back again. (The man was *ulfedhnar* – a wolf-totem shapechanger.) I saw Him then, clearly, tangibly, visibly and knew the terror that He brings to His men. I had asked Him to show me what it is His men see when He comes to them and He complied. It was the only time that the terror He evokes was so very great that I could not approach Him. I covered my eyes and bowed before Him in surrender. That was His gift to me, and it was only then in that forest that stank of death – for Woden is a God of death – that I realized what it meant to serve as He demanded I serve.

Since then, He has not only demanded that I seek out ordeal training, but He has also required me to undergo other pain ordeals of my own. When asked about this, He simply said that I could not take others over a threshold that I myself had not yet crossed. Anything I do to His men, I must have done to me first be it branding, cutting, tattooing, flogging, suspension rites or ordeal by fear – or anything else Woden may wish. Now, when He wishes a cleansing or alteration done to my person, if it can be done via ordeal, that is what He requires. Pain is a tool to Him, one that He willingly utilized on Himself to gain power, knowledge and wisdom. He does not permit this God-slave to avoid doing the same.

I enjoy the work that I do for my Lord. No... enjoyment implies that there is emotion attendant with the act of killing or dancing the ordeal, but that is not so. When Woden takes my humanity and makes of me the right hand of death, as He does when I act as valkyrie, He takes me to a place that is devoid of feeling, an immensely centered place. Better to say that I am content and fulfilled because this is precisely the work I am meant to be doing. It is the same with the ordeal, only there He does not steal my humanity; rather He fills me with a fire so intense it burns away all that separates me from Him, showing me how mortal I am in His hands. It rouses the hunger that hides in my blood and binds it to His pleasure. In valkyrie and ordeal-dancer lie the ice and fire of *Ginnungagap*, the place of primal creation and destruction that He has thus twinned within me. Whether or not my flesh is strong enough

to contain that force has yet to be seen. Pain is the most sacred of gifts when it comes from His hands, or at His behest. He is and has always been a bringer of terror, this God that I love. He has slowly, inexorably stripped away those things that bind me to Midgard. He has made of me that which is more than human... and less. He gives me a fairly long leash; I am permitted more freedom than many other God-slaves I know, but when He calls me to Him, He does so in a way that leaves no room within for anything but Him, His will, His desires.

More even than my role as priest and spirit-worker, it is my service as Woden's *godatheow* that defines me. What joy I have on Midgard comes through my service to Him. I live in a liminal place now for Him now, for more and more Midgard grows difficult for me to navigate. He uses me to spur change and create conflict where He wishes. He uses me to speak His words, and through my sacrifice of will, to create a doorway through which He may act upon this world. But don't think that it is all pain and darkness. It is my will and my desire to be exactly as I am to Him: His *godatheow*. I would not have it any other way. His courtship was a joy, and there are times when resting in the arms of this God that He bestows upon me an ecstasy so overwhelming that my human flesh can barely contain it.

He has gifted me with the word-skill of a poet, the ability to read the threads of fate with a surety that shocks even me at times, a voice fit for *galdr*, runecraft, warcraft and an internal sense of the sacred. He protects me and His presence through the bond that we share is palpable nearly all the time, a palpable comfort (and yes, at times, a goad). He has patterned my head and my will so that He may ride within me, wearing my flesh as His cloak and mask whenever He wishes. Through His eyes I have glimpsed the workings of Wyrð and weavings of the worlds in ways that my human consciousness could otherwise never conceive of. Through Him, I have moved in the company of Gods.

My flesh will tell the tale of where I have been and what I have undergone for my Gods. Pain willingly embraced out of devotion and hunger pleases Him greatly. It arouses Him and

kindles a kindred desire. He is ruthless, even with and perhaps most especially with, those He loves. My weariness does not interest Him. He was more than weary when He hung on the Tree. My strength does not interest Him. What is mortal strength to a God? It is the dark anguish of my soul that I am willing to bear only for Him that arouses His affection. It is the fire that burns within the stone façade of this warrior's heart for Him alone.



Surrender

by Galina Krasskova

I have no words with which to woo a God.
Too often, I become mute
In the onslaught of Your affections.
You overwhelm, my Lord,
And whether the storm You bring
Is that of bliss or that of terror,
Makes little difference: it is all too easy to lose myself
Within those dark eddies.

Odin, I will claw my way out of Midgard if I must
To find a way to You,
Or anchor myself here should that be Your wish,
if by doing so, I might lure you out of Valhalla.
I have no fine words, no great beauty,
No special skills to delight You.
There is only love and a devotion so all consuming
That I have become as burning flesh to Your brand.

All I can offer is the love of a heart
So shredded love no longer has any place to hide.
I am bare before You, oh my God,
A wound laid bare to the touch of Your spear.
I have been overrun and vanquished.
Your relentless march across my world
Has left only hunger in its wake.
It is my purpose: to be devoured by You.
And in this alone, I am content.

Rune Song

by Galina Krasskova

He pressed them long ago against my lips,
Mead-drenched runes tasting far more
Of the tang of blood
Than the sweetness of honey.
He sealed His gift with a kiss...
And I never felt the bite of the spear that followed.

Runes devour — He warned me
Once, but I chose not to heed.
He lured me to His side with all
The skill of a master huntsman
And it seemed better to be His prey
Than to heed His warning, gently given.
Those runes, though, they were vicious things —
Shattering consciousness into a thousand,
Thousand glittering shards,
As numerous as the searing leaves
Of the eternal Tree... and twice as deadly.
I have always had an attraction to sharp, shiny things,
Even those torn from my own mind,
Razor bright.
It has been my undoing.
I have not yet recaptured all of those shattered pieces
For He has not yet withdrawn the spear;
And His love has become my gallows.

The Tree, the greatest of all altars,
I ascended it willingly
as a woman might mount her lover.
Yet my writhings upon it have born
More ecstasy than even I can bear.
You see, He does not share His plans with me.
He distracts by scent, by touch,

By all the small things lovers do...
Even His fury leaves me hungry, a willing participant
In the murder of me. And when those things fail,
There is always pain.

I have danced across bones to reach Him,
Scavenged among the dead,
And now there is only the law of the Tree
And His hands dragging me down...
Or lifting me up, I cannot tell...
The scent of death is too strong.
One thing I know, however:
There is not enough pain in all the worlds
To pull me from that spear. I would cling to it
With bloody hands, screaming,
Until I reach Him again.
I wish there were another way but at least from here,
With the rough bark of the Tree cutting
Into my back, all roads are open to me.
And it seems they all lead to Valhalla.

Trespass

by Galina Krasskova

Oh, my Lord, there is no way
For You to trespass upon me.
For You and You alone, I would open every door;
for the merest whisper of Your presence,
I would unbar the cloistered
Gates of my heart,
And share with You my every treasure.
What use would these things be without You?
Any treasures I have would turn to dross,
Were I bereft of You.
You, my God, are the skilled thief
Who comes in the night,
Only to find I have gifted You
Already with the keys to my hall,
And I greet You not with fear, but with delight.

This is my wish, my cry of longing:
Plunder me, oh my God,
Leave no part of me unassailed. Gladly shall I
Cast myself adrift into the grip of Your fury.
You are the predator the prey itself seeks out.
Willingly shall I enter Your snare.
I want to drown myself in You, Woden.
The fury I beg of You to unleash
Upon me is the most precious cargo
My heart could ever hold.
Why do You deny me this thing?
I think You are too tender, my Lord,
Too caring. I would far rather cast myself
Heedlessly into Your raging waters
Than watch from the safety of a lonely pier.

For this moment only,
I shall allow my hunger for You to make me bold;
I shall chide You, Beloved,
For You do not trespass enough upon these
Shores. Without You, I am rudderless and empty.
How could it be otherwise?
My purpose, Woden, lies in being trapped
Within your storm.
It is Your fury that sustains me.
It is Your battering winds that give
Me strength. Remove them and my heart lies fallow.
I am as broken timber cast upon
An enemy shore. Or a ship without purchase
Upon the calmest of seas.

So do not be kind, my Lord, do not be tender,
Not if it separates me from You.
Simply be as You would be, my Warrior,
And I will be content in You.

Prayer

by Corbie Petulengro

Loba,
Wolf-goddess,
Predator,
Sniffer of trails,
Stalker,
Challenger,
Pacer of prey...

I who have caged myself
by my own hand
I call you to the confession.
I have known you from the earliest days...

At seventeen in CR group the girls wept shameful tears
about their rape fantasies...
of course we all have rape fantasies
the stranger who follows you
(and you let him, because you know what's coming)
he corners you and then you turn on him
battering, choking, his strength fled in surprise
you slam him down on the dumpster
slice his jeans off with your switchblade
and sodomize him while laughing maniacally...

...well, anyway,
it didn't take me long to realize
my rape fantasies
weren't quite like the others.

Wolf-goddess, I confess I looked at gym shorts
stretched tight across adolescent asses
in high school phys ed
and my fist gripped that ping-pong paddle

and I smacked that ball so hard —

I confess I put my hands
around my dead-drunk teenage lover's throat
and masturbated against the bedclothes
while she slept.

I confess that one day I swore off sucking cock forever
because that throbbing fragile popsicle
of sweet red iron liquid
sliding past my canines
was just too much to resist rending...

I confess I almost bit off
a brunette coed's delicate nipple.
I wrote sleazy porn for years,
threw it out, wrote more,
tried to censor my fantasies of torture
and failed.

I confess that for years I wallowed
in guilt, guilt, guilt,
almost swore off sex entirely,
chased the images around and around
my head like a housewife going after a rat with a broom —

And all the while that predator
stalked in tighter and tighter circles
in his slowly shrinking cell...

"I am the monster," said Dracula,
"that the breathing men would kill."

And now that there's someone
who loves the chain, the whip, the noose
and me
who values what others fear

what I fear
Teach me your path, Wolf-One.

You who respect your prey
Teach me not to scorn as foolish
that urge that brings her close to me
like a hypnotized bird
stronger the crueler I am.

You who do not kill for sport
but who take only what is needed to survive
Help me listen to her body
know when it's just enough
resist the urge to rend, to slay.

You who mark your territory
and guard it fiercely
Teach me about boundaries
that I may respect the ones we've set.

You who care for your pack
while insisting they show throat to you
Teach me that power means responsibility
that dominance means protection
that a leash has two ends.

Loba,
Wolf-goddess,
Predator,
Sniffer of trails,
Stalker,
Challenger,
Pacer of prey,

Be with me
as I walk the narrow edge
of this ecstatic razor blade.



Aphrodite Is A Mean Femme Top

by Raven Kaldera

Lady,
Cyprian,
She who rises from the foam
Unashamed and unafraid,
The goddess who shows us her nakedness
And expects only worship,
Sappho had words with you
Screaming her desires
Echoing down the void of time.

Millions of voices cry out
From Her velvet dungeon
Where She torments us and rewards us by turns...

And yet we treat her priestesses
Like shit under our heels,
The dancers, the ladies of the street corner,
The boy-priests kneeling in the alley,
We scorn them and then have the gall to wonder
Why She obsesses us
Why Her paeans pour from our stereos
Why we crave it so bad...

When we began to fear Her,
All those thousands of years ago,
When we began to make her into a demon
She obligingly became our Sacred Dominatrix,
And took Her revenge on our helpless hearts.

And before we know it,
We're down on our knees
Lickin' Her scarlet stiletto heels
Beggin'
Please, Lady,
...I need it bad...

That's where She likes us,
All of us,
Down on our knees and beggin'.
We're all Her bottoms,
Even those of us who think we're so tough.

Remember all Her names, ye who would call on her —
Aphrodite Pandemos, whose spark started the Universe
Aphrodite Genetrix, whose gift makes babies
Aphrodite Porne, Lady of Whores
Aphrodite Urania, Yente for the Different Ones
Aphrodite Parakouptosa, hard stone figure
Of unrequited passion
...and Aphrodite On The Tomb,
Patroness of all those who killed
Themselves or another for Love.

Remember Her whip, how good it feels
Remember Her long nails raking your guts
How She bends you over and screws you good
How She rips that heart chakra wide open and bleeding
And you curse Her
And you thank Her
And you beg Her for more.

Oh, Cyprian,
I am down on my knees
And You know just what I need.

And now the scientists say
That's it's just chemicals,
Love is just a soup in the brain
Triggered by the presence of the beloved
And that agony is just
Withdrawal...
How do you prove you're in love?
Simple — a sample of cerebral fluid
Smells like Love...

Which only proves
What I already knew.
Aphrodite's a pusher.
Dealer of the Good Drugs,
The drug that all other drugs merely seek
Without much success to imitate...
A junkie said to me once,
"I'd do heroin again
Before I'd do love...
That shit's dangerous, man..."
Just a sample, She says.
You know you want it, She says.
It'll make you feel so good, She says.
Aren't you wondering what you're missing?
Dealer of the Drug
With the highest body count
In the history of the world.

And before you know it
You're down on hands and knees
Lickin' Her candy-apple stiletto heels
Beggin'
Please, Lady,
...I need to score...

"No one,
None of the blessed gods,
(save only Hestia, Athene, and Artemis),
no mortal man,
no one else can ever escape Aphrodite."

We shall all sing Her praises to the morning sunrise
We shall worship Her with the body of our beloved
We shall make Her offerings of our sweat and tears

That is, if we know what's good for us,
We will.



Part VI:
This
Leather Ragan
Tribe

Conclusion: The LeatherPagan Tribe

You don't like us.

We are the black blotch on the colorful rainbow.

We are the sudden shudder as

Bodies are innocently exposed — the rings

Through the flesh, the pictures in the skin,

Perhaps the marks of knives, of razors, of brands.

Perhaps short-lived marks of crimson and purple,

The colors of royalty. But these are worse,

You think, for they are the slap in the face

That this was no souvenir from a decadent youth

Unless that youth ended just last night.

When you said that this was a community where

Anyone could choose to be what they wanted,

Anyone could choose how they would love,

How they would fit their bodies together, you didn't

Really mean it. You didn't mean this,

You didn't mean these choices.

But this is the price of freedom,

Of offering those sacred choices. Sooner or later,

Someone will choose something

That makes your breath stop in your throat,

Your belly turn in fear. You don't like us,

Or our choices, and if anyone can make you believe

That perhaps choice is not such a good thing,

It might be us.

You don't like us.

We confuse you. It was taught that those

Who undergo this pain are broken,

Are weakened, damaged...yet we walk tall,

Holding high our heads. We laugh, we joke, we pursue

Each other, we cook food and tend gardens

And raise children, just like everyone else.

We stubbornly refuse to hear you when
You tell us how wrong we are; your words
Fall empty before the truth spoken by our flesh.
You would hide your children from our eyes,
Our marks, our tongues, the shadows we move in
And out of. Even if you grudgingly agree
That we are strong,
There is no way that we can pretend to be
Innocent.
Yes, that at least, is so.

You hold within yourself the image of evil
Created by the ills of society,
How it looks, how it smells, and we
On the surface, seem to be a good match.
We are just close enough to frighten you,
Just far enough away to confuse you,
And you would blot us out rather than struggle
With those contradictions, those ambiguities
That shift the solid ground beneath your feet.

We point to your revered past and laugh,
Showing you hooks in ancient flesh, symbols
Cut with blades of stone, needles of bone,
The sacred plants burnt to ash and rubbed into the blood,
Blood, blood, the altars ran with it and we
Add our own to that ancient scarlet flow. We point to
Woden on the Tree, Inanna stripped and beaten,
Persephone raped, Gullveig three-times burned,
Fenris, Loki, Prometheus chained, the Corn-King
Cut down and threshed and devoured, Shiva's corpse
Disemboweled by his skull-hung mistress as She
Makes use of His dying member, and all
The other dark hands that did the deeds.
These are our Gods,
We say, and They are your Gods too
Whether you will or no.

That word, "primitive", we see it differently. No room
For idealized, pretty tales. Our ancestors
Scrambled and crawled across thorns
To survive, to do more than survive, to find these
Crumbs of wisdom that are our inheritance.
And if we think that under our
Smooth exteriors and shining toys we are
Any better, any less flesh that gives way to thorns
Then we are merely blinded fools,
And we deserve the pain unlooked-for
Rather than the ordeal we choose
With open arms, with open heart,
Legs spread wide to take in holy lightning,
Going as to the bridal bed in joy.

For we have bared our throats to the Darkness
And lived to draw the map.