

Advanced Ritual Writing I: Finding the Mystery within your Book Of Shadows

Workshop: Australian Wiccan Conference 2008
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This workshop will concentrate on coven or small group rituals and traditions. It will look at how we create, shape and use a body of work that can be manipulated to suit our own growth and the growth of our group/s.

It will also examine how we can find the mystery within the lore, poetry, prose and rituals of our own traditions. Mysteries that we may not have found, felt or acknowledged before.

There are many different types of Books Of Shadows and the interpretation that we feel comfortable with, and accepting of, will largely come down to how we perceive our personal paths.

For a solitary practitioner, their BOS may be a collection of rituals performed, research undertaken, meditations, recipes and poetry; either written by the practitioner or found in various published sources.

For a non-traditional working group, the BOS will contain much of the same style of information but with the added contributions of the rest of the group. Participants may have their own personal BOS as well as the contribution and access to, or copy of, the group's BOS.

In a traditional coven, the BOS contains the liturgies, lore, poetry and peculiarities of the tradition and lineage. It may be added to, but nothing is taken away. There is a master copy, and each member has their own personal copy. At such a time as a covenant hives off to start their own group, their personal copy will become the master copy of the new group. This means that accuracy and maintenance of the BOS is important.

In some traditions only the outline of standard ritual practices is contained in the BOS and the detailed scripts of the rituals and teachings are held in a coven diary or diaries. This is the actual work and archive of the group as opposed to the body of lore of the tradition.

For the purposes of this workshop I will be using the term Book Of Shadows (BOS) to refer to the latter type of BOS. The actual contents of my own BOS are oathbound, but quite a lot of material from various traditions has been published many times over the years. Whether this has any similarity to the material that I work with is out of the scope of this workshop. However, it really doesn't matter about the explicit content, as the techniques used for working with a BOS are the same.

Whilst many of you may have sat down and read your group's BOS or indeed spent a vast amount of time copying it out, it is by working with the material within it that we truly begin to understand the mystery that it contains.

It could be argued that the entire BOS is the Mystery, as it represents a good start in creating a shared body of knowledge that is the basis for the egregore of the group. This is indeed true, but what I am focusing on is finding the Mysteries within the overall Mystery. None of us are really capable of understanding the whole BOS at a single glance, so to understand the overall Mystery, you really need to work with, and absorb, the little bits of Mystery that form it. This process will take time to achieve, and in reality it is ongoing, but can be very rewarding.

Focused research

So to start the process, you need to focus on one topic at a time. We will get to choosing topics of study later in the workshop.

Say you want to understand the Mystery of Male / Female polarity, for this concept is very much at the core of Wiccan belief and celebration. It is a mystery with many layers.

The first step is to look at the BOS with a focused eye. Go through the BOS and read all of the various instructions and bits of lore that mention Male / Female polarity. Write down the lines that you find that describe male and female roles. This might be in circle cast liturgies, instructions on lineage or initiation rituals.

Look at some of the long form instructional poetry such as the Wiccan Rede or the Witches Creed. For example, here are some stanzas from Valiente's published version of The Witches Creed in "Witchcraft For Tomorrow", pp.172-173.

*The power was passed down the ages,
Each time between woman and man,
Each century unto the other,
Ere time and the ages began.*

You may also find the polarities mentioned in notes about the Wheel Of The Year. Take particular note of the journeys of the God and the Goddess. Now begin to examine some of your Sabbat rituals. Look at the roles assigned to male and female covenors. Look deeply at them and try to work out why those particular roles had been assigned thus.

So after all of this extensive focused examination of the BOS, you will now have heaps of notes on the roles and polarities of males and females within your traditions. However, if we are dealing with a subject such as polarity, we should also look for other instances where polarities are mentioned in the BOS.

DISCUSS: CAN ANYONE THINK OF SOME OTHER POLARITIES?

Complimentary research

Sun / Moon, Night / Day, Black / White, Negative / Positive, Land / Sea, Fire/Water, Air / Earth, East / West, North / South etc.

The Witches Creed also touches on other areas of polarity.

*For the two are mystical pillars,
That stand at the gate of the shrine,
And two are the powers of nature,
The forms and the forces divine.*

*The dark and the light in succession,
The opposites each unto each,
Shown forth as a God and a Goddess:
Of this our ancestors teach.*

List the other polarities and try to find mention of them in the BOS. Write these instances down too. At this point you may need to organise the material into a table or chart if you find working that way somewhat easier.

The next step is to compare and examine the male / female polarity material with the material sourced on the other polarities. You could stick with adding this into your table, or you could use it as the basis for a coven exercise or ritual.

Rituals of Focused Mystery

As an example of a coven ritual or exercise, you could have a male and female take the roles of the Gateways of Mystery. They can each declaim re-written excerpts of the lore of the male polarity and the lore of the female polarity. You may be able to take this body of information and form it into a piece of poetry or prose. The male can chant his lore and the female can chant her lore. You could also have the female declaim the male aspects to the male ... such as "You are the..." and vice versa. Make it ritually appropriate.

Other coven members could then chant lines that reflect different polarities with time for contemplation or meditation or inspired utterance between each set. Back and forth it goes so that each person then finds the mystery for themselves and the group.

You could extend this idea to use physical representations of the different polarities and place them upon the altar after each set or combination. Or you could have each covenor paint the symbols of the polarities upon the male and female representatives. This way, the male and female are then living archetypes of the polarities.

Further to this, after the couple are painted they could be invoked upon in aspects of the God and Goddess. More insight would then be gained from their inspired utterance. You could then bring them together in a token form of the Great Rite or have them perform Cakes and Ale. This way, the mystery of the polarities is enhanced by their union as they become one..

Each covenor can then partake of the Cakes and Ale, as they drink they find the mystery within themselves.

DISCUSS: CAN ANYONE ELSE THINK OF SOME IDEAS OF HOW YOU COULD INCORPORATE THE FOCUSED MYSTERY INTO RITUAL?

You could incorporate the gateway of mystery into meditation or pathworking cycles. As you work with the mystery, you may find that it is complimentary to, or the essence of a particular sabbat or phase of the moon. You could then work the discovery and understanding of that mystery into Moon or Sabbat rituals. This is especially effective when the group has worked together for a couple of wheels of the year. Each time they work the wheel together they find another layer of the inherent mystery to explore.

In the example of male / female polarity given above, you could work with that mystery at Beltane and Samhain as the coming together of the male and female energies, you could incorporate the ideas into the Equinoxes as times of balance, or the Solstices as times of heightened or waning powers. There are many levels of mystery to explore and experience when focusing on polarities.

Poetry of Focused Mystery:

Here is an example of a piece of invocational and mystery poetry that reflects the male and female polarity as ritual.

Priestess: *You have passed beyond the gate
of knowledge and form,
Found erect the Tower of Truth*

*You have journeyed with the Sage
through the calm and the storm
to become One with the Temple Of Youth*

Priest: *You have passed beyond the gate
of inspiration's kiss.*

Found fertile the Cauldron and Flame

*You have journeyed with the Crone
through the Valley of Mist
to become One with the Hidden Name*

Priestess: *O Mystery of Mysteries
O thought and desire
Open our hearts to the kindled fire*

Priest: *O Mystery of Mysteries
Beyond flesh, beyond bone
Open our minds, beyond tree, beyond stone*

Priest/ess: *Two become One by the Circle and Sword
The endless re-union of our Lady and Lord
The spiral entwines the Lance and the Grail
Beyond Sun, beyond Moon,
Beyond Starlight pale.*

The last verse is said in unison by the Priest and Priestess. They can move to stand together, pressing close and entwining, or they can consecrate the Cakes and Ale.

So from dry words and instructions you can create a new ritual of mystery that goes to the core of understanding of all of the participants. For as Stewart and Janet Farrar say in the introduction to *Eight Sabbats For Witches*:

"The Mysteries cannot, by their nature, ever be fully described in words; they can only be experienced. But they can be invoked and activated by effective ritual. One must never confuse the words and actions of ritual with the Mystery itself. The ritual is not the Mystery, it is a way of contacting and experiencing it."

S & J Farrar. *A Witches Bible: Eight Sabbats For Witches*. Pg 30

This is an example of just one topic whose mystery can be found hidden within the gateway of the pages of the BOS. If you have a set curriculum for your group, you may like to examine each part of it in relation to the mystery. Alternatively you could take a piece such as *The Witches Creed*, *The Wiccan Rede* or *the Charge Of The Goddess* and work your way through each line or stanza, researching and enacting the gateway of mystery for each particular topic. As you do this, not only will your understanding and experience of mystery grow, but so will your understanding of the set piece and the BOS as a whole.

The *Book of Shadows* is a world unto itself and its pages are the gateways to new realms of experiential spirituality. By working with its mystery you may also engender a deep love of your path and your Gods.