Choosing a Coven

There are many ways to honor Nature in our lives. Some of us participate in Pagan rites because there we find nurturance, guidance, and community with like-minded others. An artist, a doctor, a teacher, a technician - the work they do is real, and very necessary, but our religion is not its primary focus. Pagan worship helps them stay attuned with Sacred Source, with the rhythms of Earth and Moon, with the life-affirming values of polytheistic, Immanence-based religion. These are the Pagan laity, gathering again as our faith emerges from its long dormancy.

Others of us find in Witchcraft (or Asatru, Druidry, or several other Pagan orders) our authentic life's work, our art form. Although Witches, by Tradition, earn our livings elsewhere, we dedicate much of our free time and energy to our Craft. We are not better, holier, or even necessarily more devoted to the Gods; but here is where our talents, and our delight, seem to lie. This is our way of making a difference in the world: Witches heal.

In my observation, people often spend some time exploring the community, reading, attending public rituals or festivals. For some, this exploration fosters a hunger. They wish to study more formally, explore more deeply, prepare for Initiation into the priesthood of the Goddess. You may be one of them.

Perhaps you've followed the Old Ways for some time now, and want to go further along this Path, to deepen your experience of Pagan nature mysticism. You may believe you have the necessary talents and temperaments, and wish to use those endowments to serve the people and the Gods as a Witch and priest/ess. What next? Most of us seek formal coven training, hoping to find guidance from experienced elders and companions along the Path.

What covens can and cannot do for their students

- **Magical and spiritual power comes only from the Gods.**
- **The knowledge and skill you need to use that power effectively come from your own hard work.** Coven training is the easiest and safest way to learn and to practice in a supportive context. Alternatively, you might seek individual training from an elder you respect. Be aware that the best training system accomplishes nothing unless you actually do the work. And there certainly are skilled and empowered Witches who are solitary and completely self-trained.
- **Credentials come from other people.** If community recognition is important to you, you should join a coven that is part of a lineage, one whose elders have traditional religious authority to bring others into that collective. If legal clergy status matters,

look for a group that is affiliated with one of the duly incorporated organizations like Covenant of the Goddess. Of course, one coven can convey both types of credential -- as Proteus Coven does.

Be mindful, though, that power, skill, and credentials are three entirely separate things. No one of them can substitute for either of the others, nor prove that either of the others is also present.

Coven Shopping: finding a place to root yourself and grow

If you choose to seek formal training, look for competent training from experienced elders who are authentically spiritual in the context of a functional coven. Remember that you have a choice. Ours is one of the fastest growing religions on this continent. There are many more covens than there were, even ten years ago. Most of these covens make themselves accessible to sincere seekers. As a result, potential students can "shop around," for the best possible coven, the best possible match.

As always, people who have options are responsible for the choices they make. Be thoughtful and careful. Ask for the guidance of the Gods and listen for the still small voice that carries Their response. The quality of your experience depends on the choices you make now.

Here are some things to look for:

- People you can respect, trust and love.
- Good people. How could anyone be spiritual without being at least honest and kind?
- Authentic people - people who seem to live in accordance with the values they espouse. If they claim to be able to teach you Nature spirituality, do they live lightly on the Earth? If they claim to be able to teach you magic, do they seem to be grounded, centered and empowered?
- Competent people - people who seem knowledgeable and skilled, people who are organized, who keep their appointments and are well-prepared for their classes.
- People who listen. People who ask the kinds of questions that encourage you to explore your own spirituality and your own ideas and feelings about traditional lore. People who are genuinely open to learning from their students, as well as teaching them.
- People who will respect your confidences. People who will neither gossip nor use information you share to manipulate or hurt you.

and some things to avoid:

- **Authoritarians** - stay away from anyone who tries to censor your reading or to isolate you from family or friends. Beware of those who get irritated when you ask challenging questions. Be even more wary of anyone who, when you ask a difficult question, either ridicules you or patronizes you ("let your elders worry about that one, dear, your job right now is just to learn what we teach."). If anybody tries to forbid you to express your opinions in the presence of your elders, run screaming out the door. (all these things have happened)

- **Sexual predators** - unfortunately a few of these creeps infest every religion. If somebody tells you that your magical or spiritual advancement depends on your giving them what they want, first spit in their eye, then get away fast.

- **Hypocrites** - those who say they love Mother Earth, and live carelessly and wastefully, those who say they love the Goddess and dominate or abuse human women, those who claim to be Spirit-led while their behavior is ego-driven.

- **Exploiters** - but they're not instantly identifiable. Any coven might ask students to take a turn bringing consumable supplies like candles or cookies. Teaching covens may have monetary expenses, such as photocopying or rental for a meeting room -- and it's entirely reasonable for them to charge dues and cover their costs from the common purse thus created. There is some debate in our community about whether a Craft teacher should accept payment for their time and work. This is a matter of opinion, but you can be sure that a teacher who takes payment is not practicing Traditional Witchcraft.

  It's also fair for a teacher or coven to ask you to do your share of set-up and clean-up, or of ongoing coven projects. But if some coven leader expects you to work free in their profit- making business, or act as their domestic servant, run screaming out the door.

- **People who order you to go against your values.** Again, this involves some subtle issues. One of the major goals of spiritual development is to learn to hear the still, small inner voice. But some of our inner directives are actually cultural or familial programming. These prescriptions and prescriptions may also be wise, or they may be limiting, or actually evil (consider racial prejudice). They often drown out the voice of authentic Spirit. The best teachers will gently challenge their students to override outworn programming, but never to go against core values. The issue of readiness is also important. If you try to override even the nastiest old programming before you are ready, you might cause a painful backlash. This psychological trauma

can actually retard your progress. Beware of insensitive autocrats who try to force all their students into the same Procrustean bed. Don't ever let anybody pressure into doing anything - in or out of Circle - that you believe is wrong. In ritual, we speak to our deepest minds, establishing the moods and motivations that shape our lives. *Don't ever do in token what you would not do in truth.*

Compatibility issues

As polytheists, we celebrate diversity. Sacred diversity also shows itself in a wide range of variation among those covens that are ethical, competent and Spirit-led. You don't just want a good coven, you want one that is a good fit for your own talents, temperaments, inclinations and style. Here are some compatibility issues to consider:

- Mixed gender or all female or male?
- Size - the traditional maximum is thirteen, but quieter people may feel more comfortable in smaller groups. The average size of a coven is more like five or six.
- Ritual style - ranges from highly formal and ceremonial to spontaneous and "shamanic."
- Teaching style - they may have a highly structured curriculum or they may let their teaching be directed by student interest. If there is a prescribed curriculum, does it cover your particular interests?
- Decision-making style - this can range from full consensus process through majority vote to parent-like benevolent dictatorship.
- Time demands - good training requires the student's time and work. As the Craft matures, our notion of what a priest/ess needs to know has grown accordingly. Pacing makes a big difference -- we can either pack it in or stretch it out. Find out what a coven's typical time demands are, both for attendance and for homework. Figure out whether you can meet those demands while continuing to have a job, a family and a life.
- Thealogical emphasis or focus: Goddess only, Goddess and God in balance, or full-blown polytheism? Any particular pantheon or historical or cultural emphasis?
- Social contact - do you want your coven to also be a large part of your social life, or would you rather keep social and coven life mostly separate? (If your mate is not involved with the coven, you'll almost certainly prefer the latter.)

Summary

Coven-shopping is healthy for both covens and coveners. Meet as many covens and coven leaders as possible. Visit as many covens as you can before you commit to one. Remember as you weigh your choice that they are asking themselves remarkably similar questions about you -- and this is exactly as it should be. We all benefit when the best possible matches are made, for the coven process forms the leaders of the future -- and our Craft must ever survive.

Get to know the coven. Get to know the leaders. Coven participation is not just a simple transfer of knowledge or skill -- it is socialization into a small, closely-bonded community of priest/esses. So one final question sums up all the issues we've looked at so far. Do you want to become more like these people? If so, ask them if they will have you as their student. And may the Gods guide your Path to Their service.

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updated: February 16, 2000; © 2000, by Judy Harrow