

Concentration in Ritual

By Rev. Kirk S. Thomas

Note: This essay is based on my workshop of the same name, and I hope to create a video version to accompany this.

Have you ever watched good ritualists in action? During a rite, notice how they handle all the various tasks – and how they relate to themselves in the space, to the other ritualists, to the attendees, and most importantly, to the Kindreds themselves. And they do this all simultaneously. This skill requires the ritualist to concentrate at various levels, without losing concentration in any single one of them. While this can become automatic for experienced ritualists, it can be difficult to learn at first.

I like to call these various levels ‘circles’ or ‘bubbles’ of concentration. They require clear focus and energy to be present in order for them to work. Think about the last time you read an engrossing novel, or watched a particularly engaging movie. All of your concentration was centered on that activity, and it would take quite a lot to distract you from your enjoyment of the moment. When I’m reading a good novel, family used to say that a bomb could go off and I wouldn’t even notice. This is a good example of focus.

Circles of Concentration in the Theatre

In the theatre, a director/teacher named Constantin Stanislavski invented a set of exercises he called the Circles of Concentration or Attention. He would demonstrate it to his class with stage lighting. First, on an otherwise dark stage, a single table would be spotlighted. This was the small circle, which would correspond to the actor himself. After plunging the stage into darkness again, the lights would come up to show a medium circle, with some furniture (including that table) spotlighted. The actor was still at the table, but now had to increase his attention, his focus, over a much larger area. Finally, after another short span of darkness, the lights came up revealing everything on the stage, including the audience seats. This would be the large circle (Stanislavski, 68-89).

Circles of Concentration in Ritual

I have taken this idea and adapted it to ADF ritual technique. Here I have identified four circles of concentration: the ritualist him/herself, the other ritualists in the rite, the attendees, and the Otherworlds. I will explain what I mean in a moment.

Another thing that good focus can give the ritualist is, believe it or not, charisma. Strong focus makes you appear more attractive in some way, and folks have to pay attention.

I have a small story here. Back in the 1980's I attended a drama college in London for a couple of years. I was also an amateur balloonist at the time, and managed to get invited to a reception by the Royal Aero Club, held at the Banqueting House, Whitehall, in honor of a balloonist inventor, Tracy Barnes. The Queen, as President of the Royal Aero Club, would also be attending. Needless to say, I was quite excited.

That same day I learned about the circles of concentration in my acting class. It was a lot to take in, and I worked very hard at it, determined to internalize the technique as quickly as I could. I took this determination with me to the reception.

The center of the hall was roped off, with Girl Guides (British Girl Scouts) 'guarding' the ropes. It was a more innocent time. Early in the reception, after the arrival of the Queen, Prince Philip, and other assorted grandees, the royal party, accompanied by Ladies in Waiting and all, gathered inside the rope enclosure with the rest of us outside of it. Under normal protocol, the Queen would very slowly walk around the enclosure, talking to a Lady in Waiting, sipping her gin and tonic, while we all watched. I expect that this circumambulation would normally take about half an hour overall. The local British seemed unimpressed (or at least feigned to be so), but I was wide-eyed with wonder.

The Queen started her tour not too far away from me, and was moving slowly, so to keep myself entertained while waiting, I decided to practice creating my circles of concentration. The Queen then stopped right in front of me, and instead of moving on, stayed there for the twenty minutes that I was able to keep the circles going. Prince Philip came over to chat to the Girl Guide next to me, other grandees came over as well, and I was practically in the midst of them all. Then, exhausted, I released my circles - and they all walked away again. Amazing. It was then that I decided that there might be something to these circles after all.

NOTE: The exercises that follow (at least for the 2nd and 3rd circles) need to be done with more than one person. The 1st and 4th circles can be performed alone, but the other two circles are about 'group' ritual as opposed to solitary rites.

1st Circle – The Critic

The 1st Circle is the one that only surrounds you, the ritualist. This layer of focus is designed to keep you aware of yourself, and where you are in space, so that, for instance, you don't trip and fall into the fire. It also is the home of *The Critic*, as I call it. This is that little voice inside you that tells you when things are wrong (like pointing out the old lady in the back who obviously can't hear you) and that also comments on what you're doing, whether you like it to or not. And often we aren't even aware of our critic. My critic lives at the back of my head,

on the right side. At least, that's where I put him. The Critic can be an extremely helpful tool (as when pointing out the deaf old lady) or extremely annoying (as when it points out, unhelpfully, that you obviously screwed up that last invocation). But in any case, don't let your Critic distract you!

Please indulge me while I tell another story. This is how I discovered and became consciously aware of my personal Critic.

I mentioned earlier that I had been a balloonist. Back in the early 1990's I was also the pilot of a hot-air airship, a sort of pressurized hot-air balloon in the shape of a blimp with a 'car' complete with burners to keep me aloft, and with an engine that ran a propeller behind me for forward thrust. Steering was accomplished by pulling on special ropes designed for that purpose. I had determined that I would try for the world records in distance and duration, and so set off from near our farm in South Dakota in the middle of winter. Cold air would lessen the need for propane fuel for the burners, you see, enabling me to stay aloft longer. Or so I thought.

I flew across the Missouri river (keeping over a bridge nearby just in case something went wrong – I didn't want to land in that icy current) and over Nebraska at about 1000 feet above the ground. Suddenly, a snowstorm developed around me (which the weather folks hadn't foreseen) and the only direction I could see was down. Never mind, I thought, I'll just keep going. In any case, it was solid forest below me, with no obvious landing sites. But then disaster struck when my burners went out and I couldn't get them to relight. While I still had forward motion (thanks to my engine), I no longer had any lift, and so I slowly began to fall out of the sky.

Since I was a flying bomb, with propane tanks dangling everywhere, all connected through a manifold with a series of propane hoses, it was essential that I shut down everything before hitting the ground. Ruptured lines and a spark would be an even worse disaster for me. So I calmly, but quickly, turned all the tanks off, shut down the pilot light, and then managed to steer the beast towards a hole in the woods that suddenly materialized beneath me. That forward thrust from my engines saved me by enabling me to steer.

Did I just say that I 'calmly' went through my emergency procedures? Well, anyone watching would say that I was calm. But my Critic, at the back of my head, was screaming bloody murder the whole way down to the ground. I was only okay because, for this emergency, I managed to ignore the 'silent' screams.

But my Critic was very much there, and this was the first time I really noticed it and understood what it was.

Exercise #1: Creating the 1st Circle

Sit quietly in a chair, or stand quietly with your feet planted firmly on the ground, and place your hand over your heart. Feel it beat beneath your hand.

Close your eyes.

In your mind's eye, imagine a bubble of energy come out of your heart and slowly surround you in all directions. The bubble, or circle, is really no bigger than you are.

What does it feel like? Can you see it? What does it look like?

Feel yourself inside of your body. Notice the itch behind your left knee or the feel of your feet inside your shoes. Feel your clothes on your shoulders. Become aware of your entire self.

Now open your eyes, but keep that circle alive – be totally aware of it, and of yourself, while your eyes are open.

Now relax and release your circle. Repeat this exercise a few times until you are sure you have the hang of it.

2nd Circle – The Connection

The 2nd Circle or bubble is all about you and the relationship you will have with the other ritualists in the rite with you. In addition to having a circle that surrounds yourself, you will also need one that surrounds you and your ritual partners. This is because you will occasionally need to relate to them directly, particularly in lore plays, as well as keep track of where they are in relation to you at all times. It really looks dumb when ritualists collide or step on each other's feet, knock over the Well, or accidentally knock ritual offerings out of each other's hands, etc.

In lore plays the people enacting the myth will need to relate to each other like actors on a stage, living in the moment, with clear focus on each other.

I call this circle *The Connection* because it is all about connecting with those closest to you in a rite, theatrically speaking. I mean those people you depend upon in order for the rest of the rite to go well.

Now let me be clear that it is necessary for the ritualist to create *both* of these circles simultaneously, and keep them both going for the entire rite. This takes practice, and while it may seem difficult and tiring at first, in time it will become easy and second nature. Remember, practice makes perfect!

Exercise #2: Connecting With Your Partner – the 2nd Circle

Stand facing your partner, and each of you place the palm of your hand on the other person's heart.

- a. Breathe together, coming into sync with each other.
- b. Feel the other person's heartbeat.
- c. Place your other hand on top of your partner's hand on your heart.

Now close your eyes and create your 1st Circle. See it as a bubble only surrounding you, and nothing else. Make it strong and firm.

Then when you are ready,

- a. Create a second circle or bubble out from your heart and have it completely enclose both of you (including your 1st Circle bubble).
- b. When this new circle is strong and firm, **open your eyes and drop your hands.**

Is your 1st Circle still going strong? Are you still aware of your feet in your shoes, and the feel of your clothes on your shoulders?

Is your 2nd Circle still enclosing both of you? Is your connection to the other person still there?

Now drop both circles and relax. Repeat this exercise a few times until you are sure you have the hang of it.

3rd Circle – Awareness

The 3rd Circle is all about remembering that there are folks here attending your rite. It's all too easy to get all wrapped up in yourself or with your fellow ritualists and lose track of everyone else present. And this can lead to disaster.

A good ritualist will develop eyes in the back of his or her head. They can *feel* what is going on all over the ritual space whether they can see it or not. They know where the other ritualists are at all times and they can feel the presence of every single attendee in the circle, including those behind them. These ritualists can also sense drops or holes in the energy around them, which often result from attendees being unable to see or hear what is going on. This sense of Awareness can be extremely helpful for the well-trained ritualist. And it can be learned.

Exercise #3: Finding Awareness with the 3rd Circle

Note: This exercise requires a third person to act as a ritual attendee.

Stand with your partner back to back, with your shoulders touching. Grasp your partner's hands and keep your eyes facing forward.

The third person (the attendee) should stand to one side so that neither of the other two is facing him or her directly. The attendee should focus on the other two during this exercise.

With your back to your partner, holding hands and touching shoulders, create your 1st Circle until it is strong and firm.

Now create your 2nd Circle, throwing it around the two of you. As soon as it, too, is strong and firm:

- a. Let go of each other's hands
- b. Take one step away from the other person

Are you two still connected? Can you feel the other person standing behind you?

Now create a third circle or bubble out of your heart, and cast it around all three of you *without* looking at the third person. Feel the other two people present – know where they are, sense their breathing.

Repeat this exercise a few times until you are sure you have the hand of it.

Remember, it is necessary for the ritualist to create *all three* of these circles simultaneously, and keep them both going for the entire rite. This takes practice, and while it may seem difficult and tiring at first, in time it will become easy and second nature. Remember, practice makes perfect!

The 4th Circle – Boundaries

So far in this set of exercises we have been concentrating on focus in *this* world. Now we will hold all three circles while opening our hearts and mind's eyes to the Otherworlds as well.

In addition to knowing just where we are in space, and to relating to our fellow ritualists, and to being aware of everyone else in the circle, we also have to be able to embrace and interface with the Otherworlds when we make our invocations to the Kindreds.

And all of this has to be done simultaneously!

While you don't need to have the Gates open to do this exercise, it certainly doesn't hurt. If you can, perform a small rite, open the Gates, and prepare to make offerings to the Kindreds while you practice, below.

Exercise #4: Crossing the Boundary

Note: This exercise is written for three people, but it can also be performed alone. Just do the 1st and 4th Circle sections and you'll be fine.

Option 1 - As in exercise #3, stand with your back to your partner, shoulder to shoulder, holding hands, while the third person (the attendee) stands to the side, focusing on the two of you.

Option 2 - All three of you stand with your backs to each other, making a triangle, shoulder-to-shoulder and holding hands.

Option 3 - If working alone, ignore the 2nd and 3rd Circles below.

Now -

Create your 1st Circle – get it strong and firm.

While holding your 1st Circle:

Create your 2nd Circle – let go of each other's hands and step away, keeping your connection with each other strong.

While holding your 1st and 2nd Circles:

Create your 3rd Circle – feel a deep awareness of the third person.

Now, while holding your 1st, 2nd and 3rd Circles:

- a. Close your eyes and in your mind's eye see the Gates open as you experience it best. Open your eyes and see light sparkling at the corners of your eyes and movement just out of your vision. Then see, feel and hear the presence of the Cosmos, open to you.
- b. Keeping all four circles strong and clear make an invocation and offering to a Spirit of your choosing.
- c. See the Spirit approach. Hear the breathing of the Spirit as it approaches. Feel the footfall of the Spirit as it approaches.
- d. If there are more of you doing the exercise, have each in turn make an invocation. Keep all the Spirits called in your mind's eye -

while also keeping the other three circles strong and clear.

- e. Thank the Spirits, close the Gates, release the Circles and relax.

With practice, these exercises will become natural, and won't require much thought. If you combine these exercises with those in *The Well-Trained Ritualist*

you will have what you need to allow inspiration in ritual to flow easily through you, giving you what you need to effectively lead others to the Kindreds.

Work Cited

Stanislavski, Constantin; Elizabeth Reynolds Hapgood, translator. *An Actor Prepares*, (New York: Theatre Arts Books, 1936, translation 1948). ISBN 0-87830-001-5