

The Well-Trained Ritualist

By Rev. Kirk S. Thomas

Those of us who do public ritual for groups both small and large realize that there are certain skills necessary for a successful rite. Much preparation is required to create or learn the parts of a specific ritual, to rehearse any ritual plays or lore recitations, to memorize and/or research any invocations needed, to obtain a ritual space and arrange the potluck.....the list goes on and on.

But we don't necessarily take into account the presentational skills needed by the aspiring ritualist to ensure that everyone present, both human and divine, can take in and comprehend everything going on. We must be both seen and heard, and what we present must be both understandable and effective with a minimum of distraction. This essay attempts to aid ritualists to begin training our bodies and voices, allowing us to be able to trust them to carry our words and actions to all in attendance.

Basic Presentation Skills

PREPARATION

Relaxation

Relaxation is where we must start. A relaxed ritualist is open and able to speak and move with confidence. A tense ritualist is always constrained. Focus wanders, distractions abound, and, frankly, it shows. Warm-up techniques for both the body and voice will go a long way towards relaxation, such as shaking the arms and legs, bouncing on the balls of the feet, stretching the muscles, even running in place. Vocal exercises will limber up the voice and make it more free and effective. Mental relaxation can be achieved through meditation, slow, deep breathing, and concentration on items in your vicinity. Relaxation is not zoning out, going into a stupor or just being a bag of bones, rather it is a calm, receptive openness to everything around you.

Before rituals led by a group of celebrants, it is also a good idea to attune to the Powers and to each other, through the use of the 2 Powers meditation or other techniques. This preparation, on top of the ones mentioned earlier in this section, will aid in your relaxation.

Posture

Posture is very important for the ritualist. Not only will good posture make you look good, giving you more presence and authority, but it will also help make your voice stronger and more resonant. Take off your clothes and have a good long look in the mirror. Stand with your sides to the mirror and see how straight you are standing. Usually, most of us slouch to some extent or another.

Exercise 1: Improving Your Posture

A really good way to improve your posture is to imagine that a string is attached to the top of your head. Then imagine, and clearly see in your mind's eye, that some God or Goddess is gently pulling up on that string. Keep your shoulders relaxed, and feel yourself straighten up, led by that string attached to your head. Then try walking around keeping the same feeling. Practice this regularly for a while and see the difference in how you feel.

This posture exercise can also be a good psychic cue for you at the beginning of a rite, helping you put yourself into sacred space and time. Or you can just allow yourself have good posture all the time!

Trust

You have to trust both yourself and your fellow ritualists. Without this trust, you will be constantly on your guard and your focus will suffer. Trust is not a passive thing – it must be actively sought out. Reach out to your fellow ritualists and determine ways to work together. Should one of them prove not to be completely trustworthy, create strategies to cope with any situations you can foresee. To be able to trust yourself, you must prepare yourself, mentally and physically, for the tasks ahead. And this will require discipline. See the section on Stage Fright below for some trust exercises you can do.

Discipline

Without discipline there can be no trust between collaborators, and group ritual is a collaborative art. Be on time for any rehearsals and for the ritual itself – coming forth to lead others to honor the Kindreds is not a casual activity. It is one of the greatest importance.

Self-discipline is also required for success. Learn those invocations, warm up your body and voice, do what it takes to be totally prepared. Take the time to do what is required.

Freedom

The ritualist also must learn to be free – free from inhibitions that could stifle the work. And the ritualist must learn to enjoy this freedom – ritual is serious stuff, but it need not be solemn (Cohen, 5-24). Even within the most scripted rite the Spirits may touch you, prompting you to veer off course for a moment, giving the rite an added spark or joyous touch. Enjoy those moments of divine contact, but remember that freedom must be tempered with responsibility, so get back on track when the moment has passed.

Enthusiasm

When we make our invocations, deep inside we know that the Spirits will answer us. When we have made relationships with Them, They actually do care about us, and actively wish us well. So approach the work with a positive expectation that you *will* be successful in what you do. Speak directly *to* Them. *Know* that They will come. Doing this will also help the ritualist avoid self-consciousness (Cohen, 57). After all, you're not really speaking to the empty air, or just to the folks attending the ritual (though you are speaking to them as well). You are speaking to the Kindreds themselves.

THE VOICE

Vocal Production

Very simply, after we inhale, filling our lungs with air by use of the diaphragmatic and intercostal (rib) muscles, the excitor muscles (those muscles that control the supply of air we exhale so that sound can happen) get it all started. The controlled flow of air passes through a vibrator (the vocal cords), which produces sound as the air passes across it. These sounds are amplified and broadened by the resonators (cavities in the chest, throat, mouth and nose). These resonators affect how the voice sounds, giving it a tone unique to each individual (Elizabeth, 9).

OK, enough of that technical stuff. Let's get down to brass tacks here.

The Breath

The voice is probably the most important tool a ritualist can have for presentational work. And the breath is the basis of the voice. The ritualist's goal is simply to breathe naturally while under the pressure of leading ritual, and to supply enough power to support the voice in difficult circumstances, such as working outdoors (Cohen, 113).

Have you ever watched a baby cry? They have yet to learn the bad habits of our culture, and so breathe naturally and fully, bringing forth enough sound to shake the windows, and with apparently little effort. Notice how they breathe – deeply and fully from the base of their abdomens. They don't visibly fill their chests – most action appears to take place in the area of the stomach. This is because when people inhale, the air is sucked into the lungs by the motion of the diaphragm, which pulls down on the lungs (as well as the action of the intercostals which expand the chest). This motion of the diaphragm causes the stomach to distend, or appear to push out. The person is not pushing his/her stomach out, rather it is simply getting out of the way of the diaphragm. In like manner, when the person exhales, the diaphragm pushes upwards on the lungs and the intercostals contract, making the chest cavity smaller. This may appear as if the stomach were being pulled in.

When we yawn, we not only relax the throat but we automatically breathe from the base of the abdomen. This also occurs when we are sleeping. The trick for the ritualist is to re-learn how to do this when awake and working in ritual.

Exercise 2: Breathing from the Abdomen

Lie down on your back on the floor, knees raised and feet flat on the floor. Place one hand on your stomach and one hand on your chest. Breathe normally, paying close attention to your body and your hands. Is your chest moving? Is your stomach moving?

Place your awareness under the hand on your stomach. Breathe deeply again and “see” the air filling the cavity under that hand, passing through the chest without stopping. Did the hand on your belly rise? Did the hand on your chest remain mostly still?

Practice this a few times until you can get your breath to fill deeply within you. If you’re having problems getting this to happen, try consciously pushing out your stomach while inhaling, keeping your chest still. (Remember, the inflow of the air is not caused by pushing out the stomach, but by the action of the diaphragm). Try this a few times until you sense the movement of the diaphragm filling the lungs. It can be a subtle difference.

Exercise 3: The Yawn

Place the tip of your tongue against the inside of your lower front teeth. Open your mouth and expand your throat, and then inhale. This should lead you to yawn organically. Let the yawn flow naturally through you. This relaxes the throat and helps make vocal production easier.

Breath Support

Strengthening the muscles that control and support the breath is essential for the production of strong and directed sound. Just doing vocalizations can achieve this, but there are exercises that can help achieve and maintain this support.

First of all, we all need to have a strong core to our bodies. Only by strengthening our core can we have strong and effective vocal production. Our core is the basis of all we do – be it walk, dance, speak, sing, even have sex. And the best and easiest way to strengthen the core of the body is to do crunches. In the old days, folks were advised to do sit-ups, but we know now that the old-fashioned sit-up can actually cause lower back problems, so don’t bother with those.

Exercise 4: Basic Crunches

As with the 'Breathing From the Abdomen' exercise above, lie on your back on the floor with your knees up and feet flat on the floor. Place your hands behind your neck and interlace your fingers.

As you exhale, tighten your stomach muscles and slowly lift your shoulders off of the floor. Only raise them a few inches or so off the floor – don't go too far. When you reach that raised position, hold for a moment and then slowly lower yourself again. Repeat. Be careful that you don't pull on your neck with your hands – they are only there to support the weight of your head.

At first you may only be able to do a few of these, and that's fine. Keep working at them on successive days until you can do 25 or so in a row. That's probably enough for one session. Do a session of crunches regularly – daily is best (of course) but two or three times a week is probably adequate.

Now that you've begun strengthening your core, it's time to start working those diaphragm muscles. Here is a very effective exercise that works for most people.

Exercise 5: Explosive Breathing

Stand upright and relax your body, particularly your shoulders. Perform and Yawn exercise to relax your throat. Breathe deeply into your abdomen while staying relaxed. When ready, quickly contract your diaphragm and stomach muscles, forcing the air out of your lungs quickly and explosively.

HAH

DO NOT USE YOUR VOICE OR TIGHTEN YOUR THROAT. This is just an explosive, voiceless out-flowing of air in a relaxed throat.

Repeat this, making the exhalations closer and closer together, allowing yourself a short inhalation between each exhalation if necessary.

Be careful not to hyperventilate! Concentrate on the rapid contraction of the diaphragm and stomach muscles. ***HAH. HAH. HAH. HAH. HAH.*** Rest for a moment, and try it again.

How can you know if you have a strong and well-controlled breathing apparatus? One easy way is to do the following exercise.

Exercise 6: Making a Continuous Tone while Jumping

Make a single, continuous sound, like singing a single note, and start jumping up and down. Does the sound wobble or does it sound the same

as when you were standing still? When you have a strong core and vocal apparatus, the tone should be as steady while jumping, as it is when you are standing still.

Pitch Range

Pitch is the actual note that we use when speaking. Normally, most people speak within a range of a few notes, but when excited, the range of notes used in speech can increase. Listen to someone shout from a distance and you'll hear a difference (Cohen, 118).

Higher notes tend to resonate in the head, and lower notes in the chest and throat, but everyone is different. One thing that the aspiring ritualist needs to remember, however, is that it can be harmful to try and speak outside of your normal pitch range. Sometimes, for instance, a man may believe that in order to sound more 'manly', he needs to speak using lower notes. This is called *under pitching*, and can damage the voice. The way to have a deeper, richer voice is to *resonate* more in the chest, not lower the pitch.

Exercise 7: Exploring Your Pitch Range

Breathe from the abdomen and pick a note in your normal range. Then speak each of the following lines on that note (and this time, do use your voice):

- a. hah hah hah hah hah hah hah
- b. bah bah bah bah bah bah bah
- c. pah pah pah pah pah pah pah

Now pick a lower note in your range, and repeat the above lines. Pick a higher note in your range and repeat. You can do this with all the notes you can muster to see what your speaking range is like. REMEMBER – you are speaking, not singing.

Now do the following, sliding down the scale from top to bottom. Repeat, rising up the scale from bottom to top:

- d. ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh (Cohen, 115)

Resonance

When we make sounds with our vocal cords, certain tissues and cavities in our bodies make sympathetic vibrations, increasing the amount and affecting the quality of the sound we produce. Imagine striking a tuning fork and placing it on a wooden box – the sound you hear will be amplified tremendously (Cohen,

115). This is called *resonance*. And this is something we can do with our own bodies. Different vowel and consonantal sounds will resonate in different areas – and we can also focus our sound in different resonating cavities. The main areas of resonance are the face and nose, the throat and the chest.

Americans and Canadians tend to ‘speak’ in their throats, while Europeans tend to ‘speak’ in their faces (also called the *mask*). Resonating in the mask will act to carry your voice much further than resonating in your throat. Resonating in the chest will give your voice a deeper and richer quality.

But how do we get our voices to resonate in these places? Well, we all probably know one facial resonance spot – the nasal cavities. Most of us can, at will, put our voices in our noses and make that ‘nasal’ sound that sounds pretty funny. But this sound, when added to the resonances possible in the rest of the mask, can add a lot to the beauty and strength of the voice.

Exercise 8: Resonating in the Nose and Mask

- a. Stand comfortably but with good posture, and relax. Make a sustained *ng* sound (like the *ng* in the word *sing*). Feel the vibrations in the top and back of your nose.
- b. Now make a sustained sound of the letter *m*. *Mmmmmmmmmmm*. Feel how the vibrations have moved down to your lips. Play with the sound, going back and forth between the *ng* and *m* sounds.
- c. Now start with the *m* sound again. Open your mouth and turn the *m* sound into *mahhhhhhhh*. Go back to the single *m* sound with your mouth closed again. Repeat a few times.

In doing part c. of the above exercise, you may find your voice retreating back into your throat once you release the *m* sound and go into the *ah* sound. Keep practicing this until you can keep the entire sound in your mask, with it vibrating all through your face. Be aware, though, that the quality of the sound will be different when there is a vowel involved.

- d. Repeat part c. of this exercise using different vowels, and feel where the vibrations take place.

While chest resonance is particularly important for men, it is useful for women as well, at least in the speaking (as opposed to the singing) voice. It adds depth and strength to any voice. The sound may be subtler in women than it is in men, however.

Exercise 9: Resonating in the Chest

Have you ever blown over the top of a bottle and made it sing a note? That's the same principle that chest resonance uses. In this exercise we will be attempting to recreate a similar sound using our own chest cavity instead of a bottle.

Sit in a comfortable chair, drop your shoulders and relax. Do the yawn exercise a couple of times to open and relax the throat.

Open your mouth and throat, inhale, and with a breathy voice say,

"Oh hum, I'm so tired! Oooooooooooooooooo"

while slowly dropping your head and bending over in your seat, shaking your head side to side. (Note: the *Oooooo* sound should rhyme with the word, *boot*.)

Practice this often. When I learned this technique, it took me two weeks of steady practice to finally hear a difference in my voice, so don't despair!

SPEECH

Diction and Enunciation (Articulation)

In the old days, before Method Acting became popular in films (think Marlon Brando), diction was seen as critical for good performances. Indeed, on the stage this is still the case, but it isn't so important in everyday life, and many people have speech that is quite sloppy. Mumbling and imprecise diction are the norm, but while this may be fine for day-to-day conversation, it's deadly on the stage or in ritual. There, words have to be heard across distance, and distance distorts sound a little bit. This distortion seems to increase with distance, and when it's not possible to see the lips of the person speaking, it can be even worse. Add in differences of accent or dialect and the entire edifice falls down around our ears.

We may call this lack of clarity on the part of a speaker as 'mush-mouth'.

As a ritualist, it is your job to be heard and understood. Good diction, mixed in with vocal projection, will succeed every time. So it pays to give your actual speech mechanics a bit of your time and attention.

Are you aware that in American English, internal *t*'s often get pronounced as *d*'s? *Butter* becomes *budder*, *wetter* becomes *wedder*. In British English, some dialects have intrusive *r*'s. When a word ends with a vowel and the next word begins with a vowel, the letter *r* may get stuck in the middle - "*Asia and Africa*" becomes "*Asia/r/ and Africa*". These dialectical differences can be charming, but it's best to be aware of your own personal habits.

Exercise 10: Demosthenes Revisited

The great Athenian orator Demosthenes was said to have had a stutter as a child, which he overcame by practicing his speeches with a mouth full of pebbles. Here is a variation on that theme:

Put a pencil between your upper and lower teeth, with the ends sticking out on either side of your face. While holding the pencil securely, read a piece of text (like, say, a paragraph from this essay), taking care to enunciate each word clearly. This is excellent practice for the lips and tongue.

Exercise 11: Tongue Twisters

Tongue twisters are a great way to practice your diction and avoid the terrors of mush-mouth. Start slowly with the examples below and then speed up with practice (Elizabeth, 225):

- a. Peter picked a pint of pickled peppers. (*repeat*)
- b. Rubber baby buggy bumpers. (*repeat*)
- c. Six sleek swans swam swiftly southwards. (*repeat*)
- d. Lovely lemon liniment. (*repeat*)
- e. The great Greek grape growers grow great Greek grapes.
- f. Toy boat, toy boat, toy boat. (*repeat*)

USING THE VOICE

Liberating the Voice

Many of us have been conditioned by society to be polite in social situations, sometimes even timid or deferential. Now, even the most outgoing person will occasionally experience a moment of qualm when, say, the entire room turns and looks at him/her, but in ritual *everyone* will be looking at you, so you will need to train yourself to let yourself go. As a celebrant your voice needs to explode, to excite, to be warm and bright. It is essential that the ritualist break down these repressive hang-ups so that s/he may, at will, do what is needed.

Exercise 12: Rude Words

The purpose of this exercise is to get over saying rude words without giggling or releasing your discomfort in any other way. This may help you find the courage you might need to liberate your voice. Of course, if these

words are part of your normal vocabulary this may not work. Allow your voice to say, at full volume and with clear speech, the sort of words you don't normally get to say in public (Cohen, 130). Speak the following with feeling:

- a. Shit, shit, shit, shit, shit!
- b. Penis, penis, penis, penis!
- c. Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck!
- d. Asshole, asshole, asshole, asshole, asshole! (for our British friends, you might try saying *arsehole* instead)
- e. Testicle, testicle, testicle, testicle, testicle!
- f. Masturbate, masturbate, masturbate, masturbate, masturbate!

Vocal Warm-ups

It's always best to warm up the voice before any ritual. This will help prevent hoarseness and make your voice sound the best it can.

Exercise 13: Basic Vocal Warm-ups

These were taught to me when I played the role of Harold Hill in *The Music Man*. These warm-ups, stolen from singers, enabled me to get through a long and arduous vocal part.

- a. First, yawn (see Exercise 3 above)
- b. Keeping your throat open, as in a yawn, gently say **ah** with a breathy voice without holding a note. Make the sound for your entire exhalation.
- c. Using a keyboard, if possible, pick a note that you are comfortable with, in the middle of your range.
- d. Gently sing **ah**, moving up five pitches and back down again (for instance, if you started on middle C, gently sing **ah** on C, then D, then E, then F, then G, and reverse the process coming back down again).
- e. Repeat, but start on the next note up the scale (that would be D in my example above). Repeat, going up a note for your start until you reach the top of your range – **do not strain** to hit high notes – stop when you are no longer singing freely and comfortably.
- f. Now go back to your first starting note (middle C in my example above) and repeat. Repeat again, but go down a note for your starting note and repeat until you reach the bottom of your range. Again, do not strain the voice.
- g. Now repeat the entire process again, but this time use the sound **mah** (this brings the sound forward into your mask). You may then play with these sounds, using **moh, meh, mee, moo**, etc. (Note: the ee sound is more difficult to produce on higher notes because of the way it can tighten the back of the mouth – don't strain!)

TIP – Keeping the Voice Lubricated

When in ritual (and when warming up), your voice may start to feel dry. Before ritual begins, be sure that you are well hydrated. During ritual, **sip** only tepid (lukewarm or body temperature) water. This will help to keep your voice lubricated.

NOTE - Avoid warm and cold water, teas, honey, throat lozenges, etc. as these will fool you into thinking that your throat is feeling better when in actuality they are only deadening pain, which can lead to strain or overuse of the voice. Also, avoid any milk products for a few hours before ritual as they cause phlegm in the throat and sinuses.

Projection

Projection is the art of making your voice reach to all corners of your ritual space in as effortless a manner as possible. While this can also mean, “raise the volume”, it must be stressed that you should accomplish this through resonance and not by ‘pushing’ the voice.

Bring all your practice of breath support, pitch and resonance together as one, and this will enable you to properly project your voice. Indoors, this is relatively easy, once you master the basics, but outdoors can be tricky even for the most experienced of us (see below).

How loud is loud enough? This is a common question, and one that you will probably have to learn through experience. However, while indoors, you can judge your volume by how it sounds to you, and this can help you learn to feel your volume kinesthetically, through your body, so that you don’t overdo it when outdoors.

Exercise 14: Bouncing Your Voice Off the Walls

a. In the shower –

Stand in the shower and yawn (don’t inhale the water!). Breathe from your abdomen and place your voice in your mask by doing the *M* and *Mah* sounds exercise in 8.c. above. Then say,

*“Once more into the breach, dear friends, once more!
Or close the wall up with English dead!”*

This line can sound quite loud in this tiny space. Hear the resonance in your voice. Try it again at a different volume, first quieter, and the next time try is louder. Judge how much effort it took to make the sound ‘just right’.

- b. In a small room –

This time, prepare as usual, standing in the middle of a small room, and speak the line as before. Find the volume that sounds a bit louder than normal conversation. This is probably the ideal amount of projection for this space.

- c. In a large room –

Do the same as before, but in a much larger room, or on a stage in a theatre. Can you hear your voice come back to you from the back wall? Can you judge just how much volume is required to be heard well in this space? Get a friend to go to the other end of the room and listen to you speak. Can s/he hear you loudly and clearly? Again, take care not to strain your voice.

Projection Outdoors

Many of our ADF rites are conducted outdoors, and this can be very hard on the voice because it is so very difficult to judge your projection and volume when outside. There are no walls to bounce your voice off of, and it just keeps going past the congregation and out into the world.

For this reason *it is critical* that you practice your voice indoors and learn kinesthetically what different volumes feel like. Then, while outside, the voice can be set at the volume needed for a large room, *and no more*, to prevent hoarseness and vocal fatigue. In time, you will learn to trust your body and voice to do what you need them to do.

In a later section of this essay I will address taking space and ways in which you can better guarantee being heard in an outdoors situation.

USING THE BODY

Like the voice, the body performs at its best when it is warm. Physical warm-ups before a ritual can enhance how you feel and how you project yourself. You also will need to warm up quickly and at the last minute if your rituals are anything like ours, where there are lots of distractions from set-up and attendee arrivals.

Exercise 15: Quick Body Warm-ups

- a. First, go back and start with Exercise 1: Posture
- b. Standing straight and tall, gently tilt your head to each side and then front and back.
- c. Now gently turn your head to the left and then to the right, as far as it will go. Don't strain your neck.

- d. Rotate your shoulders both forward and backwards.
- e. Raise your right arm over your head and bend sideways to the left. Repeat with the left arm, bending to the right.
- f. Hold your arms straight out in front of you and slowly do a deep knee bend (if you are able). Stand.
- g. Run (or jog) in place for one minute.

Intentional Movement and Gesture

One of the biggest mistakes some ritualists make, and one of the most distracting, is the lack of intentional movement, or, perhaps, the *use of unintentional movement*. Often, when folks aren't sure of exactly what they're doing, or when they are thinking on the fly, they will start aimlessly wandering around the ritual space. Not only does this scatter the ritual energy and focus, it also gives the impression that the ritualist doesn't know what he or she is doing. And your attendees will find this very distracting.

Focus is crucial for all actions in ritual, and this includes movement and gesture. Never walk across the ritual space unless you are actually going somewhere on purpose. Never make a ritual gesture unless you have a reason for doing so.

Reasons for moving in the ritual space include going to the Fire, Well, Tree, etc. in order to make offerings. Another reason may be to speak to a specific part of the audience for a moment, as in storytelling, spreading the wealth around the space, as it were. Another reason may be to speak to another actor in a lore play. But in all cases, don't wander around. Actually *go* there, directly. Don't pass go, don't collect \$200, just **GO**.

In a similar way, gesture should always be intentional. Gesture should also be large enough so that it can be seen. In all cases it must be deliberate and it must exhibit follow-through, from beginning to end. No half-hearted gestures will do, they just make the ritualist look clumsy. If you want to extend your arm for some reason, extend it all the way and in a fluid motion. Don't just flop it about. And don't extend it at all unless you can think of a reason (or at least *appear* that you have thought of a reason).

Gestures to Avoid

There are a couple of gestures that beginners sometimes use that we should mention here.

- a. **Pointing** – don't point at anyone or anything unless there is a specific reason to do so (such as in a lore play).
- b. **Goosing the Gods** – this gesture is when a person holds his hand out, palm upwards, to make a point, with the fingers pointing up from the palm. It looks like you are goosing the air.

Exercise 16: Standing Still

In a large room or on a stage or in a circle, stand still and deliver a short speech from memory (or extemporaneously). Imagine a group of people are there watching you. Stand still in one place while you do this (though you may look in various directions as though delivering the speech to real people). Don't fidget.

Exercise 17: Moving Deliberately

In a large room or on a stage or in a circle, stand to one side and begin delivering a story. If you have friends or Grove mates who can be present, sitting around the edge of the room, all the better.

At a point about 1/3 of the way through the story (or at a point where there can be a crisis or other emotional point in the tale) ---

Walk directly to one part of the room, delivering that point to a specific group of people (real or imagined). Don't forget that the folks in the rest of the room need to be able to hear you as well.

After a few moments, do the same thing to a different part of the room (or group of people). Then again back to the place you started in.

Make each movement deliberate and purposeful. Don't wander. Look at the people (if any) that you are addressing. Don't stay in one place with your back to the majority of the people (or room) for very long – a few seconds at most (see below).

DIFFERENT SPACES, DIFFERENT CHALLENGES

In most ritual situations there are three layouts of space that you will encounter. The names of these layouts, borrowed from the theatre, are *proscenium*, *thrust* and *round*.

- a. **Proscenium** – This is the stage layout that we see in most churches, theatres, and cinemas. The audience sits in rows facing the front of the room where the action takes place. Many weddings use this configuration.
- b. **Thrust** – In this layout, the audience is on three sides of the stage or ritual space with the fourth side reserved for the action. Some groves set up their circles like this – the ritual table/altar is at one side, and most of the celebrants gather there when not actively speaking or performing in part of the rite.
- c. **Round** – Here the audience is on all sides of the ritual space and the action takes place in the center. This is very common in Wiccan and general Neopagan rites, and some groves use this as well.

Proscenium

In the proscenium configuration, the ritualist must remember to face out towards the audience, either in a full-front position or a $\frac{1}{4}$ position (this means that the body is angled half-way between full front and profile). With these two positions there is a greater likelihood that the ritualist will be heard throughout the space. A profile position starts to become problematic, because the voice projects forward the best, with lessening volume the further from the front of the person (that is, to the sides or back) the audience gets. In profile, the ritualist's voice may get lost in the wings.

Movement tends to take place laterally, from side to side, though it can also take place forward and backwards (though this is more difficult). The full back position can be visually quite powerful, but it makes vocal projection very difficult, and should only be used sparingly and for very short periods of time. Always avoid the $\frac{3}{4}$ position (halfway between profile and full back) whenever possible, unless you are trying to disappear. It is visually the weakest position of all.

Thrust

This configuration is probably the easiest for the ritualist to use and be effective, because it allows movement beyond the end of the room or space and still gives the ritualist somewhere to point his or her back.

Turning your back on someone has long been considered rude. In ritual, it is even worse because it makes the ritualist harder to be heard. Having one side of the space free of attendees allows him/her to stay in one place for a long time without running the risk of cutting off an entire part of the audience. Of course, there will be occasions in every ritual where a celebrant may want to address specific parts of the audience, for variety if nothing else, leaving some folks staring at his/her back. There are some tricks that will help with this that I will address after the next section.

Round

This is probably the most difficult configuration of all because the ritualist will always have his or her back turned on someone at all times. It's just unavoidable. One technique I've seen work well in large rituals is to have all the celebrants standing in the circle with the attendees until their turn comes to do their ritual part. Then, they walk forward into the ritual space and do their part, and when they are finished, they can simply re-join the circle.

Tips for Dealing with Thrust and Round Configurations

Remember, the people in front of you will hear you better than those at your sides. The people at your sides will hear you far better than the folks behind you. Think of your sound as a circle, but one where you are not in the center. Rather, you are close to the back edge of your sound-circle. If you are standing with your back to folks but very close to them, they can still hear you. Walk to the center of the space and the people behind you will have trouble hearing you at all.

- a. Do not stand in the center of the space, if possible. Rather, stand near an edge of the space and face inwards towards the center.
- b. Face one direction and turn your head to the side for a bit, then to the other side for a bit. When you turn your head, the people behind you will suddenly hear you far better. You will be spreading your voice around the space and not sending it all in the same direction. And it looks good visually.
- c. Share yourself. Face or turn to various directions during your work, unless you have your back to an unpopulated part of the space.
- d. Outdoors, in windy conditions, try and stand **upwind** of the attendees. The wind will carry your voice to them. If you face any other direction, the wind will snatch your voice away from you.

Upstaging

Upstaging is when you are doing a ritual part, and someone behind you does something that causes the audience to pay attention to him or her instead of to you. In most rituals I've attended where upstaging occurs it is usually accidental, but everyone needs to be aware of the power of upstaging.

There's a story out there (which may be apocryphal) that will demonstrate this concept. Back in the 1950's, a new, young actor was appearing in a play with a grand dame of the stage. She wasn't particularly nice to the boy, and one day he decided to get even. That night, during her big, emotional scene downstage near the audience, he sat upstage behind her, lit a cigarette and promptly stuck it in his nose, where he smoked it for the entire scene. The grand dame couldn't understand why the audience kept laughing hysterically.

Don't let this happen to you.

TYPICAL PERFORMANCE PROBLEMS (and some possible solutions)

Stage Fright

We all know this feeling. We have to get up in front of folks and speak, and butterflies invade our stomachs, our voices quiver, and our bodies shake. We feel like we're going to be sick. Sometimes there's this incredible buzzing noise in

our heads as adrenalin pushes up our pulse and blood pressure. We feel like we're going to die, and if not, we rather wish we would.

Stage fright is just that, fear. Fear of criticism, fear of forgetting your invocation, fear of leaving out a part of the story you're telling, fear of falling down or falling into the fire (really). Fear, fear, fear.

And usually this fear is based on knowing that you are ill prepared. There is an old truism in the theatre, "You cannot do what you have not rehearsed." How well do you know your part? How well have you connected with the Kindreds before? How well do you know the ritual space and any traps it may hold for you? Once, when doing a rite at an outdoor festival, I neglected to take a good look at the ground in the ritual space before the sun set and it got dark. Then, when opening the Gates my way (by spinning), I stepped into a hole, lost my balance and then knocked over the World Tree with my staff. I didn't just knock it over, I sent it flying.

It is also essential for the ritualist to have *trust*, trust in themselves and their fellow ritualists. And this trust develops over time. Usually, once people have gotten up and performed in front of people a few times, many of these concerns disappear and the stage fright lessens dramatically (or even goes away). But that's not much help, you say. You need some immediate help right now! Fair enough.

Exercise 18: Trusting Your Fellow Celebrants

a. Trust Circle

We've all seen the car insurance ad where the company CEO asks the tiny gecko lizard salesman to catch him as he falls backwards. Well, this TV joke is based on a real trust exercise.

This requires other people to participate. Have your fellow ritualists join you in standing in a circle. Taking turns, each of you stand in the center of the circle with your eyes closed. While your eyes remain closed, count to ten. While you are counting, the group circle revolves around you so that you don't know who is behind you. After reaching ten, the group stops and you slowly fall backward, keeping your body stiff and straight. The person directly behind you catches you.

c. Blanket Toss

Lay a well-made blanket or sheet on a carpeted floor. Lie down in the center of the sheet while the other celebrants gather around the edges of the sheet and grab hold of it. Now relax!

The other celebrants then lift the sheet, and you, up into the air, with a gentle tossing motion. After a couple of tosses, they lower you gently back down to the floor. Try to keep your screaming to a minimum as this might distract the folks holding the sheet.

Exercise 19: Self Hypnosis

It's almost time to start the ritual. You suddenly realize that your heart is racing and that stage fright is taking you over. What can you do?

This used to happen to me. It was so bad that I thought I would throw up before my cue came. This is how I got over it.

Gently start breathing with deep breaths, starting with a total exhalation (not inhalation) until your lungs are empty. Let the air re-enter your lungs by itself – don't actively breathe in. Continue doing this and quietly say (or think) the word, *calm*, during each exhalation, "Caaaaaaaalm. Caaaaaaaalm. Caaaaaaaalm." Focus on the word, and on your slow, gentle breathing. See yourself become calm and relaxed. Continue until you *are* calm and relaxed (or it's time to do your ritual part).

This exercise would lower my heart rate by 10 beats per minute. And the adrenalin would stop pumping so it could work its way out of my system.

Excessive Tension

Another symptom of stage fright can be excessive tension in your body while in ritual. Your voice may go up in pitch, you might feel stiff and wooden, and your shoulders have ended up somewhere around your ears.

One solution that worked for me was to simply put my tension somewhere else, where it wouldn't get in the way so much.

Exercise 20: Put It In Your Ankle

When very tense, stand as loosely as you can, and think about relaxing your shoulders and body.

Tighten one of your ankles, and let the tension flow down to there. While keeping the ankle tense, remind yourself to relax everywhere else and feel it happen.

Keep the tension in your ankle as long as you need it, or for as long as it is practical (it can be difficult to walk with tense ankles).

Fidgeting, or "Where did these hands come from? I'm sure they're not mine!"

When we're in ritual there are times when our hands take on a life of their own. We are suddenly aware of their existence – "where did these come from? What can I do with them? I just wish they'd just go away!"

Other times we will not be aware of them at all, and we are also unaware that our hands are *doing* things without our knowledge. Things like jingling coins and keys in our pockets, or finger snapping, or hand clenching, or scratching in unpleasant places.

Both the omnipresent hands and the unthinking hands need to be dealt with. They not only distract others from the focus of the rite, but they also dissipate your own energy and focus. Besides which they're damned annoying.

Tips for Annoying Hands

These tips will work for both kinds of annoying hands.

Park them somewhere. There are many places you can put your hands, and some are better than others.

- a. Fold your hands in front of your belly. Choirs do this and it actually doesn't look too bad. And your hands will be there, handy, should you need them for something.
- b. Hook your thumbs on your belt. Just be careful that you can extricate them easily.
- c. Hold something in your hands. Why do you think everyone was smoking on stage and in the movies in the bad old days? You could hold an offering, a wand, or something else ritual related. Just remember that you may need to gesture with it while it is still in your hand.

The best way, though, is a bit tricky and will require some due care and attention, but it's what we all do naturally in life:

Let your hands and arms hang at your sides in a relaxed way.

DELIVERY SKILLS

Dealing with Texts, Memorization and Internalization

Attack

Attack is how the ritualist delivers the first word of an invocation or speech. Normally, you should come in strong, with confidence, vigor and enthusiasm, and with sufficient tempo and pace (see below). This brings everyone's attention to you and helps create focus. Beginners often come in too weakly or mildly, and

this scatters the focus, possibly ruining the invocation. (Cohen, 191) Make them look at you and pay attention!

Also, since speech is an action, you may want to punctuate your start with something physical – a step forward, a gesture, whatever. Do remember, though, that when an action takes place before a spoken word, it is the word that becomes emphasized. When words come before an action, the action is emphasized. Words and action coming at the same time tend to emphasize (or neutralize) both.

Tempo and Pace

What these are, and how they are different from each other, is often very difficult for beginners to figure out. In many ways you will just have to experience it in ritual to really understand. But let's try anyway.

Tempo is the actual speed at which something is said. Are you speaking quickly or slowly? Are you plodding through a speech at one word in two seconds or racing through it at six words per second? Tempo = Speed.

Pace, though, is the speed at which your audience *perceives* your speech, invocation, or indeed the entire rite. Are they bored? If so, the speech is very long and slow. Are they interested? If so, the same speech is short, quick and fascinating. It's all relative.

Sometimes when we're out there in front of folks, speaking a complex text, we notice that they are all suddenly suffering from a bad cough, with tickled throats all around. This is a sure sign that our pace is too slow, and that our attendees are getting bored. What can we do?

Beginners will often try to fix this problem by speeding up their tempo, by speaking more quickly. Actually, this is probably the worst thing you could do. Complex thought requires you to slow down the tempo a bit so that your attendees can have the time they need to digest and understand what it is you are saying.

Other times it may mean that your focus and concentration have begun to waiver, and a good and strong attack may be called for. Use vocal variation in what you're saying, use different dynamics (like being louder or softer), start moving around or gesturing with strong intention, etc. Do something to get their attention. This is called, 'picking up the pace' as opposed to 'picking up the tempo.' And sometimes, picking up the tempo is what's needed to pick up the pace. With experience, you will learn to trust your senses and intuition in dealing with tempo and pace.

Emphasis

Now let's examine *emphasis*, how stresses and pauses in a sentence can affect its meaning. There's a wonderful section on this in *Painless Speaking* that brings this home clearly (Elizabeth, 128-9).

Take the simple phrase, "I love you." As it is, with no words stressed, it means that someone has deep feelings about someone else. But let's try putting the emphasis on specific words and see what the sentence means then.

- "I love you." - as opposed to someone else loving you
- "I love you." - as opposed to the ordinary meaning of the word
- "I love you." - as opposed to my loving someone other than you
- "I love you." - "But I don't think you love me."
- "I love you." - and someone else merely 'likes' you
- "I...love...you." - a realization just dawned

With this example we can see that stress and pauses can subtly change the meaning of a sentence. This is something that you can use to great effect in your work. Not only does word-stress give shades of meaning, but it can also help reveal meaning for your attendees when using complex texts.

Inflection

Inflection is the use of different pitches in your spoken voice to make meaning clear in a sentence. It goes hand in hand with stress, in that a stressed word often uses a higher pitch than the unstressed words (but not always).

Compare these two ways of saying, "He loves her?" Since this is a question, the last word will use a higher pitch than the rest. But what if we change the pitch of the word, 'loves'?

her?" -----
"He loves ----- meaning, "Oh, I thought he loved someone else."

and

 her?" -----
"He ----- meaning, "Horrors! Then why does he beat her?"
----- loves

Varying your inflections can also really help with a list of items you are naming, something that happens in ritual. Take the following sentence:

"Mighty Gods! We offer you pork, flowers, whiskey, this sword, and these drawings. Accept our sacrifice!"

Okay, you will probably be making each offering as you say the word, with pauses in between, which will help. But by varying the inflections of each offering you can make this speech much more interesting, even with pauses.

Start with a strong attack: "Mighty Gods!"

Then continue with:

offer pork, whis- sword,
 "We you flow- this and these drawings.

Then proceed with another strong attack: "Accept our sac-
 rifice."

Marking Text

Marking text is a way of deciding just how a speech or invocation should be spoken, and then recording it on paper so you won't forget. This is an excellent technique to use for the early stages of memorization, as it will get you off on the right foot immediately.

Should you be reading (instead of reciting) the text in ritual it is essential that you do this first. Do you remember how boring it was in school when the teacher would read long passages to the class? Well, it's the same in ritual, unless you're very, very good.

When you're marking text, be sure to pay close attention to the punctuation. Commas, periods, colons, exclamation points and question marks all have a purpose in writing, and they have the same purpose in reading and reciting. Pay attention to them! But just because there is no punctuation in a specific place in the text doesn't mean that you can't pause there, that is up to you and your gut-level interpretation of the text. Sometimes a well-placed pause in a place with no punctuation can help your attendees understand better what you are saying. And sometimes a comma in the writing needs to be ignored by the speaker.

I use some symbols when I mark text that I'm going to reproduce here as best I can. They are easier to use with a pencil than on a keyboard.

- ¶ This is the new paragraph symbol that I use to mean a new thought.
- | Pause
- || Longer pause
- ||| Really long pause, often accompanied by stress markers
- word Stressed word (single underline)
- word** Heavily stressed word (or use a double underline)
- ↑ Go up in pitch
- ↓ Go down in pitch

⇐ word ⇒ Stretch out word

⇒ word ⇐ Throw word away (under-emphasize it)

Here's a short bit of prayer I wrote some time ago that should demonstrate marking text pretty well. I'm going to go overboard with this just to make my point here.

O Fires of the Sky, O brilliant light!
Descend and crystallize within us now
That spark of order on which life depends,
That through the Sky our Father
We may shine with Order's might.

Now, let's mark it up with one possible interpretation:

¶O ↑ **Fires** ↓ of the ↑ **Sky**, | ↓O ↑ brilliant light! ||
¶⇐Descend⇒ | and ↑crystallize ↓ with↑ in us ↓ now
That ↑spark || ↓ of ↑or↓der || on which ↑life de↓pends, |||
That ↑through ↓the ↑Sky our Fath↓er
We may ↑shine | ↓⇒with⇐ ↑**Order's** ↓ might.

Chances are you would never use so much text markups, but in something really complex, you might. Roman and Greek prayers, much of the Eddas, and the Rig Veda come to mind as being a bit complex.

Just for fun, let's look at something more difficult. This is from a speech that Lady Macbeth makes to her husband when she discovers that his resolve to kill King Duncan (and take the throne) is faltering. (*Macbeth*, Act 1, Scene VII)

But screw your courage to the sticking-place,
And we'll not fail. When Duncan is asleep,
Whereto the rather shall his day's hard journey
Soundly invite him, his two chamberlains
Will I with wine and wassail so convince
That memory, the warder of the brain,
Shall be a fume, and the receipt of reason
A limbeck only; when in swinish sleep
Their drenched natures lie, as in a death,
What cannot you and I perform upon
The unguarded Duncan? what not put upon
His spongy officers who shall bear the guilt
Of our great quell?

Oooh. Good stuff, this.

And it presents a couple of problems. First of all, this speech is made up of only three sentences (though the second one is in two major parts, which we can tell by the use of a semi-colon, as well as some minor parts as indicated by the comas) and the last sentence is really just a continuation of the second one (it doesn't begin with a capital letter and the 'can we' that should go between 'what' and 'not' is assumed).

Also, there are phrases in the second sentence that are new thoughts of their own, explaining other parts of the sentence. All this makes delivery of this speech especially tricky for the performer.

Let's tear this speech apart first and figure out its meaning.

*But screw your courage to the sticking-place,
And we'll not fail. When Duncan is asleep,*

This is pretty straightforward. She's saying, "Get a hold of yourself, man! We'll be fine! And when Duncan is asleep...."

*Whereto the rather shall his day's hard journey
Soundly invite him,*

"Which he will be because he's going to be so tired from his trip that he's going to go straight to bed."

*his two chamberlains
Will I with wine and wassail so convince*

"I am going to go party with Duncan's two chamberlains (guards) and get them so drunk that...."

*That memory, the warder of the brain,
Shall be a fume, and the receipt of reason
A limbeck only;*

"....they won't remember or notice anything."

*when in swinish sleep
Their drenched natures lie, as in a death,*

"...when they've passed out unconscious like the pigs they are..."

*What cannot you and I perform upon
The unguarded Duncan?*

"Duncan will be unguarded and we can do whatever we want to him."

*what not put upon
His spongy officers who shall bear the guilt
Of our great quell?*

“What can we not accuse Duncan’s booze-soaked men of, laying the guilt on them of our murderous enterprise?”

Okay, so it’s pretty clear now what she’s telling her husband. The trick now is to say it all in such a way that the audience actually understands it all.

Earlier I mentioned using a symbol in marking text for meaning a ‘new thought’ (¶). And this speech is just full of new thoughts. Effective ways of showing your audience that you are having a new thought is by taking a pause, followed by a change of pitch and through the use of stress. A bit of movement here could also help. You need to help your audience know that your train of thought is changing.

So let’s try marking up this speech and see what we can come up with (and this is just one interpretation):

¶ But ↑ **screw** ↓ your ↑ **courage** ↓ to the ↑ **sticking**-place, (no pause)
And we’ll ↑ **not** ↓ **fail**. || ¶ When ↑ Duncan is a ↓ sleep, | ¶
↓ ⇨ Where to the rather shall his ⇐ ↑ **day’s** | **hard** | ↓ journey
↑ **Soundly** in ↓ vite him, ||| ¶ his ↑ **two chamberlains** (no pause)
↓ Will I | with ↑ **wine** and ↓ wassail ↑ ⇐ **so convince** ⇨ |
That **me** ↓ **mory**, | the ↑ ⇨ warder of the ↓ brain, ⇐ |
Shall ↑ be a ↓ fume, || and the receipt of ↑ reason |
↓ A ↑ limbeck ↓ only; ||| ¶ when in ↑ **swinish sleep** (no pause)
↓ Their ↑ **drenched natures** ↓ lie, || as in a death, ||
What ↑ **can** ↓ **not** ↑ **you** ↓ and ↑ **I** per ↓ **form** upon
The un ↑ guarded ↓ Duncan? || ↑ **what** | **not** | put upon
His ↑ **spongy** officers | who shall ↑ **bear** ↓ the ↑ **guilt**
Of ↑ **our great quell**?

Whew! But this exercise will certainly help with texts that are even remotely complex. Give it a try! Of course, all this will change in the process of rehearsal or memorization, as inspiration flows. But this is certainly a good start.

Memorization, Internalization, and Improvisation

Memorization leads to internalization, which in turn informs improvisation.

So, what I do mean by this? Let's take a simple phrase that we've all heard many times, "Sacred Fire, burn within us!" We can thank Ian Corrigan for this and many, many more liturgical phrases that are practically standards in ADF.

Let me tell a tale about a mythical ADF member we'll call Mary.

The first time Mary hears this phrase, at a ritual probably, it has weight and meaning and sounds pretty cool. At the next ritual, she recognizes it as it goes by, and even joins in with everyone else when they repeat it. This is the beginning of memorization. Over time she will get that phrase *memorized* so that when she sees it coming, she can also say it.

After a year or so of attending rituals, the phrase becomes automatic – it has lodged itself firmly within Mary's psyche, never to fade away. It may show up in her personal home rites and even in her dreams. It is at this point where the phrase, "Sacred Fire, burn within us!" has become *internalized* for Mary.

Now time passes and Mary has been accepted to help perform her grove's High Day Rites, and she's assigned the task of hallowing the Nemeton, connecting the Well, Fire and Tree to their cosmological equivalents. She gets to the Fire and begins her invocation. The phrase, "Sacred Fire, burn within us!" comes to her automatically, like the sea upon the sand – no effort is needed. After a few months of this, she decides that she wants to do more with this phrase. She attends some workshops on cosmology and learns some fun stuff there. She also keeps forgetting to rewrite the phrase in advance, but one day, in ritual, inspiration hits her and out comes, "Sacred Fire, ordering light of the heavens, bring your great power and burn within us, molding the potential that fills us all!"

While this may not be the best example (the original is a very simple phrase), I'm sure you get my point. Mary has so totally internalized that phrase that she is now able to improvise on it, to change it on the fly and run with it. Had she not internalized that phrase, she may well have stumbled over the whole thing.

The best ritualists in ADF have done what's needed – they have internalized many phrases, prayers, concepts (like the Core Order of Ritual), deity descriptions and ideas and when they need something in a ritual it's right there, at their fingertips, or on the tips of their tongues. And they continue to write new stuff and do more research, further enhancing their store of knowledge. All that beautiful prose you hear in our best rites doesn't just come from nowhere. Rather, it's the result of much hard work, mixed with true inspiration. And we steal the good stuff liberally from each other. Cross-pollination is a good thing!

Memorization

When folks first start out, doing ritual in public can be quite intimidating. And memorizing scripts adds even more pressure to the mix. We may think that we have memorized something, but when we get up there, in front of all those

people, the words just fly out of our heads. As a result, we see scripts in a lot of rites.

Now, reading from scripts is not necessarily a bad thing. It's a wonderful way to get a group of people together and do effective ritual while learning how it's done. When I was Chief Liturgist for Sonoran Sunrise Grove we used elaborate scripts for the first few years while our liturgy gelled, and as a result most of us internalized the words and prayers quite well. Well enough, in fact, to eventually lose the scripts altogether and start improvising with all that we'd learned.

And an argument can be made about perfection in ritual – the ancient Romans and Vedics were insistent on rites being done perfectly. In Rome a ritual had to be started over if even the slightest mistake was made. Many of our groves today have a simple piacular prayer that they do after the Prayer of Sacrifice. Also called the CYA Offering, the piacular offering is one extra gift to the Powers in recompense for any mistakes made in the rite. But other groves believe that this is unnecessary. As Jenni Hunt likes to say, 'Your Mileage May Vary'.

However, there are down sides to reading scripts in ritual. For one thing, the celebrant is looking down at a piece of paper instead of out into the world, where they can connect with the attendees and 'see' the Powers in the Otherworlds. Scripts get dropped and people lose their places. And it's difficult to keep up the pace and flow of a rite when the celebrants are concentrating on their scripts instead of on the rite itself. ("Is it my turn yet?" or "Where are we? I'm lost.") Now, having said that, it is certainly possible to have wonderful rituals when reading from scripts. It's just very, very difficult and requires enormous preparation. In the theatre they give whole workshops to actors on how to read from scripts during auditions. We aren't able to do that.

Memorization Tips

There are probably as many ways to memorize something as there are people doing the memorization. One way that I use is repetition, backed up with coffee.

Caffeine is a stimulant and well known to aid in memorization. Hollywood and the theatre run on caffeine. If you can't take caffeine (and not everyone can) then you'll have to go without. But it should still be possible to memorize things.

Also, speak your words 'out loud' when memorizing text. And eventually do so in full voice. There is a truism in the theatre that applies here,

"You cannot do what you have not rehearsed."

Exercise 21: Simple Memorization

- a. Take a poem or prose piece that has at least 15-20 lines of text to learn. Pick a time of day that you will be able to work on this daily

over a three or four-day period. You want to work on learning your piece everyday for a while. This is important.

- b. Say the first line over and over a few times **out loud** until you can say the entire line on your own without looking at the text.
- c. Do the same with the second line, until you can say all of it without looking at the text.
- d. Now say the first and second lines over and over until you can say both of them without looking.
- e. Add a third line to your repetition and when you are able, add it to the first two lines.
- f. Continue with this until you can recite the entire poem (or until your head explodes).
- g. Once you get this far, STOP for today. Tomorrow, you may find that you can't remember 'any' of the poem. That's normal. Just start over from the beginning and try again.
- h. After a few days of this, the poem will become memorized.
- i. To internalize the poem, recite it at odd times and in different situations, like when out for a walk, or driving the car, or grocery shopping. Reciting the piece when distracted will help push it into your internalized memory.

Variation

Some folks like to start with the 'last' line of the poem or prose piece, and work backwards. This can be good because the end of the piece becomes firmly lodged in your brain, and it's the end of the piece that can give folks the most trouble.

Some folks like to speak their lines in a bathroom, where the sound reverberates and sounds cool – it helps them remember. Others like to learn their lines in different orders, like starting at the beginning, then starting at the end, then starting at the middle. What works for you is what works for you.

TIP – Don't use a mirror! Learning or practicing your lines in front of a mirror can be a bad thing. You end up associating certain lines and actions with your own facial expressions, etc., and when you get into ritual and don't have a mirror to gaze into, you may discover that you can't remember anything.

TIP – Rhyme and meter are easier to memorize than prose. While this isn't true for everyone, it's true for most people. The rhyme and/or the meter will help to lodge the words, in the correct order, in your head. It's much like learning your favorite songs (though songs also have a tune to hang on to, making them easier still).

However,

Problems With Performing Pieces with Rhyme and/or Meter

Most modern writers write their poetry in blank verse, or even free verse nowadays. In blank verse, there may be a meter to the piece, but there are no (or few) rhymes. In free verse there are neither rhymes nor meter.

Older works, however, may be full of both. And it's wise to learn how to deal with rhyme and meter so that they don't undermine what you want to do.

Some poems have a driving, relentless rhythm that sweeps you along and hardly lets you catch your breath. *Hiawatha* immediately comes to mind. Others have relentless rhyme, like Poe's *The Raven*. Some have both (like some of my earliest invocations). Some Norse Eddas can have an uncertain, changing meter (often due to translation) and some translated Welsh poems, thanks to the great differences between the Welsh and English languages, don't even sound like poetry.

You simply have to work with relentless, driving rhythms. Try speaking them at first like they were prose, until you can get a handle on them. In performance, poetry with meter needs to have that meter, but you can make it less relentless.

Shakespeare, written usually in iambic pentameter, almost sounds like prose, and can often be spoken like prose, but you should find a happy medium between sticking faithfully to the meter and abandoning it altogether. It has to sound natural, but it's still poetry, let's not forget.

Reading From Scripts in Ritual

While I believe that it is best to aim for memorized/internalized rituals in the long run, it is often necessary for new folks starting out to read from prepared scripts when performing ritual. In Sonoran Sunrise Grove we spent a number of years reading from scripts as we slowly got used to the Order of Ritual and our grove's interpretation of it.

The main problem with scripts is that they invite the reader to concentrate on the writing instead of the ritual attendees, leading the reader to spend the entire rite with their faces **down** in the script instead of **up** with the attendees and the Spirits. The ritualists' voices often follow their eyes, falling down towards the

ground with little volume or projection, and that deaf, little old lady in the back row can't hear a thing.

In any case, there are a number of pitfalls that can be avoided while reading from scripts that will help your rite overall.

Tip – Arrive Prepared! – Spend time working on your lines, invocations, etc. *in advance* of the ritual. Speak them **out-loud** when you rehearse at home. Aim to get your lines at least half-memorized if possible. The goal here is to only use the script to remind you of where you are, or to help you with difficult passages, rather than be something that you read word for word. And as mentioned above, don't practice while looking into a mirror.

Tip – Keep Your Head Up! – In ritual, don't drop your head to look at your script – keep it up so that your face is visible. Only use your eyes to glance down at your script. If necessary, hold your script up, just below the level of your face (being careful not to obscure your face from the attendees).

When you drop your head, your focus also drops, dragging down the energy of the rite. Which leads to the next tip:

Tip – Keep Your Focus Clear! Your focus should not be on your script, but on the other ritualists, the attendees at the rites, and the Spirits of the Otherworlds who have been invited. **Never forget** to project your voice. **Continue to look** at the attendees or Spirits as much as possible. **PAY ATTENTION** to what is going on around you. Keep your circles of concentration strong (see *Concentration in Ritual* for more details).

PREPARING FOR THE UNEXPECTED

So here you are, ready for a great rite, and then something goes dreadfully wrong. Perhaps your usual ritual site in the park is flooded, perhaps the skies open and the Thunder Gods drop buckets of rain on your heads, perhaps no one shows up for your rite. What to do?

You have to be able to handle these situations, because they could easily happen to you. The easiest one to deal with is when no one shows up. As disheartening as this can be, piety demands that you perform the rite anyway – after all, it's about honoring the Kindreds, is it not? To walk away and do nothing would be like a slap in the face for Them. Fill your heart with joy and wonder and have a great rite anyway.

The other situations will demand concrete action, and I can't tell you what to do here. My best advice would be to know your ritual area well and always have a back-up plan ready, should one be needed. At least think about all the possible disasters and decide, in advance, what could be done. And then forget about it! Let it go. Should you need to make sudden or drastic changes at the last

minute, the possible solutions will fill your mind. You won't need to go looking for them.

Disasters During the Rite

Sometimes, even with the most rehearsed or tightly scripted rite, something dreadful may go wrong. Since it's almost impossible to plan for such things, you may have to 'wing it' and put things right. There are three main things to remember in such a situation:

- 1) Acknowledge the disaster
- 2) Use humor to soften it
- 3) Forget about it and go on

Let me tell you a story about something that happened to me.

Once, at a non-ADF festival, it was my job to consecrate a new ADF priest in the middle of a full ADF rite I was leading. It was my job to open the Gates to the Otherworlds, and I decided to do this in my usual manner, spinning in place while holding out a staff to 'stir' the cosmos, chanting the charm, and magically get those gates open.

However, this was a site I was not used to, and it was slightly sloped. It was also as dark as the inside of a cow, and the staff I had borrowed was very top heavy.

So as I was spinning, I suddenly realized that I had lost control and was spinning wildly. Before I could stop myself I knocked over the World Tree (a large branch we had stuck into the ground). In fact, I didn't so much knock it over as send it flying high into the air.

Everyone present froze and held their breath in horror (and amusement, I suspect).

I managed to come to a stop and ended the charm with a shouted, "Let the Gates be open, even if I did knock over the f---ing Tree!"

Everyone laughed and the incident was over. I then proceeded to run the rite as though nothing had happened, and later many of the attendees congratulated me on a powerful and moving ritual.

We have to acknowledge our obvious mistakes because if we don't, the attendees will continue to wonder if it was done on purpose, or if it was really a mistake, or what, and this will pull them out of the rite, distracting their attention.

Humor is helpful in any rite (within limits – don't spoil the magic or intent with too much humor) but in this situation humor is important because it helps to release the tension that suddenly filled everyone at the time of the mishap.

Once the incident is acknowledged and the tension released, it is very, very important to continue with the rite as if nothing had happened. This will re-gather the magic and intent and take everyone back to the business at hand. Only in this way will the incident no longer be a distraction, allowing the rest of the rite to be a success.

CONCLUSION

So here we are at the end of this essay. I hope that I have given you some tools that you can use in your work, so that you can take folks along with you into the Otherworlds in your rites, and help create powerful and meaningful experiences for everyone.

One thing I've frequently mentioned is the need for focus and concentration in ritual, but that's a big subject that I will address in a separate essay, *Concentration in Ritual*.

Much of this paper is based on my personal experiences in the theatre over the years. However, I have also taken material (often of a technical nature) from the resources below.

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