

ETHICS: THE OATH OF SECRECY **by Margarian Bridger** (updated Sep 13, 2017)

The first thing any Wiccan apprentice is asked to swear, at the beginning of formal involvement with the Craft, is an oath of secrecy. Unless we work with military or industrial secrets, or with confidential medical records, most of us aren't used to living with oaths of secrecy. We live in a knowledge-based, democratic culture; we're accustomed to the notion that we have a right to know, and to know everything. Freedom of information is good; censorship is bad. Anyone who tries to keep secrets must be hiding ugly or embarrassing truths. Not necessarily.

There are three major reasons for an oath of secrecy within the Craft, and they demand three different, but interlocking kinds of silence. Let's consider them, one at a time.

Secrecy of identities, and of any information that could lead to the disclosure of identities. This is the most basic and most necessary secrecy of all. The Burning Times are not only an historical oddity; they're part of our enduring cultural heritage. McCarthyism was a product of this century. The fundamentalist "religious right" is alive and well today. In this country, and in this decade, Witches have lost their jobs, their friends, and the custody of their children because their religious affiliation became known. This is serious stuff.

As any gay or lesbian can tell you, "out of the closet" is a one-way trip. Whether you live in the broom closet, or are publicly known to be a Witch, you will face difficulties because of your choice. From either position, you can achieve much on behalf of the Craft. But only you have the right to decide whether you will be out or not. And every other Witch, and every non-Witch who steps under our umbrella, has the same right to choose for themselves.

Don't guess or make assumptions about whether a Witch is out. They may be very visible within the Pagan community, but still in the broom closet with family and friends. They may be out to their mom, but not to their dad. Don't guess. Ask. If in doubt, always assume they're not out.

The greatest threat to the secrecy of most Witches' identities is not the dreaded (but usually mythical) fundamentalist Christian infiltrator, but the well-meaning loose tongues of their fellow Pagans.

It's not enough simply to conceal the names of your fellow Witches, and the times and places of Craft-related gatherings. You must also beware of the "jigsaw puzzle" effect, of spilling little bits of information that, taken together over time, form a coherent pattern for an inquisitive listener. Any reader of detective stories knows how to piece together clues. A good rule of thumb is that if you've narrowed it down to 100 people or fewer, you've outed the person. For example, if you mention you know a Witch who's a neurosurgeon from Chicago, you've outed him already; even a city the size of Chicago has fewer than 100 neurosurgeons. If you mention at different times a date, a place, and a type of event, you may have accidentally set up a Wiccan co-worker to unknowingly out herself simply by pausing by your table in the cafeteria

and asking, "Do you need a ride for next Saturday?"

If you're open about your own identity as a Witch, some more closeted Witches may be afraid to trust you, wondering whether you know or care how to keep their identities secret. It's up to you to prove yourself. Be careful, too, if you're public, about "guilt by association": some of your more secretive Wiccan friends may be afraid even to be seen hanging out with you.

The level of secrecy required by a Wiccan community or group, as a whole, is that which is needed by its most closeted participant; the level actually attained is that permitted by its most loose-tongued member.

Secrecy concerning what happens at rituals. When we cast a circle, we create sacred space, inside which the rules are different. Inside the circle, we try to live by the ideal of, "perfect love and perfect trust." We reveal things we might not otherwise share about ourselves; we make ourselves vulnerable in ways we wouldn't risk elsewhere. We dare do this because we trust one another to respect the confidentiality implied by the circle. Without this trust, many of the most powerful things we do in ritual simply couldn't happen.

Other, more hierarchical religions have the seal of the confessional, which is one of the burdens of the clergy. Witches share that burden more evenly: all of us are priestesses and priests; all of us must keep silence about what is shared in circle. In its simplest and most absolute form, this means, "If you weren't there, it didn't happen." As a beginner, or if you're in any doubt at all, this is the safest approach to take at all times. Later, as you develop a better feel for circle work beyond the relatively simple level you'll find at the larger, more open community circles, you'll begin to distinguish some of the nuances.

Sometimes, even mentioning that a particular ritual has happened (or is about to happen) is too much. "How come you were invited to Bob's initiation and I wasn't?" is the sort of question that can cause major rifts in the emotionally intense atmosphere of a small Pagan community. Don't try to second-guess who hasn't been invited, or why.

Other times, absolute secrecy is ridiculous. I've seen a student, a bit too literal-minded about secrecy, snap, "Mind your own business," to a fellow student who casually asked what she'd missed at last week's ritual class.

Here are some guidelines:

- 1) You may share the general nature of the ritual, and the technicalities of various bits of it, with anyone who would normally have been at that ritual, or who would have been welcome if they'd wanted to come. It's okay to tell a fellow student what they missed at a teaching ritual. It's okay to tell a regular attendee who was home with the 'flu, "You missed a good Yule rite last week. We had a ritual drama about thus-and-such, and threw paper airplanes at each other, and Jane led a spiral dance with a new chant that sounds like this."

- 2) It's okay to share your own personal experiences in ritual with someone who wasn't present,

but other people's vulnerabilities and secrets are not yours to reveal. It's okay to say, "We did a Mother's Day ritual, and talked about our own mothers. It got emotional. I cried when I talked about what Mom said to me at my twelfth birthday party."

But it's not okay to say, "Mary was crying so hard she couldn't talk at all, and John told us how he used to watch through the crack in the bedroom door while his dad beat up his mom." That sort of stuff goes no farther than the boundary of the circle, and isn't to be discussed with anyone who wasn't there. Not even if it's a circle they would have been welcome at, because if a different mix of people had been there, the rite would have happened differently. Trust is not transitive. If A trusts B and B trusts C, that doesn't necessarily mean that A trusts C.

3) Notwithstanding any of the above, significant unethical or illegal behaviors do not deserve the protection of silence. If something needs the attention of Craft elders or of the police, take it to them. Be circumspect; don't drag Wicca's name into public scandal for trivial reasons. But don't let a Law-breaker go unchecked, either.

Secrecy concerning the Mysteries of the Craft. Many of the things Witches do in ritual, many of the symbols and activities we share, simply can't be put into words for someone who doesn't already know what you mean; the harder you try, the more you'll make them sound pale and trivial. The magic we do is very real, but it's also often fragile. The otherness, the ecstasy of what we do in our rites is rarely amenable to rational scientific analysis or even an outsider's casual curiosity. You've got to have experienced it, or else it can't be told. The classical analogies are explaining sex to a virgin, or a beautiful sunset to a person blind from birth.

Consider, also, what happened the last time you tried to explain an in-joke to an outsider: by the time you backtracked to explain how it got started, and why it's so funny, your listener might have been nodding with partial understanding, but she still wasn't laughing. By then, neither were you. Humor is, in fact, an excellent example of a Mystery, though it's not a specifically Wiccan one.

The Mysteries can neither be explained to someone who hasn't been there, nor shared with someone who isn't ready for them. A simple circle casting can be punctured by the analytical disdain of a skeptical observer. The deeper Mysteries grind to a halt (at worst) or are simply invisible (at best) if an unready beginner is puzzled or frightened by what is happening.

The most carefully guarded of the Mysteries, such as initiation, depend in part upon the element of surprise. Even if it could all be put into words, no initiate would reveal the details of initiation to someone who has yet to experience it (or to a curious third party), because foreknowledge would diminish the eventual impact of the ritual.

And then there's the "Sorcerer's Apprentice" stuff, areas of the Craft in which a little knowledge is a dangerous thing. There aren't as many of these as you might think, but there are some. If you've got a normal amount of curiosity, you'll be eager to get into some of this, whether you've done the necessary preliminary work yet. It's part of your teacher's job, to keep it from you until you're ready. Once you learn some of it, it will be your responsibility not to spread it

around. It takes time to develop the perspective to know how and when to wisely share this stuff. That's one of the reasons why students are asked not to immediately turn around and try to teach.

There are also a few things, in every group or Tradition within the Craft, that are, in effect, the "secret handshake" or "password" of that group. Sometimes that's their only function; sometimes they are also Mysteries in the more sacred sense. Secret handshakes, in-jokes, and the like, may seem corny, but in fact they work. They help to create a sense of group identity and cohesion. The Craft has many such "passwords." Even as a beginner, you may have met a few of them already. Can you think what some of them might be?

Inevitably, in so large and sprawling a network as the Craft, a few people will spill the beans, and display or publish secrets. What should you do, if you run into an instance of this? First, don't compound the error. Just because somebody has already printed it up in a pamphlet, don't assume that now the damage is done, and it's okay to put it out on the nearest BBS or radio talk show.

Second, pretend to ignore it. Things can be hidden in plain sight if no one knows they're important. Don't foam at the mouth and yell, "You're not supposed to see this." Glance casually at the offending page, then turn the conversation to something more interesting, like the weather. Then consider calmly whether there's anything you can do to minimize the long-term damage.

Craft secrecy doesn't come easily, for a newcomer to Wicca. Even if you've counted yourself a Witch for a long time, your first participation in the Craft community and in deeper Mysteries gives you many more opportunities to err. Now you have other people's secrets to protect, as well as your own. It's easy to read, and think you understand, the rules of Craft secrecy, but it takes time -- months, maybe years -- to internalize those rules to the point where they operate automatically as a part of your behavior patterns. During that time, you will inevitably make a few mistakes. Knowing this, many of the more experienced Witches, who've been stung a few times in the past, will stand back and watch you for quite a while, until they're sure you can be trusted. It's largely because of this -- and not, as some assume, out of snobbery -- that some Witches will deal only with someone who's been formally trained and initiated. To get to such a point, you must have been taught the rules, taken some time to grow into them, and then in gradual increments been trusted with increasingly large secrets and Mysteries and proven yourself trustworthy with them.

Most Witches learn to talk to one another in a sort of code, or verbal shorthand, when in public. There are certain key words like "Witch" or "ritual" that stand out in conversation, and will grab the unwelcome attention of diners at the next table, as more ordinary words like "Craft" or "event" would not. Some Witches get so practiced at this circumlocution that we find ourselves using it even in private, where there's no need. We must stop and deliberately remind ourselves, then, that it's safe to let down our guard for a while.

Be careful of how much of the Craft you share with non-Wiccan friends. It's a good thing, a sign of balance in your life, to have such friends. And being able to share some of your thoughts and feelings about the Craft with a trusted outsider provides a valuable "reality check." But be careful. A non-Witch has sworn no oaths of Craft secrecy. If they think this stuff you're telling them is nifty and wonderful, they may see no reason not to repeat it to others who aren't so understanding, or who'll hear only distorted, out-of-context bits of it. Most people aren't very skilled at keeping secrets, even if they try. They may see no reason even to try, despite your warnings; after all, if you're telling it to an outsider like them, it obviously can't be terribly secret. They may protect your identity as a Witch, out of personal loyalty -- but what of the identities of other Witches, with whom they see you associating?

Avoid playing games of "I've-got-a-secret." Most of us are tempted by such games in the beginning, at least a little. The air of mystery, of occult knowledge and hidden secrets, is for most of us one of the things that first drew our attention to the Craft. Knowledge is the currency of power. And what's the point of having wealth if you can't occasionally display a bit of it?

But it's a game that can wear thin very quickly. Secrets are currency only if you can occasionally spend some of them. Anyone who's been around the Craft for a while has seen the damage such games can do. Playing "I've-got-a-secret" marks you as a beginner in the Craft -- and a childish and untrustworthy one, at that. Outgrowing power games is, in itself, one of the Mysteries unfortunately, one that sometimes takes far too long to learn.

The ability to keep silent is one of the greatest virtues of a Witch, and for most of us one of the hardest to learn. Do your best. Be patient with yourself. Learn from your mistakes, and from the mistakes of others. Respect the Mysteries that are shared with you, and the Witches who share them. Honor the gods.

EXERCISES

1) Do you agree with all the reasons for secrecy given above? About what parts do you have doubts? Can you present arguments to support your doubts and disagreements? Are you willing to take and abide by an oath of Craft secrecy, despite your doubts?

2) What mistakes and lapses in Craft secrecy have you already made? How and why did each one happen? What did you learn from it? Are you likely to make a similar mistake again? Why or why not?

3) Do you consider yourself in or out of the broom closet? What are the advantages of being in the broom closet? What are the costs? What are the advantages and costs of being out? Have you ever lived "in the closet" concerning any other aspect of your life, or have you been close to someone who did? Which issues are the same there as in the Craft? Which are different?

4) You're shopping downtown when you spot someone you know in the Craft. She's talking with someone you've never seen before. You approach her and say hi. She gives you a faintly puzzled look, as if trying to figure out where she's seen you before. How should you react?

5) You work for a large corporation. One of your co-workers is pagan-friendly, and you've told her a few bits and pieces about the Craft. One day she says to you, "I was sitting in the cafeteria today, reading that book you loaned me, and Bob came over and started talking to me about it. You never told me he was a Witch, too!" You reply that he tends to be very secretive, because of his wife's attitude. Your friend looks puzzled, and from her response you gradually realize that she's talking about the other Bob, the bachelor who works downstairs in Accounting. Oops! What do you do now? And how could you have avoided this situation in the first place?

6) You arrive at a "coffee cauldron", a social gathering of assorted Witches, Pagans, and vaguely Pagan-friendly types from all corners of the community. Several copies of a document are being passed from hand to hand and people are discussing it with great interest. When one of the copies reaches you, you recognize it as one of the more confidential portions of the Book of Shadows of the Johnsonian Tradition, of which you are an initiate. What do you do?

7) Your ritual circle, although missing several of its regular attendees, had an especially intense rite last night. It touched on some issues that were particularly important for Sue, one of your fellow apprentices, and she talked a lot about them during the course of the ritual.

a) Jane, who's a regular member of the circle, and is currently dating Sue's ex-boyfriend, phones you and asks, "What happened at the circle last night? I saw Sue this morning, and she's looking awfully shaky and red-eyed." How should you respond?

b) An hour later, Mary, who is the HPs both you and Sue are studying with but not a member of last night's circle, phones you with the same question. What do you say this time?

8) You wake up, much to your surprise, in a hospital bed. After a while, a doctor comes in and assures you that, although you had food poisoning and were feverish and delirious, you're okay now. Despite this reassurance, the doctor looks nervous and uncomfortable. Repeatedly you ask her what's the matter, and eventually the doctor admits that you said some very strange things while delirious. It turns out that you've spilled a fair bit of stuff about the Craft: names, specific details of rituals, etc.

a) What can you do now?

b) How are your options limited if the doctor also discovered and recognized the pentacle pendant you were wearing under your shirt?

9) You become aware that a certain woman in the local Craft community has been taking on 15-year-old apprentices and ordering them to have sex with her as part of their "training". Two of them have confided in you; you've gathered enough evidence that you believe it would stand up in a court of law. What do you do?

10) It's 5 p.m., and you've been asked to phone around and tell people about a last-minute change of venue for tonight's ritual. The directions for finding the new site are detailed and complex. By the time you make the last call, it's almost time for you to leave if you want to get to the rite on time; you've got farther to travel than most people, and you don't own a cell phone. An unfamiliar voice answers the phone: "Joe won't be home for another 20 minutes. May I take a message?"

What do you say?

11) Tom is active in the local pagan community, but to most people is known only by his Craft name, EagleDropping. He's never said so explicitly, but you have the impression he's in the broom closet with most of his friends and family. One day a mutual acquaintance in the Craft calls you and asks, "I've lost EagleDropping's phone number. Have you got it?"

12) You're out shopping with a friend, when one of your Wiccan acquaintances walks up and says hi. She's with several of her friends. You're about to return her greeting and introduce her to your friend, when suddenly you realize that you know her only by her Craft name. What do you do?

13) You have an email/social media pal, John, in Halifax, with whom you share not only Wicca, but several other mutual interests and hobbies. One day your phone rings. "Hi, I'm Betty and I'm new in town, and my friend John gave me your number before you left Halifax. He said you could, uh, you know, put me in touch with some congenial people."

You talk around in circles for a while, trying to find out which of John's interests Betty might share, but she's being as vague or as careful not to make the first explicit move as you are.

What do you do next?

(Try role-playing this conversation and see how it turns out.)

14) You and Donna and several other Wiccans, of varying degrees of closetedness, are at the diner two blocks from Donna's house. The waitress greeted Donna by name, and led your group to one of the best tables. Now several of the others are loudly talking pagan shop talk, and Donna is looking increasingly uncomfortable. Your waitress is standing in the kitchen doorway, whispering to another, and they're both casting nervous glances at your table. What can you do?

15) A friend drops by unexpectedly. He's "into the Craft", but as far as you know he's never had any formal oaths or training. You go into the kitchen to fix some coffee, and when you come back he's leafing eagerly through the binder you left on the sofa: your Book of Shadows, most of the contents of which are oathbound for one reason or another. How do you handle this?

16) You have just joined a Wiccan teaching group and you want to connect with some new friends on social media. Many of the people in your class and your tradition have active Facebook accounts and you ask if you can friend them. What do you think are the

confidentiality implications of friending people on social media? What questions should you ask before friending them? What about posting things to their wall?

17) You are in a social gathering with a bunch of friends, friends of friends and family and one of your relatives who you are “out” with announces to the entire group that you are a Witch and isn’t that cool! You are not out to anyone other than family at this point, how do you handle?

18) You are at a work function and one of your good friends works in the same department as you in this very conservative company. You have discussed your interest in the craft with him but casually over lunch a few times. At the function reception dinner after a few drinks, your friend says to the group that you are exploring Witchcraft, what do they think? How do you respond?

19) You have met several people in your tradition and you are excited to get together for a planned hike but suddenly you become ill. You are not on social media but you do have the numbers of everyone so you plan to send a group text to let them know you are not coming. What could be the result of this action?

20) You are totally out of the closet and you are a chatty person in general. You are taking the c-train one day and you run into your craft classmate who is alone so you feel its cool to sit down and talk about the classes you have taken. At first they are super friendly but as you start talking about the lessons and homework they become increasingly uncomfortable. What did you do wrong and how can you rectify it? How could you avoid it in the future?