Living and dying in an American Neo-Pagan community

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LIVING AND DYING IN AN AMERICAN NEO-PAGAN COMMUNITY

by

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Bachelor of Arts
St. Mary's College of Maryland
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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

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Department of Anthropology
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ABSTRACT

Living and Dying in an American Neo-Pagan Community

by

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Dr. William Jankowiak, Ph.D., Examination Committee Chair
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American Neo-Paganism is a new religious movement imported to the states from Britain in the 1930s. As a new religious movement, Neo-Pagans are, for the first time, dealing with the death of members, and as such have had to create funeral ritual of whole cloth. This study is, first and foremost, an ethnographic field account of seven funeral rituals in American Neo-Pagan communities in diverse locations throughout the United States. On basis of this ethnographic evidence, I show that Neo-Pagans visualize their dead as retaining agency, while participants in the American civil religion do not. I describe the American civil funeral cycle and the changes that have been imposed upon it by technological advances over the past 40 years. I propose that the Neo-Pagan changes to the American civil funeral cycle are informed by a theology of immanence that is juxtaposed against, and placed in competition with, the civil religion. This has the effect of creating plural, competing afterlives for any decedent who participated in both an intentional community and the American civil religion. On basis of this data, I revisit Arnold van Gennep's classic model for the rite of passage and propose an emendation that allows for the decedent to be incorporated into plural afterlives in a plural society. I propose a model for post-mortem identity formation.
consistent with the plural afterlives that appear in the ethnographic record. (Keywords: Neo-Paganism, Civil Religion, Death, Funeral, Identity, Rite of Passage)
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PREFACE

At 11:35 a.m. on March 18th, 2004, held in the arms of his wife of 32 years and surrounded by his family and friends, Jack Bowman passed into the summerland. At the second of three funeral services held in his honor, Jack's coven sister, Debbie, read the following obituary:

Have you ever noticed online, how you can always tell when someone important to people passes? Their messages get shorter. On the Pitt lists today the messages are very short.

Jack is survived by his wife, May; his son, Jack Jr.; his daughters, Samantha and Kussina; and a granddaughter, Elaine. He is also survived by the twenty-odd members of Mountain Moon Circle, the American Neo-Pagan church to which he dedicated the last five years of his life. This text is the story of how Jack, his family, and his coven brothers and sisters dealt with his transition between life and death.

Anthropology first and foremost results from the collaboration of anthropologist and informant, between self and other. I offer my unreserved gratitude to May Bowman, my coven sister, for opening her heart and home to me. Without her decision to relate her journey with the Goddess, this work would not have been possible. Special thanks also go to Mrs. Bowman's children, Sambo, Jack, and Kussina, who took a great deal of time off work in order that their father's story could be told. Thanks also go out to the clergy and members of Mountain Moon Circle, who gave me access to their Book of Shadows and provided extensive interviews. Members of other communities helped me as well. I would like to thank T.K. for sharing the story of the death of his son, and Susan Morris from Agave Spirit Grove in Las Vegas, Nevada, who offered a great deal of help concerning Neo-Pagan theology.

During the course of this research, I have been the beneficiary of a great deal of support from the academy. Thanks in particular go to Dr. William Jankowiak, my
committee chair, who humored the many changes of course this project has taken; to my committee: Drs. Tony Miranda, George Urioste, and Felecia Campbell, who have read and commented on many drafts, and to the faculty of Anthropology at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. Thanks are also due to Dr. Kevin Rafferty, chair of the Department of Human Behavior at the Community College of Southern Nevada, who provided me a space to work and much good conversation, and also to Marci Atherley, Mary DeCarlo, and Mariana Wilson, administrative assistants, for a great deal of research support. Thanks are also due to Megan Milligan who helped me in the editing phase. I would also like to extend my gratitude to Helen Gerth, who took a great deal of time away from her own work for the sake of mine.

The ethnographic portions of this text were funded in part by a generous research grant provided by Mr. & Mrs. Victor F. Wilreker, Jr. This work would not have taken the form that it has without the loving support of my daughter, Kara White, who has tolerated her dad's trips to far away places and proclivity for living with a book under his nose with a sense of humor. I also gratefully acknowledge the support of my grandparents, Mr. & Mrs. Victor F. Wilreker, Sr., throughout my academic career, and my great-grandmother, Mrs. Herma Schnaibel, whose death and funerals made me aware of the plurality of the afterlife. Special thanks are also due to Cheri, Christy, Lani, Matt and the rest of the folks at Steiner's Pub in Las Vegas, Nevada, who kept the Diet Coke flowing at all hours of the day and night as I edited this text, and to Nan Willoughby who directed plates of cookies in my direction at all the right times. I would be most remiss not to mention Winnie, who, over the past 17 years, has been my partner through many journeys. It is Jack Bowman whose life is celebrated in the following pages; to his memory this work is dedicated. Now:

let us sit upon the ground  
and tell sad stories of the death of kings

Richard II,  
III.ii.155-6

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

As members of a new religious movement, American Neo-Pagans are for the first time dealing with death in their midst. This text, first and foremost, is an ethnographic account of several such deaths and the events which followed: A story of what it means to live and die within an American Neo-Pagan community.

The core argument of this thesis is this: American Neo-Pagans treat death differently from participants in the American civil religion in that the deceased is treated as an agent rather than an uncultured "it." Any funerary system must establish the location, agentic powers, and interests of the decedent in death as contrasted to the same in life. The American civil religion specifies that the decedent in death is sequestered away from the world of the living, an object of grief, longing, and fear. American Neo-Paganism has constructed a new identity for the decedent as an active agent involved in human affairs. In either case, as you will see below, the decedent can only enter one or more of these two post-mortem identities through a rite of passage.

This rite of passage – the funeral cycle – is constrained through ritual at a variety of loci. American Neo-Pagans constrain the cycle at different locations for different reasons than those loci specified by the American civil religion. American Neo-Pagans give the process of dying meaning through a context of a theology of immanence.

1 The term "Neo-Pagan" is a scholarly one. Most Neo-Pagans in the communities I studied refer to themselves as either "Pagans," "Wiccans," or "Witches." The Term Neo-Pagan suggests to some a lack of respect for the mythology of the movement, because of the implication that modern American Paganism is "new" and not a survival of pre-Christian religious practices. I use the term as other scholars have, to distinguish the denomination as a whole in non-native terms from various sects that comprise it, such as "Goddess Worshipers," "Druids," and "Unitarian Universalist Pagans." The term "Neo-Paganism" also serves to distinguish the denomination from other similar but largely unrelated denominations, such as the "New-Age Movement."
American Neo-Pagans are also Americans, and as such the Neo-Pagan funeral cycle has been deeply impacted by the changes in the American civil funeral ritual that are a consequence of a history of increasing professionalization, and the rise of advanced technology and large urban cities in an increasingly plural United States.

The rise of plural afterlives raises the specter of competing afterlives; or more precisely, conflict between living social actors who compete over the right to display particular social markers indicating particular post-mortem identities preferentially on behalf of the decedent. I propose a system by which Americans create the post-mortem identity, and show how Neo-Pagan actors, informed by a theology of immanence, arrive at a different identity for the decedent than that specified by either the American civil religion or other, competing intentional communities. This point is particularly significant in that it applies equally to anyone who would challenge the American civil religion.

Of course there are many intentional communities that challenge the civil religion, competing for adherents in the highly plural American religious marketplace. Many of these intentional communities, unlike American Neo-Paganism, represent a form of Christianity. Furthermore, some of these intentional communities have both more adherents than Neo-Paganism, and more mainstream social capital. However it is important to distinguish between intentional communities that practice Christianity and the American civil religion which has a Deist, not Christian, character. Likewise the mainstream Judeo-Christian denominations that dominate American religious discourse are also distinct from the civil religion. The relationship the civil religion holds with the various large denominations and also with non-Pagan intentional communities is beyond the scope of this text.

Neo-Pagans often refer to "Christianity," a generalized other against which they contrast themselves. This other is a composite creature, created from: (1) Elements of evangelical Christian intentional communities, particularly the emphasis on proselytization and lack of religious tolerance; (2) elements of the civil religion,
particularly impersonal, hierarchical structures, and a "greed is good" philosophy; and (3) elements of the various large denominations, including the absence of communitas.

In this text, I am primarily interested in the Neo-Pagan protest against the civil religion, not Christianity – intentional or otherwise. Thus, the reader may assume that the other to which I refer is a civil other, and not specifically Christian unless otherwise noted. I will leave it to a later text to separate the generalized “Christian” other into its constituent parts and evaluate them.

Plan of This Text

Although there have been a number of excellent ethnographies of American Neo-Paganism, to my knowledge, this is the first full length ethnographic treatment of an American Neo-Pagan funeral. In this chapter, I address the fundamental background of the processes in question. I begin by defining the American civil religion and roughly outlining its history. I also consider historical funeral rituals in the United States, and their relationship to the American civil funeral ritual we see today. I also consider American Neo-Pagans as heirs to a long line of American intentional community builders. In chapter 2, I consider the demographics of American Neo-Paganism. I look at the organization of the church I studied, and explain how its structure is a consequence of a theology of immanence. In chapter 3, I consider this theology of immanence in detail. I then describe the core beliefs of American Neo-Paganism, and argue that they are a consequence of the American civil religion, the theology of immanence, and the pursuit of communitas. Chapter 4 is an ethnographic example of a full moon ritual. I make three key arguments here: (1) The full moon ritual is a consequence of the core beliefs articulated in chapter 3; (2) the full moon ritual serves as a template that is used in the process of ritual creation; and (3) in its role as a template, the full moon ritual serves in part to pass on the core beliefs laid out in chapter 3 to the intensive rites of passage that are created using the template. In chapter 5, I consider the illness of a member of the church community, and Neo-Pagan
responses to that illness. I demonstrate how these responses are consistent with the beliefs laid out in chapter 3. Chapter 6 lays out the heart of my argument – in this chapter I argue: (1) The American civil funeral has indelibly been altered by changes in technology and the pluralization of a late modern society. (2) I lay out a trajectory that creates two competing afterlives for the American Neo-Pagan decedent, and I point out that this trajectory applies equally to other new religious movements. Chapter 7 is primarily an evidentiary chapter, defending the Neo-Pagan changes in structure and function of American funeral ritual that I laid out in chapter 6. In chapter 8, I summarize my core arguments and tie them together with a consideration of the notion of plural afterlives within the framework of a process of elimination. The textual chapters are followed by two appendices, the first detailing my ethnographic methodology, and the second presenting the text of the poems and prayers performed at one of the funeral rituals I attended. The appendices are followed by a bibliography.

My Cases

Although I will return to this subject in the appendix, I would like to briefly summarize the funerals I attended with their case numbers:

- Case 1: 53 year old male, Groen, Pennsylvania
- Case 2: 56 year old male, Las Vegas, Nevada
- Case 3: 2 male infants less than one year of age, Indian Springs, Nevada
- Case 4: ca. 25 year old male, Las Vegas, Nevada
- Case 5: 17 year old male, Las Vegas, Nevada
- Case 6: 12 year old canine, Overton, Nevada
- Case 7: 66 year old female, Cactus Springs, Nevada

Case 1, Jack Bowman, will be the focus of this text. The remaining cases provide important supporting evidence at key points throughout the text, particularly in the
areas where the funeral cycle in case one became particularly atypical. Case 2 was a large memorial service for an individual suffered from a number of serious psychoses that limited his functionality in life. The chief mourner, a good friend of the deceased, was herself a central member of the community, and the funeral service was conducted independent of regularly scheduled rituals by a senior clergy member. Case 2 represented a highly comparable example to Jack's funeral, case 1. Case 3 involved the death of a three-month old and a neonate. About a dozen friends of the young mother and her boyfriend were present at the funeral, but no clergy member was present, and the short funeral service was conducted by the bereaved immediately following an unrelated festival event. Case 4 involved the possible suicide of a young man. The deceased had not had contact with his family for several years. Although the clergy officiating at the memorial service attempted to contact his parents, they were unsuccessful. Thus, the memorial service included only members of his church. There were no human remains involved because they had been retained by the coroner's office pending notification of next of kin. Case 5 concerned the death of a teenager who died after a fall while rock climbing. Obviously, his death was unexpected and represented an important example of how Neo-Pagans assume the identity of "mourner" when they least expect to. Case 6 was very interesting, officiated by a bona-fide Sioux shaman at the request of a couple who are registered Native Americans and identify themselves as Neo-Pagans. The decedent was a beloved family pet that was accorded religious burial. Although I have seen references to several other instances of Neo-Pagan family pets being accorded religious burial, this one was taken to an atypical extreme, and was consistent with a human burial. Case 7 was a memorial service for a professional feminist-Wiccan priestess who died from complications of lung cancer. There were about twenty five people present. The service was facilitated by a ritual leader and long-time friend from another coven in nearby Las Vegas and was attended by two other senior clergy members. The decedent's husband occupied the chief mourner role and scattered the decedent's ashes at the conclusion of the short service.
The sociologist Robert Bellah first proposed the idea of an American civil religion. He pointed out that in the United States, a clear line is drawn between any particular person's private religious affiliation and the religious beliefs that they express as public social actors. To revisit Bellah 1970 directly:

Although matters of personal religious belief, worship, and association are considered to be strictly private affairs, there are, at the same time, certain common elements of religious orientation that the great majority of Americans share. These have played a crucial role in the development of American institutions and still provide a religious dimension for the whole fabric of American life, including the political sphere. This public religious dimension is expressed in a set of beliefs, symbols, and rituals that I am calling the American civil religion. [Bellah 1970:171]

The phrase “civil religion” is Rousseau’s, and according to Rousseau (Bellah 1970:172-4) is comprised in principle of four key parts: (1) A generalized belief in God, (2) the afterlife, (3) the reward of virtue and punishment of vice, and (4) the exclusion of religious intolerance. These beliefs were held deeply by the founding fathers of our country and are encoded within the documents that founded the republic. These documents, together with the statements made by the founding fathers have set the tone of the American civil religion ever since.

Although the American civil religion is deeply situated in the protestant spirit of the early settlers of this country, the civil religion is not itself a Christian denomination. The Declaration of Independence, for example, makes four references to God but no reference to Christ. Likewise, every inaugural speech has included at least one general reference to God but none have yet referenced Christ. Bellah (1970) feels that the God of the American civil religion is both rather “Unitarian” but also “much more related to order, law, and right than salvation and love” (Bellah 1970:175).

Like any other religion, the American civil religion includes its own religious calendar, with such important events as The 4th of July, Memorial Day, Presidents' Day, Martin Luther King, Jr.'s Birthday, Thanksgiving, and the civil elements of Christmas. On these days public offices and professional offices are closed, students are released
from school, and public officials make appropriate speeches paying homage to the American civil religion. The rituals to which Bellah (1970) refers also include public rites of passage such as the inauguration of a president or other public officer, graduation ceremonies at universities and high schools, the American civil wedding, and the American civil funeral ritual.

According to Bellah (1970), the civil funeral was not incorporated into the theology of the American civil religion until the end of the Civil War. The Civil War was the bloodiest in American history; more Americans died in this war than in any other American war. Furthermore, the state funerals of President Abraham Lincoln, and a century later President John F. Kennedy, deeply entrenched the way that Americans should mourn a fallen leader. Bellah (1970) feels that the end of the Civil War marked the end of the “Old Testament” of the American civil religion. Prior to the Civil War, public dialogue primarily concerned the revolutionary American spirit; President Washington was a latter-day Moses, leading God’s chosen people out of tyranny and into freedom. Following his assassination, President Lincoln became an American Christ in the eyes of his contemporaries, living out his own Gettysburg words, “those who here gave their lives, that the nation might live” (Bellah 1970:178). Subsequent public dialogue, the “New Testament” of the civil religion, has concerned ideals of sacrifice for the nation and for the theology of freedom. President Kennedy, in his inaugural speech delivered January 20th, 1961, famously set this tone of freedom and sacrifice:

The energy, the faith, the devotion which we bring to this endeavor will light our country and all who serve it — and the glow from that fire can truly light the world. And so, my fellow Americans: ask not what your country can do for you — ask what you can do for your country. My fellow citizens of the world: ask not what America will do for you, but what together we can do for the freedom of man. [Bellah 1970:168]

The great number of Civil War dead required the establishment of a number of national cemeteries, in particular, the Arlington National Cemetery and the Gettysburg National Cemetery. Funerary cult at these war cemeteries took on a particularly
important character with the subsequent establishment of such national shrines as the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, the Eternal Flame, and the Vietnam Memorial Wall. The deification of such individuals as President Lincoln, Dr. King, and President Kennedy, as well as the construction of the monuments and the ritual surrounding them, reflect a generalized belief in deity, a conception of the afterlife, a belief that the just will be rewarded and the wrongdoer punished, and a tolerance of various competing private religious denominations, as Rousseau would have it.

Bellah’s (1970) vision of the American civil religion is based upon the writings of important public figures, and spends fairly little time on commonly held rites of passage such as the civil funeral. It is essential to my argument to point out that the American civil religion is a cognitive organization that includes a discreet set of values first and foremost. That cognitive organization produces overt behavior that includes not only the public statements of important individuals, but also the behavior and judgments of private individuals as they interact in settings that are informed primarily by the values specified by the American civil religion. Thus, when in the following pages I invoke the American civil religion, I am speaking just as much about the inaugural speech of an American president as I am the public consensus that speed limit signs are mere suggestions, except in a school zone.

Advent of the American Civil Funeral

The present-day American civil funeral is stage managed by a professional funeral director to present the embalmed and redecorated corpse to the public in a suitably expensive casket prior to burial in a commercially operated cemetery. The civil funeral during our colonial period involved the burial of the corpse by family members, with or without a coffin, on private property. This section offers a brief tour of how we got from the latter to the former.

Surprisingly, the major western faiths have fairly little to say about the disposition of the dead. The Catholic Church, in which Jack was raised, specifies (1) that the body
be decently laid out; (2) that lights be placed beside the body; (3) that a cross be laid on the breast; (4) that the body be sprinkled with holy water and incense at particular times; and (5) that the body be buried in consecrated ground. The Jewish religion specifies that the coffin remain closed throughout and buried in the earth without a vault. The Anglican version of Protestantism specifies that the coffin be covered by a pall so as not to emphasize the worldly nature of the body (Mitford 1963:191). The theological background for these relatively spartan instructions lies in the idea that the corpse after the death has fulfilled its intended purpose, that of housing the soul. With the departure of the soul, the body is now an "it" and may be treated appropriately, as if it were cast off clothing. Thus, the practice of preserving dead bodies through various chemical and other means is frowned upon by the clergy of all the major Christian denominations because it emphasizes a focus on material things over the preservation of the soul. In short, all of the major religions in the United States specify a strikingly short and inexpensive funeral process by cross-cultural standards.

During the American colonial period and first years of the republic, funeral ritual for the common man was as it was in England and Germany at the time: The deceased was laid out by the family in the decedent's home. The corpse washed and redressed in a minimum of clothing, usually a night-shirt, and then wound in a winding-sheet by members of the immediate family. The decedent was usually accompanied by mourners for a brief period, tasked with watching for the reappearance of signs of life. In rural locations, immediate family members (or sometimes the church sexton) then dug an appropriate sized, relatively shallow grave with readily available tools, and the deceased would be interred usually without benefit of a coffin on the family's property; there was no specialist undertaker. In urban areas, or among the wealthier set, a plain wood coffin, usually purchased from the local carpenter, was provided in order to transport the decedent for burial by the church sexton in the church yard. Most American new religious movements retained this pattern, neither elaborating upon it nor radically
altering it. The Shakers, for example, were reported to still be burying people in a plain pine box in the 1930’s. (Thurman 2002:168-174).

According to Mitford 1963, the modern practice of embalming the dead was popularized by an ejected medical school student-turned-mortician named Thomas Holmes during the American Civil War. During the war, thousands of Union soldiers were killed on the field of battle far from home and kin. In prior days soldiers who lost their lives in battle, with the exception of senior leaders and the fabulously wealthy, were buried in military cemeteries on or near the field of battle. During the American Civil War, effective rail transport for the first time allowed the bodies of middle class soldiers to be returned to their families rather than being buried in the field. The process of embalming became the fundamental first point of departure where the American civil funeral ritual left religiously specified funeral practices behind. Holmes promoted embalming in order that soldiers could be transported home for burial, and personally embalmed over four thousand soldiers for transport.

Certainly there are documented cases of very elaborate early American funerals. Huntington and Metcalf (1982) pointed out in *Celebrations of Death* that state funerals, in addition to the mundane task of disposal of the dead, are important rites of passage confirming the orderly transfer of power between individuals at the top of a society’s hierarchy. Probably the most significant American state funeral from the perspective of the funeral industry was that of President Abraham Lincoln following his assassination on April 14th, 1865. President Lincoln's corpse was embalmed and cosmetically restored. After his state funeral, he was transported by rail back to his home in Illinois in an open coffin mounted in the rear rail carriage. As President Lincoln was transported home the train stopped at each town along the way so that individuals could pay their final respects. His funeral cycle had the effect of displaying the new technology of embalming and cosmetic restoration to a large segment of the public, creating demand for the practice amongst the middle and upper classes.
The increasing population of cities by the beginning of the 20th century resulted in a corresponding increase in the quantities of human corpses per square mile that required disposal, and consequently resulted in the advent of professional undertakers. The technology of embalming and the tools and fluids required are fairly inexpensive. Initially, the decedent was embalmed in their own home. Later, increasingly professional undertakers began to establish places of business that included “slumber rooms” or “parlors” where the decedent could be presented for display. These facilities required more capital expense, which required the undertaking to process more funerals each year to pay for it all, which required more capital expense, and so forth. Thus the second key difference between the American civil funeral and prior religious ones was the advent of a specialized location for the processing of human corpses.

The funeral director – which is what the undertaker by about 1920 had begun to call himself – has a key problem that he must resolve as a businessman: He has very, very, very few repeat customers. The survival of his business demands that he perform a certain number of funerals each year or increase his prices as insurance against a bad year. Since the number of funerals that he performs each year is inconveniently fixed each year by dear old mother nature, an uncontrollable outside entity, the funeral director must raise his prices. By the 1940s, the funeral industry had begun to package funerals for sale, rather than selling individual parts of the funeral a la carte. The consumer no longer purchased a coffin, a hearse, a burial plot, et cetera – now they simply paid a single fee to the funeral director who organized it all at a substantial markup. The funeral director now was at liberty to embalm without consulting corpse and kin, as it was included as part of his package price; he could arrange for a blanket of flowers over the decedent at a large mark-up, and so forth.

2 The process of arterial embalming demands draining the blood from the body, and replacing it with preservative chemicals. This had the unintended consequence of rendering sitting with the body to watch for reappearance of signs of life moot. In biological terms, an arterially embalmed decedent was unquestionably “dead.”
In some ways, the funeral director has backed himself into a financial grave: he has invested in all this gadgetry in order to perform his packaged services, but this increases his overhead to the degree that he must further increase his prices, which he then justifies by a further increase in the gadgetry, and so on. Thus the present complexity of the funeral and its ostentatious display of wealth should be viewed as a proximal consequence of professional undertaking, and ultimately a result of the rise of populous cities.

However, there are certain elements of the American civil funeral that have continuity with past forms of American funeral practice. Although the funeral is the third most expensive purchase the average American makes during his or her lifetime – after house and automobile – the funeral industry represents a fairly small fraction of the gross national product. Certainly this stands in stark contrast to the rural practices of Madagascar, where nearly a quarter of the average person’s annual income is directed towards celebrations of the deaths of one’s recent ancestors (Huntington and Metcalf 1979:93-96). Likewise, the American civil funeral, both presently and during our colonial period is short; most relevant funeral practice has ended within two weeks of death. Maintenance of the grave is performed by employees of the cemetery. Americans shun contact with the dead. By contrast, the widows and other female descendants reported by Loring Danforth (1982:35-70) in The Death Rituals of Rural Greece continue to visit the grave of their loved ones daily for between one and seven years after the death, until the decedent is exhumed and the bones placed in an ossuary.

This discussion also highlights the hierarchical nature of American funerary ritual. The funeral director has placed himself in the role of the mediator – an American who wants to care for their own dead is considered exceptional. A bereaved widow addresses her concerns about how the deceased should be handled to the mediating funeral director, rather than manipulating the body herself. This places the funeral director in a position where he may decline a request or interpret it in a way that is not
consistent with the next of kin's intent. For example, in my case 1, the funeral home specified that only tea lights be used instead of the prolific quantity of candles present at all but the smallest Neo-Pagan ritual service. The funeral director becomes a gatekeeper to the presentation of the dead – He briefly recultures the uncultured “it” rather than leaving this important role to the next of kin.

Taken all together, the American civil funeral removes the decedent from the world of the living, removes their agency in a tremendously expensive display of wealth over a short period of time, and sequesters them away from the world of the living, to be cared for by paid specialists until all living memory of the individual is lost.

**Neo-Paganism as an Intentional Community in the United States**

American Neo-Paganism is a recent movement situated in a long tradition of intentional communities in the United States. Benjamin Zablocki (1980:31-40) in his book *Alienation and Charisma* describes four periods of intentional community building in America prior to the present one. The first, during the colonial period (1620-1776) included the Plymouth Colony, the Amish, Labadists, The Ephrata Cloister, the Moravian Brethren, and the Shakers. These groups shared a common flight from European religious persecution towards freedom of conscious in America. From 1790 to 1805, the Shaker movement radically expanded, dominating intentional community formation in the United States, and forming Zablocki's (1980) second period.

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1 Curiously, most research into historical intentional communities has been performed using the concept of "communitas" developed by Victor Turner. Brown points out that "the experience of communitas can be dazzling. People can communicate spontaneously on the most basic level for no other motive than desire. The most private elements of the self can be freely and safely shared. Such communion can be a powerful experience. Small wonder that people aspire to its sublimity and, once they have achieved it, do all they can to sustain it." (2002:24) Although most ethnographies of Neo-Paganism have a short blurb acknowledging Turner's contributions, none use his theoretical frame except in passing, each instead using several theoretical frames of reference. It strikes me that the core protests of the historical movements are no longer relevant to a modern audience, and thus detailed variation may be glossed over, while the protests of Neo-Paganism are still actively being resolved in the social and political landscape. Perhaps this difference in interpretive frames is a consequence of social relevance rather than the strengths or weaknesses of the respective models.
Zablocki (1980) terms his third major period the "Utopian Socialist Period," extending from 1824 to 1848. New Harmony, Brook Farm, and the Oneida colonies were founded during this period, all based upon theoretical socialist organizations worked out on paper in advance. Zablocki (1980) feels that these communities resulted as a consequence of social upheavals in the United States as the country began to industrialize in earnest.

The fourth period Zablocki (1980) considers runs from 1890 to 1915, when socialist and anarchist communities sprang up in both rural, and for the first time, urban settings. Many of these communities were social experiments developed from the transcendental writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson. Zablocki (1980) feels that the intentional communities of this period were a consequence of intense European immigration, the resulting working class poverty and social conflict.

In Susan Love Brown's (2007) book Intentional Community, she identifies a fifth period of intentional community building from 1965 through the early 1970s. The movements that formed during this period were a consequence, she says, of "confrontations with racism, war, sexism, and any number of perceived injustices that lent a hypocritical tint to many of the ideals absorbed by [baby] boomers" (Brown 2002:7). Although Neo-Paganism was founded in the 1930s in Britain, it was during this most recent period that Neo-Paganism became a uniquely American religion.

American Neo-Paganism was imported to America in the 1960s. The central beliefs of the movement include a monolatrist understanding of divinity; the deification of the feminine and the natural world; an orientation towards reconstructing pre-Christian European beliefs; and a belief in and practice of ritual magic. The core beliefs of the movement will be considered in full in chapter 4, below.

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4 Archaeologist Eric Hornung (1996) in his text Conceptions of God in Ancient Egypt: The One and The Many develops this conception of divinity. For Hornung, a monolatry is a conception of multiple divinities seen as simultaneously discreet and conjoined as part of a greater godhead.

5 In this paper, I shall use the term "Christian" as Neo-Pagans do: A generalized western, non-Pagan other against whom they define themselves. Confer Pike 2001:xii
Early scientific explorations of the movement dismissed Neo-Paganism as an inconsequential backlash against Christianity, or lumped it together with the study of witchcraft in traditional societies. Margot Adler (1979), a Neo-Pagan scholar trained in Anthropology, wrote *Drawing Down The Moon*, where she laid out in ethnographic terms the basic structure, values, and folkways of the religion. After Adler 1979 opened the floodgates of publication, eight full length ethnographies were published in quick succession, most addressing Neo-Pagan construction of self within the coven setting (Luhrman 1989; Scarboro et al. 1994; Orion 1995; Harvey 1997; Berger 1999; Salomonsen 2002; Rountree 2004; Magliocco 2004). Recent works have addressed such specialized areas as Neo-Pagan demographics and structure (Berger et al. 2003), festival life (Pike 2001), ritual tools (Magliocco 2001), theology (York 2003), and discrimination (Barner-Barry 2005). There also have been several edited volumes published in recent years (Hardman and Harvey 1996; Blain et al. 2004). Surprisingly, there are only two books written by Neo-Pagans concerning funeral ritual, the *Pagan Book of Living and Dying* (Starhawk and M. Macha Nightmare 1997), and *In the Service of Life: A Wiccan Perspective on Death* (O'Gaia 2003) although the subject is addressed in passing by several other Neo-Pagan authors.

Although Neo-Paganism began in Britain in the 1930s, and has since been exported to the entire English-speaking world, the American branch of the movement is by far the largest, probably numbering over 200,000 individuals (Berger 1999). Nearly every “essential” theological tract written to a Neo-Pagan audience in the past ten years or so has been written by an author living in the United States or Canada. Furthermore, all of the large scale new sects within the movement, such as Unitarian Universalist Pagans (Berger 2003), Neo-Shamans (York 2003), Druidic and Norse Reconstructionists (Berger 2003), and Goddess Worshippers (Salomonsen 1997; Berger 2003), have been founded by Americans or outsiders transplanted to the United States, within the

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*I am indebted to Wiccan Priestess Susan Morris from Agave Spirit Grove in Las Vegas, Nevada for these two sources.*
geographical confines of the United States, and situated within an American socio-
political context. Both British history and globalization aside, contemporary Neo-
Paganism is an American religion. Let us now consider an ethnographic example of an
American Neo-Pagan coven.
CHAPTER 2

MOUNTAIN MOON CIRCLE

About a third of American Neo-Pagans worship as a part of a church usually called a coven. In this chapter I will introduce my key informants, explain the demographics of the movement, and explain the organization of the coven that I studied. This elaboration of the main structural features will set the stage for an exploration of the core theology of the movement in chapter 3.

Key Informants

May Bowman is a spunky 53-year-old with a mop of blonde hair that seems to have a life of its own and a distinct rural Pennsylvania twang to her voice. Like 90.8%\(^1\) of American Neo-Pagans, she is white. She works as an office manager at a pharmaceutical company near Pittsburgh. She met her future husband, Jack Bowman, at a dance in October 1970. Jack was a highly skilled machinist by trade, a union man, who worked for the local utility company. In his free time he built things. Anything. If you wanted it, Jack could – and would, often without being asked – build it. By all accounts the young couple were inseparable, and they married on June 15, 1974, moving shortly thereafter into a small house in the rural community of Groen, Pennsylvania, about an hour east of Pittsburgh, where they would spend the rest of their lives together, until Jack’s death from cancer on March 18, 2004.

Jack and May have three adult children, Kussina, Samantha, and Jack Jr. Kussina, the youngest, was 19 at the time of her father’s death. She is muscular from

\(^1\) All statistics in this chapter are taken from Helen Berger’s (2003) excellent demographic of the movement entitled *Voices From the Pagan Census.*

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many years of working on and around the house, and smokes like a chimney, something that her father always used to give her a hard time about. She has long, straight brown hair and an engaging smile. She has completed high school but has no serious plans for college. Kussina describes herself as a solitary practitioner, a Neo-Pagan term for a person who is a marginal member of the religion and shares the beliefs of the religion, but who is not associated with any particular group. She is artistically talented, and enjoys painting large acrylics. Her precise memory for detail, born of many years of painting, has rendered her an excellent informant. Much like her father, it is not unusual for her to remember precisely the objects that were placed on a shrine, where they were acquired, and their individual significances. On her back, she has a memorial tattoo to her father that she designed. She is presently in a long term relationship with a young man named Casey.

The middle daughter, named Samantha, but called “Sambo” by all and sundry, is tall and wiry like her mother. She has been living for several years with her boyfriend who is also named Jack. They have a daughter together, Elaine, who was just over two years old at the time of her grandfather’s death. Jack and Sambo are not legally married, but normally refer to themselves, and are referred to by others, as husband and wife. Like Kussina, Samantha has a high school education. Samantha does not identify herself as an American Neo-Pagan.

Jack, the only son and oldest child, is a highly skilled machinist like his father and a man of few words. He is fit and muscular, with a piercing gaze and a crew cut. When he speaks, his words are sharp, to the point, and on target. In many ways he is a spitting image of his father when he was in his twenties. Perhaps the thing that most stands out about Jack is his voice – he sounds hauntingly like his father, particularly to an outsider. And, like his father, Jack is very loyal and a man of his word; once his word is given, he always follows through unless there is a darned good reason. Jack is employed in construction, and for the past several years he has functioned as general
contractor, organizing the construction of the family’s new residence which is the size of a small apartment complex. Jack does not identify himself as an American Neo-Pagan.

Demographics of the Movement

The consensus of the literature is that about two thirds of American Neo-Pagans are female. About a third of American Neo-Pagans are legally married, but only one percent of the Neo-Pagan population are widows or widowers. Jack’s death forced May into a new social identity, that of “widow”; a social identity largely undefined by Neo-Pagan theology or tradition. This may account in part for the prominent role she took at his funeral. May is also older than 88 percent of American Neo-Pagans. Although she is not the oldest member of Mountain Moon Circle, both the clergy members who celebrated her husband’s funeral were younger than she. Some members of her coven are barely older than her children. This age discrepancy may have had some impact on her role at the funeral and her identity construction process.

Jack completed high school, while May had completed a year and a half of undergraduate work. In this sense, Jack in particular was highly atypical within the movement, since most Neo-Pagans complete an undergraduate degree, and many complete advanced degrees. Approximately 92 percent of Neo-Pagans have undertaken some form of postsecondary education, as opposed to about half of the general population (Berger 2003:32). Berger 2003 also points out that there is a discrepancy between the average income of American Neo-Pagans and their educations. The median income Berger 2003 reports is $30,001 to $40,000. She points out that this income is consistent with the average American income which has hovered around $30,000 since 1989, even though American Neo-Pagan educational achievements dramatically exceed the national mean. Prior to Jack’s death, the Bowman family’s income was in the $50,001 to $60,000 bracket. Since Jack’s death, the surviving family members have had to struggle to maintain their standard of living.
Several explanations have been offered for the discrepancy between education and income. Some have noted that perhaps Neo-Pagans sacrifice high paying jobs in favor of time to pursue their spiritual pursuits. Berger points out that a large number of Neo-Pagans are homemakers, students, and women, all of whom generally earn less than the mean. Many of my informants were employed within the medical profession, usually as nurses and technicians. Berger notes that “helping professions,” including nurses, therapists, and social workers, when taken together account for about ten percent of Neo-Pagans. Loretta Orion (1995), in *Never Again the Burning Times*, suggests that there is a pattern of healers within the religion. Berger 2003 notes this finding as curious, but inconclusive. In my experience, a large proportion of Neo-Pagans feel called to “create healing change in ourselves, our community, and our world” (Mountain Moon Circle Charter n.d.:1) by religious means. For example, all of the members of Mountain Moon Circle have learned basic skills of healing by laying on of hands. I was taught this skill before I formally joined the coven. It was considered a basic, fundamental skill. Many members of the coven have participated in formal training in religious healing through methods such as Reiki or Crystal Therapy. Yet many of these people would not define their occupational identity as that of a healer. In short, both Berger 2003 and Orion 1995 are correct; there is a pattern of healing, yet it has little impact on occupational statistics because few are paid for their healing services, and even fewer derive their primary source of income from healing.

Jack and May both come from a working class background; Paul Fussel (1983) would describe their class status as “high prole.”2 Although neither Jack nor May had

2 Paul Fussel (1983) in his humorous tour of the American class system, *Class*, distinguishes three “working classes,” instead of the usual one: the High, Mid, and Low Proles. Fussel defines Low Proles as long term minimum wage workers such as those studied by Barbara Ehrenreich (2001) in *Nickel and Dimed*. Fussel defines Mid-Proles as long term factory workers and other union laborers such as those studied by Eliot Liebow (1967) in *Talley's Corner*. Fussel's (1983) High Proles are highly skilled, very well educated, and very highly paid blue collar workers, such as machine shop foremen, high-rise iron workers, or master carpenters or joiners. High Proles usually blend in with the middle class in survey instruments because of their high family incomes, but are distinguished from middles by lacking the undergraduate degree that constitutes one's ticket to the middle class.
much access to middle class social capital, both were deeply involved in their non-
Pagan communities, and had built up a great deal of working class social capital, which
would be key in the realization of their mutual dreams. As such, they stood upon a
bridge, one foot in a largely Christian, working class world, and the other foot in a
middle class, American Neo-Pagan world.

Like most Neo-Pagans, May has little confidence in American governmental, social,
and financial institutions. She describes them as divorced from her needs, self-
interested, and pursuing an agenda that clashes with the needs of the American public.
Like 43 percent of Neo-Pagans, May is a registered Democrat; only a tiny fraction of
American Neo-Pagans are registered as Republicans; many participate in marginal,
liberal political groups such as the Green and Communist parties. May has been active
in political campaigns, lobbying and grassroots organizing, particularly for candidates
who run on a platform emphasizing protection of the environment and basic social
welfare. She is particularly opposed to big business and would characterize the U.S.
congress as a den of thieves:

[Congressmen are] A bunch of egotistical scofflaws that just love to tell other
people what to do, but are sure the rules don’t apply to them. A very few are
sincere and try to do well, but there aren’t enough honest ones to counteract the
bad ones.

Jack was not politically active. May describes him as cynical and disenenchanted with
the political process, and American social institutions in general. Berger 2003 sums up
the problem succinctly:

Many Neo-Pagans view their spirituality as offering an alternative image of the
relationship of people to one another and to the earth – an image in which
people respect each other and treat Mother Earth with respect. This image is of
less bureaucratic societies that are based on concern and sharing, and which
eschew hierarchical institutionalized power. For Neo-Pagans this image serves
as an alternative to what they believe are the problems of contemporary life.
Although... Neo-Pagans use the political system to work for social change,
ultimately they have little faith in the bureaucracies and social institutions they
use. [Berger 2003:81]

Although a small proportion of people have been born into Neo-Pagan families,
American Neo-Paganism is a religion of converts. Jack was raised in a Catholic family,
while May has a Protestant family. Shortly before their first child was born, they became affiliated with the Episcopal Church down the street from their home. When asked about their choice of religious affiliations, May responded that they felt the Episcopal Church was a good compromise between the deep history and tradition of Jack's brand of Catholicism, and the progressive congregationalism of May's Presbyterian upbringing. Both felt, after some years, that the Episcopal Church was not meeting their needs. It would not be until the children were grown, however, that they would actively seek out a new church.

Organization of the Coven

Mountain Moon Circle is a moderate sized Wiccan-style eclectic coven located in Groen, Pennsylvania about an hour's drive east of Pittsburgh. The coven, legally incorporated as a church in Pennsylvania, was founded in 1997, and is unusual in both its size and longevity. Like most so-called "storefront sects," Wiccan covens tend to collapse within two years; but through good management, a clear sense of the sacred, and a strong sense of purpose, Mountain Moon Circle has endured. Public services normally draw between thirty and sixty people, with the exception of the "Wiccan Wicnick," a one-day festival held each year in a public park that draws approximately two hundred people.

In the highly pluralistic American religious landscape, churches young and old alike must compete to attract and retain adherents. As such, a small proportion of seekers are "shopping" for a church to join on a more permanent basis. Like most MMC members, when May talks about her pre-Mountain Moon Circle past, she reports that she was dissatisfied by her earlier Episcopal faith. She felt that the members of her

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3 Eclectic coven means that members of the coven are not obligated to worship a particular set of gods that are associated with the coven, but may instead worship any particular form of divinity that they feel speaks to them, so long as they adhere more or less to a group of commonly held principles and practices.
church were closed-minded. She felt that the “peace hugs” given at the end of service were perfunctory and without meaning:

We never made close friends [in the Episcopal Church]. We were very friendly with them, and they were very nice people, but I've never felt that close-bond connection that I wanted... We would go over for coffee and donuts and stuff in the morning after the services, and ... the people there were nice but I just never felt drawn to them. I always thought that there was something different that wasn't quite what I was looking for.

An outsider would also note that May and Jack would have had little in common with Episcopalians; the Episcopal Church is composed primarily of well educated middle and upper-middle class individuals. Charismatic expression is generally avoided in the Episcopal Church, whereas it is central to the practice of American Neo-Paganism.

Susan Harding (2000), in *The Book of Jerry Falwell* describes the conversion process as having two distinct phases: crossing into belief, and crossing out of disbelief. The former is the first, tentative phase during which the convert has one foot in the old world and the other foot in the new world. It requires a suspension of disbelief in the new world without disavowing belief in the old world. Crossing out of disbelief means disavowing the old world and accepting the new beliefs fully, without reservation. Not until this phase is reached does the convert feel the totality of impact of the conversion, the quickening of the imagination that becomes the focal point of a new identity.

Although the language they use is different, to most Neo-Pagans, Harding's (2000) view of conversion would sound familiar. Neo-Pagans say that the conversion process begins with a "homecoming." The term describes the experience of discovering that there is a language to define one's feelings, and a community within which the ego is supported and grows. One begins listening to others, their writing and their speech, and exploring the personal implications of their statements. One explores new possibilities while retaining a firm grip on one's previous view of reality. At last, there are names for one's religious feelings, and other people who feel the same way.⁴

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⁴ I am indebted to Dr. Curt Raney at St. Mary's College of Maryland for the many conversations that clarified this point for me.
Like most Neo-Pagans, May describes her crossing into belief as a homecoming. She feels that she always believed in the way of Neo-Paganism, but finally has found others who share her belief. May describes her first encounter with the charisma of American Neo-Paganism:

Everyone was very warm, and very friendly. Jack and I went to the first Mountain Moon Circle meeting, and as soon as we were there, we knew we were home. That was it. As soon as we met the people, started talking to them, it was an immediate knowledge. That the connection that we felt, the drawing in of the vibration, the chemistry was right, everything just clicked. We just looked at each other, and said "This is it. This is where we belong."

Michael York (1995), in The Emerging Network records a survey respondent:

I burst out laughing with recognition; this is mine; this is for me; I have come home. This feeling of recognition and coming home is, in my experience, what all witches and pagans report... [York 1995:204]

Neo-Pagans can take years to explore the depth of their homecoming. The term implies belief, along with an unwillingness to separate from secular society. A Neo-Pagan who has come home⁵ will probably not be "out" at work, perhaps not even with family members, or close, non-Pagan friends. The far more difficult step, that the Christian would call "being saved," has no common name among Neo-Pagans. The following passage from the introduction to a popular Neo-Pagan book describes the feeling well:

The charge comes to each of us in a different manner. It is the moment in our lives when we feel the magick of the universe coursing through us for the very first time, and we know beyond all real and imagined shadows that this calling to the mysteries is indeed there. It is not a whimsical flight from reality. [Ravenwolf 1993:7]

The charge is the experience that the conservative Christian would describe as being saved. The ego, already having crossed into belief, now crosses out of disbelief, in the certainty that its feelings are very real. The Neo-Pagan who has made this transition is able to "come out of the broom closet," facing friends, family, and co-workers in public acknowledgement of their faith. However, unlike Christian conversion, proselytizing is expressly disavowed by the Neo-Pagan community. Emphasis is placed on development

⁵ Note that, although the term homecoming is ethnographic, I have discovered name for this experience that is used consistently from group to group in the communities I've studied.
of the self, the identities. For the first time, the convert is willing to identify himself or
er herself as a Neo-Pagan in non-Pagan circles, regardless of the consequences. The old,
secular self becomes a metaphorical martyr. A new, Neo-Pagan self rises from the ashes
of the old, spurned self.

A Heterarchical Structure

The church is organized into a set of three heterarchies:

1. **seekers**
2. **members**
3. **kore**

Members of Mountain Moon Circle identify congregants who routinely
attend their services as *seekers*. There are approximately four hundred seekers on
Mountain Moon Circle’s mailing list; at any time, about fifty of these actively attend
services. A handful of these have attended Mountain Moon Circle services consistently
for several years; the majority of seekers are newcomers, popping in and out in
conjunction with their needs and personal interests. Seekers have no formal
responsibility to the group. Informally, seekers have helped clean up the outdoor
sacred spaces where about half the group’s rituals are performed and have provided
logistical and material support for the annual Wic-nick. Seekers make an important
financial contribution to the church through direct contributions (usually about $5 per
person) made at each service, and by patronizing classes, workshops, and services
offered by full members of the coven, but not directly sponsored by the coven. An active
individual seeker might make donations amounting to $200 per year to the church.
This figure is consistent with donations reported by about two thirds of Berger’s (2003)
respondents.

Full *membership* in Mountain Moon Circle is accorded to individuals who are willing
to make a public, ritual commitment to the coven, to take regular responsibility for the

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6 A *heterarchy* is defined by Erik Hornung (1996) in *Conceptions of God in Ancient Egypt: The One and the Many* as a community of peers with approximately equal access to
power and capital, who are situated within a hierarchical relationship to one or more
other heterarchies. Neo-Pagans have made a very self-conscious effort to establish
egalitarian communities that usually seem to inadvertently result in heterarchies. I will
consider this further in chapter 3.
leading of religious services, perform a coven service role, and participate in the
business of the coven. Including ritual attendance, business meetings, and service
tasks, a typical coven member spends between ten and twenty hours each month on
coven work. When an individual expresses interest in joining the coven, they are given
a questionnaire that asks them to respond in short answer form to a series of questions
about their religious beliefs, their goals in joining the coven and what they can offer the
coven. Most applicants describe their religious lives in great detail in their applications,
which can reach several pages, typed, single space in length. The application is then
circulated among the members by email, and considered at a quarterly business
meeting attended by all members of the coven. The applicant is not normally present,
although there have been exceptions.

Most members are accepted with little fanfare. During my fieldwork, eight members
were accepted through this process. Harmony within the coven is a key value. Most
members were assessed by these criteria: Is this individual a nice person? Will they
keep up with their share of the work? Can I lead a service with this person? One clergy
member summarized these criteria with this catchy description: "It's our 'not-an-
asshole' policy." By the time my fieldwork drew to a close, the "not-an-asshole policy"
had proven insufficient. One member had been accepted who had serious emotional
problems that had proven disruptive to harmony; she subsequently resigned. Another
member was accepted who had already accepted membership in another coven, and
who was very ambiguous in her goals for joining the coven. She, too, voluntarily
resigned. Some members also attributed a period of unusually rapid turnover in the
group to inadequate screening of new members. Applications began to be considered in
more detail, and for the first time, in 2005 a prospective applicant was rejected.

I can clearly recall the apprehension of writing my application essay, even though I
was aware that, at the time I applied for membership, no one had ever been rejected.
Other members have reminisced about their applications as well. This apprehension is
the beginning of the rite of passage into membership, a complete surrender of power to
the Mountain Moon Circle community that culminates with the ritual of dedication to
the coven, and the regaining of power in modified form.

The **kore** are the spiritual leaders of the church. All kore members function as
clergy members within the church context; most are legally ordained ministers. During
the course of my research there were usually four kore members of six active at any
time. Kore members lead services at least once and often several times each month;
represent the church in the interfaith community; meet monthly to handle the routine
business of the church; lead prospective members and kore member apprenticeships;
and are authorized to perform wedding and funeral services on behalf of the church. At
the kore level, in practice, there is no vote; all kore members must agree to both
business and religious policy proposals. One kore member described this process as
“loud.” An individual may be admitted to the kore through a year-long training process
that culminates with initiation during a ritual that is held privately by members of the
kore. Kore members are distinguished by a handmade, knotted gold rope that they
wear like a belt when officiating or participating in services; only one non-kore member
of the coven, Natalie, wears a hand-made cord.

The American Neo-Pagan community contains a quite small group of central figures.
Sayward, for example, is a member of the Ravenwood coven described by Scarboro et al.
1994. In addition to her gold Mountain Moon Circle cord, she also wears her red
Ravenwood cord, and a blue cord from a third coven in Texas. Likewise, Ray was an
informant for Berger 2003. Alice was a co-founder of the Spiral Scouts, a national Neo-
Pagan organization presented as an alternative to the Boy and Girl Scouts.

In principle, the kore are first among equals. When asked of their role, kore
members will emphasize their service commitment to the coven. At one point I grilled
Alyssa, a kore member, at length about a seeming contradiction in the coven – if all
coven members are equally empowered, why have a kore? She explained that all
members are equal before spirit. Members with greater depth of experience and
commitment to the coven who have chosen to undergo the lengthy and emotionally
trying kore apprenticeship are empowered to speak on behalf of the group as a whole because they are able to see a bigger picture that individual members who have not undergone this process of awakening might not grasp. For Alyssa the important part of being a kore member is one's ability to "feel spirit" speak to you.

Consensus Decision-Making

All coven decision-making is through a process of consensus. This idea is taken almost without modification from the Reclaiming Witches described in Salomonsen 2002. Neo-Pagans feel that Americans proceed from the assumption that people will not agree, all voices will not be heard, and some people will always leave the table unhappy. This dictatorship of the majority specified by the American civil religion is troubling to Neo-Pagans. They view their consensus process an alternative model that allows all voices to be heard.

With the assembled members seated on the ground or in chairs in a large circle, often in the large, open, finished basement of a home rented by two of the clergy members, a member responsible for coordinating membership activities announces aloud that the group will now consider so-and-so's application for membership. She will ask, "Are there any concerns?" In most cases a brief discussion will ensue. "What job will so-and-so take?" "Has so-and-so completed the required classes?" "I met so-and-so, and she's always so polite at ritual." When the person facilitating the meeting senses that people are repeating themselves, she will call for consensus. Each member will hold both hands in front of them, palms outward and down, and will wiggle their fingers to indicate their consent – a process informally called "twinkling." The process of twinkling also represents the final opportunity for a member to speak up if they have a concern. If a member raises an objection the objection is discussed at length, until the objecting member feels their concern has been satisfied and withdraws their objection. Rarely, a member will indicate that their concern cannot be resolved, and discussion of that particular item will be set aside until the member's concern can be
addressed in private by the clergy. There is strong social pressure not to be the only member in dissent in business decisions. If there are no objections, the facilitator announces that so-and-so has been accepted as a member, and directs a member who is taking notes to note consensus in the minutes. The meeting then moves on to the next item of business and the process is repeated.

**Conflict and Cooperation**

The members of the coven acknowledge that their ideal of consensus is difficult to enact in practice, and that, even in an intentional community, people have trouble reconciling their disagreements. This has resulted in a non-normative heterarchy that is hard to reconcile with egalitarian ideals.

In practice, although the kore occupies the top layer of the Mountain Moon Circle heterarchy, the kore members have only a limited power to enforce their will upon the group as a whole. Any one kore member may speak for the kore as a whole; as such, dissent within the kore, although present, is not publicly acknowledged, and the kore presents a united front to the rest of the coven. Although the kore members cannot force the consent of the members to any particular proposal, they can and do use a substantial power of dissent to avoid policy or religious decisions that they feel are not in the best interests of the coven. The kore represents about a quarter of the coven. When the kore dissents as a whole, they make a powerful political statement. Likewise, when the kore, as spiritual leaders of the community, present a proposal, the proposal is always discussed and often approved.

By and large, the members trust the kore's sight of the larger vision of the coven. Most members agree with the ideal of kore members being first among equals. When conflict between members of the coven and kore does appear, they appear when the kore seems to become too powerful. For example, the kore meets privately once each month. At a regular business meeting, certain members of the coven felt that the kore meetings should not be private; why should these particular members meet in private
and make business decisions that the other members were not party to? Kore members pointed out that the vast majority of discussion at kore meetings was of the run-of-the-mill, bureaucratic variety, and that they could not imagine anyone being interested in their deliberations; after all the final proposals would be presented to all the members at a regular business meeting. Furthermore, as the spiritual leaders of the community, the kore often discusses confidential membership issues and private spiritual counseling concerns that were between themselves and individual members. In response to the members concerns, the kore agreed to publish the minutes of their meetings to the members with any identifiers and private kore business omitted. Furthermore, a representative of the members was selected to attend kore meetings to add a non-kore voice to the deliberations. This proposal served as an equitable compromise because the members felt that they walked away from the table empowered to have a greater voice in the business of the coven, while the kore felt that nothing much had changed at all. This sort of give-and-take between the members and the kore is a constant feature of life in the coven.

It is worth noting that proposals put forward by kore members are occasionally not accepted by the coven as a whole. When considering the issue of the kore’s claim to the “big picture,” it is also worth noting that kore proposals that have been rejected in the past by the coven are occasionally put back on the table a few months later by a member, reconsidered, and accepted. The kore does indeed usually have their fingers on the pulse of the coven, even if it is at the expense of a non-normative heterarchy.

Jone Salomonsen (1997), in Enchanted Feminism notes a similarly non-normative hierarchy occurring in the San Francisco Reclaiming Collective. Sally, a founding member of the coven and kore member, was trained by members of Reclaiming, and her influence is readily apparent in the structure of the coven and the kore. Salomonsen 1997 describes her informants as “people,” with human successes and failings:

It is obvious that the construction called “Reclaiming” was not as welcoming and inclusive in 1990 as intended on a social level, no matter how alternative and good-intentioned. Instead of representing “paradise lost”, Reclaiming was rather
a community of ordinary people who gossiped, hurt each other, had loud discussions and insisted upon humor and irony as primary criteria for belonging. At the same time, they made a lot of compassionate demands on each other in terms of experimenting, caring, speaking up, processing, forgiving and helping each other grow. [Salomonsen, 1997:60]

Salomonsen 1997 goes on to evaluate why a model intended to avoid an insider-outsider sort of relationship in practice tends to emphasize such relationships. She identifies four points. First, women are redefined away from being caretakers and towards being powerful. Power exists not only in practice but also in threat of practice; the power of exclusion and inclusion is part of the process of claiming the powerful female. Secondly, the consensus process lends authority to those with age and experience. Salomonsen 1997 notes that sometimes Reclaiming witches who had age and experience would use the consequential authority in non-normative ways. I have not witnessed this in the Mountain Moon Circle community. However, in Mountain Moon Circle, those who are empowered to participate in the consensus process are seen as having authority over those who cannot participate. The Reclaiming movement explicitly attempts to combine religious action with political action; authority thus is given to those with more time to commit to political causes. This third point is not nearly so evident in Mountain Moon Circle, because Mountain Moon Circle as a group does not conjoin political action and religion, although some members, Like Natalie and Sally, do on a personal basis. The fourth criteria that Salomonsen 1997 notes is that in the Reclaiming Community, there were no formal rules for membership – participation was through action and leadership. Likewise, in Mountain Moon Circle, the “not-an-asshole” policy is quite vague. The kore apprenticeship is highly individualized, and the individual apprentice usually has little idea of what she or he is seeking until it is found.

The structural qualities of Mountain Moon Circle are a consequence of the core theology of the movement. In the next chapter, we will explore that theology.
CHAPTER 3

THEOLOGY

The religious practices I witnessed members of Mountain Moon Circle perform are resolved from a corpus of commonly held Neo-Pagan beliefs, most of which are themselves resolved from either a grand theological proposal of immanence; are a consequence of, or are intended to maintain, a sense of communitas; or reflect beliefs commonly held by members of the American civil religion. This chapter will explore the concept of immanence, important beliefs held by members of the movement, and typical practices I’ve witnessed at religious activities hosted by members of the coven. These practices should be construed as a proximal source of Neo-Pagan funerary ritual, and are presented to clarify the significance of key elements of the Neo-Pagan funeral ritual.

If a researcher were to suggest to an American Neo-Pagan that their religion is fundamentally rooted in Christianity, they may find themselves figuratively tarred, feathered, and carried out on a rail. When I made this suggestion once to one of my informants, she very abruptly responded by paraphrasing Margot Adler (1979): “We worship neither the Christian God nor the Christian devil.” Yet, none the less, when an outsider observes an American Neo-Pagan ritual, the similarities to liberal Protestant denominations such as Unitarians or Quakers are striking. Certain Neo-Pagan theological elements appear to be only slightly altered from the Protestant movement, including key rites of passage such as the handfasting (wedding) ritual and the saning¹ (baptism) rituals. Parts of the regular full moon and sabbat services – the Neo-Pagan equivalents to the Sunday church services – are also strikingly similar to corresponding parts of Christian order of service, such as the “cakes and ale”

¹ Pronounced “sane-ing”
sacraments, which are very reminiscent of Catholic Mass and sacramental use of food throughout Protestantism. American Neo-Paganism is further situated within the American civil religion, which itself is fundamentally Protestant. One can hardly talk about American Neo-Paganism without talking about Christianity.

Surprisingly then, most ethnographers of American Neo-Paganism gloss over this touchy subject, addressing only the somewhat different subject of overt conflict between Neo-Pagans and conservative Christians (cf. Pike, 2001:xii). None the less, one cannot understand the making of an American Neo-Pagan funeral without first considering the relationship between Neo-Paganism and the broader American theological landscape.

Sources for American Neo-Paganism

Ethnographer Sarah Pike (2001), in *Earthly Bodies, Magical Selves*, a discussion of American Neo-Pagan festivals, summarizes four core social and theological sources for contemporary Neo-Paganism. They are:

(1) *Pre-Christian European “folk” traditions.* Many Neo-Pagans claim pre-Christian European roots; Jack and May for example both saw themselves as affiliated with European deities. Although the contemporary Neo-Pagan understanding of these roots is taken largely non-critically out of their original sociopolitical context and highly romanticized, the roots remain none the less and serve to anchor Neo-Pagans in a particular geographical and temporal location creating a common frame of reference for a shared identity. The romanticized writings of certain early anthropologists, particularly Margaret Murray and Margaret Mead, have contributed to the Neo-Pagan romanticization of the past by lending it an air of “science.”

(2) *The “elite” ritual magic of Europe.* The western occult movement began in Europe in the 1860s, and reached its height during the 1890s. During this period, newly founded “ancient” ritual groups created, collected, and organized a large body of writings of medieval alchemists, recently decoded Egyptian documents such as the “Book of the Dead,” Asian philosophical tracts that were previously hard to come by in
the west, and conventional classical Hebrew, Greek, and Latin writings into several organized theological systems. The most significant of these ceremonial magic organizations was the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn. The Golden Dawn's membership roster reads like a who's-who of 19th century British occultism, including the famed and often reviled Aleister Crowley; psychic Dion Fortune; Arthur Edward Waite and Pamela Coleman Smith, producer and artist respectively of the first mass produced tarot pack; noted Egyptologist A. E. Wallis Budge; and the Irish poet William Butler Yeats. The Golden Dawn's system of degrees, taken directly from Freemasonry, would precede the heterarchical organization of much of modern Neo-Paganism, and their corpus of theological material would be broadly interpreted and reinterpreted by their 20th century successors. These practices combined with traditional American spiritualist practices would form the theological backbone of the movement in the United States.

(3) Nature Religions. The third principle source for American Neo-Paganism is the "nature religion" movement in the last quarter of the 19th and first quarter of the 20th centuries in the United States, including the New England Transcendentalism of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Euro-American interpretations of Native American shamanism.

(4) 1960s Counterculture. The fourth key source for American Neo-Paganism is the 1960s counterculture, including such elements as experimentation with psychedelic drugs, the feminist movement, growing ecological awareness, science fiction and fantasy novels, and fascination with Asian religions, including Zen and Tibetan Buddhism and various forms of Hinduism. The 1960s counterculture should be construed as providing the majority of overtly social and political elements of modern Neo-Paganism, whereas the majority of strictly theological elements come from the first three.

Interestingly, it took the insight of Jone Salomonsen from the University of Oslo - a foreigner to both Neo-Paganism and to the American civil religion - to begin the process of placing Neo-Paganism within a broader religious frame. Salomonsen is trained both as a comparative theologian and as an anthropologist - thus, although she used an
anthropological methodology, performing participant observation research off and on from 1985 to 1997 among the San Francisco "Reclaiming" feminist Witches as part of her dissertation research, she inherited a different set of theoretical biases from those of most researchers in the field. This distance allowed her to evaluate both American Neo-Pagans and the American civil religion.

The San Francisco Reclaiming Collective that Jone Salomonsen (1997) studied offers an excellent example of late 20th Century reinterpretation of the four key sources for Neo-Paganism mentioned above. In the first chapter of her ethnography, entitled Enchanted Feminism, she argues that theology can be "gendered." For Salomonsen 1997, theology exists in reference to the physical bodies that our reflexive selves occupy. Given that Neo-Paganism is an American religion, and a product of an essentially Protestant religious landscape, she argues that the Reclaiming Witches of San Francisco have inherited their conception of how, precisely, religion is gendered from their Protestant ancestors, who themselves received it from Roman Catholic understanding of gendered theology prior to the Reformation. Thus, during the middle ages:

Men's authority was derived from their education and ordination; [while] women's religious power derived from inspiration or ecstatic visitation. Thus, the opposition between knowledge received externally (priests) versus knowledge received internally (mystics) was represented as a dichotomy between the learned and the ignorant, which in medieval Europe coincided with the hierarchical opposition between men and women. ... When witches confess to a theology of "immanence, interconnection and community", their discourse resembles to a large extent a subcultural heritage line in the Christian tradition which in medieval times was primarily associated with women (and heretics). [Salomonsen 1997:14-15]

The basic theological proposal here is that the divine becomes a part of a person in conjunction with their birth, not as a consequence of ritual behavior such as baptism or ordination. Access to the inner sacred is a birth-right of all humans from this perspective, not restricted by social class, membership to any particular institution, or gift of a person of authority. To an American Neo-Pagan, divinity is immanent: it is part of both the natural world and humans who live in that world. Neo-Pagans contrast this

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immanence to a “masculine” Protestant theology where god stands apart from the world with all its troubles, and sacred status must be conferred through ritual.

Obviously, the principle of immanence is fundamentally antithetical to the institution of dogma; how would one person or group have the authority to impose dogma from above? If a member of the religion did not follow the dogma, who would impose theological consequences? By what authority could a person say that his or her version of practice is preferential to that of another if the divine spark lives equally in all?

Salomonsen 1997 tells us that the Reclaiming Collective has placed the final source – the social and political agenda of the 1960s counterculture - in a place of theological priority over the other three sources. Salomonsen 1997 cautions us not to take her theological reading of the Reclaiming Collective as representative of other Neo-Pagan organizations, and her caution has been noted by other ethnographers. Berger 2003 interprets this warning to indicate that the theology of the Reclaiming Collective is representative of feminist Neo-Pagans in the United States exclusively. Two of the founding members of Mountain Moon Circle are themselves also members of the Reclaiming Collective, and their influence appears writ large in the theology of the organization.

Salomonsen’s 1997 point cannot be overstated – For American Neo-Pagans, the core theological protest consists of a rejection of the masculine, hierarchical, and dogmatic, in favor of the feminine, egalitarian, communal, and ecstatic. None the less, Neo-Pagans are fundamentally participants in the hierarchical and dogmatic American civil religion. Herein lies the fundamental tension and contradiction which much be resolved in both Neo-Pagan belief and practice.

*Neo-Pagan Core Beliefs*

If you ask a member of Mountain Moon Circle about their core beliefs, most will direct you to the principles laid out in the coven’s charter. I have based this list of
beliefs on the format of the beliefs presented in the charter, although I have altered it extensively based upon the practices that I witnessed. I found the degree of familiarity with the principles laid out in the charter held by individual members of the coven to be highly variable. All members, however, seem to enact behaviors consistent with the following list of beliefs.

(1) Consensus. The members of Mountain Moon Circle value harmony, consensus, autonomy, self-awareness, and close, feeling-oriented, meaningful interpersonal relations. This belief is both a strategy of interaction intended to maintain a sense of communitas, and a consequence of the theology of immanence outlined above. Of course, in practice values can conflict with one another in implementation. It is each Neo-Pagan’s duty to aid others in their journey of self-awareness. When a conflict occurs, ideally, Neo-Pagans are to seek a consensus arrangement that allows each individual to pursue their own path in harmony. Neo-Pagans refer to this process of negotiation as the ideal of “perfect love and perfect trust.” The coven models this ideal for members through the consensus dispute resolution process laid out in the example above.

(2) Heterarchy. In American Neo-Pagan rituals, the idea of setting one or more individuals apart as privileged is abhorrent and to be avoided. This assertion of absolute equity is a consequence of the theology of immanence. However, as heirs to the American civil religion, the members of Mountain Moon Circle are used to operating in hierarchical organizations. In practice, the coven is organized into a number of formal and informal heterarchies of peers, where all members of each respective peer group have approximately equal access to power and resources.

With this said, under any circumstances where equity is functionally possible, it is attempted. For example, rather than congregants approaching a Eucharistic minister, at a Mountain Moon Circle full moon service, every person becomes a Eucharistic minister, feeding sacramental wine and bread to the person on the left and receiving it from the person on their right. In theory, in this community, every voice is heard.
However, as Americans, Neo-Pagans value their personal accomplishment of their journey of the soul, and use their names and their material culture to communicate that journey. When a congregant says to the assembled group, “I am BlackWinter and I am a member of MMC,” she is making a statement of her personal location in her project of ego development. However, the outsider would note that she is also making a statement that has implications in terms of decision-making power, forum for leadership, and other empowerment to personal expression that a person who is not entitled to claim membership in Mountain Moon Circle would not be empowered to express in this particular public forum, regardless of their location on their spiritual journey. Although seating around the circle does not follow a pattern, when a member says her name, she identifies herself as a member of the coven. These statements of membership, reaffirmed by the gold cords worn by members in the circle, affirm before the sacred the existence of layered groups of peers, or heterarchies: members of the coven and visiting seekers, us and them. This tension between the egalitarian ideal on the one hand, and the hierarchy of the American civil religion on the other, is a constant feature of Mountain Moon Circle members lives together.

(3) Energy. All ethnographers of American Neo-Paganism and the New Age report a belief in an animatistic psychic energy; this belief seems central to the movement. Energy is usually construed as an omnipresent, morally neutral manipulateable force that may be modified through ritual means to do just about anything that the practitioner can conceive of. In practice, energy is also considered to be a property of an object, place, or person, and may be construed as “positive” or “negative.” Much of a Neo-Pagan’s formal training consists of learning to become aware of and manipulate energy.

The emphasis upon energy may be a consequence of the sense of communitas created within the liminal space of the ritual circle. Although Neo-Pagans manipulate energy outside the ritual circle, most use of energy occurs within the ritual circle. The
circle is seen as a container for energy by Neo-Pagans. This container is expressly a liminal space.

Although an outsider may look at energy as a word for the effervescence created by communitas, energy is seen by Neo-Pagans as "real," as a tangible substance that can be manipulated by a properly trained practitioner. Energy can be given both a form and a moral quality desired by the practitioner. Energy is given physical form by visualizing the completed form within space, normally in front of the practitioner. Likewise, if someone were to place a curse on someone else, they would allow themselves to feel anger and rage inside themselves as they empowered whatever ritual object they were using for the curse.

When asked, Neo-Pagans often compare energy to electricity. Energy located within a person can be construed as balanced or imbalanced. An imbalance of energy (too much, too little, the wrong kind) is seen as having a negative impact on the individual person. It is considered very unsafe, even irresponsible, to send a person home "wired" on energy, especially if that person has not been trained to handle the energy. A reasonable Neo-Pagan would expect a person who is "high on energy" to experience paranormal experiences outside of the circle, to behave unusually or erratically, or to experience wild mood swings. Since Neo-Pagans are obligated to cause no harm, knowingly sending someone away without "grounding" them, or ritually removing the imbalance of energy – particularly if they were expected to drive an automobile - would be considered morally objectionable. In particularly intense rituals, coven members who have specialist knowledge of grounding are asked in advance to be ready to aid anyone who becomes overwhelmed. There is a direct link between the concept of energy and a Neo-Pagan's concept of spirit. Energy is a logical extension of both the godhead and the natural world.

\footnote{All of the Neo-Pagans I've talked to both affirm that they know how to place curses on other people and expressly disavow that they ever would do it, because it is not in the spirit of harmlessness noted below. In practice, the prohibition against curses ends up being one of the most important "thou shalt not" proscriptions of the movement.}

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Although the Neo-Pagan concept of energy seems to be an elaboration and animatism of the communitas concept, the idea of the efficacy of animatistic energy seems to also be present in the general American population.

(4) Protestant work ethic. Most Neo-Pagan rituals, particularly those that would not be construed by an outsider as rites of passage, are termed “workings,” and are suggestive of a broadly held Protestant work ethic within the community. This, of course, is drawn from the American civil religion and reapplied to the Neo-Pagan project of self-growth. To participate in a Neo-Pagan service is to work on one’s own spiritual journey of ego development; to work with others in community development; and to use magic to create Neo-Pagan values of harmony and peace in the greater world.

(5) The sanctity of sexual expression. Neo-Pagans value freedom of sexual expression. As such, open expression of sexual behavior, taboo according to the American civil religion, is freely expressed in a Neo-Pagan community. Sexual relations between members of the coven were neither avoided nor discouraged during my time there. Three members of the coven are openly gay. Three are actively polyamorous. Several members of the community are actively bisexual or have experimented with bisexuality. The community is particularly tolerant of non-normative sexual behavior so long as the behavior is consensual and not harmful anyone involved.

If one might normally construe the Catholic mass as ritual cannibalism, then the “great rite” which stands at the heart of the regular full moon service is openly acknowledged ritual sex. The dagger and chalice are clear and present allusions to, respectively, the male and female sex organs. The ritual is seen as ritual intercourse between the archetypical feminine in the form of the goddess and the archetypical masculine in the form of the god. The resulting union generates harmonious energy, love and trust. Members of Mountain Moon Circle refer to this ritual as a “symbolic great rite,” since in theory, the great rite occurs when the priestess and priest engage in sexual intercourse. At Mountain Moon Circle, there is no direct, physical intercourse between celebrants; nor have I observed any public instances of intercourse between
celebrants at any of the other covens or festivals that I have attended. It seems that there is ritual intercourse between celebrants who are also romantic partners in private. Several informants have mentioned or alluded to ritual intercourse with their spouses or long term romantic partners. This suggests that Neo-Pagan sexual license, often discussed in the literature (Berger 1999; Harvey 1997; Salomonsen 2002; Pike 2001) follows the conventional rules for the division of public and private in American civil life, and may be somewhat overstated in the literature. Pike suggests that the centrality of sexual symbolism in American Neo-Paganism results from the moral ambiguity concerning sex and gender that faces Americans as a whole. Sex-play is co-opted by Neo-Pagans as part of the self-definition project of the ego. That self-definition, in turn, helps individuals to negotiate the ambiguous boundaries of late modernity.

Although the language and experience of Neo-Pagan sexual expression is largely distilled from non-Pagan countercultural movements, such as polyamory – most of which are marginal to the American civil religion – the open acceptance of alternative forms of sexuality is probably a consequence of the theology of immanence, where the feminine is given theological equality to the masculine, and any means of sharing the divine spark is to be celebrated.

(6) Harmlessness. Mountain Moon Circle, like most Wiccan covens, expressly disavows any act that harms other people. This position has been expressly articulated since the founding of the first Wiccan sects in the 1930s in Britain. The early elements of the religion have been abandoned or radically altered by most modern American Neo-Pagans, yet this concept has remained constant. Some Neo-Pagans take this admonition against harm to its logical conclusion, and adopt a vegetarian or vegan diet.

The theology of immanence was developed in the late 1960s and early 1970s simultaneously by several Neo-Pagan feminist authors, including Zuzanna Budapest

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3 There is a small cadre of Neo-Pagans who identify themselves as “British Traditional Witches,” who remain faithful to the earliest expressions of the movement. Most British Traditional Witches feel that they are directly connected to an ancient European lineage of Witches, although scholars disagree.
and Starhawk. Their version of Neo-Paganism retained the idea of harmlessness, first developed in a different cultural context, because it was consistent with the new theology of immanence. If the divine spark lives in everyone, then violence against anyone is violence against the sacred.

(7) Ecological awareness. Likewise, if the sacred lives in everything, if the gods are located within the world, and not apart from it, violence against the earth is violence against the sacred. As such, even for Neo-Pagans who are otherwise uninvolved with ecological activism, wanton violence against the environment has become a key proscription of the movement.

Most of the Neo-Pagans with whom I have discussed this subject have a highly romanticized image of the interaction between traditional peoples and their environment and feel that they are reenacting that balance in their own lives. This particular theological element is a consequence of an increase in public awareness of environmental stewardship, quickly becoming an important part of the American civil religion, in conjunction with the theology of immanence.

(8) Personal growth. When one becomes a Neo-Pagan, they begin a process of transforming the ego and increasing self-awareness; this process is what Neo-Pagans call their “journey.” The name a Neo-Pagan chooses for him or her self describes their journey. One might hear animal names like “Raven” and “Coyote,” or names of the ancient sacred, like “Innana” or “Gaia.” Some names are simply made up or taken from fiction; I chose “Starvada” to use in public, modified from the name of a minor character in C. S. Lewis’ “Chronicles of Narnia.” In addition to the names used in public, some Neo-Pagans have one or more additional, “initiated” names. When a person completes an important rite of passage, for example, becoming a member of the church, or getting “handfasted” (married), they may take on a new name. In her study of Neo-Pagan festivals, Sarah Pike (2001) relates an informant’s story:

As to the name Vegtam... it is the name given to me by the priestess at my dedication. Names are very powerful and provide lessons for us. After my dedication (to Goddess and God) was complete, I was told that my first lesson
was to learn the origin of my Craft-name... The name comes from the Baldur saga in Norse mythology. It was the name used by Wotan as he quested for knowledge about the impending fate of his son Baldur. As I progress to higher degrees, I will receive additional names, which are held in close secret, except to members of the particular degree and of the tradition involved. [Pike 2001:132]

A few Neo-Pagans choose to share these names publicly, but most do not. Special knowledge of a Neo-Pagan’s initiated names confers a degree of trust and intimacy. I chose the name “Shem-Ma’at-Hanaf,” meaning (the goddess) “Ma’at walks with him” in ancient Egyptian, when I became a member of the coven. Several coven members privately call me by the diminutive “Shemp.”

At this point, the admonishment of “know thy self” is deeply entrenched in the American civil religion. Individuals who do not have a deep self awareness are noted as socially and civilly immature in secular society. The commandment to “know thy self” in a Neo-Pagan community creates a forum for communitas, in the sense that much deep interpersonal sharing between individual coveners concerns individual expressions of their place in their journey. Thirdly, the theology of immanence demands that practitioners seek the spark within in whatever manner most clearly allows the sacred to speak to the practitioner. It is little wonder then that personal growth has become one of the core beliefs of Neo-Paganism in America.

(9) Healing change. Very closely related to the idea of personal growth is the idea of healing change. While Neo-Pagans are obligated to seek self-awareness, they are also obligated to help others seek self-awareness. Neo-Pagans do not distinguish clearly between physical ailments and mental hygiene in the way customary amongst medical professionals. They view such distinctions as artificial, seeing the mind and body as a whole unit. Thus it would be artificial to distinguish Neo-Pagan faith healing that is directed at physical ailments from faith healing that is directed at helping an individual Neo-Pagan “break through” emotional barriers that are “blocking” them from continuing further on their journey of self-awareness. I will leave further discussion of this subject to the ethnographic example of Jack’s hospital stay, below. Clearly the emphasis on healing change, like the emphasis on the personal journey both reinforces communitas...
and is a consequence of the theology of immanence. There is little precedent for faith healing in the American civil religion; indeed faith healers are marginalized. However, there is an emphasis on mental health in the American civil religion. Furthermore, most of the major denominations invoke some sort of divine effort for healing purposes.

The president, in his role as the voice of the American civil religion has publicly encouraged Americans to pray for those emotionally and physically injured in local, regional, or national disasters. In doing so he is incorporating by reference the faith healing practices of the various denominations into the American civil religion. Thus the American civil religion must also be considered to be an important source for this practice.

10) A mythology of persecution. As a movement, American Neo-Paganism thrives on marginality. Every Neo-Pagan is aware of the persecution of past peoples whom they retroactively identify as Neo-Pagan, such as the witch hunts of Europe and the persecution of the American Indian. Some know Neo-Pagans with direct experience of persecution in employment, housing, or legal matters on basis of religious affiliation; others have experienced religious discrimination themselves. As such, there is a perpetual tension between the “Neo-Pagan” and “American” aspects of most Neo-Pagan’s lives.

The mythology of persecution was constructed into the early theology of the movement in the 1930s. It served as an integrating feature, as people who identified themselves as witches strove to have extant witchcraft laws in Britain repealed, and worked to gain legal recognition of the religion. Most of the active acts of persecution that have been reported to me seem to be a consequence of American Neo-Pagan’s marginal participation in the American civil religion. The mythology of persecution is also important in creating a sense of communitas, as individuals join together against a profane and hostile secular world.

11) Cultural borrowing. Like most religions, Neo-Pagans do not create their ritual tools of whole cloth. Unlike most Protestant sects, however, Neo-Pagans have not
inherited a discrete corpus of ritual tools with which to tinker. Nearly all of the ritual tools in the American Neo-Pagan corpus are adopted out of their original cultural context, from societies radically removed in time and space from both the Neo-Pagan borrowers and from one another. The individuals from whom Neo-Pagans adopt their ritual tools have in many cases been dead for hundreds, if not thousands of years. However, some ritual tools, like the smudging ritual noted below, are also used by either modern indigenous groups or by their descendents. Pike 2001 notes that in particular, Sioux tribal religious leaders are particularly offended by the appropriation of their practices by American Neo-Pagans, and that this has been cause for conflict in the past. Fred Voget (1984), an ethnographer of Native Americans, in The Shoshone-Crow Sun Dance, likewise has noted conflict between Native Americans hosts and American Neo-Pagan participants in the revitalized Sun Dance festival. In particular, Voget 1984 notes that the Shoshone leadership tolerates non-Indian participants because of the important financial contribution that they make to cash-poor hosting reservation communities. This practice creates a perpetual conflict between financial incentive on the one hand and ethnic and religious boundaries on the other. The concept of cultural borrowing seems to be a consequence of Euro-American romanticization of the Native American as the “noble savage,” which has become deeply ingrained in the American civil religion, together with increasingly easy access to the a large corpus of (often decontextualized) cultural information in the form of the internet, bookstores, and libraries.

(12) The circle. The circle is the dominant symbol seen throughout the American Neo-Pagan movement. The omnipresent identifying symbol of the movement is a pentagram, a five-pointed star inscribed within a circle, single point upward, said to represent the body of a person within the circle, or the four elemental forces and the godhead within the circle. Almost all ritual activities are conducted within a circle. The altar, where energy is directed, is itself usually circular and situated at the center of a circle. Members identify themselves to one another by wearing circular cords, and greet
each other with circular hugs. According to a hymn, “We are a circle, within a circle, with no beginning, and never ending.”

Belden Lane (2001) pointed out in *Landscapes of the Sacred* that experiences of the sacred are always “placed,” that is, situated within an identifiable locale, and experienced as part of that locale. However, American Neo-Pagan groups are small, and usually do not have the fiscal resources to maintain a permanent house of worship. Likewise, Neo-Pagans deify the earth and frequently celebrate rituals in places of nature. The sacred circle is the Neo-Pagan resolution to this conflict. The circle can be built anywhere, and strong circle building is considered an essential skill of a member. Each member has their own corpus of personalized circle-building rituals, (usually just called “the building,” verb form “we’re going out to build.”) varying in complexity, time to completion, material components required. The choice of building ritual to be used is made by the ritual leaders and is based upon how “strong” a circle is needed. A strong circle is required to contain intense energy or to keep “negative” energy out when the coven is building their circle in what the leaders sense is a potentially hostile energy environment. A “permeable” or weak circle is used when it is desired that people (such as non-Pagans, or children) be able to pass through the boundaries of the circle at will, without the assistance of a gatekeeper. If a person accidentally were to step through a cast strong circle, they are likely to be “shocked” or overloaded with energy. I have not personally witnessed this occurring, and by and large Neo-Pagans are very respectful of the boundaries of a cast circle. When assembled as a group, the coven uses three main building rituals depending upon the context; two are permeable, one is not. The member’s building is the strongest building ritual. It is performed by the assembled members at sabbats out of the view of non-members, and takes between twenty minutes and half an hour to complete. The members building may also be used when the members are assembled during a crisis, for example if magic is being performed to heal a sick member. The content of the member’s building is held in confidence by the members, and I will not publish it here. Some of its emotive power lies in its secrecy.
and complexity. For several published examples of similarly strong building rituals, see Silver Ravenwolf (1999), *To Stir a Magick Cauldron*.

The weakest circle routinely used by the coven simply acknowledges that a circle exists. The ritual leader will turn to the person on her left, take their right hand, look them in the eye, and say meaningfully, "hand to hand, and heart to heart, I build this circle." That person will then repeat the procedure, until all have joined hands with the ritual leader. She will then acknowledge, "Hand to hand, and heart to heart, this circle is cast," and the group will break hands. This circle is commonly used at business meetings and small private gatherings, even around the dinner table. It is occasionally used in larger gatherings, such as at a full moon gathering.

Like the principle of harmlessness, the persecution mythology, and the principle of cultural borrowing, the idea of the sacred circle has been with the movement from the beginning. The idea of a ritual circle was utilized in several western occult movements that preceded British traditional Wicca, and was also used in some form by a number of European indigenous groups. Retention of this important symbol gives a sense of continuity both with past indigenous groups and with past and present forms of Neo-Paganism.

**Summary**

In this chapter, we have seen how Neo-Pagan beliefs are a consequence of a theology of immanence, based upon first principles of Judeo-Christian belief. Taken together with an effort to maintain communitas within an intentional community and beliefs broadly held within the civil religion, the theology of immanence becomes a key source for all of the major alterations we will see in funerary practice below.

Salomonsen 1997 argues that it would not be appropriate to generalize her theology of immanence proposal to all of American Neo-Paganism. She certainly may still be correct in this caution. However, my data indicate that her theology of immanence
proposal is also a central organizing theme in the Mountain Moon Circle community that I studied, which is interesting because Mountain Moon Circle is not in any way directly affiliated with the Reclaiming Collective. This suggests that the theological proposal of immanence that Salomonson 1997 articulated has far broader currency than she is willing to argue. I offer the following ethnographic example of a full moon ritual to illustrate how these theological principles are enacted in practice.
CHAPTER 4

A FULL MOON RITUAL

At Mountain Moon Circle, the full moon ritual is the most regularly scheduled, and in format the most invariable, public ritual. The full moon ritual should be construed as a ritual presentation of the core beliefs laid out in the previous chapter. The full moon ritual template is enacted so frequently that everyone, even occasional seekers and non-Pagan family members, know when to proverbially sit, stand, and kneel. Thus, the full moon template has served as a point of departure in a number of important rites of passage for the coven, it should come as little surprise that one of Jack’s three funerals was based in part upon the modal full moon ritual template. In this chapter I will explore a typical Mountain Moon Circle full moon service so that we can better explore how it was modified and elaborated upon in the funeral ritual.

Mountain Moon Circle celebrates twenty-one regularly scheduled rituals each year: each of 13 full moon rituals, and eight seasonal sabbats, or high holidays: Imbolg (pronounced “im-bolk”) on February 2\textsuperscript{nd}, Ostara on the vernal equinox (about March 22\textsuperscript{nd}), Beltane on May 1\textsuperscript{st}, Litha (informally called “midsummer’s”) on the summer solstice (around June 22\textsuperscript{nd}), Lammas on August 1\textsuperscript{st}, Mabon on the autumnal equinox (around September 22\textsuperscript{nd}), Samhain (pronounced “sow-in”; rhymes with “cow”), on October 31\textsuperscript{st}, and Yule on the winter solstice (around December 22\textsuperscript{nd}). Samhain, the American Neo-Pagan New Year, and Beltane, a celebration of spring and the sacred marriage of the Goddess and God, are the two most important and most largely attended holidays. Other ethnographers of American Neo-Paganism have reported a similar ritual schedule, despite the wide range of theological orientations espoused by members of various groups. It seems the ritual calendar serves a central unifying...
feature within the movement. When asking members of the coven to date events such as the diagnosis of Jack’s illness, or his admission to a rehab facility, the members often indicated dates indirectly. “I remember seeing him just after Litha and thinking that he was not well.” “He was admitted to the hospital just after Yule.” By contrast, when interviewing non-Pagan family members and friends, abstract dates were always noted by month. The sabbat schedule is convenient interface with the secular, solar calendar because, unlike the full moon celebrations, the sabbats fall at the same time each year.

Mountain Moon Circle celebrates full moon rituals on the evening of the full moon, while sabbat rituals are conducted on the evening of the Saturday immediately preceding or following the calendar date of the holiday. The exact schedule is prepared by a member who holds the service role of ritual scheduler, in consultation with another member who holds the service role of coven astrologer. The final version is usually discussed and agreed upon by consensus at the fourth quarter business meeting, usually held in November or December. May held the ritual scheduler role for several years before Jack’s illness caused her to take a sabbatical from her coven responsibilities. Her efficiency in the role, born of many years as a Girl Scout leader, has been noted by a number of informants. At the time of my research Jack was one of two coven sextons, responsible for the construction and maintenance of physical property belonging to the church, in particular sacred ritual tools such as the coven’s altar.

According to the literature, most Neo-Pagan groups that host rituals that are open to the public choose one or more sabbats as their public rituals. At Mountain Moon Circle, full moon rituals are generally open to the public, while attendance at most sabbats is by invitation. When I joined the coven, the public rituals were held in a rented room on the second floor of a natural foods co-op. The room had very old couches in colors reminiscent of the 1970s lining three walls, a small table in the center, and windows overlooking a quiet side street off the main drag in downtown
Groen. Posters taped to the cracked beige walls exhorted the observer to remember founders of the food co-operative movement and support Amnesty International. Attached to the room was a food preparation area with a stove, full sized refrigerator, and a large, antique bread slicer. The room could only be described as "cozy" when thirty people were packed in, often with standing room only. With the abundance of candles used at a typical ritual taken into account, a fire marshal would have been beside himself.

It was with this overcrowding in mind that, a year into my studies with MMC, the group moved their public rituals to a Unitarian Universalist church. By comparison to the co-op, the beautiful UU sanctuary, with its forced perspective nave, hand laid wooden paneling, and stained glass windows was both huge and quite "churchy." The congregation now sat in a single circle on folding chairs, and the typical full moon attendance swelled to about sixty. Neither seating nor the fire marshal were now a problem: The church was designed to hold upwards of three hundred.

Preparing the Ritual

Mountain Moon Circle full moon services are led by two members of the coven guided by a clergy member. Each ritual is written and performed once. There is no stock corpus of liturgy, although there is a ritual template laid out in outline form that presents the correct order of service. The order of service template has large blank sections for ritual leaders to write in their thoughts in outline form; the final ritual is then typed out. Ritual leaders often reference the coven's archive of past rituals, called the "Book of Shadows" for inspiration in terms of content. The ritual leaders (who will henceforth be called the priest and priestess) are chosen between a month and a year in advance. Some members lead only a handful of rituals each year, others (informally called "ritual junkies") lead as often as they can find an open spot. Each ritual has a guiding theme, a lesson that the congregation is to take home with them. The subject of the ritual is highly variable, but is usually expressed in metaphorical language.
emphasizing individual connectedness with a god and goddess affiliated with a pre-modern culture. Mountain Moon Circle is highly eclectic, in that there is no coordination from full moon to full moon or sabbat to sabbat. We might be in ancient Babylon this month, and exploring Plains Indian drumming the next. Other groups noted in the literature, such as the Ravenwood coven (Scarboro et al. 1994) are more consistent from ritual to ritual. At Mountain Moon Circle, little effort is made either to verify the historicity of the statements made about foreign cultures or to place the appropriated ritual material into historical context. A single source reference or hearsay are usually sufficient authority. Most people who have participated within the religion for a long time have studied a single pantheon and often have adopted a single god or goddess as their patron; May has committed herself to the mother goddess Gaia; Jack associated himself with Lugh (pronounced Loo) the Celtic sun god. Individuals known to have specialized in a particular pantheon will serve as reference to a priest and priestess writing a ritual; their specialist authority is normally accepted without cross-reference. When it got out that I had an interest in Egyptology, Mountain Moon Circle members frequently referred to me on rituals that included Egyptian components, for translation services in particular. Ultimately, it is the metaphor to be communicated, not any sense of precise historical accuracy, which takes priority in ritual construction.

Preparing the Ritual Circle

Two members are assigned to assist the priest and priestess at any given ritual, the altar attendant and the gatekeeper. While the priest and priestess are viewed as responsible for spiritual continuity within the ritual, the altar attendant and gatekeeper are responsible for the physical space. Both show up at the church about half an hour early. The gatekeeper takes responsibility for traffic-flow management: welcoming people as they enter the church, directing them to their seats, welcoming new seekers, and answering questions. A folding table is normally set up near the door to the
sanctuary with a small, black cauldron for donations and colorful flyers announcing upcoming Mountain Moon Circle events and events sponsored by individual members. New people are directed to sign in and leave their email address so that they may be added to Mountain Moon Circle's announcement list. The altar attendant takes responsibility for the hustle and bustle of setting up the ritual space itself. He will ask for volunteers to pull folding chairs from their preset rows and set them in a large circle. The Mountain Moon Circle altar is a folding card table painted in "elemental colors": Yellow for east and air; red for south and fire; blue for water and west; green for north and earth. Each member has affixed a photo of something that represents their personal identity to the surface of the card table. The location of individual photos on the table is itself significant, as people have located their photos in the quadrant of the table that they feel is most appropriate for their own identities; a member who feels she has a "watery" personality, might have affixed her photo in the west, for example. The photos are permanently affixed, having been lacquered to the table. Members who have joined since the table was made, or who were not present at the ritual where the table was completed, are not represented. The altar is normally obtained by the altar attendant from the storage closet at the UU church where it is kept. The rest of the ritual tools are stored at the home of a member and transported to the event in a contraption affectionately dubbed the "altar-in-a-box." This is a wheeled luggage dolly stacked with two plastic file storage bins, one black, one grey. These are the sort of file storage bins that have an organizer in the lid normally used for paper clips, pens and other office miscellany. The ritual tools stored in colorful, handmade pouches and are carefully packed according to a plan taped to the inside lid of each box. The altar attendant is responsible for the packing and unpacking of the box as well as for setting up the altar. Many of the ritual tools are fragile, and the altar-in-a-box is transported several times a month. The packing scheme has been worked out over the years by trial and error – lots of error, I am told – to reduce the likelihood of breakage of emotionally significant ritual tools.
Appropriate Attire

While gatekeeper and attendant prepare the space, priest and priestess prepare themselves. Some members arrive dressed in their ritual clothes, others change after they arrive. The clothes worn are highly variable. Some individuals lead ritual—especially a public full moon ritual—wearing street clothes. Galadriel, for example, leads wearing blue jeans and a collared shirt. Most Neo-Pagans own some sort of personalized ritual robes, either entirely hand-made or modified commercial garments ornamented to mark the person’s religious identity. One member, Ray, who self-identifies with Native American spirituality, wears a pouch made of fox pelt on a belt. Sayward wears a hand-made necklace made of ceramic bones to indicate her affinity with crone wisdom. Natalie often wears a bindi, a dot of ink in the forehead that marks her Hindu affiliation; she also routinely attends services at a Hindu temple near her home. When a member attends a ritual, they may wear either special ritual clothes or street clothes. When a member leads ritual as priest or priestess, they almost always wear ritual clothes. The altar attendant and gatekeeper may wear street clothes or robes depending upon their personal preference. Most members do not use their ritual clothing except at events. When I lead ritual, I normally wear street clothes—usually the same thing that I would wear to teach a class. I lack the specifically Neo-Pagan wardrobe that a lot of the members have acquired over the years. I purchased a very large quasi leopard-print dress at a women’s plus-sizes store before I lead my first sabbat ritual on the advice of a clergy member. This has served me well as a ritual robe, and I’ve become quite fond of it. The sem funerary priests of Old Kingdom Egypt wore a leopard skin when performing their official functions. I chose the pattern of my robe with this association in mind. In subsequent conversations with coven members, as I explained how I chose my robe, they told me in very personal terms about their own “paths,” or journeys of the self. For an American Neo-Pagan, religion is a path of personal growth, and this growth is annotated on the canvas of the body through the medium of material culture.
The person functioning as priest – who may be either male or female – normally carries a ceremonial dagger called an athamé (pronounced ah-tha-may). This dagger is used for the “direction of energy” at certain points in the ritual. It is not normally used for cutting objects, and most of the athamés that I have seen are quite dull, often intentionally for the sake of safety. The athamé is the private property of the individual member: Harley uses a three-inch long piece of hematite; Jack’s athamé was the size of a short sword. Alyssa’s first athamé was a rosewood letter-opener; now she uses a dagger that is about four inches long. Sayward’s is likewise a white-handled dagger. I purchased a dagger, sharp on both sides, with a rosewood handle for leading services when I joined the coven. When attending ritual, most members wear a gold cord, about a quarter-inch in diameter, which identifies them as a member of the coven. The cord is tied by a special knot called an “ankh knot” that the member is taught to tie at the time that they join the coven. Some members omit their cords when they attend ritual, but few would omit the cord when leading ritual. Usually the priest’s athamé hangs from this cord; occasionally from a belt if the athamé is large or heavy. The priestess – who also may be either male or female – usually carries her athamé as well.

_Beginning the Ritual_

Rituals usually start a few minutes late. Members of the coven refer to schedules as existing on “pagan standard time,” meaning that something will happen eventually but not right on schedule. Often if a precise schedule must be adhered to, the ritual leaders will mention it, because it is so unusual. Pike 2001 notes this phenomenon and the term in her ethnography of festivals.

Shortly before the service begins, the priest and priestess will go into seclusion in another room for about fifteen minutes to meditate and prepare for ritual. The beginning of the service is marked by the return of the priest and priestess. When the members see the priestess and priest return to the room, they will take their seats if they are standing and conversations will quickly and politely terminate. Any new
seekers who look confused will be herded to their seats by the gatekeeper. There is not normally a processional or any music. Priest or priestess will begin by reading the following statement, read at each ritual:

Mountain Moon Circle is a coven dedicated to spiritual growth, empowerment, fostering spiritual community, as well as promoting healing change in us, our larger community, and our world.

Priest and priestess will then introduce themselves, followed by members of the congregation in a clockwise, or “sunwise” direction. Most Neo-Pagans have a religious name, and many have several. As names are announced around the circle, the listener hears a collective verbal statement of who I am, of who we are, of how we interact. This process takes about five minutes depending upon the size of the group.

In a public gathering the use of religious names offers a degree of anonymity. Obviously, one cannot look up Silver Wolf in the telephone directory. When I got to know members of the coven better, I was told things like “call me Rich; I only use BlackWinter in circle.”

When everyone present has said their name, the priest or priestess will read a list of prepared announcements. These announcements are exclusively secular, for example the date of the next public service, class, or event. After the priest and priestess have finished their announcements, they ask if anyone else present has announcements to make. Members and long-term seekers will take this opportunity to plug whatever workshops they are leading independent of the coven in a sentence or two, and direct interested parties to locate their flyer on the table by the door. This process takes about five minutes.

The priest and priestess will then take a few moments to explain the main point of the service. The statement of the main point of the service, at Mountain Moon Circle services, is prefaced by the following statement, read at every ritual:

The circle is the temple of the Divine. It bridges the vast gulf which lies between the worlds of people and the domain of Spirit. All who enter therein shall set aside everything except their love and understanding of the Goddess and God. When we come to circle, we cast off the concerns of the mundane world—for all who enter here, enter in perfect love and perfect trust.
The spiral of energy we create moves deosil or clockwise as it grows and widdershins or counterclockwise as it diminishes. Therefore, we move sunwise to build energy and moonwise [ed.: with gestures to indicate direction] to bring energy down. The circle, which is really a sphere half above and half below the ground on which we stand, is sacred space. As such, we ask that you remain within its bounds until it has been opened. Look to the Gatekeeper [ed: gatekeeper waves at group to self-identify] for guidance in the circle. If you should need to leave the circle, she will let you leave with respect for the sacred space that has been cast.

When we are in sacred space, our words and our intentions take on a weight and depth of meaning they might not have in the mundane world. Thus, take care, for what we promise in circle, the universe will expect from us.

This introductory statement is a veritable Nicene Creed that states what it means to be a member of this Neo-Pagan community.

_Casting the Circle_

The sheer fact that we are standing in a space utilized for ritual does not make that space sacred to Neo-Pagans. It is the circle-building ritual that designates this particular space as sacred. All members of the coven know at least three main forms of the circle building from memory, ranging from the half-hour long ritual circle building utilized at sabbats to a simple acknowledgement that a circle exists. At most full moon rituals, an intermediate form is utilized.

The ritual instructions state that “all who enter here [the circle], enter in perfect love and perfect trust.” A circle building ritual, then should be construed as a symbolic process of setting aside those things that interfere with the ideals expressed as love and trust; things that are not in the spirit of harmony and consensus laid out in the previous chapter. Having finished the announcements, the priestess stands and proceeds to the altar located in the center of the circle. She takes an abalone half-shell that the attendant has filled with white sage prior to the ritual, and sets fire to a couple of the leaves, usually with a disposable butane lighter. She pauses a few moments and then blows out the fire, causing sage smoke to curl up from the shell. She stands in front of the priest facing him, and holding the shell in her left hand, she rapidly fans the smoke over him using a large flight feather or the dried wing of a bird. She works in
a clockwise direction, beginning with the head. The priest then turns his back to her, and she repeats the procedure. As he undergoes this process, termed "smudging," the priest is clearing his mind of worldly thoughts and focusing on the task at hand, that of directing the energy of the ritual. The priestess hands over the abalone shell and wing to the priest, who repeats the procedure on the priestess. She then proceeds to the person just to the left of her seat, and performs an abbreviated version involving only the front half of the person on each congregant in turn. If the congregation is large, over forty people, the priest will take a second censor half-way around the circle, and will work clockwise towards his seat, cutting the time of the procedure by half. The process takes about ten minutes, during which there may be silence, song, slow drumming, or meditation. Smudging is a Plains Indian practice. This practice, in particular, represents an excellent example of Neo-Pagan borrowing of ritual tools.

After priest and priestess have finished smudging the congregation, they return to stand facing one another on opposite sides of the altar, priest to the south, priestess to the north. The priest holds a butane lighter over his head in his right hand, and uses it to light a small white taper with his left hand. The small white candles that observant Jews use for Friday night prayers at home are preferred for this purpose because of their size, availability, and cost. The priestess then lowers the flame to the center of the altar in a single, slow, vertical movement, and lights a red pillar-candle inside of a hand-made stained glass jar about the size of a mason jar. After the candle has taken fire, the priest steps back. He may hold his hands crossed across his breast, fists toward each shoulder - but many members skip this step. The priestess then stands on the west side of the altar, facing east, and draws a large pentagram in the air in front of the altar. Most priestesses use their athamé for this purpose, although a pointed index finger may be substituted. She begins the pentagram by her left knee, and in a series of discreet movements draws up above her head, down towards her right knee, across towards her left shoulder, horizontally towards her right shoulder, and back to the starting point by her left knee again. The body-metaphor of the pentacle is
Having drawn the pentacle, she extends her arms together in front of her, palms facing towards the sides as if she were opening a curtain, through the pentacle she has drawn. She may say out loud "go."

This process completes the clearing of the sacred space of any “negative energy” that might have accumulated since the last time the ritual was performed. The circle is now seen to be a void to be filled. The second half of the building constitutes bringing new “energy” into the space that has an appropriately harmonious moral character. The altar is the site of interaction, the site of harmony, the site of perfect love, and perfect trust. The priestess draws a second pentacle, just like the first and repeats the same procedure except she substitutes the word “come.” This “activates the altar,” bringing “spirit-energy” in perfect love and perfect trust into the void.

**Calling the Quarters and Invoking Spirit**

Prior to the ritual, either priest or priestess will approach four people to serve as “quarter callers.” Individuals selected to call a quarter are normally seekers who have attended more than one full moon service. If there are insufficient volunteers, one or more members will fill in. Volunteers are given a typed slip of paper with a statement to read. Normally a member or long-term seeker performs the east quarter, the first one to be read. On a cue (usually a nod, sometimes she’ll just say “east”) from the priestess, the east-quarter caller turns to face the east. The congregation turns to face the same direction. Most of the congregation will assume a particular posture that they associate with this particular direction (called a mudra, pronounced “mood-ruh”). Conventional postures for east include hands clasped at the sides, or left hand held, palm out and over the head towards the east. Although members are taught to use particular mudras, there is a lot of variation in what individual members will do, and even more variation in what seekers will do. The text below is an example from the October 1997 full moon of what is said by the quarter callers. The text is highly variable from moon
to moon, but is almost always two to four lines, and includes both the name of the
sacred energy invoked, and the meaning of the metaphor:

East:
Hail and welcome spirits of the east, spirits of air.
Your gusts of clarity reflect our higher selves.

South:
Hail and welcome spirits of the South, spirits of Fire.
Kindle our inner fires with your gifts of passion and energy.

West:
Hail and welcome spirits of the West, spirits of Water.
Bathe us with peace, even in the midst of chaos.

North:
Hail and welcome spirits of the North, spirits of Earth.
Root us with your strength, love and joy.

The congregation responds to each evocation with “hail and welcome!”

Seekers experienced in other groups, or those who have attended several Mountain
Moon Circle services tend to put a great deal of inflection and feeling into their voices as
they read these lines, but they do not improvise. Newer folks tend to stumble through
them at a bellow, supported by reassuring smiles from members. After the quarters
have been called in the order listed above, the congregation faces inwards towards the
altar again.

Like the invocation of spirit energy, the calling of quarters is seen to invoke the
named qualities of that particular direction and elemental force. The purpose of
invoking these energies is to create a balance and harmony of energy within the circle
for a particular purpose. It is the responsibility of the priestess and priest to manage
the energy as it enters the circle so that it creates harmony.¹

Priest and priestess stand facing each other on the west side of the altar. The
priestess will evoke “goddess energy” into the circle. A speech is almost always

¹ Every Neo-Pagan knows stories of people who manipulated disharmonious energies
within in a circle. The effects may be disastrous: candles knocked over to start a fire,
gusts of wind disrupting the service, or a freak thunderstorm that soaks everyone to the
skin. Or they may be hilarious, as it was when a cat accidentally burned off half of his
whiskers and set his tail smoldering while checking out a candle – but an imbalance of
energy is never harmonious.
prepared in advance, which she may memorize or read from paper. Like the calling of
the quarters, the priestess' evocation will include the name of the spirit being called and
a clear statement of the metaphor to be expressed. The priestess' evocation will be
longer than the quarter calls, usually six to ten lines. After she performs her evocation,
the priest evokes "god energy" in the same way.

The priest and priestess are seen to have artistic control over the content of the
ritual as spiritual directors of the ritual. Thus, either may – and often do – ad lib their
evocations. Such evocations are "intuited," meaning delivered directly to the
congregation from the goddess or god through the vehicle of the priest or priestess. The
ability to serve as a channel for the goddess or god's voice is an important value and the
mark of a strong member.

The priestess will announce that the circle is cast. The congregation is standing
within a spatial metaphor, a harmonious blend of earth and sky, fire and water,
individual and spirit.

Ritual Body

The priestess and priest will take their seats, signaling the congregation to do so as
well. They will take a few moments to indicate to the congregation exactly what sort of
"work" is to be performed at that night's service. "Work" is used in lieu of, and
synonymous with "magic," and suggests a strong protestant work ethos in the
community. Neo-Pagans seldom pray. They work.

The body portion of the ritual is the most flexible for elaboration. Thus when the
full moon ritual template is used for something other than a full moon ritual, such as a
funeral, most of the changes to the theme occur here.

In a typical example of the main body of a full moon ritual, the coven, as a group,
created an "astral" or spiritual "peace dove" for the purpose of aiding the ongoing
middle-east peace process. The congregation stood very close to the altar, in many
cases reaching over one another. They held their hands out into the space over top of
the altar, reaching, shaping, and adding energy until each person was satisfied that they had created a dove above the altar. This dove was then instructed by the priest and priestess to give the good energy it carried to political leaders who were negotiating peace terms at the time. An individual may give energy its moral quality by feeling feelings associated with that moral quality as they are manipulating the form of the energy. Thus, a person creating the “peace dove” was to focus their feelings on group harmony, and set any disharmonious thoughts aside.

In the spirit of heterarchy, everyone normally participates in the body of the ritual. Many body activities are hands-on craft-style projects, reminiscent of the sorts of things I did in grade school; collages, coloring projects, and the creation of “god’s eyes” have all been used as “workings” in the past. The priest and priestess, together with attendant and gatekeeper take on the role of facilitator, guiding and encouraging, rather than commanding. The physical objects are “charged” with “energy” to give them magical effectiveness. The group may dance, sing, drum, or all of the above, always around the circle in a clockwise direction, around the altar, to intensify the power of the metaphor that is the altar, and to grab some of that metaphor both figuratively and literally, and stuff it into their individual project, their journey of the self, their individual “work.”

This main body of the ritual should take about half an hour; if a detailed craft project is involved, the project may take longer, although as the coven has grown there has been a formal effort by the clergy to reign in drawn out art projects because of time constraints and costs involved in coaching fifty plus people through a task.

*Cakes and Wine and the Great Rite*

Following the main body of the ritual, the priest and priestess return to the script for “the great rite” and “cakes and wine,” reminiscent of Christian communion rituals. The priestess is usually responsible for bringing something (usually non-alcoholic owing to the presence of recovering addicts and minors in the congregation) to drink for the sacrament, while the priest normally provides something to eat. Finger food is
preferred, and something that can be broken into small pieces, like bread or cookies. Some ritual leaders make something particularly for the ritual. One woman in a coven I visited was known for making “yoni-cakes,” which were cookies shaped like female genitalia, for the cakes and ale service. Many participants and ritual leaders arrive with grocery-store bought food.

A portion of the cakes are set on a plate, while the wine is poured into a clear and blue glass chalice. (The coven has gone through several chalices, resulting in the packing scheme noted above.) The priestess holds the plate with the cakes in her left hand and the chalice with the wine in her right hand so that the cakes are underneath the wine. The priest then holds his athamé above the chalice with both hands grasped one over the other, blade pointing downward. The congregation stands when they see him assume this position. He and begins to lower the blade into the chalice. The priest and the priestess begin the following chant, the rest of the congregation joining in right away:

I am faith and courage
I am being and doing
I am love and will
I am feminine and masculine shining in one
Integration in my goal,
Creation my pleasure, and
A centered self my Will manifested

As the last line is completed, the tip of the athamé touches the bottom of the chalice, with an audible “clink!”

The priest now withdraws his dagger from the chalice, wipes it on a cloth, and returns it to his belt. The priestess says, “Lady, in honor of thee I drink this toast and pour this libation.” She proceeds to sip from the chalice, and pour a small amount in a dish on the altar set aside for this purpose. She then places the chalice on the altar and picks up the plate with the cakes. Holding the bottom of the plate with her left hand, she holds her right hand above the cakes and says, “Bless these cakes with the wisdom of the ages.” She then eats a small piece, and drops a small piece into the dish
with the libation of wine. The portion set aside in the dish will be deposited under a
tree outside privately by the celebrants after the service.

The priestess then turns to the priest and feeds a small piece to him, saying “may
you never hunger.” She then hands the priest the chalice and he drinks from it. As the
priest drinks, the priestess says, “May you never thirst.” During this ritual there is
silence from the congregation. After the priest has drunk the altar attendant and
gatekeeper move quickly to the center of the circle to help the priestess and priest
prepare four plates of food and four chalices. Each takes a plate as soon as it is ready,
carries it to the quarter caller, and feeds them, repeating the same formula: “May you
never hunger. May you never thirst.” The quarter caller then feeds the person to their
left (clockwise), repeating the formula. Each congregant receives the cakes and wine the
same way, from the person on their right, and then offers the sacraments to the person
on their left. This process takes about ten minutes, and is usually accompanied by
cheerful song begun by a celebrant and or African drumming performed by a
congregant who has been tapped for the job in advance. Celebrants stay near each
chalice and plate in order to refill them with food and drink as needed.

Closing the Circle

Following the cakes and ale ceremony, the altar attendant and gatekeeper tidy up
the altar and quickly shuffle the serving apparatus out of sight under the altar cloth,
returning to stand in front of their seats in the circle. The priestess will return to the
west side of the altar and offer a few closing words. She might say something to the
effect of “I see we’ve raised a lot of energy here tonight! Let’s ground some of our excess
energy.” She will kneel on the floor on one or both knees, and place both hands on the
ground. Individuals who sense that their energy is out of balance with the harmonious
energy in the circle will follow her lead, placing their hands on the ground. They see
themselves passing “negative” or “excess” energy into the ground and drawing up
balanced harmonious energy into their bodies. When they sense that they are in balance they will stand up; the priestess is usually last to rise.

Once the priestess and priest rise again, and see that everyone has risen from their kneeling, grounding position, they will return to stand in front of the altar. The priest will dismiss the god energy first by either saying a six to ten line prepared speech or by "intuiting" one ad lib. The speech always names the god energy that was named in the initial evocation, thanks it for being present, and names the moral qualities that it has leant to the circle. When the priest has finished saying his piece, he concludes by saying "stay if you will, go if you must." He then takes an audible breath and says, "Hail and farewell!" which is echoed by the congregation. The priestess then repeats the process to dismiss goddess energy from the circle. The quarters are dismissed in reverse order by their original quarter callers: North and earth, west and water, south and fire, east and air. As each is dismissed, the congregation turns to face in the appropriate direction and make the appropriate mudra. As before, the quarter callers read prepared remarks from a piece of paper that they have been given beforehand. The priest and priestess then return to stand in front of their seats in the circle. They join hands with the people on either side of them. The members and experienced seekers also join hands with people on either side of them, and others who do not know what is going on mimic the members. The priest and priestess begin to sing "The circle is open, but it is unbroken. Merry meet, and merry part, and merry meet again." The congregation joins in after the first two words. Usually the song is sung with enthusiasm; some people swing their arms, others have been known to kick their feet up as if in a chorus line. The verses are sung three times. On the third "Merry meet..." the priest and priestess raise their hands, still joined together high above their heads, and most of the congregation follows suit. At the end of the song, hands still over their heads, the circle breaks into a chorus of hoots and cheers. They release hands and some applaud briefly.
As participants leave the circle, they take with them the immediate moral lesson taught. The message has been basic, and reiterated throughout the service. They may take with them the object that they've made, a token of a few more steps taken on their personal journey. These tokens usually find a permanent home in the individual Neo-Pagan’s personal home altar. Sabina Magliocco (2001) note this as well in her piece on festival altars. They also take with them the balanced energy, the harmony of love and trust that they spent the hour and a half long ritual building. Following the ritual, there is a pot-luck “feast” of mostly store bought finger-foods that people bring to eat after the fact. This serves as an abbreviated social hour, as friends mingle and catch up with each other. Attendant and gatekeeper help the celebrants pack up the altar-in-a-box, and return the seating in the church to rows. Often the celebrants, various groups of members or congregants will go out for a late dinner or dessert after ritual at a diner. Usually the last people have left the church by 45 minutes after the end of the service.

**Summary**

The modal full moon ritual reiterates the key Neo-Pagan theological elements laid out in the last chapter. Several circular images have been used, and laid out in a heterarchical manner. The principles of harmony and consensus have been articulated both symbolically and literally. Energy has been manipulated for purposes of healing change, and to aid members of the community on their journeys of personal growth. The Protestant work ethic has been clearly laid out, and members have been able to bring tangible results of their work home with them. The ritual has been formalized through the metaphorical sexual union embodied in the great rite.

In addition to functioning as a regular means of celebration, the full moon ritual is a dress rehearsal for more serious performances. In the next chapter, we will see how the members of Mountain Moon Circle reapplied the fundamental theological principles to
the problem of an extended hospital stay made by a coven member with a life threatening illness.
CHAPTER 5

HEALING CHANGE

Jack’s illness and institutionalization represented a grave threat to the energy of communitas, to Jack’s ability to act as an agent, and to the boundaries that protect this intentional community from outsiders. Jack’s American civil peers likewise had to resolve the breach created by his absence. All of these problems were resolved through ritual behavior. In the American Neo-Pagan case, this ritual behavior was distilled from the core theological proposals outlined above, just as the full moon ritual has been. Non-Pagan responses were resolved from the longstanding traditions of the American civil religion. The following ethnographic example of Jack’s hospital stay illustrates this process of ritual creation.

The story of Jack’s mercifully rapid decline and death from an aggressive strain of multiple myeloma is an unfortunately typical one. There is no cure for multiple myeloma, although in the less aggressive forms it can be treated and forced into remission for a period of up to five years through a combination of radiation and chemotherapy followed by a bone marrow transplant. Myeloma is more common in men than in women, and it is twice as common in African Americans as in Caucasians. American Cancer Institute statistics place the incidence of myeloma among white Americans as 4.1 cases per 100,000 individuals.

As a machinist, Jack’s cardiac and muscular health was excellent. However, thirty years of work in a machine shop had taken its toll. Kussina, his youngest daughter, informed me that he managed once to burn all the hair of his head with a blow torch! His skeletal system was compromised by years of heavy lifting. He had bad knees all his life. After a back injury requiring surgical intervention in the late 1980s, Jack had
experienced regular back pain. Although Jack was a non-smoker, he was routinely exposed to second-hand smoke in his place of employment. Furthermore, both Jack’s employment and hobbies involved intermittent contact with carcinogenic chemicals. In particular, exposure to petroleum products, heavy metals, and asbestos are all risk factors for myeloma. Because myeloma usually attacks people over 40 years of age, with a mean age of onset of 68, it is thought that myeloma results from an accumulation of carcinogens over time. If this is true, Jack’s risk was quite elevated because of his long-term exposure to hazardous materials. Most myeloma fatalities, representing about one percent of American cancer deaths each year, proximally result from renal failure.

In addition to Jack’s demographically elevated risk for cancer, there were a number of behavioral risks that assured the cancer, when it did appear, would not be detected early. As with the members of many working class families, Jack was not the sort of person to seek out preventative medicine. Jack spent his life around pain. His ethos, and that of members of his work community, was that pain was something one “worked through.” Pain was part of life; wimps ran to the doctor every time they stubbed their toe. When May describes Jack’s medical history, she distinguished between “physical problems with his body,” and viral or bacterial infections. Jack thought of things in terms of engineering. When there was a mechanical failure in his body, like the injury to his back or knee, when the pain became unbearable instead of the dull pain that punctuated most of his life, he was willing to seek medical intervention. His body had a mechanical problem that needed to be fixed; he went to the doctor, the mechanic, to fix it. Jack did not conceive of non-mechanical sorts of diseases, like the flu, to be life-threatening. In most circumstances, he was correct; he was after all, in the best of cardio-pulmonary and immunological health until only a few months before his death. A certain suspicion and cynicism concerning the motives of medical professionals may also have contributed to Jack’s institutionalized avoidance of the medical profession.
Entering the Hospital

It should come as little surprise then, when in September of 2003, Jack began to have splitting headaches and a backache, he did not seek medical intervention immediately. Backaches he was used to, and he had been working a lot that summer. He knew some guys at work who had had back operations similar to the one that he had in the 1980s, and they told him that ten years is all you got out of a repaired back. He wasn't at all surprised then that his back had finally started to go out. He would just work through it. The headaches, centered on his ear, were a different matter, and he consulted his family physician, who thought an ear infection might be involved and prescribed medicated ear drops and an antibiotic regimen. When this treatment was unsuccessful, May relates that Jack turned to a simple, comprehensible, engineering sort of explanation:

He got to the point where he was positive a bug had flown in his ear and died in his ear. He was sure that was what it was. He said, "I think there's a bug in my ear. I think a bug crawled in my ear and died and they can't find it, and that's what the problem is."

Over the next three months, Jack saw several doctors, and eventually ended up with an ear, nose, and throat specialist who identified a large mass beginning near his ear and proceeding across the back of his skull and ordered a biopsy, which confirmed the cancer. Jack was referred to an oncologist, whom he saw the following Monday, December 22nd, 2003. The oncologist ordered him admitted to the hospital immediately for therapy with radiation to address the mass in his skull and thalidomide to attack the osteotic lesions that had spread throughout his skeletal structure. Jack would spend most of the remaining three months of his life institutionalized.

1 In considering the following discussion, it is important to keep in mind that Jack's personal response to his illness, particularly in its early stages, was more consistent with the American civil religion than with American Neo-Paganism. May, on the other hand, is far more deeply embedded in American Neo-Paganism than in the American civil religion. Since May staged managed and narrated much of the dialogue of Jack's hospital stay, the latter part of Jack's life was mediated in Neo-Pagan language to a greater extent than would have been the case had Jack narrated his own story. The first part of this chapter clearly reflects this difference in tone.
Faith and Courage

As the secular medical resources began to address Jack's cancer, the members of Mountain Moon Circle mobilized for war. Everyone in the community was aware of Jack's headaches. The community includes four members who are nurses, nurse's aids, or nursing administrators. Sayward, a kore member who was a nursing home administrator at the time and is now finishing her nursing degree, recalls being quite concerned about Jack's health that fall. May telephoned Sayward on December 19th after she was informed about the diagnosis. Sayward sent an email announcement to the coven that would echo weekly reports to the coven until Jack's death:

December 19th, 2003

Dear Folks:

May asked me to write this to the group list. Apparently Jack had the results from his biopsy today and the doctors told him he has a rare form of bone cancer. It is somehow on his skull. Unfortunately May wasn't able to be with him at the doctor's and so they don't have the report and can't really tell us any more than that. The next step is that Jack has to see a specialist about this. May will get the report on Monday, and hopefully be more informed on what's going on.

I know both Jack and May could use us keeping them in their prayers. If you can send them loving supportive energy on this and best wishes for a clear informative resolution that would be wonderful.

Sayward

At surface value, Sayward's email sounds much like the email any American might send to family and friends on finding of the serious illness of a loved one. Wait. Let the doctors do their thing. Pray. Hope.

The last sentence, however is telling. Most Neo-Pagans will not use ritual magic unless they are invited to do so by the recipient. The final sentence was a call to “work” by a member to the coven: Fear, Fire, Foes, Awake! Permission had been given – do what it would take to restore harmony. The coven arose to the challenge.

The day after Jack was admitted to the hospital, Alyssa, a kore member, began to orchestrate a magical healing effort that would last the next three months and involve almost every coven member. Although the original intent was for Jack to stay at home
and undergo radiation as an outpatient, he began to develop difficulty swallowing, and was admitted to the hospital on January 1st, 2004. Once the details of Jack’s illness became clear, Alyssa scheduled a hands-on healing session on January 3rd. Hands-on healing is seen as more effective than distant healing, and is considered preferable if time and transportation afford it.

Like the distant healing efforts, the hands-on healing that was performed on Jack was conducted in a heterarchical group. Two attempts were made collectively, one on January third, and one in early February. Several efforts were also made privately by individuals as they visited Jack in the hospital. At least eight members were involved in the first healing effort, facilitated by Alyssa. Four members were involved in the second attempt, all hands-on healing specialists, facilitated by Sally. No one has a clear memory of exactly the procedure followed, and I was not present, so I have substituted a procedure used by the coven in a previous healing effort as a representative example of what may have occurred. Because so many people were present, a circle was cast, using the “weak” version described earlier because of the confined space of the hospital room. A member was selected who placed their hands on Jack. This member was responsible for directing energy to Jack’s injuries, by moving her hands around Jack’s body; we will call this person the conduit. The remaining members circled around Jack’s hospital bed, making physical contact with one another by holding hands. The member who was standing behind the conduit member placed both of their hands on the conduit member’s shoulders; the members on either side of her grasped her shoulders to complete the circle. The facilitator of the group then began a “continuous Om.” This is accomplished by slowly exhaling a breath, over about 45 seconds, while intoning the word “Om,” with emphasis on the resonant portion of the “m,” very deeply. When each member finished exhaling, they would take a deep breath, and begin again, so that the “Om” did not cease until cued by the facilitator. The individual voices of the “Om” blend with one another so that the coven is experienced as speaking with a single, great voice. This is perceived to generate a
great deal of energy, and is very hard on the conduit member who may visibly shake with the impact of the energy. When I served as conduit at an unrelated healing, I felt single minded, as though it took every ounce of my being to keep my attention on the point to be healed; all other voices faded to nothing save for the vibrating breath of the “Om” in my ears. It was sort of like standing in front of a loudspeaker at a rock concert. When I described my experience to Alyssa, she said it was typical, although each person learns to feel energy in their own way. Sally, who facilitated that second group hands-on healing effort describes the feeling of the energy:

I did a lot of work at his throat, because there was something with his throat, and also at different points on his back, so I put my hands on those places where I thought it would do the most good and just left them there and allowed healing energy to flow. When I do Reiki, it’s not my energy, but I’m a conduit, a channel for universal life energy, for chi. Usually the recipient of the Reiki, it feels comforting, it feels warm, they will relax and their pain will lessen... Jack was in pain, and ... we were working on relieving his pain... When I put my hands on someone, and do energetic healing, I don’t necessarily know what is going to happen. I do it in a way that is guided, and I may not know. I may just feel heat and feel energy flowing, or I may feel energy blockage and clear that blockage, but not really know what's happening on a physical level.

May absented herself from the group healing work. By this time, she says, "I was a wreck." When you're doing healing work, all you want is “pure, positive vibrations going out and going to the person who needs it.” When a person is not emotionally balanced and able to exist in harmony with the group, their contribution is likely to disrupt the work at hand. May knew this, and even though she was invited to participate, she voluntarily stood aside, watching the young son of one of the members in the hallway as the community worked.

_Amulets and Talismans_

Because American Neo-Pagans view energy as resident in physical objects, in addition to the healing efforts made on Jack's behalf through remote and hands-on healing, several healing efforts were made using energies that had been placed in objects that were left in Jack's room. There are two ways this sort of healing is handled, one involving energy with a particular quality seen as inherent in objects
(usually called “amulets”), and the other involving energies that have been ritually added to objects. Both methods were used in Jack’s case.

“It seemed to me,” Sally says, “that a hospital is a really negative place to get well in.” Hospitals are conceived of by some Neo-Pagans as depressing, depersonalizing and institutional, and thus filled with negative energy. Neo-Pagans conceive the impersonal, abstract medical voice in the healing dialog to be negative and oppressive, but necessary. Jack’s illness, furthermore, was conceived of as a response to negative energy in the body. The magical prescription for healing was to draw negative energy out of Jack and out of the room, as poison is drawn from a wound; this was done using objects. The void of negative energy had to be replaced with positive energy. Although the hands-on healing attempts emphasized positive energy, objects were used for this purpose too. At the first hands-on healing session, Natalie gave Jack a little, colorful bag that she created, suspended from a string, containing herbs with healing properties. Although some of the power of this amulet came from qualities seen as inherent in the herbs themselves, the power of the amulet also comes from the energy that the person committed to making the amulet and giving it. May says that the Amulet that Natalie gave to Jack was very special to him:

He wore that around his neck the entire time. He wouldn’t take it off – even when they took him down for radiation. He said, “No! Leave it on! Mine! Beat it!” And he just wore that night and day the whole time.

Sayward and Sally both presented Jack with loans of large crystals. A larger crystal contains more effective magic. Large crystals are also expensive and difficult to come by. Small crystals are often given as gifts. In this case, Sayward leant a large piece of clear quartz in order to magnify Jack’s energy and give him strength. Sally leant him a large piece of black jet, a personal favorite stone, intended to draw out negativity. The Jet can become saturated with negative energy, so it is important to wash the negativity off of the stone with running water at least once a day. Sally showed May how to do this in bathroom sink in Jack’s hospital room. Although the negative cleansing power of the stone is important – Rich tells me he has a piece of jet big enough to suck the
negative energy out of a whole coven – It was the thought, the personal energy contributed by the giver that counted also. Sally explains:

It seemed important to me that Jack have a positive attitude, that he feel like he’s healing, that he not worry, that he know that other people are bringing things, that there were others who were rooting for him. So it was all the other things – whether or not the rock did any good, the fact that I had brought the rock seemed important. I cared enough to bring the rock. That he might believe that the rock could help him. And so I grabbed the jet as something physical that I could give him, even if the not-physical stuff didn’t work.

Like most energy work, efforts involving multiple people working together are seen as more effective than efforts done alone. On February 7th, Debbie sent an email to the coven spearheading an effort she and Alice, both junior members at the time, organized to create a magical healing quilt. Like the hands-on healing effort, process was heterarchica l, with the organizers limiting themselves to a coordinating role. Each participating member was assigned to assemble a block of the quilt. Astrology was taken into account in the project. Debbie says in her email, “Since blocks will be created during the waning moon, sewers should focus on helping Jack shrink the tumors and eliminate the disease.” May elaborates:

The design of it was a spiral at the top and a reverse spiral at the foot, to pull in the sickness and the negative energies that were coursing throughout his body, and to pull them away from his body and out of his body and dispersed it through the foot and out away from him.

Building a Sacred Circle

With all these people coming and going with gifts, Jack’s hospital room was something that had to be seen to be believed. Jack was in a private hospital room. In addition to healing gifts from coven brothers and sisters, May and the kids went all out in their decorating efforts. The middle daughter, Samantha, created ceramic mobile with that included a polymer that glows in the dark, and she hung it in the room where Jack could see it at night. Samantha’s daughter, Elaine, was often present; her crayon drawings and coloring-book art was hung up all over the room. The cards that Jack received were taped all the way around the television and lined the tops of three of the walls like a cornice molding. Colorful flags with images of goddesses painted on them

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that were normally hung out at coven sabbats had been hung around the ceiling so that the air conditioning would cause them to flutter. In addition to about a half a dozen mylar balloons with secular get-well messages that were tied to just about anything that would not float away, there was a veritable garden of live plants brought from home. May downloaded images of healing gods and goddesses and taped them to the wall around the head of the hospital bed. There were also gifts from members of other Neo-Pagan groups in the greater Pittsburgh area. The Circle of the Ancient Gods, for example, provided a healing cloth with stars and moons on it that had been created by their group; this was hung near the bed from the ceiling, like a curtain.

The room was organized with both aesthetics and energy in mind. In addition to the objects added on an ad hoc basis, for example, May contracted Kussina, the youngest daughter, to create four elemental paintings that were placed at the appropriate walls of the room where the quarters would fall in a cast circle as indicated by a compass.

Kussina is a skilled artist and a Neo-Pagan. She discusses the paintings in the room:

I drew the four different elements ... I think there was a tree of life with a women in it, much like the one I've drawn outside on the sign out front, for earth, and then for air there was a blue fairy, and then for fire, there was a woman in the painting that's in the other room that I showed you, and for water, there was a green mermaid - I used like seventeen different shades of greens and blues for it, and that was his favorite one. He liked the mermaid. I don't know why it was his favorite one. I don't think it came out the best out of all of them, but he liked that one.

The imagery she describes is conventional, and would be understood by any American Neo-Pagan; in particular, the color scheme that she describes is quite common. The anthropomorphic figures used in the images are Kussina's own creation and are based upon personal assertion; they are tied to Kussina's own journey, not to Jack's. When asked the significance of the mermaid, for example, she said, "It just seemed appropriate for water. I've always liked mythical creatures. My mom used to read me all the Greek and Roman myths..., fairy tales, mysteries, things like that to sort of broaden my horizons." Jack enjoyed the expression of his daughter's love, her communication of her journey, and the intense energy that went into such difficult

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pieces of creative art. While most of the room decorations were retained by May after Jack left the hospital, the paintings were returned to Kussina; they are part of her story of the final steps of her journey with her dad.

I noted that although May had chosen to absent herself from the hands-on healing rituals, she spearheaded the effort to decorate the room. I asked her why she chose to participate in this activity, when she felt so distraught that she could not participate in the hands-on healing. Wouldn’t her negativity be encoded in the physical objects being hung all over the room? She said that that was different. Decorating the room was a low-level sort of energy. She made a point of smudging the entire room regularly with sage in order to chase off any negative energy. May also made a point of bringing her two-year old granddaughter, Elaine, to help, and she conversed and laughed with whoever was visiting, read aloud jokes and cards as they were hung up. This had the effect of creating positive energy. The healing rituals, however, were intense, with many, many members magnifying the energy generated by their effort together. Had she participated, the effort would have magnified the negative energy that she was feeling, and as she put it, “spoiled the soup.”

Jack lived the final months of his life in a sacred, liminal, Neo-Pagan space. The negative, institutional, hospital nature of his circumstances was utterly banished. In its place Jack found his bed to be standing in place of an altar, within a circle cast around him, in love and light by his wife, his family, his coven brothers and sisters. The circle was filled daily with as much positive energy as could possibly be created; its boundaries circumscribed and defended by the sacred elements. Images of his goddess and god had been placed around Jack’s head as though they were standing on the altar. A very powerful circle was thus maintained for two and a half months by the collective effort of the entire community.

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Neither Jack nor May's extended families are American Neo-Pagans, and thus they responded to the crisis of Jack's health in their own way. May arranged for Jack to be released from the hospital for an afternoon so that he could come home for a celebration of his 53rd birthday. Like many American families, both Jack and May's extended families are spread out throughout the Northeast United States. They had been informed of Jack's condition by May through regular email updates and telephone calls. When May passed on word that she would be bringing Jack home for his birthday, the family proverbially dropped everything, loaded the kids in the car, and descended on May's house in Groen. Jack's elderly mother was there, May's three sisters and Jack's sisters drove in with their families. May's parents and several close family friends popped in. The place was jumping. Kussina remembers that her dad arrived wearing his favorite "hoodie," a hooded sweatshirt that she had given him. She captured a picture of him smiling as he walked in the door and saw the whole family assembled.

The old folks in my family always lament that the whole crowd never gets together except for weddings and funerals. I'd suggest that this folkway is encoded into the broader American civil religion. Jack was seriously ill; he might not survive. It was important for his extended family to provide him support. They chose a quintessential event of the American civil religion, the birthday party, which usually passes marked informally by only immediate family and close friends, to collectively show their support of Jack in his time of need. A traditional American ritual was magnified and intensified for this purpose.

2 The birthday celebration has been incorporated into the American civil religion many times since the beginning of the 20th century. Marilyn Monroe sang "Happy Birthday" in public to President Kennedy; Martin Luther King, Jr.'s Birthday was selected as a national symbol of the African-American struggle for civil rights; Presidents Lincoln and Washington's Birthdays have also both been enshrined in the liturgical calendar of the American civil religion.
Unlike Jack's Neo-Pagan community, the extended family organized their collective support of Jack outside the hospital. Although Jack's kids, his mom, both of May's parents, and various colleagues, neighbors, and family friends all routinely visited Jack in the hospital, they did so individually or in small groups. Jack's son Jack is probably the least Neo-Pagan of the nuclear family. He put it succinctly: "I wasn't [at the hospital] to decorate the room. I was there to see my father." For Jack Jr., the hospital was not to be turned into a home away from home; to do so would be a violation of sequestration. Jack repeated again and again, "your job is to get better dad. My job is to build this house." The formally organized, large scale event occurred outside of the hospital, and pretended that Jack's illness didn't exist. The illness became the unacknowledged white elephant standing in the corner; the family assembled to celebrate a birthday.

There were intrusions of the greater hospital environment into Jack's protected sanctuary. May recalls that Jack's room was near the elevators. Many times Jack would be able to see deceased people being wheeled out, their faces covered by a sheet. The medical staff were not terribly discreet about closing doors when they wheeled human remains about in the hallway. Likewise, when Jack took his exercise in the hallway on a daily basis, he would see people's personal effects piled up in front of their rooms. Doubtlessly, some of these people were simply checking out - but in most cases this was an unambiguous signal that a person had died here. The general population was already sequestered from both ill hospital patients and any deaths that occurred by the hospital walls; there was no need to sequester living patients from the dead.

Anthony Giddens points out the increasing sequestration of death and anything concerning the biological function of the human organism specified within the American civil religion. He notes that the ill are removed from society, their every biological function monitored, and their very experience of reality mediated by an obscure institutional terminology.
Jack was weakened by his radiation therapy, and the thalidomide and pain killers slowed his mind, causing periods of drug-induced hallucination and other erratic behaviors. Of course, some of these behaviors in retrospect are pretty funny. May recalls fondly a time that Jack cornered her father and had a long and incoherent talk about sex:

My dad was there one day and visiting him. When I walked into the room, my dad looked like he was shell-shocked. You know I got into the room and I said, "Hi Dad!" and he says, "hi, um – I have to leave now!" I said, "ok," and I sat on the foot of Jack's bed, and looked at Jack, and I said "hi hon, how you doin', my dad was here talking to you," and he says "yup. We were talking." And I said, "oh, that's nice, what were you talking about?" "Sex." I said, "You talked to my father about sex? Ah. Ok. What did you say?!" He said "ask him." No, I'm not going to ask him that! I don't think I want to know! So we pretty much left it at that. So I, to this day, I have no clue what my husband told my father about it! So I have no idea if he was accurate, or if he was hallucinating all kinds of weird things – I'm not sure which would have been worse!

Giddens points out that during the sequestration of the hospital experience, many of the usual social rules are suspended, and the infirm is accorded the sort of tolerance of social faux-pas that are reserved for small children. Sudnow 1967 would add that this tolerance is extended to grieving immediate family members post-mortem. In effect the patient, and post-mortem, the widow, becomes a child, dependent upon others for the gratification of every need.

Sudnow 1967 points out that, because of the sequestration of death specified by the American civil religion, medical professionals are reluctant to talk about death with a patient or immediate family members. He notes that only particular people are authorized to deliver the bad news. He further notes that the nursing staff, in particular, are able to guess if a new admission is terminally ill with about an 85 percent accuracy rate, but are usually forbidden from communicating their expectations to the family.

Palliative Care

Jack was very ill. Myeloma creates lesions in the skeletal system. Although radiation had minimized the growth of new cancer, Jack's bones were riddled with
lesions and looked like Swiss cheese. His back, already compromised by years of labor, was now creased by numerous small fractures in his vertebrae; the flat bones of his rib cage were brittle and damaged by numerous hairline fractures making every breath painful. The tumor in Jack's brain had compromised his ability to swallow, so Jack was usually fed intravenously. When he was fed solid food, he would aspirate some of it, and thus he suffered from frequent bouts of pneumonia.

"I never dreamed it was so serious." May indicates that from the beginning, she thought Jack would get better and return to his conventional lifestyle, as he might have were he hospitalized for a surgical procedure. Although there was a slim chance that Jack would survive for several years, there is no cure for myeloma. Furthermore, there was a high probability that, had Jack survived for a period of time, he would have survived in a wheelchair-bound state, cared for by others. From the point that the radiation therapy began, Jack's lifestyle as he knew it had ended; yet this was not communicated to May. May heard the doctor's discussion of extended remission via a bone marrow transplant as a possible cure; the slim chance of long-term survival became "we're going to beat this." May is the eternal optimist, and she passes her optimism on to everyone who knows her. She kept hope alive long after the medical professionals that worked on Jack's behalf knew that there was no hope of meaningful recovery.

It is clear in retrospect that Jack had accepted that he would not survive this illness. Jack lost his father early, when he was in his twenties, and May reports that he did not think that he would live longer than his father did. She thinks that this fatalism may have contributed to his rapid decline. I personally think that it contributed a great deal to the grace with which he accepted his mortality. Sally reports that as she worked to heal him, Jack at one point said, "It's been a good life." She recalls acknowledging to another coven member at that point that Jack's body would probably die. Likewise, as the end drew near, Jack made a point of clearing up certain things that were very important to him. Kussina recalls that he sent her out of
his room to find food while he talked to her long-term boyfriend, Casey. When she returned, she overheard her dad giving Casey his blessing to their relationship.

Some of the Neo-Pagan healers who were working on Jack are also secular medical professionals, and were well aware that Jack was unlikely to survive. Natalie, a journalist originally trained as a biologist, while working to heal Jack, thought it likely that he would not survive. She describes how she handled the conflict of interest:

My goal was the highest good possible. So if it were physical healing for Jack, so mote it be.3 If it were to be his emersion in love through passing, that’s what it needed to be. But mostly it was creating a really strong connection to the core of god, goddess, spirit, whatever it is, and just allowing it to be in that space. I think that what can happen is that the... small consciousness, the ego self... can decide erroneously what the best thing is and what we wish would happen. And it is my purpose when I connect with spirit to really... open my mind to encompass and understand what the true best situation is, and to let that be so. And so my healing often will incorporate wanting to bring comfort and energetic change that will help the person feel the best that they can physically and emotionally, and as integrated as they can. [I had] to get out of the way and allow magic to work, as opposed to profess with my most conscious literal mind that I know what that is or what needs to be.

None of the Neo-Pagan healers communicated their expectation of Jack’s demise to May before the fact; it wouldn’t have been appropriate. To communicate this point to May would be to assume an authority accorded to the position of the medical doctor attending the case. Of course, there was no overt duplicity; no one was lying to May. Once it became clear from the secular perspective that Jack would not survive, the awful isolation of the widow, carrying the authority brought by death, had begun.

In the hospital environment, when therapy has been unsuccessful, and the patient is terminally ill, yet not expected to die during this hospital admission, they are normally placed in a long term care facility for a variety of pain management and managed nursing that has been termed “palliative care.” Some hospitals designate a floor for this purpose; others utilize hospice facilities or a combination of hospice and home health care. The hospital that cared for Jack maintains relationships with a number of extended care facilities off the hospital campus; when it became clear to Jack’s doctors that he would not improve, yet that he was not in immediate danger of

3 So mote it be is a Neo-Pagan phrase indicating “make it so.”
dying, he was transferred to one of these facilities on March 4th, 2004. May was told that Jack would undergo two weeks of physical therapy, and then would be sent home. In the absence of information to the contrary, she interpreted this as good news; Jack was getting better, and was well enough to be sent home.

Because Jack's stay in the rehabilitation facility was expected to be so short, May only transferred certain of the more portable objects to his room; the rest were sent home to await his homecoming. The healing quilt, in particular, was presented to Jack while he was at the rehab facility, on March 10, 2004. Jack was doing well in physical therapy and regaining some strength. Likewise, with clear signs of Jack's improvement being announced on the members' email group, Jack was not attended all of the time any more. His room at the rehab facility looked like anyone else's; the coming and going of Jack's family was like the coming and going of everyone else's families.

Furthermore, the attending nurses knew of the seriousness of Jack's condition; these were the circumstances where social death could occur. It is unclear if Jack began to be treated as socially dead by some of his attendants at the rehabilitation facility. However, he began to lose weight, and he was aspirating food, suggesting neglect. May holds nothing back in her anger about his care:

I think they were stupid and incompetent. But you can't prove it. ... I don't think that the people at the nursing care place took care of him properly. Because he could not keep any food down, he still couldn't eat or drink, and they were giving him nourishment and water through a feeding tube directly into his stomach. And he could not keep it down – he would be throwing it up, he would be getting diarrhea from it, and he was not keeping anything in his system.

In this ethnographic example, we have seen the same theological principles articulated in chapter three above reapplied in a unique way. For a Neo-Pagan, there is no particular magic formula, no dogmatic way of implementing healing – instead we see a heterarchical group of peers implementing the theological principles laid out above in novel, unique ways. This system of personal ownership of theology probably accounts for some of the movement's appeal. The ritual voice becomes each practitioner's voice,

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4 See discussion in chapter six
speaking as one. The end result of the intensification of ritual activity that surrounded Jack in his final months was the *creation of a liminal space*, and the *intensification of a sense of communitas*. Even in an intentional community, the dead cannot participate in communitas. In the next chapter we will consider an example of this recombination of theology into unique form, that of a rite of passage.
CHAPTER 6

THE ANATOMY OF THE AMERICAN FUNERAL CYCLE

Although most Americans, including American Neo-Pagans, conceive of death as though it were a precise point in time, death is actually a process with no objective beginning or end, culturally constrained through ritual at a variety of different loci. All funeral rituals are rites of passage, bookended on the one hand by rites of death, and on the other hand by funeral and burial rituals, with a period of liminality between. In this chapter, I will address the present structure of the American civil funeral cycle, and the changes in technology over the past few decades that have radically altered it. In particular, I will address the decreasing significance of the period of liminality in the American civil funeral cycle, as a consequence of the advent of medical technology and the increasing professionalization of the funeral industry. I will consider the process by which Americans determine how they will relate to the decedent in death, and I will then discuss how the divergent American civil and Neo-Pagan funeral cycles are a consequence of plural identities in a late modern society.

The different elements of the American civil funeral cycle are largely transparent to most Americans, naturalized as part of the expected moral order of society. On top of the assumptions made by most Americans about funerals, there is a frustrating lack of consistency in the funeral literature about what the various parts of the ritual should be called. For the sake of clarity, I will use the following terms to describe the structure of the cycle throughout this chapter: (1) When I speak of the death ritual, I am referring to the bedside events that occur when a person dies attended in a hospital, hospice, or at home; (2) during the period of liminality, I am referring to events that occur between
the death ritual and funeral ritual; (3) when I refer to the funeral ritual, I am speaking of the events that occur in a funeral home or religious establishment leading up to disposal of the remains; (4) when I refer to the burial ritual, I am discussing the ritual disposal of human remains, and (5) when I refer to the funeral cycle, I am referring to all of the abovementioned parts of the rite of passage as a collected whole. (cf. Figure 1, below.)

![Diagram of rite of passage](image)

**Figure 1.** Model for Death in Traditional Societies

The funeral rite of passage affects the social status of the living as well as that of the dead. One of the central tasks that faces a mourner at an American funeral is to establish a new relationship with the decedent in the afterlife. The mourner must construct new social and relational identities vis-à-vis the decedent. This process occurs during the funeral cycle through a process of imposition, where the mourner...
creates a post-mortem identity for the decedent, and then interacts with that identity in the funeral context. In this chapter I will describe this process of structural imposition. In order to clarify the theoretical landscape, I begin with a brief discussion of the literature concerning the study of death.

**Literature Review**

Any discussion of the tremendous literature concerning death and dying begins with Robert Hertz's (1960) *Death and the Right Hand*. Hertz was a student of Durkheim, and his evaluation of death ritual in Borneo, based on ethnographic work conducted shortly after the turn of the century, was the first to establish the structure and function of death in society. Hertz was deeply influenced by Arnold van Gennep, and felt that death was fundamentally a rite of passage, beginning with the physical destruction of the individual, and culminating with the initiation of the individual into the social afterlife as an ancestor. For Hertz 1960, death is dangerous and frightening, leaving both a void in the moral fabric of society and highlighting the fundamental discontinuity of individual human existence. Hertz 1960 felt that the primary function of the funeral ritual is to reconstitute society by means of performance – to fill the void in society, and establish continuity for the social identity of the individual.

This topic would be revisited in the early 1980s through a spirited debate between Richard Huntington and Peter Metcalf on the one hand and Maurice Bloch and Jonathan Parry on the other. Huntington and Metcalf (1979) in *Celebrations of Death* prefer a classical structural-functional model, and rely to a great extent on Metcalf's research in Madagascar, laying out the basic structure of different sorts of funerals from those of peasants to those of kings. Bloch and Parry (1982), on the other hand, in *Death and the Regeneration of Life* prefer a strong social constructivist position, and emphasize the role of social ritual surrounding the ancestors in constructing meaning in the lives of their living descendents. The debate concerned three main questions: (1) What is the relationship between emotion and ritual? (2) What is the political
significance of a funeral ritual, and by extension, ritual in general? (3) Are there
universal symbols in the study of death?

Bloch and Parry 1982 take the position that emotions call rites of passage into
being; in short, the emotions come first. Huntington and Metcalf 1979, on the other
hand, feel the reverse to be true. For Huntington and Metcalf 1979, the structured
wailing and other stylized emotional presentations, while genuinely felt, are themselves
a part of the structure of the ritual. Bloch and Parry 1982, on the other hand, feel that
the emotions precede and cause the ritual. I am personally inclined to side with Metcalf
and Huntington 1979 based upon the data I will present below. American Neo-Pagans
have no structured laments or formalized grieving. Like all Americans, however, the
type of grieving expressed is consistent with the social relationship between the
decedent and mourner. This social relationship is clearly a social structure which, as
Durkheim would have it, precedes behavior. I personally believe that the form that
grieving takes is based upon the core emotions inherited in an evolutionary context as
informed and modified by the structures of society into which a child is born. Bloch
and Parry 1982, following Hertz 1960, argue strongly for universal symbols associated
with death. Metcalf and Huntington 1979, on the other hand, accept the possibility of
universally held symbols, but are reluctant to ascribe the causative relationship
between symbol and ritual that Bloch and Parry 1982 favor. On basis of my fieldwork, I
am very reluctant to ascribe universality to any of the symbolic structures I have
witnessed. Bloch and Parry 1982 emphasize the role of food in funerary ritual, for
example, and claim universality. Food was quite unimportant in each of the Neo-Pagan
funeral cycles I witnessed. I conclude that Bloch and Parry 1982 went looking for
universals, and found them, by reading a great deal of unconscious internal thought
into behaviors in a way that is entirely not disprovable, and yet also not consistent with
the overtly stated “native’s point of view.”

All of these texts discuss primarily the role of the second part of the rite of passage,
the funeral ritual. The tacit assumption is that what comes before the funeral ritual
(i.e. death) is so obvious and straight-forward that it requires little elaboration. Research in the United States, first by David Sudnow (1967) in his book *Passing On* and then by Margaret Lock (2002) in her book *Twice Dead* has clearly shown that the point of death – even in biological terms – is not nearly so cut and dried as previously assumed. Sudnow 1967 and Lock 2002 both demonstrate that death is a process, with no objective beginning or end, constrained through ritual at a variety of loci. Thus the task before us, in evaluating an American Neo-Pagan funeral, is that of establishing the loci where the death process is constrained and the reasons for that constraint.

*Technological Impact on the Locus and Process of Death.*

A participant in the American civil religion was raised to believe that death occurs at a fixed locus, that personal and biological death are tied to one another, and that there is no conventional American death ritual. The rise of life-saving technology has made visible the mythology of traditional assumptions of the point of death, even to the layperson. Lock 2002 explores this subject, using the modern legal fiction of “brain death” in both Japan and the United States to highlight several of the many ways that we can constrain the process of dying. Lock 2002, for example, describes three different loci of death: (1) *Biological death*, when a human body ceases to function as an integrated unit; (2) *personal death*,\(^1\) when the higher brain exhibits no coordinated electrical activity; and (3) *social death*, where other people do not interact with an individual as if they were an agent. A century ago, prior to the advent of medicine as we know it, there was no effective means to distinguish between personal and biological death. Without technologies such as the respirator, there was no means to preserve life following major neurological trauma, and even if these technologies had existed, there was no technology which permitted the delivery of food and water to a person unable to

\(^{1}\) Note that this is different from brain death; a person who is brain dead cannot breathe without the assistance of a ventilator; a person who has suffered “personal death” has irrecoverably lost their personality, although they may continue to function as a biological organism.
swallow. In short, personal and biological death were inseparably connected at the end of the 19th century. Lock points out that the advent of modern medical technology has had the effect of decoupling death of the personality from death of the body. A person who has suffered personal death may be kept alive, in rare cases indefinitely, through medical intervention: A living corpse.

Of course a biologically and personally living human is in a position to actively assert that they are either “living” or “dead.” However, a person who is either personally or biologically dead, and thus not in a position to directly assert anything, may have the status of “living” or “dead” applied to them by others, regardless of the objective truth of this statement. The rise of modern medical technology has increased the likelihood of a person becoming socially dead while they remain biologically alive.

Sudnow 1967 clarifies the concept of social death. He observed that individuals in a terminal coma would be treated differently by their caretakers. Doctors would discuss their medical condition in their presence, whereas such conversations would otherwise be removed to a hallway or office. In cases where an individual was likely to die within the next several hours, the staff would quietly prepare the body for transport to the morgue once death was declared: The groin area would be swaddled in a white cloth like a diaper; the legs would be bound; an identifying tag would be attached to a foot. It was easier to accomplish these tasks when the patient was still biologically alive, barely, than post-mortem. More than once during Sudnow’s (1967) research, a patient woke up with a tag tied to their toe wondering what on earth had happened because of mistakes made by overly-enthusiastic orderlies.

Sudnow 1967 noted that these incidents usually occurred when certain conditions were satisfied: (1) The patient’s prognosis was extremely poor; (2) they were not conscious; and (3) there was no attending family or clergy present in the room. Sudnow

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2 Cf. Huntington and Metcalf 1979 for several very interesting ethnographic examples of individuals who are both biologically and personally alive who, when they feel that they are near death, to choose to become socially dead in order to effect smooth transitions of political power and other forms of inheritance.
1967 identified these individuals as socially dead; they had been "uncultured;" they were now an "it." He furthermore noted that it was possible, although uncommon, for a person to linger as socially dead, but biologically alive, for some length of time. Lock 2002 would add that advancement of life-support technology in recent years has extended this ambiguous half-alive half-dead period, and that individuals with certain severe disabilities, such as late stage Alzheimer's, or those who had been forcibly removed from society, such as criminal sociopaths, can be biologically alive, yet socially dead for very lengthy periods of time.

The members of Mountain Moon Circle routinely organize community service activities. It was during one of these activities that I had my first direct encounter with social death. About half a dozen members of the coven went to a state-run hospital for indigent individuals with developmental disabilities to distribute Halloween gifts and candy. As I went room-to-room with coven members, handing out gifts and candy to the residents, I saw many people in various states of disrepair. Most were only half dressed; many required the use of a diaper. Almost all had various speech impairments, and some were grossly disfigured. The community was highly social; two women in their fifties giggled like schoolgirls as they compared their "loot" in the hallway after we presented our Halloween gifts. One young man in the common room pointed to the television with a loud "Da!" as another applauded when I arrived. Many of the rooms were colorful, decorated with plants, photos of relations, and pictures colored by children. Most of the rooms were a veritable mine of clutter, looking more like my teenage daughter's room than a hospital room; the atmosphere could only be described as "cheerful."

I recall my shock then when I entered one man's room. He was a tall, fit African-American in his late thirties. His black hair, with speckles of grey beginning to show, was neatly combed, and he was seated on the side of his neatly made bed, gazing out of the window. He was wearing a dignified button-front plaid shirt and tan slacks with the pressed creases readily apparent; he could have passed for a college professor. What
stood out even more than his neat and ordered appearance was his bare room. The immaculate tan wood furniture was not adorned with a single card or photo. The shelves that I saw through his slightly ajar closet door were bare except for his neatly folded clothes, diapers, and toiletries. He did not respond to my voice or to the gift I left with him on the bed. He just stared out of the window, until after a few moments, a nurse came in and wordlessly collected him, with only a vague smile in my direction, guiding him by the arm out to the lunch room. As the nurse collected her other charges from their rooms, the man stood stock still in the hallway where she left him, not even so much as turning his head until she returned, leading him by the arm again. Socially, this man did not exist as an agent.

The coven’s effort on Jack’s behalf proximally assured that Jack never experienced this sort of social death, even when his medical condition became grave and he began to hallucinate or lost the ability to communicate effectively. The highly meaningful cornucopia of cards, fabric, and plants in his room, to a non-Pagan physician, nurse, or orderly simply communicated “this person remains a living social actor; treat him accordingly.” None the less, this symbol of social agency was not always sufficient; Jack was on several occasions left without sufficient pain medication, even after May intervened with the staff, in one instance for four hours. This event prompted May to make both a formal complaint to the hospital’s patient’s rights advocate, and to send a plea for help out to the coven. May felt – correctly, it would seem in retrospect – that Jack would not receive proper care if he were not attended by family and friends for the duration of his stay at the hospital. From that point forward, Jack would be attended each day by coven members, family, and friends, in order that he would receive appropriate care. The constant influx of friends and family members assured that social death did not occur.
Actors at an American Funeral

Loring Danforth (1982), in *The Death Rituals of Rural Greece* notes that there are three dramatis personae in a funeral rite of passage: The decedent's body; the decedent's soul; and the living mourners. He says, "The ultimate goal of the rites of passage associated with death is to effect a smooth passage, a successful transition, from one state to another for each of the three actors in this ritual drama. The remains of the dead must be properly disposed of, the soul must arrive at the proper destination, and the mourners must be reincorporated into the flow of everyday social life" (Danforth 1982:37-8). Each of these dramatis personae experiences the five core elements of the rite of passage independent of one another. In this section, I consider the mourners at an American funeral.

To my knowledge, none of the authors who have discussed American funerals have considered the experiences of different mourners from one another as they experience the rite of passage. This seems surprising, since on the basis of my fieldwork there are very clearly several different classes of mourners. Mourners are very seldom available to researchers for interview for ethical reasons during and through the period immediately following the funeral cycle, which may have contributed to other authors inclination to lump them together. I divide American mourners into the following five groups: (1) Chief mourners, (2) stage managers, (3) helpers, (4) general mourners, and (5) acquaintance mourners. At the funeral of a public figure, we typically find a sixth category of spectator mourners. Each of these groups must be handled separately.

The chief mourners are those people who have the most political control over the presentation of the deceased's post-mortem identity. In the Neo-Pagan communities that I studied, the person or people occupying the role of chief mourner had a great deal of power to impose their version of the post-mortem identity upon the corpse in preference to those identities selected by others. At Jack's first funeral, I commented to the widow that I was surprised at all of the people talking about the gifts Jack gave people. She responded that I clearly didn't know Jack very well because his tendency to
give gifts was one of the most central features of his personality. In saying this May
was asserting her memory of Jack’s identity preferentially over mine; as chief mourner,
May had the authority to construct Jack’s post-mortem identity as she pleased, while
as a spectator mourner I was expected to defer to the wishes of the immediate family –
her perception of the “truth” was given priority over my perception of the “truth,”
regardless of which of us was objectively correct because of her role as chief mourner.
In an interview she said, “I’m the widow, so I trump everybody.” Chief mourners do not
of necessity have the greatest degree of emotional commitment to the decedent.
However, chief mourners - usually including spouses, adult children, siblings, and
parents of the decedent - continue to display the social markers of a mourner for an
extended period of time beyond the public funeral process. The social expectations of a
chief mourner may be situationally suspended for upwards of a year after the funeral.

Interestingly, the chief mourners may not physically manipulate the corpse to
present the decedent’s identity; this is usually left to the stage managers. The stage
managers include paid professionals, such as the funeral director, or clergy member. A
paid professional usually takes the role of chief stage manager, coordinating the
activities of other stage managers. Sometimes family members or friends take the role
of stage manager, particularly in a Neo-Pagan funeral. In particular, it is essential that
the chief mourner not also be the chief stage manager. The American civil religion
specifies that the chief mourner be sufficiently consumed by grief that they are not in a
position to conduct mundane activities such as stage management. When a chief
mourner interacts with the corpse, they do so in ritual ways, such as the Catholic
practice of kissing the corpse shortly before the coffin is closed, or the Neo-Pagan
joining of hands with the corpse as a part of the circle. The professional stage
managers are distinguished from the other mourners in that their period of mourning

3 Sudnow 1967 notes that this may not actually be the case. The death of an elderly
parent, for example may be viewed by an adult child functioning as chief mourner as a
welcome release from end of life care. None the less, the chief mourner expected to
behave appropriately for the role (cf. Sudnow 1967:130-164).
begins when they are notified of the death, usually after the fact, and ends at the end of the formal mourning process. The social expectations of appropriate behavior are never suspended for stage managers; indeed as "professionals," paid stage managers are often held to much higher standards of performance decorum than the general populace.

Several ethnographers have noted that the chief mourner – particularly when the chief mourner is a spouse, or single surviving parent – normally selects an extended family member or personal friend as a “helper” to provide emotional support throughout the process. This person may also serve as stage manager, but their primary role is to support the chief mourner. Like the chief mourner, helpers remain in contact with death well after the end of the formal mourning process ends. Unlike chief mourners, however, social expectations are not suspended for the helpers during this period. Two of the key functions of helpers are to notify people who are not “in the know” that the person they are helping is a chief mourner, and to stage manage appropriate social interaction with the chief mourner they are helping. Many times during my research, a helper would identify a widow, widower, or grieving parent by pointing them out to me and communicating the appropriate social relationship: “So-and-so was his father” or “Jane was married to Bob for 21 years.” In doing so, they were identifying to me the chief mourner so that I would know the appropriate frame to interact with this person. This is probably necessary because there is no clear symbol of mourning specified by the American civil religion that would communicate this information. Likewise, the helper fills the role of being sufficiently emotionally sensible to help the chief mourner – who is expected to be distraught – as she negotiates the maze of legal business that awaits the new widow. Anne suggested to May that she have an autopsy performed in case she eventually elected to sue the rehab facility where Jack was housed, for example. May was not expected to think clearly enough to make these decisions on her own.

General mourners are often difficult to distinguish from acquaintance mourners. They are similar in that their period of public mourning begins with their notification
that a death has occurred, and ends with the end of public mourning. Expectations of social behavior are not suspended for either general or acquaintance mourners at any point of the process. General mourners include people with a close social relationship to the decedent, such as extended family, personal friends, and co-workers, while acquaintance mourners include for example spouses of co-workers; senior management who only knew the decedent professionally and at a distance; and distant family members, their spouses, or children. The difference between general and acquaintance mourners is that general mourners attend primarily out of a need to participate in the rite of passage for psychic reasons, while acquaintance mourners attend because it is important that they be seen attending the rite of passage.

When a major American public figure dies, individuals will participate in the public service who had no reciprocal relationship with the decedent. In other words, the mourner feels some deep emotional connection to the decedent, but the decedent had little or no direct connection to the mourner. I have termed these individuals spectator mourners. Researchers of whatever stripe, journalists, and their entourages would also qualify as spectator mourners in most circumstances.

*The Rite of Passage in a Plural Society*

Jack, as a member of a plural society, in effect underwent *two funeral cycles simultaneously*, one stipulated by participants in the American civil religion, and another specified by American Neo-Paganism. Both of these rites of passage removed Jack from the same social identity, that of a living person. However, the American civil funeral incorporated Jack into the new social identity of “dead person,” a social identity well defined by the American civil religion as sequestered from the living without any meaningful agency. The American Neo-Pagan funeral, on the other hand, incorporated Jack into the social identity of “agentic ancestor,” a new social identity that Neo-
Pagans, as members of a new religious movement are in the process of creating. In 1906, Arnold van Gennep identified the process of a rite of passage, which in its most basic form contains five steps. They are:

1. **The old social state.** The old social state is the publicly recognized identity of an individual prior to undergoing the rite of passage.

2. **Rite of separation.** The rite of separation is a collective ritual, at a discrete point in time, which removes an initiate from the old social state.

3. **Liminality.** Following the rite of separation, the individual undergoing the rite of passage, in theory has no social identity; they are betwixt and between, neither a

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The distinction between American civil and American Neo-Pagan conceptions of the deceased is so fine that members of the general population are blind to it, and Neo-Pagans are aware of it only in part. Although Neo-Pagans are aware that their dead adopt a particular social identity, they have not distinguished that social identity with a name. I have invented the term “agentic ancestor” to distinguish in this paper between the American civil and American Neo-Pagan decedent’s social identities; this should not be confused for being a term recorded in an ethnographic community.
member of the social identity that they have left behind, nor part of the one that they will enter.

(4) *Rite of incorporation*. The period of liminality is terminated by a rite of incorporation, at a discrete point of time, which incorporates the individual into their new social state.

(5) *New social state*. The new social state is the new, publicly identifiable social identity that the person enters having resolved the rite of passage (cf. Figure 2 above).

This model for a rite of passage has been useful in several ethnographies, particularly in traditional societies. For example, Danforth 1982 uses van Gennep’s model for a rite of passage in his analysis of rural Greek funerals. The rural Greeks that Danforth 1982 studied practice exhumation and secondary burial, unlike most Americans. For Danforth’s 1982 Greeks, the rite of separation was the primary burial, while the rite of incorporation was the secondary burial several years later. He points out that, one would expect the rites of separation and incorporation to dominate the funeral process, but in the case of the Greeks, the period of liminality is most important.

For modern Americans, including American Neo-Pagans, the public mourning process is not nearly so lengthy. The rites of passage that I witnessed involved a clear rite of separation at the time of death, followed by a clear rite of incorporation at the funeral ritual. Here we find a fundamental difference in the cultural constraint of the process; the Greeks Danforth 1982 describes constrain death principally at the point of burial and reburial, while modern Americans constrain the death process primarily at the points of the public death and funeral rituals.

The sequence of events of the American civil funeral cycle is: (1) the *death ritual*, where the decedent’s soul is released from the world of the living, the decedent’s corpse is isolated from the world of the living, and the chief mourners acquire their mourning status; (2) the period of *liminality*, where the decedent’s soul is considered to be en route to a variety of afterlives; the decedent’s corpse is processed by death specialists;
and the mourners attend visitation rituals in a funeral home; (3) the *funeral ritual*,
where the decedent's soul is commended to the afterlife, and all but chief mourners and
helpers are returned to the world of the living; and (4) the *burial ritual*, where the
decedent's corpse is incorporated into the world of the dead, and the remaining
mourners return to the world of the living. In the next sections, I'll address each of
these in turn from the American civil and Neo-Pagan perspectives.

**A Rite of Separation: Death Ritual In America**

It may come as somewhat of a surprise that the American civil religion specifies a
death ritual. The death ritual normally occurs when an expected death occurs in the
hospital. The family is notified of the impending death and travels to the hospital to
await the physician's pronouncement of death. The next of kin are called aside and
given the bad news by a physician. A discussion about organ donation may occur. The
next of kin may be invited to make a decision to discontinue life support. A clergy
member is summoned. Prayers are said. Following the pronouncement of death, the
widow or other next of kin is obligated to fill out paperwork and arrange for the
disposition of decedent. The medical staff usually leave the next-of-kin with the
decedent as long as he or she wishes following the pronouncement of death. In the
event that the next of kin is the spouse, some of this time is normally in private. The
spouse is typically the last family member to leave the decedent's bedside. When the
widow or next of kin has left the decedent's bedside to fill out the paperwork, the
decedent has socially died and may be treated as such by hospital and funeral staff. It
is clear that there is also a death ritual that occurs when a mourner is notified of an
unexpected death. Further research on this point is required.

What is clear, however, is that the death ritual has been heavily impacted by
changes in medical, communication, and transportation technology over the past half
century. In non-traumatic deaths, medical professionals are typically well aware of the

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Sudnow (1967) and Lock (2002) both note this process.
patient's impending demise well before the fact — indeed, a patient with terminal cancer may be informed that they have six months to live when, to all outward appearances they are healthy as a ram. Without advanced diagnostic equipment, disease must progress much, much farther before it becomes readily apparent that it will result in death. Technologies such as the respirator allow a badly injured patient to survive much longer. Universal use of the telephone allows kin and friends to be notified of an impending death, and universal access to air and auto transport allows relatives far removed to travel quickly to visit the gravely ill patient. In short, the time of death can be predicted with accuracy; kinsmen can be notified quickly and efficiently; and after notification they can travel long distances. The end result of all this technology is that the death ritual is now heavily attended, where in the past it was not.

In Jack’s case, although both American Neo-Pagans and their American civil counterparts experienced the same rite of separation, they interpreted the events of the rite of separation in systematically different ways. American civil participants experienced a “death;” the decedent’s ego had come to an end, and was now journeying away from the world of men. American Neo-Pagan participants experienced an “expansion;” the decedent was “expanding” to become a part of this world, not traveling to another world. The former perspective is that of the American civil religion; the latter, a logical consequence of the theology of immanence.

Obviously, in a context of a sudden summons to the hospital, under duress inspired through emotion, lack of sleep, and decisions of grave import, no one was intentionally inventing new theology. The theology employed by both Neo-Pagans and members of the American civil religion during the rite of separation was inherited rather than actively invented anew. Most adults had been witness to at least one rite of separation in the past; some had attended several. Both called upon simple, broadly held beliefs to express their views. Jack’s mom recited the Lord’s Prayer, held very nearly in common by all of the Christian faiths. Members of the coven directed energy to Jack. Kussina held a pentacle close to her father. May quietly spoke to her husband of the Goddess
and the God. Taken together these points read like the laundry-list of Neo-Pagan beliefs I presented in the previous chapter - faced with death in their midst, both the members of Mountain Moon Circle and members of the American civil religion turned inward to basic expressions of their core theology.

Perhaps the most distinctive feature of the rite of separation was that there was consensus among the American Neo-Pagans that their form of expression was marginal and subordinate to the expression of the American civil religion, even though most were not pleased that this was the case. Also significant was that the participants in the American civil religion were entirely unaware that there was any competition going on at all, or indeed that they had just participated in a major rite of the American civil religion. None the less, all involved were actively reinterpreting their theology, implementing, and employing it in practice. Participants of the American civil religion were distilling appropriate behaviors from their informal enculturation that they learned as children. American Neo-Pagans distilled their behaviors from a corpus of widely held core beliefs that are reiterated again and again at Neo-Pagan rituals like the full moon ritual discussed above. In short, the full moon ritual and other similar rituals constitute a "dress rehearsal," which assures that everyone is on the same page when an emergency occurs - The "dress rehearsal" creates a meaningful frame of reference for social interaction and ritual improvisation when participants are under duress and time pressure. American civil actors, on the other hand, were primarily informed by other funeral rituals they had attended in the past, each of which served as a de facto "dress rehearsal."

There is very strong social constraint to conform with the American civil death ritual to the greatest extent possible. Thus, the Neo-Pagan community has not developed an alternative ritual of death. They have chosen to interpret the conventional American civil ritual differently, however, employing the core theological principles outlined in chapter three. Natalie, for example, describes Jack as "expanding." In essence, we see a multivocalic interpretation of the same ritual of death, one perspective being held by
members of the American civil religion, and the other by the American Neo-Pagans in attendance.

The Period of Liminality

Both Hertz 1960 and van Gennep 1906 spend a great deal of time on the liminal nature of the death experience. In the case of Danforth’s 1982 Greeks, the liminal period continues on for several years until the remains are exhumed and secondarily interred. During the liminal period, mourning women travel daily to the decedent’s grave. Dressed in black, they clean off the tomb, light candles for the decedent, arrange flowers that they have brought with them and sing formal laments for the deceased. The American funeral process is much shorter – the formal process ends following the burial which may be as little as a week after the death of the decedent. In this very short period of time, there is a tremendous amount of work to be done by the next of kin. May ran through a laundry list: Insurance companies must be notified and hospital bills paid; employers, friends, and distant relations must be notified; financial and tax matters must be settled; ownership of major property including real estate and automobiles must be settled; the funeral must be arranged and paid for. There is simply no time for liminal rituals, such as the formalized grieving that the mourning women Danforth described, to occur. Thus, in the American civil funeral, the liminal period takes a secondary position to the death ritual and the funeral ritual.®

The liminal period is short at least partly because the liminal period during historical funeral cycles was quite short by cross cultural standards. The professionalization of both the funeral and medical industries over the last century have had the effect of inserting a great deal of social obligation into a period that would otherwise consist of reflection and mourning with immediate family, clergy, and close friends. There is also strong social pressure as a consequence of the Protestant work

® It is worth noting that the American civil wedding is also quite short by cross-cultural standards.
ethic encoded into the American civil religion for the bereaved to return to work within a
given period of time. Employers normally allow three to five days of leave for
bereavement, for example, and this bereavement leave is normally only offered to people
who could conceivably fill the role of "chief mourner." The professionalization of the
medical and funeral industries, and a civil religion tied closely to the Protestant work
ethic have had the effect of deemphasizing the liminal period by cross cultural
standards.

The funeral home is a liminal space. Americans in general do not like to be in
contact with death, as Sudnow 1967 points out. In one of the two hospitals Sudnow
1967 studied, the morgue orderly changed out of his working clothes into street clothes
in order to go to lunch in the staff cafe. His change of clothes was unique – everyone
else came to the cafe in whatever their job demanded that they wear, from scrubs to a
business suit. The morgue orderly was leaving the contamination of death behind him
when he went into public. People who fail to take such ritual precautions are ridiculed.
Mitford 1963 points out that the American funeral industry is perpetually lampooned in
the media. Leno (1992) in Jay Leno's Headlines, devotes a full ten pages to amusing
newspaper errata concerning the funeral industry. Likewise, the Hal Ashbury (1971)
movie Harold and Maude goes on in deadpan humor for ninety minutes about a teen
and a septuagenarian who become romantically involved and make a hobby of
attending funerals and other places of the dead. In short, direct contact with the
deceased is only appropriate when one is displaying the social identity of "mourner."

The consensus of the Neo-Pagans I have interviewed has been that the soul of the
Neo-Pagan decedent follows a similar trajectory to that of a chief mourner during the
period of liminality. In the immediate period following death, the decedent’s soul
remains in the vicinity of the body, and then travels to contact important individuals in
his or her life. Because there is no compulsory, formal theology in Neo-Paganism, there
is little consistency between mourners concerning the location of the soul at any point
of the process, or even the words that should be used to describe it. Most agree,
however that prior to the first funeral ritual the soul is present in the world of people. During the period following the first funeral ritual, the decedent is either traveling to another place, or betwixt and between, sometimes in the world of men, and sometimes in the world of spirit. In any event the soul of the decedent during this very early period is likely to spontaneously directly contact the mourners, and may be accessed through ritual means such as divination or channeling. Both the chief mourner and the decedent have had direct contact with death – during the liminal period, the Neo-Pagan decedent, through his interactions with the living, becomes a mourner of his own demise.

Funeral Ritual in America: Incorporation into the Afterlife

The funeral ritual portion of the funeral cycle serves two purposes: (1) incorporating the decedent into the afterlife, and (2) incorporating most mourners back into the world of the living. The American civil funeral has seven parts: (1) The decedent is transported in a casket to a place of worship in a black hearse provided by the funeral director. In some cases, the ritual occurs in a funeral home. The 19th century practice of driving past the decedent's home or place of employment has been largely abandoned. (2) The decedent's casket is normally decorated with a pall, a spray of flowers, or an American flag. Six individuals who are immediately related to the decedent, such as grandchildren, cousins, or close family friends, are selected as pall bearers, and are responsible for transporting the casket throughout the service. Often

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7 This section describes the Protestant church funeral service in general terms. The Reform and Conservative Jewish services are radically different in that the corpse is not taken to the Temple, and most important ritual actions occur at the graveside. The Jewish period of mourning is specified by religious law, and during the period of mourning, a group from the Temple may travel to a house in mourning in order to pray with the mourning family. In recent years, there have been an increase of funeral services at a funeral home with a Rabbi in attendance. Although there seem to be an unusual concentration of people of Jewish ancestry in the Neo-Pagan communities I've studied – in one community the figure was 15 percent - the Jewish traditional funeral seems to have little bearing on the funeral creation process I have observed.

8 In the case of the Anglican Church.

9 Particularly in the Catholic Church.

10 For military veterans only.
they do not carry the casket, but pull it on a dolly concealed by a cloth. (3) Most American churches are arranged in an oppositional format, with an audience seated in rows facing a slightly elevated sanctuary. The audience seating is normally separated into two halves by a center isle; in large churches there are several isles. In many denominations, the sanctuary is partially separated from the audience by barrier railings. In the sanctuary, there is usually a monumental crucifix (with or without an image of the crucified Christ, depending upon denomination) mounted to the back wall above the sanctuary, a monumental altar set forward upon a dais, a tabernacle which contains the sacraments, and chairs for the celebrants. The celebrants are thus set above and in front of the audience, in a position of authority. Prior to the service the audience file in and take seats as they arrive, with chief mourners and helpers seated in the front rows, and other mourners seated toward the rear. Individuals who arrive early may quietly pray, or converse with people seated nearby in hushed tones. (4) At the beginning of the funeral service, the priest or minister officiating and his entourage process behind the casket – dolly assembly and pall bearers toward the sanctuary. Usually the casket is preceded by an altar server who is carries a crucifix mounted on a pole in the air. (5) When the processional reaches the sanctuary, the officiating celebrant may bless the casket with holy water or incense as he passes it. The casket is normally left outside the sanctuary in front of the audience, and the pall bearers take their seats behind the chief mourners. (6) The service normally includes at least one eulogy for the deceased, normally given by a close or intermediate relative such as a sibling, cousin, or close family friend. The person giving the eulogy is not normally a chief mourner. The celebrant offers a reading from the gospel and a sermon at various points, and there are one or more readings from scripture, often by distant relations or family friends of the decedent. Most denominations also include the sacrament of communion. (7) Following the service, the celebrants recess, usually in the same order as the processional. The casket may be recessed with the celebrants, or may be left in
the church to be removed following the service by the funeral director for transport to
the burial site.

American Neo-Pagan funerals\textsuperscript{11} normally occur in a funeral home. This seems to be
the case because Neo-Pagans have few dedicated houses of worship, rather than as a
consequence of theology. The audience normally takes their seats in a circle. At a
funeral home service there will be an altar in the center. At a graveside service, the
open grave will be in the center. The celebrants sit in the circle with the mourners. The
celebrants will begin the ritual by casting a sacred circle and calling quarters. A person
tapped in advance will usually read a prepared eulogy. Members of the congregation
will read eulogies, perform prayers, songs, or speak ad lib about the significance of their
relationship with the deceased. The chief mourner may facilitate the service in
conjunction with a clergy member or by himself, and usually addresses the community.
There may be a cakes and wine ceremony similar to the one discussed at the full moon
service above. At the conclusion of the service, the clergy members will close the circle.
I will consider the differences between the Neo-Pagan and American civil funeral
services at length in chapter 7.

\textit{Burial Ritual in America}

Major Christian denominations specify earth burial the day of the funeral service.
This serves the function of disposal of the mortal remains, and completes the formal
funeral cycle. Most graveside services are short and include a clergy member, the
funeral director, chief mourners, and helpers. The burial ritual is now considered less
"essential" than it has been in the past, and is often omitted entirely, with the remains
interred unceremoniously by paid specialists using mechanized equipment.

\textsuperscript{11} Memorial services – distinguished from a funeral because there is no body present -
will normally be held in a practitioner’s home, often that of the chief mourner, or at the
community’s regular religious meeting place. Neo-Pagan memorial services often are
almost identical to a funeral service.
In my case 5, the decedent was buried in a very traditional rural Oklahoma burial ritual that seems quite similar to burial ritual at the turn of the century. The decedent's father, Mike, describes the burial:

The Baptist church maintains a cemetery. And the way it works, is if you need a cemetery plot, you go find one that ain't taken, and you mark it. If you need a hole dug, you call the county commissioner, and he sends down a backhoe. So Bill arrived, Bill is [Matt's] grandfather... We go to meet the backhoe, and dig the hole, and it takes like three scoops because we're just burying a small box, and [Bill] straightens it up real pretty, and we cover it with plastic, because we're expecting rain before the funeral. And [the day of the burial] we all drove down there, it was like four, five, six vehicles, and [Matt's mom] had prepared a note... [I]t was a few sentences, but one of the things I remember most about it was that one of her coworkers was comforting her and saying that it was such a shame that [Matt] just barely got to start living his life. And [Matt's mom is] like, no that's not right. Matt lived more in seventeen years than most people do in a long lifetime. He lived more than a whole life. He just crammed it all into seventeen years. And then we sat the box down in there, and [Matt's mom] and I did the first shovelfuls, and then we passed it around and anyone else that wanted to did a shovel, and then the men finished the job. Me and her dad and my dad and uncle, and stuff like that. At the old days at that church, they'd ring the bell, and the wives would pack up a lunch and the wives would all sit and gossip while the men would dig the hole. And there was a lot of that kind of feel - we were only there for thirty minutes, but we got him buried, tools in the back of the car, and went home. Had lunch, and everybody went back home.

American Neo-Pagans usually cremate the remains of their dead. I recorded only a single instance of a Neo-Pagan funeral where the remains were buried rather than being cremated, including rituals that I attended but did not report as "cases" for the purposes of this study. Mitford notes that cremation is on the rise in America, and that there is a correlation between liberal political affiliation and a tendency to cremate remains. The American civil religion specifies that the decedent's remains are to be segregated from the world of the living. After the funeral ritual incorporates the soul of the decedent into the world of the dead, sequestered away from the living, the burial ritual incorporates the decedent's mortal remains into the world of the dead, sequestered off in delimited cemeteries far away from the living spaces of the survivors. In well over half of the Neo-Pagan cases I recorded, the chief mourner retained the ashes of the decedent in their home, usually in until the second funeral service, which often also served as a burial ritual. The cremains were usually assembled in a public place in the house, together with ritual objects in the form of a shrine. In two of my

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cases, the decedent was buried at the home of the chief mourner, in the yard. At Neo-Pagan funerals we see a clear absence of sequestration of the dead from the living, probably because the dead remain socially living in the American Neo-Pagan schema.

One of the curious consequences of the very short American funeral cycle is that it is simply inadequate to allow grieving to occur. Although most people associated with the ritual are removed from the status of “mourner” and returned to the status of “alive” at the conclusion of the funeral cycle, chief mourners retain many of the trappings of liminality for upwards of a year, long after they, in theory, have been reincorporated into the world of the living. This extended period of liminality is particularly apparent for those individuals who have ongoing direct, literal experiences of the soul of the decedent following death.

For the American civil mourner, this is an issue to be directed to their therapist, clergy member, and supporting family friends – there is no further ritual, such as secondary burial, for a grieving American civil chief mourner to publicly walk away from their mourning status. The American civil mourner is left waiting: Waiting to live, waiting to die, waiting for an absolution from guilt and grief that comes very slowly, and in private.

The American Neo-Pagan mourner has somewhat more latitude in this area for improvisation. Clearly, most American mourners are prepared to return to the world of the living following the end of the short American civil funeral process. Thus a funeral in the conventional temporal location a week or so following death serves the purpose of reincorporating majority of spectator, acquaintance, and general mourners into the world of the living. The American Neo-Pagan funeral cycle has appropriated the burial ritual, moved it several months after the death, and changed its focus to addressing the chief mourner’s grieving process. Unless the decedent died in late September or October\(^{12}\), a typical time for the second funeral ritual is at a Samhain ritual, held near

\(^{12}\) If the decedent died in October, the chief mourner would probably wait a full year until the following Samhain.
the end of October each year. Samhain is the Neo-Pagan religious New Year and day of the dead. Many Neo-Pagan groups hold large, public rituals at Samhain, and it is typical for a Neo-Pagan to attend three to five large scale rituals during the last two weeks of October. In some cases, as it was with Jack, a special, second burial service is held particularly for this purpose; in other cases, the chief mourners meet at a regularly scheduled ritual to negotiate this grieving process; the remains may or may not be buried at the same time.

The burial ritual does not compel the chief mourner to leave mourning status behind him or her, and fully return to the world of the living. Neo-Pagans do not compel one another to adopt any particular identity. For a Neo-Pagan, in keeping with the theology of immanence, one's identity is a consequence of his or her understanding of the spark of divinity within. Thus, normatively, only the chief mourner can choose to assert that he or she is or is not a mourner. A Neo-Pagan chief mourner can choose to remain in mourning, long after those around her have gone on with their lives, in part because there was no ritual that would compel her to leave the status of mourner behind her.13

The Process of Incorporation into the Afterlife

As I've discussed above, the mourners are in a position to choose how they will be incorporated, or not incorporated into the broader society following the completion of the funeral cycle. The decedent, however is not in a position to personally influence the social markers that indicate their location in a plural landscape. The primary function

13 I have not discussed the subject of professional stage managers here. They present an interesting case, because they are perpetually in contact with death and located in places of the dead, yet they are not, properly speaking, mourners of any one particular death. Sudnow 1967 discusses the rituals by which the morgue orderlies remove the contamination of death when they enter public spaces of the hospital (Sudnow 1967:95-107). Mitford 1963 likewise discusses the great pains that members of the funeral industry have taken to alter the language of death with euphemism in order to distance themselves from the contamination of death (Mitford 1963:227-231)
of the funeral portion of the American civil funeral cycle is to indicate the location, agentic powers, and other features identical to the decedent in the afterlife. Modern Americans participate in a highly plural society where any given individual participates in a tremendous multiplicity of social identities, most of which are actively constructed, managed, and manipulated for desired ends. The participants in each of these social identities – co-workers, family members, friends from various clubs, ethnic organizations, religious groups, and other organizations, are each likely to feel they have a claim to how the decedent's post mortem identity should be portrayed. In many cases these claims do not compete with one another; it is unlikely that Jack's union friends would object to social markers associated with his place of employment, for example. However, when a person dies who participated in two groups that view themselves as being in direct competition with one another, there is likely to be some overt conflict over how the decedent's post-mortem identity should be displayed. This sort of conflict is particularly likely at a Neo-Pagan funeral, because both Neo-Pagans and conservative Christians feel that their own identity mutually excludes the other. Since approximately 25 percent of Americans identify themselves as conservative Christians, it would be a rare Neo-Pagan funeral indeed that did not include at least one conservative Christian who was in some way related to a Neo-Pagan decedent. Furthermore, since about 85 percent of Americans practice some form of Christianity, it is very likely that there will be a substantial number of American civil participants at a Neo-Pagan funeral unless they are specifically excluded. Thus, at a Neo-Pagan funeral, there almost certainly will be people involved who feel that the Neo-Pagan identity scheme is in some way false, unethical, immoral, or sinful – a virtual recipe for conflict. This observation is particularly important in that it applies equally to any intentional community that would openly challenge established Christian denominations or the American civil religion in a funeral context.
This circumstance was not foreseen by van Gennep and his students, who primarily applied the model to traditional societies. The rise of plural societies and plural identities means that any given individual may be incorporated into several different, competing social afterlives following their demise. Clearly, this competition between plural identities is a product of late modernity, not our agricultural past—the rise of a plural, urban society has resulted in competing afterlives for the deceased. In order to better understand this process, we must briefly digress into an examination of identity formation.

Recent models for identity emphasize that identity construction is a process of *negotiation* between individual and society. Most models for identity formation and negotiation proceed from the assumption that identities are tied inseparably to physical bodies. However, the identity structure precedes a person's birth and survives their death—sometimes by centuries, and rarely millennia, in either direction. Although it would be most unwise to discount models for identity formation tied to negotiation between the ego and society, *only living identities require bodies with subjective minds.* To use an identity structure designed to describe the processes living people use to negotiate their place in society in order to describe the projections of the living upon the objectively non-living or the non-human is to pound a square peg in a round hole.

Weigert et al. 1986 identifies two identity structures that are projected upon objective persons, but the outsider would note are not experienced subjectively by the object: The prenatal identity (PNI) and the postmortem identity (PMI) structures (Weigert et al. 1986:92-114). Although I am primarily interested in the latter, some discussion of the former is necessary as the two structures have much in common.

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14 Except Victor Turner, who successfully applied the “liminality” concept to modern western societies late in his career.

Pre-Natal and Post-Mortem Identity Formation

The process of constructing an identity for a soon-to-arrive social actor share a number of features in common with the process of constructing an identity for a recently departed social actor. Briefly:

(1) In both cases an identity is being constructed by social actors for an individual who is presently and for the foreseeable future unable to control their own identity in any particular way.

(2) In both cases, identities are constructed through a process of “guesstimation,” where markers are applied according to generally held norms, folk taxonomy, and in the case of a decedent, survivors memories of past behaviors.

(3) In both cases, particular people have a greater degree of control of the object’s identity – namely, in the case of a birth, the parents, and in the case of a death the chief mourners. Furthermore, in both cases, an individual’s ability to apply features identical to the object increase with social proximity to the parents or chief mourners.

(4) In both cases, there may be conflict between individuals who have a legitimate claim to primary control over the object’s identity. In the case of an infant born to a very young mother, the maternal grandparents may conflict with the young mother over this role, for example. In the event of such a conflict over claims of “chief mourner” or “parent” status, the conflict must be resolved, by the courts if necessary.

(5) In both cases, the persons chiefly responsible for producing social markers on behalf of the object are obligated to actively decide between mutually exclusive, competing social identities. According to the American civil schema, an infant cannot be both a “boy” and a “girl” regardless of their reproductive anatomy, for example.

Of course there are some big differences between the function of prenatal and postmortem identities. The prenatal identity is created with the idea that identity management will be increasingly assumed by the child, and later by the adult. The degree to which the parents grant the child autonomy to alter or determine their

16 In Weigert et al.'s (1986:98) sense of the word.
identity is not stipulated by the American civil religion and varies highly between American subcultures. Prior to birth, however, the infant has absolutely no direct control of their identity. The postmortem identity, in theory, is a presentation of the decedent’s living identity in final form. As such the decedent has some ability to influence his PMI prior to death. For example, a decedent can stipulate the form his funeral is to take, and such a stipulation is enforceable in court. Likewise, the decedent could bequest assets in a way that would make it clear how he should be remembered. Thus a decedent, prior to death, can have some active influence over the presentation of his PMI in a way a neonate could never have.

The pre-natal and post-mortem identity formation processes seem to follow a similar trajectory to one another.\(^\text{17}\) The pre-natal identity construction process begins when a mother becomes aware that she is pregnant,\(^\text{18}\) or when she makes the decision to intend to become pregnant. The post-mortem identity construction process begins when a person becomes aware that they will die, and begins to plan accordingly, or when they actually die, whichever comes first.\(^\text{19}\) In both cases this social identity planning phase has a certain “unreal” character. One of Miller’s informants comments:

Unless you really stop and think about it, that there’s a person growing inside your body, you don’t feel that close to it. I’m sure I will when it begins to move and I can really tell there’s something there. [Miller 1978:194]

In my many conversations with mourners at funerals, the nature of the funeral setting causes people to consider their own mortality. Many of my informants, in a

\(^\text{17}\) This discussion is based upon a model articulated by Rita Miller (1978) in _The Social Construction and Reconstruction of Physiological Events_, and uses her terminology.

\(^\text{18}\) Regardless if she actually is physiologically pregnant or not.

\(^\text{19}\) Clearly the actual timing of this identity construction process is highly variable. In my case 6, the dog in question died from cancer that attacked his right rear leg. The dog’s owners objected on religious grounds to euthanasia, and took the animal home to die when he was ready - a long, slow, and painful process. The owners had ample time to invite in a clergy member, plan a service, and begin to visualize the decedent’s PMI long before the dog died. In case 5, on the other hand, the teenage decedent died from injuries sustained after a seventy foot fall while rock climbing with friends. In this case, the construction of post-mortem identity began after the fact and was mediated by medical professionals. The parents were told that their son had died; they were told that they should adopt the role of mourner and begin to construct a PMI rather than beginning on their own initiative.
funeral setting, commented in passing that they began to think about establishing or altering wills, power of attorney, or medical proxy. Of course their death is inevitable in an organic sense. However, my informant’s awareness of that eventuality represents either a beginning or slow elaboration of their own post-mortem identity.

There are two voices present in both PNI and PMI construction: The voice of the decedent or infant, and the voice of the chief mourners or parents. In the former case, the decedent exercises his agency primarily at the beginning, and then with decreasing coherence and frequency toward the end of the PMI construction process, while the infant expresses his voice toward the end of the PNI construction process, with decreasing frequency and coherence toward the beginning of the process, as perceived respectively by the mourners and the parents.

In the cases of both the pre-natal identity and post-mortem identity the first element to solidify is the social identity schema. In both cases key social markers are established through common-sense folk taxonomy. For example, the object to be identified is obviously “human.” It is also a member of a social class, race, and gender. In the case of a fetus’ identity, the parents may choose to display such social characters as religious affiliation, and ethnicity, and may be choosing between competing social identities. Likewise a new decedent, or someone who is planning how they are to be remembered once they have died must have these same social identities applied to their corpse after death. Key ex post facto evidence for the preconstruction of the social component of the post-mortem identity first is the American civil system of bequests. An American who is planning for their death well before the fact – in many cases, decades beforehand – is likely to bequest portions of their estate to key social institutions, such as churches, schools, foundations, or similar organizations that illustrate their social identity in life. A man may say “I am an alumnus of St. Mary’s

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20 My discussion of tiers of identity is consistent with Cote and Levine’s (2002) *Personality and Social Structure Perspective* of identity.

21 Of course, objectively, a corpse is no longer human, having been uncultured by the death ritual.
College" by bequesting a certain figure for a scholarship fund; another may say "I am a Mason" by contributing a figure, and so forth. Bequests are made to children or friends to likewise reaffirm and communicate the relevant social relationship. Note that from the perspective of the parents and mourners respectively, the fetus has virtually no input in social identity creation, and the not-quite-yet-decedent may plan his PMI without reference to the mourners if he so chooses.

Miller 1978 notes that during the second and third trimesters there is an intensification of relations between the parents and the fetus. It is during this period that the relational identity schemas are formed. The relational identity, in this case, is the corpus of appropriate behaviors for a human social actor to interrelate with an identical object such as a fetus or corpse. In the case of a fetus, the relational identity begins when fetal movement becomes apparent, usually sometime during the second trimester. The appearance of fetal movement allows the mother to have a frame of relational reference, a sense that she is interacting with someone. It is during this period that there is serious conversation about names, a space is set aside for the child, and appropriate social markers are chosen and displayed to indicate the child's social identities. The people who perform such important actions as contributing names, helping prepare the child's space, or offering gifts establish their own relational identities to the child about to be born. Likewise, when it becomes apparent that a living social actor will die in the near future, there is an intensification of social interaction prior to death. The soon-to-be-decedent, particularly if the terminal illness is detected early on, may be aided by grief counselors to help them interact with their soon-to-be survivors and to help them to directly add their own voices to the construction of their post-mortem identity. An American Neo-Pagan informant told me of a funeral she had attended that the soon-to-be decedent, who suffered from cancer, hosted on her own behalf. The soon-to-be-decedent stood and danced around the fire.
briefly at her own "funeral," a little over a week before she died, held at night on a beach in California. In her dancing, she added her own voice to her survivors’ constructions of her relational identity. Any final business concerning the will, medical functionaries, and the disposition of the remains is settled by the soon-to-be-decedent in conjunction with their soon-to-be chief mourners. Funeral professionals are notified and contracted. Serious discussion begins about the nuts-and-bolts of transfer of major property. During this period, the soon-to-be-decedent may make a point of settling any interpersonal issues that are important to them. Jack, for example, gave his blessing to his daughter's relationship with her long-term boyfriend prior to his death. Particularly if the soon-to-be-decedent is quite ill, intermediaries are often necessary to effect this intensification, and these intermediaries are frequently the next of kin who will take on the chief mourner role when the decedent dies. This intensification of interaction has the effect of establishing the statuses and authority of chief mourners, and in some cases, helpers, for the upcoming funeral cycle. In some cases, the soon-to-be-decedent will ask a particular person to manage the funeral affairs, and as such choose a chief mourner who otherwise would not have been considered a chief mourner.

During this period of intensification, the mother applies meaning to her experiences of the fetus. She may interpret the fetus as liking or not liking certain things, or apply modes of relation such as “playful,” “happy,” or “sleepy” to the fetus. From her perspective, the fetus is actively relating to her by communicating elements of her relational identity. Likewise during this time the soon-to-be-decedent communicates important elements about how people should apply meaning to his actions after he dies.

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22 This is not a funeral ritual in the sense that I have used the word in this chapter, although the participants termed it a funeral. There was a memorial service after this particular decedent died that filled the role of “funeral” in my sense of the word.

23 In a recent civil funeral I attended, for example, the decedent specified in his will through a system of bequests which of his two daughters should be the chief mourner. Likewise, Leona Helmsley, by bequeathing a larger sum of money to her dog than to those people who would be her chief mourners, set the stage for her dog to be her chief mourner, with the unintended consequence of creating a great deal of ambiguity and much fodder for late-night comedians.
Like the parents, it is the chief mourners who must interpret the seemingly contradictory signals and messages offered by a dying person, and interpret those that are meaningful from those that are not.

When a child is born, the pre-natal identity is then transferred over to the child. Eventually the child will to a greater extent manipulate his own identity than that identity will be manipulated those around them. The post-mortem identity, after the death ritual, removes the decedent from the world of the living, is entirely in the hands of the mourners – it is they who will perpetuate the identity of the decedent or forget it; it is they who will alter it for political reasons; they who will glorify or vilify the decedent. Each individual mourner imposes their own understanding of the post-mortem identity upon the empirically inanimate corpse, based upon each individual actor’s understanding of the decedent’s prior, living, relational and social identities juxtaposed against a new landscape of social death informed by theology and folk ideology – In short, the post-mortem identity, following the death of the decedent, consists of what the mourner thinks the decedent probably would have chosen given a certain situation and theological orientation.

In Jack’s case, his American civil survivors, in particular, his evangelical Christian mother-in-law and Catholic mother interpreted “what he would have done” within a generalized Christian and American civil framework, where the funeral constituted a departure. These decisions were naturalized as given parts of the social landscape by the American civil actors. The American Neo-Pagans in Jack’s life interpreted “what he would have done” through a Neo-Pagan lens. Their responses to Jack’s death were predicated on the assumption that Jack retained agency after death and would continue to interact with them. Like the growing identity of a child, after death the post-mortem identity is tied to the present, and responds to present concerns, with the opinions of those presently able to manipulate the symbol of chief mourner – the post mortem identity ceases to have much direct relevance to the actual actions of the
decendent, just as a 30-year-old’s actions make few references to the pre-natal identity established for him by his parents three decades prior.

Post-Mortem Agency

Recall that, following death, the mourners impose upon the corpse a post-mortem identity that they have constructed in two parts, one based upon the social roles the decedent occupied in life, and the other based upon how they interacted with the decedent in life. When placed against the landscape of theology, these two elements determine the general social identities the decedent occupies in death, and the specific ways in which mourners may relate to the decedent. American civil and American Neo-Pagan mourners, during the funeral cycle, share similar interpretations of the decedent’s socially identical roles except religious affiliation. Religious affiliation informs the theological landscape against which people make relational decisions. Thus, American Neo-Pagans relate to their dead in radically different ways than most Americans.

The American civil religion, in keeping with its Protestant history, proceeds from a theological assumption that values actors according to their work potential. Robert Fulton (1976) sums up the problem succinctly:

Industrial societies value people in terms of their present functions and their future prospects; the aged not only have become disengaged from significant family, economic, and community responsibilities in the present, but their future status (politely never referred to in our humane culture) is among the company of the powerless, anonymous, and virtually ignored dead. In societies where the dead continue to play an influential role in the community of the living, there is not period of the life span that marks the end of a person’s connection to society, and the aged before death begin to receive some of the awe and authority that is conferred on the spirit world. [Fulton 1976:49]

Fulton 1976 goes on to point out that there are five types of immortality: (1) immortality through children; (2) theological immortality; (3) immortality through creative works; (4) immortality through immersion in nature; and (5) immortality through ecstatic rapture. Historically the American civil religion has emphasized the first three positions, in particular the third. Fulton 1976 points out, however, that the American
civil religion is presently facing a crisis of immortality: Dissolving families have
deepest a the importance of children and inheritance, and increasing
secularization has made many Americans aware of the symbolic nature of theological
immortality. The theology of creativity, of leaving some legacy to society has slowly
increased in prominence over the last thirty years.

American Neo-Pagans relate to their dead in a theological landscape informed by a
theology of immanence. The dead become one with the natural world, rather than
being removed from it. The practitioner may relate with the decedent in any place of
nature. The practitioner may relate by contributing energy to the decedent, with an
appropriate moral character, as well as through ritual magic and divination. The
direction of energy can take many forms. In the spirit of heterarchy, the Neo-Pagan
dead are partners and may be petitioned for aid by practitioners when a need arises.
These petitions take on a character of generalized reciprocity, much like those reported
in a traditional society. The dead in traditional societies, however, are often powerful
and capricious. I have never heard of a Neo-Pagan employing magic to hold off the
vengeful ghost of an immediate ancestor. In the spirit of harmlessness, the assumption
is that no dead person would have a reason to harm an immediate descendent unless
that descendent directly and intentionally gave the ancestor a particularly good reason.

Taken from the Neo-Pagan perspective, then, a Neo-Pagan decedent is able to add
his own voice to his post-mortem identity by generating paranormal experiences that
will be meaningful to his descendents. Neo-Pagans, as a whole, are neither fools nor
particularly naive. Most do not take anything that could possibly be paranormal to be
paranormal, and likewise, of the subset of events that several people agree are of a
paranormal character, only a very small few may be considered to constitute direct
communication or intervention by a particular Neo-Pagan decedent.

For an American Neo-Pagan, then, certain social actors, particularly nuclear family
members and close family friends, include the subjective experience of direct post-

24 I have italicized theological elements laid out in chapter three for clarity.
*mortem interaction with the deceased* within the post-mortem identity construction process. Invocation of post-mortem contact with the decedent may occur at any time after death, but it is likely to be taken most seriously during the several months immediately following death. Any potential claim for contact is scrutinized by the chief mourners for consistency with the post-mortem identity that they have already created for the decedent. Elements that are seen as particularly important in scrutiny include: (1) A distant social relation gaining information about the decedent's life through independent, paranormal means that is known only to the chief mourners; (2) a striking coincidence consistent with the interests of the decedent; (3) paranormal behavior associated with an object owned by the decedent that is consistent with how the decedent might have utilized that object; or (4) A direct paranormal experience between the decedent and a chief mourner.

Once confirmed by the chief mourners, a Neo-Pagan’s direct interactions with the decedent become a point of authority by which that mourner may add their voice to the PMI construction process preferentially over the voices of others who lack direct access to the decedent. The mourner who had a confirmed post-mortem experience of the decedent gains some of the authority of a chief mourner, and is able to speak on behalf of the decedent. The story of a Neo-Pagan’s interaction with a mourner is in turn told and retold among members of the community and become an integral part of the collective post-mortem relational identity of the decedent. Note that post-mortem interaction makes no change to the decedent's social identity, because this is the frame of reference against which the relational elements in post-mortem communication are, in part, judged for accuracy.

Certainly the outsider, in keeping with the social sciences orthodoxy of institutional atheism, would agree that this process of post-mortem identity construction is an imposition, a reculturing of an uncultured, no longer fully human “it.”

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25 This institutional atheism is probably a consequence of our dualistic vision of the soul as imprisoned within the flesh, dating back to the time of Plato (cf. Bloch and Parry, 1982 for discussion).
assumption is fundamentally founded in an American civil understanding of death. In the context of the American civil religion, the metaphysician is "a man who goes into a dark cellar at midnight, without a light, searching for a black cat that isn't there" (Schweder 1991:34). The American civil religion specifies that after the funeral, any given decedent's post-mortem identity is fixed, unless new evidence that was created during the decedent's lifetime is uncovered. From the Neo-Pagan perspective, post-mortem evidence is equally admissible in altering the decedent's relational identity, although post-mortem social identity changes are vetted against the criteria specified by the civil religion. Thus, the Neo-Pagan decedent's relational identity is much less fixed than that of the American civil decedent, because the Neo-Pagan decedent continues to relate long after death from the perspective of those who create and propagate the identity.

Plural Identities, Plural Afterlives

The key consequence of all this imposition of post-mortem identities is that the funeral ritual in a modern, plural society is obligated to incorporate the decedent into several separate afterlives that may be in competition with one another. In the present example, we have separate afterlives specified by the American civil religion and by American Neo-Paganism. I've included a diagram of this process in Figure 3, below. May felt that these two afterlives were mutually exclusive to the degree that she hosted two separate funerals for her husband. The civil funeral on the first day incorporated Jack into a civil afterlife removed from the world of men, without any form of agency. Jack Jr. felt that his father "died" – i.e. suffered personal death – the evening before he biologically died, because he never regained consciousness the following day. For Jack Jr., personal death was "death." After Jack's personality died, for Jack Jr., his father had ceased to bear the social identity of "living person." The Neo-Pagan funeral on the second day incorporated Jack into a religious afterlife where Jack retained
agency. In chapter seven, we turn our attention to an ethnographic example of this process.
CHAPTER 7

DYING IN AN AMERICAN NEO-PAGAN COMMUNITY

The difference between living and dead for nearly all Americans can be construed as the point where "I" becomes "it," where "culture" becomes "nature." The American civil religion specifies that the decedent is removed from the world of the living, isolated, and without any ability to interact with the living. American Neo-Pagans, in keeping with the theology of immanence, feel that their ancestors are present in the world and both willing and able to interact with the living. This in short is the fundamental difference between the American civil decedent, and the Neo-Pagan agentic ancestor. First and foremost, this chapter will document this difference.

American Neo-Pagans live simultaneously in both a secular, American world and a sacred, Neo-Pagan world. Throughout the following account you will hear two voices: those of the American Neo-Pagans from Jack’s church, and those of his secular American family, friends, and the medical professionals who cared for him during the last months of his life and after his death. Jack’s steps through the funeral cycle would be given meaning independently by each these contextual frames. Sometimes the ritualized application of meaning was performed in a segregated civil or Neo-Pagan event; at other times different people applied different meanings to the same multivocalic events. Throughout the process, however, these meaning seeking processes would stand in stark contrast and tension with one another. This chapter will serve to illustrate the structural elements I laid out in chapter six, as the

1 See chapter six for a detailed discussion of this term.
participants in these two contextual frames create separate post-mortem identities for
Jack.

The Death Ritual: A Rite of Separation

On the afternoon of March 17th 2004, Jack was rushed to the hospital in renal
failure. Myeloma compromises the kidneys when cancerous white cells block the
microtubules that are used to filter urine from the bloodstream. It is unclear whether
renal failure was medically inevitable at this point, or if it was accelerated through
malnourishment and dehydration. In the hospital, Jack was rehydrated with
intravenous fluids, and he seemed to rally, but simple rehydration could not resolve the
inadequate blood flow to his kidneys, and overnight his blood became toxic.

First thing in the morning, having spent the night at the hospital, May set into
motion two independent notification systems, one within the secular world, and one
religious. Sudnow 1967 points out that there is a set order that Americans notify their
families of an impending death: Nuclear family members are contacted first, followed
by parents and adult siblings and children of the deceased and spouse, close family
friends fourth, then followed by extended family members, co-workers and more distant
relations. The decedent's spouse, or parent if there is no spouse, is almost always
notified first and in person, preferably by the attending physician. It is now considered
appropriate to notify others by telephone, although this practice was only just
beginning when Sudnow did his work in the mid 1960s. Likewise, distant relations and
co-workers are now often notified by electronic mail.

May chose her best friend, Anne, as her principle helper. Although Anne is a Neo-
Pagan, she is not a member of the coven, and has been a close friend of both Jack and
May since well before they joined Mountain Moon Circle. Anne had supported May
throughout Jack's hospitalization; May contacted her first and asked her to call the
family. May in turn called the family in the order specified by the American civil
religion. Second, May called Alyssa, a kore member of the coven. Alyssa headed over to
hospital after notifying the member with the service role of “coven crier” and asking her to activate the coven’s telephone tree. An email was posted on the coven’s email list, but an effort was made to telephone each member personally. Many members were contacted twice, first by the crier, and second by Alyssa. Only a handful of members found out first via email. American Neo-Pagans use terms of fictive kinship to refer to their brethren. The order and means of notification of the coven suggest that the members of the coven truly were Jack and May’s brothers and sisters – both biological and coven brothers and sisters were notified by the same means and at approximately the same time. This, of course, can be accomplished because the church is so small, and would not be possible were Jack and May still members of the Episcopal Church.

Jack was located in the intensive care unit and “hooked up” as May put it, “to all these crazy machines.” By the morning of March 18th, Jack was largely paralyzed. He was in the hospital bed on a ventilator, his eyes half-open because voluntary muscle control of his eyelids had failed. The children arrived as quickly as they were able. Jack Jr. reports that he drove to the hospital at over a hundred miles an hour and ran every red light. Coven members trickled in, and soon Jack and May’s natal family members began to arrive, including Jack’s elderly mother. By ten thirty, there were easily thirty people jammed into that little room. May describes the scene:

Well, he knew we were there. And I know he knew because he was hooked up to all these crazy machines. And every now and then, one of these machines would emit this strange sound. It would like beep or something. And I couldn’t figure out why the heck this stupid thing was beeping because it didn’t seem to have a regular pattern to it... Finally, after a while a nurse came in to check on him, and I asked her what the machine was and what it’s doing, and she said “that monitors his pulse rate.” And I said, “how come that’s making these random beepings?” And she said, “oh, he’s reacting to what’s happening around him.” And I said, “you’re kidding. If I say something to him, that’s what makes the beep?” And she says, “yeah. He can understand what you’re saying and his body is registering his awareness. ... We were all around the bed, and then people just started pouring in, and pouring in. ... Every time I turned around, somebody else was there. It was just amazing. And every person who came in, came over and held [Jack’s] hand, and said, “It’s me Jack, Natalie’s here.” “It’s me Jack, Anne’s here” “It’s me, Jack.” You know, everybody would come over and say their name and let him know that they were there for him. And he would beep.
This continuity of awareness is the common feature of Neo-Pagan responses to Jack's death. The points that stand out are the points that the Neo-Pagan survivors perceived that Jack was communicating to them that he remained a social agent; that he remained alive. They were not attending to witness a death, they were attending to witness a departure. Natalie said "I had a sense of him expanding – being more than confined to his body." The American civil identity schema has the individual agent die when death is pronounced; within the American Neo-Pagan schema, the ego retains its agency, although the form that agency may take must be altered due to the fact of biological death.

Jack, the eldest son, is the least Neo-Pagan of Jack's children. He recalls that he felt his father died during the night, because Jack never regained consciousness in the morning. For Jack, his dad was already gone – the organism laying in front of him had ceased to be "I" and was now "it," even though cardiac arrest had not yet occurred. Jack said, "to me, when you're gone, you're gone." Jack points out that cardiac arrest would have occurred during the night had Jack not been connected to extensive life support. The decision to discontinue life support constituted releasing Jack's body from a half-alive half-dead state from which Jack felt there could be no recovery.

Around eleven o'clock, the attending physician, accompanied by a nurse, called May and her kids out into the hallway, and said "Jack is gravely ill." May interpreted "gravely" as "seriously." The doctor repeated himself. "Jack is gravely ill. At this point we should consider discontinuing life support." May said she asked him if there was any hope. The nurse replied:

She looked at me straight in the eye, and she says, "Well, I gotta tell you, if it were my father, I'd remove him at this point." She said, "it's up to you, we'll leave him in if you want to, and we'll keep on going, but if he were my father, I'd remove [him]."

Sudnow 1967 talks at length about the official pronouncement of death. In Jack's case, the pronouncement of death took a back seat to May's decision to remove life support. The actual pronouncement of death involved no hallway meetings, no special
fanfare. The decision to remove life support was particularly hard on May because she had to actively choose to let Jack's body die. The American civil religion schema, which introduced a fear that Jack's ego would be irrevocably removed from the world of the living, was placed into direct conflict with the American Neo-Pagan schema which said Jack would continue to experience and interact with the world of the living.

She told the doctor to remove life support. "He hates all those tubes anyway." After the medical apparatus had been removed, May returned to Jack's side, and took his hand:

I finally accepted that he wasn't coming home. I let him go. I told him he didn't have to fight any more, and I was ok, we would be all right. And he couldn't talk, and he couldn't move, ... he had no muscular control at all. But I know he heard me because I saw a tear come down. And I told him to go dance with the Lady and go shake hands with the Lord and it was ok for him to go.

Once again, for May, the key feature was Jack's retention of agency, even to the end.

May was not the only one who experienced conflict between the view of death articulated in the American civil religion and the American Neo-Pagan schema that morning. As Jack's family, friends, and Neo-Pagan community stood in vigil by his bedside, the Neo-Pagans contributed energy to his passage. Normally, energy is directed by pointing with one or both hands extended, with fingers either spread apart, palms outward; by extending both hands before the practitioner, palms outward, with thumbs and index fingers touching each other so as to form a triangle; by using an index finger, athamé, or other ritual tool; or by making physical contact with the person to be given energy. May remembers seeing people with their fingers discretely extended in their laps, or forming a triangle. She said, "the place was swirling with energy." The purpose of committing all this energy was to facilitate Jack's transition; to give him the energy he needed to leave his body behind.

As Jack approached cardiopulmonary arrest, Jack's mother asked May if she could say the Lord's Prayer. May agreed:

Our Father, who art in Heaven, hallowed be thy name.
Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in Heaven.
Give us this day our daily Bread, and forgive us our trespasses,
as we forgive those who trespass against us.
Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory
Forever and ever.
Amen.

Jack’s mom was praying to her God for Jack’s reception and salvation in Heaven, while
the American Neo-Pagans around her were offering energy to Jack for his journey to the
summerland. This is a difference in kind, not quality. It reflects a key difference
between the American civil and American Neo-Pagan understanding of the soul’s
repose: The American civil understanding is that the soul’s final resting place is
sequestered away from the living at the right hand of God, without direct agency. The
American Neo-Pagan understands the soul to exist in a place identical to the choice of
the ego and retaining agency. From the American Neo-Pagan perspective, Jack needed
that energy in order that his soul would be able to fully experience, choose, and
participate in its journey to the summerland.

Kussina, who sat on Jack’s right as he lay in bed that morning, recalls that she felt
bad that there was no pentacle visible in the room. She took off her Goddess necklace,
which is surmounted by a pentacle, and clasped it between Jack’s right hand and hers.
She explains:

I always wore it. I never took it off, because I needed some kind of strength. I
needed goddess to be with me all the time. I thought he deserved a pentacle
somewhere, and he hadn’t told my grandparents that he was Pagan, and he
always wanted to, but he hadn’t, and there was no pentacle in the room with
him, so I took off my necklace and let him hold it. I thought he should have
that, you know?

Some of the other Neo-Pagans present felt restricted in how they could express their
beliefs. Of the family present, it was unclear who knew of Jack’s Neo-Pagan beliefs;
most of Jack’s coven brothers and sisters knew he was not out to his mother-in-law.
Thus it would have been highly inappropriate to openly organize a collective energy
raising effort, or sing Neo-Pagan hymns. One informant felt sad about this. She said:

This is a very painful thing for me. [Jack’s] family, you know the parents and
parents-in-law were there and at that time, they weren’t out to them as Pagan.
And really one of the most painful things for me was when... someone started
saying the Lord’s Prayer, and they said, “let’s everybody pray.” It’s a valid
prayer, you know, and it is fine, but it hurt so bad that the rest of us couldn't say the prayers out loud that we would want to have said for him out loud.

The attending physician noted Jack's death from renal failure at 11:35 a.m. on March 18th, 2004 at the age of 53.

"I Cried a Lot." – The Period of Liminality

May has little memory of the four day period of liminality. Overcome by grief born from the loss of her husband of over thirty years, she relied to a great extent on her helpers. Right after she left Jack's bedside for the last time, May went with her friend Anne and filled out releases and other paperwork. She was asked if she wanted an autopsy, and initially she declined. Anne intervened and suggested that if she wanted to take legal action against the rehabilitation facility, she would need an autopsy. Eventually May decided in favor of the autopsy. May also filled out papers indicating who the funeral director would be. Jack's cousin is a funeral director, so May made this choice easily.

Mitford 1963 makes it clear that the funeral industry has made a point of articulating their role as grief counselors. She finds this hard to believe, notes that funeral directors have no formal psychiatric training and lampoons the industry for practicing quack psychiatrics. None the less, May believes in the importance of the viewing as offering closure to the mourners. She says:

Well, I always planned to have a viewing, and I knew an awful lot of people would want to come and pay their respects. So, it was important to me to give them that closure, and give them that chance to say goodbye. Because I know I would have been very upset if I hadn't had that opportunity, if a close friend of mine passed away, I would want to be there...

Mitford (1963) clearly underestimates both the importance credited the viewing by some Americans, and the extent to which the American way of death has been influenced by the marketing of funeral products and participation in funeral activities. May also recalls paying a number of bills, particularly the funeral bill, and filling out insurance paperwork for Jack's hospital stay.
One of the major tasks specifically appointed to May during the period of liminality was that of preparing appropriate clothing for the viewing. At the funeral director's request, she ironed Jack's best suit, and selected appropriate civil clothing for Jack to be presented wearing.

As the funeral approached, both May and Jack's extended families descended on May's home in Groen. May's sisters were invaluable in keeping everyone fed and finding lodging for all involved, leaving May with little of her routine housekeeping to do. However, as chief mourner, May felt obligated to greet and spend time with the people coming to visit from near and far. Thus occupied, the time passed quickly.

May said that she made a point of feeling throughout the process – She turned down Prozac\(^2\) offered to her by one of her helpers. She wanted to be fully present and experience the process, no matter how painful. She felt that this process was part of her process of healing change, part of her journey, and to avoid it would be doing herself a disservice.

Taken all together what stands out about this period of liminality is its brevity, its lack of formal ritual organization, and the amount of social obligation required of the bereaved.

*The American Civil Funeral: A Rite of Incorporation*

Jack’s funeral represents an interesting case because he had two full-blown funerals, a day apart, one loosely following the cannons of the American civil religion, and one directed at the members of his coven and American Neo-Pagan community. These two celebrations of a single man’s life illustrate the key differences in identity construction I laid out in chapter 2.

Like many Neo-Pagans\(^3\), Jack and May used the term “Christianity” to indicate a set of social and relational identities that mingles some elements of what an outside

\(^{2}\) It probably wouldn’t have done anything anyway. Prozac takes several days to show much effect at all.

\(^{3}\) Pike (2001) notes this usage as well.
observer might call "evangelical denominations" with elements of the American civil religion and the major denominations. When faced with the funeral process, May contrasts Neo-Paganism with Christianity, and she feels that these two identity schemas are so mutually exclusive that placing the two into direct contact with one another would generate conflict and prevent healing change. In particular, May feared her mother's reaction to Neo-Paganism, and to a lesser extent her father's and Jack's mother's reaction. Not coincidentally, this reads like a laundry list of non-Pagans who are also chief mourners, and could have reasonably contested her decisions – all other non-Pagan mourners did not have sufficient social standing to challenge her decision making processes.

When I first considered in depth May's decision to host a separate American civil funeral and Neo-Pagan funeral, I thought it idiosyncratic. But then as I reviewed my notes of other funerals, I noted that in all cases save one the Neo-Pagan mourners isolated themselves from non-Pagans for the funeral ritual, although they did not isolate themselves during the period of liminality or the burial ritual. The main funeral in case 2 was hosted at the home of a clergy member to an invited community of sixty Neo-Pagan friends of the decedent. There was a small, separate memorial service held several weeks later for the decedent's non-Pagan friends. Case 3 was held at a small, permanent, Neo-Pagan ritual center in the desert an hour outside of Las Vegas. It was attended by about twenty friends of the young mother. There was no civil service. Case 4 was hosted by the young man's religious community and was only attended by members of his church. I assume that his family in California hosted a civil funeral.

4 The funeral in case 5 was an incredibly complex, multi-vocalic event including a large Neo-Pagan community and a large number of participants from a medieval reenactment organization called the Society for Creative Anachronism (SCA). The SCA includes large numbers of Neo-Pagans, a substantial number of secularists, and a small but vocal minority of evangelical Christians. Helpers to the chief mourners attempted to create a space where the Neo-Pagan decedent and his community could mourn together with the conservative elements of the organization. To a great extent this was successful, but there was some conflict, particularly over the creation of sacred space. One thing was certain: This funeral represented a collaboration between at least two separate intentional communities, and the American civil religion was to a much greater degree than usual excluded by both.
once they recovered his remains. The family did not return requests of the clergy members to meet or an invitation to the funeral service, so it seems they felt the Neo-Pagan social identity was sufficiently different from their own that they chose to marginalize it. Case 6 included only a handful of invited Neo-Pagan friends and the ethnographer. There was no civil service. Case 7 was hosted in the same location as case 4 and included about twenty-five Neo-Pagans, a number of secular friends, and a contingent from the Las Vegas Paiute Indian reservation, with whom the decedent had a relationship spanning two decades. At the decedent’s request there was no civil service. Clearly there is a broad consensus among Neo-Pagans that this important ritual should be isolated from the American civil religion. Although May’s particular justification for hosting two funerals was unique among my cases, the end result was not: There were two separate funerals for Jack, and he was incorporated into two separate afterlives.

Like most American dead, following autopsy, Jack’s remains were handed over to the funeral director for transport to the funeral home and embalming. Because Jack’s cousin was the funeral director, none of the salesmanship, wheeling, and dealing that Mitford 1963 records occurred in his case. May says the price was reasonable, although she had hoped for a discount as a family member. Mitford 1998 noted that, in 1998 the average American funeral cost $7,000.

May instructed the funeral director to follow his standard procedure for treatment of the remains, with no specifics provided. Thus, Jack was arterially embalmed, and placed on display as if he were sleeping, in a painted aluminum casket, wearing his best dark suit with a silk shirt and tie showing a scene from “starry night” that May had bought him on a recent trip to Paris. Over top of it all, he still wore the little herbal pouch that Natalie made for him; she felt very touched that he was still wearing it. This was the only clearly Neo-Pagan element displayed on the corpse at the civil funeral. The casket lid was divided in two; the portion covering his feet was closed, while the
Figure 4. Plan of the Viewing on the First Day

Widow and immediate family stood in this area most of the day.

Seating

Doors to Hallway

Seating

Seats for Immediate Family

Seat for Widow

Folding Chairs for Mourners
portion covering his head and torso was open. His head was on a pillow, and the interior of the casket was lined with white satin.

The embalmer's art is limited however. Jack lost a great deal of weight during his illness; in the casket he did not look to me anything like he had looked prior to his illness, although the restoration was faithful to his appearance at the time of his death. While in the hospital he had worn a beard, but May instructed the funeral director to shave his beard. Samantha, the middle daughter, did not recognize Jack in the casket immediately because she hadn't been warned about this change.

Most funeral homes have large viewing rooms that can be subdivided and used simultaneously for smaller events. Because a large crowd was expected, Jack was set up in his casket in one of these rooms with the partition withdrawn (see Figure 4 above). His casket was situated between two tall stand-lamps reminiscent of the candles that frame the altar in a Catholic church. Dark blue folding chairs with fabric seats had been set in rows, to seat the mourners, with a center isle like the audience seating of a church. A plush English winged armchair was provided for the widow; there were also comfortable backed chairs for other chief mourners in the front row.

May, dressed in a conservative black skirt-suit, sapphire earrings, a ring, and a necklace that Jack had bought for her seven years ago when their marriage was going through a rough patch, says that she hardly sat in that chair. She spent most of the day standing near Jack, greeting mourners who lined up in a receiving line that went out the door and down the hall. At times, the wait on the receiving line exceeded an hour, what May referred to as "running the gauntlet of hugs."

In the days leading up to the funeral service, all stops were pulled out. Kussina was sent on a wild goose chase all over Westmoreland County to buy up every box of tissues that was blue and decorated with suns and moons that could be found. The stars and moons were reminiscent of the mobile Samantha hung near his hospital bed. Jack himself had brought home a similar box of tissues some months back before his illness. Samantha, Kussina, and Elaine went through the (extensive) family photo albums and
selected photos that showed just about every aspect of Jack's life to be put on display. Jack liked to work with metal; he used a variety of stainless sheet steel called diamond-plate in much of his hobby work. The girls, together with several of their close friends, affixed the photos, without captions, to four sheets of diamond plate that Jack Jr. dug out of the garage. Kussina explains how the photos were chosen:

We made up all different memory boards, stuff, pictures that he was in, pictures of the cars that he used to own, even a dump truck that was black on the cab with orange and red flames shooting up the side. He loved that dump truck. I think he went on his honeymoon in that dump truck. I know that they went to Niagara Falls in the dump truck, and I know that they got a lot of the big rocks that were around the house in Groen with the dump truck, but I think I always just put two-and-two together that they took the dump truck on their honeymoon.

Kussina chose photos that described the biography of Jack's personal journey of the soul – his energy, in Neo-Pagan terms – to illustrate his life. The fact that the photos were not captioned was an important point. To Jack's Neo-Pagan community, the photos of Jack's private life were simply that – to his family, the photos of Jack with his Neo-Pagan community was simply Jack hanging out with friends. The absence of elaboration helped to keep the American Neo-Pagan community marginalized from the American civil religion at an event that included adherents to both faiths.

The diamond-plate collages were then delivered to the funeral director who set the collages on easels near Jack's casket where they would be seen by people standing the receiving line. Several large flower arrangements were also contributed by Jack's union and his colleagues, and set up on easels, mostly in the far left corner. Flower arrangements were not contributed by American Neo-Pagans, although several Neo-Pagans made donations to the church, at May's request, in lieu of flowers in a total amount of about $200.

May had little to do with the actual arrangement of the room, which was set up at the funeral director's discretion. The established hierarchical relationship based upon seating stands out as significant. The seating is similar to the seating in most mainstream Christian churches, with the rows of seats divided by a center isle. The
deceased is set as if he were an altar, sequestered apart from the mourners who socialized among the seats. When the mourners approached the front of the room, they did so in a respectful receiving line.

Although Neo-Pagans were invited to the first service, and almost every member of the coven attended, an email was circulated reminding all and sundry that May was not “out” to her parents and that Neo-Pagans attending should come dressed in street clothes. Many of the community stood up to this challenge admirably: Ray, for example, in a clean-cut grey suit and tie, could have passed for a bank manager. However, the “street clothes” worn by Neo-Pagans are usually easily recognizable as Neo-Pagan to other Neo-Pagans. Clara, for example, a forty-something transplant from the San Francisco Bay area with a unique fashion sense, commented that she was “curious about the way some of the people dressed.” In particular, the absence of formal wear (suits, ties, jackets) and logos among the men, and flowing clothing with a lot of brightly colored print fabric, particularly at the sleeves and hemline among the women, stands out as characteristically Neo-Pagan. Some Neo-Pagan men who are not fetishists routinely wear skirts similar to those worn by the women, even in non-Pagan settings. Likewise, piercings and tattoos are quite common in all genders, often in visible locations. Clara felt that these styles were particularly apparent in the receiving line.

I asked Louise, a MMC member, about her clothing as the viewing came to a close. She was dressed in a plain black turtleneck and slacks and was wearing a black jacket. A velvet medicine pouch figured prominently around her neck. She told me “my witchy clothes will come out tomorrow.” In the private funeral the day after the viewing, concealed from the competing, dominant faiths, the pentacle will be home.

Funerals are high state occasions, involving large numbers of amateurs under pressure, and everything never goes according to plan. There is nothing like a large funeral to flush whatever happens to be lurking in the family broom-closets out into broad daylight. “I was busted,” May says. Because of the marginality of the movement,
many American Neo-Pagans feel obligated to live double lives, isolating their religious beliefs from non-Pagan co-workers, neighbors, family, and friends. Throughout the process, May took great pains to keep knowledge of her Neo-Pagan life away from her conservative parents. However, she posted an obituary in a local newspaper, and directed that in lieu of flowers, donations be made to Mountain Moon Circle. Apparently, a woman who is very active in the evangelical church to which May’s mother belongs, saw the obituary and looked up the coven on the internet. This woman took it upon herself to approach May’s mother at the funeral home and describe May’s involvement in American Neo-Paganism to her in less-than-flattering terms. May elaborates:

[She] came up to mom, and sat down next to her at the viewing, and said to her I don’t know how to tell you this, but do you know what horrible things Jack and May are involved in?’ and she went on to fill her with all kinds of satanic nonsense, and witchcraft, and turned our back on God and Jesus Christ, and all this other total nonsense that is the stereotype that uninformed people believe of witches. So, my mother is now going into shock.

So May’s mom, feeling frightened and alone at her son-in-law’s funeral, looked about her, and saw all these people wearing black clothing that does not precisely match the expectations of the American civil religion, and decided that Jack and May were part of some sort of satanic cult that would soak up the house and the kids and leave all involved burning in hell. Because May and Jack had not “come out” to May’s mom, she did not have a symbolic frame of reference to apply meaning to her experiences at the funeral, and as such she applied the symbolic frame of reference that she had been taught at church, placing the negative social identity conventionally associated with the “witch” into direct competition with the positive social identity May and her coven family were covertly asserting for the role.

May’s mother did not say anything to May immediately; she addressed her concerns to May’s sisters, all of whom knew of May’s participation in Neo-Paganism. May’s sister Sabina held her mom off until services for Jack had ended, and then called May to explain the situation. So May found herself explaining her involvement with Mountain
Moon Circle to her parents and to Jack’s mom, who she invited into the conversation, the evening after her husband’s funeral, and somewhat under duress. In retrospect, May returns to her wish that she and Jack had come out to their parents nine months earlier, together, at a time of their own choosing. May feels deeply saddened by her inability to share this important part of her life with her parents.

American civil funerals normally have a viewing of the body in a funeral home, followed by a church service at a house of worship. If the deceased had limited social capital in life, or was not a member of a church, a memorial service may be held in lieu of a church service, normally at the funeral home. In some cases this memorial service will be presided over by a minister in the employ of the funeral home, particularly in the event that the deceased is privately religious but not an active member of a particular congregation, or if the next-of-kin are religious, but the deceased was not.

May sought to keep her “American” and “Neo-Pagan” lives separate. As such, she intended the first day of funeral services to emulate a funeral-home style memorial without a clergy member present. However, this sort of memorial is usually organized for persons with limited social capital who at the time of their deaths had already dissolved most of their social responsibilities. In short, funeral-home style memorials are held when elderly people die without hundreds of grieving family and friends members who want to attend a service. Although the first day memorial service followed the cannons of the American civil religion fairly closely, it seemed a little bit “off” because of the unusual size of the service.

The organization of the effort presented a second problem. To invite a Neo-Pagan priestess from the coven to officiate would obviously blow May’s cover. To invite a Presbyterian minister from her mother’s church or a Catholic Priest from Jack’s mother’s church would be morally objectionable. In May’s eyes Christian faiths make a demand of exclusivity; a statement that Christianity is the only way to salvation. When I asked her if she felt it was possible to be both a Christian and an American Neo-Pagan, she replied:
I don't believe it's possible to be both, simply because Christianity tends to believe that their way of doing things is the only true way. And there is only one “God the father” and the only way to “God the father” is through “Jesus-Christ-Our-Lord-Amen.” ... You can believe in the teachings of Jesus Christ, because I do too. Reading the sayings that are attributed to Christ, I don't have a problem with those things. I think the man was an absolutely phenomenal person. I don't think the only way to get to heaven is through Jesus Christ. I think a way is through Jesus Christ and his teachings. I don't have a problem with that at all. I think he was a phenomenal person and I think if quote-unquote “Christians” actually did abide by what he said, there'd be a lot fewer problems in the world. But, unfortunately, I found an awful lot of Christians that I consider to be rather hypocritical. They say one thing and profess to believe things, but they don't follow through on them.

May's solution was unique from the American civil perspective; she officiated – or more appropriately, facilitated – the service herself. If there had been a clergy member present he would have faced the group in an oppositional format that would have set him apart as a voice of authority; instead, she adopted that authority herself, setting herself apart at the head of the room to address the mourners. From the American civil perspective, it is not conventional for a new widow to address the community. The role of the widow specified by the American civil religion is passive. Speeches are normally made by more distant relations, such as cousins of the deceased. The nuclear family of the deceased are expected to be sufficiently consumed by grief that taking an active role in the mourning process is out of the question. Whether the nuclear family is actually this consumed by grief is irrelevant – the social role of mourner within the American civil tradition demands it.

However, as Sudnow 1967 points out, when in a state of mourning, the folkways that externally compel some social behaviors are temporarily suspended. When Jack died in the hospital, Kussina reports that she ran from the room crying. She said:

I went out in the hallway, crying hysterically, screaming hysterically at the nurses and the doctors. “Go in there and fix my dad!” I lost it for a few minutes. “My dad is broken, go fix him!” I couldn't think. I didn't know what to do. ... I walked out of there a few minutes later and I felt guilty because everybody was paying attention to me and trying to make me feel better when they should have been paying attention to my mom.

Given the circumstance, Kussina's behavior was not inappropriate.
Likewise, although May's decision to facilitate her husband's funeral did not follow the usual social conventions, it would have been most inappropriate for any non-mourning party to tell May what she could and could not do at her husband's funeral. To do so would have been to hold her socially accountable when a widow is most certainly not considered socially accountable. Additionally, May had paid for the whole business, and the American civil religion specifies that the person or people who are financially responsible for a public event have control over that event.

American Neo-Pagans mourners, unlike their American civil counterparts, seldom take a passive role. The whole point of a Neo-Pagan funeral is to help the mourners to redefine their personal identities vis-à-vis the newly deceased. When May found herself in a situation where she must define the social identity of the Neo-Pagan mourner, she did it actively, which stood out as inconsistent with the role of the American civil mourner. May is certainly not the only Neo-Pagan to take a key role in facilitating the funeral of a loved one. In case 2 noted above, for example, the chief mourner, during the funeral ritual, sat together with the priestess on a blanket on one side of the circle; most ritual actions were undertaken by the chief mourner guided by the priestess, not by the priestess herself. In case 3, that of the young mother burying her two small children, no clergy member was involved. The young mother facilitated all aspects of the service herself, from notification of family and friends that the funeral would occur, to ornamenting the remains, to officiating the funeral herself, and excavating the grave where the remains were buried. The young mother's behavior in case 3 was strikingly similar to May's method of handling the Neo-Pagan "chief mourner" role. In case seven, the decedent's husband facilitated several parts of the service, supported by the several clergy members present.

The method May used to facilitate Jack's funeral was consistent with the theology of immanence; she facilitated, rather than commanded. Standing near the front row where she had been most of the day, her children standing at her side, she addressed the people chatting in the seats; the room became silent except for May's voice. She
explained that Jack knew many people who practice many different faiths, and that each should be able to mourn Jack's passing in his or her own way. Sally once mentioned to me that Jack did not say very much in circle, but when he did open his mouth, it was short, sweet, to the point, and on target. Standing in front of Jack's family and friends, May repeated a metaphor that Jack used once to describe his religious feelings:

Jack and I believe that all religions are facets of a diamond and that the divine and the creator is the diamond itself. And none of us can see the whole thing itself, because it's just too big for our human mind to comprehend. All we can see is the one facet that we follow, but each one of those facets is a path into the heart of the diamond. And though we can't see the whole thing, we can still appreciate the beauty of the one facet that we can see.

In Conceptions of God in Ancient Egypt: The One and the Many (Hornung 1996), archaeologist Erik Hornung terms this organization of belief a monolatry; such monolatries seem to be a central feature of American Neo-Paganism. Within American Neo-Paganism, any claim to exclusivity is anathema; each person is entitled to their own understanding of the mind of God.

With this in mind, May had prearranged for several of her coven sisters to perform prayers for the dead. Harley, who was formerly Jewish before she came to Neo-Paganism, read the Hebrew Mourners' Kaddish. Natalie sang a Hindu mantra called the Maha Mrityunjaya Mantra, while playing her harmonium and accompanied by chimes played by Sherri, another coven sister.®

Following this performance, May invited Jack's mother to perform the Lord's Prayer, and her own mother to perform a Presbyterian prayer. May then asked if anyone else would like to perform a prayer appropriate to their religion. Perhaps a third of the people present were American Neo-Pagans, but all were either aware that May was not out to her parents or were sufficiently uncertain that they kept mum. Yet some did not like their marginal position – Clara, for example, even though she knew she should keep quiet, felt that she wanted to say:

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® The full text of this chant is preserved in Appendix II.
May ... said “does anyone else have anything they want to bring up of any other religions,” and that, of course, was like, weird, because I just felt this vibe of every Pagan in the room thinking, “yeah, dammit, we’re Pagans, and we’re not supposed to say it here.”

At a normal funeral home memorial service, a single religion is represented, the generic non-denominational protestant theology of the American civil religion. If a clergy member is present, that clergy member represents a single religion. The American civil ideology demands that religious identity be mutually exclusive; a person cannot participate in several religions simultaneously. The decedent is assumed to be socially identical to the religion symbolized by the clergy member and the ritual service. The clergy member becomes a walking social identity marker. The American civil funeral has no format to represent several different religions. May made the decision to represent the many faiths of the mourners present, not Jack’s faith, which she intended to keep hidden. May’s decision to represent a number of religions stood out as highly unorthodox from the American civil perspective, because it was impossible to identify Jack with any particular religion, including the American civil religion, on basis of the markers presented. Jack was thus only partially recultured from the American civil perspective.

After the prayers had been said, Jack’s children said a few words about their dad. All the children emphasized the things Jack had built, and in doing so emphasized the idea of immortality through creative works noted in chapter 6. In their brief remarks, Samantha and Jack also emphasized what a good father Jack had been, and all the things that he had taught them – In short, they discussed the many ways in which Jack met their expectations of the social role of “father.” Kussina, on the other hand, spoke of Jack’s eccentricities. She told a story of how, when she was a teenager, her dad had a habit of tooling about the house in his skivvies. When she had friends over, as she ran to the door to meet them, she would holler “underwear!” at the top of her lungs to warn him that there were outsiders afoot. Kussina, her shouts of “underwear!” in honor
of her father resounding about the funeral home, was emphasizing the unique ways that she related – and as a Neo-Pagan, continued to relate – to her father.

During the ritual performances and subsequent remarks, those standing in the receiving line remained standing in line. After the rituals had ended, the “gauntlet of hugs” continued for the rest of the evening.

*The American Neo-Pagan Funeral: A Rite of Incorporation*

The second ritual service for Jack was an openly Neo-Pagan funeral held by invitation at the same funeral home where the viewing was conducted the previous day. For the funeral, the room had been reorganized by the funeral home staff according to May’s specifications. Most of the chairs had been folded up and leaned in stacks against the right hand wall (cf. Figure 5 below). The remaining chairs, about eighty, had been set in a large, oblong circle. More people than expected attended, and so more chairs were brought out in a series of second rows around the perimeter of the circle. Jack’s casket was moved out and placed into the circle with the head facing to the left, towards the English armchairs reserved for the chief mourners. The coven’s altar, set as if for a full moon service, was placed in the center of the circle. Jack had been redressed with his black ritual robe, and the cord that marked him as a member of the coven. His hands were folded across his unsheathed athamé, as a knight with his sword on the tombs of a bygone age. He was still wearing the herbal pouch that Natalie gave him, and next to him was set out his hand-made wooden staff. When I asked May about how she decided to redress him, she was very explicit:

Those were the tools that he made himself. He made his athamé, and that was his magical tool, and his staff. He used that all the time. And he put hours and hours and hours and hours of work into creating that staff and each part of that staff had meaning to him. Each one of the vines had meaning, each one of the, the copper he used to shod it with was used to conduct electricity and energy. And the wax that he used to polish it was a natural wax, it wasn’t chemical. And the crystal that he put on top was held by a dragon’s claw for power. And it was just a very, very personal choice and he used that staff a lot and it was appropriate that it be with him at the end. ... It was the farewell ritual for him, and it was right for him to be in his ritual raiment. And to have his ritual tools
with him. And for him to be part of the circle. Because when we made the circle, he was in it, he wasn’t apart from the circle, he was a part of the circle.

Sayward, a Kore member, told me “the cord represents the commitment that Jack made to the coven.” May saw to it that he kept that commitment in death as in life. At his final circle, he wore his cord, and was cremated while wearing it.

Even within the funeral home setting, the American civil religion specifies that the deceased is set apart from the mourners, and approached briefly and respectfully. The mourners interact with one another, rather than the decedent, in hushed terms. In the liminal space of the American Neo-Pagan funeral, however, the decedent retains agency and thus is intentionally not sequestered from interaction. It was critically important that Jack continue to participate in the ritual community, and as such his remains were situated within the circle as if her were alive.

Alyssa and Sayward, members of the kore and founding members of the coven facilitated the service as priest and priestess, respectively, at May’s request. May says she had little to do with the arrangement of the service. She requested a favorite song, Bette Midler's (1989) *Wind Beneath My Wings*, and told the clergy members to come up with what they thought would be best. Neither clergy member had facilitated a funeral service in the past and Mountain Moon Circle does not have a stock liturgy to draw upon. The clergy members turned to other, outside organizations with which they were affiliated, in addition to a variety of internet Neo-Pagan resources, for guidance. Here we see a very important impact of technology on the process by which Neo-Pagans create ritual. The various denominations have well established mortuary theology to which any clergy member has easy access. The American civil religion specifies the treatment of the remains according to funeral industry standards, once again, that are easily accessible to funeral professionals, and are enculturated in the population from childhood. Neo-Pagans, on the other hand must actively create funeral ritual.
Figure 5. Plan of the Funeral on the Second
Computer technology gives them access to information provided by far-flung Neo-Pagan communities in order to create a new ritual on short notice.

Using the data they had collected, the clergy modified and intensified a conventional Mountain Moon Circle ritual service, the full moon ritual, to arrange an outline of the ritual. Once the bare bones outline of the ritual had been established, they sought input informally from members of the coven to fill in details such as the form of the circle to be cast, and the songs to be performed.

Some people, particularly those visiting from out of town such as Ray, wore the same thing that they wore to the civil viewing on the first day. Some of Jack and May's non-Pagan friends were present, and also dressed appropriate to the American civil religion. Most members of the coven, however, wore their ritual robes. For the funeral, Sayward was dressed in her black ritual robes that she uses for all rituals, and was wearing her red Ravenwood cord, together with her gold, hand woven cingulum that marked her as a kore member of Mountain Moon Circle. From her cords, she wore a four inch long, white handled athamé. Alyssa wore a plain black dress, with a white shawl over the shoulders, and her gold Mountain Moon Circle cord. May wore her light and dark blue ritual robe, with her gold cord that marked her as a member of the coven. She also wore a black belt with a small black pouch containing various magical miscellany on her right, and her silver-handled athamé on her left. She wore a small, silver pentacle on a chain around her neck. Here the pentacle was home.

Members of the community and invited guests milled about the preset circle talking in hushed tones for a few minutes before the start of the service, but the service began on time, so the time for socialization was short. The service began when Jack's coven sister, Debbie, reading a eulogy she had written. It is important to note that this eulogy was situated in place of the usual ritual instructions given at a full moon service, where the celebrants would acknowledge the lesson to be taken home from the service. The instructions normally given are directed to newcomers; everyone present was either a long term member of the American Neo-Pagan community, or an immediate family
member. The instructions could be omitted because all present knew when proverbially to sit, stand, and kneel. There were no audio recordings of the ritual taken. I have taken the texts that were read from the celebrants' notes and from the recollections of the people who read them. The eulogy is reproduced in full below.

To Honor Our Brother, Jack

On Thursday morning, March 18, 2004, our Beloved Brother, Jack passed beyond the veil into the Summerland. Surrounded by friends and family, engulfed in their love, Jack moved peacefully into the Spiritual realm.

Jack was a devoted husband to his beloved wife, May. He was a dedicated father, to his children Sambo, Jack, Kussina, and to his son-in-law Jack. And he was a doting grandfather to his sweet little granddaughter Elaine.

Jack's devotion to his family and their common dream, was so strong that it manifested in the creation of Lugh's Garden, a wonderful spiritual retreat. This natural sanctuary will grow and thrive as part of Jack's legacy.

Not only was Jack devoted to his family, but he was also dedicated to his extended family and spiritual community. Jack has been a cherished and well loved member of Mountain Moon Circle for more than 3 years now. Always ready to lend a hand, Jack has been a generous supporter of our community efforts, devoting his time and talents. A trained machinist and skilled craftsman, Jack was a wizard with mechanical things. A great finder of things, Jack possessed the rare talent of being able to deliver any object you could describe. Constantly, giving and always sharing, Jack was always willing to employ his skills to help a friend

Even as he struggled with health challenges, Jack was giving to the community. With the common goal of helping Jack, family and friends rallied together sending prayers, conducting Reiki sessions and generating healing through creative projects. We came together with the united purpose of helping Jack, but it was we who received the benefits, the innumerable benefits of a stronger, more soulful community. What was intended as our gift to Jack, became Jack's gift to us.

Thank you Jack, for touching our lives and for generously sharing your many gifts with us.

We are honored and blessed to have known your loving spirit.

Blessed Be

In analysis of the text noted above, I would point out that the first four paragraphs situate Jack within the social landscape: They celebrate his socially identical roles. They also present a vision of immortality that emphasizes the "creative works" model I mentioned in chapter 6, and to a lesser extent the "children" and "theology" models.
The fifth and sixth paragraphs describe several relational identities and create a frame of reference for interaction with the deceased post-mortem. As such, this eulogy is highly in keeping with the best traditions of the American civil religion – but it also sets the stage for the Neo-Pagan understanding of the agentic ancestor. The eulogy element of the American civil religion was appropriated and plugged in, as it were, to Mountain Moon Circle’s traditional full moon service. This method is consistent with other forms of Neo-Pagan cultural borrowing that I have witnessed and that are noted in the literature – the American civil religion is a foreign culture, which includes cultural characters which can be borrowed and reconstructed just like any other in the American Neo-Pagan schema.

During this ritual, several reversals of pattern occurred that can be contrasted with a modal full moon ritual. This reversal of pattern was intended to bring the practitioner partly into the underworld, where meeting the spirit of the dead would be possible. The circle to be cast was a circle of liminality – a ritual statement that brought the mourners directly into contact with the ego of the deceased, and likewise, the deceased directly into contact with the living. This ritual completed the process that the mortician had begun, that of reculturing Jack’s body.

In a conventional Mountain Moon Circle circle building ritual, most ritual actions proceed clockwise around the circle. At Jack’s funeral, the building proceeded counterclockwise, or “widdershins.” Following the introductory eulogy, the priestess identified herself by her religious name and identified herself as a member of the coven and the kore. She then took a moment to describe her social relationship to Jack. Having done so, she turned to the priest on her right, took her hand, and said: “Hand to hand and heart to heart, I build this circle of Jack.” Alyssa, serving as priest, then

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6 Strictly speaking, at the beginning of the death ritual the mourners are already in the liminal space, having been placed there by the death ritual. This step may be necessary for those mourners who did not participate in the death ritual by witnessing the death, and thus enter the state of liminality – it certainly is not necessary for the chief mourners who witnessed the death, all of whom were very obviously in a liminal space throughout the process.
repeated this process, identifying herself by her religious name, identifying herself as a member of the coven and the kore, and identifying her social relationship to Jack. She then turned to the congregant on her right, took her hand, and repeated: "Hand to hand and heart to heart I build this circle of Jack." This process continued around the circle, as people tearfully identified themselves: "I'm Jack's coven sister." "I'm Jack's coven brother." "I'm Jack's daughter." "I'm Jack's friend." One of the central features that stood out was the use of the present tense. Jack is alive, Jack is a part of the circle, and Jack is participating. Perhaps one of the most emotionally moving moments in this building of the circle occurred when it came May's turn to speak, and she grasped hands with Jack in the casket, completing the circle. By this time, many people present were openly crying. In case 2, the circle was also built counterclockwise.

The funeral home does not allow open flames other than tea lights. In lieu of the conventional smudging ritual noted in the full moon ritual above, specially prepared sage water had been placed in a trigger-sprayer similar to those used to hold household cleaning fluids. The priestess and priest misted each other lightly in turn with the sage water, proceeding clockwise in the usual fashion, beginning with the head. They then proceeded around the circle counterclockwise, spraying each congregant lightly, until they reached Jack's remains, which were thoroughly sprayed. The priest and priestess then activated the altar in the usual manner (drawn pentagrams, et cetera) noted in chapter 4 above. The negative energy of the funeral home had been banished; with it the circle had been set apart from the world of the living. The community now stood on the threshold of the world of the dead. Sayward acknowledged this process by saying to the assembled congregation "This is a place which is not a place in a time which is not a time halfway between the worlds of the Gods and of mortals."

In a conventional Mountain Moon Circle full moon service, the east is the first quarter called, by a congregant, and calling proceeds clockwise around the circle. In this case, the quarters were called in reverse order, beginning with the west, by full members of the coven who had been tapped in advance. As is typically done at the full
moon, the congregation stood and faced the appropriate direction for each quarter call, while producing the appropriate mudra. The quarter calls themselves were written by the priestesses, adopted from those used at another funeral. The prepared quarter calls appear below. A bell was rung by a celebrant at the end of each quarter call.

West says:

"As the sun sets, So our friend Jack has left us. The water of our tears, like the salt water of the sea, and like the water of our mothers' womb, blesses this Gathering."

South says:

"As life is a day, So Jack has passed into the night.
The fire of our life, the memories and courage, the strength given to us by our friend blesses this Gathering."

East says:

"As all that falls shall rise again, So our friend will be reborn.
The air we breathe, this treasure of our life, the compassionate caring we give each other blesses this Gathering."

North says:

"As the Earth forms us, so our friend shall return to the earth.
Our Mother feeds us, and clothes us. She gives us everything and in the end she takes our bodies back. And earth blesses this Gathering."

The purpose of the quarter calls is to bring the appropriate energy into the circle.

Several key points stand out about these quarter calls. On the one hand, they acknowledge the death of the body. On the other hand, they emphasize the departure of the ego. At first this seems contradictory – if Jack had departed, how could he retain agency? Note that these quarter calls present an image of immortality consistent with the "rejoin with nature" model. Jack's energy was now all around us – and as such, he could influence the world of the living.

The quarter-callers were all coven members, which is exceptional. Like in the American civil tradition, the quarter callers were not members of the nuclear family. As a full member of the coven, had May requested it, she could have called a quarter, as could any of the family. She left this task to others; her grief was too great.
In other Neo-Pagan funerals, the west has also figured prominently. In case 3, although a circle was not cast, the burial was conducted on the west side of the temple grounds. In case 5 the ashes of the decedent were set in the west corner of the back yard where the funeral occurred. In case 4 the decedent’s soul was commended to the west at the end of the service by the priestess and priest. In case 2 the chief mourner was seated on a blanket on the west side of the circle with the attending clergy member. The west is seen as the locus of sunset, the place where the decedent’s ego enters the world of the dead, while the East is the locus of rebirth. For the American Neo-Pagan, the world of the dead is a womb, a place of growth and rebirth. The “circle of Jack” transported the congregation to the threshold of that womb, where the kicking of the growing soul within could be felt by all involved.

The priest and priestess returned to the east side of the altar, facing west. In most full moon services, a text evoking the energy of the goddess and god is written in advance of the ritual, although in practice the celebrants often leave the script and wing it during the ritual. The more experienced a member is, the more likely that they are to “intuit” the evocation of the goddess or god than to read it from the script. Both Sayward and Alyssa are senior clergy members, each with over a decade of experience. So neither wrote what would be said at this ritual, but rather intuited their evocations at the time of the ritual performance. There were no tape recordings made of the ritual, so exactly what was said has been lost.

Following the invocation of the goddess and god, the priestess and priest, respectively, delivered the “charge of the goddess” and the “charge of the god.” This step is not normally performed at full moon rituals, being reserved for the sabbats, where the strong member’s building ritual contains the powerful energy of the god and goddess within the circle. The weaker, “permeable” version of the circle used at full moon rituals is generally seen as insufficient to this task, but in this case the invocation ritual did not excite comment. During the charge of the goddess, the priestess enters a trance-like state and speaks with the voice of the goddess present in her body. When a
celebrant performs this task, they usually do not remember what they have said. In case she could not successfully enter the trance, Sayward made the following notes to herself to be read from the script when she performed the charge of the Goddess:

We have for a while lost one who is dear to us, And we all feel the loss. But it is only for a time, and our sorrow will lessen.

There is a reason for being here, and a reason for going. The Other Side, the Places Beyond, are warm, pleasing and beautiful with all ills gone, and youth anew.

There is a reason for leaving, when the purpose of this life is done. We must all journey beyond to pause, to rest, and to wait for those who are loved, In a place far from the cares of this world, with happiness and strength renewed. For dying is only a mode of forgetting, a way of rest, a way of returning to the Eternal Source, however we may see it.

Sayward says that dying is a rest of the soul, a means of forgetting. In other words, the agent has chosen to leave his body behind, chosen to forget the physical world, and chosen to rest, and will eventually choose to be reborn. The decedent is not stripped of his agency by death to be in the presence of the all-powerful god of the American civil religion that is equal to the constraint imposed by society itself.

Like most American Neo-Pagan services, the body of the ritual was normatively egalitarian and invited everyone present to participate. The clergy had tapped particular members of the coven in advance to conduct readings, and I was among those invited. I was second to speak, and I read a prayer from the dead common on stelae from the end of the Old Kingdom and later in Egypt.°

Following my reading, Sayward, filling the role of priest, performed an anointing of the dead. This element was culled from similar ritual performed for another decedent by the members of a Neo-Pagan organization in which Alyssa participates. Anointing of the dead was only included in one other service I recorded, and so should not be construed to be an essential element. To anoint the dead, the priest took up the

° See Appendix II for a full transcript of all the poetry that was performed at the ritual.
° In Case 6 the Sioux shaman who conducted the service smudged the decedent’s corpse with sage smoke by lighting a bundle of sage, extinguishing it, and blowing the resulting smoke around the decedent’s corpse at approximately a similar point in the ritual. In Jack’s case, a similar smudging was conducted at the beginning of the service. This may have been the shaman’s introduction of a Sioux element into an
anointing oil and drew a “spirit invoking pentagram” on Jack’s hands. She did this by
drawing a tiny five pointed star, the first stroke moving upward towards the forehead,
the second downward toward the right knee, the third upward towards the left
shoulder, the fourth from the left shoulder to the right shoulder, and the fifth back
towards the first point. While drawing this pentagram, the priest said “Blessed be your
hands that do their work.” The priest then drew a second pentagram over Jack’s
mouth, and said “Blessed be your lips that speak Their names.” The priest then drew a
third pentagram on Jack’s forehead just between his eyes and said “Blessed be your
eyes that have seen the beauty of the Great Mother.” The final pentagram was drawn in
the center of the forehead, and the priest said “Blessed be your mind which seeks to
know Them.”

Sayward told me that this part of the ritual was particularly challenging for her
because she had to get very close to Jack’s body. In other parts of the ritual, she had
been focused to a greater extent on remembering her lines and the appropriate ritual
actions, but when she reached this point the reality of the situation sunk in.

The anointing ritual was followed by nine poems. In between each of these poems,
Alyssa asked if anyone would like to share a memory of Jack. People spoke of their
relationships with Jack – his idiosyncrasies, the gifts he gave, times spent together.
Toward the end of the poems, May, flanked by her children stood and addressed the
community. She thanked everyone for being there, and for the outpouring of love from
the community. She expressed that she could not believe the number of people who
showed up. She told a couple of anecdotes about Jack. Then Kussina spoke about her
father’s conversion to Neo-Paganism:

I made a sort of speech, ... about what my father ... believed in... . My father
when he started his life was like this with his hands together. [clasps hands as
if praying]. And that was a symbol of the religion that he held. And the hands
were closed, and they were disciplined and they did what they needed to do.
But these hands are for praying. And my father evolved and opened those

otherwise Neo-Pagan service, or simply an idiosyncrasy.

9 A number of different oils were used during my time at Mountain Moon Circle; the
precise recipe seems to be up to the personal preference of the celebrants.
hands to feel more things and to create more things, and to change more things, and later in life in religion, he joined the Mountain Moon Circle, and their symbol is this [demonstrates] with the thumb and the pointer touching, and the palms outward. And he had a pair of brass hands that he found. And they were the praying hands mounted on a wooden block. And he cut the fingertips apart and opened them, and put a triangle in one and a star in the other, and mounted them on a log.¹⁰ It was just beautiful that he did something like that, because his hands could just change anything. He could take the smallest thing that anybody would throw in the trash, ... and he'd take it and cut it apart and change it .... He could change anything into anything and he just created so many beautiful things in his life that his hands were of change, and it was appropriate that he had changed those hands to teach others to change their hands.

This was a time for articulating personal, relational parts of the identity - there was no formal reading of the decedent’s social identities as we saw in the eulogy. Without exception, everyone I interviewed felt that these personal statements of relationship were the most significant portion of the ritual. May’s comment is typical:

I have to say it was the most amazing outpouring of love I have ever witnessed. People were just pouring their hearts out at that funeral. And it made such an impression on me. I’ve been to funerals where people got up and said a few words, and things like that, but not like this. People were speaking from their hearts, and [Jack] touched so many lives in so many ways, and to hear people get up and perform music for him, and to read poetry for him, and to bring up the Egyptian book of the dead for Pete’s sake – I’ve never been to another funeral when anybody did that! Things that were written that weekend, and things that were six thousand years old were just chosen with such an appropriate, heartfelt rendering, it was, it was amazing. It was heart-wrenching to be there and know that this tribute was being poured out for my husband, but it was, it was just, it was the most honorable thing I’ve ever experienced.

As people spoke, the clergy members stood near Jack, or walked slowly clockwise around the circle. Two to three people spoke between each poem reading. As such, the body of the ritual was quite long, extending for over two hours. No one with whom I spoke complained about the length of the service. Jack likewise felt that the time for open sharing by the community was preferable to a traditional service where “you’re looking at everybody’s head.” Shortly before his father’s funeral, Jack attended an American civil funeral for a friend’s father, and this is how he reports his reaction:

We didn’t go around the room like that. ... It was just a regular funeral. Everything was quiet. One person would come up to [the decedent] and speak to him maybe in private, quickly or whatever, but that was about it. Nobody was given a chance to speak on the floor and say how they feel about everything

¹⁰ Here, Kussina describes the Mountain Moon Circle logo.
on a around the room basis, you know. And plus, you weren't sitting in a circle either. You're sitting all lined up back to back, looking at the back of everybody's head. Not looking at everybody's face, you're looking at everybody's head. That's not nice either. But, traditionally that's the way it's done.

At the end of the open forum for grieving, the clergy members returned to the script for the cakes and wine ceremony, which was conducted exactly according to the modal full moon template. The cakes and ale ceremony is probably so seldom altered because (1) it marks the end of the body of the ritual unambiguously; (2) it includes the core theological statements of Mountain Moon Circle; and (3) because most of the congregation enjoys participating in it. During the cakes and wine ceremony the celebrants played Bette Midler's (1989) song *The Wind Beneath My Wings* on a stereo.

The closing of the ritual was short. The congregation stood and faced inward toward the altar. The priest and priestess returned to the center of the circle following the cakes and wine ceremony, and dismissed the god and goddess. Both Alyssa and Sayward intuited their dismissals, so the details have not been preserved. The quarters were then dismissed in the reverse order. This process was much shorter than usual, since each quarter caller was scripted to make only a single statement. As usual, the congregation faced the appropriate direction, and made an appropriate hand gesture.

The quarter dismissals are reproduced below:

- **East** - "The sun will rise again."
- **South** - "Life continues."
- **West** - "Love is all that we can be sure of."
- **North** - "Only the Mother is eternal."

The conventional Mountain Moon Circle full moon ritual uses a song entitled "The Circle is Open" to complete the circle. The standing congregation joins hands, raising their hands over their heads after the third time through the song. In this instance, the celebrants substituted another song in the same place. I have not seen any other instance of a substitution in this place, for the same reason that there are seldom changes to the cakes and wine ceremony. In the other cases, where there was a ritual template to be followed I have not seen alterations made. The lyrics to the song were:

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11 See chapter 4.

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When we are gone, they will remain.
Wind and rock, fire and rain.
They will remain, when we return.
The wind will blow and the fire will burn.

This song articulates a vision of immortality that is consistent with the "natural world" model I discussed in chapter six. This song was repeated three times in the usual way. "The circle is open" is sung in an upbeat, energetic way, while this song was sung in a way that could only be described as a dirge. There were none of the usual chorus line kicks or arm swinging that normally occurs — there was no doubt that this event memorialized a traumatic passing.

*The Firehouse Reception*

Following the invitation-only Neo-Pagan Funeral, there was a reception held at a firehouse near the Bowman family home in Groen. This reception was coordinated by Jeff, a family friend who attended the viewing on the first day. Jeff had adopted Jack as a second father, and felt that it was very important to offer something for his mentor. He organized everything, although May paid for the event. The event was well attended by both members of the Neo-Pagan Community and by Jack's American civil friends. Jeff, a non-Pagan, organized the reception to be consistent with the American civil religion. May explains:

It's customary to have friends and family over after a funeral, to kind of break bread together and have a funeral feast and socialize a little bit. And many times the only time family members get together is for weddings and funerals. People don't see each other very often and things like that. And it's pretty much a common American custom to do that.

There were about forty round folding tables set up in the firehouse hall, and light food set up by the caterer buffet style. No speeches were made. Folks mingled and chatted for about two hours. I noticed that most of Jack's secular friends sat together at tables, and most of his Neo-Pagan friends sat together. There was little cross over because few of Jack's secular friends knew his Neo-Pagan friends, and vice versa.
There was a small-scale repeat of the "gauntlet of hugs" from the viewing, as people who were unable to attend the viewing paid their respects to May.

This particular ritual represented a radical departure from the funerals I witnessed for other Neo-Pagans. None of the other funerals included a separate reception, or anything resembling a separate reception. When Jack died, however, he was in the prime of his life with a tremendous amount of social capital across two communities. The firehouse reception may have been an indication that Jack had more social capital in both the Neo-Pagan and American civil communities than any of my other cases. Some of my informants had receptions attended by other Neo-Pagans. More cases would be needed to clarify whether this is an idiosyncrasy or an indication of social capital.

*Cremation and the Period Prior to Interm ent*

Jack was cremated the day after the Neo-Pagan funeral. May explains that it was important that Jack be cremated because fire was so essential to his personal energy:

I don’t believe in putting someone’s body in the ground and just letting it rot. And Jack hated the cold. He liked heat. He hated the cold, and the snow, and the ice, and all that; he liked the heat. When we used to have a fireplace, he would lay on the floor as close to the fire as he could get, and his Dalmatian dog would lay on the ledge with him, and his fur would get so hot that if you touched it, your hand would get burned. He loved it. And the two of them just loved the heat, loved the summertime, loved the sun. And it was just so much more appropriate to cremate his body, and let him have that heat, than to put him in the cold ground to rot. He would have hated that.

May’s decision was quite typical in this regard – In my case seven for example, the decedent was a clergy member who had served a Neo-Pagan temple near Las Vegas for over a decade. Her husband scattered her ashes there because he felt that the temple had become so much a part of her. Likewise, the decedent in case 6 was buried under the family’s chicken coop because the (canine) decedent had spent the majority of his life “trying to get at those chickens.”

The family was invited to attend the cremation, but all declined. Jack explains:

Who the heck would want to see that? Nobody wanted to see that. Everybody was curious about it, but nobody wanted to go see it. Go learn about it some
other way. Everybody wanted to see what procedure was involved with it, but not that bad. So nobody went to [the cremation].

May picked up Jack's ashes several weeks later. The ashes were in a black plastic urn provided by the crematorium. When the ashes were returned home, they were placed at the center of a large shrine on a buffet table in the family room. Kussina explains:

He was on my buffet. ... Strange thing to have on a buffet. It's a long piece of furniture, about seven feet long, maybe, with all ornate filigrees in the doors, edging, wider panels inside the doors and brass knobs, and this big mirror over it, that my dad had bought for my mom, and the wall sconces were on either side, and he was in the middle, in front of the mirror, with this statue of Pan on one side and this statue of Ganesh on the other side, and there was a god candle and a goddess candle, in the two brass candle holders with the cut glass things, the chandelier things that match the wall sconces actually – A garage sale find. And in front of his box that he was in at the time, was a large shell... Abalone, that's it. And I put in flower petals, that I'd sun-dried from the wreaths that were at the funeral parlor with him... It was stuff from around the house that we liked, and we put it there because he liked it too. And [mom] moved his two statues over there. ... The statue of the archer was a gift that my mom bought for my dad. ... And he loved it. He thought it was beautiful. And it was appropriate to have something that was such a significant gift with him on that sort of altar, and the god and goddess candles were of course appropriate for any altar, and in the dish, in the abalone shell, was all flowers from the wreaths from the funeral and there was a twizzler in there because he liked twizzlers... I think it was on his birthday I took a twizzler out of the drawer and put it in there. I just kind of came over and talked to him sometimes. Once in a while, I'd pick up the box and hug it.

May also reported that she periodically handled the urn of ashes for similar reasons. She placed on the shrine the little herbal pouch from Natalie, a bottle of his favorite Polish blackberry liquor, and several of his ritual tools. May also recalls putting one of Kussina's paintings near the shrine.

Jack was interred at a special Samhain ritual on October 31, 2004. In the seven months between his death in March and his burial, he resided on the shrine Kussina described above. Clearly, this is in violation of the American civil understanding of the boundaries between the living and the dead. Kussina records the beginning of her reciprocal relationship with her father as an agentic ancestor. Unlike a traditional society, however, there is no formalized grieving that occurs during this period. Each mourner could choose to interact or not interact depending upon their personal inclination – however, with Jack's ashes sitting in plain view in the family room,
everyone who entered had to actively choose to interact or not interact. Anne reports the first time she saw the shrine, she thought "oh, hi Jack." This encounter for death was somewhat of a shock for many of the people, including American Neo-Pagans, who had such a direct and unexpected encounter with death in a place where one would not normally expect to encounter the dead.

**Burial**

Jack was buried in a public ritual held at Lugh's Garden, the Bowman family residence, on Samhain eve the October following his death. The ritual was performed in two parts, the first part being the regularly scheduled Mountain Moon Circle semi-public Samhain ritual, and the second part a graveside burial service. May explains why she chose Samhain for this important ritual:

Samhain is the traditional time of releasing spirits that have passed during that year. ... That is when the veil between the worlds is thin, that’s the time to say goodbye to our departed that left us in the light, in the life, and ... it's the high holy day for witches, and as far as I'm concerned there could not have been a more appropriate night to inter him and to release his spirit.

The clergy of the Samhain ritual were well aware both that Jack would be buried at the conclusion of the ritual, and that this ritual would be very significant for Jack's immediate family, so all the stops were pulled out. The ritual was an elaboration of the Innana myth, where the goddess Innana descends into the world of the dead in order to retrieve the soul of a loved one, and succeeds by leaving her own soul in exchange. This Samhain ritual had two circles instead of the usual one: (1) A circle of congregants who would stay in the world of the living to pray for those who would descend into the underworld and (2) a circle of those who were in the underworld. A third group, including May, were to travel to the world of the dead. Those in the “living” circle walked in a clockwise fashion, while those in the “dead” circle walked into a counterclockwise fashion, creating a powerful energy vortex, particularly at the point where the two circles met. There were about seventy attendees at the two rituals, an

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12 This is a part of Babylonian mythology.
unusually large figure because it included a number of Jack's non-Pagan relatives and family friends.

The first ritual was very complex and involved the entire coven, including people from out of town. Although everyone appreciated the hard work that went into the ritual, there were several concerns voiced about the ritual, particularly by immediate family members: (1) Jack's energy was fiery, and the ritual was very dark and earthy; as such, it was not appropriate to Jack's energy and not something he himself would have participated in. (2) The ritual was too complex and beyond the means of the coven to successfully accomplish without a far greater amount of rehearsal than was actually attempted. (3) The ritual departed so radically from the usual Mountain Moon Circle format that individuals who did not attend the rehearsals did not know when to proverbially sit, stand, and kneel. I would add a fourth point that since the ritual emphasized a highly specialized mythos that most of the participants lacked emotional commitment to the ritual. These four points had the collective effect of rendering a ritual that was intended to be "high energy" to be a "low energy" ritual because the community was not "directing their energy" in a cohesive manner – i.e. enough people flubbed lines or made errors in ritual actions that the ritual as a whole had the feeling of a performance to the participants. The critical feeling of communitas was missing from the ritual.

I view this ritual to be somewhat idiosyncratic. Cases 2, 4, 6, and 7 held burial rituals independent of any other ritual. Case 3 had a burial ritual immediately following a regularly scheduled festival event that made no allowances for the funeral to occur, and as such occurred in exactly the same way that the participants expected. In case 5, there was an American civil burial a month after the funeral. The chief mourners performed the "mourning" part of the burial ritual as a part of a regularly scheduled Samhain ritual. Thus, although two of my cases were attached to large and complex rituals, Jack's burial was the only one that was attached to a large, specially convened ritual that was a one-shot deal.
The first ritual was performed in the back yard of the Bowman family residence, which is located in a rural, wooded area on twenty five acres of land. The second ritual was performed at the graveside, which, when facing the house from the street, was on the left hand side of the house and slightly towards the street. The family had created a large memorial garden there. The design of the garden was created with an eye towards Jack's personal energy. It included the statues that decorated his shrine, “moon and stars watermelons” the seeds of which are sold by a company with a name similar to the name of the coven, and a large bush called a “Henry Lauder Walking Stick” bush. May describes how the bush was selected:

The Henry Lauder Walking Stick bush that the kids bought ... is a hazelnut tree. Jack's favorite nuts were hazelnuts. If you look at the branches of the Henry Lauder Walking Stick hazelnut bush, they are very crooked and twisty, almost like writhing snakes, sort of.

Prior to the ritual, Jack, Jr. created a steel urn for the ashes to be buried in instead of the plastic urn that the crematorium provided. He reported that he spent hours shining that urn up until it looked like a mirror you could shave with. He also dug a hole in the center of the garden and four smaller holes, one in each cardinal direction from the center.

At the beginning of the ritual, members of the community assembled in a circle surrounding the grave, which was in the location of the normal Mountain Moon Circle altar. Members were instructed to choose a quarter to stand in appropriate to their personal energy. A circle was cast counterclockwise. Each participant in turn, starting in the west, took the hand of the person to their right, and said “Hand to hand, and heart to heart, I build this circle of Jack.” The quarters were called by members of the coven tapped in advance.13 The Priest, Ray, invoked the God Lugh (pronounced Loo; Jack’s patron deity) into his body. Harley then invoked the Goddess Gaia, May’s patron deity, into May’s body. This is a departure from the normal procedure. May then

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13 The text of these quarter calls and the following invocations of the God and Goddess, were not preserved. They were in no way atypical however. In particular, Harley spoke of releasing Jack’s soul and letting him move on. She also spoke of the importance of the community moving on.
"passed" the goddess energy to Harley by placing her hands on Harley’s shoulders and then embracing, so that Harley could continue with the ritual in her role as priestess. May and her children entered the center of the circle, just on the margins of the garden, aided by Harley. May briefly thanked everyone for coming, and expressed how much it meant to her that everyone was there. She placed an eagle feather in the hole in the east quarter, a bit of the fire candle from a Mountain Moon Circle ritual in the south quarter, a shot of Jack’s favorite blackberry brandy in the west quarter, and a Samoa Girl Scout cookie in the north quarter – these were all things that Jack liked and as such were particularly associated with his personal energy. May then opened the urn. She and the kids took a few small scoops of the ashes, and distributed them in each of the small holes in each the quarters. Members of the coven were then invited forward to do the same if they wished; most did. This left about an inch of clearance at the top of the urn. Rich, the other Mountain Moon Circle sexton, placed Jack’s Leatherman utility knife in the urn with his ashes, because “he never went anywhere without it,” and resealed the urn, which was lowered into the central hole by May. The immediate family then backfilled the holes by hand. Harley and Rich then dismissed Goddess and God, the quarters were dismissed, and the coven sang “The circle is open,” in keeping with the order of the full moon ritual. There was an extended pot-luck feast and social hour following that lasted late into the night.

May felt that this ritual was a very powerful healing experience for her as chief mourner. She said:

I was so emotionally involved in it. To be honest with you, I didn’t know what anybody was doing. All I know is that it worked for me. I felt Jack’s presence, I felt the presence of the Goddess and God there. I felt extremely comforted when we did the actual internment, and I called in Gaia, to enter [Harley], and she entered me first. And when I started to call her in, she just completely entered myself. And I could feel that light up from within. And I know my whole body relaxed and I felt comforted and I was able to smile, for the first time in a long time. And when I called her into [Harley] she also went into her, but she also remained within me at the same time, which, when you’re a goddess, you can do.

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14 Jack was initially buried in the plastic urn provided by the crematorium due to a misunderstanding. Several days later he was quietly disinterred and reburied in the polished chrome urn that Jack Jr. made for him, where he remains today.

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those things. ... It’s a filling. It’s as though you’re just filled with energy and just filled with light and peace and calm and understanding, where you’re not tense and worried about anything, that you know, “oh, ok, things are all going to be fine. This is how it’s meant to be, so it’s all going to be ok.”

In my case 5, the decedent’s father, Mike, held a traditional burial for his teenage son near where he grew up in Oklahoma about six weeks after the Neo-Pagan funeral.

But Mike reserved his grieving for Samhain is a way reminiscent of May’s grieving process:

One of my management techniques for dealing with the grief was tell the story a lot, let myself cry when I told it. But when I needed to put it aside when I needed to go to work, or whatever, I told myself “You can deal with all this at Bone Dance in October,” because [A] [Matt’s] birthday is October the thirtieth, Bone Dance is always right around Halloween, of course the veil is the thinnest then, and that just seemed like an appropriate date to make. “Matt, you and I have a date then, in the mean time, I’m going to go on with my life, and if I have an incidenta breakdown or whatever, that’s fine, but I’m not going to consciously do a lot of work on processing the grief, until then.”

I got to bone dance about midnight... which was by then his birthday. And obviously, I had the whole car ride ... to be with myself, so I was getting pretty somber. And over that summer, [my former girlfriend] and I had moved out but kept dating. And after Matt died, I just shut down and withdrew. And it was kinda like, that was the beginning of the end. We’re still dear friends, we’re just not dating. That summer she started leaning on [someone else]... She didn’t stop seeing me, we just didn’t see each other much. Of course, you know we’ve always had an open, something between an open marriage and polygamy, or whatever, and she had invited [someone else] to go with her. ... I knew they were going to be there, it wasn’t a shock, and as soon as I get there she comes running up and gives me a big hug and helps me get settled and all, and that was all good. But as I walked into the circle, I saw her there in [another fellow’s] arms, and that was very difficult and all, because no matter how magnanimous and poly you want to believe you are, at your weakest moments, you’re still human. That was really difficult, and I so almost left. That was so painful. And luckily my mind was in control still, barely, and said “No, that’s not why you’re here. ... You have business with Matt, ... you and Matt have a date, deal with it, suck it up and deal with it.”

So, I tried to center myself, I went down to the warming fire, got some food, went up to the Temple, tried to meditate, did my best to stay there, tried to play the drums, that wasn’t working, finally started walking the circle. I’m by myself the whole time. [I was] feeling very empty this whole time [and] feeling very sorry for myself. I’m trying to get in – get centered, and spiritually connected where I can drum, where I can participate, ... where I can be part of the circle.

About the second orbit [around the circle], the floodgates burst loose, and I just started crying and at that point I was confirmed why that was where I needed to do this, because within seconds [my former girlfriend] ... [She] grabbed my arm and literally lead me around the circle, because I couldn’t see, I was crying. Nobody else touched me, but I was surrounded by people with eagle feathers, and rattles protecting me.

I went around the circle until I couldn’t breathe because of my allergies, and then I went and sat on the hay bale, and ... I had people behind me with a rattle,
holding space, I had people coming up to me, strangers, ... Everybody did something different. ... I was well taken care of, particularly by the elders.

It got overwhelming. Sitting on that hay bale, the pure energy, the love, the positive got so overwhelming, I couldn’t take it. It was so much. I described it as waterfalls of joy washing away the tears, the sadness. I used that phrase then and it still applies, it was so accurate. It was a torrent of positive energy washing away the sadness, and difficulty.

So I had to get up. I got up and started walking around the circle, and I’m walking around, and I noticed a very cute young lady wearing not a lot, and she had on this very transparent top over like a halter or something, and she was taking the translucent top off, and I’m noticing all of this. And I kind of went “wait a minute!” ... That was not at all out of character for me, to observe this, and feel the way I did. But it was very much out of context. That’s not where I was. Until I realized – “Matt cut it OUT!” It was Matt screwing with me. He got inside my head, and said “dad look at her, look at that! She’s cute huh? Well, if you don’t want her I do!” Yeah, he was there, absolutely, he was there.

Even though this example from case 5 was not a burial ritual, it shared many of the healing elements of the burial ritual in the other cases. It was seven months after the decedent’s death. It was performed primarily by the chief mourner. It was intended to deal with the chief mourner’s grief, to wash it away. And very importantly, we see the agentic decedent peeking his head into the ritual at the very end. It is this subject that we consider next.

Examples of Interaction with the Agentic Ancestor

In these examples, I will present ethnographic evidence for the post-mortem agency as a Neo-Pagan sees it. In particular, I will emphasize the structural features that allow a Neo-Pagan to distinguish between communication from an agentic ancestor and non-communicative events. Each representative example will be followed by a brief discussion of important structural features.

Jack and a Dirty Dog

Elaine is our granddaughter... and Jack passed away, she was still three. And she was just the apple of his eye. They played together a lot, she loved her grandpa Jack, she went to the hospital many, many, many, many times to visit. ...Well Jack, for almost a year, when we first started planning to get this house, she wanted a puppy. So Jack kept saying, “when we move into the house, I’m going to get you a dirty dog.” “gonna get you a dirty dog. For your birthday, I’m gonna get you a dirty dog.” Couldn’t be a clean dog. Had to be a dirty dog, right.
Well, we have to backtrack a few years. Long before Elaine was born, when my kids were little. We had a Dalmatian. Actually we had the Dalmatian before the kids were born. And the Dalmatian was Jack's dog. And obviously, Dalmatians have spots. Every year for Halloween, Jack would take a magic marker and draw stripes down the middle of the dog's forehead, down to his nose. And that was [the dog's] Halloween costume. He had a stripe down the middle of his nose. And this went on year, after year, after year, every Halloween, this dog would have a stripe down the middle of his nose with black magic marker. And of course, eventually it would wear away. ...

[Years later] we decided, we're gonna get a dog for Jack Jr., cause every boy should have a dog. So we went to the pound, and we found this dog, it was a Shepard mix, and this dog, we named [her] mischief. She was always in trouble. She was a cool dog, but she was like the Houdini of dogdom. She could get out of anything. Well, she was a brown-and-white Shepard mix dog. Jack decided every Halloween he was going to draw spectacles around this dog. No stripe – this dog got black magic marker spectacles every Halloween. ...

So, Sambo had always wanted a dog. She had always wanted a husky with one blue eye and one brown eye, but we could never afford a purebred like that. So we just never got her her husky. And she was the kind of kid that didn't complain and didn't beg for things, and everything, so she just never got her dog. So, lo and behold, time passes, and Elaine is born, and Jack is promising his granddaughter a dirty dog for her birthday. Well, he passed away before her birthday came. Two weeks before her birthday, Sambo's Jack gets this phone call from his boss, his bosses wife works for a vet and someone had been abusing and neglecting this dog, and they took it away, and they were looking for a home for this dog. So, the boss thought of Jack, knew he had a little girl, said, we've got this dog, do you want it? And he says, I've got to ask Sambo and see if she wants it. He says, I'll tell you what. I'll bring you the dog, take the dog home, let her take a look and see if she likes the dog. So he says ok.

So he brings the dog in. It's a husky. One blue eye, one brown eye. With a black stripe down the middle of its nose, and black markings around its eyes. Samantha was blown away. ... So she says, does the dog have a name? He says, yeah, the dog's name is Angel. Needless to say, they kept the dog. Two weeks before her birthday. [emphasis added]

May terms the coincidences noted in italics above synchronicities. They are among the core pieces of evidence considered by a Neo-Pagan in determining if a particular event constitutes Post-Mortem communication. Magic in action looks like luck. One of the core features that distinguishes between an accident and intentional communication is that the person relaying the communication must have no prior knowledge of the synchronicity. Jack's co-worker could not have known of Jack Sr.'s promise to his daughter or of the significance of the markings on the dog. May interpreted the markings to indicate that it was Jack (social identity) and not some other actor communicating; furthermore, the form of the object – a dog – indicated to May that Jack was fulfilling his promise to his granddaughter (relational identity).
It is very common for a Neo-Pagan to receive messages from a decedent that are via a professional psychic, either because the Neo-Pagan sought out the message, or because the agentic ancestor sought out the mourner. Another example:

*The English Psychic*

Jack Jr.’s friend Bobby, ... is roughly the same age as Jack. And his father passed away within two weeks of Jack. Now I had never met his father, never met his mother. I knew Bobby a little bit, because he was Jack’s buddy, but I didn’t really know him well. And one day, we were working on the house. ... I hear Jack hollering for me. Ok, so I got down of the ladder, and I went around the corner in front of the barn, and I saw this woman standing there, and Jack says mom, this is Bobby’s mom, I wanted to introduce you. She has something that she wants to show you.

So the girls heard her over there, and both Sambo and Kussina came over to see what was going on. And the woman said, you know my husband died right about the same time as your husband did. I said, “yeah.” And she said, “well, there was a psychic that was ... providing psychic readings for people over in long island ....” And this woman found out about it and she decided she wanted to go to see if she could contact her late husband. So she went and she was talking to this psychic said that he contacted her husband, and her husband was saying things about ... - Bobby and his brother had some watches. And one of the watches broke. And this happened after the husband passed. And [the psychic] was talking about “you know, your gonna have to get that watch fixed.” So, she was like, “how did he know about this, he’s already dead when [the watches broke].” So she’s obviously all worked up an emotional and everything, because it’s a pretty amazing thing. And then, all of a sudden, the psychic looked at her and said “who’s Jack?” And she kind of did a double take and said “uh, um, my son has a friend named Jack?” And the psychic says, “Well, did he loose his father recently?” And this woman says, “yeah, he died right around the same time that my husband did.” He says, “Well, I have Jack here, and he says he wants you to tell his family that he’s ok, and that he said hi.” And the woman played the tapes, because he had taped this session. And you could hear this man with a British accent saying, “Who is Jack?”

And that is exactly the kind of thing that Jack would have done. He would have looked around trying to find a way to get a message to us. It wasn’t coming through to me. And I’m sure I was just too emotionally blocked to receive anything. So I can picture him walking up to this total stranger, didn’t know the guy, but knew he was in contact, “by the way, who you talkin’ to?” “I’m talkin’ to my wife.” “Well, isn’t your kid and my kid friends?” “um, yeah.” “tell ’em I said hi!” I mean I could picture Jack doing that. Because that is exactly what he would do all the time any time someone was on the phone. Every time the phone rang, I’d pick up the phone, answer, “who’s on the phone? Oh, well tell them I said so-and-so.” So this just totally blew me away. To get this message like this. And there have been a few other instances since then where he has gotten a message through various people and he has visited me a few times. He hasn’t talked to me, but he’s made his presence known. Which is kinda nice. A little strange, but it’s kinda nice. 

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15 This story is selected from half a dozen similar examples. This is probably the most common form of post mortem communication from an agentic ancestor.
In this conversation, May is clarifying the criteria by which she judged the legitimacy of communication. The person performing the communication had no way of knowing the significance of the information they were presenting – indeed, Bobby's mother is not a Neo-Pagan. In this case, the social identity of the agentic ancestor was communicated directly by the psychic, who had no way of knowing any relevant information except through divination. Furthermore the content of the communication is consistent with the relational identity May has imposed upon her husband – In other words, he said what she expected him to say. A similar example:

Melody's Message

[Jack] ... sent a message through Melody. She was at a – not really a psychic fair, but it was one of those kinds of places, with the holistic healing, and tarot cards ... There was a psychic as well, and [she] asked if there was someone there who had lost someone recently whose name began with a “J.” And Melody kind of raised her hand and said, “Yeah, I know someone.” And the woman said, “Well, his wife is going through a lot with packing boxes and everything.” And that was right around the time that we were packing everything up and getting ready to figure out where the heck we were going to be living. So, she didn't even tell me about the message, cause she just kind of blew it off and said, “Well, it's just a lucky guess, that kind of thing.”

But then when I got this other message in December, and I said what a comfort it was to me to know that yes his spirit lives on. Because you can say it, you can give it lip service, you can think you believe it, but there's still that worry down inside until you get concrete, absolute, can't possibly doubt it, like that tape-recorded message. So that was such a relief for me to know that, alright his body's gone, but the essential Jack, he's still out there, keeping an eye on things and staying involved in what he has to do. He still goes on.

In this example May and Melody come to the conclusion that the message may not be authentic. The synchronicity element was present in part, but it initially sounded like the sort of vagueness that characterizes psychics who aren't connected well to spirit, by Neo-Pagan standards, or who are just out-and-out frauds. None the less, after other similar examples that include far more synchronicities, May comes to the tentative conclusion that this may have been a genuine communication, although she only could reach that communication through the confirmation of additional, similar messages.
“My Side Hurts”

Laura was at work [the day Matt died]. ... She said it was the weirdest thing, that afternoon before it happened, [she] started breaking down crying. “I didn’t know why I was crying, and my side hurt something fierce, and I couldn’t figure out why or what.” Well it turns out that when [Matt] landed on that ledge, his side is what hit. And the timing coincided with when she experienced this. None of us knew that when she was telling the story. But we pieced it together later when I got the report from the parks service. Matt died when he hit that ledge. After he landed on the ground, he did a death rattle for a couple of minutes, but that was just the brain stem dying. But he was already gone. ... He had some pretty massive head trauma, that she didn’t feel, that would have happened after he fell on down.

Well, she felt his side hit, so at that moment they were connected. Matt reached out, and I guess she was the one that was the easiest to get to, she was the most psychically aware at the moment, and she started crying, so she was there. In that instant they were connected.

In this example, we see a third major form of communication: Communication that is at the moment of death from the decedent’s perspective, but that is prior to notification of death from the perspective of the recipient of the message. The legitimacy of the message was confirmed by synchronicity – Laura experienced the injury to Matt’s side a month prior to date that the chief mourner acquired the same information from the medical examiner.

Lights on, Lights off.

Steve and [Timothy] were both visited by Matt a lot during the next couple of weeks. Steve was probably his best friend at the time. ... Timothy wasn’t [psychically aware] ... but Matt kept turning lights off and on in the room. And Timothy was staying with Steve. And Timothy would go to Steve and say I’m scared, I think Matt is doing this, and Steve would say “Matt cut it out,” and it stopped. And [it happened] two or three times more, and Timothy would say “Matt stop please,” and it would stop. Some times one or two more [light flashes], and it would stop.

At first glance, flashing lights seems to be more consistent with a bad horror flick than with serious religious experience. However the experience Mike relates here, seems consistent with other overtly paranormal experiences that constitute communication by a decedent. Timothy witnessed Matt’s violent death – indeed, he performed CPR on Matt for nearly two hours until paramedics arrived on the scene of the accident. So Timothy’s sheer proximity to Matt at the time of his death caused it

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seem reasonable that Matt (social identity) would choose to communicate with Timothy. Furthermore, to all involved that the unusual light flashes were overtly paranormal – not a mechanical failure – and constituted communication from the decedent, because they stopped when a living actor in the room spoke with the decedent.

"You're Late!"

But of course, Steve, being psychically aware, actually talked to Matt over the next couple of weeks. And he was going on to another planet, and he had some big adventure on some other planet somewhere, and was late – he should have gone. He was probably supposed to die [during an earlier accident] and didn’t. Because his soul was late for it’s next appointment, according to Steve, [he had to go]. And Steve finally told him “Matt, GO! You’re late, go!”

The last form of communication I want to discuss here is the idea of **overt contact with the agentic ancestor made by a living actor.** Surprisingly, it usually is the ancestor who initiates contact with the living actor, not the other way around. However certain circumstances warrant an attempt to directly contact the decedent. In this case, we see a person whom the chief mourner respects for his consistent connectedness with the spirit world initiating contact on his own accord, for an important spiritual purpose. Similar direct attempts to contact a decedent might be made because the chief mourner needs an important piece of spiritual information about his or her journey of personal growth; the decedent might be invited to intervene in the affairs of an associate particularly because of illness or because of a worldly problem of grave import. The most common time to contact an agentic ancestor would be Samhain, and my experience has been that this is the most typical time a Neo-Pagan would seek the direct advice of an ancestor in absence of an emergency. Some Neo-Pagans do not ever directly contact the agentic ancestor, but proceed from the position that the ancestor will seek them out if there is something sufficiently important to be communicated.
Summary

The American Neo-Pagan funeral cycle structurally proceeds as follows given a slow death in hospital:

(1) The decedent begins creating the social portions of their post-mortem identity prior to their death through the creation of their will and, in some cases the purchase of pre-need funeral and burial services.

(2) The decedent becomes terminally ill. There is an intensification of social interaction surrounding the decedent. Chief mourners and helpers are identified, and may begin making decisions on behalf of the still-living decedent. The relational aspects of the post-mortem identity begin to form.

(3) It becomes apparent that the decedent will die in the immediate future. Clergy, family, and friends are notified and wait with the decedent for the death to occur. The decedent biologically dies, and the death ritual concludes after it has separated the decedent from the world of the living. The chief mourners now formally acquire mourning status. The rite of separation may include non-Pagans, and will probably be multi-vocalic, as participants in multiple intentional communities and the American civil religion each interpret the death ritual differently.

(4) During the period of liminality, the chief mourners settle a great deal of paperwork, and participate in a public viewing at a funeral home. There is a great deal of ambiguity as to the location and powers of the decedent's soul during this period. There may be a contest between chief mourners over which of the decedent's living social identities should be included in the publicly acknowledged post-mortem identity. One or more funeral rituals are performed, representing different theological landscapes, and incorporating the decedent into the afterlife. A general consensus of the people that subscribe to any given theological landscape develops about the whereabouts of the decedent's soul. These funerals each set the tone for the way in which the living should relate to the decedent. Most mourners are incorporated into the world of the living.
(5) The decedent is cremated without ceremony, and the ashes returned to the chief mourner. The decedent’s ashes may be included in a shrine in the chief mourner’s home.

(6) In the period between cremation and burial, the chief mourner may experience any number of events that are vetted against both theological criteria and the chief mourners preexisting understanding of the decedents social and relational identities for legitimacy. Those events that pass the theological and identity tests are considered legitimate communication from the decedent, and are communicated to other mourners and former mourners by the chief mourner. These interactions become a part of the relational portion of the decedent’s post-mortem identity, and by association are used to vet additional post-mortem interactions for legitimacy.

(7) The following Samhain, the decedent’s ashes are interred by the chief mourner and helpers. The chief mourner intentionally creates an alternate reality expressly for the purpose of grieving. At the conclusion of the ritual, the chief mourners and helpers may leave the markers of mourning behind them. This completes the formal funeral cycle.

(8) Direct interaction with the decedent tends to decrease in frequency, and be more generally restricted to Samhain rituals, the date of the decedent’s death, and important parts of the civil ritual calendar, such as the decedent’s birthday and Christmas.

Although I do not have evidence, I suspect that the decedent’s relational identity becomes relatively fixed several years after the completion of the funeral cycle. Likewise, I think it likely that after the chief mourners die and there is little direct living memory of the decedent, new ways of relating may be developed and implemented by people who do not have direct memory of the decedent. This observation is based on my experience of the relational identity the young people in my family have created for several of my family’s deceased matriarchs. Because Neo-Pagans are just beginning the process of funeral cycle creation, there is little longitudinal evidence that would support such a contention empirically.
CHAPTER 8

THE UNDISCOVERED COUNTRY

Let us return now to the first of four principle themes of this thesis: The agentic ancestor of American Neo-Paganism. The agentic ancestor is ultimately a consequence of a trajectory of belief that begins with the theology of immanence. These beliefs are then juxtaposed against a funeral ritual framework informed by the traditions of the American civil religion. These two together – the beliefs held in common by Neo-Pagans and the common Neo-Pagan inheritance of the American civil religion – proximally create any given funeral ritual. The funeral ritual itself is a forum for the creation and display of the decedent's post-mortem identity. During the funeral cycle, conflicting elements of the social portion of the post-mortem identity must be negotiated and developed, and consensus reached on which elements will and will not be displayed overtly. More importantly, from the Neo-Pagan perspective, the mourners must determine how they will relate to the decedent in death: they must create the relational aspects of the decedent's post-mortem identity. It is possible that some Neo-Pagan chief mourners feel that this is easier to do if the mourners can actually see the corpse and interact with it post-mortem, hence the elaboration of the body in cases 1 and 6, or of the casket in cases 3 and 5.

The second broad theme of this thesis concerns the American civil funeral cycle, and the changes that have been imposed upon it in recent years. At the beginning of chapter 1, I set up the core historical problem: Two hundred years ago, the decedent was laid out and buried by immediate friends and family without much pomp and circumstance. I described an ethnographic example of the burial component of such a
funeral in chapter 6. Modern American funerals are now the third most expensive purchase an American will make, after house and automobile, and rival the civil wedding in their complexity. How did we get from the former to the latter? I concur with Mitford 1963 that the increasing professionalization of the industry had had a big hand to play in the changes to this important American civil rite of passage. However, the second contributing factor, which Mitford 1963 does not discuss, is the impact of technology on the entire process. The death ritual has increased in prominence as people can now be informed of an impending death, have the means to travel to the dying person's bedside, and in many cases the time of death can actually be chosen by the next of kin's decision to remove life support. As I've recorded above, the decedent's chief mourner, in addition to filling the role of hostess at a viewing, must now take care of this mountain of paperwork during the already short liminal period, limiting her grieving process until after the funeral ritual.

A third key point I would like to address concerns the literal accuracy of Arnold van Gennep's 1906 model for the rite of passage. Van Gennep articulated three distinct social states – the old social state, the period of liminality, and the new social state – separated from one another by a rite of separation and a rite of incorporation. Van Gennep 1906 did not allow for a single individual decedent to be incorporated into more than one new state. Yet the ethnographic evidence clearly indicates not only that this occurs, but also that it occurs frequently in the United States.

The Selection of Funeral Characters in a Plural Theological Landscape

Probably the most significant finding of this study concerns the importance of plural afterlives in America. That any given individual may experience plural afterlives is something that is not readily apparent in the literature. However, the existence of plural afterlives is something that applies not strictly to Neo-Paganism, but to any intentional community that would challenge the American civil understanding of the
world to come. It is clear from the literature that Americans are in some way dissatisfied not just with the funeral industry, but also with the sequestered ancestor it creates. American Neo-Pagans, and doubtless others, have created alternative models that offer an ancestor who is not sequestered from the living, and create a set of rules for interacting with that ancestor. Although the sequestered, forgotten dead is the dominant model in our society, these cultural experiments with the afterlife stand waiting in the wings to enter broad American discourse. Doubtlessly, most of these models will continue to be held and employed only by limited membership of the intentional communities that formulated them. However, should one of these models be selected for non-elimination given a changed theological landscape within the American civil religion, it may become the dominant means by which our children, as heirs to the American civil religion, will apply meaning to those who have come before them.

Suggestions for Future Research

Certainly there is a great deal left unsaid in this text. My cases were Neo-Pagan; my discussion of the American civil funeral cycle was informed by the theoretical and ethnographic literature, extrapolation from my Neo-Pagan funerals, and the many civil funerals I have attended as a participant – clearly we need an updated ethnography of the civil funeral cycle.

In this work, I did not distinguish between the American civil religion and the other, non-Pagan intentional communities that occupy the landscape. Many of these other intentional communities have both more adherents than Neo-Paganism and greater access to mainstream social capital. How do these other intentional communities modify the civil religion? Do they have an agentic ancestor, the conventionally sequestered dead of the civil religion, or their own unique and distinctive view of the dead? Indeed, I have presented the agentic ancestor as uniquely Neo-Pagan and based
ultimately upon the theology of immanence. Perhaps it is actually common to other American intentional communities, and by association a subset of the American civil religion – only additional research can address this point.

There seem to be some commonly presented positions in the literature that I could not confirm in my research. For example, Mitford 1963 takes the position that there is no demand for the funeral industry. Yet the Neo-Pagans illustrate that there very clearly is demand; the very people who would, all else being equal, seem most likely to care for their dead themselves actively demanded professional funeral services. The causes and consequences of this phenomenon need to be evaluated.

Berger 1999 reports little regional variation in American Neo-Pagan demographics, and my data indicate that a funeral held in rural Pennsylvania was indistinguishable from one held in the desert southwest. However, there may be variations in American civil funeral practice. I think that if there is such variation, it will result as a consequence of the variable religious topography of the United States, including both the concentration, or lack thereof, of intentional communities that challenge the civil religion in funeral practice in a given area, and variations in the American civil religion as a whole. In particular, variations in the topography of the American civil religion need to be documented ethnographically.

Pike’s 2001 discussion of the Neo-Pagan festival community represents a fascinating opportunity for elaboration. The American civil model specifies that key rites of passage should be held independent of another event – however, it is very common for Neo-Pagan weddings to occur as adjunct to a festival context. Some elements of Neo-Pagan funerals also have occurred either at, before, or after a festival. Both the process of situating the festival within the American civil religion, and the funeral within the festival are very interesting subjects.
In his famous "to be or not to be" speech, Hamlet refers to the afterlife as:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{The undiscover'd country, from whose bourn} \\
\text{No traveler returns, puzzles\textsuperscript{1} the will,} \\
\text{And makes us rather bear those ills we have} \\
\text{Than fly to others that we know not of?}
\end{align*}
\]

*Hamlet,*

III.i.78-81

In this speech, Shakespeare refers to many things – fear of the future, fear of death, the life and death of both people and communities – many of the same things that come to the minds of modern Americans when they consider their own mortality.

In most texts, this would be the place to drop in some educated guesswork as to the trajectory that both American Neo-Paganism and the American civil religion will take moving forward. I feel that detailed speculation forward into the undiscovered country is unwise at this juncture. Certainly an increasing dissatisfaction with American funerary practice reported in the literature may force the large, commercial, and income-oriented funeral industry to respond in yet-to-be invented ways in order to keep bringing income to their stakeholders. American Neo-Paganism is also very much in a place of transition right now as individual Neo-Pagan communities experience a process of denominationalization. I cannot imagine that the Neo-Pagan community thirty years from now will look anything like it does today: As it denominationalizes, each of the key beliefs of the movement which are a consequence of the theology of immanence will be evaluated in light of the selection process I outline above, and some will doubtlessly be discarded as no longer tenable. Likewise, new elements will be added, either adopted through cultural borrowing or invented anew. These beliefs stand in a key place in the American Neo-Pagan theological structure – virtually every Neo-Pagan ritual great and small is based upon them. As such, any change to the core beliefs will radically alter the movement. I sincerely hope that the agentic ancestor survives this re-evaluation unscathed; in my heart I think it will.

\textsuperscript{1} By "puzzles" Shakespeare means "paralyzes".

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One thing is certain however: People will keep dying. Whether the agentic ancestor of American Neo-Paganism will be selected for non-elimination by the heirs to the American civil religion within a changing American cultural landscape or not, our children will remember us, and their memories will be constructed into several post-mortem identities which they will use to define our present in whatever way is most meaningful to them given the plural theological landscape in which they will participate.

Shakespeare's understanding of the undiscovered country is fixed – there is a single future, unknown to mankind, and from which no man returns. For Shakespeare, the undiscovered country is “real” and exists independently of an observer. Much has changed since the end of the sixteenth century. Our children create the undiscovered country for us: To them, and to their posterity, we commend our future.
APPENDIX I

METHODOLOGY

I began fieldwork among Neo-Pagans in Pennsylvania in the Summer of 1999 with an eye to write a general ethnography of the movement. I joined a Neo-Pagan coven called Mountain Moon Circle, located in Groen, Pennsylvania. Mountain Moon Circle is a moderate sized "eclectic" coven with approximately twenty-five members and several hundred "seekers," or congregants.

Entree to the community was facilitated by a priestess of the coven who I met at a local natural foods cooperative. By Neo-Pagan standards, Mountain Moon Circle is an open group, hosting 13 public and 8 to 10 semi-public events each year. I attended full moon and sabbath rituals for about six months before I went through the process of formally joining the coven. I was an active participant in the coven until I moved to Las Vegas in the summer of 2001, when I extended my research to include several similar covens in Southern Nevada.

Jack's death came somewhat as a surprise. I quickly realized the importance of Jack's funeral, but I had some concerns about how representative his funeral was of Neo-Pagan funeral rituals in general. Jack was, after all a man at the height of his career with an above average income and substantial access to social and material capital. Was the ritual I witnessed typical of most Neo-Pagan rituals? What would a ritual for a poor Neo-Pagan look like? Or an elderly Neo-Pagan? Or an exceptionally young one? I began to attend other funerals that friends in the Neo-Pagan community made me aware of. I have been witness to a total of seven funerals or memorial services since 2001:

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• Case 1: 53 year old male, Groen, Pennsylvania.

• Case 2: 56 year old male, Las Vegas, Nevada.

• Case 3: 2 male infants less than one year of age, Indian Springs, Nevada.

• Case 4: ca. 25 year old male, Las Vegas, Nevada.

• Case 5: 17 year old male, Las Vegas, Nevada.

• Case 6: 12 year old canine, Overton, Nevada.

• Case 7: 66 year old female, Cactus Springs, Nevada.

I made a point of only recording those rituals where an open invitation was extended to the Neo-Pagan community, because the random nature of death rendered obtaining prior consent impossible. Although I have attended several private funerals, they were not included in the data set. Since carrying a notebook or tape recorder about would have indelibly identified me as an outsider, I relied on my memory, making notes of rituals immediately after the fact, and where ever possible, obtaining the script of the ritual to assist my memory.

In observing these rituals, I came to realize that Jack's funeral - noted as case 1 above - was highly typical of Neo-Pagan funerals in general. The main elements of Jack's funeral rituals were present in at least one, and usually several other rituals that I have witnessed. Most of the differences between Jack's funeral and others that I witnessed concerned Jack's relative wealth and his important place in both the American Neo-Pagan and American civil communities.

Neo-Pagan covens, in general, are quite concerned with the privacy of their members – Mountain Moon Circle was not an exception. I made it my practice to only directly record those rituals that were open to either the general public, or long-term members of the congregation. I intentionally omitted content that would reveal information that, as a member of the coven I am privy to, but is not accessible to non-members. Likewise, I did not include any photos because they might have identified an individual who wished to remain anonymous. Likewise, the published image of an
important ritual tool, in Neo-Pagan theological terms, could conceivably create an impact on that tool's energy within the circle.

**Pseudonyms of Informants**

"Call him Jack," May said to me during one of our first tape-recorded conversations. Certainly the name by which you call someone - the name identical to "me" - has particular power for people. A great deal of social, relational, and intrapsychic power is encoded into names. Neo-Pagans in particular invest additional value in names because most Neo-Pagans have adopted one or more religious names, each of which is meaning laden. This practice of creating new names that fit the practitioner's chosen Neo-Pagan identity is an important protest against the anonymity of a late-modern urban world.

It is conventional in ethnographies to in some way disguise your informants to protect their privacy, usually by assigning pseudonyms and disguising the locations where events occurred. Over eighty percent of my informants did not want their names changed to pseudonyms; several informants emphatically did not want to remain anonymous, including May. May in particular felt that made up pseudonyms were just not meaning-laden; they did not capture the personal energy of an informant in some essential way.

The inclusion of any identifiers in this text, however, would have exposed the handful of members of the community that wanted to remain private to outside scrutiny. As a compromise, I invited each informant to create a name by which I would call them in this text. May chose "Jack" to refer to her late husband because when they first met at a high school dance, she misheard his name, and thought he said his name was "Jack." By choosing this name, in effect, May allowed Jack to name himself. May invoked Jack's agency to allow his energy to come alive in these pages.

Curiously, no one was particularly upset that I disguised the location of the events of Jack's life. Neo-Pagans, like most Americans are mobile urbanites and often lack
deep roots tied to a particular geographical location. Theologically, the sacred circle
where worship occurs is "beyond time and space," and as such can be created
anywhere. Mountain Moon Circle could very easily have been located in rural
Pennsylvania, in a theological sense, if the members of the community had willed it so.

Once I had developed the core research questions of this thesis, and after receiving
approval from the Institutional Review Board at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, I
returned to the field in the summer of 2006 to conduct structured tape-recorded
interviews with informants. I sought to interview everyone who had supported Jack as
he was in the hospital, or who had attended one or more of the funerals in his honor.
In practice, this was not possible; the attending physicians, funeral director, some
family members, and other important dramatis personae in the American civil schema
could not be reached for comment. So of necessity this thesis represents the Neo-Pagan
side of the story to a greater degree than the American civil side.

Informed Consent

American Neo-Pagans are literate, and typically college-educated, urbanites. One
informant is a professor of sociology at a major university. Several of my informants are
employed in the arts, including a journalist, two musicians, and two theater
professionals. All have participated in studies of various kinds in the past. However,
American Neo-Paganism thrives on its marginality. Every Neo-Pagan knows of the
persecution of the founders of the movement in Britain in the 1930s; some have
disciplined academic knowledge of the subject. Most also know of Neo-Pagans who
have suffered discrimination (particularly in employment) based upon their religious
affiliation. A number of key informants would not have participated if their anonymity
outside their church community could not be assured. With this in mind, I requested
that the University's Institutional Review Board waive the usual requirements for
documentation of informed consent.
I contacted most interviewees personally to request their participation; No one I asked declined, and indeed several interviews went on into second and occasionally third sessions. I obtained informed consent prior to the interview. Interviews were conducted at the homes of informants or at the Bowman family residence. I reconfirmed informed consent at the time of the interview by reviewing the consent document verbally with the tape recorder running and asking the informant for their informed consent.

*The Interview as Healing Change*

During the interview, interviewees were invited to discuss some of their memories of Jack in life as a warm-up topic to gain familiarity with the interview process. I then asked each interviewee to tell me when and how they found out that Jack was sick. Each person was invited to recall their memories of Jack in the hospital. If the informant was present when Jack died, I asked them to relate their experience of his death. Each interviewee was then invited to describe the funeral rituals that he or she attended. At the conclusion of the interview, I asked each person to relate their vision of where Jack was presently located.

Several informants commented about the healing nature of the interview process. In almost every interview there were regular pauses for tears, as both my informants and I became overwhelmed by memories of Jack. In some cases I had to recontact informants after the fact because the tape recording became garbled at key points. If I ever interview about this subject again, I will bring a lot more tissues.

At the conclusion of fieldwork, I returned to Las Vegas and created transcriptions of each tape-recorded interview. I then recontacted several informants on the phone or by email to clear up inconsistencies. Several informants requested that particular aspects of their lives that they discussed on tape, or that I am aware of as a member of the coven, be omitted from the text. In all cases these requests have been honored.
APPENDIX II

PRAYERS, SONGS, AND POETRY

Natalie’s Performance at the Viewing

The following chant was performed by Natalie and Sherri at Jack’s viewing on the first day. A translation follows.

(Note: Each “/” notes the ringing of a chime.)

Maha Mrityunjaya Mantra
Om Tryamakam Yajamahe
Sugandhim Pusti – vardhanam /
Urva - rukamiva Bandhanan
Mrtyor - muksheeya Ma - amritat //

Translation:

Om. We worship The Three-Eyed Lord Shiva who is naturally fragrant, immensely merciful and who is the Protector of the devotees. Worshipping him may we be liberated from death for the sake of immortality just as the ripe cucumber easily separates itself from the binding stalk.

Readings from the Funeral

The following readings were read at the Neo-Pagan portion of the Jack Bowman’s funeral. Some of these readings have also been reproduced in the text. There were several readings that were performed ad hoc, and have not been preserved, so this list should not be construed as exhaustive. The names of the authors and people who presented the texts have been removed to protect the privacy of the people in question. When a published author is referenced, the name is preserved.
Eulogy

On Thursday morning, March 18, 2004, our Beloved Brother, Jack passed beyond the veil into the Summerland. Surrounded by friends and family, engulfed in their love, Joe moved peacefully into the Spiritual realm. Jack was a devoted husband to his beloved wife, May. He was a dedicated father, to his children Sambo, Jack, Kussina, and his son-in-law Jack. And he was a doting grandfather to his sweet little granddaughter Elaine.

Jack's devotion to his family and their common dream, was so strong that it manifested in the creation of Lugh's Garden, a wonderful spiritual retreat. This natural sanctuary will grow and thrive as part of Jack's legacy.

Not only was Jack devoted to his family, but he was also dedicated to his extended family and spiritual community. Jack has been a cherished and well loved member of Mountain Moon Circle for more than 3 years, now. Always ready to lend a hand, Jack has been a generous supporter of our community efforts, devoting his time and talents. A trained machinist and skilled craftsman, Jack was a wizard with mechanical things. A great finder of things, Jack possessed the rare talent of being able to deliver any object you could describe. Constantly, giving and always sharing, Jack was always willing to employ his skills to help a friend. Even as he struggled with health challenges, Jack was giving to the community. With the common goal of helping Jack, family and friends rallied together sending prayers, conducting Reiki sessions and generating healing through creative projects. We came together with the united purpose of helping Jack, but it was we who received the benefits, the innumerable benefits of a stronger, more soulful community. What was intended as our gift to Jack, became Jack's gift to us. Thank you Jack, for touching our lives and for generously sharing your many gifts with us.

We are honored and blessed to have known your loving spirit.
Blessed Be

Quarter Calls

In order performed:

West says:

"As the sun sets, So our friend Jack has left us. The water of our tears, like the salt water of the sea, and like the water of our mothers' womb, blesses this Gathering."

South says:

"As life is a day, So Jack has passed into the night. The fire of our life, the memories and courage, the strength given to us by our friend blesses this Gathering."

East says:

"As all that falls shall rise again, So our friend will be reborn. The air we breathe, this treasure of our life, the compassionate caring we give each other blesses this Gathering."
North says:

"As the Earth forms us, so our friend shall return to the earth. Our Mother feeds us, and clothes us. She gives us everything and in the end she takes our bodies back. And earth blesses this Gathering."

Charge of the Goddess

We have for a while lost one who is dear to us, and we all feel the loss. But it is only for a time, and our sorrow will lessen.

There is a reason for being here, and a reason for going. The Other Side, the Places Beyond, are warm, pleasing and beautiful with all ills gone, and youth anew.

There is a reason for leaving, when the purpose of this life is done. We must all journey beyond to pause, to rest, and to wait for those who are loved. In a place far from the cares of this world, with happiness and strength renewed. For dying is only a mode of forgetting, a way of rest, a way of returning to the Eternal Source, however we may see it.

Reading 1

Tir Inna Mban -- woman describing island to Bran mac Febhail

There is a distant isle, around which sea-horses glisten, a fair course on which the white wave surges, four pedestals uphold it.

A delight to the eye, a glorious range, is the plain on which the hosts hold games; coracle races against chariot in the plain south of Findargad.

Pillars of white bronze beneath it shining though aeons of beauty, lovely land through the ages of the world, on which the many blossoms fall.

Unknown is wailing or treachery in the happy familiar land; no sound there is rough or harsh, only sweet music striking on the ear.

Then if one sees the Silvery Land on which the dragonstones and crystals rain, the sea breaks the wave upon the land with crystal tresses from its mane...

The host races along Magh Mon,
a beautiful sport that is not feeble;
in the many colored land of surpassing beauty
they expect neither decay nor death.

Reading 2

Egyptian Prayer for the Dead

Middle Egyptian:

Hotep radi nesu Asir neb abdju, netjer ah-ah, neb djedu, radif peret-kheru te
henket ka apdu shes mekhet, khet-neb nefer wab ankh netjer yem, en ka en
yementy Jack ma’at kheru.

Translation:

An offering that the king gives before Osiris, lord of Abydos, great god, lord of
Busiris, so that he may give a voice-offering of bread and beer, oxen and birds,
alabaster and linen, everything good and pure on which a god lives, for the soul
of the revered ancestor, Jack, true of voice.

Anointing of the Body

Anoint the hands and say “Blessed be your hands that do their work”

Anoint the lips and say “Blessed be your lips that speak their names”

Anoint just above the eyes and say “Blessed be your eyes that have seen the
beauty of the great mother.

Anoint the middle of the forehead and say “Blessed be your mind that seeks to
know them.

Poem 1

Funeral Blues by W.H. Auden

Stop all the clocks, cut off the telephone,
Prevent the dog from barking with a juicy bone,
Silence the pianos and with muffled drum
Bring out the coffin, let the mourners come.

Let aeroplanes circle moaning overhead
Scribbling on the sky the message He Is Dead,
Put crepe bows round the white necks of the public doves,
Let the traffic policemen wear black cotton gloves.
He was my North, my South, my East and West,
My working week and my Sunday rest,
My noon, my midnight, my talk, my song;
I thought that love would last for ever; I was wrong.

The stars are not wanted now: put out every one;
Pack up the moon and dismantle the sun;
Pour away the ocean and sweep up the wood,
For nothing now can ever come to any good.

Poem 2

Success by Bessie Anderson Stanley

He has achieved success who has lived well, laughed often and loved much; who has enjoyed the trust of pure women, the respect of intelligent men and the love of little children; who has filled his niche and accomplished his task; who has left the world better than he found it, whether by an improved poppy, a perfect poem or a rescued soul; who has never lacked appreciation of Earth’s beauty or failed to express it; who has always looked for the best in others and given them the best he had; whose life was an inspiration; whose memory a benediction.

Poem 3

So Many Hearts by Ms. Caliburn

You came and touched so many hearts
In so many different ways.
You gave so much, and asked very little in return.
There is an emptiness as if a part of me is missing,
But I am sure with time you will show me how to be whole again.
I know you are safe now, and nothing can harm you.
Remember, although we’re apart,
We will always be together.

Poem 4

Elegy (author unknown)

Do not stand at my grave and weep,
I am not there, I do not sleep.
I am a thousand winds that blow,
I am the diamond glints on snow.
I am sun on ripened grain,
I am the gentle Autumn’s rain.
When you wake in the morning’s hush
I am the swift uplifting rush

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of quiet birds in circled flight.
I am the stars that shine at night.
Do not stand at my grave and cry,
I am not there, I did not die.

Poem 5
Carry Only Love

Beloved one, you are dead
But you are not alone
We are here with you
The beloved dead await you.
You go from love into love.
Carry with you
only love.
May our love carry you
and open the way.

Poem 6
Shivo Ham (I am Shiva)

When the breath of life blows through me, Shivo Ham
When the blissful ocean woos me, Shivo Ham
When the shifting tides confuse me, Shivo Ham
Shivo Ham, Shivo Ham

Chorus: Shivo Ham, Shivo Ham, Shivo Ham, Shivo Ham, Shivo Ham, Shivo Ham

When the evening rain’s begun, Shivo Ham
When I’m standing in the sun, Shivo Ham
When I’m singing the Name of the One
Shivo Ham, Shivo Ham

Chorus

When I’m balanced on a wire, Shivo Ham
When I wade into the fire, Shivo Ham
In the stillness at the end of desire
Shivo Ham, Shivo Ham

Chorus
Poem 7

Blessing of the Elements

May the air carry your spirit gently.
May the fire release your soul.
May the water cleanse you of pain and sorrow and suffering
May the earth receive you.
May the wheel turn again and bring you to rebirth.

Poem 8

Blessing of the Dead

Be free, be strong, be proud of who you have been,
Know that you will be mourned and missed
That no one can replace you,
That you have loved and are beloved...

Move beyond form,
Flowing like water,
Feeding on sunlight and moonlight
Radiant as the stars in the night sky.
Pass the gates,
Enter the dark without fear,
Returning to the womb of life to steep in the caldron of rebirth.
Rest, heal, grow young again.
Be blessed.

Poem 9

Listen People
[Note: This was spoken from the back of the room]

Listen people,
The universe is alive
And I will always be,
Flowing in and out of Form,
Dying and being born,
Forever.

Priest’s Benediction

May the Mother hold you in her arms as you return to her.
May the ferryman aid you in your journey, that your crossing may be smooth and peaceful. Short pause

On the other shore find rest, and regeneration.
Springtime...time of birth.
Turns to Summer, and then Fall. *Short pause*
Leaves gently float to the earth. *Pause*

Fall turns to winter. Time of rest and regeneration.
Know that nothing dies Forever.
Nature is a renewer.
The corn and grain will fall at harvest and return in due season.
All that die rise again also.
Journey on now, brother. We will follow when we can. May you be born
again at the same time and in the same place as those you knew and loved in
this life. May you know them again and love them again.

*The Mountain Moon Circle Great Rite*

I am faith and courage
I am being and doing
I am love and will
I am the feminine and masculine shining as one
Integration is my goal,
Creation my pleasure,
And a centered self my will manifested.

*Closing Quarter Calls*

East – "The sun will rise again."
South – "Life continues."
West – "Love is all that we can be sure of."
North - "Only the mother is eternal."

*Closing Song*

When we are gone, they will remain.
Wind and rock, fire and rain.
They will remain, when we return.
The wind will blow and the fire will burn.
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