

The Real Meaning of Initiations

by Jaq D Hawkins

Initiation plays an important role in many magical paths. In Witchcraft, initiation can mean a 'bringing into the fold', or a self-initiation can mean a dedication to the chosen path. Similarly, an initiation into a ceremonial magic Order is a formal recognition of becoming a part of that group, as well as a self-dedication to its principles and practices.

In my most recent book, *The Chaos Monkey*, I write about life's initiations. These are the changes that seem to be inherent in the lives of those who choose to walk a magical path. They can often be devastating, Dark Night of the Soul experiences, although not all of them are quite so extreme.

The purpose behind all initiations is really a demarcation of change, specifically a significant change in the life of the initiate. From this point of view, self-initiations become every bit as important as any initiation into a recognised group. After all, what is a hierarchy except an artificial construct, which gets its power from those who choose to recognise it as something with relevance? Technically, I am an initiate of a line of Witchcraft, because I took part in a ceremony which officially made me so. In actual practise, I am recognised as someone who practices witchcraft by some Hereditary friends of mine because of my magical practices, rather than any ceremony or even blood line, as well as someone who practices magic by my magician friends. My initiation magic took place many years before the ceremony referred to above, and had far more meaning. It was a 'real-life' initiation, one where my life irrevocably changed because I chose to walk the path of magic at an early age.

In the realm of groups and hierarchies, there can be genuine relevance in the acceptance of a ceremony of initiation. The one I have already confessed to held little real meaning for me, solely because I was pressured into it by someone who wanted to play 'superior witch' and teach me his brand of magic, despite the fact that I had been practising magic for much longer than he had and in more diverse circles.

More recently, I seriously considered accepting an initiation from a group for which I felt far more affinity, and yet I hesitated in this decision. Why? Many years ago, I wrote an article titled [Initiations, Memberships and other Games That People Play](#). This article described my attitude toward hierarchies and those who set themselves up in positions to bestow initiations. Far too often, these positions are filled by people who, like my initiator into the witchcraft line, are more interested in feeling in some way superior to the person to whom they are bestowing this honour. I had seen such power gaming in the political structure of this particular group. At one point I had agreed to the initiation and made arrangements to make it a bit special, but immediately after I agreed to it, it was like someone had flashed a neon light on reading "game on" and those in charge began the power games. I walked away, not disgruntled but with no doubt that I had made the right decision.

Not all initiations fit this model. There are groups which genuinely treat the process as one of official acceptance of someone who has already proven themselves suitable to be included in that specific group's structure. Ceremonies in such a situation can be a beautiful thing, much like a wedding or a coming of age ceremony in many cultures. In this situation, the change has really already been accomplished, and the new initiate is simply being formally welcomed.

Another important aspect of initiation is as a test. Returning to my statements about life's initiations, these are the ones that can test one's ability to cope with the ever changing panorama of existence that is the magical life. They can be much more profound than the relatively simple tests that one is usually put to for a group initiation. At one point in Chaos Monkey I state that "when everything seems to fall apart at once, you know you're on the right track." The magic, personified as The Monkey in this book, will certainly test you. Lessons are sometimes learned through hard teaching methods, and magic can be the hardest taskmaster you will ever encounter. This is as it should be, because magic is a responsibility which requires a certain strength of character to wield responsibly. Sadly, far too many who lack this character will set themselves up in positions of artificial authority in order to compensate for the real strength which they lack. Their magic will probably be limited as a result, but they can often impress the inexperienced enough to gather a few followers.

There is an art to recognising the onset of life's initiations, and to learning to ride them out in good humour, accepting the inevitable changes as they occur. It is something that comes only with practise, and will come more easily for some than others. Having had several such initiations over the years, I find that group initiations lose their mystique, but not their charm.

As a species, we seem to need our ceremonies to mark important occasions. Every birthday party is like a new initiation to another phase of life, special anniversaries and the Millennium itself serve as doorways in our conscious perceptions to new opportunities and the promise of the future. We look forward to special events, and an initiation into a magical group or coven is very much one of these special occasions which we enjoy celebrating so much, if perhaps rather more intensely for its spiritual significance.

It is a sad fact that many initiations of this sort are characterised by subservience games by the initiators. One must question what purpose it serves to prostrate oneself to those who would bestow the honour, but only if one is willing to co-operate with personal abasement. To some degree, this has become a common practise in ceremonial initiation. There is a historical basis for it to some degree in that it was once necessary to pledge secrecy at pain of death in order to belong to a secret society. Absolute loyalty to the group was essential for the survival of all of the members. In modern times, when such a promise may still hold some importance for those who are not in a position to admit to their magical affiliations because of things like job discrimination or child custody battles, the subservience is all too often taken well beyond the necessity for discretion and used as an excuse for personal power games.

The magician or witch who survives several of life's real initiations may find these games a bit difficult to take seriously. Genuine trials leave a much stronger impression on the psyche of those who have traversed the Abyss and come back with new strength as a result. Suddenly, the games that people play can look very petty and meaningless when compared to a Dark Night of the Soul, and the internal transitions which accompany the real life initiations that can never be bestowed by any individual or group.

One of the dictionary's definitions for initiation is a "first step". When contemplating an initiation which is offered or taking place of its own accord, perhaps the wisest question to ask oneself is "What am I stepping into?" Then perhaps it will become clear whether it is a step in the right direction, or whether it is time to perhaps consider a new direction. That too, is one of life's initiations.