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FLOATING THE CANDLE

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Like so many other Craft groups in the past, we have found ourselves lumbered with the perennial problem of what to do when someone wants to lay down office and be released from the oath they took when assuming that office. Just standing in the centre of the circle and saying: "Right, that's it, I'm packing it in", or words to that effect, never quite seemed to fit the bill. We also have the same problem with people leaving the group for various reasons and who wanted to be released from the coven oath, even though they were parting on the best of terms. For us, and I suspect many others, there is a certain level of ceremony involved in the taking of oaths, but very little done to release people from them. In the end, by looking at our mythos, we hit on a method that fitted the bill exactly. Certainly not 'traditional' in the true meaning of the word, it plugged a glaring gap in our coven workings and, because it fitted in so well, seems to have been there for far longer than it actually has.

We based it on what we considered to be the ideal site, that being one on the edge of fast flowing water and, if possible, a waterfall. In the mythos of our tradition we have always seen the boundary between this world and the place we have created in the Otherworld for ourselves as a river with a waterfall. Classically this is the Lethe, the river of oblivion, where the memories of earthly life are purged from the spirit, leaving behind the spiritual knowledge gained during that lifetime. So by finding a working place that closely corresponds to the above is quite important to us and in my case I have found such a place.

In the second part of the equation, we always use a candle as part of our oath taking ceremony. This serves as a soul candle and is symbolic of the very soul itself. When it is put out and relit it represents the snuffing out of the past life and its beliefs and the rekindling of the light of the spirit in the name of the Old Gods and the Goddess, pledging to offer them acts of worship. So candles play an important part in the oath taking rites. Now if a candle is used then, why not use it when releasing someone from an oath? Looked at from the symbolic point of view, by lighting a small candle, which of course represents the original one lit at the oath taking, then floating it on the stream close to the falls it will be carried over and extinguished. Remembering what a river or stream represents in terms of our mythos, when the candle goes out in a symbolic sense the river of oblivion has taken away the pledges forever. I suppose in a sense this could be called a little piece of sympathetic magic, where an action on one level creates an effect on another - and why not? Isn't that what the Craft is all about?

Though some people may think this is rather an elaborate way of doing things, I can assure you it is not. Probably purely psychological, the fact that one has done something ritually, rather than just made a bald statement of intent, creates a feeling that something positive has occurred in a formal way, rather than half done. This is in itself no bad thing. Once used the idea gathered strength and we soon found ourselves using the ritual for separating a secondary group from the founding one of the clan. Once released from their coven oaths by 'floating the candle' they were then free to form their own grouping within the clan structure. In its final usage it can also be the way of separating groups and individuals from others in the clan or gathering when an unbridgeable divide opens up, something that does happen occasionally in a clan system. The one benefit of 'floating the candle' in this case is that people can agree to differ and separate without the need to call for the sword and a formal banishment, which invariably leads to a lot of unpleasantness all round. Far better to separate in a civilised manner than one of hostility.

The one cavil I can see people having to this idea is finding a suitable stretch of water to use. In our case I know we were lucky, but when it boils down to it any river, stream or lake will do. In essence all that is needed is a body of water to float the candle on, even if it means trimming most of the candle away to cut down on the burning time. Just how simple or complicated a

ritual is used would be purely up to the gathering. In fact there is no real need for any sort of ritual to be performed at the water's edge at all. This could be done away from the water, say in a circle with the candle being taken there afterwards. The important thing is that eventually the water extinguishes the flame, thus symbolically extinguishing the oath candle used when it was originally taken, and that this is witnessed by the other members of the gathering.



The writer was a member of the famous coven led by **Robert Cochrane** (left) in the Sixties and is now the Magister of the Clan of Tubal Cain. He has written several books on traditional witchcraft and is a regular contributor to TC. A retired engineer, he also served in the British Army and fought in the Suez and Malayan campaigns.

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