

DREAMING THE DARK

Magic, Sex & Politics

New Edition

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STARHAWK

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UNWIN PAPERBACKS

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# Chapter Seven



## Circles and Webs: Group Structures

DREAMING THE DARK / 115

bow to the authority of those above. The higher rungs are populated by fewer and fewer people, so a small number always exercises power over a much larger mass.

The structures of immanence are circular: clans, tribes, covens, collectives, support groups, affinity groups, consciousness-raising groups. In a circle, each person's face can be seen, each person's voice can be heard and valued. All points on a circle are equidistant from its center: that is its definition, and its function — to distribute energy equally.

Creating and working in circular structures, however, is an enormous challenge. We are familiar with ladders; we understand them even when we dislike them; they make us comfortable because we know what to expect. Circles are unfamiliar territory, new ground. The experiences we have within them can be healing or heartbreaking, wonderful or extremely frustrating, intimate or alienating, more intense than any other relationships except family ties.

Changing the structure of a group can be a powerful way of changing the relationships among people within it. Every group has both an open and a hidden structure. To a large extent, especially in nonhierarchical groups, structure can be thought of as patterns of communication that determine how information flows. Information is power — it enables us to do what we otherwise could not do. In a hierarchical group, only a small number of people have access to information and they make decisions. In a nonhierarchical structure, everybody makes decisions and so all must have access to information. Most nonhierarchical groups do not pay enough attention to the ways in which information spreads among group members. Systems to spread information — newsletters, flyers, telephone trees, meetings, and (most of all) conversation — are the life blood of any group. Groups thrive when people within a community have many informal meetings, go to the same parties, run into each other on the street, meet for coffee, and generally enjoy each other's society, because a network of friendships creates a grapevine that is the only truly efficient way to spread information. People often ignore leaflets, but everybody listens to gossip.

In the circle, we all face each other. No one is exalted; no one's face is hidden. No one is above — no one is below. We are all equal in the circle, the womb, the breast, the eye, the cunt, the sun, the moon — the forms of immanence.

All groups have structures — open and hidden. Just as individuals have bones and flesh, and also a subtle energy-body in a treelike pattern formed by currents of power, so too a group has an outer form and an inner form.

We can change consciousness, we can transform our inner landscape, tell new stories, dream visions in new thought-forms. But to change culture we need to bond in new ways, to change the structures of our organizations and communities. "Function follows form," we could say (reversing the Bauhaus dictum). For as we have seen, structure determines how energy will flow.

The structures of estrangement are hierarchies. Their form is the ladder. In schools, in corporations, in government bureaucracies, in social agencies and professions, we are expected to climb from rung to rung. The function of a ladder is to be climbed. The rungs keep those above separate from those below. Upon each rung, we wield power over those below, and must

The formal roles people take on in a group are its bones, the underpinnings of its outer structure. To assure that power is shared within a group, formal roles should rotate among members. People can practice a role, such as facilitator, in a relatively safe setting — a meeting of a small group in an unstressful situation. Virtuoso facilitators can reserve their talents for moments of great need — for example, legal meetings in jail that take place shortly before arraignments. Good facilitators should also rotate, however, so that they, too, learn a variety of skills. A good, though of course flexible, rule-of-thumb is: never perform the same job twice in succession.

Groups function best when their formal structures are clearly defined and understood. Following is a description of six of the formal roles often performed in a variety of nonhierarchical groups, ranging from collectives to covens. (I personally dislike most of the names for these roles, but haven't invented any better ones.)

### THE FACILITATOR

The facilitator observes the *content* of talk in a meeting. She/he keeps the meeting focused and moving. Commonly, when people are discussing one proposal, they will drift off the subject and begin talking about something else. The facilitator reminds them of what the subject is, and if necessary sets aside a future time to discuss the related issues that surface. From time to time, the facilitator may give a brief "state-of-the-meeting" report, saying, "This is what we are talking about. . . . These are the positions and concerns. . . . This is what we have already decided that is relevant." Making reports and restating proposals is especially necessary in long, tense, exhausting meetings during which people have a tendency to forget what they are doing.

The facilitator calls on people. When several people raise their hands to speak, she/he can give them numbers and let them speak in turn. When people are assured that they will be called on, their anxiety levels are lessened, and they can more easily listen to others.

The facilitator should maintain neutrality on the issue being discussed. If she/he has a strong position, or wishes to speak to the issue, another facilitator can be chosen.

### VIBESWATCHER

A vibeswatcher (used in the Abalone Alliance) watches the process of a meeting. In particular, she/he remains aware of levels of tension and anxiety. She/he may interrupt the meeting periodically to suggest that people breathe, that feelings be acknowledged, that personal attacks be stopped. In large or tense meetings, a vibeswatcher can be appointed. In smaller meetings, every person present can take on some of this responsibility.

### PRIESTESS/PRIEST

In a ritual, the priestess or priest watches the energy of the group. She/he keeps it moving, starts and stops phases of the ritual as the energy changes, *channels* the energy by opening her/his own body to let it flow through. The priestess/priest develops a dual consciousness, an ability to be ecstatic in the moment and, at the same time, to keep a practical eye on what everybody else is doing, whether the cauldron is burring too high, and whether the children are getting trampled underfoot. Especially in large rituals in which many people are unfamiliar with magic, the Priestess/Priest must assure that the energy starts grounded, stays grounded (in the sense of maintaining connection with the earth) and is returned to the earth at the end. It is helpful to have more than one person acting as priestess/priest within a ritual.

### PEACEKEEPERS

Peacekeepers (used in the Abalone Alliance) function not only during meetings, but whenever the group is active. They help keep order and deal with crises. At demonstrations, marches, and blockades, they may function as monitors who are trained to defuse potential violence from outside the group or from within it.

Peacekeepers do not have arcane or professional skills. They may have practice in calming and centering themselves, in active listening, in establishing communication with hard-to-reach people. They may encircle a violent person and walk her/him out of the area, or sing to drown the voice of a verbally abusive person. Their value is not so much in their techniques, but in their willingness and readiness to assume responsibility. Ideally, every person in a group becomes a peacekeeper.

### MEDIATOR

A mediator is a neutral, objective person who helps others resolve a conflict. A mediator is not a judge, she/he does not choose between two people or two factions, but rather helps each to listen and to resolve their differences. Mediation is a definite skill, and, usually, good mediators have had some training or much practice. Most communities, however, include many people who make good mediators. When conflicts arise within a group, members should not be ashamed to call for help from the larger community.

### COORDINATOR

A coordinator can serve as a group center, a switchboard through which information is passed. She/he keeps track of what is being done, who is doing it, and what needs to be done. The coordinator's role is especially important in large projects involving many details and many helpers. It also tends to be exhausting and not as rewarding as many other tasks, but it provides a marvelous opportunity to make mistakes and learn how to take criticism. Coordinators should be more widely appreciated, and should exchange roles often.

The most interesting aspect of a group, however, is its hidden structure. All groups function according to both overt and covert rules. The unspoken rules often concern expression of feelings. In many families, for example, an unspoken rule says: you can't say anything negative about Mommy and Daddy. In many groups, a similar unspoken rule holds sway: don't say anything negative about anybody.

In the Reclaiming Collective, however, we run our meetings by this covert rule: if people laugh at you, insult you, and swear at you, they are showing affection; when people speak quietly and carefully according to the approved growth-movement formulas, watch out! Children run in and out, we eat and drink continuously, and the meetings resemble something between amateur comedy tryouts and a pitched battle in a nursery school. The meetings inevitably run for four or five hours, but we get through our agendas. I consider these meetings to be great group process.

The overt rule, which we are continually struggling to live down to, is: all feelings are real, and inherently valid; express them freely.

Another aspect of a group's hidden structure can be made visible by having members ask themselves the following questions: How much do I feel connected to the group? How alienated do I feel? If the group were a circle — where would I be in it? At the center? On the periphery? Outside? How would I act differently if I felt central and connected?

A group that is having conflicts might ask each member to draw the group as a circle, and to mark her/his position, so that everyone can look at the drawing and talk about the various perceptions of the structure.

One easy way to give up power is by assuming we don't have it. There are strong cultural forces at work making us feel alienated and isolated, so it should be no surprise that group situations can be very painful for many people, who feel excluded or peripheral, never quite in with the in-crowd. Someone who feels isolated feels powerless; and it is always easy to feel that others — the group — are doing something to that individual, imposing something that she/he doesn't have the right or authority to challenge. After all, throughout our lives various groups *have* been imposing conditions on us that (they claim) we do not have the right to challenge. We tend to assume, even in structures that are openly committed to egalitarian, antiauthoritarian principles, that we don't have the right to make decisions unless we are given specific permission. That is what our experience in authoritarian structures has taught us.

As an example, in the early days of the Diablo Canyon Nuclear Power Plant blockade, another woman and I felt a need for a general gathering in the evening, to sing, share announcements, and feel a sense of the camp as a whole. The blockade was clearly an open, anarchic structure; nevertheless, our first instinct was to seek out a trainer, someone who seemed to have a position of leadership to ask, "Who has the authority to call a meeting?" "You do," was the response. So we did — by simply walking around camp and calling out, "We're having a gathering."

We could easily, however, have assumed a position of powerlessness, and spent the evening grumbling about how insensitive the leaders were because they didn't see that we needed a meeting of the whole camp.

Let's imagine, for a moment, that the Abalone Alliance had a hierarchical structure, that when we asked, "Who has the authority to call a meeting?" we were told that we could submit a proposal in triplicate to the Board of Directors, and that the Chairman would decide.

We could still have walked around camp, called out, "We're having a meeting," and had one. The consequences might have been different — but the power was ours if we had recognized and been willing to take it. That's important to remember when we deal with the hierarchical structures we encounter constantly in daily life. Very often, we abandon our power even when the structure does not take it away from us. Or we ask permission to take it — putting ourselves in the position of dependent children, instead of assuming our right and authority to make decisions.

The formal roles in a group can be used consciously to help change its underlying structure. For example, during one meeting in the women's jail at Diablo Canyon, I was about to facilitate when another woman objected. "The same people always run the meetings — and I think there are some power issues going on."

We asked if she had ever facilitated a meeting, and when she said no we appointed her facilitator for that one. Instead of being an outsider complaining, she was given a formal role that placed her at center. Often now, in the collective groups I belong to, we begin meetings with a weather report, asking each person how central or distant they are feeling. Whoever feels most peripheral may be appointed facilitator. Whoever tends to monopolize the talk is asked to take notes. Whoever feels grumpiest and most irritated is asked to be vibeswatcher.

In any group, members have associations outside the group itself. These contacts may range from quick exchanges of news to deep friendships. The more two people communicate outside the group, the more information they may exchange, and the more they may influence each other. An outside coalition can increase

the influence of its members within the group. A coalition, like an individual, can take the position of outsider, encapsulating its members and alienating them.

When a group is alive and thriving, coalitions are constantly forming, shifting, deepening, re-forming. When there is a great deal of crossover among coalitions, they become the stitching that binds the group together as a whole. But if they become frozen into factions, or if one or more members find themselves excluded from coalitions, the coalitions can become sources of schism.

There is no way to make people like each other if they don't. There are, however, ways to increase contact and communication among members. When two people work together, they generally draw closer, provided they are both responsible. Otherwise, they may end up hating each other. In that case, one or the other may leave the group, thus resolving the problem. If people from different factions within a group take on a task together, they are forced to communicate more with each other, and often a new bond is formed. In Reclaiming we have found that teaching in pairs and meeting often to plan classes causes us to grow very close to our co-teachers. That closeness becomes one of the rewards of teaching. Nevertheless, we make an effort to shift teams around, so that we maintain many ties with many members, and the group as a whole is strengthened.

People come to groups, as we have said, from many different backgrounds and with many different needs and experiences. The positions we assume in a group are often part of an ongoing pattern that each of us repeats in life unconsciously, unless we make a deliberate effort to become aware of it and to change. Some of us get used to being at center, important figures in any group. Others gravitate toward the middle, where they can be anonymous. Still others are always on the outside. It takes a lot of work to change the patterns we have learned in competitive groups and in other structures of domination.

Following are descriptions of ten such positions, ten informal roles I have seen people take on in nonhierarchical groups. Of course, no one plays only one role — we all switch, invent new characters for ourselves, grow and develop. Some of us are even

## 122 / Circles and Webs: Group Structures

able to function as solid, committed, loving, hard-working, real people.

Power-from-within encompasses the power to change ourselves. In my experience, people change not by being given answers, but by asking themselves pertinent questions. I have provided such questions for each of the roles I describe. The ten are arranged according to the place within a circle that each tends to assume, moving from the periphery to the center.

### THE LONE WOLF

You don't commit yourself to the group, but love to criticize and compare the group with other groups, usually unfavorably. Ask yourself, "Why do I want to hang around people I consider inferior? Am I afraid of my equals?" Also ask, "How would my criticisms be different if I said, 'We should' . . . instead of, 'You should' . . . ?"

### THE ORPHAN

Often you come from a background of loss and deprivation. You may have been a prisoner, mental patient, or another one of the culture's Fallen. You desperately want the closeness the group offers, and are terrified both of the vulnerability that represents, and of the rejection you are sure you will get instead. You believe that if people really knew you, they would be disappointed or disgusted. So you sink around the edges of groups, never opening up or making close friends, and eventually others do start to dislike you, fulfilling your worst fears. Ask yourself, "What work can I take on for the group, preferably in company with one or two others? What can I contribute?"

### GIMME SHELTER

You are constantly demanding something from the group: advice, reassurance, help. You want the group to make you feel welcome, important, loved, supported. After all, don't they say that's what it's there for? Ask yourself, "What actual work can I do for the group? What tasks can I take on — and can I do them in such a way that my work does not require anyone else to expend time or energy on the tasks?" Also ask, "How would I act differently if I felt I had power?" then act that way.

## DREAMING THE DARK / 123

### FILLER

You just take up space. You feel your opinions and ideas aren't very interesting or valuable. Perhaps you have been trained all your life to think that way. Wear brighter colors and encourage yourself to speak up at least once at every meeting, particularly when your ideas and perceptions differ from others'. Take on a task involving more than routine work — perhaps with the orphan. Make a date with someone from the group to do something together outside the group.

### THE PRINCESS

You are so very sensitive that the group process is never smooth enough for you. You feel compelled to comment on slight tensions and minor nuances of conflict, often expressing great anxiety. The Princess (who may also be male) is often a therapist or a psychic, and often leaves groups unless she/he is running them. Ask yourself "Who am I competing with, and why?" Refrain from commenting on group process until you can do so by affectionately insulting another group member.

### THE CLOWN

The clown or fool is an important figure in many tribal religions. The clown's job is to make fun of people and ceremonies, and to provide comic relief. You probably provide an important service to the group. Nevertheless, ask yourself, "Can I be serious when necessary? Do I know when to practice restraint? Is my clowning, at any given moment, furthering the work of the group? Am I afraid of open conflict?"

### THE CUTE KID

You are charming and cute, and want approval from others badly. Your excuse, when you don't want to do something, is to plead helplessness or get sick. You would love to be taken care of, yet you are actually much more competent and strong than you are willing to believe. Ask yourself, "Do I really mean that I can't, or that I don't want to? Does the task perhaps need to be done whether I want to do it or not — and done by me? What new level of power or responsibility will I come to if I do it? Does that scare me?" Also ask, "What in my life — in the group — would I do



whether or not others approve?" Ask the group not to praise you for doing those things.

### THE SELF-HATER

You are a perfectionist, harder on yourself than on others. Nevertheless, you are continually escalating your standards for the group, and continually outraged at how much others fail to live up to them. You don't understand why other people feel guilty after talking with you, when you are truly only trying to raise their consciousness about the issue of the moment.

Be nicer to yourself. Play. At least once a day, do something irresponsible. Sandwich your criticisms between expressions of appreciation. Ask yourself if you identify with Jesus. If the answer is yes, get friends to sing hymns to you off-key before meetings.

### THE ROCK OF GIBRALTAR

You take on thankless tasks and get them done. You remember what everyone else forgets. Everyone comes to you with their problems. Outsiders often see you as "the leader" of the group. Indeed, you feel that the group would fall apart without you.

Ask yourself, "Am I afraid of showing my weaknesses?" Also ask, "What tasks can I delegate?" Give away some of the juicy, creative tasks as well as the routine work. Begin training your replacement immediately, before burnout sets in.

### THE STAR

You feel the meeting hasn't really begun until you arrive. You talk a lot, and often interrupt people, because you know that you will say exactly the right thing to save the situation. Really, you are brilliant, and you enjoy impressing people.

Practice silence. Ask yourself, "Do I want to impress people or to empower people? How do I feel about people who are constantly trying to prove to me that I can never equal *them*?" Recognize that others feel the same way about you. Change, and keep your friends.

My tendency in groups is to play the role of Rock or Star. I was trained for those roles from childhood. In my family, I was given a great deal of responsibility. Because my father died when I was

five, I was often my mother's confidante, and learned that even adults took my views and opinions seriously. I grew up feeling special. In school, I was often the smartest kid in the class, the one who always knew the right answer when nobody else did. I was also smart enough to realize that being the constant winner in the classroom competition did not make me well-loved, and in fact, it could easily make me a target of jealousy and hostility. So I developed a kind of phony humility, a manner that said, "Aw, shucks, kids — I'm just one of the gang — those As were sort of an accident. And look how bad I am at softball (heh, heh)."

In groups, I felt comfortable taking on a lot of responsibility, facilitating meetings, taking the role of teacher, priestess, leader. In collectives and nominally leaderless groups, my outward manner was still "Aw, shucks, kids — I'm just one of the gang." Yet, actually, much of my own sense of identity depended upon being the one to step in with a brilliant answer at the crucial moment.

In *The Spiral Dance* I recorded some of the struggles around power and leadership that we went through in my first coven. My present coven, Raving, emerged from a class for women that I taught. We spent three years struggling to break out of the teacher-student framework and make our power relationships truly equal. For a long time I was genuinely confused. I thought I was bending over backward to give people power — I didn't understand why they weren't taking more of it. What I didn't see was the way I held tight to the reins while complaining loudly that the horses wouldn't guide themselves. As long as I saw myself giving people power, I unconsciously believed that that power belonged to me.

For example, for a long time we considered our rituals collective because we all performed such tasks as leading various parts, writing invocations, and guiding trances. That was certainly a step toward collectivity and away from the custom of one person leading everything. However, because the actual control of a ritual rests with the person who controls the transitions and the timing — who starts and stops things — it was a lot easier for me to give up leading anything overtly than to give up starting and stopping what everybody else was doing.

I also discovered — painfully — that as each woman in the coven finally came into her own sense of power, she and I would have a fight. I gradually understood that, having taken on a position of authority in the group, I, on some level, represented the principle of authority to each woman, a principle each of us must battle: if we are to claim the authority in ourselves. As long as I was willing, even unconsciously, to play authority, each woman was going to have to battle me. Such conflicts may be productive between analyst and client, but in a circle they tended to be extremely draining, especially for me.

Somehow, Raving managed to muddle through. Eventually, we became a collective, called Reclaiming, as well as a coven, and decided to begin teaching classes and helping new groups to form. We also decided that there must be ways to structure the groups based on another model of power, so the new groups wouldn't have to repeat our struggles with authority.

One decision we made was to teach in pairs, so that from the beginning students could see power being shared and flowing easily. One teacher almost inevitably becomes an authority — two create more space in the center, so others can join them more easily. We also systematically turned over parts of each class and each ritual to the students, so that everyone got a chance to be the central focus, to take both power and responsibility. Finally, advanced students began teaching with us.

Another lesson we learned is that the roles people take on in groups are often related to their class backgrounds. Class is not just a matter of income, but of values and expectations, the subtle messages one gets from one's family and peers. My family valued intelligence and education — there was never a doubt in the atmosphere that I was bright, would go to college, and would succeed at something requiring brains. I could have been born, equally bright, into a family in which children were discouraged from speaking to their elders, or where there were too many children for any one to receive much attention. The family values might have centered around hard work instead of education, and the expectations might have been that we just weren't the sort of people who excelled in school, which wasn't an important arena

of life, anyway. I might have grown up thinking I was dumb and should keep my mouth shut in groups of smart people.

Opening up a discussion of our class backgrounds is important in groups — not to make middle-class people feel guilty or defensive, but because we do not really know each other unless we know each other's histories. When class differences can be named, the sense of isolation, of being from another planet, that people from poor or working class backgrounds often feel in groups can be lessened. And we can learn from our differences in ethnic background, race, sex, physical limitation, and appearance.

Estrangement perpetuates itself by keeping us divided from each other. We are taught to fear people of different ethnic or class backgrounds, to turn our frustrations and resentment on each other instead of on the system that hurts us all. Talking about our differences, confronting our distrust of others who are different, is the first step in healing the pain we feel at our separation. Only through such healing can we create community that reaches across the lines of race, sex, and class, so that all our separate strengths can be joined together.

When we struggle to step out of roles, to confront our differences, we do so not to be politically correct, but to free ourselves and to enrich our experience. The culture of domination rewards us for being at center, for hanging on to attention, status, and control. The cult at the heart of American culture is that of personality, offering as its highest reward the narcissistic joy of Making It, of being applauded, admired, and looked-up-to from below as one straddles the top rungs of the ladder. But the top rungs are isolated and unstable. One can always fall. And being looked up to is very different from being supported by the real love and real trust of others upon whom we can also depend, because they are equals, because they can call forth their own power-from-within.

At center, we get attention. We wield power — but we are not free to move. When you are uniquely important and responsible for everything, you are also neatly trapped. When you let go, when you realize that others can do what you do equally well, although undoubtedly differently, you can move on, and under-



## 128 / Circles and Webs: Group Structures

take new responsibilities, without expecting what you have built to collapse when you leave.

About a year after we began teaching together, Reclaiming went through a period of crisis. Two of our five members had to move away from the area in order to find jobs in their fields. The remaining three of us were struggling to continue the classes and meet the commitments of the collective. Two of us went to the Diablo blockade, when the alert was called, leaving Lauren by herself to handle everything. At such moments, collectives often crumble. But because we had trained our replacements, other women were ready and eager to take over our responsibilities. Instead of dying the group expanded.

A healthy group is never stable. It is always changing, growing, re-forming. There are many theories about the stages of group formation, but in my experience with groups several stages are generally occurring at once. Nevertheless, a broad movement can usually be discerned, and knowing something of its pattern can, at least, reassure us that we are not the only group who ever went through these particular conflicts and survived. I prefer to conceive of the cycle as following the magic circle of the four elements:

### CYCLES OF GROUP TRANSFORMATION

#### AIR

The group begins with a common vision and common perceptions. Often, members are excited when they meet others who think as they do, who share common goals. This is usually a honeymoon period, during which members feel close to each other and admire each other — because they don't really know each other. Energy is generated.

#### FIRE

The group struggles to discover how to use its energy. In hierarchical groups, members struggle for power-over. In nonhierarchical groups, members struggle for power more subtly, or struggle to define structures and processes that will empower individuals and allow them to share power equally. The group begins to discover its will, and deep feelings are generated.

## DREAMING THE DARK / 129

#### WATER

The group struggles with the feelings members have for each other. Now that members know each other, they love each other and rage at each other. People in the group both want and resist more intimacy. They fight about their closeness or distance. Someone's feelings are continually being hurt. Sometimes group members become lovers — or, worse, fall in love with each other's lovers. This stage once drove me to formulate Starhawk's Three Laws of Small Groups:

1. In any small group in which people are involved sexually, sooner or later there will be grave conflicts.
2. In any small group in which people are involved, sooner or later they will be involved sexually, even if only in fantasy.
3. Small groups tend to break up.

#### EARTH

If the group survives its emotional conflicts, it tends to *crystallize*, defining itself and its boundaries more clearly. As its purpose and character emerge, the group can begin to undertake serious work. During this phase some members usually leave the group (if they haven't left before). New members join. The group functions in the wider world. Its successes, failures, and continued growth lead eventually to a new vision — and the cycle begins again.

In each stage, conflicts arise about the very areas which are potential sources of new growth. Conflict can be creative if we look upon it as telling us what tasks we need to accomplish. Some guidelines for each of the stages follow:

#### AIR

Conflicts arise about goals, perceptions, and differences. Vision and goals need to be expressed. Accept that people will have differing perceptions. Discuss people's differences in background, including class, race, culture, education, and conditioning to sex roles. Also discuss differences in people's present situation, including their special needs, the resources of time and money available to each, and their personal goals. Differing levels of experience should also be acknowledged.

Create a bonding ritual.

## 130 / Circles and Webs: Group Structures

### FIRE

Conflicts arise about power. Use all the processes described above that encourage the sharing of power. Exchange roles, train replacements, encourage silent people to speak up and talkative people to occasionally shut up. Practice consensus.

Competition is always present in groups. Acknowledge it: it can be used creatively. Create situations, such as rituals, in which people can show off and be admired.

Work directly with group energy through breathing, chanting, dancing, and grounding.

### WATER

What are people feeling? Express the negatives. Speak the unspeakable. Name the group's unspoken rules. Be aware of how much time, energy and attention each member asks for, and receives. Give the group, and individuals, praise and appreciation as well as criticism — and encourage members to accept praise. Share food. Have fun.

When couples or coalitions develop, take care that those involved also strengthen ties with other group members — perhaps by working together on projects.

### EARTH

Clarify the group's organizational structure and its boundaries: who is in and who is out. Wish those who leave well, but don't try to keep them if they want to go. Take on new people. Get the work done.

### AIR

Reflect on the experiences that grow from the work. Arrive at new visions, perceptions, goals, differences. Start a new cycle. \*

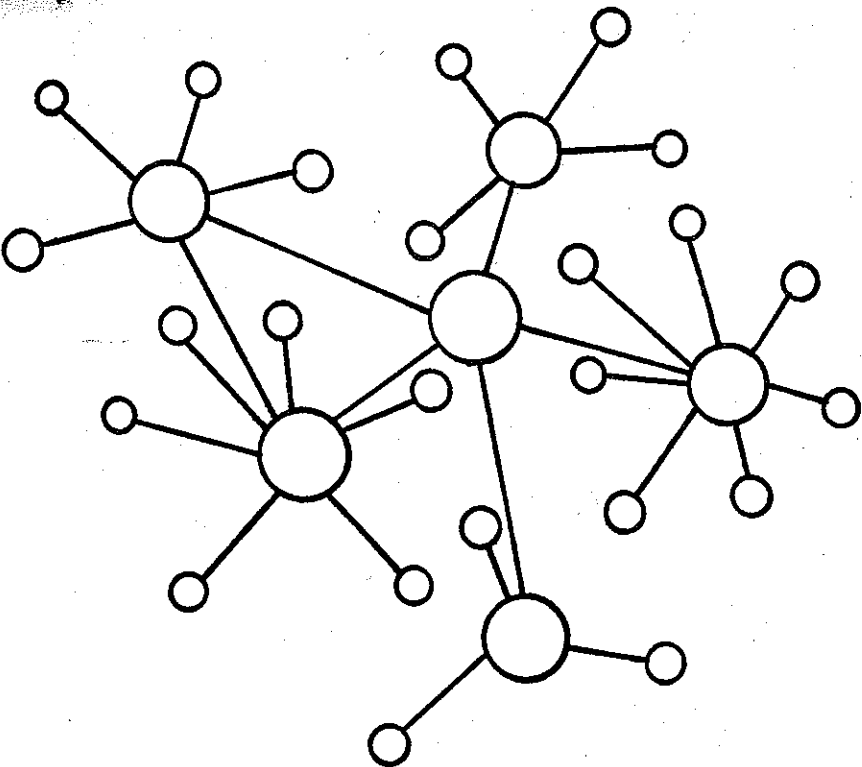
### METASTRUCTURES

And so groups grow and combine — but not into faceless masses. They grow as bodies do, into organisms consisting of many cells, many parts, each of which retains its own integrity. We make networks. We weave webs. We could also say that our organizations are like music — they should contain silences and

## DREAMING THE DARK / 131

many small phrases repeated with infinite variations, and they should join in strong rhythms, in moving themes.

Small groups network by using *spokes* (as they are called in the Abalone Alliance) as wheels use spokes to join the rim to the hub. These spokes, however, join wheels to wheels, circles to other circles. I am drawing this as I write and I make patterns that look like snowflakes, crystals, stars, diagrams of molecules, a bed of sea coral, a matrix of bone, something organic, or perhaps a demented child's tinkertoy construction.



Spokes are people chosen to speak for the group, to embody the group will and to connect it with other groups. Like people taking other formal roles, spokes should be changed frequently. Spokes from many groups can meet to discuss issues and, if their groups empower them to do so, to make decisions. When all groups work by consensus, every decision is a synthesis of many people's viewpoints and ideas, not an either/or choice decided by a majority. At the blockade, for example, affinity groups formed clusters and sent spokes to cluster meetings. Each cluster, in turn, sent a spoke to the overall council that made decisions affecting the camp. But the council held no power-over individual groups. Power always rested in the smallest unit. The affinity groups shaped the decisions of the larger groups. The council, after hearing from the clusters, who in turn had heard from each affinity group, could make the decision to begin the blockade. But it could not tell any individual group where to go or what to do.

Such structures are often criticized for being inefficient. They are easily ridiculed — especially in the media. Of course anyone who has recently dealt with a government agency, or tried to get a large corporation to redress a computer error might well question whether hierarchical structures are, indeed, as efficient as we like to believe. In fact, anyone who has ever worked in the lower levels of a hierarchy knows the amount of waste, theft, and minor sabotage that occurs daily. Hierarchies appear to be efficient only because they have enormous resources, money and the armed forces of the state to back them up.

A general can tell a soldier where to attack and what weapons to use. If the soldier disobeys, he may be shot or thrown into prison. Networks of circles cannot call on the national guard to enforce their commands, even if they want to. Covens, peace groups, antinuclear groups, and women's groups can neither buy nor command obedience. Indeed, if they tried to command it, they would arouse nothing but resentment. Our major (perhaps our only) real resource is people — their good will, their power-from-within. Efficiency can only be judged by the degree to which the will and the power of the people involved are tapped and

strengthened. By that standard, egalitarian structures are highly efficient.

However, networks do not always convey information quickly. A network does not need a leader, but it often needs a *center* — some point where information can be collected and distributed to all the circles.

On some projects, the center might be a person or a small group of people. Inevitably, because we have all been conditioned to seek outside authority, network members will imbue the central person with authority, ask them to make decisions, and often see them as leaders. Central figures in egalitarian groups should be prepared to challenge others' assumptions, and to maintain a sense of humor.

A center does not have to be a person or group, however. It may be a physical place where people can meet; it may be a periodic event, such as the general camp meeting my friend and I called at the Diablo Canyon Nuclear Power Plant blockade. It may be a telephone tree, or a bulletin board located in a central place. It may be a radio station, a newspaper, a newsletter, a coffee house, or a neighborhood bar. It may be a festival or a ritual — but there must be some way to spread information quickly among members of a group, because without information, nothing can happen.

The Goddess manifests where we are. If we dream these networks, these snowflake structures, into a larger vision, we find that their texture differs from place to place. People begin to speak of politics of place, of bioregions.<sup>1</sup> My community is concerned with this neighborhood: with knowing the local dogs and their owners; the child of the couple who run the flower shop; the identical twin butchers; the black man who sits on his stoop and smiles as I walk up and down the street, and who likes to watch the comedy auditions at the Other Cafe. It has to do with history — with the wild boar that once ran on Suro Hill, with the hippies who flocked here in the sixties, and with their sad remnants, the burnouts, the addicts, who still haunt Haight Street like the ghosts of acid trips past.

Our vision is of this neighborhood, this city, governed not from above but from below. What could we do, as neighbors, as citizens, if we took our power — if we shaped the future of our city out of our love for these particular hills crowned with imported eucalyptus forests, these waters, these bridges, this clear air, these Victorian houses with their long halls and tiny rooms, this legacy of poets and gold dust and earthquakes? What if we also called our community this bay, this ocean? What if it were not something separate from the pelican and the snowy egret and the gray whales passing in their migrations past our cliffs? Perhaps if we knew our neighbors we would not allow them to be forced out of their homes by the ever-rising rents; perhaps they would protect us. Perhaps together we would change the city's face, find ways to draw power from these winds, these tides, find ways to help each other through the losses, the hard times — because hard times come to us all.

When we say *community*, we might think about things in new ways — not with loyalty to "one nation, indivisible" (too big to grasp), but with loyalty to real people in a real place, where we live. Loyalty to a watershed that stretches from the high Sierras down the winding delta into the bay, and to all people who drink that water. In Europe, the old cultures arise again: we are not British, they say, but Irish, Scottish, Welsh, Cornish, Manx; not French, but Breton; not Spanish, but Catalan. The empires come apart at the seams. In the Southwest of the United States, in the Black Hills, the Indian tribes still fight to survive. Perhaps it is time for all of us to reconsider our loyalties, to consider what might further human survival. Our work is not just sawing the legs off the ladders, but building the structures that can replace them.

We spin our circles. Some of them hold and many unravel; yet we begin again, knowing that this work of making community is weaving the mantle of the Goddess. May it be a cloak to shield each one of us from the cold; a net to catch us when we fall.

## Chapter Eight



### Sex and Politics

August, 1979

Coven Raving is meeting. As always when we meet, we talk about our lives, about our needs, about our lovers or lack of lovers.

We are gathered under a high Victorian ceiling in a flat in the Mission district. The sashes are drawn as the time comes to work magic. We take off our clothes.

That is relevant, because our magic, our deliberate linking and focusing of minds, our raising and molding of subtle energies, our touching of each other, our intimacy, is not separate from our sexuality. Nor can our sexuality be separated from our magic. We are not lovers with each other, but we are five naked women in the small room, and as we breathe together, inhaling and exhaling in unison, becoming one—one breath, one organism—the air is heavy with odors that are earthy, spicy, feid. We are exotic flowers; we are slowly-eroding-over-a-lifetime flesh.

We are Witches. We pursue together the Mysteries. And sexuality, not in its narrow but its broadest sense, is the essence of those Mysteries.