

Organized Modern Polytheism

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Polytheist Leadership Conference Keynote/Lecture

Friday, July 11, 2014

So I promised myself, once I found out that I wasn't just offering to give a presentation at this Polytheist Leadership Conference, but had been voluntold to be its keynote speaker, that I wasn't going to get up here and blather like some old fool about how things were in the old days. That should be easy. First of all, 45 isn't that old. And second, things weren't very good in the old days.

A couple of weeks ago, I called Craig, the person who has done more than anyone else to help me grow the religious organization I founded in my college dorm in 1989, and told him that I was going to be the keynote speaker at the PLC.

"What?! You're not going back there, are you?"

For a moment I didn't know what he meant. Then I remembered. Twenty years ago, he and I had walked out of another organization's meeting, and that group had also been called PLC. Only it was a Pagan Leadership Conference, Several of the pagan leaders gathered there had objected to our presence, saying, "if you aren't Wiccan, why are you here?"

That meeting led to our formal withdrawal from the Chicago pagan community, and propelled us into going it on our own. Without any help from the people we thought were our co-religionists, that little temple with six or seven people meeting at my house on Friday nights grew into the incredible thing it is today: a full-fledged religion with multiple temples and shrines, more than a dozen ordained priests, and hundreds of members in more than 30 countries and all 50 states.

Walking out of the PLC turned out to be the best thing we ever did.

I have not referred to myself as pagan since. I still have issues with the term for a number of reasons that predate my having left the community. Yet, in recent years, there's a growing awareness that Wicca may be fine, but it's not all there is. There is growth and interest in taking both pagan and polytheist organizations to the same level that any other religious group on the planet has been able to achieve. People in both the pagan and the polytheistic communities are finally seeing what I saw and dreamed of, so many years before.

Fear of secrecy is past for most people, and the fear of failure with it. Fear of success, I expect, still holds some back, and fear of hard work, or just not being willing to do that work, holds back more. But there are encouraging signs of a critical mass, signs

that there are people who worship many deities, people ready to be professional and reach out and take what is theirs if only they want it: the recognitions, protections, acceptance, and resources that any religious group is capable of achieving.

So why am I back at a group called the PLC?

This PLC is one I am honored to attend. It took the priests of two tricksters to pull it off – maybe that shouldn't be so surprising, given the way these communities often work. We should all be very grateful to Galina and Sannion for what they have done, and the example that they have set, by being willing to do the work to put this together for us.

I know how hard it is to put together such an event, and I know it has taken a great deal of time and money and effort. Thank you both, for giving me – and us – this gift.

I am honored to be here today and speak with you – not about polytheism as a practice, since I expect each of you could teach me about that – but to speak specifically about organized polytheist groups. I'd like to share something of what we did with the House of Netjer Temple, and the Kemetic Orthodox Religion, in hopes that you might be inspired to join me in bringing as many forms of polytheism as we can to the religious table with the big kids, once and for all.

And now, I'll take off the old lady hat – 20 years ago, we had to call each other to rituals on telephones that were tied to our houses with wires! – and I'll put on my modern polytheist hat with my fancy digital presentation.

(cue presentation – main slide)

SLIDE – POLYTHEISM

To be sure we're talking about the same things, I'm going to take a moment and define my terms. You're more than welcome to disagree. However, please understand that my presentation has been created with these definitions in mind.

The word *polytheism* comes to us from the Greek words *polu*, meaning many, and *theos*, meaning gods. Technically that should be *theoi*, but the dictionary lies. In any case, polytheism, then, is the belief in and worship of many gods, and that is as far as I intend to define it for our purposes today.

I do wish to add a sub-definition for the gods themselves: for me, and for the purposes of this presentation, those gods are distinct, individual, real beings who are not a part of my imagination, my identity, my archetypal existence or any lack thereof. Each of these gods and goddesses has independent existence, identity, integrity, and agency within the created universe.

There are lots of forms of polytheism. Thankfully, I only have to deal with a few of them at a time, and you can cover the rest of them. Some forms of polytheism are quite ancient, and derive from various indigenous civilizations. Some forms have died out. Some have been revived or reconstructed into newer forms, synthesized into later religious practices, or adapted for modern usage. Still other polytheisms are modern, or a mix of various types.

I'm not here to tell you if you're a polytheist or not. That's between you and your gods. What I am here to talk about is leadership –specifically polytheist leadership.

SLIDE – LEADERSHIP

Okay, so what's leadership?

I define leadership in three ways. As a verb, leadership means to lead a group of people, or to lead an organization. As a noun, leadership can be two things: it can be specific, as in the act of leading or being a leader; and it can be more general, as in “the leadership of this group.”

Groups are a natural human occurrence. Sometimes we refer to groups as communities. I often hear community being used as some sort of dirty word in pagan or polytheistic circles. I don't think it has to be. Groups, and communities, however you want to refer to them, are a natural side effect of gathering human beings with shared values and experiences. When you meet someone who shares life experience with you, you bond. Each member of a group, whether it consists of two people or two thousand people, will have a relative place or position in that group, dictated by a complex set of variables including the group's needs, its shared values, its cultural norms, and interpersonal reactions between individual members.

SLIDE – POLYTHEIST LEADERSHIP

To paraphrase George Orwell, all animals are equal, but some are more equal than others. This is also the case with polytheists, whether we like to admit it or not.

Eventually, any group will recognize leaders, whether because they are the ones who brought the group together, or they are the oldest members, or they know the most, or they can protect the group from its enemies – whatever the reason, there will be leaders any time there is a group.

So, to be a polytheist leader, would mean being a leader in one's polytheist community. If that community comes into contact with other communities and seeks to found an alliance or otherwise interact with that larger group, then there would also be polytheist leaders who are leaders of the larger polytheist community. Or not, depending on whether or not such a community formed.

But there's the trick of it. Leadership is only required if there is community. If there is no community, there is no need for leadership. You cannot be a leader if you have no community, because you'd have nothing to lead.

Your first decision is to decide: do you want to be in a community? If you do, then leaders happen, whether you expect it or plan for it or train for it or not, because this is human nature. Remember, some are more equal than others, and some group members will always want to be led.

SLIDE – SO YOU WANT TO LEAD A CULT[IC PRACTICE]

Congratulations. You've made the decision to create an intentional polytheist community, and now you have your own cult! Who ever thought being a cult leader would be so easy?

I've been accused of running a cult in the past. The most interesting thing about that is that if I go back to the Latin word *cultus*, meaning "worship," it's not an insult at all, because it's precisely what I'm doing. A cult, or cultic practice if you want to use the politically correct anthropological term since the "c" word has unpleasant associations you probably don't want, is nothing more than a system by which one conducts religious veneration or devotions.

Cult, or cultic practice, is what polytheists do, both as individuals and as a group. If you only want to practice cult by yourself, you don't need leadership, as I've already mentioned. But if you have a cultic practice with a community attached, that practice will need leadership.

Traditionally, states or polities supported polytheist cultic practices. They had the blessing of the local chieftain or governor or even a sovereign, and might receive great offerings and resources from state treasuries, spoils of war, or the thousands of devotees who entered those practices' temples and shrines. The high priest of Amun at Karnak never had to worry about whether or not his god would receive proper attention. He had a royal treasury and hundreds of trained clergy at his command. The oracles of Delphi never had to worry about being sued for slander if they decreed bad prophecies. The priests of the Celts never had to worry about someone taking their children away because they had sacrificed one last autumn to the gods of the peat bog. (I'm not advocating child sacrifice, naturally, but I am illustrating a point: that cultic practices had protection to do what they felt their gods wanted when the cultures and political entities they lived in supported them, and they did not have to navigate that alone or, as we sometimes must do modernly, in opposition to cultural or political practices.)

Because of the connection between cultic practices and politics and culture, polytheist organizations enjoyed the protections and recognition of the states they existed within, and generally received financial and other considerations from those states. A small few, such as the Shinto of Japan, still exist in that form today, but they

are definitely the exception to the rule. In the United States, for example, we have enshrined the idea of a separation of the purposes and needs of church (or cultic practice) and state (or cultural-political “secular” practice) into law.

Today, if you want to run a polytheist religious organization, you are going to have to do all of your own work, whether that’s completely alone, or with the help and advice of hired professionals in nonreligious professions like law and accounting. You are going to have to find people and resources to create the vision you have, or the vision your gods have beaten you over the head with....and you are going to have to put in your own time, effort, and sometimes money to make that happen.

I used to keep track of how much money I put into creating the Kemetic Orthodox Religion and supporting it during the years that we were growing it to the point it could sustain itself, a point really only reached in the past decade and still very much subject to the winds of economic fortune. I stopped counting after \$50,000; effectively, I’ve dedicated my retirement savings to my work by this point. I was smart and I never counted the amount of hours of work I put into it, but I can say that I have spent more years of my life working for my temple than I have doing anything else, including living only on what donations would support from 2000 to 2011.

I took great risks, and some might say stupid ones, to make this work. It was not easy. But I do not regret any of it. I mention this only so that you know what you may be getting yourself into, if you take the steps I’m about to discuss, toward legal recognition and taking your organization to the next level. This is not a sacrifice that everyone can make or even that everyone should make, and it requires a great deal of thought and preparation.

SLIDE – WHY INCORPORATE?

Say you’ve already got an “official group.” Show of hands: how many of you run your own temples or other groups right now? How many of you are legally incorporated in your state? How many of you are legally recognized as charitable organizations by the federal government? All of you know how this works, and you can probably go take a break now. For the rest of you, if becoming legally recognized as a religious organization has ever intrigued or interested you, you may wish to stay.

Why would you want to incorporate? There are a few important reasons to consider legal recognition or incorporation of your religious group, and I’ll go over them quickly. Please understand, first of all, incorporation does not equal state sanction of your religion. In the United States at least, there is Constitutional separation of the powers of the state and the powers of religious groups. All the government can do is regulate the manners in which religious groups are held apart from the state. If your group is small and will always remain small, and you don’t want to go through the difficulty of incorporation, or aren’t interested in it, or you don’t think you need the

benefits and protections that incorporations provide, then you can go take a break now, too!

The biggest reason why you may wish to consider incorporation is liability. For example: if you lead a group, and you decide to hold meetings or rituals on your private property and someone gets hurt, unless your group is legally recognized, you will personally be held responsible for that person's welfare and medical bills. If you want to hold a religious event in a hotel or other public place, most will refuse to insure you against liability unless you can provide legal recognition paperwork. Many banks will not open a nonprofit group's account unless a group can prove it is legally recognized, most insurance companies do not write policies for informally-organized religious groups, and if you ever want to buy property or raise public funds, you will be personally responsible for all taxes and expenses related to those things unless and until you are legally incorporated as a tax-exempt organization.

If your clergy members want to marry people legally, they may not be permitted to sign marriage licenses unless your organization can prove it's legally recognized, depending on where you are located. You will not be able to offer clergy a wage free of taxation, like clergy are entitled to under US tax law, unless you're recognized. And the list goes on from there.

Of course, in theory, the government cannot *make* you prove any of these things, but the U.S. Constitution is not the Internal Revenue Service, and if anything you want to do involves taxation or money? You're not going to be protected from potential taxes or legal prosecution for misrepresentation, unless you get that incorporation.

Additionally, there is a status consideration. To be incorporated as a religious nonprofit in the U.S. provides certain protections: protection from taxation, protection from government intrusion, and protection from discrimination most significant among them. When polytheist groups go through the same steps as the major world religions to gain legal recognition for their groups and clergy, they cannot be treated as if they are not real or not serious.

When my temple was going through a zoning hearing on our property, as soon as paperwork from the state of Illinois and the IRS was placed in front of the judge, he silenced the attorney trying to argue that the Egyptian religion wasn't "real," stating that he was not even permitted to say such a thing in court, because that is discrimination that is not permitted against a legally-recognized nonprofit. The commentary was struck from the record, and our zoning was granted.

You hear much complaining of late, about how this or that religious group seems to be getting special treatment before the law. The only reason that your religious group isn't getting that treatment is because you're not going through the same steps that such groups have gone through to gain such treatment. There is *zero reason* why any religious organization cannot gain the same protections and benefits – except the reason where people refuse to go through the steps to gain

them. They aren't easy or fun – governmental bureaucracy never is – but once done, this is a foundation upon which you can grow an organization that will outlive you, and do the work your gods ask of you.

SLIDE – USA: HOW TO INCORPORATE

I'm going to talk a little bit about the actual process of incorporation. Note that I am not a lawyer and thus I am not able to give official legal advice. I am also only speaking about the United States, and when speaking about my own experience, I will be referencing the nonprofit incorporation process in the state of Illinois, and the 501c3 recognition before the Internal Revenue Service that constitutes federal recognition. I cannot speak for other states, and your experience can and will potentially be different from ours. But it is helpful to give some idea of the basics of the process.

First of all, there are two levels of recognition, as I already mentioned. To be recognized, you have to be incorporated as a nonprofit religious organization in the state where you maintain that practice; and you may or may not want to add the additional protections of being federally recognized as a 501c3 organization before the IRS. 501c3 stands for the section of the tax code where such organizations are defined. 501c3 organizations are not liable for federal income taxes, either on donations, property, or the salaries of any of their employees, clergy or not. They are also entitled by law to grant tax exemptions to people who donate to them. This is something that may be useful to you, especially if you intend to solicit donations or tithes, because people are more generous if they get a tax deduction for their donations. It's also nice to not have to pay taxes on your buildings, or the donations you take in, if you don't have a very big group and you don't have a lot of cash.

To incorporate at the state level, you need to contact your Secretary of State, and find out what the rules are. Usually there's a short application process that requires you to submit articles of incorporation, which is legal talk for a mission statement and definition statement of the organization's identity and work; and bylaws, which are the rules by which your organization is run, who its board officers are, and how they manage the organization. In Illinois, we had to submit articles of incorporation and bylaws, and a \$150 fee, to be incorporated. The entire process took about three months. After that we had a certificate of incorporation, and once a year, we have to file a single sheet of paper with the Secretary of State indicating if we have changed any officers in the past year and if we are still operating, with \$15 to cover the filing fee. This is very reasonable. Most states have similar, or even easier, requirements. If you are daunted by the idea of putting these things together yourself, it is easy to hire a lawyer to help you incorporate and generally doesn't cost that much.

Legal recognition as a 501c3 is a great deal more complicated, expensive, and frustrating, as you'd expect anything involving the IRS to be. Part of that is likely to see if they can convince people to give up, since it's not in the IRS's best interest to be declaring businesses exempt from tax. Part of it is also to make sure that one is

really trying to start a religious organization, and not trying to declare their back porch the Church of Spongebob in order to get out of property taxes. The application form is almost 100 pages long, and back when we applied in 1999, it cost \$500 to file. It took almost a year from application to approval, with several sub-reviews along the way, where we were asked to supply additional information about things we'd said in the application. [Note: As of July 15, 2014, it seems that the IRS may be making this process easier for some 501c3 applications. See irs.gov or the news for more details on the particulars of this change.]

As far as a belief test, all the IRS requires is that your organization is created around the support of a "sincerely held belief." So, if you could prove that you're honestly devoted to Spongebob, maybe you could have that porch chapel....but really, what the questions ask are things like how many members do you have, how often do you meet, how many donations do you expect to get, what kind of charity work do you do, etc. They're not hard to answer, especially if you've already been working for a while and can provide supporting documentation like literature or financial statements, or photographs of people in ceremonies, or media writeups about things that you've done.

There are two ways to do your recognition work, if you choose to apply for both state and federal recognition. Some people file for state recognition first, and then wait five years to file for 501c3. The rationale for this approach is that it is easier to gain federal recognition if you provide five years of actual financial reports to support your application. If you try to do state and federal recognition at the same time, as a new group, you will be asked to estimate your financial returns for a five-year period, and those returns will be checked for the next five years anyway, to make sure you're not just trying to create a tax dodge rather than an actual religious group. Waiting on filing for your 501c3 allows you to prove much more easily that you are real people, with a real organization that hasn't fallen apart over those five years, and it helps your case. If it will be a definite hardship to wait to get your tax exemption, you may wish to file both together, but consider this carefully. While it was difficult for us to pay property taxes on our first property, having waited for federal recognition and then having that be solid, rather than probationary recognition, helped immensely when we were purchasing and zoning the second.

Again, if you don't think you can handle this on your own, seek the advice of others who have been through the process, or hire a professional. Never be afraid to ask for help. Even the IRS and the state can answer questions, and their websites are filled with plenty of helpful guides and advice.

SLIDE – ONGOING CORPORATE DETAILS

Once you've done all that, you might want to crawl in a hole and hide, but remember: this is an actual business now, a corporation, and it requires maintenance to remain in working order and active recognition status. If you are federally recognized as a 501c3, you do not have to file additional paperwork with

the IRS unless you open up certain types of subgroups like charities or foundations, or if you bring in more than \$50,000 per year above expenses. If you are required to file with the IRS annually, this is done with paperwork called Form 990. Your 501c3 certificate will tell you if you are a Form 990 organization or not.

There's also another neat and important thing about that, incidentally. Grantmaking organizations, and things like Amazon Smile, which donates a portion of Amazon sales to the charitable organization of your choice, use your IRS designation to define such organizations. You can look up any organization on the IRS website to see if it's legally recognized or not. Everybody from the insurance company to the local police *will* check to see if your organization is listed there, and thus "real" in their eyes...and there are a lot of organizations out there claiming to be 501c3s that aren't listed.

The official file number your organization receives as a 501c3 organization entitles your organization to its own tax exemptions, salary exemptions, and anything else where anybody requires you to "prove you're a church." It makes your organization equal, by law, to any other legally recognized religious organization out there, and it's well worth getting.

Some states require you to file a copy of your bylaws annually. In Illinois, submitting bylaws only has to be done if we change them substantially. We are required, by our own bylaws, to meet at least once a year, to review all of the bylaws, and change them wherever necessary. How and where and when board meetings are held cannot be dictated by the state, but it will be dictated by the bylaws you draw up, and your board members have to agree on them.

Most states require at least two board members, sometimes three; one person will be named a "registered agent," whose job it is to keep all the paperwork current. Some states require board members to reside within the state; others only that a certain percentage of board members and the registered agent must live in that state. If you open more than one location, such as multiple shrines or temples, you may have to incorporate in other states, or you may be permitted to let smaller shrines or temples operate as sub-locations under your main headquarters. Read your legal requirements carefully and keep your paperwork up to date.

Some local governments require clergy to be registered with them to perform legal marriages or work as chaplains in hospitals, etc. Others do not. Make sure you know what the local laws are, and keep your information up to date. Banks and insurance companies, lawyers and businesses that grant your organization credit may also require various paperwork to verify your status. Remember, the organization isn't you: it is its own entity, and it has its own rules for operation. And remember again, if you're afraid to do these things on your own, hire professionals to help.

And now that I have either terrified you or put you to sleep with all this talk of bylaws and IRS forms, I'd like to take a short break. When we come back, I'd like to

talk about what you do with that organization once the bean-counting part of setting it up legally is out of the way.

(BREAK)

Welcome back. I'm glad to see I didn't scare you all away.

SLIDE – INSIDE THE ORGANIZATION

Now you have your organization and it's all nice and legally recognized. Or maybe you haven't gotten that far yet, and you're still thinking about what kind of organization you'd like to lead. Either way, that's what we'll talk about through the rest of this presentation.

The two biggest things you have to think about as a religious organization in the modern world are education and outreach. Education happened in ancient polytheisms, too. There were formal teachers, and formal ways to teach the priests how to do the work of the gods, and formal teaching of the ways and the stories of those gods to the laity, the people who were not priests.

You need to set down a formal understanding of what you think the members of your organization should know, and what they should be able to do, as members. If necessary, you may need to set up a curriculum or teaching program for them to achieve those things. Whether that's a formal class, or hands-on training where you all learn to do rituals together, the form will be dictated by your group's needs. But there should be a transparent and uniform plan for that education.

Priest education is also crucial and important. I would argue that a formal training or education program for priests is very necessary, no matter how enlightened we may think we are, or how distant we might be from ancient polytheists. Priesthood is a vocation – a job or a profession. It's not a perk or a fancy, empty title. Gerald Gardner wanted a religion where everybody was a priest, because when everyone is a priest nobody is a priest, and that would in turn break the hegemony of the Church of England over religious organizations. That was great for his time and his intended purposes, but we're not his students.

If only because we as polytheists tend to hold to ancient models, and we know they had training programs, priesthood should mean something more to us than Gardner's anti-Christian political movement. As polytheist priests, and further, as polytheist leaders, I believe that we are obligated to train ourselves to the best of our ability.

If you want to be a dentist, even if you feel in the depths of your heart that you want to be a dentist, even if you think that Ra Himself wants you to be a dentist, you are probably not going to go down the street, rent an office, and invite people to come in and let you pull their teeth out with a pair of pliers. Wanting to fly a plane does not magically grant you the ability to do so. Swearing your life to save dying babies won't mean much, if you don't have the knowledge or the ability to do it. Priesthood

– that service to our gods and Their creations that we invest great sacredness in – should be no different.

Your organization should have a formal priest-training program, with distinct, agreed-upon expectations and a curriculum to get a potential priest from the place where they want to be a priest, to a place where they can actually do that. Your trainers should themselves be trained, people of experience and integrity who can teach and mentor new priests under their care. If you want to train priests, get yourself some training. Haven't got anybody to train you? Find someone. Find another group that will permit you to train with them, or at very least, show you how they do it. Talk to someone who knows, about how they go about it, about what sorts of skills are required. Take classes in various skill sets that you will need that aren't directed by divine means – there will be some; trust me, the gods gave us teachers, too – and get those skills.

If you are not the teaching type, find another priest who is, and let that person be your head instructor. Having a formal training program not only produces priests who will serve your organization, your gods, and your people with integrity and talent for years to come, but it also helps those priests to become leaders, to live up to their own spiritual vows and potentials. You serve the gods by serving your priests, and then your priests will serve the gods and complete the circle.

I'm going to talk a little about outreach, and this is a fuzzy area. Ancient polytheists didn't do outreach, or anything we would modernly equate with "ministry." In ancient times, the positions of moral elder and teacher of values, mediator of conflict and family protector, were held by family or village elders, and they were generally not religious in nature. The priests just had to do the rituals to serve the gods, and sometimes pass along gods' messages. They didn't have to offer moral teaching or counseling or all the touchy-feely things that we associate with ministers these days, where they are called "pastors," as if their job is just to keep sheep in line.

You can definitely run an organization where your priests only do ritual work, where they are strictly ritual technicians, and then everything I'm going to say about outreach is not applicable to you. However, because old habits die hard, and most people who think of "clergy" these days *do* also think of ministry and pastoral care, you may wish to consider whether or not your priests, either all of them or a specially trained subset of them, will enter into that kind of work.

In Kemetic Orthodoxy, we have two kinds of priests. *W'abu*, named after the purity priests of antiquity whose job was to run the rites in the shrines, are lay priests. I do not grant them the title of Reverend. The state or the federal government does not legally recognize them as ministers or pastors. *W'abu* priests do nothing but run rituals, and are trained solely on how to run those rituals. They are not expected to exercise any authority over or moral guidance for temple members, other than to discuss the rituals themselves. Some people are quite happy being *W'abu*, and that's all they are called to do, and thus the job suits them well.

Others feel called to a deeper vocation, to serve the gods through service to the gods' children in a ministerial sense, and thus I permit those people to train to become *Hemu-Netjer* priests. That's the ancient term for a person who ran a temple, the "servant of the god," and while in antiquity that person had no ministerial or outreach responsibilities, for us as Kemetic Orthodox, Hemu-Netjer get the title of Reverend before their name, and are legally recognized as clergy representatives of the community. They are entitled to offer pastoral counseling if they are so trained; they also train clergy, teach laity, and conduct the rites of passage including legal marriages, funerals, etc. as required in the modern concept of "minister." I also require my Hemu-Netjer to offer service to the larger world outside our community, by mandatory service hours to another nonprofit organization.

That's how we make it work. That may or may not fit your model. You will have to decide what your organization needs and wants, and then construct your own model accordingly.

There are other methods of outreach or ministry that you will have to decide if you or your clergy or laity will engage in. There is pastoral counseling – and I strongly suggest that if you engage in this, your counselors are formally trained, for liability and ethical reasons. There is prison ministry, a difficult kind of outreach that not everyone is suited for, but there is certainly a rising call for, as so many people who are incarcerated often turn to religion. There is interreligious outreach, and service work, with other religious groups. And then there is the decision of whether or not your organization will proselytize. Mine has chosen never to do so, and we have enjoyed slow but steady growth. I'm sure we could have had more members if we engaged in active attempts to recruit, but I'm not as certain that we would have been ready for them. These are all individual decisions for you and for your organization to consider.

SLIDE – THE INTERNET

Something that's become an important part of our work over the last decade, a thing that is responsible for our being here today, is the Internet. Once upon a time, a religious organization could avoid the Internet entirely, or just have a static website, and be done with it. This is not the case any longer. Your organization can use a content management portal to run a "virtual church" on the Internet, hold online classes, and even convene online meetings or ritual simulcasts. Social media permits your membership to be in contact all over the world, 24 hours a day, and if you don't use it? They will anyway. You are missing a huge opportunity if you do not engage with the Internet. Decide how you will or will not use it as part of your organization.

Of course, as we all know from the various blogosphere wars that occur, not everything on the Internet is happy or useful all of the time. There are some serious drawbacks and limitations to the Internet as part of your organization's operations, and I've had 20 years to observe many of them. The biggest one is what I call a social

media effect, and this is only intensifying as social media becomes easier and faster and more prevalent, with the rise of smartphones and peripherals.

People who interact with you predominantly via Internet tend to forget that the organization has a life outside the screen. They may not donate, or offer other help to the group, since, from their perspective at least, it is all free on the Internet. They may not participate beyond the Internet, either because they are far away from other members, or because they can't think of it as a "real group" due to distance, and just treat the group as yet another social forum, rather than a living and breathing community.

Until and unless virtual reality technology improves considerably, the Internet cannot, and will not, surpass live time, face-to-face interaction. You can use the Internet to bring members together, absolutely. But you will also have to be able to get them off the Internet, and into the world with each other, if you want to build a real community and not just pixels on a screen.

The relative anonymity of the Internet can also present its own issues. If you take applications over the Internet, you have no way to verify the information is true, unless you engage in background checks. People tend to be less well behaved on the Internet, believing that no one can see them and there is no "real life" repercussion for bad behavior. These things must all be considered, when seeking balance.

SLIDE – KEEPING IT ALL BALANCED

And balance, after all, is what we all want, right? Except maybe the Thracians and the Dionysians...

Seriously, though, balance is important, between your members and for all the various parts that make your organization work. You have got to be able to balance the community: with an open, honest model where people feel safe, and can open themselves up, so you can all honor the gods together. You've got to make sure your clergy are up to the task, trained well enough that they can do the jobs that are expected of them, and able to understand their roles. Your clergy need to balance with your laity, so nobody feels like anyone is taking advantage of each other, so that there is no unnecessary strife, and so that everyone knows what is expected of them and their responsibilities, and who they can talk to to get things back to balance should they fall out of it.

And even after you've managed to do all that, you have to make sure everyone is balanced enough that you will be able to survive the truly unforeseen events that can – and will – come to your organization. Whether that's a fire that burns the temple down, or a schism between members that threatens to tear the group apart, or something as individually challenging as clergy burnout, or as painful to the entire organization as an allegation or the actual occurrence of abuse, you need to make sure that your organization is strong enough, and knows how to work

together well enough, that those storms will not bring the house down around your heads. If you have done your preparation well enough, every storm will be weathered and thus strengthen the house for the next inevitable tempest.

None of these things are easy. All of these things are important, and should you engage yourself in this work, it may be the hardest job you ever do. At the same time, it will probably be the hardest job you ever love. Working for the gods is demanding, and the salary isn't that great. But the benefits! The benefits are everything.

I've said enough. Hopefully I have given you things to think about as we begin our weekend here together, and maybe, it's inspired a few of you to think about what is possible. It is not easy to be a leader. To lead in a productive way requires you not to be out in front with a flag, but behind the front line, gently inching everyone else forward until the ground is secured. If you think you can do that, and you're willing to do that, I salute you, and I wish you all good blessings, and I pledge to offer you any help and advice that I can.

I've been standing here a while now. It's exciting to think there are others to stand here with me, and that we can find even more to hold this ground once we're gone. If I can do only one thing at this conference, it will be to remind you that yes, you can do this, if you want to and you're willing to do the work.

You might even enjoy it.