

Rites that go Wrong

by Phil Hine

I am indebted to the indomitable Reg for suggesting the subject of tonight's talk. Magicians are all too eager to hold forth about the rituals that work - the superb invocations, the powerful evocations and the money-working spell after which you find a tenner lying in the street. But what about the rituals that don't come off as planned - the invocations when the deity doesn't manifest, the Results Magick that doesn't come up with the goods, and the workings which leave you with a sense of 'was that it?' Tonight I'll be looking at some of the magical 'wobbles' that I've experienced, and discussing how they changed my life - or perhaps didn't, and some 'wrongs' that have occurred to colleagues. On rereading, it looks like yet another Hine excuse for multiple anecdotes, but what the hell, eh?

Why Rituals don't Work

Reading Pete Carroll's mathematical exegesis of magic, I sometimes get the impression that if a ritual goes wrong, it's because someone got a decimal point wrong somewhere. The explanations that we often use to describe how magick works - you know, morphic fields, Butterflies flapping their wings, and so forth, are all very well, but reading them, I often get the impression that magick shouldn't, all things considered, miss the mark. In some circles, occultists fall back on the argument of 'ah well, the tides were against that particular working' or 'it wasn't my Karma for that spell to work' - spot the cop-out clause? Under these arguments - if your rite works, then it's 'ego-stroking-time', if it didn't, then it's the fault of some cosmic agency.

And anyway, what do I mean when I say 'Rites that go Wrong'? In the case of Results Magick (Sorcery) this would refer to spells to bring about a specific condition that haven't manifested yet. In which case I might argue my way out of that one and say that 'the Universe is still working to manifest that one' - i.e. The cheque's in the post. For Invocations, 'going wrong' might be when the deity being summoned fails to turn up. Well, I'll go into that one in a while. Of course, a lot of magick doesn't require hardcore results - subtle stuff like personal development & so forth, where you can only judge the 'results' over time.

Results Magick

Results Magick or Sorcery is concerned with bringing about specific changes in your conditions. One of the simplest approaches to Sorcery is using Sigils. The important thing about Sigils, I would stress, is getting your intent as precise as possible - vague 'wishing' tends to give rise to vague results, in my experience. However, there are other factors to bear in mind as well.

Right then. Sex.

Hands up everyone who's ever done a sigil to get laid.

Me too.

Works doesn't it? Well, most of the time.

A while ago, I did a TOPY sigil with the intended result of bringing about a much-desired sexual fantasy, and no, I'm not telling you the details. Needless to say, it hasn't worked ... yet. And for what it's worth, I'll treat you to my own reasoning behind this. A core part of the sigilisation process is allowing the desire to become latent - that is, you don't allow it to resurface into consciousness. Seeing as the sigil was for an extremely powerful desire - an obsession, even. I'm probably too bound up with that particular scenario to let it become 'latent' and so manifest. To do so, I'd probably have to rework some of my lust-complexes. If I did, and then the opportunity arose to 'manifest' the result. I might no longer be interested. Then again...

A 'traditional' magical line is that you shouldn't place too much strain on the Universe. There is the old adage of a magician who does a spell for money and waits for the multiverse (like Santa) to provide. He doesn't do anything to 'help' the desire manifest, and so his result manifests by him getting insurance compensation after tripping over a loose stair carpet in the dole office and breaking both legs. A succesful result, but not in the way he expected it. Which if nothing else shows that the Multiverse has a slappy sense of humour.

Invocations

I've often been at group rituals where the deity being called upon descends, not into the chosen priestess or priest, but into someone else. This can be embarrassing for all concerned, especially as in most of the rites where I've seen this occur, the whole thing as gone ahead as normal, whilst one of the celebrants is standing/sitting there totally zapped. Only afterwards do you get the mutters of 'Kali was in me, not so-andso', etc. The other point to mention is that after an invocation, not all entities will obligingly go away. Some refuse point-blank, and have to be cajoled, threatened, or plied with alcohol. This isn't so much 'failure' though, as an unexpected level of success. Magicians should beware the unexpected. A friend of mine once did some conjurations of 'Dark Gods' in his flat. Good Chaos Magician that he was, he banished with laughter. However, 'something' was still around and whatever it was, it literally kicked him out of bed....Laugh that one off.

York, 1985 and I was performing an invocation of Baphomet with the High Priestess of the coven I was then half-in. Again, 'something' in the room objected. Whatever it was pulled a heavy poster off the wall - it didn't just slide off, oh no, it looked for all the world like someone was peeling it back from the wall, at a right angle. After that went, my stereo speaker plinth started rocking. We took the hint, banished, and went down the pub.

Group Magic

I don't like working magic with people who I have nagging doubts about - or simply don't like them for very clear reasons. Why I've set this rule up goes back to an incident in 1986. I was in a group, and a big meeting was planned - lotsa people coming in that were 'invited' specially because of the 'importance' of this working. Two of the people who came down for the do

spent the whole time bickering with each other, and generally bringing a bad vibe (man) to the whole thing. I was pissed off, and would have much preferred not to have taken part. Couldn't back out tho', as I was playing a key role in the ritual. So I went ahead with it. I forget what other people thought but I came out of that temple thinking 'yecch' and just wanting to get out of the place. Since it was 3am, I was stuck there, so I went into a spare bedroom, laid me down, and decided to go for a bit of an astral wander. Like you do.

Whilst I was happily floating round the Tree of Life, 'somebody' else came in and decided that I was under astral attack by demons, as well you might if you come across someone lying peacefully on the floor. If you've ever been forcibly dragged out of a deep trance to find a large person sitting on you, wielding an athame and shouting 'out vile spirit', you'll know what it was like for me. Not a happy pixie.

I declined to take part in the next day's working and departed, thinking "never again". Wait for it though. Here's the best bit. As British Rail whisked me back to the relative sanity of York, the people I'd been working with were en route to their next working. Somebody got a flash message from the astral guardians and, while I'm sitting on the train drinking Newcastle Brown and thinking of taking out a subscription to New Scientist, my astral body is under attack (again!) and the group have pulled over onto the hard shoulder, linked hands, and are battling for my soul. On returning home, I sought the advice of an elder colleague, who agreed that the whole thing had been a cock-up and that my best route was to steer clear of "daft buggers" in future. Advice which I have, with one or two exceptions, mostly followed.

The result of this particular shebang was that I left that particular group and soon after, joined another one, with an accordant change of magical direction. And a conviction never to do any serious kind of magick with people I didn't trust.

Sometimes, I have thought that a ritual had gone wrong, when in fact it hadn't. Two illustrations spring to mind here. The first is when a colleague and I attempted to get through to the wizard Amalantrah - one of A.C's inner-plane contacts. We were setting up a new magical group at the time (Dark Star), and, flying in the face of discussions in the 'zines about HGA's etc, decided to have an 'inner-planes adept' or two heading the Order. I recall the rite fondly, as a circle of fairy lights and a chocolate easter egg were part of the temple props. To cut a long story short, we got through to old whatzis-face, but he wasn't interested in sponsoring our temple, as it were.

Second one is an invocation of Thoth. Again, during an attack of Thelema. The whole thing went smoothly, except Thoth didn't manifest in any discernable way - no 'inner voices', no visions, nowt. What a let down etc. Except the next night, I was asked to do a tarot reading using the Thoth deck. It went on and on - for about five hours, and I realised that I had a lot of realisations about the cards etc. Again - the unexpected.

Talking about 'unexpected results' there's Eris to consider. She's got one helluva an odd sense of humour. We did a working once on behalf of someone with Eris as the powering current. The rite worked for that person, only they got a whole heap of shit with their result to work through as well. As for me; the following day, I locked myself out of my top-floor flat - necessitating a climb over the roof (it was raining) to get back in; my computer monitor suddenly 'died' on me, and a condom split, necessitating a few days of anxiety for myself and the other person

concerned. Hail Eris!

Nowadays I tend to more-or-less hold the belief that if I do a working, it's going-to-bloody-well-work! Having said that, I'm careful to only attempt things which have a good chance of coming off - not straining the fabric of the wossname too much.

I can recall, many years ago, doing a pentagram ritual and thinking "oh shit - I just did all the pentagrams wrong - and, like, nothing noticed." And if they did, I haven't been stitched up by something nasty - yet. In the first proper group I was in, I was brought up to believe that if you crossed a ritual circle once it was set up, then it gave you a nasty turn. Consequently I was somewhat taken aback when I was visiting another group one time, and they were in and out of the circle like yo-yos. Still, I suppose it was good practice in disciplining people to do their wee-wees before the ritual and not halfway through the invocations ... mind you, for some people that is their idea of ritual.

But this isn't answering the question of why do Rites Go Wrong? I think Group Dynamics, or perhaps, the lack of awareness of, can explain some occult gaffs. A typical example is the instance where no one really knows what they're doing but is either too nervous to voice this, nor to they wish to look a prat in front of their colleagues. To maintain magi-cred, it's not usually considered good form to say "er, I don't understand why we're doing this bit". Mind you, if it turns out that nobody else does, then this could mean trouble all round.

Not Having the Right Attitude

Not having the rite attitude is probably responsible for a few gaffs. There was this time we did a Mercury ritual. Tricky bastard, Mercury is. (Mind you, aren't they all?) There was this couple - not taking it seriously - probably still hoping that after this ritual there would be an orgy after all. Everyone else got their desire manifested. They got their house broken into. So what's the 'right attitude?' Difficult to define, but I think playful seriousness probably sums it up for me. Get too serious and you tend to get pompous. Get too playful and you'll get on other people's nerves - possibly including the entities you're working with.

Not Bothering to Banish

Not bothering to Banish is always good for a few sticky moments. Okay, there are times when you don't have to banish anyway, but you need to develop a sense for this, and I have met numerous people who have started off by saying that they 'never bother with banishing' and have gone off their heads. One acquaintance burnt all his magical books, cut a pentagram into his chest and was last seen being held down by burly nurses.

This is a good point to mention Loonies. Yes, we've probably all met magical Loonies. The scene is full of them. The 'Maguses', reincarnations of Aleister Crowley, people who have astral battles with imaginary black lodges, and the ones who think they're gods. In my book, going Loony is a magical mistake. Well, it's supposed to make you a better person, isn't it? So if you end up boring people stupid then you've done a whoopsy somewhere. Simple guideline: if you go Loony and pull out of it, then it was an 'initiation'. If you stay a Loony then it was a mistake. You might think that you've crossed the abyss, kicked the crap out of Satan and discovered a

whole new set of initiation titles for yourself, but if everyone else thinks you're a prat, then its tough shit. It's easy to do your head in with magick. If you consistently invoke the same deity, it's quite likely that you'll end up obsessed by that deity. Sure, invoke often, but variety please. One of the Leeds magia a few years ago did too many invocations of Pan and was last heard of wandering around Newcastle city centre displaying a proud erection and declaiming himself to be the personification of the male principle and where was his Priestess? What he did get was a manifestation of spirits clad in blue..

Over-Confidence

With magick, it pays to have a certain amount of confidence - if you're not sure what you're doing, I think that this can sometimes lead to a working going awry. But with confidence, you can have too much of a good thing. If you're totally confident about how something's going to work out, then you're less likely to adapt quickly if something doesn't happen as you think it should.

1981 and I am part of a group watching a Priestess go into trance. Lie still, relax, mumble mumble. Fine. Nothing we didn't expect. Suddenly she starts twisting and groaning and generally doing things that we thought weren't supposed to happen. So somebody sprinkles holy water on her. Someone else draws a pentagram over her - she gets worse. By this time people are panicking and who's going to volunteer to go out and ring an ambulance? General consternation, what do we do etc and eventually she comes back and is not pleased. Didn't we know that she was fighting a demon and our well-meaning efforts were getting in the way? minus 10 million points of karma and stand in the corner of the temple 'til you've memorised all of the laws of Witchcraft.

Likewise, what do you do when someone won't come out of trance? Leave them to it? Call their name gently? Tickle their feet? Throw a bucket of water over them or slap 'em round the chops? Books on how-to-do magick don't tend to mention this sort of occurrence - you give the license to depart and off goes the entity back to wherever-it-was they manifested from. You hope.

Sometimes rituals go wrong because something that sounded okay during the planning didn't actually come out right when being done. Some friends of mine planned to do an Odinic working. If forget the details, but it involved hanging someone in a tree. The arrangement of ropes did something horrible to the volunteers's circulation and he had to be taken down. That particular rite was aborted.

Similarly, the problem with becoming over-reliant on other people's ritual scripts is that it's hard to improvise if you're not used to it. One group I was in was on one occasion doing that old Wiccan favourite 'The Descent of the Goddess into the High Priestess'. After which the Priestess would declaim the Charge of the Goddess - that was the plan anyway. However, after stumbling over the first two lines, the next thing we heard was "oh shit, I've forgotten the rest" followed by a fit of giggles. Okay, we all forget our 'lines' now and again, but if you can't improvise in such moments, then it can lead to a sudden 'deflation' of any ritual atmosphere that's been carefully built up.

Being Wet

I think a key point about doing ritual is that if you're going to do it, do it with a bit of jazz - style. Imagine you're an actor on stage and put a bit of life into. You may not believe that the Gods you're invoking are real - but you were up on some lofty spiritual plane, would you bother dragging yourself all the way down to the lower astral for some drip who erred, ummed, and declared the invocation with about as much enthusiasm as Robert Maxwell answering back to the tax inspector? And call those pentagrams...? Magick works very much on the principle of nothing in, nothing out. If you can at least act as though you're summoning up powerful forces from beyond space and time, you might get somewhere. If you're into ritual at all then it's quite likely that, somewhere amongst your legion of selves, there's a drama queen screaming for recognition. So be flamboyant. Put on a good show and the gods will reward you, give good reviews, come back for more and tell their friends about you.

And this brings up something else. Asking gods to do things for you. This can be tricky. Asking Kali to blat the guy in the next flat who plays his stereo too loud when you're trying to meditate is a bit like using a tac-nuke to swat a fly with. It is said by some that gods have a different sense of time than we do and our sense of 'now' is a lot different to theirs. I got the impression, when doing some work with Isis a few years ago, that she wouldn't actually get round to doing anything for a few thousand years at least. Elementals are easier by far. Though again, they can be tricky. I blame all this magical psychology. It lessens the impact of all the entities and let's face it, if someone came up to you and said "you're only a subpersonality of me, so do this sharpish mate" would you go for it? No, you'd punch them in the face (hopefully) and half the time I think that entities feel the same way about all these jumped-up magicians saying "do this, do that" without so much of a please, thank you or a decent sacrifice.

If, at gatherings of the occult hoi-polloi, you actually admit to a working going wrong. Some clever dick is bound to point out a flaw in your research. Like, "oh you didn't invoke the wosname through the right portals, nor did you have the right colours on the temple banners and you did the dance widdershins" and that kind of thing. After discussing our abortive Amalantrah working with a member of a certain O.T.O faction I was given the clue - "well, you see, the inner-plane adepts are in a period of silence at the moment" which presumably meant they were all 'out to lunch' or having a quick nap. Ergo, it followed, the entity who we got through to who claimed it was Amalantrah wasn't - it was something else posing as an inner-plane adept. ...It was the chocolate easter egg that screwed thing up, I know it. Needless to say, I pointed out that we had gone through all the usual tricks to test the validity of the entity. Did the fact that we had done it without a Scarlet Woman zonked on ether make a difference? End of conversation.

I'm not a great fan of this kind of explanation. Most 'systems' seem to have whopping great contradictions in them. For example, no one has ever been able to give me a good explanation of why the sphere of Hod in the Qabalah is given the elemental association of water. I never spotted it until we did a series of Hod workings last year, and no one has come up with a satisfactory explanation since. Still, I digress.

Nevertheless, there do seem to be some ground rules in certain types of magical operation.

Take Goetia. Ooer, yes, summoning demons. A couple of years ago we did a whole series of evocations from the Lesser Key of Solomon. For the first working, we thought "why bother with all this circle & triangle on the floor stuff - we'll just visualise 'em instead." The main result of that was that we both suffered nausea and a 'drained' feeling for a couple of days afterwards - a sort of dark hangover of the soul, I suppose. And the demon didn't come through very clearly. It turned out that Goetic demons have fairly 'traditional' ideas about how they liked to be invoked. None of this trendy stuff for them. Either we did it properly or we'd have a strike on our hands.

Dreamweaving

This is a nice trendy-sounding name for what often amounts to little more than intense fantasising so that you continue to dream about what you were thinking about before you drop off to sleep. What often happens is that you drop off to sleep anyway. This can happen with pathworkings too. You're leading a pathworking, with the whole group laid out in front of you, you're using your best 'pathworking' voice and then suddenly, there it is ... snoring. I recall dropping off in a pathworking once. Everyone else had wonderful visions to report. Then it was my turn. "Well, actually I was so knackered from the drive down here I just fell asleep." Cue look of faint disgust/superiority from everyone else present. I used to worry about my tendency to drop off to sleep whilst practicing 'astral' banishings in bed. No problem, as it turned out.

It seems to be a part of magical learning. Whilst you class yourself as a neophyte, you sort of 'expect' things to go wrong, and are continually over-stating the consequences of what 'orrible thing might appear if you do something wrong. Once you've knocked around for a bit, you're more confident about what you're doing and when something does go wacky, you're often less prepared for it. These days I try and go for a mix which is: if I do this working then something will happen, but I'm not 100% sure what. Magick involves taking risks. If nothing else, getting into a sticky situation will give you a new perspective on things.

1979. I'm doing Psychology at Poly. Doing some work with Tattva cards & elementals. Magick is just an extension of psychology is what I'm thinking. Ha bloody Ha. I wake up one night. There's a red mist in the room and it feels like someone has dumped a suitcase full of concrete on top of me. ...oh shit.

I can't move. I can't speak. What the fuck do I do. Heavy. Eventually I projected a banishing pentagram outwards. The feeling of weight vanished, as did the mist, and I promptly went into gibber mode. For about two days. Okay, so I had one of those experiences of when you think you're awake but you're not that Keith Herne was going on about at Squawking Prick a few weeks back. At the time though, it really threw a scare into me, and it gave me a deeper respect for magick. So that was okay, in the end. Ah the days of youthful folly.

Not long later I did my first attempt at evoking Yog-Sothoth. You know, one of the most 'orrible of the 'orrible Great Old Ones. Being on the edge of the Peak District, I had some good mountains to choose from and chose one of the highest in the district. It was snowing too. I took a torch with me, and remember the eyes of sheep reflecting red in its beam. Spooky. I don't quite remember the details, but I do recall seeing a beam of light coming down from space onto

the stones I was sitting on. The next thing I can recall is getting the hell out of there in a blind panic and turning up at a friend's house. More gibbering. I don't know whether that was a failure or a success, but once again, I managed to scare the shit out of myself. Perhaps at the time, it's what I needed.

It may be that we learn far more about magick and ourselves when things don't quite go according to plan. If magick was as easy as some people make it out to be, we'd probably find it too pedestrian and we'd be a secret cabal of Christians plotting the downfall of the Pagan Aeon or something. No. Magick, like life, is wacky, weird and wonderful. It's never ceased to amaze me that by standing in a room, waving your arms about, and spouting awful verse, you can change the atmosphere, how you feel, and possibly set off a stochastic process that will result (more or less) in what you want to happen, happening. We can theorise, argue, and waffle pedantically all we like, but the core of the mystery I don't think will ever be pinned down.

I think it's extremely difficult to judge magical results entirely in terms of success and failure. My experiences with doing magical sigils for example, have shown me that quite often, the results don't manifest until I've thought "well bugger this, that was a waste of time" - and then they pop up. Some magical approaches do in fact recommend that you work occasionally for a negative result - and the opposite will come along in due course. Any magical act should be instructive, especially when it doesn't go the way you planned.

Let me finish then, with some magical axioms to bear in mind

Invoke Often

Banish Often

Do it with Style

Keep a sense of perspective

When caught out - Improvise!