

STARTING AN ASATRU KINDRED

By Tina LeBouthillier

You've recently come home to Asatru, the religion of your ancestors. You have read and studied, looked around on the Internet, and have done some rituals on your own. The next step? People say you should start a kindred. But how to go about it? Here are a few guidelines and handy hints put together by some of us who have been through the whole process - things that we wish we had known!

Who are you? You could be a person practicing alone who knows no one in your area you could have a family who is interested also, or you could have a group of friends who would like to start a kindred but you don't know quite how to proceed.

You may be asking "Why should we go through this process ? We just want to get together for blots and socialize." There are lots of reasons. You will know each other better and what your vision of the kindred is today and what it might be tomorrow. If you decide to incorporate later as a non-profit organization, that will be a less complex job. You will be a stable group where newcomers will be comfortable. And because you are a stable group, you will be able to face conflicts with less stress, whether they are internal or external. There will also be less internal conflict because you have the experience to deal with it in a pro-active manner. When you are a group rather than an individual, your luck and talents become more than the sum of your individual efforts, and you can put more energy into your personal efforts and when honoring the gods when you have a group assisting and supporting you.

One of the first things to do is to find out if there are established kindreds in your area, using the Internet. If there are, you may or may not want to join them, but if not, maintaining a frithful relationship can be important in how your kindred is perceived in the long run and kindreds will be willing to refer people to you later. If you can't find any local kindreds, contact some of the larger organizations. Also contact kindreds in your state that may be too far away from you for any physical contact. Get to know them through e-mail, ask if they know of any people in your area, and also if they wouldn't mind sharing some of their experiences getting started - the problems they encountered and things that have worked out well for them. Join some Asatru Yahoo groups , preferably in your state or region. You may find there are folks right in your area now! Let people know you are interested in starting a kindred. It is very easy to start your own Yahoo group too!

Although most kindreds will have similar activities, blot, sumble, celebrating specific holidays, it is important to think about what type of kindred you will be comfortable in. For example, would you rather have a family-oriented group, a close-knit group of friends with similar interests, or a large group of people with diverse interests? Will you focus on the Norse gods only, or a greater Pan-Germanic pantheon? To some people runic and seith practices are of great importance. Would you be happier in a small, stable

group, or would you like to grow Asatru in your area and meet a lot of new people? Would you like to write and publish your own material, or make lore study your focus? It sounds like a lot to think about, but these are general questions you can ask yourself that will help you get a clearer picture in your mind of what you want.

Begin scheduling regular meetings to look for potential members and publicize them - on the internet or you can print up flyers and distribute them to local pagan groups. For example, you could be at a specific restaurant the second Saturday of each month from 1:00 to 2:00 pm. Even if you are the only attendee for a few months, don't get discouraged. If people know that you hold regular meetings, they are more likely to show up. Even though you haven't gone through the whole process to become a kindred yet, it is ok to start looking for others who may share your general vision. And if they don't, your time and the time of those who come to your meetings won't be wasted. Be clear with people that you are just in the planning stage right now.

Because many of us are idealistic, we sometimes tend to overlook red flags in people's personalities, thinking that being Asatru and wanting to join a kindred is all we need to look for in people, that problems will work themselves out once we get to know the individuals better, or that we can be a good influence and help people with problems. When you take on a wounded personality, they can benefit from the sense of community, but only if they have the willingness to learn and grow and change. A 'wounded personality' can be a bully who gets his way by shouting the loudest, a manipulative or controlling person who considers himself a victim and uses guilt to get his way, a control freak who needs to be a leader and can't be a follower, those who can't control their drinking or use drugs, those who feel they are outcasts from society and have a sense of pride in it. What most of these people will have in common is an extreme focus on themselves and their own needs, without the ability to see the needs of the group. Unfortunately, some of these people we won't recognize until they have done their damage, but be aware that you will encounter some of these folks since they tend to gravitate to non-mainstream religions.

Asatru, and our individual kindreds and communities are small. Larger, older, and well established communities and organizations can take on difficult people without much damage. But if your group is small and new, taking on a challenge like this can drain your energy.

Having a screening process, such as a probationary period before membership will help prevent conflict later, and can be discussed and added to your by-laws when you write them. In the meantime, look for emotional maturity and self esteem in the people you meet. Everyone has problems, but if all you hear from a person is talk of being alienated from their family and co-workers, they don't have reliable transportation, they are having money problems, if they only want to write to you on line and not meet in person, or if they can't be clear on what their expectations are for belonging to a kindred - several of these issues at the same time should ring some warning bells. If you are selective, you will attract a higher quality of people than if your doors are wide open to everyone.

If you have a core group now, or you have assembled one from the people you have met during your meetings, get together a few times socially and talk about your ideas and hopes for the kindred, your conceptions of the gods, do a few informal trial runs of blots and sumbels. Take your time getting comfortable with each other, and each other's personal styles of working, studying, and playing! Don't feel as if you have to start the formal kindred right away. Toss around ideas for names for the kindred. The name should be meaningful to each of you. The focus of your kindred can change in time, but the name is something that should remain the same over time. So take your time deciding. This should be something that you are all in agreement upon, not a majority rule issue. An old family name can cause resentment later from those who aren't in the family. Naming a kindred after a sacred tree or an animal is common, for example Wolf or Ash. It helps if they actually exist in your area and members should feel a deep connection to the tree or animal. If using an Old Norse name, if it looks hard to spell or pronounce, chances are that it will be misspelled or mispronounced by others! Don't let that stop you, but be aware that often you may have to explain what it means! You may want to discuss an oath that people will take when joining the kindred, and if you want the core members to take the oath now or at the actual formal formation of the kindred.

When you are ready, you can sit down and begin to write your mission and vision statements and by-laws. Before you do though, it is helpful to learn a little about holding productive meetings and decision making. If you are a group of good friends and not used to conducting meetings, be aware that you may be a little uncomfortable with this at first. Some of you may not want to criticize each other or bring up things that you know others are touchy about. It may be helpful to buy a copy of Robert's Rules of Order, and even some business books on conducting meetings. Appoint a "traffic cop" or facilitator beforehand. Their job will be to make sure your meetings start and end on time, that items on your agenda are brought up and everyone stays on track discussing them, that everyone gets a chance to speak and have their opinions heard, and that people aren't attacked when they speak. Try to schedule them for about an hour at a time at first - so you don't get burned out discussing issues - with a specific ending time. Encourage everyone to minimize distractions during the meeting - don't eat, turn off the TV and cell phones. Keep in mind that your group is a spiritual entity, and the statements should reflect that.

Vision/Mission Statements: These should be written before the by-laws. They are actually two separate things, but can be combined into one statement. Usually one paragraph is enough. The Mission Statement says who you are, what you do and for whom, and how you are unique as a kindred. The Vision Statement paints a picture of the future, what the success of your kindred will look like. Take your time, write down different versions and see which version really says who you are. If you are alone, this will not be too difficult. If you are in a small group who have decided to start a kindred, keep in mind that even if you all seem in agreement in general conversation, putting things in writing is sometimes a little harder. Some people have an eye for detail, and some would rather keep things more general. Some may object to specific words, and

some may think that a statement like this is a waste of time. Giving yourself an estimated date of completion can usually get people on track. Although your statement looks at the big picture, try not to have a "one size fits all" statement. Tailor it specifically to your group. Keep in mind that even if you or your core group are sure of your focus, new people coming in may see the statement from a slightly different perspective. Don't be afraid to change your statement a few years down the line as your priorities change.

Decision Making: There are two kinds of decision making, by vote and by consensus. In consensus decision making, proposals are introduced, discussed and when it is time to decide, the members will give their consent to the proposal, say that they don't agree totally but they can live with the decision, or block the decision by saying no, which means it won't be implemented at that time. A lot of kindreds will either use straight voting, or a combination of voting and consensus. For example: A quick vote can be held to reimburse Joe for his printing expenses. But you may have a situation where half the people favor a new applicant for membership and half don't. You could discuss the pros and cons, and what it would take the members to be able to live with allowing this person to join. You could extend the probationary period, or ask them to attend a few more events before applying for membership so you can get to know them better. Then if you vote, people will be assured that their concerns are noted. There is also another type of kindred, one run entirely by the Gothi/Drighten. This can work well, especially when you have an older, wiser, and more experienced person in charge and the members are comfortable with that structure.

By-Laws: By-Laws are not that complicated! They just show how your kindred will function. Ideally, they should be detailed, but you should be able to print them out to give to members without running your printer out of ink! Some topics that should be covered:

1. *Requirements for Membership:* Will you have a probationary period? At the end of that period, will there be a vote? It is advisable to have an application form on file with home address and emergency contact numbers. Also it should be noted if anyone has any medical conditions - allergies to medications, diabetes or heart conditions, in case of emergencies where you can't contact relatives. Will there be an age requirement? If not, ask under age persons applying for membership to supply something in writing from their parents. Also, you don't want people in your kindred who live too far away to attend events on a regular basis. They should be encouraged to start their own kindreds locally.

2. *Frequency of Meetings:* How often, how long, what will constitute a quorum.

3. *Voting:* It should be clear if each individual member has a vote or if a husband and wife are members, if there is one vote per family.

4. *Officers:* Will you have traditional titles running your meetings (secretary, chairperson, treasurer) or Gothi, Lawspeaker, Drighten, etc.? Whatever you choose, be sure that each office's responsibility is defined in your by-laws. Some people may feel uncomfortable

about being stuck in a specific role forever. If so, you can rotate duties to see what works best for everyone.

5. *Dues*: It is advisable to set some amount for dues and decide if dues will be collected monthly or yearly, even if you don't have a need for the money at this point. You may want to set up a post office box, print brochures, or use the money to pay for food at meetings or blots.

6. *A Formal Procedure to Remove Problem Members*: Not something we like to think about, but there should be something in place. Just a discussion, presentation of the opposing side, and a vote is enough.

7. *A Provision Stating That the By-Laws and Mission/Vision Statement May be Modified or Changed With the Permission of the Members*.

8. *The kindred oath*: If you have written one, it should be included.

Miscellaneous Thoughts

Holidays and Blots: A listing of the holidays and blots to the gods that you will observe will be helpful in scheduling. Scheduling events six months in advance will be helpful as well, especially as your kindred grows. Smaller groups can move dates around easier. With large groups it is more difficult.

Oaths: Don't be in a hurry to take personal "forever" type oaths to each other. Spend a lot of time getting to know people before doing something that serious. Usually there is an oath members take to the kindred upon joining. Remember that people will grow and change, divorces happen, members may move away, or your group may grow to the point that some might want to start a second kindred. Releasing people from your kindred oath can be accomplished much more gracefully and frithfully than from a "you are my blood brother forever" oath.

Communication : If you don't want to use a personal e-mail account for people communicating with your kindred, a free Yahoo or Hotmail account works great. If you have the skills to put up a web page, by all means do so. If not, your kindred can get its own Yahoo group, have discussions, schedule events, and post pictures. Try to keep in touch with other kindreds in your state - they can be a good source of new members ! You may want to get a P.O. box now, or later as the need arises.

Roles: Most kindreds will have a person who acts as Gothi, and is comfortable doing rituals. But some kindreds also rotate that role. You will also need someone to check your

e-mail messages on a regular basis and write back to people, and someone responsible for scheduling meetings and events and contacting members about them. You will probably add more roles as time passes or as you grow.

Conflict: It's part of life. Having conflict is normal in a group, it is how we handle it that is important. Setting ground rules ahead of time, before problems occur helps. Some of your ground rules can be : A commitment to mutual respect. A commitment to try to solve the problem with the best interests of persons involved and the group in mind. No name calling or put downs. No intimidation, implied or direct. No physical contact. No interrupting - let each person have their say. Set a timer for each person if necessary.

Start by stating the problem as a mutual one to be solved, not a win-lose struggle. Get agreement on this before continuing.

Acknowledge that the issue is important to the persons involved.

Ask each person to share his version of the problem, stating only the facts.

Ask each person to state the other person's viewpoint.

Ask each person to confirm the accuracy of the restatement

Ask each person to suggest a solution, discuss the pros and cons and come to an agreement.

Ask each person to restate their agreement.

Schedule a follow-up meeting .

These are just a few, hopefully helpful bits of wisdom that we have learned over the years. We hope that this will make the process of developing a kindred a little easier for you. The hard part is over! Now you can relax a little! There are many activities kindreds can share in besides blots and sumbles. You can host lore or rune classes or discussion groups on Asatru (ethics and theology) learn crafts together (traditional or modern), take field trips to museums, learn about wild plants and animals native to your area, even host gatherings and invite neighboring kindreds! Good luck with your new kindred!