

Constructive Critique By Starhawk

For power to be accountable, leaders must be willing to hear criticism. As leaders, teachers and priestesses, it is our responsibility to both give and receive constructive feedback.

As an artist, Donald is familiar with the need to give and receive constructive criticism.

"A true critique is a gift," Donald says. "It's a mark of your respect for the other person as an artist, to take the time and trouble to constructively criticize their work."

Donald has a set of guidelines he uses to distinguish constructive criticism from simply shredding someone's creative work.

1. A constructive critique must be specific, not "I hate that chant," but "The words and the rhythm are fighting each other."

2. For criticism to be constructive, the intent must be to improve the work, resolve a conflict or improve a situation. "I'm telling you what I don't like about your chant because I want it to be moving and beautiful and because I believe you have the capability of making it so."

3. The timing must also be right. Immediately after the ritual, when the priestesses are still in trance and exhausted, is not the moment to rip apart the drum trance.

4. Another helpful guideline is that a critique must focus on something the person can actually change. As in "Have you thought about taking some voice lessons to help you learn how to project in a group?" rather than, "Your personality is too mousy for a teacher."

5. Finally, consider whether this criticism is best delivered privately or publicly. Email makes this consideration especially important, because it is so easy to press a button and deliver a critique to a whole listserve.

A public confrontation almost inevitably will feel like an attack. When we are criticized in front of others we lose face and feel humiliated. It's the difference between quietly telling your friend, "Your fly is open," and yelling loudly in a crowded room, "Hey, everybody, JOE'S FLY IS OPEN!"

Excerpted from *The Twelve Wild Swans* by Starhawk and Hilary Valentine, SF, HarperSanFrancisco, 2000.