Of Corpse

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“WHO ARE THE GRATEFUL DEAD, ANYWAY, AND WHY DO THEY KEEP FOLLOWING ME?”

Time is like a handful of sand. The tighter you grasp it, the faster it runs through your fingers. But if you caress it, it will leave in its wake memories of its gentle flow, rather than the roughness of its stones. (anonymous Deadhead)2

It was early the morning of August third, commonly known to Deadheads as “the day the music died.” Grabbing my bags, about to dash off to work, I heard one fragment of the morning radio news, something about Jerry Garcia—and heart failure. Immediately, my phone began to ring as panic-stricken Deadheads called their Deadhead “families” to determine if this time the rumors were “really true.” “It was a long strange trip,” sobbed one young Deadhead over the radio, personalizing a Grateful Dead song lyric, “but not nearly long enough.”

Until Garcia died, the Grateful Dead (a.k.a. “The Dead”) toured the country year round, playing wildly improvisational music, and drawing hundreds of thousands—if not millions—of followers who began calling themselves “Deadheads,” or just “Heads” for short, in the 1970s (Ruhlmann 1990, 43). Deadheads followed the Grateful Dead to hear their favorite band, dance to live music, and hang out with other “cool” Deadhead-type people. What started out as a small community of fans in the mid-to-late 1960s evolved into a large, self-sustained subculture, replete with its own language, art, dance, economy, politics, and sense of spirituality. Via interviews with many Deadheads, I found that their raison d’etre involved one or more Deadhead traditions, including the music, the Dead community, and the dancing. Regardless of which element was more prominent for a particular Deadhead, or which served as the original attraction to the movement, there was an undeniably profound transformative experience which occurred at Dead shows that

Mythologist Joseph Campbell, who’d never been to a rock concert before attending, at the age of eighty, a 1986 Dead show, “got it” immediately—he saw the rapture in the faces of Deadhead dancers and knew that he had stumbled upon a modern-day Dionysian revel. This wasn’t just rock ‘n’ roll—it was an unselfconscious celebration of life manifested in music and dance and community. He later declared that the spirit exemplified by the Dead and their fans represented, in human terms, “an antidote to the atom bomb.” (Jackson 1992, x)

Before there were Deadheads, there were “Dead Freaks,” early fans of the band who were invited by Jerry Garcia—via an advertisement on the inside cover of the 1971 album *Skull and Roses*—to join a mailing list. The announcement read: “DEAD FREAKS UNITE. Who are you? Where are you? How are you? Send us your name and address and we’ll keep you informed” (Shenk and Silberman 1994, 56–7). Deadhead Paul Grushkin explains that as a result of this announcement:

The letters poured in from everywhere—all 50 states and many foreign countries. In early 1972, just prior to the band’s first major tour of Europe, the Dead responded with the first official *Deadheads Newsletter*. Bearing messages both diffuse and succinct, it provided the basis of an irregular pattern of keeping thousands of inquisitive souls up-to-date on the Grateful Dead. (Grushkin, Bassett, and Grushkin 1983, xii)

Defining what it means to be a Deadhead today is no simple feat. Deadheads are an extremely heterogeneous group of people, although ironically they generally share the same ethnicity. Deadheads Shenk and Silberman write, “Though the Grateful Dead river is fed by many streams of African music (R&B, jazz, the blues), and the Drums are energized by the spirits of Latin congeros and Japanese taiko drummers, many have noticed that the Deadhead community itself is predominantly, though not exclusively, Caucasian” (1994, 65). While the majority derive from Euro-American backgrounds, they vary widely in terms of religious orientations, educational levels, class levels, and degree of devotion to and involvement with the Grateful Dead. Although they are generally ethnically homogeneous, their behavior
suggests otherwise—displaying numerous beliefs and traditions borrowed from other cultures. In fact, Deadheads mirror the band itself, primarily composed of Caucasian individuals (except Garcia, of Hispanic ethnicity) who actively value and appropriate the traditions of other cultural groups.

Of course, not every person who frequents Grateful Dead shows considers him or herself a Deadhead. Even among Deadheads, a continuum of emic classifications or degrees of Deadheadliness appear, distinguishing between “professional” Heads who live on tour (e.g., who have no other homes to which they return in between tours), those who maintain homes and jobs outside of their touring schedule, and “amateurs” who attend an occasional show (Shenk and Silberman 1994, 291–2). Many so-called Heads differ on the philosophical issue of whether being a Deadhead is “a lifestyle, a set of progressive social values, a religion, or strictly a musical preference” (Shenk and Silberman 1994, 60). There are many people who would be called “Deadheads” by most standards because they spend a considerable amount of time and energy with the movement, although the individuals deny such an identity. “Yeah, I see shows,” many have said, “but I’m not really a Deadhead.” Whether feeling inadequate for the title, resistant to any labels or classifications, or hesitant to accept the “negative” stereotypes that often accompany it, many “Deadheads” do not label themselves Deadheads, although behaviorally, they are practically the same. David Shenk comments in his 1994 introduction to Skeleton Key: A Dictionary for Deadheads, “If there’s one thing this extraordinary American ethnic group/religion/subculture is, it is inviting [emphasis in original]” (xiv). Definitions of the term “Deadhead” as a voluntary identity, of course, vary greatly. This very discussion about exactly what constitutes a Deadhead could continue ad infinitum; in fact, Grateful Dead Merchandising has even copyrighted the term. For the purposes of this analysis, though, I use the term Deadhead as Shenk and Silberman have done, simply to refer to “Someone who loves—and draws meaning from—the music of the Grateful Dead and the experience of Dead shows, and builds community with others who feel the same way” (1994, 60).

Clearly, Deadheads are more than just fans of the Grateful Dead; they are people who have ritualized the process by which they draw meaning from the Grateful Dead’s music, as well as their traditions of communal lifestyle, artistic expression, transformations reached through the music, dance, and drug use (often referred to in religious terms among
Deadheads as “sacraments”). Furthermore, Deadheads have created close-knit communities with others who feel similarly, creating a distinct subculture that embraces a unique worldview most ingeniously expressed through the art, iconography, and symbols of its members, much of which remains cleverly coded from outsiders, while functioning emically as in-group identifiers. Most outside observers, and especially insiders, agree that something spiritual and even religious occurs at Dead shows. In this vein, sociologist Rebecca Adams explores the meaning of the commonly used phrase “getting it”:

On one level . . . ‘getting it’ is understanding shows as spiritual experiences, though Deadheads are quick to point out that many people ‘get it’ in places other than at a Grateful Dead show. On another level, ‘getting it’ is perceiving these spiritual experiences as inseparable from the music, the scene, and a cooperative mode of everyday existence. (Quoted in Shenk and Silberman 1994, 105–6)

In fact, terms like “ritual,” “church,” “vision,” “sacred,” “sacrament,” and “myth” are used emically by Deadheads to describe their behavior and the community experience.

“NOT ALL WHO WANDER ARE LOST”: DEADHEAD SACRED HISTORY AND NARRATIVES

My discussion begins with some of the more influential parts of a grossly abbreviated Deadhead history—starting with the Beat Generation and early hippie culture, and leading to the Merry Pranksters and the Acid Tests. While tracing these vital historical events points to continuities in traditional behavior among current Deadheads, this discussion also demonstrates that Deadheads have not just blindly accepted traditions handed down from their hippie predecessors, but have reworked them, retaining elements of some, innovating upon elements of some, and casting aside others. By retelling the epistemological stories, Deadheads are effectively reenacting what I call a “sacred narrative.” Through their current rituals of community, dance, music, material culture, and psychedelic “sacraments,” Deadheads continue to recreate a mythological sacred space and time.1

While many observers note the Beat Generation of the 1950s as a cultural influence on 1960s counterculture, most fail to include the Harlem Renaissance (1916–1940) or the jazzy hipness of the 1940s as precursors to both the Beats and the hippies. In this neglect, observers
also fail to adequately acknowledge the diversity of ethnic and cultural influences that led to the Grateful Dead, and to the development of today's Deadhead subculture. The Beat Generation, and the anti-war movement that arose simultaneously, both "influenced in great part by the African-American movement" (Baraka 1994, 4), fit into this general reaction against the conservative, pro-war period. Alternative ideas were set in motion that disrupted these conservative forces—especially those of class privilege and racial supremacy. Baraka states:

On one hand there was the group of largely petty bourgeois white youth who were called the Beat Generation, who claimed to rebel against the complacent mediocre hypocrisy of American life. This middle-class rebellion appeared in literature heralded by Allen Ginsberg's poem Howl. The so-called Beats, along with other young American poets... challenged the polished ready-made academic poetry as lifeless and socially irrelevant. They also challenged the American petty bourgeois lifestyle with their varied versions of mid-twentieth-century American bohemia. (1994, 1–2)

Commonly called "The Beat Generation," or just "the Beats," the bohemian counterculture of the 1950s served as predecessors to the hippie counterculture of the 1960s, an intrinsic factor in the evolution of hippie culture. A number of continuities can be gleaned by examining some elements of the Beat poets, the counterculture that grew up around them, and other figures intrinsic in the eventual development of Deadhead culture. The story always begins with the legends of Neal Cassady and Jack Kerouac. Beat member John Holmes describes this in "The Philosophy of the Beat Generation":

It was Kerouac’s insistence that they were on a quest, and that the specific object of their quest was spiritual. Though they rushed back and forth across the country on the slightest pretext, gathering kicks along the way, their real journey was inward; and if they seemed to trespass most boundaries, legal and moral, it was only in the hope of finding a belief on the other side. (1967)

"The Beat Generation," Kerouac himself said, "is basically a religious generation" (Holmes 1967). Members of the so-called Beat Generation drew upon numerous cultural traditions that represented exotic and alternative ways of seeing and being—such as the jazzy hipness and coolness of African-American culture. The practice of drawing upon other cultural traditions, as well as the idea of experiencing everyday life as
“sacred,” which were vital characteristics of the Beats, continue to be visibly important today within Deadhead behavior. Deadheads view the Beats as spiritual adventurers, upon which the Merry Pranksters, and their own lifestyle, are based.

Deadhead sacred narratives recount this journey, starting in the 1940s, and evolving into the Beat Generation of the 1950s. Beat members “hung out” in a string of coffeehouses in San Francisco—the paths of which led inexorably to the Grateful Dead.  

Escaping through a lily field,  
I came across an empty space  
It trembled and exploded,  
Left a bus stop in its place.  
The bus came by and I got on,  
That’s when it all began.  
There was Cowboy Neal at the wheel  
Of a bus to Never Ever Land.  

These lyrics from the Grateful Dead song “The Other One” refer to the legend of “Cowboy Neal,” a.k.a. Neal Cassady, one of the Beats and early hero of the Deadhead sacred narrative. The lyrics recount the band’s legendary origins, which has had profound effects on the Deadhead movement today. Like the lyrics of many Grateful Dead songs, these reference a vital part of the history of Deadheads, a history that is considered sacred and is still reenacted and reinterpreted thirty and forty years later. The story can be regarded as part of the sacred narrative because it represents Deadhead mythology, shaping Deadhead worldview and functioning etiologically, explaining how things came to be as they are in the Deadhead world. Cassady was a crucial hero in the story, his life having a domino effect on those around him. The story of the Merry Pranksters and the Electric Kool-Aid Acid Tests is also important, because it articulates the context out of which “the scene” evolved, and because, like many other Deadhead narratives, it emphasizes the dynamic of a perceived serendipitous force influencing events.

“There were the freaks, one step from the Beats,” explains a Deadhead about the early hippies (Brightman 1998, 99). A number of social and political events occurring in the 1960s influenced young radicals, eliciting revolutionary reactions from the early hippies. Brightman explains:
One cannot re-create the era out of which the Grateful Dead emerged without recalling civil rights and the Free Speech Movement, Vietnam, the Cuban Revolution, and Weathermen. But reviewing this history also reminds us that when this “Sixties band” lifted off into the 1970s, ’80s, and ’90s, it left a good deal behind. (1998, 8)

Deadhead narratives, however, usually do not mention these social/political issues, focusing instead on those specific events that seem to have more directly impacted the development of their subculture. Such events include the following, which appeared in a pamphlet accompanying “Dead On The Wall,” an exhibit of Deadhead art:

1) The Beatles: The Beatles single-handedly rescued rock and roll from its doldrums and, above all, demonstrated that playing rock music could be incredibly fun.

2) The Haight-Ashbury: the San Francisco neighborhood bordering Golden Gate Park . . . [was] from 1964-66 . . . a laboratory for a new humane social order based on the shared enjoyment of art, music, psychedelics, and the spirituality and sensuality of daily life.

3) The Diggers: One of the first communes in the original Haight-Ashbury, and very influential in shaping the hippie ethos that was the rootstock of Deadhead culture. . . . The Diggers kept the pre-Summer of Love Haight fed and clothed by scoring food from local supermarkets and restaurants.

4) The Acid Tests: Events hosted by novelist Ken Kesey and the Merry Pranksters in the Bay Area and Los Angeles in ’65 and ’66, featuring improvised music, strobes and black lights, films and projections, tape loops, hidden microphones, and LSD—which was still legal—dissolved into Kool-Aid.

5) The Be-In: A “gathering of tribes” held on January 14, 1967, in the Polo Field of Golden Gate Park, featuring numerous musicians, including the Grateful Dead. The Be-In was conceived by San Francisco Oracle editor Allen Cohen as an “ecstatic union of love and activism.”

6) Woodstock: The Aquarian Music and Art Fair, “three days of peace and music,” the archetype of the outdoor rock concert as tribal gathering . . . of the postwar generation announcing their presence in the world by sheer force of numbers—an audience of 400,000—as champions of peace, community, spirituality, spontaneity, self-determination, and fun. What the Be-In was to the Haight, Woodstock was to the world.

While Deadheads include the above events in their sacred narrative, they focus mainly on those involving Ken Kesey, the Merry Pranksters,
and the Acid Tests. In 1965, with the proceeds made from the publication of his book *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*, Kesey and a group of free-spirited friends bought a 1939 International Harvester school bus, painted it a myriad of psychedelic designs, equipped it with interior and exterior sound systems, as well as sleeping quarters, and began to tour the country—piloted by Cowboy Neal (a.k.a. Neal Cassady). Calling themselves “The Merry Pranksters,” they dressed in circuslike clothing and took great pleasure in putting on shows wherever they went, “playing tricks” on people and acting silly. They called their traveling home “Furthur,” deliberately spelled to suggest traveling, and “trips” of both geographical, spiritual, and psychedelic realms. The Pranksters met the Grateful Dead (then called the Warlocks) through Kesey and Cassady. They collaborated on a series of adventurous experiments called the “Acid Tests” (Wolfe 1968).

The Acid Tests, hosted by Kesey and the Merry Pranksters in the San Francisco Bay Area and Los Angeles in 1965 and 1966, provided a way of introducing LSD, which was still legal at the time, to the rest of the world. The object and purpose of these “mind-altering free-for-alls” was to push the limits of everything—including ideas about art, music, philosophy and the meaning of life. Jackson asserts they were named “‘Test,’ because acid [a.k.a. LSD] brought you to that . . . edge . . . psychic whitewater; to pass it was to stay in the moment, the beautiful or fierce or ecstatic or terrifying or peaceful moment that is the only golden road” (1983, 95). The purpose of the tests, according to Jackson, was to stretch the imagination. The following ethnographic excerpts from several Deadheads writing about the Acid Tests help illustrate the environment reenacted later at Grateful Dead shows. For instance, Jackson explains:

The basic philosophy of the Acid Tests was that everything was permitted; involvement was encouraged. This meant that people would mill about freely, walk up to microphones and talk or sing into them if they felt like it. Unusual clothing was practically *de rigueur* [italics in original], with Kesey, his cohort Babbs and other Pranksters often leading the way by donning superhero costumes and other strange attire. . . . “Anything was okay” [Garcia commented]. “The Acid Tests were thousands of people, all hopelessly stoned, all finding themselves in a roomful of other thousands of people, none of whom any of them were afraid of.” (1983, 55)

In a similar vein, Shenk and Silberman describe the events:
Admission was a dollar, even for the musicians, and “everyone was involved,” explains Dick Latvala, the Dead’s tape archivist. “It wasn’t ‘audience’ and ‘performer’—those distinctions were deliberately blurred. You are it [emphasis in original], you are the experience you’re witnessing—that was what it was all about.” And “it” often lasted until dawn.

The musicians—including assorted Pranksters, and the Grateful Dead [then the Warlocks]—played for hours, or just a few minutes. Neal Cassady . . . was often the “announcer,” space-rapping alone or in tandem with Wavy Gravy,10 or dancing, while Ken Kesey, dressed like Captain America, played a kazoo, or made apocalyptic noises on the Thunder Machine.11 . . . People crawled on the floor, stirred fingers in Day-Glo paints and pressed their hands to the walls, tossed toilet paper streamers that fluttered down in the strobe lights, and glued jewels and sequins to each other’s faces, while [Grateful Dead singer] Pigpen riffed down-and-dirty on “Midnight Hour,” or [Prankster] Ken Babbs delivered a rap about going into orbit. . . .

Flyers passed out in advance and at the door said, “Can You Pass the Acid Test??” “Passing the Acid Test,” Stewart Brand says simply, “meant lasting all night.” (1994, 4–5)

This notion of “passing the Acid Test” basically represents a ritual initiation into the movement, one that continues to be ritually reenacted in present Deadhead culture. “In the wildest hipster, making a mystique of bop, drugs, and the night life,” Beat novelist Holmes observed in the 1950s, “there is no desire to shatter the ‘square’ society in which he lives, only to elude it. To get on a soapbox or write a manifesto would seem to him absurd” (1967, 22). Brightman connects this Beat philosophy to the Merry Pranksters’ political style, saying:

The wildest Prankster behaved the same way—unless he stepped forth, as Kesey had at the Berkeley teach-in, to kick over the soapbox. Why strive to change the structure of the puny environment in which you’re stuck when you can see the big picture? The point is to accept it, and then rise above your environment, or alter your perception of it, by accepting the larger pattern. (1998, 36)

This philosophy helps explain why Deadheads today focus on a relatively narrow historical timeline in their sacred narratives. They pay attention, not to the social and political events into which the Acid Tests, inter alia, fit, but to the direct evolutionary line of events that led to themselves. Today’s Deadhead subculture represents a syncretism of historical traditions. The Beat Generation and the anti-war movement,
which proved to be predecessors to the hippies, were influenced by the African-American cultural movements—all revolutionary reactions to the conservative, socially oppressive environment of this country.

Deadhead behavior has led many outside observers to hastily interpret Deadheads as “living in the past” or as “sixties gypsies surviving in the nineties” (Gans 1985, viii). While some obvious continuities are apparent, many observers fail to recognize the degree to which Deadheads actively pick and choose traditional elements to draw or discard. The Beat Generation stories about Cassady, Kerouac, and Kesey set the narrative stage for a reenactment of this Deadhead mythology. The adventures of the Merry Pranksters and the Acid Tests, also a significant part of the sacred narrative, serve as ritual initiations into the counterculture movement—rituals that persevere through Deadhead behaviors today. Evidence of such continuities are striking in the carnivalesque environment and “rituals of transcendence” of Grateful Dead shows (Brightman 1998, 51), and through Deadhead vehicles (see figure 1)—both ritual reenactments of the traveling lifestyle espoused by the Beats and Merry Pranksters. Such aspects of Deadhead culture represent continuities as well as innovations of the traditions outlined in this history.

FROM THE WARLOCKS TO THE GRATEFUL DEAD: EFFECTS OF A SERENDIPITOUS NAME CHANGE ON DEADHEAD ICONOGRAPHY AND WORLDVIEW

Another seemingly serendipitous event greatly impacted Deadhead culture. In 1969, the experimental proto-Grateful Dead rock band, originally called “The Warlocks,” changed its name upon discovering that another group was already producing records under the name “Warlocks.” The name change opened up new possibilities and helped direct the development of belief, narratives, behavior, and art. According to Deadhead oral tradition and several written accounts, the name “Grateful Dead” was revealed almost mystically: band member Jerry Garcia flipped open a dictionary, closed his eyes and pointed with his finger, coming up with the words “Grateful Dead.” Jackson describes this incident:

Even before The Warlocks headed for Los Angeles, Acid Tests in tow, they were actively contemplating a name change.... They threw around literally hundreds of improbable names in their search, everything from the Emergency Crew to the Mythical Ethical Icicle Tricycle, but, predictably, in this age of stoned realizations and acid flashes, the name they eventually chose was revealed [italics in original] to them.
“One day we were over at Phil’s [Grateful Dead bass guitarist] house smoking DMT (a hallucinogen),” Garcia told writer Michael Lydon in 1969. “He had a big dictionary. I opened it and there was ‘Grateful Dead,’ those words juxtaposed. It was one of those moments, you know, like everything else on the page went blank, diffuse, just sort of oozed away, and there was GRATEFUL DEAD, *big* [italics in original], black letters edged all around in gold, man, blasting out at me, such a stunning combination. So I said, ‘How about Grateful Dead?’ And that was it.” (1983, 59)

Brightman notes that in a later account of the historical moment, “Garcia didn’t like the name at first but felt it was too powerful to ignore . . . [band members] Weir and Kreutzmann didn’t like it, either, but people started calling us that and it just started, *Grateful Dead, Grateful Dead* [italics in original] . . .” (1998, 80). A densely encoded Deadhead bumper sticker visually recognizes this serendipitous moment (see figure 2). The words “Grateful Dead” appear as they did that fateful moment Garcia found them—in the larger context of the dictionary (from “grateful” to “gratify”). The bumper sticker contains other visual codes, including the image of young Garcia as he would have looked when the name change occurred; a single eye centered in the palm of Garcia’s famous hand (with the classic missing two middle finger joints); another eye (Egyptian style) at the top of the sticker; and a Steal Your Face emblem (skull with lightning bolt) at the bottom. Taken altogether, this item of Deadhead material culture speaks to the vital importance of the serendipitous moment when the Dead’s name was magically revealed to them.
The name “Grateful Dead” refers to the motif of a cycle of folk tales in which the grateful dead man plays a leading role, described by Stith Thompson in *The Folktale*.
In these tales we learn of a hero who finds that creditors are refusing to permit the burial of a corpse until the dead man’s debts have been paid. The hero spends his last penny to ransom the dead man’s body and to secure his burial. Later, in the course of his adventures, he is joined by a mysterious stranger who agrees to help him in all his endeavors. This stranger is the grateful dead man (1955, E341).

When the Warlocks changed its name to the “Grateful Dead,” the doors were thrown open for widespread narrative and material folklore to develop around those two words. Jackson explains:

“The Grateful Dead” as a new name was not exactly an instant sensation; in fact, there was even some initial resistance to it within the band. Bill Graham [the band’s producer] was reluctant to bill the group under its new name for the dances he organized, but the underground acceptance of it was overwhelming, and soon “Grateful Dead” began springing up on posters and handbills all over town. “It was definitely kind of creepy to most people,” Garcia commented several years ago. “They just didn’t know what to make of it at all.”

Actually, the “creepiness” is part of what made “Grateful Dead” such a perfect choice for a band name in the nascent days of psychedelia. It went beyond being bizarre for the sake of being bizarre—the more nonsensical the better seemed the rule of the day, as if groups were taking their cue from Lewis Carroll—and instead offered a paradoxical concept that teased and threatened simultaneously. The name conjured up images of a joyous post-apocalyptic ascent to the heavens in some people’s minds, and menacing specters like those in Northern Renaissance woodcuts, in others’.

“Grateful Dead” was a fitting pie in the face of a straight universe obsessed with its own mortality, that routinely went selfishly on with its “pursuit of happiness” to make life pleasurable and cheat the Grim Reaper. “Grateful to be Dead?” (Jackson 1983, 61–2)

Brightman notes the significance of the Grateful Dead tale as well, arguing that it mirrors the altered states of an acid trip, with their “merging of visible and invisible worlds” (1998, 81). Deadhead Alan Trist retold the tale in his book The Water of Life: A Tale of the Grateful Dead, which incorporates the traditional Grateful Dead motif:
“You have shown me kindness,” the beggar said, “and the way to the Water of Life is long and hard. You must pass through the Dark Wood then climb high into the Mountains of the North where stands the castle of a fierce ogre. The object of your quest can be found there. In order to succeed you must defend yourself against enemies and give of yourself when no one asks.” (1989, 12)

The challenge “give of yourself when no one asks” has, in fact, become a code esteemed by Deadheads. A number of Deadheads I interviewed, pondering the significance of the band’s name, told variations of the Grateful Dead tale. It seemed to function as a necessary key to understanding part of the Deadhead culture’s philosophy. One informant, who had never read any “official” versions of the tale but, rather, learned it through oral transmission from other Deadheads, explained:

It’s the story of a hero who is going along in life and meets some poor helpless waif by the side of the road. He in some way befriends or helps the man. The hero’s adventures take him into the underworld, to hell itself. And he learns that the deceased spirit of the person he helped, helps him through the adventure. And that’s the grateful dead man who helps you through. (1995)

It becomes clear, in examining my informants’ explanations, that the name “Grateful Dead” and the folktale to which it refers are closely tied to a self-conscious philosophy of life. The impact of this happenstance name change cannot be taken lightly; the philosophy suggested and interpreted through it influences a great deal of Deadhead behavior, including beliefs about life and death, and values placed upon traveling, living communally, sharing, and not only helping total strangers, but viewing them as “family.” Deadheads embrace a sense of reciprocity, of giving when one has something to give, and receiving when one is in need. Deadhead Natalie Dollar concurs, implicitly referencing both the philosophy of the Grateful Dead tale and the nomadic history of Deadheads: “When a Deadhead, for example, offers another a place to crash for the weekend shows, the individual receiving the favor is encouraged to do the same for others in need of help ‘down the road’” (1988, 27). Another Deadhead commented on this value, saying, “everybody shares whatever they have, food or wine, or drugs or whatever. As much as the music and the Dead themselves, I come for that feeling of closeness among the people. It’s just like my lifeblood” (Perry 1980, 22).

Because of the value of communal living, the terms “family” and “tribe” are used by many Deadheads as more intimate synonyms for the
community of Deadheads. Shenk and Silberman describe the usage of “tribe” as “one way in which Deadheads think of their community—as an extended family of people from various classes, races, sexual orientations, backgrounds, and other musical interests” (1994, 294). Although the term “tribe” conventionally refers to a group of people descended from common ancestors, within the so-called Deadhead tribe, membership is not inherited but, rather, recognized within oneself (see figure 3). Barbara Saunders writes from an emic perspective on the “tribe” of Deadheads:

The Deadhead tribe is centered around what’s missing from many ethnic, national, and religious communities: peak experience that unifies individuals into one people.

Having shared with other Deadheads our most intimate moments and mind-expanding experiments, we expect from each other tolerance, understanding, and unconditional support. . . . Our dedication confuses and scares people. Even the most WASPy Deadhead knows firsthand the feelings of being discriminated against, of being closeted, and of coming out. Where the only recognized tribal links are genealogical, a brother/sisterhood among fans of a rock group makes little sense. But as a friend of mine put it, “We grew up together.”

Being “on the bus”15 for any length of time includes birthing babies and mourning deaths; watching children grow up; and seeing relationships move from glances exchanged while dancing, to parenting. And through it all the music never stops; doing what moon cycles did for the ancients—providing a touchstone for the passage of time and the stages of our lives. (Qtd. in Shenk and Silberman 1994, 294–95)

Besides the gifts of food, money, gas, shelter, and alcohol/drugs, one clear example of “tribal” reciprocity among Deadheads involves the phenomenon of “miracling.” A “miracle” (a term incorporated, like numerous other items of Deadhead folklore, from one of the Grateful Dead’s songs entitled “I Need a Miracle”) frequently occurs when someone arrives for the show without a ticket, hoping to receive one for free or for an unbelievable bargain. Douglas Hadden describes the practice of gifting concert tickets as “a ritual courtesy among Dead fans, part legend, part real.” He also notes the importance of remembering and reciprocating such favors:

The first time I heard the Dead in their own West Coast environment, I stood in line before-hand without a ticket, with friends who long before had bought
their to the “Bill Graham Presents” bash at Winterland in San Francisco. “Are
you guys sure I’ll get a ticket?” I asked my friends. “Ticket?” said a bearded fel-
low two folks in front of me. Yup. And 5 1/2 hours and the New Riders and a
Grace Slick guest appearance later, the five bucks was forgotten, and the cour-
tesy of a ticket for face value was not. (Qtd. in Grushkin, Bassett, and
Grushkin 1983, 6)

At any given show, one can observe a number of people milling
around with signs depicting a thematic variant of the “I need a miracle”
lyric (see figure 4). Many Deadheads merely hold their index finger
above their heads, signifying non-verbally that they need a ticket. I have
heard many chant or sing their earnest pleas: “I need a miracle,” “Please
help this Deadhead see his 100th show,” “Miracle me,” and “I’ll be your
best friend for a ticket.” Grateful Dead staff/crew member Harry Popick
recounts a creative variant of this traditional behavior:

You know how people are always standing by the road on the way to gigs
holding up signs that say “I need a ticket” and “I need a miracle”? One time,
driving to the Greek Theatre in Berkeley, I saw one guy with his hands in that
position, holding up an imaginary sign! (Qtd. in Grushkin, Bassett, and
Grushkin 1983, 166)
Popick’s narrative reveals that the tradition of miracling is so ingrained, all the Deadhead must do to indicate his request is to hold his hands in the position of a sign. My informants indicate that the more elaborate, original, or creative the plea, the better the chances of being miracled. Examples of some more elaborate signs seem to support this belief. All of my informants emphasized the importance of giving what one has, and receiving what one needs—mirroring the hippie value of communal living.

Even the way Deadheads dance is material evidence of their communal, egalitarian ideology. When I mentioned to a Deadhead friend that I was exploring Deadhead folk dance as a genre that mirrors the Deadhead worldview, he laughed.

“Why do Deadheads dance like this?” he asked, moving his hands in graceful, swirling horizontal and vertical waves in front of his face, as if in a trance.

“Why?” I responded automatically to the formulaic structure of his joke.

“Because they’re trying to keep the music from getting in their eyes!” he answered, followed by laughter from everyone present.

My friend should know, I thought; he has danced like that before. I have seen it myself a number of times. Walking around Dead shows, I noticed that sometimes people seem to be dancing together, sometimes totally apart. There seem to be a few basic dance styles, upon which Deadheads improvise with their own individual creative moves. For
instance, while there might be one person off in the corner just bouncing up and down to the beat, another might be spinning continuously for entire songs, with arms straight out or reaching up in the air—without stumbling or getting dizzy. Yet another might be “noodling around,” moving arms and legs as if “being played by the music” (see figure 5). Nancy Reist argues that dancing at Dead shows parallels the chanting, singing, and dancing associated with shamanism, stating that:

Dancing draws the whole body into the rhythm of the drum, increases the possibility of hyperventilation, and induces the release of endorphins—a naturally occurring brain chemical that acts as an opiate.

Altered states of consciousness are a significant and infamous part of the Grateful Dead experiences. Many Dead Heads have favorite stories about that special insight or perfect vision they had during a particularly moving show. These experiences are one of the primary attractions for many of the Dead Heads. (1997, 93)

There are often twenty or more dancers (who likely have never met each other before) dancing in exactly the same style almost in unison, often with their eyes closed—as if being controlled by a greater force than their individual selves. As the music and beat change, so does the dancing. Like a school of fish, many informal groups of dancers seem to move intuitively in a mass motion. The belief that the Grateful Dead’s music moves dancers is mirrored by many of my informants; another common theme in Deadhead narratives includes the sudden and profound realization that every single person in the arena is dancing. They report it being simultaneously empowering and humbling. Zephyr describes “getting it” while at his first show:

I started dancing and then suddenly it was like I was having a psychic orgasm, like a sense-surround psychedelic, psychic orgasm at the same time with all these people. Like the band and the people would build to a peak and then release. It was my first experience with that kind of gestalt feeling of being one with everybody, and dancing for the greater good, or whatever the hell I was doing. I remember thinking this was taking dance to the eternal fire, whatever the hell that means. (1995)

Many Deadheads attempt to define their fantastic experiences at Grateful Dead shows using argot such as “one mind,” “group mind,” “gestalt,” “magic,” “the X-factor,” or “the zone.” Each term refers to a state of being to which band members and the audience “travel”
together when the music and dance is at its most intense, exploratory, and collective (Shenk and Silberman 1994, 336). These represent the psychic or spiritual space Deadheads experience while dancing at Dead shows. Folklorist Sw. Anand Prahlad uses the term “ecospace” to describe this aspect of the Deadhead experience. He discusses spiritual symbols and iconography:

> Just as ceremonies in most religions or ritual contexts contain symbols that aid in creating a conducive atmosphere for surrender, so do these. And they are in some cases the same kinds of symbols that one finds universally. The strong scents of incense, perfumes; the ingestion of natural and synthetic substances that assist in jarring one loose from identification with the “unreal” material world and makes an encounter with the psychic world more possible. (1996)

> These “common signifiers . . . are sensed and responded to by the body,” Prahlad continues. “With a lessening of control by the rational mind, the body is freer to move forward into a central position as an instrument for the expressions of the spirits” (1996). The term “Dead Time” is frequently used by Deadheads to reflect this marked temporal

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Figure 5. Emic drawing of ecstatic Deadheads dancing at a Grateful Dead show.
space entered at Grateful Dead shows. Yvonne expressed this idea, stating, “It’s like . . . there’s no time when you’re at a Dead show. It’s just like Dead time. Groovy Dead Time” (1995). Prahlad’s discussion about “ecospaces” applies well to such emic concepts as “The Zone,” “Dead Land,” and “Dead Time”—and reminds us of the sacrality of Deadhead rituals when the ordinary sense of time and space is suspended.

When Deadheads talk about dancing, they end up talking about the Grateful Dead’s music. When talking about the music, they end up talking about dancing. The two are obviously integrally related. It makes sense that an eclectic dance style accompanies the eclectic musical repertoire. At times the dance is vaguely familiar to other dance idioms, such as belly-dancing, whirling dervishes, reggae dancing, rock ‘n’ roll dancing, and jazz dancing.

Religious studies scholar Karen McCarthy Brown writes about the significance of ritualized dance in her article, “Serving the Spirits: The Ritual Economy of Haitian Vodou.” Brown introduces the concept of “the mindful body” to explain how the body absorbs experience and information, often in the form of understanding and remembering (1995). While dance can express an understanding of communal history and mythology, at the same time it can express both individual and shared spirituality. Brown argues that for practitioners of Haitian Vodou, dance is one means by which to act out and therefore comprehend personal identity, as well as power relations between characters, human and divine. The body can explore, analyze, and critique situations through dance. Like practitioners of Vodou, Deadheads dancing at Grateful Dead shows appear to be rehearsing a particular way of life and acting out egalitarian power relations. By going through this part of the ritual together, Deadheads enact a lifestyle that reflects their peaceful, anti-corporate philosophy and ethos. My exploration into Deadhead dancing supports Brown’s theory that dancing acts out relationships and values. If the lack of conflict at Dead shows (and related events) is not proof enough, the iconography embraced by Deadheads, and subsequent philosophical interpretations, demonstrate how Deadhead dancing reflects a spiritual as well as a social reality.

Obviously then, the name change had a profound impact on Deadhead philosophy and worldview, expressed eloquently through the traditions of “miracling” and Deadhead dancing. It also had transformative effects on other areas of the material culture surrounding the band. The name inspired innovations by causing contemplation on the words
“grateful” and “dead”. For one thing, the new name led to the popular and accepted nickname for fans/followers of the Grateful Dead band—“Deadheads”—as well as numerous items of folk speech involving plays on those words (see figures 6 and 7). The proverbial statement “If you’re not a head, you’re behind,” as well as the messages “Born again Deadhead,” “I’d rather be Dead,” and “Long Live the Dead” appearing on bumper stickers, function well as examples of this wordplay. In essence, through its folklore, the subculture subverts conventional meanings of “death” and “dead”—transforming them into life-affirming terms, as these examples illustrate.

In addition to its effect on Deadhead philosophy and wordplay, the serendipitous name change also greatly impacted the subculture’s chosen symbols. As Jackson recounts, artists looked to other cultures, particularly Tibetan and Egyptian mythology, for visual inspiration. He explains:

Regardless of the name’s origin or possible meanings, it immediately lent itself to intriguing iconography among the artists in the burgeoning San Francisco poster scene. And suddenly grinning skeletons were everywhere, as different artists interpreted the name in their own way, while announcing upcoming dances where the band would play. More than any other band on
the scene, the Dead had a name that lent itself to visual interpretation, and of course there already existed countless examples of skeletons in art over the centuries, ripe for use by the imaginative, eclectic artists. (1983, 63)

Indeed, a nineteenth century illustration of a skeleton wearing a crown of roses drawn by E. J. Sullivan to accompany the twenty-sixth quatrains of *The Rubaiyat* was adapted by San Francisco poster artists. It has since become the group’s most recognized image, gracing an album cover, the band’s comprehensive songbook, and even their official stationery. “I was just looking through a book one day and there it was,” artist Alton Kelley recalled. “It was so perfect I couldn’t believe my eyes” (Jackson 1983, 63). Shenk and Silberman cite an interview with Kelley:

The skull-and-roses image was originally a black-and-white illustration by Edmund Sullivan that appeared in a nineteenth-century edition of *The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyám* [an eloquent, philosophical poem by the 12th Century Persian, Khayyám]. Artists Alton Kelley and Stanley Mouse were smoking pot in a converted firehouse, with the old horse troughs intact, on Henry Street in San Francisco when Kelley discovered the original illustration, realizing it was the perfect icon for the recently renamed Warlocks. The image, with added lettering and color, was used shortly thereafter on posters for a show at the Avalon Ballroom. “Everybody loved the image,” recalls Kelley. (Shenk and Silberman 1994, 263)

Again, note the emphasis placed upon serendipity. Like Garcia, who unintentionally happened upon the words “Grateful Dead,” Kelley magically stumbled upon the Persian image of the skeleton with roses (see figure 8). Brightman explains:
It started around 1969, when the band dispatched its first power object, the image of a skeleton walking on stilts across *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, dragging a ball and chain. The work of a forgotten artist, it was the original Mr. Bones, a Grateful Dead icon; and Hart [Grateful Dead drummer] remembers it as a code that "let you see in the windows of people in San Francisco who were Deadheads before there were Deadheads." (1998, 3)

Owsley also made innovations on the death imagery, further influencing the Grateful Dead skeleton iconographic tradition. Brightman notes that Owsley conceived the original skull and lightning bolt logo, used on the cover of the 1976 Grateful Dead album *Bear’s Choice*, known in Deadhead vernacular as *steal your face* (see figure 9):

In the early '70s, Owsley began doing fine ornamental metalwork, a craft to which he brought the same meticulous exactitude that he had brought to his chemistry. His Stealie pendants—depicting the familiar lightning-streaked skull that he designed with Bob Thomas . . . are prized by Heads. (1994, 214)
The front and back covers of Shenk and Silberman’s *Skeleton Key*, which depict dancing skeletons, illustrate the Deadhead practice of borrowing from Tibetan mythology. The authors explain that “In Tibetan Buddhism these dancing skeletons or *citipati* represent the triumph of enlightenment over death. When enlightenment is achieved both earthly existence and death have no meaning” (Shenk and Silberman 1994, back cover). The skeleton iconography—dancing and smiling skeletons—that immediately sprung up around the band’s name had profound effects on the community’s philosophy and spirituality, drawing heavily, of course, on the ideas and images of Tibetan and Egyptian spiritual belief systems. The spiritual symbolism represented by certain images of death (dancing skeletons, skull and roses, skull with lightning bolt) proliferates in the Deadhead community today, and still remains (in some instances) relatively coded from outsiders. Skeletons continue to serve as extremely positive symbols of the band and of the Deadhead community in general. The iconography consistently appears whenever and wherever the band or “the scene” is being referred to—on album covers, stage decorations, books, bumper stickers, patches, tattoos, shirts, buttons, and hats (see figures 10–12).

Religion often functions to provide a meaningful way of understanding death. Like other cross sections of society, those in Deadhead communities include a variety of religious orientations, including Christians, reincarnationists, atheists, Buddhists, and Rastafarians. This subculture seems to share, however, certain attitudes about life and death, and a recognizable group philosophy/ethos/worldview. The band’s name change inspired and perpetuated a philosophy to which Deadheads adhere: most live in mortal splendor, the story goes, paying the price of a collapsed vision of the afterlife. Death is the great equalizer. Just as we live, we must also die. By coming to terms with our own inevitable death, we are able to live more fully in the present. The skeleton which dances inside us all is the core truth, a germ from the 1960s that stubbornly resists extinction.

Reist points out that symbols associated with birth and death are particularly common among shamanic cultures. “The death imagery,” she explains, “often is associated with the stripping down of the ego and allows the shaman to start anew without the cultural baggage carried through life. The skeleton stands free of the flesh and its associated weakness and vices” (1997, 200) (see figure 13). Holger Kalweit argues in a similar vein that the death images associated with shamanic cultures
Figure 9. Classic Grateful Dead icon of a skull with a lightning bolt running through it, known as “Steal Your Face” or “Stealie,” found in the form of a sticker.

Figure 10. Variant of the Steal Your Face icon, combined with Grateful Dead lyrics on a T-shirt.
Figure 11. Various portrayals of skeleton imagery: a postcard of a skeleton playing an instrument (left), a Steal Your Face variant with Garcia’s face inside the skull (upper), and an Uncle Sam skeleton sticker (lower right).

Figure 12. Steal Your Face variant combined with a rose peace sign and Grateful Dead lyrics, embroidered on the back of a prison shirt in the early ’70s.
are closely related to the death images of generation rites-of-passage and transitory rituals (1988, 90–95). Finally, Mircea Eliade suggests that the prevalence of skeleton imagery in the ritual costumes of shamanic cultures represents the spiritual death and rebirth of the shaman (1964, 158–68).

The skeleton imagery associated with the Grateful Dead and Deadheads parallels the above discussions regarding death symbols in conjunction with shamanic accoutrements. Reist makes this point more clear by discussing the symbolic significance of such iconography:

Throughout the Grateful Dead concert experience, one encounters a number of consistent and powerful symbols. The skeleton emblem, which is also a fundamental shamanic symbol, is undoubtedly the most pervasive of these. Skeletons appear in a number of guises, including the traditional image of the skeleton and roses that comes from the *Egyptian Book of the Dead*, a skull with a yin-yang lightning bolt across the forehead, and a skeleton dressed as Uncle Sam. (1997, 201)

Reist argues that the basic Ur-form of the skeleton evolves to reflect different circumstances, specific events, and individual idiosyncrasies (1997, 201). A skeleton with roses entails a different feeling than does a dancing skeleton, or one dressed as Uncle Sam. Hence, the basic motif is altered depending on the specific meaning of the situation.

Bruce Olds’ description of the use of skeleton images during a 1979 Grateful Dead show provides a perfect example of an individual’s use of skeleton imagery:

Now you noticed some pretty strange goings on [at a Grateful Dead show]. A guy wearing an Uncle Sam outfit, another sporting a foot-long papier machier[sic] mask of something, still another dressed like a rat—ears, tail and all—with a bulbous, red, plastic clip-on nose. There was a group with skull decals stuck onto the middle of their foreheads.

And then there was Rick Rickards. He was carrying a bamboo pole with a human skull bolted onto the end. At least, from a distance, it sure looked human. “Naw,” said Rickards, eighteen, from Doylestown and a student at Central Bucks East, “it’s only plastic, like the ones they have at Halloween.

“See, I got it at K-Mart during a blue-lite special. You can always tell a Dead Head because if I shake it like this,” he shook it up and down, “they’ll start shouting and clapping and dancing around.” (Qtd. Grushkin, Bassett, and Grushkin 1983, 30)
Reist presents another specific example of how the skeleton iconography changed to reflect a new context:

During the year of the Egypt concerts, the skeletons were shown in the context of Egyptian symbols, such as the pyramids. Two skeletons have been shown back to back, one facing the Golden Gate bridge and one facing the Brooklyn Bridge, emphasizing the connection that the Dead Heads make between the U.S. coasts. These particular skeletons are both dressed in the Uncle Sam costumes—a particularly fascinating manifestation of the skeleton. The Uncle Sam skeleton appears in the Grateful Dead movie and on album covers, as well as in a variety of unofficial publications. He is a combination of the Grateful Dead’s emblem and one of the most easily recognized symbols of the United States. The Uncle Sam symbolism represents the Dead Heads’ position as members of the U.S. culture, while the skeleton suggests values that differ from those of mainstream society. (1997, 201)

Clearly, Grateful Dead iconography reflects this parody with skeletons—which are blatant symbols of mortality—laughing at death, and
engaged in activities of daily living like dancing, playing cards, riding in Deadmobiles, and so on. (see figures 14 and 15). The iconography is utilized to subvert a strictly negative meaning of death. Recall the Deadhead response to Rick Rickards shaking the pole with skull—they danced around, clapped, and shouted in joy. Having been involved first in heavy metal culture, which also utilizes skeleton imagery, Yvonne initially had the impression that skeletons represented evil, darkness, wickedness, and violence. Following her entry into Deadhead culture, however, she began viewing the death imagery in a different light—as positive, spiritual, healthy, helpful, and as friends. To signify this change, Yvonne replaced the broken knob of her car’s stick shift with a plastic skull, so that she could remind herself of the image’s transformed meaning and how empowering it felt for her. She described what this alteration means to her:

We all look like skeletons. Without our skins, muscles, hair, clothes, makeup, money, etc. We’re all skeletons dancing. It’s very unifying. We’re all one, and no one’s more beautiful or better. We’re all beautiful. (Interview 1995)
Such examples clearly illustrate the interplay between the use of death symbols and the community’s worldview and values. Moreover, they demonstrate how Deadhead interpretations of the group’s name, their chosen iconography, and elements of spiritual mysticism (including dance) continue to influence Deadhead philosophy and spirituality even today. The serendipitous name change from the “Warlocks” to the “Grateful Dead” profoundly impacted the development of Deadhead beliefs, narratives, behavior, and art. It led Deadheads to contemplate the meaning underlying the grateful dead folktale, which has influenced their philosophy and reinforced traditions of communality, helpfulness, and giving—evidence of which can be located in the rituals of miracling and dancing. Their reflections and play with the words “grateful” and “dead” led, as well, to many examples of Deadhead ritualized speech.

The historical event, itself serendipitous, during which the skeleton imagery was discovered and began to be used by Deadheads, caused spiritual and philosophical evolutions. The iconography began to be utilized as power objects within the community to subvert the fearsome notions of death. In effect, the name change can be held both directly and indirectly
responsible for much of the sense of spirituality, worldview, aesthetics, and artistic behaviors embraced by Deadheads today. The symbolic intricacies of meaning expressed through Deadhead artistic behavior reveals how the death imagery was transformed into a celebration of life manifested in music, dance, and community. By their use of the skeleton iconography and folktale philosophy, Deadheads are essentially “laughing in the face of death or, more precisely, obliterating conventional conceptions of mortality” (Jackson 1983, 62). The dancing skeletons, which fit perfectly into the Deadhead carnivalesque environment and “rituals of transformation,” represent, on a very profound level, the “triumph of enlightenment over death” (Shenk and Silberman 1994, back cover).