

Why I Love Samhain

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In an old auditorium in San Francisco, California's Mission District, strange beings scurry about preparing for a sacred rite. Outside in the foyer people begin to congregate, pressing closer and closer as the space becomes more crowded with new arrivals. The sanctuary where the rite will take place remains closed to the celebrants who've come to help turn the Wheel of the Year. It's Samhain, the most powerful and mysterious night of the year, when the veils between the worlds of the seen and the unseen, the mundane and the spirit worlds, are thin. Humans can travel to the Otherworld and Otherworld beings, be they the *sidhe* or our dead ancestors, or one and the same, can move in the mundane world.

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When I was a child being brought up in a Christian household, Halloween was always my favorite holiday. I didn't especially associate it with the dead, although on the night before Halloween, called in that time and place "Mischief Night," outhouses were found upended and other such pranks were discovered when the Sun rose in the morning, perpetrated by unknown beings. I associated Hallows with chilly late Autumn nights with the smell of burning leaves in the air, with wearing a costume and being someone else, with suspending disbelief, with bobbing for apples and caramel apples on a stick, with magic and mystery. I had yet to learn that hallows means holy.

We children made our own costumes, often with the help of parents or other adults. Lots of kids dressed in old white sheets (in those days there were no colored or printed sheets, only white). They cut eyeholes and went as ghosts. There were no prepackaged costumes of Disney, film, cartoon, and other pop commercial characters sold in stores. We were on our own. I once remember going trick-or-treating in a black, red taffeta-lined cape and velvet capri pants, as a matador. I thought I was spectacular.

We went in small groups from door to door around the neighborhood and rang the doorbells. When the occupants answered the door, they went through elaborate guessing games trying to figure out who was who among the costumed beggars. This drama of identity could last a while at each house. Then we were invited in, sometimes asked to sing, dance, or recite a poem, after which we were given treats, usually apples and nuts and sometimes candy bars or that awful candy corn. Ick!

Things have changed a lot since those days, both in society at large and for me personally. Because few children, or adults, create their own costumes anymore, I see much of our child play, our creativity, our sense of self-reliance, and our exploration of self-expression lost to mass-marketing and consumerism. Further, neighborhoods aren't necessarily populated by family and friends, but are instead often full of strangers who don't know one another. Nowadays, schools and after school programs, clubs and families, give Halloween parties for kids. Kids come in store-bought costumes, play games, and take home treats, but there's not much mystery.

For me, the drastic change is that I'm no longer a Christian child playing at a secular folk tradition in my neighborhood. Instead, I'm a Witch (and a Crone at that) on the opposite coast of the continent, and I love to come together with my co-religionists to celebrate, honor, and mourn our ancestors and our Beloved Dead.

When I first found the Craft, after looking for several years, I was given to understand that since the time that humans first began to observe Samhaintide, the Witches' New Year has been the time when all ends and all begins again, when the gates to the Otherworld open wide, when we all gather in large groups on the hillsides.

Later, when openly practicing Pagan rites was frowned upon by both church and secular authorities, first for being heresy and second for being superstitious, Witches, the ones concerned with keeping these ways, gathered secretly, working in small, intimate covens. At Samhain, though, these keepers of the old ways knew how to find each other, knew others were out there, and so they came together as a larger group, assembled from smaller groups and individuals, to join in a big ritual honoring the dead. It was this romantic assumption that I held for many years, and in many ways, I still do.

The first real Samhain ritual I was invited to was hosted by two covens, one all women and one of mixed gender. There were two or three other guests besides myself. At the proper time, we took off our clothes, were blindfolded, and led up a stairway to a large ritual room in a penthouse. It was in the Marina District of San Francisco down by the Bay, which I thought at the time was an unlikely place for a secret gathering of Witches. The main part of the ritual involved our sailing over the sea to the island of the ever-young to meet the dead. With our hands on the bare shoulders of the person in front of us, we swayed and chanted, "Set sail, set sail, " over and over again as our ship bore us to the other side.

The following year, and for a few years afterwards, I was invited to Witches' Samhain rituals that were held in halls, put on by many more people than a single coven. Witches from numerous local traditions got together to celebrate in a larger ritual.

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At our instant celebration in the auditorium-cum-temple, while eager celebrants wait in the lobby for the gates to open, we see a darkened room lit primarily with candlelight from four altars.

Now the doors are opened. The celebrants enter through a curtain of long strands of fabric, and encounter the scents of fresh herbs and incense, and a sprinkling of salt water upon each of them as they enter the sacred space. A woman softly plays an electric cello, filling the room with its deep, eerie sound.



Far over in the corner, to the right as you enter the room, but extending partway down two sides of the wall from that corner, is the magnificent North altar. The late Judy Foster and a crew of her magical friends have spent most of the day building this structure. The altar is made of tables and boxes, with little alcoves displaying special individual shrines, geodes, and all manner of interesting and beautiful art. It holds objects, symbols, and photographs of our dead. Some of the images are those of ancestors, some are heroes

and heroines, some are the Mighty Dead of the Craft. On and in it can be seen statues, vases of marigolds, pentacles, antlers, sheaves of wheat, Indian corn, bones, lace, and wee *los calaveras El Dio de los Muertos* dioramas. Here and there are a pomegranate, an apple, squash, and pumpkins.

All is lit with dozens of candles and votives.¹ Space is left for mourners, who've come to the ritual to share their grief in community, to write prayers, messages, names on little cut-out paper skulls, and to pin them to places on the grand altar. This altar is the main physical focus of the evening.

To be sure, there are bright, beautiful altars in all four Quarters, each radiating the Element it embodies. Yellow, silver, white, and gold, with feathers and crystals, blades and shiny objects, adorn the East altar, draped with light-colored cloths. A long batik banner covered with clouds serves as a backdrop.

A complimentary banner in yellow, orange, and red batik, all visually aflame, hangs behind and above the Fire altar in the South. This altar is strewn with red peppers, hearts of all kinds, and many other objects symbolizing the qualities of passion, courage, and will.

In the West another banner, this one in shades of blue and depicting waves and fishes, reaches up from the altar of Water. Chalices, cups, seashells, seaweed, crystals, glitter, foamy white lace, and other watery things are strewn across altar cloths of blue, turquoise, purple, gray and white, eliciting emotion and intuition. Blue candles and

¹ There are fire extinguishers under each altar, and at least one dragon to monitor the altar throughout the ritual. That dragon knows where the fire extinguishers are and how to use them.

blue glass votives light this altar, just as yellow and white ones illuminate the East altar, and red and orange ones the South. Each altar has been created by a different small group, often a coven.

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Before unrehearsed participants are let into the ritual space, we who've been working months to put on this ritual have worked most of the day preparing the space, transforming it into a temple. We've been fed, costumed, painted, bedecked, ornamented, and warmed up. We do these things with and for each other. The dancers, musicians, and chorus have gone through their final rehearsals. Then all of us, including cooks, lighting technicians, altar-builders, artists, children, graces,² dragons,³ performers, priest/esses, purswardens, gofers, everyone, gather in circle to breathe in unison. We ground together and remember why we're here and what the sacred work is all about.

Then we open the doors.

People stroll quietly around the room, viewing the altars, chatting with friends. Some have brought photographs or small belongings of their loved ones who've passed through the veil and they find places for them on the North altar.

Meanwhile, the musicians have taken their places in the small section of the room where they'll be playing, next to the platform where the chorus will stand. The other rehearsed participants, the priest/esses, dancers, chorus, litanists, and drummers, stand out of site on the mezzanine above the main auditorium awaiting their time to enter.

Two women begin to sing an ancient song, "This Ae Night."⁴ A voice here and a voice there, from different points in the room, spontaneously begin to sing the second and fourth lines, which are repeated throughout the song. With each verse, more voices arise. Up in the mezzanine with the chorus, where I am, we join the song. We've heard this opening song for so many of these rituals, our Samhains called The Spiral Dance, that we cannot help but sing along. We weep in joy and a recognized kinship, goosebumps on our arms. We can palpably feel a "tradition." We all know this ritual, this song. We all resonate. We feel like a family.

When the song ends, the room is darkened almost completely. A lone woman steps into the center of the circle. On the floor before her sits a cauldron. A flame is lit in the cauldron; it leaps up to illuminate her haunting face. In a clear, sweet, strong soprano she sings to the spirits of each cardinal point, walking around the fire and facing each

² Graces, dressed in white, are assistant priest/esses who keep the marked aisles clear, help people with mobility problems or other special needs, give tissues to people who may be crying, and assure the smoothness of the culminating giant spiral dance.

³ Dragons, dressed in black, are basically border-keepers. They attend to the doors, see that altars aren't bumped, put out fires (a very uncommon occurrence), and generally protect the sanctity and safety of the big circle.

⁴ "This is [the] night."

different direction in turn to make a prayer to each. She asks for herself safe passage to the other world as she is burned at the stake, and for the daughter she leaves behind, protection.

Her song ends with silence and shivers for everyone in the room.

The rehearsed participants, each except the drummers carrying a lit candle, process down a stairwell from the mezzanine above and encircle the room and everyone in it, signaling the beginning of the ritual.

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Over many years, The Spiral Dance, which was originally created and performed to celebrate the publication of Starhawk's eponymous book, has undergone revisions, experimentation, modification, additions, and changes, but its heart remains the same. It grew from an event for about 150 people, to become one of 400 or 450 participants for many years. Today the number of attendees exceeds 1500 and the ritual is held in a vast warehouse space on a demilitarized pier in San Francisco Bay. Some major changes have been required to accommodate such a crowd. Nowadays you'll see room-sized altars you can enter and walk around in, giant puppets, people twirling fire batons, and performers descending from the girders on ropes and swinging on trapezes. New roles have been created in an effort to manage the energy of that many people, many of whom have never attended any Pagan event before this.

The primary elements, though, have endured. They are the calling of the Gods, the Mighty Dead, the Beloved Dead, and the ancestors; grieving in community; traveling over the sunless sea to the island to meet the dead; returning to dance the spiral of renewal; and celebrating the new lives that have come to ground in the year immediately past. Just like in the very first Witches' Samhain I participated in all those years ago when we chanted "set sail" as we journeyed to the island of the dead, so we still do each year. The chant has grown to be more of a song and is longer, the journey more elaborate, and the journeyers greatly increased in number.

In this area of the country, in addition to Reclaiming's giant Spiral Dance, other local Craft traditions regularly presents an open Samhain ritual, as well as open rituals for each of the seven other Sabbats.

Just as it is in the San Francisco Bay Area, so too in more and more communities throughout the United States Pagans and Witches of many stripes have been presenting open or public Samhain events. Some are "Witches' Balls" or costume parties, which may or may not include a ritual. Pagans have emerged from the broom closet in many places. Open Sabbats for all eight points on the Wheel can be found.

These rites are attended by Witches who normally work in covens, as well as by folks who call themselves "solitaries." In my observation, many Witches who call themselves solitaries are in actuality simply covenless Witches (that is, they haven't found the right coven, they're between covens, or a coven they were in has dissolved for whatever reasons). Only a small minority of them seem to prefer to work alone exclusively. Rather, most welcome the chance to come together in community to share the turning of the Wheel.

There are still many, many Witches, and I count myself among them, who prefer the intimacy and common understanding of Witchen ritual and how to do it, that is found in private work. Putting on a large event for the public is, for us, quite a different experience from that of working with trusted, trained co-religionists.

To address this need, some friends and I began holding private Samhain rituals outdoors on public park land. All Witches of any kind are invited to this Sabbat; however, they are not open to non-Witches. We have created this venue because we want the depth and intimacy that working with experienced Witches can provide, and because, rather than working alone on Hallows Eve, we want to be in community with others when we dance with our Beloved Dead. Some of us are in covens, some are not, others come with their entire covens.

These rituals are low-tech, simple in design, and only minimally scripted. There is no altar, very little in way of gear and implements, and, for safety reasons, absolutely no open flame. They are not advertised in any way, not even in private e-mails. Invitation is by word-of-mouth only. People come prepared to honor, celebrate, and commune with their Beloved Dead on that most magical night of the year, to do this among their colleagues. The dead, in turn, have answered our calls. We've called them to this circle enough times so that now they anticipate this annual gathering on the very western edge of the continent, where headlands meet the ocean. This is an example of an open ritual that is not public.

Witches everywhere gather in their covens on Samhain night. During most of the years of our concealment in society, we deliberately maintained discretion about our religious practices and our religious affiliations. Times have changed and now we (not all of us everywhere, but most of us in many places) are free to walk in the open without fear of persecution, or at the least, ostracism. Many Witches still work in their individual covens on Samhain, but many others choose to come together in community, to share our celebration, to share our grief for those we've lost in the past year, to reach beyond our boundaries, and to embrace our Witchen colleagues.

Where are we now in terms of community rituals to celebrate the Sabbats? We have reached a point where we need to look at the notion of more specialized ministries, and the more specialized training that such ministries warrant. I have been happy to have participated in the development of open and public Sabbats. Such activities foster learning for everyone involved, offer instances of deep bonding, promote a sense of belonging, and build Witchen solidarity. I love that.

At the same time, as I've mentioned above, working on a smaller scale is more effective and powerful for many people. We have grown so rich and diverse, with so many talented and skilled practitioners, that we can have it all. Or at least most of it. We can produce giant events in elaborate, temporal temples, filled with all kinds of artistry in honor of our God/esses and the dead. These larger events can display all the best of who and what we are. We can also meet with our loved ones for a quieter, more reflective or contemplative experience. I love all of these manifestations of our growing movement. Best of all, I love them at Samhain, when we may pass through the veil and back, when we are touched by the ancestors' breath.

Note Precious archival photos illustrative of these memories, by the late Ken Willard, can be viewed somewhere on [this website](#)

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