

SAMHAIN

by Merlyn

An earlier version of this article appeared in Lady Letter, volume 1. no. 2.

This page was downloaded from www.ladywoods.org, the website of the coven of Our Lady of the Woods. It may be used for personal and educational purposes with credit to the author.

Wiccans and Wiccan detractors who think that Wicca is only a religion of sweetness and pleasure should become familiar with the Samhain Sabbat and its theme of death. Samhain, October 31, is a time to remember departed family and friends and to squarely face our own future deaths when we will cross over to the other side.

Samhain is celebrated in mid-fall at a time when nature is filled with widespread death and impending death. Fall frosts have killed tender summer plants and fruits, and now the small and large animals that depended on these plants or their herbivores for food face a season of slow starvation which many will not survive.

Human mortality rates also go up after Samhain, although I don't remember the exact statistics. Living in New Mexico where most winter days are sunny and mild makes us forget just how dreary winter is in Edinburgh, Scotland or Lansing, Michigan. There and in hundreds of other towns, the sun shines through the clouds on only a few winter days, while most days the weather is cold, damp, and gray. Some people weakened by disease or advanced age seem to subconsciously decide that they can't last another four or five months, waiting for the spring sun and the mild breezes to return. So it is natural that we pause at Samhain and concentrate our thoughts on death, the common fate that we share with ancient gnarled pine trees and grasshoppers freshly hatched in September.

Ancient Celts and other Europeans believed that Samhain was the best time to communicate with the dead. The veil between the worlds of the living and the dead was thought to be at its thinnest during the period from Samhain to Yule.

We modern Pagans live in a society that worships perpetual youth and tries to pretend that death can be avoided with proper diet and exercise. We still die anyway. Only by pausing and getting comfortable with the idea of our own death and the deaths of all our family and friends can we then go on and live with zest.

We know very little about death except that it will happen to each of us. A visionary flash or a snatch of a dream may suggest something about what exists on the other side after life, but we can never be sure. Science, which is grounded exclusively in this physical world, provides no answers about what happens after death. A belief in reincarnation is just that--a belief which cannot be validated. Our DNA is eternal, as long as the human species survives, but does that part of us which is unique continue after this life? Does that part of us survive which likes candlelight rituals, spaghetti, and red wine? That part of us which holds memories of the places, people and events we have encountered in this life? Each individual decides what to believe about life after death and our future existence on the other side. Personal beliefs about an existence after death are common among Wiccans.

Celebrating Samhain

Some ancient Samhain traditions survived under Christianity. Halloween is celebrated as a children's holiday in North America where images of witches, ghosts, and skeletons are used to scare the young. Halloween as now celebrated enables adults to avoid a serious consideration of death. In Mexico, El dia de los muertos, November 2, is a fun holiday with human skulls made of sugar candy, but it is also a memorial day when adults take the departed's favorite foods and other gifts to the cemeteries where family members and friends are buried.

Wiccans today are rediscovering the importance of Samhain as a time to seriously face death, while at the same time retaining the fun aspects of Halloween. A good party, even one based on a sober theme, is always welcome. Many elaborate rituals based on the themes of death and communication with the dead have been written. In addition, Raymond Buckland recommends using the Samhain ritual to get rid of personal weaknesses, just as the weaker cattle were once sacrificed at Samhain to save scarce winter fodder for the stronger cattle.

Starhawk, in *The Spiral Dance*, describes a coven ritual in which the members sit together on the floor in rows facing the same direction as if they were passengers in a large rowboat. Each member puts his/her hand on the shoulder of the person in front and collectively the group bends and rows together in symbolic journey to the Isle of the Dead. Upon arrival each individual performs personnel scrying to communicate with significant departed ones.

Apples and pomegranates are present on her ritual altar, because the pomegranate is the fruit of life, while the apple is the fruit of death. Cutting and sharing pieces of each fruit connects coveners with both the birth and death aspects of life's eternal spiral.

Samhain's gift to us is a realization that death is a part of life and you cannot really appreciate life until you accept death as just another part of the cycle. After confronting death at Samhain and in the following quiet period lasting to Yule, we can then go on and enjoy life during the seasons of increasing light. Each sabbat following Samhain is joyous, particularly the sensuous Beltane, until we again confront Samhain next fall.