

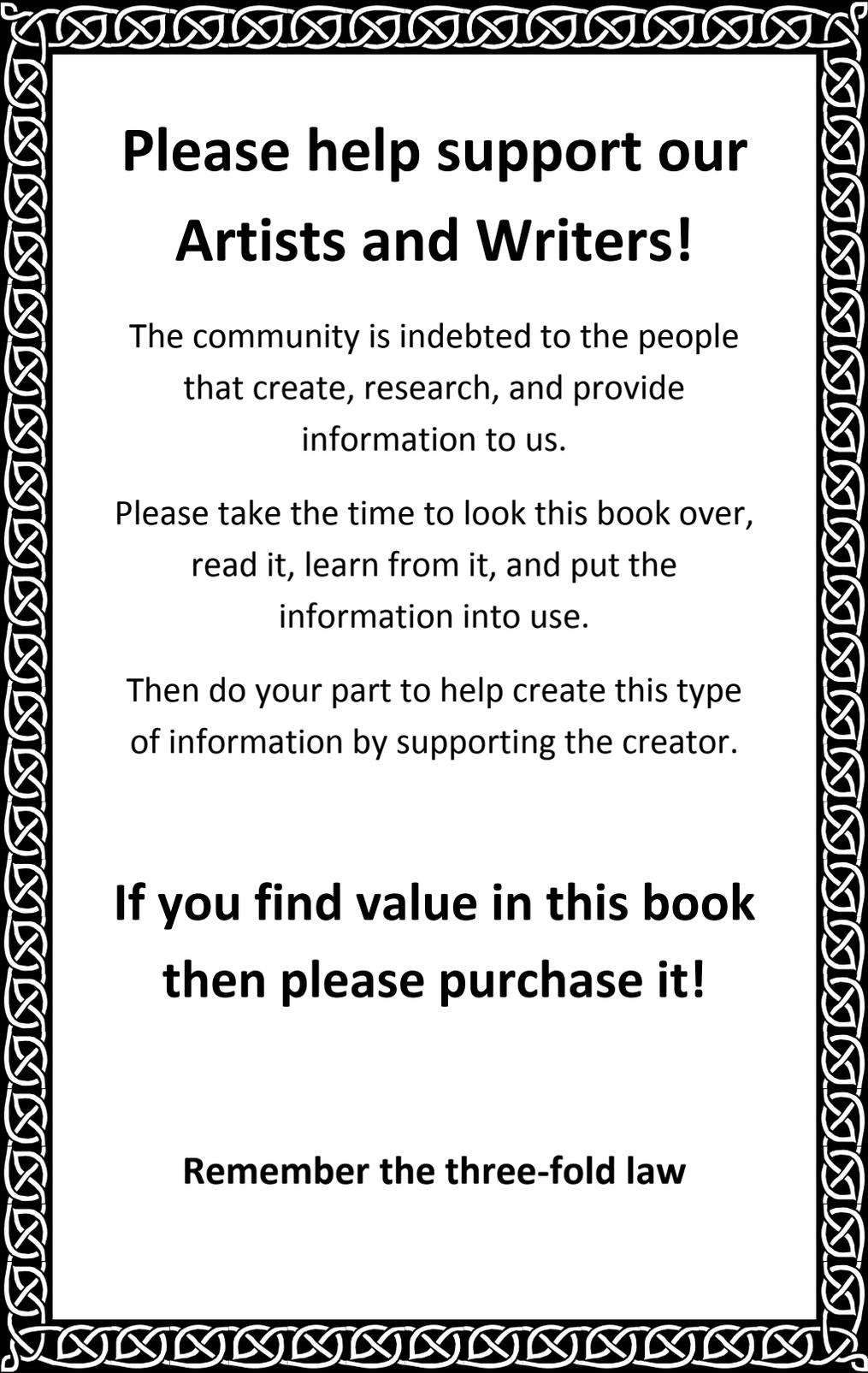
Celebrating
the Seasons
of Life:
Samhain to
Ostara



Lore, Rituals,
Activities
and Symbols

Ashleen O'Gaea





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**Celebrating
the Seasons
of Life:
Samhain to Ostara**

**Lore, Rituals,
Activities, and Symbols**

By

Ashleen O'Gaea



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EDITED BY KATE HENCHES

TYPESET BY EILEEN DOW MUNSON

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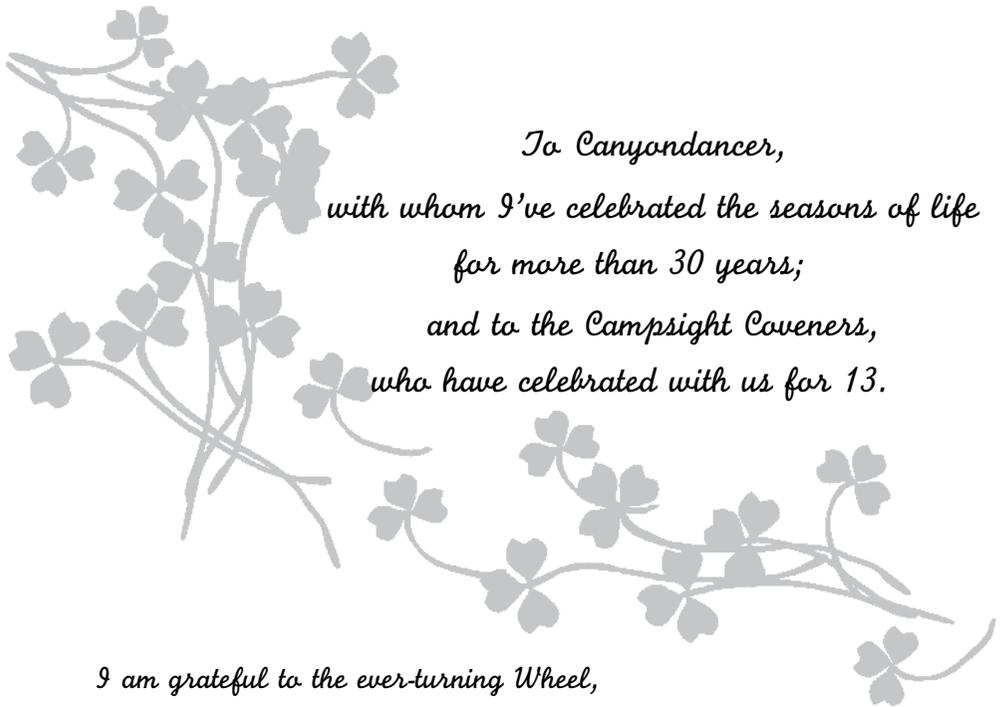
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*To Canyondancer,
with whom I've celebrated the seasons of life
for more than 30 years;
and to the Campsight Coveners,
who have celebrated with us for 13.*

*I am grateful to the ever-turning Wheel,
and of course to the Gods, but don't presume they'll read this.
I do hope that the people I'd like to thank will see my gratitude
here, though:*

*the recently disbanded Campsight Coven,
the newly formed Hearth's Gate Coven,
and the past and present members of the Camping
Contingent for their cooperation, contributions, and
inspirations;*

*Rick Johnson, Gamlinginn, and Kirk Thomas for sharing
their experience and offering their information and advice;
and Canyondancer for his supportive editing.*

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 **reface**

What do we mean by “celebrating” the seasons of life? What’s the point of making rituals to mark the Solstices and Equinoxes, and what we call the “cross-Quarter” days between them? The Earth will orbit the sun whether or not we cast our Circles and light our candles; we ourselves will age and die, and the generations parade through our lives, whether we notice them or not. Why do we bother?

We bother because we are hard-wired, so more and more scientists suspect, to cherish and hold holy our connections to the rest of life. We are social creatures, we humans, and we see and speak reverently of our kinships—with each other and with other species, and with the systems and cycles of life itself.

The word “celebrate,” according to my old *Webster’s New World Dictionary* (a 1960 edition left over from the undergraduate days of my husband, Canyon dancer), is from the Latin *celebratus*, meaning “to frequent, go in great numbers, honor.” Modern meanings include “to perform a ritual publicly and solemnly; to commemorate an anniversary, holiday, and so on, with ceremony or festivity; to proclaim; and to honor or praise publicly.”

Wiccan Sabbat celebrations do all these things, and quite often in great numbers, although solitary practice is considered equally valid. It’s not hard to understand how celebrating the seasons of life, as marked by Wiccan Sabbats, is commemorative rituals and festivities; it’s not hard to understand Wiccan Sabbat celebrations as public honor and praise of our Goddess and God. It might be harder to see how “proclaiming” and “frequenting” fit into Wiccan practice.

In the old days, before the Inquisition, Pagans tended to “frequent” certain holy locations. Whether or not a public ritual was scheduled, it was not uncommon for individuals to pass by a well or spring, or a grove, or to climb a hill. Indeed, individuals and families frequently passed holy sites, and often stopped to make a votive offering or empower a charm.

Pagan practices in the days of our lore were different than our practices today, for our understanding of the nature of deity and how magic works is undoubtedly different than what was “common knowledge” or cutting-edge theory a thousand years ago or more. What we share, with medieval (and older) Pagans and with the Neolithic ancestors of our cultures, is a faith that we are part of Nature: We belong to the Earth’s powerful systems and cycles.

Do we respond to them as our ancestors did? No. Most of us don’t believe in *Fantasia*-like Greek gods living on a literal Olympus, or in fairy palaces that would show up in photographs, beneath Britain’s megalithic mounds. Most of us understand the life of the Otherworld to be in a different dimension, which, from our perspective, can be called metaphorical or subconscious. We understand, too, that the effect of metaphor, of our dreams and emotional experiences, can be, on CT scans, indistinguishable from our physical experience. Few if any of us fall to our knees begging for mercy when thunder booms and lightning cracks. Few expect to meet a triple goddess or a stag-headed god on the street—such experience is limited to movies and guided meditations.

That doesn’t mean that movies and guided meditations can’t inspire us, though. *The Lord of the Rings* movies inspire me; Gandalf and the Hobbit quartet are real to me in ways that my toaster will never be. Nor, for Wiccans, does it mean that we don’t meet the Goddess and God in other people, for we do, every day. The regal aspects we give them in our liturgies are marks of the awe and respect we feel for the miraculously mundane world that is their true nature: Nature, and all its workings. From an infant’s eyelashes to mountain storms, the power and the diversity and the synchronicity of nature is that which we hold holy, what we seek to name when we speak of the Goddess and the God and when we describe their many aspects in our humble human terms.

Even when storms knock out our electricity and threaten our ability to make it to work or school, most of us pause for a moment to appreciate the grandeur of the gathering clouds. Whatever we think of its consequences, don't we all smell rain coming? And who doesn't, whatever inconvenience it causes, love—at least for a moment—the beauty of falling snowflakes and the diamond-like glitter of the blanket they throw over our yards and alleys?

The smell of freshly mown grass drifting from next door or from blocks away perks up our souls. The feel of a morning's light glancing through stems, branches, or lampposts alerts us to an imminent Imbolc. Before my jasmine vines or orange trees have opened their own flowers, I've caught their cousins' scents in the air, from neighbors' plantings, and known by the fragrances how close we are to Ostara.

Many of us manage to make pilgrimages to holy sites in Wicca's homelands—to Newgrange in Ireland, to Stonehenge or Avebury in England, to the Arthurian coast of Wales, or to the Scottish Highlands and other sacred territories. Mundane circumstances keep many more of us from making those trips, yet we are all followers of a nature religion. So instead, we frequent the Sabbats, we notice them, we celebrate them as we can. Perhaps we daily pass and salute inconspicuous altars in our homes, altars that others do not recognize and so cannot desecrate. We frequent our holies at home, in our hearts, when we cannot frequent them in the landscape. Sometimes respectful behavior in an apparently nonritual circumstance substitutes for, and is as reverent as, casting a Circle and performing a ritual.

Today, I think more Wiccans frequent holy places in our thoughts and in our attitudes than in person. Oh, some of us are fortunate enough to live on wide enough tracts of land to find and often visit corners that we feel are particularly powerful; some of us are privileged to camp often and to experience the wilder natural powers. We feel their influences even when we cannot go to natural shrines as our ancestors in faith did.

We all have the power—the ability and obligation—to make holy wherever we are and whatever we're doing, to recognize that wherever we are and whatever we're doing *is* holy. In a very real

sense, the proclamations we make of life's seasons—in the words and gestures of our Sabbat celebrations—are but echoes of the proclamations life makes of its own seasons. To the attentive, life's proclamations of changing seasons, no matter how subtle they may be, are as clear as a baby's cry. Sabbats are our joyous response to the clarion calls of nature, of our Goddess and Her Consort, as They dance through our lives.

Remembering that dictionary definition of *celebrate*, as much as Wiccans' celebration of the seasons of life (marked on our liturgical calendar as Sabbats) honors our Gods, it is our honor to participate in the cycles of life, which we call the Spiral Dance. We “proclaim” not only the fact of seasonal changes (the astronomical events of the Solstices and Equinoxes and the agricultural traditions of the Northern Hemisphere), but our delight in belonging to the Earth and Her life. Every Sabbat celebrates an anniversary of a step in the Spiral Dance; every Sabbat is a reminder that we “frequent” life with every breath we take.

For a long time, it's been hard to celebrate properly: The *public* aspect was missing for hundreds of years and has not been entirely restored even yet, and not all Wiccans believe it should be. (The Druids do, and they're working hard to restore it.) But with every season that turns into another, with every death and rebirth of the solar year, more people understand more about Wicca.

It becomes clearer with every Sabbat that the Goddess and God are not locked in antagonistic competition for our souls, but share in the loving nurture of life; it becomes clearer that Neo-Pagan religions are joyous and life-affirming. With the publication of books like these, and by the courage of those who bring what they read here out of the broom closet, Wiccan rites come closer to being true celebrations, public expressions of the honor it is to experience the seasons of life—in these pages, from Samhain to Ostara.

(Be sure to get a copy of this book's companion, *Celebrating the Seasons of Life: Beltane to Mabon* [New Page Books, 2004], too.)

ntroduction

Most calendars are linear. You see them beautifully illustrated, showing one month at a time; you see them showing a whole year at a glance, printed in neat rows of three or four months each. This reflects our acceptance of time as linear, and our tendency to forget that the past has anything to do with the present or the future.

Wicca's calendar, the Wheel of the Year, is different. Wicca's calendar is round, reflecting our understanding that life is not linear, but cyclical. As a round table allows everyone seated to see everyone else and keeps anyone's position at the table from being more important than anyone else's, so does Wicca's round calendar, the Wheel, let us see the relationship of each Sabbat to the others, and keep any from being more significant than any other.

We must make a certain exception here: Traditionally, Samhain and Beltane are the two "most important" Sabbats on the Wiccan Wheel. This is exactly because they have long begun the two halves of the year, and in the "old days" were celebrated at agriculturally significant times; it's why this book and its sister volume open with looks at Samhain and Beltane. We say that the "veil between the worlds" is thinnest at these Sabbats, and we still recognize that it's easier to reconnect with the dead at Samhain (Halloween) and with the faeries at Beltane (which non-Pagans know and love as May Day).

Some Wiccan Traditions do celebrate Samhain and Beltane more elaborately than they do the other Sabbats. Samhain is a time for requiems, even if other services have been held for the dead; and Beltane's a favorite Sabbat for handfastings (Wiccan weddings), religious or legal. My own coven celebrated a little more lavishly at Samhain and Beltane, for Samhain was our last camping trip of

every year, and though Beltane wasn't the first, it was usually the first warm trip, and preparations for the Maypole just *do* take more time and effort than preparations for most other Sabbats.

In these books, you'll see this slight favoring of Samhain and Beltane reflected, but only gently, for the other Sabbats are all highly significant in their own, sometimes more subtle, ways, and deserve our attention as much as the holidays that begin the two oldest seasons.

This book and its sister (*Celebrating the Seasons of Life: Beltane to Mabon*) explore each Sabbat thoroughly enough to bring its meaning home to modern Wiccans. In the "old days," when our ancestors were still caring for their herds on the hillsides, there were two halves to every year: Winter and Summer. These two books group the Sabbats around this old division, so that we can make better sense of the details added since then.

Winter begins at Samhain, and Yule is mid-Winter; Imbolc marks the beginning of Spring, and Ostara is "mid-Spring"—and on the Wheel, they're all Winter holidays. Understanding them as such not only gives us a new perspective on both Winter and Spring, but also helps us remember that Winter does become Spring, and because Spring then becomes Summer, we can see that time is cyclical, not stopping or starting, but rolling on through the years, dancing the Spiral Dance of life.

The Wheel of the Year actually combines two calendars: the agricultural and the astronomical. (That's astronomical, not astrological. Although many Wiccans are interested in astrology, astrology is not "part of" Wicca.) The agricultural year is concerned with when to plant and harvest, and when to move domestic herds from the pasture to the barn; the astronomical calendar relates to the tides and seasons, which depend on the relative position of the Earth to the Sun and Moon.

In the old days of our lore, people who kept farms and tended animals were only casually aware of Solstices and Equinoxes; their attention was on the change of seasons. In those days—well before biblical times—it was the Priests who understood astronomy: Stonehenge is a well-known example of an artificial horizon, over which times of sunrise and sunset can be measured, and astronomical events such as eclipses can be predicted.

Samhain, Imbolc, Beltane, and Lammas, which Wicca observes as cross-Quarter Sabbats, were more important to herders and farmers than the Solstices and Equinoxes, and as we already know, the cross-Quarters were marked and celebrated first. The astronomical moments we celebrate as Yule, Ostara, Litha, and Mabon were added to the calendar later. This explains something you may already have noticed: the two calendars don't fit each other exactly. For instance: Wiccans count Samhain the religious New Year, yet the Sun is not reborn until Yule (close to which secular reckoning celebrates the beginning of the year), and we don't notice the days lengthening until Imbolc!

Another example of what seems like an inconsistency is that the Goddess, at least according to most Wiccans, gives birth to the Sun God at Yule; yet when we say that She resumes her maiden aspect at Imbolc, we're suggesting that She's a crone when She gives birth. That's not how it works for human women (even though medical advances have made it possible for women to give birth later in their lives than is historically usual). The answer to this apparent problem is that the Wheel of the Year doesn't measure just the human cycle! Indeed, though it's based on real agricultural and astronomical cycles, the Wheel is a religious calendar, and as such is as much metaphorical as literal. (This is especially true in the Southern Hemisphere, where mid-Summer is in December, mid-Spring's in October, and so on.)

Wicca reveres all life, and the human life cycle is but one of many. (Geological cycles, much longer than most of us can imagine, are included in Wicca's reckoning, too.) Most of us do look for close correspondences between the Gods' stories and our own—in Celtic mythology, goddesses and gods are often spoken of as kings and queens. This anthropomorph is natural, and mostly convenient, but we can think of the Goddess and God too personally. When we forget that They primarily represent the relationship of individuality to wholeness, the relationship of natural forces to the cycle of life, and try to use Them as practical role models for male and female behavior, we can find ourselves unnecessarily confused.

This is not to suggest that there is no aspect of the Great Mother that loves us individually, or that it is wrong to imagine Her rocking us when we are needy, as a human mother might; and it is not to

suggest that the Horned One is not our brother, encouraging us from His experience to face death with a courage born of knowing we shall be reborn. It is only to say that the Gods do not exist only for us or only in aspects convenient to our perspective. It is also to say that, being Witches, we have both the capacity and the obligation to learn to know (and love and trust) their other aspects as well. When we remember this, and don't take our human metaphors too literally, the Wheel rolls more smoothly around the year.

This book looks at several aspects of the Winter holidays. Acknowledging that our mundane lives are lived in linear time, it examines each Sabbat in turn, opening with a look at the lore surrounding Wicca's celebrations; continuing with ritual celebrations for solitaries, families, and covens; followed by activities for solitaries, families, and covens; and finishing with a discussion of the Wiccan symbols for each Sabbat. Another thing this book acknowledges is that Wicca shares an Anglo-Celtic heritage with two other Neo-Pagan religions, Asatru and Druidry.

Although we won't go deeply into Norse mythology, we'll note that, as the Vikings made themselves at home in England, their religion adapted right along with them. Odin became Wotan, and Wayland the Smith became better known. The Anglo-Saxon runes, to which we'll refer, expanded the original Elder Futhark to accommodate sounds that Old English used and Old Norse didn't.

Druidry is fairly widely practiced now, and though its modern forms are different, they are still just as varied as they were in "the old days." There are several forms of Druidism, and it's ADF Druidry that informs this book. (ADF stands for *Ar nDraiocht Fein*, pronounced *arn dray-okt fein*, and means "our own Druidry." It was founded by Isaac Bonewits and is the largest Neo-Pagan Druid organization in the world.) Kirk Thomas, the Liturgist for the Sonoran Sunrise Grove tells us that "in ADF we have many Norse, Roman, Hellenic, and Slavic members who would have different traditions. I can only speak to Celtic ADF." That's fine, because it's the Celtic heritage Wicca shares with Druidry.

Both Asatru and Druidry differ from Wicca in some important ways. Their rituals are different: Even though they both tend to gather in circles, they don't work in capital-C Circles like Wiccans do. They

honor the Directions, but in different ways. The Asatru work almost exclusively with the Norse pantheons, and primarily with the Aesir. (The Aesir are Sky gods; the Vanir are Earth gods. Worshipers of the Norse Vanir may distinguish themselves as Vanatru, but many accept the term Asatru as inclusive.) Rather than calling themselves Pagan or Neo-Pagan, most Asatru and Vanatru refer to themselves as Heathen.

Those who practice Druidry call themselves Druids. But the Liturgist Thomas explains something most people don't realize: "We are polytheistic, not duo-theistic [ditheistic] or pantheistic. So we do not believe in a God and Goddess who have different aspects. Rather, each God and Goddess, and there are many, is a distinct and living personality, separate from the others." Some Wiccans understand deity this way, too, but as the introduction to the Charge of the Goddess suggests, most Wiccans think of the Mother Goddess and Her Consort as "the Goddess" and "the God," and consider Them each to have many aspects, which we know by various names. (The introduction to the first part of the *Charge* says, "Listen to the words of the Great Mother, who of old was known as..." and there follows a long list of Goddess names.)

Throughout this book, then, you'll see not only how the Sabbats relate to each other, but also how "the big three" Neo-Pagan religions are related and influence each other. On virtually every page you'll be reminded that life is a cycle, and, to use some very human metaphors, that each Sabbat is always balanced and supported by the others, for any Wheel, if it's to roll, needs all of its spokes and the whole of its rim.

Winter's bright sword protects you,
Summer's bright crown endows,
and the turning Wheel perfects you,
as by the spokes you make your vows.

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Samhain



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In the “old days,” when our ancestors—Celts, mostly (the “English” influence in our Anglo-Celtic heritage came later) spread out across Western Europe—were still caring for their herds on the hillsides, there were two halves to every year: Winter and Summer. Winter began around the time modern Wiccans identify as Samhain. The weather in most places was seriously cold by the end of October, even in those years when Autumn had been gentle.

The cattle, goats, and sheep, by Samhain, were herded down from Summer’s high pastures, and those not fattened enough to survive on Winter’s lesser rations were slaughtered. Fewer mouths to feed meant the healthier beasts were more likely to survive, and the meat of the butchered animals kept families alive during the months when hunting was less feasible.

Today, the animals we eat are butchered with no ceremony at all; but for Neo-Pagans, slaughter is sacred. When, in *Teutonic Magic*, Kveldulf Gundarsson talks about the central act of a blot (the word rhymes with “boat,” literally translates as “blessing” and is what the Asatru call their ritual gatherings) as being “the sacrifice of one or more animals.” He explains that the sacrifice was “performed less for its own sake than as a hallowing of the slaughter, which was a practical necessity.” He suggests, too, that each animal was individually blessed before it was killed.

Although whole beasts are still roasted at some gatherings, most of us—of any Neo-Pagan faith—don’t have the opportunity to bless and slaughter our own meat anymore. Gundarsson suggests a Teutonic alternative that can serve us all quite well: “Make animals out of bread (charging them strongly with life energy) and ritually slaughter and eat them, sprinkling mead or ale from the blessing bowl.” He takes this idea from the medieval German custom of exchanging animal-shaped loaves of bread, and refers to the modern Swedish tradition of a pig-shaped cake substituting for the Yule boar.

Honoring the death of slaughtered animals, whose life force nurtures our own survival through the Winter, is one way to honor the God’s death in the service of our lives. It’s also appropriate to honor the exchange of energy that occurs when one Neo-Pagan religion borrows customs and symbols from another—as when Wiccans might share animal crackers at Samhain, and toast not only the relationship

of life to death, not only the concept of rebirth, and not only our kin in the Otherworld, but also our kin in other Neo-Pagan religions.

Growing seasons in the North were shorter than those in the British Isles, where the final harvests of grain and other crops were finished by Samhain, lest anything left in the fields freeze as the last warm days of October hardened into November's frost. Winter rains could make fields impassable with mud; once the snow started falling, families could be farm-bound for weeks on end. It was imperative to make the harvest safe by the end of Summer.

Indeed, many Wiccans understand "Samhain" (almost universally pronounced *saw-win*) to come from two Gaelic words, *sam* and *fuin*, which mean "end of Summer." [One source for this etymology is Jean Markale's *The Pagan Mysteries of Halloween: Celebrating the Dark Half of the Year* (Inner Traditions International, 2001). Markale's a specialist in Celtic studies at the Sorbonne, and I believe his scholarship is reliable.] Janet and Stewart Farrar, in *A Witches Bible Compleat* (Magickal Childe, 1984) tell us that, in Irish Gaelic, "Samhain" is the name of the month of November, and "Samhuin" is Scottish Gaelic for All Hallows, celebrated on the first of November.

In *The Women's Encyclopedia of Myths and Secrets* (Castle Books, 1996), Barbara G. Walker says that Samhain was "named for the Aryan Lord of Death, Samana, 'the Leveller,' or the Grim Reaper, leader of ancestral ghosts." But "the Grim Reaper" has never been part of Wicca's pantheon. Wicca's God is more traditionally envisioned as the leader of the Wild Hunt, and His aspect in this role is, well, wild.

However, the wilderness represents Nature, which Wicca holds sacred. (One of Wicca's cultural progenitors was the Romantic movement, which transformed our understanding of Nature from an uncivilized, treacherous badlands to a pastoral haven and retreat from the oppression of the industrial revolution.) Nature doesn't frighten us, and (at least theologically) neither does death. Our God, whether leading the Wild Hunt in celebration of death or guiding us between lives through the Summerland, is not grim.

"Horned One, Lover, Son, leaper in the corn—deep in the Mother, die and be reborn!" That's a line to a very popular chant, which we

start to sing at Lammas and keep singing through Yule, so that it links Summer and Winter. Our God is not a jealous god, He's gentle, and guides us through the Underworld, through rest and gestation toward rebirth. Our God has an animal aspect, and a vegetable aspect—our God is all that dies and is reborn, and He mirrors and appreciates those same aspects in each of us.

He is our role model, our mentor, our guide, our brother, and in many (not all) Traditions, He is a father figure as well; but He is *not* a judge or an executioner. No matter that some insist that "Sam Hain" is a devilish Lord of the Dead, the Sabbat's name and significance to modern Wiccans is consistent with *our* world view. This Sabbat marks the end of Summer and the beginning of Winter, and so we begin our look at the Winter Sabbats with Samhain.

It's inappropriate to look at Samhain all by itself. It's the third and final harvest Sabbat on Wicca's liturgical calendar; it should be seen in relation to the other two harvest festivals, and in relation to the Sabbat which follows it (Yule) as well. Indeed, no Wiccan Sabbat stands alone. The reason we call our calendar the *Wheel* of the Year is that we understand time to have, like a wheel, no beginning and no ending, and to be to be cyclical, seasonal.

Of course Samhain *does* have a relationship to death. Everything has a relationship to death, and everything has a relationship to life, too. Everything, in fact, has a relationship to—is in a relationship with—everything else. In many places, and certainly in the British Isles, Wicca's homeland, at the end of Summer—Samhain—it is hard to tell the difference between life and death.

The leaves are off the trees, animals have migrated south or gone into hibernation, the ground is covered with ice or snow, and the fields are empty or prickly with rotted harvest stubble. When you can see it, the sun is low on the horizon, and not very warming. Daylight is short. However, it's not that one day it was high Summer and light outside until 10 p.m., and the next, it was dark by 4 p.m.

The Wheel turns slowly in most places, and, if we are paying attention, we notice the days gradually shortening, from Litha (when it is light until late in the evening), through Lammas (when day is done about dinnertime), through Mabon (when it's dark a little earlier), until Samhain (when shadows fall even sooner). Yule's the shortest

day of the year, and we celebrate that, too, not in hopes the darkness will be propitiated, but because we *know* that the Wheel will keep turning, that the days will gradually lengthen again.

It's this gradual change through the seasons that inspires Wicca to call its calendar a Wheel, and to speak of our Sabbat rituals in terms of turning the Wheel. Perhaps our ancestors did believe that unless they performed the proper rituals, the seasons would stop cycling, but we know better. Call it science or call it "perfect trust," we know that the Wheel will turn even if we can't build a fire on a particular day. That certainty is what we celebrate.

This is not to say that our Sabbat celebrations contribute nothing to the worlds; quite the contrary. It's our celebrations of the Sabbats that give them meaning. Their glories would be unobserved and insignificant without our attention; it is only we humans (as far as we know) who can name things, and call them sacred. In our lives, in our memories of the past and our dreams of the future, in the fullness of our immersion in the present, we manifest the Gods. In many Craft creation myths, we express the idea that the Goddess gave birth to individuality from Her wholeness—we are Her consciousness, individually experienced: She is aware through us. The Asatru tell of Odin offering himself to himself. Our Sabbat celebrations are the Goddess's offering to Herself, through our awareness of both wholeness and individuality, of both mortality and eternal life.

As we've already seen, it's relatively easy to understand, in practical terms, why Samhain marks the final harvest. But this Sabbat is the Witches' New Year and a family reunion, too. Why?

The dark half of the year is for introspection. Hibernation is a form of turning inward, returning to the womb, as the God has done in his death in hunt and harvest. We do our inner work in the Winter—not exclusively, of course, or therapists would be on vacation six months of the year. Spiritually, Winter gives us time to look within, undistracted (well, *less* distracted) by tending the fields and hunting, painting the house and taking the kids to Disneyland.

Winter is when we are shown, if we dare to open our eyes to the truth, that death is just one step in the Spiral Dance. Death is not a final stage, it's just one stage in the cycle of life. From death, life is reborn—as Spring follows Winter. So, when Winter begins, Witches

see the beginning of the whole Year. (In a similar way, we see the lunar cycle beginning with the New or “dark” Moon, rather than with any of the Moon’s other phases.)

And how is Samhain a family reunion? Aren’t most reunions scheduled for the summer months, when kids are out of school and workers take vacations? Yes, probably so, but families aren’t limited to their living members, and the reunion at Samhain includes those who’ve “gone before,” as the *Charge of the Goddess* puts it.

We say that, at Samhain, the “veil between the worlds” is thin. Most of us believe, though maybe not quite literally, that the Otherworld (also called the Spirit World, or the Astral Planes, and by other names) is just beyond the world in which we live. The cultures from which Wicca draws are full of stories about people wandering in and out of Fairy Land accidentally, because the separation is more perceptual than actual; and during Samhain and Beltane (May Day), it’s harder to perceive the boundaries. As a physical veil can obstruct our mundane vision, so the veil between the worlds can hide the Otherworld from our mundane consciousness. But at Samhain, the veil is thin, the distinction between life and death, this world and the other, is not as clear. And it’s easy for us to remember our ancestors so clearly that they can be with us again, at least for a little while.

And because it is so easy to get back together with them—and because we don’t fear them—we invite them to our final harvest feast. It’s not just to our table we welcome our “ghosts,” though. Most of us don’t grow and harvest our own food anymore, though many of us still have gardens that supplement our groceries, and many of us grow magical herbs and seasonal crops...such as pumpkins for Samhain. For the vast majority of Wiccans, though, the harvest is of inner crops. So we offer to share with our ancestors everything we’ve accomplished through the past year.

We share our hopes and dreams, our mistakes and what we’ve learned from them. We share our love, our sorrows, our discoveries about ourselves and the world(s). We acknowledge the ways our ancestors still influence and enhance our lives. I actually still write letters to my parents, though they’ve been dead for several years. I can’t say whether they appreciate hearing from me as they did when

they were alive; I *can* say that writing to them helps *me* keep the events of my life in perspective. (And if it's difficult, finding something to appreciate about certain people who've died, then the effort it takes is another enrichment of our personal harvests).

What about the Halloween part of Samhain? I know (and maybe you do) quite a few Wiccans who celebrate Samhain a night, or a weekend, early, so they'll be free on the 31st to supervise their children's trick-or-treating. What about that?

Canyondancer and I camp for at least three Sabbats a year, and Samhain is one of them. Years ago, we were careful to schedule these trips so that we could do our ritual on the 31st of October, even if that meant taking a couple of days off from work. And for a while, our friends who had children brought them along; but when the kids got to be 5 or 6 years old, and aware that *their* friends were donning costumes and getting candy, well, we had a choice. We could camp on Samhain, pretty much by ourselves, or we could move our Sabbat celebration and still enjoy the company of our friends, who wanted their children not to be outcast.

Though a bit reluctantly, I must admit, we chose to camp the weekend ahead of Samhain. As people began to feel more pressure at work, it was harder for them to take days off in the middle of the week, too, and five years out of seven, Samhain falls on a week day. We feel that by celebrating early, ours is part of the energy building up to fuel the Sabbat; when the group Sabbat can't be on the exact day, it's our preference to meet ahead of time. (Sometimes the only chance for communal activity comes after a Sabbat, which we find disappointing, but when we have to, we can adapt to that, too. And some Pagan clergy argue that when you can't celebrate a Sabbat on the proper date, you should wait till it's past so that your energy doesn't peak before it joins that of other Circles.)

Halloween's costumes and trick-or-treating customs aren't religious for Wiccans—but some of them are old customs, and we can understand them in a Wiccan context; our lore makes it easy. We can talk about Jack-o'-Lantern being the counterpart of May's Jack-in-the-Green. We can talk about costumes giving us the chance to confront our fears, channel our ancestors, or enact our dreams; all this is magically and psychologically substantive. When we reinterpret

customs consistently with our theology and philosophy, we are deepening our experience of Wicca, and that's a good thing.

Were our ancestors celebrating the same things we celebrate at Samhain? Probably not. In the Middle Ages, for instance, most people were afraid of ghosts, because the popular culture (that is, the Catholic Church), told very scary ghost stories, and there wasn't much in the way of science to contradict them.

Couldn't parents tell their children different stories? Not safely, no, for fear of their children letting those heresies slip. Besides, life was tough then—the “noble savage” images we have of medieval times are way off the mark for peasants—and the idea that life was dangerous and hell was real probably made sense in most people's experience.

It's okay, now, for us to understand ancient customs differently than the people who used to practice them did. We can light our jack-o'-lanterns as reverent images of our God, as expressions of joy in our knowledge that “all that dies shall be reborn,” even if 500 years ago people lit them to scare away ghosts and goblins. It's okay that our ancestors understood ghosts and spirits to need propitiation, and we don't. They had one relationship with the natural world, and we have a different one. We carry on some of their customs, giving them new meanings, and that's one way that life comes again from death; we call that turning the Wheel.



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Though Wicca has Anglo-Saxon and Teutonic roots too, most of us are more familiar with our Celtic heritage. Lots of our culture's fairy tales are Germanic, but the myths most Wiccans refer to are mostly from Ireland, Wales, and Scotland. Most Celtic Goddesses are Triple Goddesses, and throughout our lives, each of us, like the heroes in our stories, must relate to each of the Goddess' three aspects (Maiden, Mother, and Crone). At Samhain, it's the Crone aspects we meet and engage.

Those who are used to dividing the world into "good" and "evil" halves expect that everything occurring in the light of day is godly, and everything occurring in darkness is devilish. But of course, both common sense and science tell us that without the dark half of the day, there'd be no time for sleep, and without sleep and REM (dream) sleep, we quickly become addled and even insane. Perhaps we can extrapolate from this that we *need* the visits to the Otherworld that Sabbats such as Beltane and Samhain schedule for us.

Celts, from whom Wicca inherits much, are apt to divide the world into triads: Many Druidic expressions and teachings still take a three-line form. As inheritors of that tradition, Wiccans see the aspects of the Triple Goddess—Maiden, Mother, and Crone—*complementing* one another and cooperating as the Year turns.

The Goddess's Crone aspect, the Dark Goddess, *does* oversee death. "From me all things proceed," the Goddess tells us in her *Charge*, "and to me all things return." The Greek Fates spin, measure, and cut the threads of our lives; the Norse Norns (past, present, and future) determine the fates of humans and gods. But Wiccans do not fear the Greek Atropos or the Norse Skuld, though they cut our threads and end our incarnations, for we believe in *reincarnation*—rebirth through the Mother.

Thus, death is not an end, and not a punishment, but a return to the Mother's womb, a step toward rebirth. The ways we can die may quite alarm us, but death itself holds no fear for Wiccans; in some initiation rites, we remind our initiates that without dying they cannot be reborn.

The Crone is not, for us, the bent and warty fairy-tale witch who roasts children for her dinner, but the kindly grandmother who always has a plate of cookies ready when we visit.

An important aside: The Hansel and Gretel story, by the way, came from a time when second wives, in order to protect their children's inheritance potential, often really did try to dispose of their husband's children by his first wife. From that perspective, it's not about witches really; it's about the terrible consequences of serious socioeconomic situations.

The Hansel and Gretel story doesn't have to be taken literally at all, though. It can be symbolically about growing up, about leaving the ordered world of childhood and entering the woods of self-discovery. In such an interpretation, the Witch is a catalyst, and thus a "good guy," for she forces the children to draw upon their own resources as they learn to survive in adult society.

Lots of Crone stories, in fact, are best understood as being about growing up. Many begin by challenging a youth or maiden to marry, care for, or otherwise befriend a hideous hag, who may have a dreadful reputation. The young people who are disdainful of her or cruel, scorning her odor and toothlessness and mocking her rags, usually meet with terrible ends—they die painfully (or at least ironically) or marry very poorly and suffer to the end of their days. Those who are kind to her, daring to kiss her, brush her hair, or marry her despite having been tricked into it, are lavishly rewarded.

Usually, she turns out to be rich and in a bequeathing mood, and when the hero being tested is a young man, she generally transforms herself into the most beautiful young woman in the kingdom, and they live happily ever after. These are thinly disguised stories of death and rebirth and hint that if we struggle against the cycle, we'll fare the worse for it.

The Dark Goddess represents our inner life, our "mysterious powers" (which are only unexplored, and not unnatural), our instincts,

our dreams, the unconscious understandings we have of our interconnectedness. No wonder she frightens so many people! Most of us, at one time or another, have doubted ourselves—wondered whether we can live up to other people's expectations, pass the test, finish the project in time, or do it as well as someone else we admire.

Many of us grew up being told that we're clumsy, foolish, witless, ugly, or otherwise inadequate—and we wonder, at least once in a while, if it isn't true. Doubting ourselves in this way is uncomfortable, so we look for ways to avoid it. If we see ourselves, or fear that others see us, as spent and ugly hags, we turn away from that image when we see it in the rest of the world, hoping to keep it out of our own mirrors.

But wait—remember the stories. Look beyond what's on the surface, beyond appearances and our fear of them. Get by the notion that beauty is always divine and ugliness always sinful or profane. (Balancing the stories in which the Crone is beautiful inside are plenty that tell of deceptively beautiful connivers who lead superficial mortals to their ruin.) Dare to adjust to the darkness, accept mundane blindness, and see with your inner eye, which is made to perceive the wonders of the inner realms. Embrace the Crone, as the heroes of the stories do, and be rewarded as they are.

For many Wiccans, Hecate is the goddess most associated with Samhain. (The pronunciation of her name varies. Some say **Heh-kah**-tay, some say **Heck**-a-tay, and a very few say **Heck**-ate. Most of the Wiccans I know say **Heck**-a-tay.) She's not a Celtic goddess at all; she's Greek, and pre-Olympian, but the Romans knew her, and introduced the Celts to her when the Caesars's empire extended through Western Europe and into Britain. In Her maiden aspect, She's a Moon goddess, in Her mother aspect She's a goddess of magic, and as a crone, She's an Underworld goddess. (She's not the only Greco-Roman goddess known in Wicca's homeland, either—Diana, a very strong manifestation of Maiden energy, is also a favorite of modern Witches.)

One reason Hecate's associated with Samhain is that Her Crone aspect is well developed. She's a goddess of crossroads, of choice and change and turnings. In Greece and Rome, She was the goddess to whom both the living and the dead turned for purification,

and expiation—a graveyard goddess. Janet and Stewart Farrar, in *A Witches Bible Compleat* (Magickal Child, 1984), say that “Hecate is the Dark Mother, in both the positive and the apparently negative sense. She can send demons to torment men’s dreams; she can drive them mad, if they are not well integrated enough to cope with her; but to those who dare to welcome her, she brings creative inspiration.” According to the Farrars, one of her symbols is the torch, “which illumines the unconscious and reveals its treasures.” (It was Hecate, not Satan, who Shakespeare’s wonderful trio of witches worshiped. She’s a Triple Goddess of past, present, and future, whose visionary and divinatory powers are quite appropriate to Samhain.)

One of her Celtic counterparts is, of course, Cerridwen, another Triple Goddess with a Dark Mother aspect about Her. One of Wicca’s favorite chants is “Hecate, Cerridwen, Dark Mother, let us in; Hecate, Cerridwen, let us be reborn.” My coven harmonizes this chant as we process from our Samhain camp to the sheltered area where we’ve performed our Samhain ritual for many years now.

Both Hecate and Cerridwen are aspects of the Dark Mother, and often pictured as seriously and frighteningly ugly old women, an image which has become the modern stereotype of witches, with the crooked, warty features, the nasty white hair, the humped back and knobby fingers, toothless and cackling. (The word “hag,” by the way, comes from the Anglo-Saxon “haegtesa.” It’s a cognate with the German “hachel” and the Old Dutch “hagedisse,” and means “witch.” In Old and modern Dutch, it also means “lizard,” and lizards have Shamanic associations.) It is easy to understand why dreams of Hecate might drive one mad!

Yet as we recall, many are the stories of young men or women who fail the challenge of loving the hag, passionately or only kindly, and who are rewarded with her wrath, when those who dare to embrace her find, when her torn and greasy cloak falls away, that she’s a beautiful maiden after all. Spring does follow Winter, as day follows night, and all the seasons and times are of the same cycle. Embrace the one, and the other embraces you.

According to Sonoran Sunrise Grove’s liturgist, Kirk Thomas, “Samhain is a time when the veils between this world and Otherworld are thin (as at Beltane), so trance journeys to meet our dead are

done now.” ADF (Ar nDraiocht Fein) Druids often invoke the Morrigan at Samhain, he tells us; as she is Irish, the Dagda’s often invoked with her.

Samhain occurs in what the Asatru call the “blood month,” or Bloatmonath in Anglo-Saxon, referring to the slaughter of animals. Asatru is also known as Odinism, Odin being the chief god of the Northern pantheon. Odin’s Shamanic aspect is quite powerful—perhaps you already know that the magical significance of the runes was revealed to him as he hung from Yggdrasil, the world-tree, for nine days and nights in a Shamanic journey usually described as a sacrifice of himself to himself. Following this example, Asatru’s animal sacrifices, too, were not only practical, but served to bless the whole act and purpose of slaughter. Because of his Shamanic journeys, Odin is associated with “the dead and their remembrance,” as Freya Aswynn puts it in *Leaves of Yggdrasil* (Llewellyn, 1990).

Aswynn notes that another of Odin’s Shamanic journeys was to Hel (an icy realm of the Otherworld, not the Christian realm of punishing fire) to consult the volva (sybils, prophetesses) as to the meaning of certain dreams. She associates this journey and the observance of Einherjar’s Day, also known as Remembrance Day (and usually celebrated in mid-November) with Samhain, for they both “concern the dead and their remembrance.”

Gamlinginn, a respected and experienced gothi (Asatru Priest) in New Mexico, adds that Vetnætr, translated as “Winter Nights,” are the three consecutive nights which begin Winter. Some Asatru feel, he says, that the 24th, 25th, and 26th of October is closest to the “correct” time, but Winter Nights is often celebrated on October 31st now, in concordance with the Wiccan Wheel of the Year.

Samhain’s god is, to my Wiccan mind, Herne the hunter, the Horned One, who is both slayer and slain. He is the god of the hunt, and not only the “Priest-king” of the herd, but the leader of the Wild Hunt, a powerful manifestation of all the spirits of the dead. Herne’s form—the stag-headed man—manifests the God’s animal aspect; but of course, He has a vegetable aspect as well. Because Samhain’s counterpart is Beltane, joyfully represented by the Green Man, a corresponding way Wiccans recognize the God at Samhain is as Jack-o’-Lantern.

Jack-o'-Lantern is best known to many non-Pagans in Washington Irving's story about the Headless Horseman. Certainly there are Wild Hunt associations with Samhain, and with Herne and Jack, but the popular culture's versions overemphasize the threatening aspects of these symbols. For too many people, Samhain—Halloween—is all about death and our fear of it; but Wiccans don't fear death, because our Goddess and God are not vengeful and we know death to be followed by rebirth. Ghost stories might be entertaining, but most Wiccans know ghosts as beloved ancestors rather than as fearsome devils.

Pumpkins, as you may know, are not native to the British Isles. There, Jacks were originally carved from hollowed out turnips. Some say they were carried to frighten away witches and ghosts, but I've heard that these poor-man's lanterns were carved as faces for companionship on long night's journeys—as well as to shed light on the road and make a traveling party merrier. I know there weren't Wiccans in the old days, but I do believe that the correspondence of "Jack of the Lantern" to Summer's "Green Man" was obvious to everyone. The Green Man's lit from outside, by the Sun; the Jack's "sun" is inside, as a candle or a glowing coal.

Jack's light is inside, and hidden by the uncarved back of the pumpkin, just as life's spark is hidden by Winter's apparent death. "Jack" is an Underworld aspect of the God, too; but remember, for the Celts from whose beliefs Wicca developed, the Underworld was not a dreadful place.

The Celtic Underworld—an aspect or realm of Wicca's Summerland—is the fabulous land beneath (inside) the fairy mounds. One of Jack's aspects is the King of the Underworld, the King of the Fairies. Powerful and dangerous He is, surely, and stern; sometimes ruthless—but not "evil" or cruel.

One of the more popular stories in the Wiccan repertoire is the Descent of the Goddess. (We shall leave analysis of it to other works, and say only that it is meaningful on many levels.) It's a story often told or enacted during an Initiation rite, and eminently suitable for Samhain. Here is one version (Inner City Books, 1989):

The Descent of the Goddess

The Goddess is Maiden and Mother and Crone;
Her children surround Her; She's never alone.
She lives in the moment, knows no grief or uproar,
'til Harvest rolls 'round and brings death to Her door.
Then Her bright colors fade and Her glitter grows dim,
for Her son lives no longer; She's mourning for Him.
He's fallen upon her body of Earth—
oh, how can it be deadly, which once gave Him birth?
She buries him gently, and follows Him down,
and She casts off in grief all Her robes, jewels, and crown.
There is no need of finery where now She sets foot,
down in the darkness of loam and of root.
Her heart is bound tightly, no peace stills Her mind.
She is cold and bereft; She is angry and blind.
She stumbles and staggers; ever weaker She grows,
but then hears a voice She is certain She knows!
"My Mother, my Lady, why have you come here?"
'Tis the voice of Her lover, Her son, in Her ear.
"Why have you left me?" She cries out in grief.
"Why must I bear you to be my joy's thief?"
He has come here before, but She does not recall,
and He touches Her hand, to explain again, all:
"It's age and fate, Lady. There's naught I can do,
save promise by rebirth I shall rejoin you.
You are ever my Lady, my Mother, my Dear,
and I swear that in death there is nothing to fear."
Now She remembers: the grave's but a womb
and a promise of rebirth brings light to the gloom.
There's peace and reunion to follow each death,
as a moment of stillness will follow each breath.
And the Goddess emerges each time She withdraws,
and the Wheel turns to freedom, and rolls without pause.

We think of Hecate at Samhain because Her connection with the Underworld, and with magic, is well known; Cerridwen's honored at this time of year because She is the Goddess of the Cauldron. It's told that "Queen" Cerridwen brewed, in that magical cauldron, a magical elixir that would benefit whoever who drank it with inspiration and knowledge. (Goddess stories are often told about Queens, very possibly because, historically, male storytellers preferred to think of female power as mundane rather than as divine. Wiccans know better, but "queen" is certainly a legitimate Goddess aspect.)

Queen Cerridwen, then, was preparing this brew for one of her children, but it had to be stirred constantly for a year and a day, and having other business as well, she assigned a servant to stir it. On the last day, three drops of the brew splashed upon this servant's fingers, and naturally he licked it off—and found himself suddenly possessed of all knowledge! This included the understanding that Cerridwen would be royally upset with him, for now the elixir was spoiled for anyone else. Luckily, the brew inspired him, too—he shifted his shape and became a hare, running from her as she became a greyhound.

Next he was a fish fleeing before the otter she became, and after that, he became a bird and she a pursuing hawk. Finally, when he shifted to the form of a kernel of corn, she transformed into a hen, and ate him. Resuming her human form, she shortly gave birth to him, and, as her son, he became known as Taliesin, and became the still-remembered, still-honored, greatest Bard of Wales.

Another animal sacred to Cerridwen (and a shape she often takes) is the pig. One description of Cerridwen says she has hair like a boar's bristles. The same description, from Gwdihw's *Cerridwen's Cauldron* (OriolCambria, 1997), says that while She is "stirring the cauldron with her right hand, a piglet sleeps tucked under her other arm." In the form of a pig, She is known as Hen Wen, the White Sow, and in that aspect gave birth to many magical creatures: grains of wheat, bees, a wolf cub, an eagle chick, and a kitten—Cath Palug, which grew up to be a fierce creature and has a few stories of its own.

Pigs don't have a very good reputation in our culture, but they were of great value to our Celtic ancestors. According to Jean Markale, "the domestication of wild pigs, otherwise known as boars,

which people were formerly restricted to hunting, changed the lives of the Celts.” Feasting upon pork bestowed immortality on the Tuatha de Danaan. Mananann Mac Lir, the god who hosted the Tuatha’s Feast of Immortality, kept magical pigs. Slaughtered in the evening for the Feast, they were reborn the next morning to survive the Winter and sustain the community.

Among mortals, the herds traditionally are brought down from their Summer pastures at Samhain. Those that are beyond breeding, or cannot be kept over the Winter, are slaughtered, and the rest are sheltered and fed from the same harvest that supports the people through the Winter months.

Though Her influence extends to sky and sea, Cerridwen’s roots are deep in the Earth—in the Underworld, where death and rebirth meet. (Pigs root in the earth, and from the dark and fertile soil, nose up truffles, valued all over the world as delicacies. Just so, Cerridwen brings the delight of life forth from the darkness of the Underworld.)

There is another Goddess, in stories called a queen, who has some associations with Samhain. She is Rhiannon of the Silver Wheel (the North Star, around which other stars seem to turn). This queen was Mananann’s wife—after she was widowed by Pwyll, who was for a year and a day the Lord of the Underworld. (This was the result of another cauldron-theft episode, one of many that make it quite clear that sovereignty depended on a connection to the Goddess.)

She rode a white mare that ran a steady pace, yet went so swiftly none could catch her. She is, by this evidence, a Moon Goddess. The most famous story about her is that, while she was married to Pwyll, she was accused of the death of her 3-day-old son, who was actually lost to kidnappers by the negligence of her servants. In penance, for a period of seven years, she had to carry on her back, up the hill to her husband’s castle, all their guests.

She was eventually relieved of this burden when a horse-keeper, whose favorite mare’s foals kept disappearing, discovered and killed the monster that had been taking them. He found a baby boy near the foal he’d saved, and as the boy grew, his resemblance to Pwyll and Rhiannon became apparent. When the child was 7, the horse-keeper returned him to his mother, who was exonerated by the reunion.

Rhiannon, who as Pwyll's queen of the Underworld, had birds whose songs restored the dead (and put the living to sleep), and who was married to Mananann Mac Lir, a sea god, also had influence in the realms of sea and sky. Yet, like Cerridwen, She is primarily an Earth Goddess, with intimate experience of death and loss, and also of re-birth.

A king's authority came from his kingdom, from the land itself—Herself, really—and kings needed to marry a goddess, for and by whom they could rule. The Dagda, whose name means “the good god,” is, in many stories, called the father of Dana (or Danu) and Brigit (or Bride). Yet Dana is the Tuatha's Mother Goddess, and Bride is a Triple Goddess with a mother aspect; it's likely that the Dagda was, in the unrecorded pre-Christian stories, a son and/or husband of one of them, and only became their father when followers of a father god told his story.

Indeed, one story is that the Dagda was Boann's consort. Boann is the goddess of the River Boyne, a sovereign goddess in Her own right, as we can guess from the name of Their son: Aengus mac Óg, the son of the virgin. (“Virgin,” in this sense, means “independent,” not sexually inexperienced.) The Dagda's more famous wife was the Morrigan (a Triple Goddess); and significantly, he married both of them on Samhain.

Marrying both Boann, a fertility goddess, and the Morrigan, a war goddess, Dagda is empowered in the two ways a good king serves his people: he ensures the fertility of the land, and he protects the kingdom from invasion. Yet the Dagda's stories also incorporate another theme even more appropriate to Samhain: the old king supplanted by the new—death and rebirth.

Wiccans more often call “Horned One,” “Cernunos,” or even “Herne,” the deer-antlered aspect of the God who is both hunter and hunted. (Some Wiccans believe that every god is an individual; most see all gods as aspect of the God. Indeed, this is a perspective that distinguishes Wicca from Asatru and Druidry. These perspectives are not, however, mutually exclusive. The forces of the universe, gravity, and electromagnetism, for example, function distinctly from one another, yet science still seeks to know the Unified Field Theory, in which all forces are one.)

The simplest version of the God's story is that, in His animal form—stag or boar, horned or tusked—He willingly dies to the hunter's arrow that the tribe may feed from His flesh and blood to survive the Winter. Through the selflessness of His act and by the magic of the Mother, He is reborn. Of course, he dies in the fruit and grain we annually harvest, and also in the fish and fowl that concede to our nets and knives. Like Mananann's pigs, and like the grain and game, in the sharing of the tribe's (the family's, the coven's) resources, all are protected and reborn in the Spring.

For many Wiccans, Mabon is the main harvest festival, and Samhain is the moment when the God's death is transformed again to life, when His grave in the Earth becomes the womb in which He awaits rebirth at Yule. Even as we may be culling the last of the crops and riding to the last of the year's hunts, the spark of life has been struck from death. This is what makes Samhain so special.

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ituals

We Wiccans use a lot of natural material in our work, to enhance our spells and decorate our altars. From Lammas through Samhain, our altars can illustrate the turning of the harvest from Autumn to Winter. At Lammas, we might decorate the altar with fruit, at Mabon with grain; yet while Samhain does mark the time of year that livestock is slaughtered, we don't decorate the Samhain altar with meat! We can use skulls, antlers, tusks...or miniature pumpkins and other small squashes, which are among the last vegetables to be harvested.

You can find colorful mini-gourds at most grocery stores; where do you get real skulls and antlers? If you spend any time in the woods, you may be fortunate enough to find them. We've found quite a few skulls and other bones in our 20-plus years of camping. You may even find the bones of squirrels, ground hogs, or other small wildlife in your own yard, if you or family members live in suburbia or rural areas. We occasionally find rabbit and bird bones in our yard, and maybe you do too. No matter where you live, you can find some leaves, feathers, cones, twigs, and other natural materials. When you're collecting bones and feathers, remember that federal, state, and some local regulations limit the material you can legally possess. The laws' concern is for endangered species, which might otherwise be killed for their parts! Just as it's a good idea to read the rules posted in state and federal campgrounds every time you stay there, it's wise to check with your local game and fish headquarters to find out what animal materials are protected—that's another way of accepting personal responsibility.

You can also borrow from the Mexican celebration of the Day of the Dead (a bit different than the American Catholic observation); California, Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas were once part of Mexico, and Latino culture's influence is growing. You may not be able to find the Day of the Dead figures—cheerful papier-mâché skeletons, anywhere from 3 inches to a foot (or more) tall, brightly dressed and enjoying everything from playing music and dancing to riding Harleys—where you live. But no matter where you are, you can bake skull-shaped cookies to share along with the more familiar pumpkin-shaped ones.

And you can use bright yellow and orange marigolds, a flower that decorates Mexican graves, on your table and on your altar.

You may find old hunting trophies, old wreaths, and various other natural materials at yard or garage sales, or at thrift shops. You can't know the attitude of the hunter who killed the deer whose antlers you may find for \$1 at a yard sale or a thrift shop, and you don't want to be responsible for someone else's "vibes" on your altar. We can bless baked goods while we're making them, but leather we've bought at a craft or thrift store, bones we've found in the woods, rocks we've picked up, or any other Natural finds or purchases need special attention. They need to be consecrated before they're used. Here's a way to do that.

Blessing and Consecration for Found Bones (or Other Natural Material)

For this rite, you need salt and water, burning incense, a candle, and a clean white cloth. The incense should be woody-smelling, and the candle should be red or orange (colors of life) or black (for reunion with the Mother in the tomb/womb), as you see fit; the cloth can be an altar cloth or a towel, if that's more appropriate. You can lay the cloth on your altar, on another table, or on the floor or ground. The space where you do this should be clear of clutter. You don't need to cast a formal Circle, but you should be facing North as you perform the rite.

Arrange the natural items to be blessed and consecrated on the cloth. Around them, set the salt at North, the water at West, the incense at East, and the candle at South. (Mind your sleeves and hair as you lean over the candle!) As you would before casting a Circle, prepare the salt and water; light the incense and the candle. Meditate on the items that are before you, letting the incense remind you of the items' habitats and thinking about the items as they were in life.

When you are centered and grounded, hold your hands, palms down, over the items before you. Say this (or something similar to it):

*You, bones of wild things once alive,
I set your spirit(s) free to thrive.
Begone all pain, begone all fright,
and all abuse be set aright.
Blessed be; hallowed remain,
to serve untainted: I so ordain.*

The Reverse Spiral Dance

This most famous Witches' dance, requiring a fairly large number of people for the proper effect, and appropriate at any Sabbat, usually spirals from the circumference of a circle to the center, and then back out again. Samhain is the one time in the year when we can, if we want to, do it in reverse.

There are two ways to reverse a Spiral Dance. One is to start out widdershins (counterclockwise) instead of deosil, and the other, which I'll describe, is a little more complicated. Some groups need more guidance than others; you may need to appoint a leader and caution everyone to let the leader lead! (We've begun spiral dances only to have a few neophytes get overeager and try to start the spiral too soon.) This reverse Spiral Dance does not have to be done as part of a circle, and if one or two organizers can guide the group so that it feels spontaneous to most people present, it's an even more powerful experience.

Instead of forming a wide circle, gather together in the center of your space. Instead of walking around the circle once before you begin, start by stepping in place for several seconds, so that everyone's "warmed up." Join hands. Start the music: If you're chanting, begin now; if you're using an audio tape or a CD, start it now; if you're lucky enough to have live music, cue the musicians or drummers now.

When everyone's moving to the beat, the leader will move out, making as tight a circle around the center group as possible. The spiral will widen slightly as the line winds around and proceeds toward the outside of the circle. Once the leader has gone around the circumference once (it's possible that not everyone will, and the leader will *not* stop), she or he will begin spiraling back toward the center. It's at this point that the line should begin to pass itself: some will still be snaking outwards as the first people move back toward the middle.

As the spiral settles back into the middle, you'll find yourself gathered in a tight knot once more. Even when you can't progress any further, keep stepping in place till everyone's spiraled back to the middle. (Remember not to crush each other—you're a group, not a mob!) Then finish your chant by getting a little softer on the last line, and end it with a "hmmmmmm"—which is even nicer if it includes some harmonies.

Singing for the Ancestors

When I say “ancestors,” I use the term loosely. Of course I mean our grandmothers and grandfathers, parents, aunts, and uncles who’ve passed on. But I also mean siblings and friends, and I don’t mean to exclude companion animals, either. I also mean anyone who’s had a great influence on your life: I might sing for Jackie Kennedy, for instance, or for a friend’s brother, for Carl Sagan, or for Doreen Valiente or Gerald Gardner. None of them are my blood ancestors, but they are people who were dear to me, who gave me *part* of my life. I think of them often, and I wish to honor them. You can sing for all such people in your life, too. And one other thing: When it comes to such rites, *everybody can sing*. No one should be excluded, or exclude themselves, from this ritual. No arguments: Whether you should quit your day job or not, you can sing for your ancestors.

All you will need, besides your voice and your memory of someone dear, is some water (or cider, or tea, and so forth) and some snacks for afterwards. Your singing may both energize and drain you, and even a small feast when you’re finished will help ground you again. If you’re singing with friends, a potluck makes it even more fun and meaningful, especially if you bring dishes made from old family recipes.

This is another “rite” that can be conducted within or without a formally cast Circle. It’s a little like atonal chanting, except that there is an effort to keep the harmonies pleasant. It’s best if everyone’s sitting or standing in a rough circle (rather than in rows). Someone begins by saying, “I sing in honor of _____,” naming an ancestor. She or he “aaahhs” or “ohhhhs” a tuneless or nearly-tuneless few notes, and then someone else joins in.

“I sing for _____,” the second person says quietly, and then “aaaahhs” or “ohhhhs” (or “oooohhs”) on the same note(s) or in harmony. One by one, everyone present joins in, naming first who they’re singing for, and then adding their voice to the sound. If a tune develops, fine; if none does, that’s alright too. The harmonies can go high or low; someone may wish to voice a beat, an “oom-pah” or a “dah-da, dah-da,” or a “hummm, hummm, hummm, hummm.”

Stay with this long enough to get through any initial awkwardness, and let your voices blend. Perhaps someone will introduce a well-known chant, or its tune. Maybe someone will be inspired to something like an aria. Maybe people will make other rhythms by

clapping their hands or drumming on their thighs or on the floor, or tapping their feet; maybe someone—maybe several people—will start dancing.

“Sing, feast, dance; make music and love,” the Goddess says in her *Charge*. I’m sure our ancestors second that, and will very much appreciate being remembered in this lovely, powerful way. You probably won’t need anyone directing the energy this rite raises. Most likely, it will fade on its own. If you feel “buzzy” or lightheaded when all the voices are quiet, sit on the floor and put your palms flat on the ground beside you, and let the energy drain into the earth. The ancestors will accept it as part of the offering. When everyone’s feeling relaxed again, share a bit of food and drink, and don’t forget to make up a plate for the ancestors! (To take that literally, see page 52.)

A word for solitaries: If you have a tape recorder, you can tape yourself ahead of time; then when you play the tape back, you can harmonize with yourself. If you slowly say the names of the people for whom you’re singing, you can speak during the pauses on the tape, too. You could add a guitar, if you play one, or beat a drum, too. But your voice alone really is just as pleasing to the ancestors as a full choir. (And yes, it’s okay if the dog sings too.)

A Samhain Rite of Transformation

A theme that unites Samhain’s aspects—harvest, reunion, and New Year’s—is transformation. This theme is so strongly at the core of this holiday that it has survived even into the secular celebration: for most non-Pagans, dressing up in costume is what defines Halloween. This ritual highlights Samhain’s power of transformation.

For this ritual, you need very little. If you are casting a formal Circle, put your altar at the edge of the Circle (at whichever Quarter you feel is appropriate: there are good reasons to place it at West, North, or East). If it’s possible, a grouping of candles in the center of the circle (on a small table so they can be moved later, if necessary) is very nice. Rather than Quarter candles, though, there should be very subtle marks on the floor, made with chalk, tape, or paper so that no one trips on them.

Whether or not you conduct this as a formal religious ritual, the Directions should be invoked. (This is something a family or a

non-Pagan group can do without over-emphasizing Wicca, should there be a need for discretion.) If you are working with young children, you may need to phrase things a bit differently—you'll know how to convey these ideas without frightening anyone. From the East, call in the "crisp breath of inspiration," so that everyone can feel the nip in the air as invigorating. From South, call in the "warmth of the hearth fire," so that everyone can appreciate the coziness of a family gathering. From West, call in "memories and promises," for it is good to appreciate our ancestors and their legacies. From the North, call in "the blanketing snows," so that, as the harsher views of Winter are obscured, we can all take time to rest and reflect.

A coven performing this ritual should cast the Circle, call the Quarters, and invoke the Goddess and God as they usually do, although the following invocations of deity may be substituted, with the singular pronouns a solitary would use changed to plural ones:

"Triple Goddess, You who are all and ever, I hail You! As Winter begins, I am warmed by the flames beneath Your cauldron. Your magics stir in my veins. I am cleansed as Your tears of grief become tears of joy. I am stronger for the transformation that is Your blessing at this season. Triple Goddess, in whom we are all and ever, I invoke You! Hail and welcome!"

"Horned One, You who die and are reborn, I hail You! As Winter begins, I am warmed by Your courage. Your faith stirs in my veins. I am cleansed as Your blood becomes bounty. I am stronger for the transformation that is Your blessing at this season. Horned One, You who show us how to die and be reborn, I invoke You! Hail and welcome!"

Should you prefer them, here are rhyming alternatives:

*Triple Goddess, ever, all
I welcome You into my hall.
The flames beneath Your cauldron warm my heart as well,
The magics that You're stirring the turning Wheel bespells.
The joy You spin from tears of grief,
Offers me the same relief;
They cleanse my soul and lift it
from a wintry bier,
Made strong by transformation,
I do invoke You here!*

*Horned One, back to life recalled,
I welcome You into my hall.
You have love and trust of dancing, though the tune but faint remains.
Your blood now turns to bounty and Your courage stirs my veins.
You befriend my soul and guide it
From a wintry bier,
Made strong by transformation,
I do invoke You here!*

A solitary declares, or the coven's Priestess and Priest share, the explanation of Samhain: This is the moment when the God's grave becomes a womb, when He is no longer dead, but gestating. Now we no longer mourn His harvest death, but anticipate His rebirth at Yule. The Goddess still holds Him in the Earth that is Her body, and though Her body is chilled with Winter, the spark that is His life promises restoration to Her as well. It's the transformation of death to life that we celebrate now, in many ways.

If you're a solitary, stand in the center of your space or Circle; a coven should form a circle now and stand facing outward. Each celebrant wraps his or her arms around their own shoulders, as if chilly. Close your eyes, and feel your separateness from everyone else. Draw your aura inward, and imagine that around and behind you there is nothing but empty space. Let yourself feel all alone. (This should take 1 or 2 minutes for a family or non-religious group; for a coven, whose members are used to meditation or visualization, it might take up to 3 minutes, but it shouldn't take any longer than that.)

After 1 to 3 minutes, the solitary practitioner, or the Priestess (or "group leader") begins chanting or humming, "Hoof and Horn" or "Horned One" are good chants or tunes to use. Your voice(s) should start very softly and get slowly louder. When the chant or tune has been repeated three times, everyone should turn around and join hands. A solitary can turn (deosil—sunwise) in place, and extend his or her arms widely, as if welcoming friends. In doing so, everyone is transformed from a lonesome individual to a beloved member of a group. No longer limited to your personal resources, you now have the strength and creativity of your whole family or

coven to draw upon. You're no longer alone, even if you're by yourself for this ritual; you're snug in the "womb" of family and friends, awaiting rebirth with the God at Yule.

A Witch alone declares this aloud; to a group, the Priestess or Priest explains it and encourages a group hug. Many covens end their rituals with a group hug following the "merry meet," and there's no reason not to do that when this Circle's closed. The group hug at the earlier point in this ritual, though, complements the aloneness you experienced earlier, and reinforces the idea that you've been transformed—from "one" to "more than one," from isolated to reconnected.

Group hugs are difficult for solitaries, but a victory dance—whether as graceful as if you hear a waltz, as energetic as if rock music's playing, or like the steps to a polka or square dance is up to you—is appropriate. If you have companion animals who have joined you in your rite, by all means include them in your hugging and/or dancing! The chanting or humming that began before you experienced this transformation can continue for several more repetitions now. (A coven or other big enough group may wish to segue into a circle or Spiral Dance, too.)

When the hugging and dancing has wound down, consecrate Cakes and Ale, and when those have been shared—with the Gods, if not with other people (animals and children enjoy most Cakes, but should pass if the Ale is alcoholic)—conclude the Circle as you normally do. If you haven't cast a formal Circle, remember or remind everyone that, wherever we are, whether we're by ourselves or with our families, we always have the powers of Nature with us, in all seasons.

Remember or remind everyone again about the windy breath of inspiration from the East, the warm flames of South's "candles in the window," the memory of all who love us in the West, and at the North, the strength of rest and reflection. (Little children may understand these blessings better in terms of the breath of a new morning, the warmth of cookies baking, the away-from-home memory of Mommy's kisses, and the support of a favorite storytelling chair. You'll know what modifications you need to make for the people with whom you share this ritual.)

If you don't have your own invocations, you might not have your own farewells, either. You can use these ways of saying farewell to the Goddess and God if you like. Again, groups will need to change the singular pronouns to plural.

“Triple Goddess, You who are all and ever, I hail You! As Winter begins, I am warmed by the flames beneath your cauldron. Your magics have stirred my blood. I have been cleansed as Your tears of grief turned to tears of joy. I am stronger for the blessing of transformation that You have inspired. Triple Goddess, in whom we are all and ever, I thank You for your presence here. Hail and farewell!”

“Horned One, You who die and are reborn, I hail You! As Winter begins, I am warmed by Your courage. Your faith has stirred my blood. I have been cleansed as Your blood turned to bounty. I am stronger for the blessing of transformation that You have shared with me. Horned One, You who show us how to die and be reborn, I thank You for Your presence here! Hail and farewell!”

Again, for those who prefer rhyming invocations and farewells:

*Triple Goddess, ever, all,
I bid You farewell from my hall.
My heart's warmed; my soul is lifted.
The Wheel has turned; the season's shifted.
Made strong by transformation, by light my faith increased,
From this Circle I do bid You hail, farewell, and peace.*

*Horned One, back to life recalled,
I bid You farewell from my hall.
My heart's warmed; my soul is lifted.
The Wheel has turned; the season's shifted.
Made strong by transformation, by light my faith increased,
From this Circle I do bid You hail, farewell, and peace.*

The Samhain Vow

In the old days and still for some, one of Winter's vital tasks was to mend Summer's tools—to mend the fishing nets, repair the hoe and shovel handles, and so on. Today, most of us don't have that sort of work to do, but we all have inner work of equal importance to do. Perhaps there's anger that needs healing so that a relationship can be restored. Perhaps there are prejudices that need education, so that we may do less harm in the worlds. Perhaps we need to confront some

fears so that we can be more truly free, as the Goddess charges us to be. The Samhain vow commits us to reconditioning our attitudes and repairing the damage that anger, prejudice, and fear do to our souls, so that our own strength can wax with the turning year's strength.

In calling upon our “ancestors’ relief,” we’re agreeing to find some strength in all our inherited legacies. Many of us (most, I hope!) have been lucky in knowing at least one person—a teacher, a friend, a favorite relative—who deliberately helped us find our own strengths. Yes, sometimes confusion or frustration dominates our memory of a relationship, but as Wiccans we know that we can learn something from even the worst of them.

The most abusive of family members have at least shown us the perils of the paths they chose. If someone betrayed you, they also made you aware of the need for compassion and empathy, and showed you the dangers of holding grudges or accepting judgments of worthlessness. Demand of your interpretation, of your own experience, that those before whom you were helpless inspire you to be encouraging—to yourself as well as to others. That’s the “relief” that all our ancestors—the kind or cruel, and those of spirit as well as of blood—can offer us, and it is within us all to accept it.

This vow will be both more effective and less intimidating (though no less serious) if you take it before a burning Jack-o’-Lantern that you have carved yourself. If you like, toast the pumpkin seeds with a bit of brown sugar to treat yourself after you’ve sworn the vow. If you’re making the vow part of your Circle work, save the pumpkin seeds for Cakes and Ale. (To keep the rhyme tight, use the “saw-win” pronunciation of “Samhain.”)

The Samhain Vow

*On the Wheel of the Year now does Winter begin;
the world is austere and we all turn within.*

*I vow there to face the shadows I find,
and work to unlace all their power to bind.*

*I vow to invoke my ancestors’ relief
and release in the smoke all my fear and my grief.*

*This task do I claim as I mark this Samhain,
and swear’t by the flame behind Jack’s cheery grin.*

ctivities

Our choice for Cakes and Ale at Samhain has long been gingerbread and Guinness. For any children present, there's always juice or water; some adults choose not to drink alcohol, and they have the option of using their portions as libation, or simply saluting the Gods with the cup before passing it on. Guinness you have to buy. Gingerbread you can make.

Gingerbread

Canyondancer rarely uses boxed mixes for baked goods (except for the fat-free brownies that I love). Although we do follow a low-fat, low-cholesterol diet most of the time, we suspend it at Sabbats, so the gingerbread's made with "real" ingredients. Canyondancer has modified a recipe from *Joy of Cooking* (Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1973) recipe; here's how he makes our Samhain Gingerbread:

Sprays a 9 × 9-inch pan with fat-free cooking spray, and preheats the oven to 350 degrees. Beat together 1/2 cup of sugar and one egg. Into a separate bowl, sift 2 1/2 cups of flour (all-purpose, sifted), 1 1/2 teaspoons of soda, one teaspoon of cinnamon and—don't forget this—one teaspoon of ginger, and 1/2 teaspoon of salt. In a third bowl, combine 1/2 cup of molasses, 1/2 cup of honey, and one cup of hot water. Mix all this together, pour it into the pan, and bake it for about an hour.

It fills our kitchen with one of the most wonderful Winter scents there are. He always has to make a couple of extra batches, too: One's a prize for the adult winner of our Samhain pumpkin-carving contest, and we like to freeze one and bring it out again at Yule. In fact, one year, a loaf of his Samhain Gingerbread was a very well-received Yule gift!

(Of course, you can make gingerbread muffins, too, with the same mixture. Most stores sell Halloween muffin or cupcake papers, to make them even more fun to hand out.)

Building a Community Altar

One Samhain activity we enjoy with our camping companions (Pagan or Pagan-friendly) is making a community altar. We're at Samhainville (what we call our camp-out) for three or four days, and we're never really finished with the altar. In our group campsite, we reserve one of the big cement tables for the altar, and everyone contributes. You can do the same thing if you camp—but you can do it at home, too, in the yard, on the patio, or, if need be, inside.

We begin by covering the table with a colorful cloth—ours happens to be an old “Native American bedspread” with the tree of life on it, torn and stained from many years' use—holey, but still *holy*. To hold down the corners, we use the pumpkins we've brought to carve later. In the center, we set a heavy candle holder—recently, it's been one in the shape of a stag's head, and most years, we face it toward our camp (rather than toward the road through the campground). Most years, we bring a few strands of fall garland and trail them across the table, too.



Hearth's Gate Priestess Chandra Nelson and her daughter Ivy add to a community Samhain altar.

After that, the altar's decorated with stones, twigs, acorns, pretty dried leaves, tea lights, pine cones, bolls, late flowers, interestingly shaped roots, and whatever else we find in the woods. Once in a while, other campers see what we're doing, like the idea, and add something themselves!

If you can prepare this altar shortly after Mabon, you can consider it a sort of "advent altar." Instead of opening squares on a calendar over the days leading up to Christmas, you can add an item to the altar every day until Samhain.

When we build our altar in the woods, we usually have a few brochures about our religion on hand to give anyone who shows serious interest, but most people are satisfied with the explanation that Wicca is a Nature-based religion, and we're celebrating Halloween as the beginning of Winter, making an altar to our faith that Spring will follow.

Your own altar might be decorated with twigs and stones you find in your yard, dried flowers, cones from your own trees or from nearby parks; perhaps you've got shells or driftwood from the beach or natural mementos from Summer vacation spots. If you have children, maybe you've got bits of egg shell or snake skin they've collected, or stones they've found.

Give some thought to the meaning of the items you bring: A round stone or a shell might represent the Goddess, while a forked stick or a longish bit of bark might represent the God. The 2- or 3-inch brooms you can buy at craft stores represent them together! It's nice to make some Samhain decorations with materials from the craft store, so you can bring them out year after year. But most decorations should be this year's, found outside, even if it's harder to get into the woods than it is to get into the mall.

Take some time to "walk with Nature" and you'll find plenty to decorate an altar. Really, that's one of the points to making it—the opportunity it gives you to slow down and pay attention to the Natural world. These altars are decorated with the gifts of nature, with small, ordinary-seeming objects that are actually promises that the Wheel is turning.



Flowers, leaves, seed-pods, pine cones, and rocks collected in your yard make fine decorations and offerings on your advent altar.

This sort of community altar isn't meant to be one of ritual—as it grows, there's little room left for the cup or salt and water bowls, and it isn't very practical to move it to the center of a Circle! We like our Samhain Circle altars to be relatively conventional, yet not without some seasonal touches; the community or advent altar is free-form.

An Offering Plate for the Ancestors

At Samhain, we invite our ancestors to share our feast with us and, naturally, we want the table to look nice for them. Just as we put out the “good china” when we invite the living to reunion dinners, we like to make a special place at the altar and our feast tables even for those who are attending only in spirit.

The simplest and least expensive way of making a special plate to hold the ancestors' portion is, of course, with paper plates and crayons. One advantage is that little children can do this quite easily, and it's artistically nonthreatening even for adults! It's certainly

possible to use drawn-upon colored plates at more than one ritual, too. Yet for those who want something that looks and feels a little more permanent, and perhaps even stores a little more of our own energy, following is another idea for a special offering plate to honor your ancestors and the other spirits with whom you share your Samhain.

This takes some advance preparation, and may not be feasible for every group; on the other hand, it is suitable for any group of people, coven, or family (Pagan or not), and a solitary can enjoy it as well. The first thing you need to do is find a ceramic shop in your area that sells greenware and glazes. (Greenware is dry but unfired clay.)

Select a plate or bowl for everyone who's participating. (If you're ambitious and you can afford it, select a whole place setting: plate, bowl, cup, and saucer!) Also select two or three glazes in colors you like. A coven or other group can share the glazes, and of course, everyone will want a say about what colors to choose. Because it's Samhain, orange and black are two good colors with which to start, and you might like to add purple and red, too. (Be warned that red glazes can be tricky to work with.)

If other colors appeal to you, get those—serve the ancestors your own artistic vision as well as a portion of Cakes and Ale! The employees at the store can help you get glazes that will work with the greenware you've chosen; just be sure they're willing to fire the plates for you, too.

Greenware *does* need to be fired once before you glaze it, and it needs to be cleaned up a little before that first firing. As you look at the pieces on the shelves in the shop, you'll notice some tabs left over from taking the piece out of the mold, and probably some other imperfections. You can take care of these yourself, carefully cutting off the extra bits, and sanding the pieces, or the people at the shop will do it for you.

"My" ceramics lady doubles the cost of the greenware for this service—a piece that costs \$1.25 to buy costs another \$1.25 for her to clean it up for me, and I find that reasonable. Keep in mind one of the first cautions I heard after I found Wicca: Never haggle over the price of a tool. Because the offering plate this greenware will

become is a tool, I wouldn't dream of complaining about the price, and if I thought it was too high, I'd clean the piece myself.

Something else you need to remember is that some glazes are not food-safe, and so the plates you decorate with them can *only* be for the ancestors. They can't hold the Cakes for your ritual, and you can't let the dog or the cat lick them when you're done. Most glazes indicate right on the label whether they're toxic or not. Some of mine say, "SAFE FOR FOOD CONTAINERS," or "MAY BE HARMFUL IF SWALLOWED, DO NOT USE FOR FOOD CONTAINERS." Read those labels carefully, and check with the crafters in the shop if you have any questions.

You don't need special brushes for this project; the inexpensive ones you can get at any craft store will do just fine. Depending on the design you choose to paint on your dish, you might also want a sponge, a pencil with an eraser on its tip, decorative stamps, stencils, or other drawing supplies. You may even want something to carve some designs into the greenware you've selected.

This can be a sacred activity, done as magic in a fully cast Circle, or it can be an afternoon's project, done with friends for fun. Give some thought to your design ideas. If you're making a plate to honor your own ancestors, then a design resembling a family crest might be appropriate. (Don't have one? Make one up!) If you're making an offering plate for the Elements, then a design to represent each one is what you want. Harvest designs are right, too. Maybe you're making an all-purpose plate, and you'll have Elemental designs on the rim and ancestral images in the center. It's up to you! (By the way, this is one of those projects for which everyone is enough of an artist.)

Something that makes this project especially interesting is that most glazes, when put on clay, are not the color they'll be when they're fired. This means that you have to read the labels and *trust* the labels. You won't be able to tell how the glaze colors are mixing, either, when you combine them on a palette or layer them on your piece. No matter how carefully you plan, there's always a certain element of surprise in a project such as this one.



Clockwise from upper left, these offering plates were made by Red Wolfhound, Canyondancer, Shepixi, and O’Gaea, in shades of yellow, purple, black and red on a white background.

Of course, it will take some time to complete this project. It may not take you long to paint your greenware, but when it’s dry, someone will need to take it back to the ceramic shop and leave it there until it can be fired, and then go and pick it up again. There’s some cost involved, too, but small or simple greenware is not usually very expensive, and firing fees are usually very reasonable. When you have your plates back—don’t forget to sign your creation on the back!—you’ll have another piece of altar gear that is all the more sacred because you designed and made it yourself.

Consecrating the Plate

Before you use this plate on your altar, you need to consecrate it, even if you made it in a Circle. It’s not that there’s anything “bad” or “profane” about the plate that needs to be gotten rid of or cleansed, it’s just that anything you’re going to use as a sacred tool should, out of respect, be properly prepared before you use it. (It’s *kind of* like the need to season an iron skillet or pot before you cook food in it.) Consecrations are usually performed as part of a Circle, and can certainly be done in a Circle cast especially for the occasion, rather than at a Sabbat or Esbat.

When the Circle's been cast, the Quarters called, and the Goddess and God invoked, bring the offering plate from the altar to the center of the Circle. From there, introduce the object to each Quarter in turn. (If your altar is at the center, then move to each edge of the altar as you face each Direction.)

“Hail, East! By breeze and gale, I bid you recognize this plate, and know that it is sacred to me. Witness that I consecrate it now and dedicate it to the service of the Gods and the Ancestors.”

“Hail, South! By spark and blaze, I bid you recognize this plate, and know that it is sacred to me. Witness that I consecrate it now and dedicate it to the service of the Gods and the Ancestors.”

“Hail, West! By ripple and tide, I bid you recognize this plate, and know that it is sacred to me. Witness that I consecrate it now and dedicate it to the service of the Gods and the Ancestors.”

“Hail, North! By mote and mountain, I bid you recognize this plate, and know that it is sacred to me. Witness that I consecrate it now and dedicate it to the service of the Gods and the Ancestors.”

Now set it on the floor or ground at the center of your Circle, and say:

“Goddess of Earth, Great Mother, know this plate, and know that it is sacred to me. Witness that I consecrate it in Your name, and to Your service and the ancestors’.”

Hold it above your head and say,

“Horned One, Herne, You who die and are reborn, know this plate, and know that it is sacred to me. Witness that I consecrate it in Your name, and to Your service and the Ancestors’.”

Now return to the altar (or stand before it facing North or East, as you prefer) and sprinkle a bit of salt on the plate. Next, pass it through the incense smoke. Then either pass it through a candle flame or drip a bit of candle wax on it, whichever is most meaningful to you and least awkward at your altar. Then sprinkle the plate with water, and finally, with salt again.

Set the plate in the center of your altar and say:

“Plate, you are a creature of Earth, and I charge you with all the Elements to be ever faithful to the Goddess, from whose body you are made. I create you for the Ancestors, and charge you to work no ill, and to bless the work you do with the blessings and intentions that make you holy.”

Now you can use the plate; in fact, you should. Consecrate Cakes and Ale in your usual way (or as suggested in Appendix A), and use the plate to make an offering of a portion of the feast. This immediate use of the tool seals its purpose in its aura.

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ymbols

“Sabbat symbols” can mean one of (at least) two things: A symbol can be an object closely associated with a Sabbat, or it can be a half-drawn, half-written sign, a sort of short-hand notation, for a concept associated with a Sabbat. For example, a cauldron is a symbol of Samhain because anyone who sees a cauldron is very likely to think of Halloween; and we might also think of ✎ as a symbol of Samhain, representing the spark of life that transforms the God who died in the Harvest to the God who waits for rebirth.

We’ll consider both sorts of symbols here, beginning with objects that traditionally symbolize Samhain.

The Cauldron

The cauldron that is a symbol not only of Wicca, but of Samhain, is Cerridwen’s cauldron. Sometimes it’s called the Cauldron of Annwn, the Underworld, and said to belong to Arawn, its king. But we know that kings do not rule except with the authority of their queens, who represent the Land itself (the Goddess herself), and that the great possessions of kings are usually gifts from and/or symbols of the Goddess; so it is with the Cauldron of Cerridwen. (It’s the same cauldron that Arthur stole from Arawn as proof of his own kingship; but that’s another story.)

Cerridwen’s cauldron is an amazing piece of work, and has various magical qualities. It will provide, endlessly, both food and drink, but it will not feed any who are false-hearted; and the dead are restored to life in it. As Samhain is the time of death and rebirth, the cauldron is almost always part of Samhain “decoration.” But the cauldron has another significant power, and the story that reveals it shows us the Goddess’s power over death and rebirth, too.

The cauldron, so much a symbol of Samhain, appears again when we look at the Dagda—whose name literally means “the good god.” As the Dagda was, as the Farrars put it, “the unquestionable king...of the Tuatha dé Danaan,” his cauldron was one of the Four Treasures of the Tuatha. Like the modern Wiccan God, the Dagda led people to and through the Underworld when they died, and in His cauldron, restored them to life. The cauldron is a symbol of the Goddess’s womb, so again, He led His people back to life through Her.

None of the chants we so often sing at Samhain mention the Dagda, but they do mention the “Horned One,” whose Latin name is Cernunos, calling Him also “lover” and “son,” and “leaper in the corn.” The Dagda and Cernunos share, as one of their symbols, the snake—long and in many cultures representing healing and continued rebirth. “Deep in the Mother,” the chant bids the God, “die and be reborn.” It’s through the Mother’s generative power, symbolized by the cauldron that represents the tomb-become-womb, that we’re reborn; it is by the God’s annual example of death and rebirth that we know and trust that this will happen.

Jack-o’-Lanterns

We’ve already talked about the significance of the Jack-o’-Lantern, but let’s review, briefly, here. Jack-o’-Lanterns represent the foliate or vegetative aspect of the God, as counterparts to May’s Jacks-in-the-Green or Green Men. We light our Jack-o’-Lanterns as reverent images of our God, as expressions of joy in our knowledge that “all that falls shall be reborn,” even if 500 years ago people lit them to scare away ghosts and goblins. The candle we set in our hollowed-out pumpkins represents the Sun and our confidence that, though it’s waning at Samhain, it will “return” after Yule; and it represents the spark of life we know is kept alive deep in the grave, which at Samhain becomes a womb again. Nowadays, with pumpkin carvings going well beyond faces—at least, when the campers we know carve them, the designs are wide-ranging—Jacks symbolize the hopes and dreams we know will survive Winter’s apparent death.

Masks

Although masks appear at other times, they're mostly associated with Halloween, and thus with Samhain. (As I write, it's still baseball season, and as the TV camera pans the crowds cheering on the Arizona Diamondbacks, we see the occasional fan wearing a mask that is meant to look like one of the players, and there are a whole group of superheroes who wear masks no matter what time of year it is.)

Masks are disguises, meant to hide one's true "guise," or appearance. There are masks that cover only the area around our eyes, and they don't really do much to conceal our identities. There are some masks that cover our foreheads and noses, and those can be a little more effective. And of course, there are full-face masks, some painted on, some fastened with an elastic band and some slipped over our heads, to makes us look like specific characters or generic stereotypes.

Some criminals do use such masks to make themselves harder to identify, but usually, we don't intend serious deceit when we put on masks like these. Generally, they're used socially, for a few related reasons. One is to cue our friends that we're in a make-believe situation, and that our identity is to be determined by something other than our familiar features—a costume we're wearing, behavior we're displaying, an accent we're affecting. Another purpose masks serve is to let us function as someone or something else, for the benefit of a ritual. Among the Native tribes of the Southwest, for instance, masks transform the wearers into a vessel for the spirit of individual Kachinas; and in Wiccan rituals, we may wear masks and other costume elements to take the role of an aspect of the Goddess or the God. A third and related function of mask-wearing is for the wearer to become, in his or her own perception, the character or aspect of deity represented by the mask.

Here's an example to make that distinction more clear: One of the presentations I've given to non-Pagan groups who needed to understand the difference between Inquisition witches and real Witches involves putting on an old black choir robe and a green-faced witch mask. With or without a broomstick, I run through the group, cackling away, until everyone's got the whole stereotype "gestalt" firmly in mind. Then I stop, unzip the choir robe and let it fall to the floor,

and toss the mask down beside it, shaking my hair out and smoothing my own clothes. “There’s the stereotype,” I say, pointing to the costume on the floor, “and *I’m* what a real Witch looks like.” When I wear that witch-mask, I’m doing it for my audience’s benefit; I don’t even begin to experience life from that stereotype’s perspective.

When, however, in private or in a ritual, I don a feathered head-dress or a crone’s veil, I am serving those around me and I am letting the mask’s perspective “possess” me. Masked, I serve as a visual focus for those who need a “real” experience of a particular entity or aspect of deity, and I allow myself to temporarily become that entity or aspect. It’s possession, it’s trance, it’s transformation, it’s shapeshifting. It’s an expansion of my own experience, a widening of my own perspective. You can even call it Shamanistic, especially if what I learn from that “becoming” helps me to serve my community better.

Masks and the degrees of transformation they effect symbolize Samhain because at Samhain we celebrate and explore transformation. Religiously, we acknowledge the transformation of death to life. Psycho-emotionally, masks help us explore our own potential transformations. They allow us to see ourselves, and thus the world, from different perspectives; they allow others to see us, and thus the world, differently, too. At Samhain, the world is different: death has become life, and our use of masks makes that magic visible.

Skeletons

Our culture associates a lot of ideas with skeletons. Being a woman “of a certain age,” as they say, one of the first associations that comes to my mind is...the band, the Grateful Dead! None of us can be sure whether our own beloved dead are “grateful” to us for remembering them, but I know that I’m grateful for the many blessings I have from those who have “gone before,” as the *Charge* puts it, and I expect that you’re grateful for most, if not all, of your legacy, too.

When I was a young child, I overheard my mother and her mother talking about “skeletons in the closet,” and of course I took it literally.

The idea terrified me. Skeletons seemed somehow malevolent—after all, the skull and crossbones graces pirate flags and bottles of poison! Now, living as close to Mexico as I do, new images have replaced those from my childhood. Skeletons here in the Southwest are really quite cheerful!

In Tucson, Arizona, Mexican-Americans celebrate the Day of the Dead on November 1st. They make a picnic of it, taking most of the day to visit the family's graves, clipping the grass, replacing the flowers, sharing sandwiches, and catching up on family gossip. For dessert, they're likely to be eating skull-cookies, specially baked at this time of year, and frosted with sugar. It's all about how those who've died are still important to us, still influential in our lives, about smiling at their memories, and trusting that they still love us, too, and care what happens, and are watching over us.

In gift shops, you see delightful figures, ranging in size from 2 or 3 inches to 1 1/2 feet tall—papier-mâché skeletons, dressed for dancing or gardening or riding Harleys. There are musicians blowing mean saxes, there are brides and grooms, there are frumpy housewives, all of them brightly-dressed skeletons with smiles on their faces. Wicca's Celtic heritage tends toward seeing the dead as more fleshed out—restored from the Cauldron whole, if speechless—but the Day of the Dead figurines sure do capture a similar spirit (no pun intended).

Symbolically, skeletons remind us that we are of the Earth: Bones are associated with that Element, and sometimes buried within, and leach minerals back to the earth to nourish future growth. Our bones are the structure of our bodies, just as our ancestors are the source and structure of our personal histories and our genetic inheritance as well as anything more material we're left.

Knowing this makes me much more comfortable with the idea of skeletons in the closet. My mom and my grandmother may have meant "scandals" or family secrets that shouldn't be dug up, but from my Wiccan perspective, having a skeleton in the closet can be a good thing. It can mean having the strength of generations to support us, right in the center of our homes, ready to give us extra blessings and protections whenever we grab our coats to go out.

The Spiderweb

The spider web is a popular special effect in horror movies, where it represents the unseen, the unknown. The spiderwebs hanging in dark and unexplored passages brush against us, felt but not substantial, like ghosts or nightmares that frighten us without ever revealing themselves. Really big spiderwebs can entrap us and keep us struggling against some danger yet to come. Spiders themselves are often shown as cruel and poisonous creatures with terrifying fangs and evil intentions.

In fact, spiders are, mostly, wonderful creatures: In our gardens, they eat insects that might otherwise destroy our plants, and left alone in the corners of our homes, they'll eat those pesky flies, too. Yes, some are poisonous, but they are also clever enough to know that humans are too big to eat, and they don't, as a rule, attack unless they feel threatened. The silk of their webs is impressively strong and even has some medicinal uses, and anyone who takes nature walks (or pictures for a hobby) knows how beautiful a spider's web can be, sparkling in the sunlight or diamond-studded with dew.

For Wiccans, the symbolism incorporates some of the fright and some of the beauty. First and foremost, the web symbolizes our interconnections, sometimes straightforward and symmetrical, sometimes less ordered. Part of Wicca's Anglo-Saxon heritage is the "Web of Wyrd," which can be represented by a spider's web.

Sometimes the web of life is studded with dew-like gems, sometimes with forgotten intentions like half-decayed flies. The strands are very sensitive, though, and when we're attuned to the vibes, we can be aware of things that happen far away, just as the spider knows when a zephyr or a meal has touched a strand on the other side of her web.

Sometimes it's frightening to realize how close we all are to each other, how much what's happening on the other side of the world—this world—really does matter in our lives. Sometimes that understanding is overwhelming and we just want to brush it aside, like the startled protagonist in a movie who screams and flails at the spiderweb she or he has blundered into. But those dark passages we sometimes have to explore usually lead us to something we need—the

next clue, perhaps, or the treasure we've been seeking. Our lives are poorer for avoiding the darkneses, and the spiderwebs remind us that life is everywhere, and that other lives are significant to ours.

The Stereotypical Witch

Many years ago I handed out flyers about Wicca at craft stores, campaigning as many of us did to get rid of green-faced witch masks and other offensive Halloween decorations. Now, in fact, you don't see the green-faced masks much anymore, and the green-faced cardboard witches aren't on many school bulletin boards, either. (Okay, that's partly due to the efforts of right-wing Christians, but I think it's alright to appreciate it when their prejudice sometimes works in our favor.) But there are still bent, warty "wicked" witches a plenty come Halloween—and what are we to think of them?

We've talked a little about the role of the Hag, or the Crone, in our lore, and I think we can use the stereotypical witch to remind ourselves that the Crone is sacred. We can use her to remind ourselves that with age comes wisdom as well as a widow's hump—and perhaps we can use that image to remind ourselves that people live longer now than in previous generations, and if we don't want to be stereotypically hunched over, we need to take good care of ourselves now!

In the Middle Ages, our "lore days," an old woman was a phenomenon. Back then, life expectancy was somewhere in the 40s, and a woman who lived much beyond child-bearing age was unusual. Of course, men also died sooner, and women could be widowed more than once before they reached their 50s—and if they lived longer than that, people were impressed. So the old woman, the crone, was a survivor, and, in her years had learned much, so she was wise as well. For us, at least, the hag, the crone, the stereotypical witch, can symbolize strength and determination and wisdom.

Now, what about all this broomstick stuff and those rumors about flying? You hear that there were ointments going around, ostensibly to keep your skin from freezing when you met for those midnight Sabbats in the woods. That's lore: The only evidence that anything like the gatherings depicted in woodcuts and other old illustrations ever happened is in Inquisition testimony. That wasn't people

telling the truth; that was people saying what the guys with the hot pokers wanted to hear. The medieval church made up that old Witchcraft.

There were, however, fertility rites that involved jumping through fields to give the crops an idea how high they were supposed to grow—that's sympathetic magic, and we know it was done through the Middle Ages and beyond because there are records of Priests being reprimanded for participating in such rites. The broom is a symbol of, to put it delicately, coitus—the stick representing the phallus, and the besom (the brushy part), representing female genitalia—which makes the broom a fertility symbol. Riding a broomstick through a field could only encourage the fertility of the seed in the earth. Done at night—for during the day, there was work to be done—it could look like “flying.” If there's anything at the bottom of Inquisition testimony about witches flying on broomsticks, that's it.

Some of Samhain's symbols—the cauldron, spiderwebs, and even stereotypical witches—are symbols of the Craft as a whole. That's really quite appropriate, because Samhain itself seems to symbolize Wicca to most non-Pagans. Indeed, I must mention one other, very modern, symbol of Samhain: the media piece! Whether it's an article in the local paper, an interview on the radio, or a segment on the local or national TV news, every year there's something in the media about Samhain. In some regions, it's likely to be sensational, but in some areas the reports are genuinely informative. Those of us who've been in the Craft for several years now do tend to roll our eyes about the fact that we're still only newsworthy around Halloween, even though our religion is interesting year-round, but we do appreciate the improvements we've seen in the media's coverage.



Yule



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An astronomical event, the Winter Solstice is the time when the Sun seems to be, in relation to the Earth, as far South on the horizon (in the Northern hemisphere) as it will ever get. It's the shortest day, and the longest night. Although the moment of Solstice is impossible to notice "with the naked eye," humans have, for thousands of years, been able to calculate it, and to calculate from it.

"The diligent observer," William H. Calvin says, in *How the Shaman Stole the Moon* (Bantam Books, 1992), "experiences great difficulty at the extreme positions [of the artificial horizon along which the points of sunrise are noted] because the position of sunrise changes so slowly from day to day. If you want to celebrate the turnaround, and your method can't spot the reversal until a few days after it actually starts, then your winter solstice celebration will occur—Christmas Day!"

In Ireland, the neolithic tomb we call Newgrange was constructed in alignment to the path of the Sun to allow a shaft of light to enter the main chamber for several minutes on the Solstice Day. In Northern Arizona, a carved spiral augments a natural stone formation where another "sun dagger" shines through and under an outcropping to mark the Solstice and other solar events. From the Solstice, the hours of sunlight we notice in a day begin to lengthen: Using natural metaphor, we say that the Sun is reborn. (We know that's a metaphor; similarly, we refer to the Sun's movement around the Earth even though we know, now, that it's the Earth that revolves around the Sun.)

We can, and many books do, trace the origins of Winter Solstice festivities back to Egyptian times, through Mesopotamia, and beyond the Middle East. However, sites similar to Newgrange, in Wicca's home territory, were built around 3300 B.C.E., only a little later than the pyramids. Smaller tombs were built much earlier, but on similar alignments, so it's clear that Wicca's native ancestral cultures understood the Solstices as significant quite early on.

That Christmas was on the 25th of December to take advantage of virtually universal celebrations of the Winter's Solstice was one of my first religious understandings. Different climates may give Yule different weather in different places—alas, it pretty much never snows for Yule in Tucson, and decades ago, my parents fled a snowy Portland, Oregon to spend the time between Christmas and New Year's in Hawaii—but every clime and hemisphere on Earth does respond to the shortest day and longest night.

As Wiccans celebrate the rebirth of the Sun—the God’s solar aspect—at Yule, let’s take a quick look at the nature of God as Wicca understands him. The concept of Mother Earth and Father Sun is an old one, and one upon which some Wiccans rely, but to my mind, it’s not a particularly Wiccan pairing. Our liturgical material calls Him “Horned One, Lover, Son,” and that is how I know Him. Yes, part of the God’s role is to facilitate the Great Mother’s fertility, but it’s as Her lover, and as Her son, and not “our Father” that Wiccans honor the God. Plants do regenerate from their own seeds, and certainly rutting beasts father their own fawns and cubs, but what is significant about the God in our relationship with Him is that He dies and is reborn.

The Sun that is reborn at Yule is reborn of Mother Earth, the Great Mother. *She* is the parent in Wiccan cosmology; He is the child and the partner. Following the lead of what is probably the best-known Wiccan chant—“We all come from the Goddess”—my Tradition does not recognize a specific Father God. It does, however, recognize, enjoy, hold holy, and appreciate the human capacity for both biological and socioemotional fatherhood.

So—at Yule, He is Her son, reborn in His solar aspect. Religiously, we allow the physical illusion of the Sun’s rising from the Earth to be meaningful, and say that He is reborn of Mother Earth at Yule. (We acknowledge that birth, growth, death, and rebirth is indeed a cycle when we celebrate the rebirth of His animal aspect at Imbolc, and His vegetable aspect at Ostara.)



ore

The first Yule god that comes to most minds is Santa Claus, the “jolly old elf” of Clement Moore’s famous poem. That Santa is an aspect of Pagan deity is widely accepted. Perhaps he derives from Odin, perhaps from the Dagda or other Celtic gods known as gift-givers; Janet and Stewart Farrar said, in *The Witches Bible Compleat (Magickal Childe, 1984)*, that “The Holly King is the true origin of Santa Claus, rather than the fourth-century bishop of Myra....”

Indeed, it’s the Oak King and the Holly King, ruling at Yule and Litha, who are the gods of Wicca’s Solstices, mid-Summer and mid-Winter. (American calendars say that “Winter begins” on the Winter Solstice. Wicca’s Wheel of the Year calls it mid-Winter.) The Oak King and the Holly King battle twice in every year, and at Yule, the Oak King wins.

They are also known as the light and dark twins—and again, we need to remember that light and dark don’t represent “good” and “evil,” but light and dark, each of which has its own power and purpose, both of which are necessary to the proper progression of the days, months, and years. And though the battles we reenact in our Circles seem to end with the death of one king at the other’s sword-thrust, the truth is that, just as our covens’ men don’t really die, neither does the “slain” king. He gives over rulership of the year to his brother, his own other self, for the needs and tasks of each half of the year are different.

In some mummer’s plays, still dramatized in England, once St. George (the Oak King) has skewered the Turkish Knight (the Holly King), a character called “the Doctor” comes out to restore the dead Knight. This form of the play uses Crusades metaphors—but these represent archetypes that Wicca represents in older characters. In some Wiccan rituals, the Goddess, usually in her Maiden aspect, takes the slain king away to restore him in time to win the

battle at the next Solstice. The famous story of Gawain and the Green Knight is an Arthurian version of the Oak and Holly King's battle: Gawain is Oak, and the Green Knight is Holly, and they alternately behead one another, promising and trusting that the cycle of the seasons will continue.

By the way, the word "knight" is Anglo-Saxon, and in that language (spoken from about 500 C.E. through about 1200 C.E.) is pronounced "kuh-nig-cht." Monty Python had it very nearly right!

Gawain and the Green Knight

The story goes something like this: The custom at Arthur's Court is that no feast is begun until there has been an adventure, and on this occasion, they're waiting for some sign that they may begin the Yule feast. Suddenly, into the great hall comes an imposing knight, his great horse all draped in green, with a red bridle, and the knight's armor shining with green trim and feathers. Without a word, the knight rides to the king's dais, sidles up to the table, and in a gesture that only pretends to be a salute, upsets the queen's wine into her lap.

Needless to say, all the chivalrous knights are outraged at this insult, and leap to their feet (no doubt upsetting more goblets in the process). Arthur quiets them, and admirably holding his temper (for he recognizes this as the adventure they were awaiting), asks the strange knight what his business is with the court.

"Sire," says the knight, "I have offended by spoiling the queen's wine, and in payment for the insult I will let one of your knights behead me..." and as you may imagine, there are surprised murmurs among the knights. "But," the Green Knight continues, "I offer this only on the condition that six months hence, this same knight shall come to my dwelling, and allow me to behead him in turn." And now, as you can also imagine, the murmurings became disapproving. None of the knights wants to dishonor himself by appearing unwilling to defend the queen against the Green Knight's rudeness. All of them are strong enough to behead the stranger, but then again, none of them are eager to put his own head on the block.

But Gawain, one of the youngest and most energetic of the knights, draws his sword and without asking Arthur (or Guinevere) cries, "The bargain is made! I will behead you now, Sir, and meet with you again in your court six months hence." And so it happens—a chopping block

is brought to the hall, the Green Knight dismounts his steed and lays his head on the block, and right through his armor, Gawain swings his sword and in a single blow beheads the fellow.

You won't have much trouble imagining the company's surprise when the Green Knight gets back to his feet, collects his head from the corner where it has rolled, remounts his steed, and with a wave meant to reaffirm the bargain, rides away. Arthur, in his experience used to such magical events, pauses for a few moments to let what has happened sink in, and then proclaimed it time to eat. "We have had our adventure," he declares, "and now we shall have our feast." Litha is so far off that even Gawain is not put off his appetite, so as soon as Arthur and Guinevere take their first bites, the whole party digs in and enjoys the Yule table.

Many are the Winter chores in a palace such as Camelot, and before long, it's Imbolc; and not long after, Ostara rolls around. The Year has well and truly turned toward the light now, and everyone's thoughts turns to Beltane, when one or two weddings are to be celebrated, and the woods around Camelot will be well enjoyed even by those couples not formally handfasting this year. Everyone but Gawain is quite cheerful; he, however, realizes that Litha and his appointment with the Green Knight is not far off. In fact, he has to set out not long after Beltane, for the Green Knight's home is a few weeks' ride.

He stops for directions (an example more modern men should follow!) at the castle of one Lord Bertilak, whose lady rather fancies Gawain, and in token of her (chaste, I'm sure) affection, gives him a green scarf, which she bids him wear around his neck. Being chivalrous, he does as she asks. Lord Bertilak leads him to the Green Knight's home, and Gawain is wearing the scarf when he lays his head on the block the Green Knight has set up.

Thinking that he's led a satisfying and worthwhile life, if not a long one, Gawain waits for the Green Knight's blow to fall, and it does—not once, not twice, but three times—but his head does not roll. In fact, and only by the Green Knight's third blow, Gawain is only nicked. When he stands up (in some amazement, as you might guess), the Green Knight introduces himself as Lord Bertilak. He didn't complete the first two strokes, he explains, because although Lady Bertilak gave Gawain ample opportunity, he did not give her

more than a kiss. The nick from the third blow was but a reprimand for Gawain's accepting the scarf, which was offered as magical protection. The whole episode, Lord Bertilak tells Gawain, was to test the character of the Knights of the Round Table—and thanks to Gawain's bravery and honor, they are all well acquitted.

(There's a bit more to the story than that, of course—deeper symbolism and further intrigue; in some versions, we understand that Lady Bertilak is Arthur's sister Morgana. But in this case, the rest of the story is another story altogether, and shan't be told here!)

Ever after, in one form or another, at Yule and at Litha, the submission of these knights to one another is remembered and reenacted. Indeed, a test of the Knights it may have been, but even Gawain's adventure followed an older form, and was itself a re-enactment of the eternal cycle of Winter's and Summer's alternation. Life persevering through the season of death and the premonition of death in the season of life is a part of this story as it is part of all Wiccan rituals. In many Wiccan Traditions, the ritual celebration of the Sabbat is undertaken before the Cakes and Ale are consecrated, so one way or another, we, too, have the adventure before we taste the Yule feast.

Yule is the shortest day of the year, and though from Solstice Day forward the days begin to lengthen, few of us are marking sunrises on an artificial horizon, and it's not until Imbolc that it's at all easy to see that lengthening with our own eyes. At Yule, we're both celebrating and trusting that the Sun has been reborn. The Sun God will, come Summer, be high and mighty again, but at Yule, He's just newborn, still low on the horizon and not sharing much in the way of heat or light. Like midwives, we work to encourage His safe return to our world.

In some obscure (and maybe no longer celebrated) traditions, Robin Hood is connected with the Oak King, although the Sheriff of Nottingham doesn't seem to take the role of Holly. Instead, it's Robin's name association with the bird, whose red breast symbolizes the Sun, which makes the connection. With the smoke of the Yule Log (sometimes oak) Robin rushes up the chimney, and reappears as Belin, little-known brother of Bran, whom he recognizes as the Holly King, and hangs. (In modern times, Robin Hood, still "oakey," is associated more with Beltane than with Yule.)

ituals

One thing we can all do at Yule is a bit of calendar magic—but that’s hardly “magic” at all. It’s more like common sense. Your holiday season will go more smoothly, though, if you take a minute, in the week after Thanksgiving, to check your schedule. Block out a few afternoons for shopping and other errands, and save some time for relaxation and meditation.

In our very commercially-oriented culture, it’s hard for people of most faiths to keep their minds on the “reason for the season.” With family obligations peaking around the Winter holidays, it can be hard to feel like *celebrating* fewer hours of daylight, when that seems to give us even less time to do all the things we need to.

Because Yule is the shortest day of the year, as the Sun’s light fades, let’s take a step back and look at the whole Wheel of the Year, and get our bearings. Winter began at Samhain (remember, the name of that Sabbat means “end of Summer”), and Samhain marked the end of the harvest. This means that we’ve got what we need to carry us through the Winter. Part of what we’re expressing in our Yule festivities is our confidence that we’ll make it to the next planting and growing season, and that the harvest that’s sustaining us is abundant enough to share with others. That’s one reason we exchange gifts with each other.

A Coven Gift Exchange

Witches are notoriously poor, spending most of their money on candles and books, but covens usually manage some sort of gift exchange. One way to handle it is to select a single design of wrapping paper and one color of ribbon, which every member will use, so that no one can tell who brought which gift. (Givers must remember size or shape or how their ribbons are tied!) Ask every covener to bring one gift, something cheery and not too expensive, and to set their

gifts near the altar before the Circle is cast. Then, during Cakes and Ale, everyone can choose for themselves a different gift than the one they brought. The gifts are considered to be from the Goddess and God (or from Santa, if you like), and bring a little more magic into the rite.

Next, I'll offer you two variations on older customs, either or both of which you can add to your Yule ritual during Cakes and Ale. One may be part of your coven's customs already.

After the Ale's been blessed, some of us say, "May you never thirst" as we hand the Cup to the person next to us. At Yule, it's nice to add, "You complete my Circle as I complete yours." At Yule, it's appropriate to recognize *as* gifts the gifts of love, trust, and energy that we give each other every time we meet in Circle. No matter how formally or informally we practice, no matter what fluffy bunnies or serious souls we are when we meet on Moons or Sabbats, we've all made the effort to be there, and to focus on the work at hand—and too often, we take this effort for granted.

Whether it's the Priest or Priestess who says, "Aw, no, I had to vacuum anyway," or the family who drives across town saying, "Oh, it's only a half-hour drive," the energy it takes to leave in time to make that drive, and the energy it takes to get the house ready for another Circle, is energy that we give to each other. Our Circles may be offerings to our God and Goddess, but my offering is the lovelier for my coveners' efforts, and theirs is the lovelier because the house is tidy. Together, *we* are one and more than one, and at least once a year, we should appreciate that gift of energy we exchange.

But maybe you already make it a point to see that we all complete each other's Circles, so following is a little ritual you probably haven't tried.

The Wassail Circle

Wassailing, as we know, is an ancient custom of blessing orchards with fertility for the coming year. Not all of us are looking for physical fertility, of course, but most of us are happy to be creative in other ways. To make this ritual part of your Yule Sabbat, you need a bit of Winter greenery—one small evergreen branch for every participant. (If you don't live near a source of evergreen branches,

you can usually get leftovers at most tree lots, sometimes just for the asking; otherwise, a coven can split the cost of a wreath, and take it apart.)

You can use the same “ale” you have for Cakes and Ale, but it’s equally appropriate to prepare a special wassail drink for this rite; and you may wish to do this short ritual at another time or place than your Sabbat. Traditional Wassail is a wine-based drink, but any festive drink (including the recipe on page 88) will do. Invite the children to participate, and feel free to use alcohol even if your coven is dry, because drinking isn’t part of the rite. Everyone does need a glass or a cup—use festive paper cups, individual chalices, drinking horns, or wine glasses. The hems of your robes might be splashed, so hike them a bit if you can, and so might shoes; if it’s not too cold, barefoot is the best way to do this.

Stand in a circle—it can be a capital-C Circle, formally cast, or a small-c, casual circle to share with non-Pagans—with the supply of “ale” on a table at the North or in the center. (A solitary celebrant can stand at the altar, facing South to begin with and including all the Directions in everything she or he does.)

It is the host’s or Priest’s job to fill everyone’s cup. All lift their cups, and the host and hostess, or Priest or Priestess (or both, sharing the lines) make the toast, which everyone then repeats in unison:

*Hail and wassail to everyone here
May our blessings increase as waxes the year!*

A solitary might say the rhyme this way instead:

*Hail and wassail to myself, and good cheer!
May my blessings increase as waxes the year!*

Everyone (or just one) now raises the greenery to shoulder level or higher. The following lines can be memorized, or they can be read by the Priest or Priestess and repeated by the group:

*We grow like the trees, and our labors bear fruits;
Like trees we are grounded, like trees we have roots.
We can shade one another, and shelter from storm;
We bend to each other, by passions keep warm.
Like trees may we blossom, and keep safe the vale—
As an orchard we thrive! Now hail! And wassail!*

A solitaire may modify the rhyme thusly:

*I grow like a tree, and my labor bears fruits;
 Like a tree I am grounded, like a tree I have roots.
 I can shade and I'm shaded, and sheltered from storm.
 I bend and am bent to, and by passion kept warm.
 Like a tree shall I blossom, and keep safe the vale—
 Part of a wide orchard! Now hail! And wassail!*

As the last line is spoken or repeated, everyone simultaneously lowers the greenery (mind you, this requires some coordination, so take it slowly), and pours out the contents of their cup on the green branch to their left. A solitary pours blessing on the branch he or she holds, turning deosil in place as she or he pours. Thus does the blessing go deosil (sunwise) around the circle.

In performing this rite, we acknowledge our connection to the God in His vegetable aspect—for He is the evergreen as well as the deciduous trees that take the form of death every Yuletide, and are reborn to leaf, flower, and fruit again. We express our understanding that none of us can get by without a little help from our friends, even if we're not with them at the moment. We're part of the cycle, and we must nurture each other to survive ourselves. (For a solitary, the branch represents not only his or her immortality as a participant in the cycle, but also the absent friends he or she is nurturing by proxy.) This ritual also creates for us a new connection with those who did and those who still do tend orchards.

At mid-Winter, when in many parts of the world we are paralyzed with cold, worried about our supply of heating oil, and wondering whether we can get to the grocery store for today's or tomorrow's supplies, it can be hard to feel like celebrating. For some time now, the economy's been slow, and giving the posh gifts we see advertised is a strain on the budget, if, indeed, it's possible at all. "The holidays," for lots of people, are depressing because keeping up with the Joneses is harder and harder; and these days it's hard for the Joneses to keep setting their legendary pace, too!

But we all have more to give than "stuff." Yes, yes, we all love to open lovely packages at Yule, and we all feel bad when we don't have money to spend on our friends and relatives. But we can give a number of noncommercial gifts that share the season's faith. A natural

souvenir—a pretty stone unearthed in our yard, a summer flower pressed to decorate stationery, or a bit of driftwood, sanded and polished, a special photograph framed in hand-cut paper, a child’s drawing glued onto a magnet, a scented pillow or an herb vinegar, a collection of recipes (or poems or family stories) are all unashamedly inexpensive gifts you can give with pride. An invitation to dinner or a shared outing is harder to put ribbons on, but just as heartfelt and meaningful.

Yule rituals reenacting the semiannual battle of the Oak and Holly Kings—the Light and Dark Twins, Summer and Winter (Oak wins at Yule and Holly wins at Litha)—are set forth in several books, and indeed, are fairly easy to write on your own. The general idea is that the Holly King of the Waning Year has to give up his throne to his brother, the Oak King of the Waxing Year. Holly is naturally reluctant to do so, and the brothers fight; at Yule, Oak defeats Holly, and the Year waxes until Litha, when Holly brings his own challenge and wins back the throne.

Traditionally, the Kings fight with swords, and these can be anything from plastic “costume” swords you can get at party shops before Halloween, to the bamboo practice swords some martial artists use, to the Jedi knight or Hobbit swords, complete with sound effects, that you can find at toy stores. Those rituals can be a lot of fun; my coven and most others I know have enjoyed them for years. But sometimes, a change is what you want, so here’s a variation on the theme. It doesn’t have a traditional look, yet it respects the elements of tradition while drawing on some of the God’s most popular aspects.

A Yule Rite

For this rite, you need at least two people (more is better!), a Santa hat, a leafy mask (you can make one with a plain eye-covering or half-face mask, silk foliage, and some craft glue), two toy swords, a tote bag, and a next year’s (secular) calendar with the Summer Solstice boldly marked. Everyone attending should bring an inexpensive, unisex gift, colorfully wrapped but with no tag. Before the ritual begins, put all the wrapped presents into the tote bag. The altar needs to be at the East or the North—if it’s in the middle, it’ll be in the way. The Circle should be as wide and as clear as possible.

When the Goddess and God have been invoked, Yule should be introduced. In your own words, explain that, at Yule, the Sun is re-born, and although it's still Winter, the Wheel is turning toward Spring, and the Holly King must think about relinquishing his throne.

At this point, whoever is playing Santa (the Holly King) should begin to walk widdershins (counterclockwise) around the edge of the Circle, carrying the tote bag of presents and wearing one of the toy swords. "Ho, ho, ho!" he should boom. "This year is mine! I don't want to give it up. You all love me—you don't want me to step down!"

Now whoever is wearing the Green Man's mask and the other toy sword begins to walk around the Circle, deosil. "Give it up you must, old man! I am yet young, but the year is coming to me, and I will have your throne."

Both kings now pull their swords and wave them about dramatically, getting ready to fight. "I have the gifts people want," Santa says confidently.

"I give gifts of my own," the Green Man answers, snagging the tote bag with his sword and taking it away from Santa.

Santa tries to get the tote bag back, but the Green Man keeps it just out of Santa's reach. Swords may be brandished, or may actually clash—this is up to you. Finally, Santa admits defeat.

"I give up, Green Man, for I know that the year is yours now; only in exchange for my surrender, let me distribute the gifts!" Santa offers the Green Man his sword, and the Green Man trades him the tote bag for it.

Holding the two swords above his head victoriously, the Green Man says, "The Year is mine, and Summer is on its way! We shall have light and warmth again—and thus assured, let us now celebrate in honor of my defeated brother!"

The High Priestess—or a designated Maiden or Snow Queen, at the group's discretion—steps in now, and stands between Santa and the Green Man. "As we celebrate the Green Man's victory," she proclaims, holding the calendar aloft so that everyone can see the date of the Summer's Solstice circled, "let us not forget that he, too, shall relinquish the year in his turn! Hail Santa! Hail the Green Man! Hail the turning of the Wheel!"

Everyone cheers, Santa and the Green Man embrace, and the gifts are passed out. (No one should get back the gift they brought.) Once everyone has a gift, the Cakes and Ale are consecrated, and once they've been shared, the gifts can be opened. When everyone's had a chance to open and exclaim over their gifts, and when any exchanges people want to make are made, close the Circle and head inside for the Yule feast!

The Rite of the Sun's Rebirth

This rite can be modified for a group, but it's written for a solitary, who'd have a little trouble with any version of the Kings' Battle. What's needed for the Rite of the Sun's Rebirth is a large gold, red, or orange "Sun candle" (and one that combines those colors would be excellent), a cauldron in which the candle can sit (a plastic one is fine if the mouth's wide enough for you to lift the candle in and out safely). If you have no cauldron, a bowl painted black or covered with black paper or cloth will do, so long as it will hold the candle without fire danger. You also need a gold or red "cape" and a Sun-crown (see page 94); you'll need a lighter or matches, too.

Set up the altar at the North. Set the cauldron in front of the altar, and the Sun candle in front of it. After you bless, consecrate, and combine the salt and water, but before you cast your Circle, light the Sun candle. The red or gold cape (any sun-colored piece of fabric big enough to cover you from head to toe is fine, if you don't have a flowing gold cape handy) should be under the altar, easy to reach. You may also want to make a Sun crown (see page 94) and have it handy.

When your Circle's been cast and the Quarters called, invoke the Goddess:

"Great Mother Goddess, as You prepare to give birth to the Sun God, I invoke You! I invoke You in the depth of Winter when all seems lost; I invoke You in trust that through Your holy womb of night, the Sun will be reborn. Mother Goddess, I am one of Your children and as I await my rebirth with the Sun's, I invoke You!"

Now invoke the God:

“Oh Sun, You shine but dimly now, and the world misses you. You began to set as long ago as Litha, and a new year began with the season that sees You at Your darkest. Yet I grieved Your loss but briefly, for You have been reborn to us many times, and trusting that You will be reborn from the Mother’s wintry womb again, I invoke You now. I hail Your rebirth and invoke You now at the Solstice!”

If you like rhyming invocations, try these:

*Mother Goddess, giving birth,
bring the Sun back from the Earth
Winter’s ground seems like a tomb:
let this Circle be Your womb.
I wait my rebirth with the year—
Mother, hail, and welcome here!*

*O Sun, since Litha’s on the wane,
now You shall be born again.
I shall mourn Your death no more:
Your light the Mother shall restore!
Dying and reborn each year,
I bid You hail and welcome here!*

Go to the altar and pick up the Sun candle. Carry it once around the Circle, deosil. Begin by holding it at your waist, and as you circle, raise it slowly, until it’s over your head when you pass South. You may do this silently, or if you like, at South you may repeat, from the invocation, this line: “You began to set as long ago as Litha.” As you continue moving around the Circle from South, slowly lower the candle, so that it’s at your waist by the time you get back to North.

When you return to the North, extinguish the candle (not by means of your breath—wave your hand over it, or moisten your thumb and forefinger to pinch it out) and lower it into the cauldron. Stand, turn deosil, slowly, in place, and say, “It is mid-Winter; this day is the shortest in the year, and the Sun is gone from us.” Take up the “cape” and put it around your shoulders, as dramatically as possible. Walk

around the Circle yourself, drawing the cape more tightly about you as you pass each Quarter.

When you come back to the North, say, “We all die like the Sun God,” and squat or kneel on the ground, and cover yourself completely with the cape. Wait for a count of five heart-beats. (If you’ve made a Sun crown, you can put it on now, and surprise any others in your Circle with it.) Stand up as quickly as you can (mind you don’t tether yourself by standing on the cape), and fling your arms and the cape wide from your shoulders, the more dramatically the better. Say, “And like Him...we...**are...REBORN!**” (If a group is celebrating this rite, it’s appropriate for people to cheer a bit here.)

Now turn (deosil) again toward North, and light the Sun candle in its cauldron. If the flame can be seen above the rim of the cauldron, leave the candle in the cauldron; if the flame is not visible, lift it out of the cauldron. Raise the candle high, showing it off, and turn in place again, saying, “Though it is mid-Winter and the shortest day of the year, so it is also Yule, and the day of the Sun’s rebirth. And behold! The Sun has been reborn!” (More cheers can be forthcoming if a group is celebrating. “Huzzah!” “Go, Sun!”)

Carry the Sun candle around the Circle again. This time, you’ll speak at each Quarter. At East, say, “Blessed be the Sun from the East, where it rises, that we may see clearly by its light.”

At South, say, “Blessed be the Sun from the South, where it is strongest, that we may be energized by its rays.”

At West, say, “Blessed be the Sun from the West, where it sets, that we may find peace in death.”

At North, say, “Blessed be the Sun from the North, where it awaits rebirth, so that our trust may always be in life.”

Now hold the Sun candle up again, and say, “In perfect love of life and in perfect trust that the Wheel shall turn, we celebrate the rebirth of the Sun!” (More cheers!)

Replace the candle (in the cauldron or on the ground if it’s still in the cauldron) in front of the altar, and proceed to the consecration of the Cakes and Ale. Leave the candle burning until the rite is fully concluded, and if possible, till it goes out on its own.

If you want rhyming farewells, you can use or modify these:

*Mother Goddess, giving birth,
You've brought the Sun back from the Earth.
Winter's ground seemed like a tomb,
but You transformed it to a womb.
I feel the light, reborn, begin to swell,
and bid You now hail, and farewell!*

*Oh Sun, since Litha's on the wane,
now You have been born again,
Now to grow and brightly shine,
to spark our lives with light divine.
Your light, reborn, begins to swell;
I bid You now hail, and farewell!*

The Yule Vow

At mid-Winter, we're expressing our joy at the Sun's rebirth, and our belief that what's left of the harvest will sustain us until Spring, when we can hunt again and replant the fields. When we share the Yule feast, we're digging into what's left of the harvest, sharing food that we're hoping we won't need once it has run out. That can be scary.

Those of us who were brought up with the idea that you should never quite finish anything (in case you need more of it later), or with the feeling that any good fortune should be put by rather than enjoyed (in case ill fortune follows), are taking an emotional risk to give away as much as the Yule feast represents. Taking that risk is an offering to the Gods, an expression of trust that the Wheel will continue to turn, and that Spring will come and our larders, material and emotional, will be resupplied. The Yule Vow takes this sense of risk, the bravery of making this offering, seriously.

Whenever it occurs to you to worry about dipping into your reserves is the right time to take the Yule vow. You may want to take this vow before the gifts under your Yule tree, or as you assemble the ingredients of your feast. Perhaps it will seem more appropriate to take it before you carve the roast, or even before you head out to the mall or the craft store. Remember, the Goddess

asks naught of sacrifice, and you don't have to withdraw anything from the trust fund or empty the freezer; it's legitimate to save for the future. It's just not necessary to save everything for the future. After all, this year is the future you saved for last year, so it's alright to celebrate now.

*Mid-Winter is come on the Wheel of the Year;
With chill we are numb, and the short days are drear.
But the Sun is reborn; through the sky He ascends,
And my faith I adorn as my soul comprehends.
I vow love and trust that this longest of nights
Shall yet dawn robust and return the Sun's light.
Honoring confidence, I hoard not, nor conceal:
In the turning is renaissance, all hail the Wheel!*

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ctivities

Ah, Yule! Even in Arizona and other “warm Winter” places, we can fire up the oven and make traditional Winter meals now. The truth is, as Baby Boomers get older, more and more of us find ourselves coping with special diets—and Canyondancer and I are no exception. His heart attack and a triple bypass four years later changed our eating habits: Normally, we don’t eat much meat, and all our dairy products have been nonfat for several years. At Yule (and one or two other Sabbats), though, we make an exception.

What’s your favorite Yule menu? Ours is “roast beast,” creamed onions, carrots, and mashed potatoes. Potlucks are becoming more and more popular—they’re less expensive for the hosts and make the buffet more interesting. Our Sabbat feasts have been “cauldronluck” for years now. At Yule, Canyondancer and I provide the roast, and our favorite side dishes, but everyone who comes brings something else yummy to eat.

My Tradition (Adventure) does not require fasting, so in our covens’ Circles, Cakes and Ale are a token meal. My coven generally had a nice red wine, chosen for the occasion and first opened for the rite, and if one of our members hadn’t baked, we shared something from the grocery’s bakery. Campsight’s Yule Circles were often open to non-coveners—most of them solitaries or friends from other covens who had time for more than one celebration—so the feast following our ritual was always more significant to us than the Cakes and Ale we shared in Circle.

A custom that outlasted our coven—which disbanded after 13 years—is toasting with what we call the Festive Drink. (It’s a recipe that we found in *Better Homes and Gardens Magazine* in December of 1989; it was submitted by Sarah Wright Frazier of Idyllwild, California, and won a \$50 prize—deservedly so, we think.) We make two batches, one “spiked” (with cinnamon schnapps) and one not.

December Cider (a.k.a. Festive Drink)

Start with one 12-ounce can of frozen apple juice concentrate and one 12-ounce can of frozen cranberry-apple juice concentrate, thawed, and combine them in a 4-quart kettle with six 12-ounce cans—that's 9 cups—of water. Stir in a 6-ounce can of frozen lemonade concentrate (thawed first), and add five sticks of cinnamon, a teaspoon of ground nutmeg, and seven whole cloves.

Bring it to a boil, reduce the heat, cover, and simmer for 15 minutes. Remove the cinnamon sticks and the cloves. It's optional to stir in 1/3 cup of rum or cinnamon schnapps—Canyondancer makes two batches, and spikes one. Be sure, he cautions, to let the brew cool below 100 degrees before adding alcohol. Serve this drink warm—and if you serve it in mugs instead of punch cups, you can put a fresh cinnamon stick in each mug. Each batch makes about 3 quarts, which is approximately 12 servings—of about 153 calories each (less without the alcohol), if you're counting.

It's with this that, once at the Groaning Board (a reference to the times when dining tables were just planks set up on sawhorses or barrels, and the feast dishes were so many and heavy that the plank, or board, groaned with the weight), we toast the Yule and each other. And by the way, a collection of everyone's favorite Yule recipes makes a wonderful booklet, usually not too expensive to have copied at a local shop, for the coven to add to their individual Books of Shadows.

Making Ornaments

One of our favorite activities is one most of us can adapt to our own circumstances. It can be done inside or out, depending on where you have the most room. First, find some plastic or foam ornaments; the kind wrapped with colorful threads will probably end up doubling as cat toys. (We'll talk about when to use these later.) Then, get an extra Yule tree. It can be real or artificial. Set it up outside or in a spare room, and during your Yule celebration, open that space to your guests and let them decorate a tree!

We're fortunate to have a "temple room" that is closed to the rest of the house most of the time; we put up an extra tree back there, and after the Yule ritual, we open that room and bring out a

box or two of unbreakable ornaments for our guests—some years including children as young as 3 or 4 years old—to hang on the tree.

Most years, we put a few strings of lights on the tree first, weaving them among the branches close to the trunk. That takes quite some time, and the lights are breakable, so we don't let our guests worry that they or their children will wreck a string or hurt themselves.

Some of the ornaments that go on this very special Yule tree are family heirlooms—paper and cloth ornaments our son, the Explorer, or his friends made years ago. But most of them are red and green and purple balls, the kinds you can get pretty inexpensively at any craft store, and at many department and drugstores. We've got a few shiny plastic lemons, limes, apples, and oranges, too, and those are just as much fun to hang. Best of all, if you drop them, they just bounce and roll across the floor. You hear the occasional "oops!" but never any hushed or worried "uh-ohs."

The thread-wrapped balls make wonderful bases for more elaborate ornaments that even young children can make if they have careful adult supervision. At a craft store, buy long pins (with round ends in bright or pearly colors, not the craft pins with T-shaped ends). If you're working with young children, be sure that they don't hurt themselves on the pins. You will know whether your own children can heed a warning, or need more hands-on supervision. Use the pins to attach pony beads or other beads you've collected, or take apart a bead chain for a supply of decorations. You can also cut out the rosettes on paper doilies (gold or white or silver; even red if you remember to stock up around Valentine's Day) to affix to the ornaments. Narrow strips of ribbon or lace are also appropriate, and you'll find other things that look right to use, too, if you browse your sewing room or the craft store shelves. Don't forget the craft glue!

You need to allow at least an hour for a "decoration decorating" project, and you should have enough materials on hand for each person to make at least two ornaments. Having some very narrow ribbon, or some slender cord, or even some lengths of yarn on hand for hanging the ornaments is a good idea, too. The only trouble is that most people will want to take their handmade ornaments home instead of leaving them on *your* tree!

Decorations can be made by hand from natural materials, too: Pine cones with glue lined on their edges and sprinkled with glitter are very nice, for instance. You can wire all sorts of dried materials to wreath forms; if you don't use all the cinnamon sticks in the festive drink, they're lovely on a wreath! You can even make the wreaths yourself if you're thinking far enough ahead and shape Summer's pruning leftovers.

We have a sumac that puts out suckers from its trunk, and most years I wait until there are five or six, and then make a wreath that's easy to shape while the clippings are green, and dry by Lammass or Mabon. If there's more humidity where you live, it could take them longer to dry, but if you don't plan on using them till the following Winter, they'll be ready.

Decorations made from natural objects can look nice on your altar, too, though in this context, for most of us, size does matter. The altar table I use outside is 18 inches in diameter, made from one of those three-legged decorator tables you can get at craft stores and bed and bath supply shops, and it's really too small to put much more than the usual gear on it.

But the altar we use indoors is bigger, and has a second shelf, too, where we put the bits and pieces we plan to use in any spells we might be casting; the oil and extra incense goes on the bottom shelf, too. We have some cloths that hang down far enough to conceal whatever's on the shelf, but we rarely use them because the altar itself is so nice.

It was handmade for us by a British Traditional Priest who happens also to be a good—and talented—friend, Rick Johnson. We have room for decorations on this altar because we don't *have* to put a pentagram on it—one's inlaid! (See Appendix A for a photo.)

We vary our altar decorations every year, because every year is different: Our moods are different, we may have new guests or be missing some usual ones, and every year we have new ideas and unique opportunities. But among the decorations from which we can choose are small antlers (two or three of them, not sets but singles, found in the woods and given to us by a former covener), pine cones we've collected and saved from nearly two decades of camping trips, a horned

crown, upright stones, carved stones, garlands, silk holly leaves (some years we find and buy real holly, but it's not easy to come by here in the desert), interestingly shaped branches, also collected on camping trips, and variously shaped candles or candle holders we've found at thrift shops.

My cats (bless them!) found their way onto a shelf they shouldn't have and knocked my favorite chalice (a Third Degree gift) to the tile floor—even if we finish gluing it back together, it'll never hold Ale again—so we've had to use other chalices. Not having the one we used since the coven's formation has been a disappointment, of course, but it's also opened up other possibilities. Sometimes we used Canyondancer's chalice; sometimes we used a lovely green pressed-glass one, decorated with Oak leaves. Perfect for Yule!

A Yule Necklace

It's said that every Priestess should always wear a necklace—but why should Priestesses be the only ones?! (The tradition comes, by the way, from the Asatru, through the Vanatru, for the goddess Freya had, as one of her tools, a magical necklace called Brisengamen.) Following is an idea for a Yule necklace that anyone can make on their own or with friends or coveners. Make one for yourself, or make more than one and give some away! You can even make bracelets instead of necklaces; and if you add end pieces of cloth or leather, the necklace can become a loose-fitting belt that anyone can wear.

What you'll need are some of those pony beads (with an emphasis on red, green, white, gold, and silver), some sturdy white string or some very narrow, white or black grosgrain ribbon, and a few plastic or wooden Yule ornaments meant for tabletop or miniature trees. You can, if you like, get some fasteners at a jewelry supply store, so that you can fasten and unfasten the necklace to put it on and take it off, but it's easier to make the necklace long enough to put on and take off over your head. If you want to make a bracelet instead, use fairly thick elastic cord instead of string.



*These Yule necklaces and bracelets are made from beads, tiny jingle bells, and miniature decorations meant for tabletop trees. Some are strung on leather, others on decorated wire; all supplies are available at craft shops. (See page 40 of *Samhain Rituals* for a blessing/consecration for the leather cord you might use.)*

Measure the distance from the back of your neck to a point two inches below your collarbone, and add 2 inches. That's (at least) how many inches of beads you should string, or string that you should leave bare, before you begin to add the colorful mini-decorations. Use anywhere between three and seven decorations on each necklace, and space them with more beads. When you've strung all the mini-ornaments you want to use, add the same number of beads to the other side of the necklace, and tie the ends of the string together. Don't tighten the knot yet—first make sure it really is long enough to take it off over your head!

What the Colors Mean

When a Witch makes something, the colors she or he uses are almost always symbolic. In making Yule necklaces, we've emphasized the colors red, green, white, gold, and silver, so let's take a look at what those colors mean.

Red stands for the spark of life that Winter's cold does not extinguish—the heart that beats even while animals hibernate. We see red berries on holly bushes, we see red decorations and lights on our Yule trees, we see red cheeks on our faces when we play outside in the snow, and many of our festive drinks are red in color, too. All this reminds us that life goes on, even when it's hidden by Winter's snow and ice.

Green stands for eternal life. *Evergreen* trees don't lose their leaves in the Winter—they don't succumb to death. They are usually pleasantly fragrant, too, when most other plants' scents are hard to smell when it's cold outside. Green reminds us of the vitality that will return come Spring.

White represents many things to many people. Among the associations relevant to Yule are purity, peace, silence, and serenity.

Snow is white, and when it blankets the ground, it covers up most of the signs of death's decay—from dead grass and rotting leaves to the mess we left in the yard at Summer's end. But the white snow doesn't just make things look pure, it also helps to “purify” life's leftovers, for in the moist darkness beneath the snow, organic waste decays and goes back to the Earth, enriching the soil so that next Spring's growth will be nourished.

Snow can also insulate and muffle sounds, and though the happy shrieks of children at play can echo across snow-covered yards and hills, many of us find ourselves awed to silence by its beauty. In this silence, we find serenity, and a personal sense of peace. White is also a neutral background against which the colors of life can be especially well seen—and at Yuletide, these range from holly berries and evergreens we've already mentioned to the bright spots of our caps and coats against sledding hills and ski slopes, or flashing among the trunks of the forests where we take calming walks to enjoy the season or find a special tree to bring home.

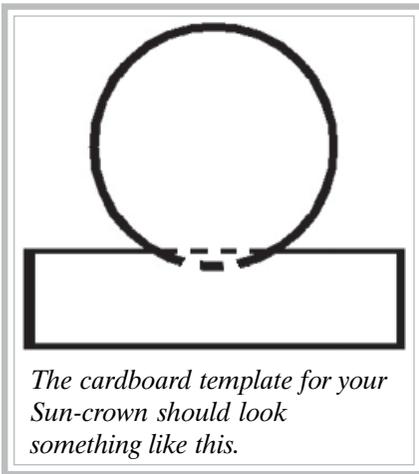
Gold and silver represent, respectively, the Sun and Moon, the God and Goddess. The brightness of gold symbolizes the brightening Sun when it's reborn at Yule. The dearness of gold—both financially and emotionally—represents the great value we place on knowing that the Sun is reborn, and will grow stronger from now on. Silver honors the Goddess, and Her Yuletide role in giving rebirth to the

God in his solar form. And speaking of His solar form, a Sun crown is a nice accessory for many Wiccan Yule rites. Here's one way of making one.

A Sun Crown

Making a Sun crown—you can put it on right before you rise up, reborn in your Sun cape, in the Rite of the Rebirth of the Sun (page 81)—can be easy or elaborate. Once you read these directions, you may think of other ways to put one together. What you need for this construction are two 1-yard lengths of gold or red-and-gold ribbon, 3/4 inch or 1 inch wide, a 4-inch square of cardboard, gold wrapping paper scraps (gold foil wrapping paper is wonderful), and some craft glue. Small beads, and bells (and a thread and needle) are optional.

On one side of the cardboard, draw a line 3/4 inch or 1 inch (depending on the width of your ribbon) from the edge, to match the width of your ribbon. On the rest of the cardboard, draw a circle that



The cardboard template for your Sun-crown should look something like this.

touches the strip you've drawn along the edge. Then cut out the strip and the circle in one piece. Cover both sides of the cardboard with the gold/foil wrapping paper, so that you have a "sun disc" on a support strip.

Center the strip between the two ribbons, and glue it in place between them. The "Sun disc" should seem to be resting on the edge of the ribbons; the cardboard will stiffen it so that it doesn't droop. When the glue is dry, you can tie the crown around

your head. If you have beads and small bells, you can sew them onto the ends of the ribbons for added drama.

Of course, you can make the sun disc as big as you want to, and you can use any sort of ribbon you like, from grosgrain to satin to velvet to lame. Just be sure the glue is dry before you try it on!

Gifts of Blessings

Although I was sad to see my first and favorite cup shatter, I can also see it as a blessing in disguise. A healthy Yule activity is to count your blessings. What nurtures you? A cup of tea or cider in front of a warm fire? An afternoon making snow faeries in the yard? Stopping the housework long enough to sing along with a favorite tune on the radio? Preparing a meal? Setting the table with the family china and silver? Having time and money to spend an afternoon at the movies or the mall? Catching up on your reading? Do you feel blessed to have a job you love? To be in touch with distant friends by e-mail?

Now think about how you can share those blessings, make gifts of them to other people. Who can you invite over to share that tea or cider? Is there someone to whom you can send a lovely mug filled with bags of your favorite tea or a cider mix, surprising them with a little slice of your life in their mail? Can you pencil in a trip to the mountain next Saturday morning, to make snow faeries with the kids...or with the coven...or by yourself? Can you make copies of the words to your favorite song and teach a friend or the coven how it goes, so you can sing along together? How about leaving work early today, coming home and making that meal, and serving it up on the good china, just because any day you can break bread with your family is a special enough occasion.

When's the last time you treated yourself to an afternoon of window shopping, or seeing a movie that intrigued you? I routinely stop at a favorite used bookstore to stock up on light reading to get me through my 40 minutes on the exercise bike. Sometimes, I indulge myself by making a cup of tea and curling up on the couch with one of those books instead of saving it for my thrice-weekly trips to the gym.

If you love your job, take a bag of chocolates or a batch of cookies or a bowl of fruit to your coworkers, just to share your pleasure. Cut out a page of classifieds and cover it with a big red circle with a slash through it; underneath that, write "This job's the best!" and put it on the company bulletin board...or on the supervisor's or boss' desk. Sappy? Sure, but sap rising is what brings the trees back to

bud and leaf in the Spring, and nobody complains about *that*. That's another reason we celebrate in "the dead of Winter"—to remind ourselves that Spring *will* roll around again.

If you love being in touch with friends by e-mail, maybe you can offer to pay for a month of their service, instead of trying to find a more conventional Yule gift. Maybe you can write them a poem of appreciation. (Those animated greeting cards are nice ideas, but not everyone has time or inclination to go online to read them, and I think a heartfelt personal message is nicer.)

The point of these examples is, at Yule, part of what we're celebrating is that the harvest we took in back at Samhain is keeping us through the Winter, with enough left over to treat our friends—and what we share with them should be more than the presents we buy in stores or from catalogues or on eBay. It takes more than the material harvest to sustain us through the Winter, so we should share more than our material blessings with our friends and families.

ymbols

Much of Yule's symbolism is obvious. Evergreen trees and shrubs show off life when everything else looks dead. Holly, with its blood-red-for-life berries, is a potent image, standing thick and green against snowy ground and grey, cloudy skies. Not only does it seem to defy death, but holly hedges are safe places for small animals (and even the occasional human traveler, caught in a blizzard) to shelter. It doesn't take a Priest to suggest that bringing a sprig, or a bough, or even a whole small tree, indoors might let some of the life-in-the-dead-of-winter magic rub off on the householders!

Apples and other fruits, dried to keep through the winter, still keep some of the color of life, and their symbolism is plain, too. It's this color, this vitality, that we know the Sun will show us as the days lengthen and the year grows. The ornaments that decorate our Yule trees now are reminiscent of those simpler symbols.

Modernizing Meanings

There's much discussion about the Pagan origins of various Yule customs, from wreaths and bells and carols to Santa and the exchange of gifts. The truth is that, yes, many of these modern customs have some historical root in ancient Pagan practice; but another truth is that ancient Paganism wasn't anything like modern Wicca. The Egyptian, Greek, and Roman rituals were part of state religions, overseen by politically powerful Priests (vulnerable to the same corruption we know plagues today's "organized religions"). Rather than encouraging the "regular folks" to be in tune with natural forces and accessible deities, these old-time Pagans focused on precise rituals that kept "the people" in line, under the ruling class's control.

Wicca's a religion of experience. It is human nature to extrapolate from one experience so as to understand other experiences better. When we see our own Yule customs originating in ancient

cultures, we give ourselves a sense of much wider experience than we, as individuals, can have in a single lifetime. We use the connections that we both discover and create to enhance the feeling of interconnectedness that Wicca holds holy.

There's nothing wrong with looking back at ancient customs and seeing that elements of the old rites are part of today's ceremonies. It gives us all a sense of connection, through time and culture, with our ancestors, and it helps us see how Wicca fits into the history of Paganism. We need to realize, though, that there are limits to connections we can make—and that it's alright that Wicca isn't directly connected with ancient Pagan religions.

Carolers

Caroling is a fairly old custom—certainly it extends beyond living memory—and it's one of my favorites. Our standards for the custom are Victorian: a group of warmly bundled folk walking down decorated neighborhood streets, stopping before each door to harmonize a few verses, and then share mulled wine or hot chocolate with the householders they've been serenading.

In Tucson, the Neo-Pagan community rents a horse-drawn wagon and clip-clops through Winterhaven, the neighborhood famous for its elaborate decorations. We don't stop at anyone's door, but we carol as our carriage rolls through the streets. T.A.W.N. (the Tucson Area Wiccan-Pagan Network that sponsors the annual event) provides songbooks, compiled of words our members have rewritten over the years.

I think it's important to note that there are mixed feelings in the Neo-Pagan community about “filked” Yule carols. Personally, I see nothing wrong with writing Wiccan (or Druid- or Asatru- or Goddess-related) words to the same tunes that Christians have been singing for years. After all, most of the old carol tunes are in the public domain now, and a fair number weren't carols in their original versions. Some don't need much changing, either—“Deck the Halls,” for instance. I see the revisions as tributes to fond memories of our (mostly *not* Pagan) childhoods, and I see the song rewriting efforts as offering to the Goddess and God.

But to be fair, there are other Wiccans who find the practice offensive and refuse to sing “filked” carols. They think we should be writing our own carols and hymns, and they think it’s rude and confrontational to share caroling occasions with people who may be shocked to hear Pagan words in Christmas carols. I respect this opinion, even though I don’t share it. If it were feasible, I’d be all for writing entirely new carols for Wiccans, and getting the local community together to learn them. In the meantime, meaning no offense to my friends who feel otherwise, and neither reading music nor playing an instrument, I’m personally content to write new words to tunes I already know and associate with Yuletide.

The following is an example of a filked carol, to the tune of “We Three Kings”:

Pagans from the country are we,
Bringing home an evergreen tree
Symbolizing our Sun’s rising,
Returning for all to see.

Oh, oh!

Sun of wonder, Sun of light,
Sun with royal beauty bright
Ever-burning, season-turning,
Guide us through the longest night.

Pagans from the city we are,
Celebrating with pine and with fir
Dancing, singing, voices ringing,
We greet the returning star!

Oh, oh!

Sun of wonder, Sun of light,
Sun with royal beauty bright
Ever-burning, season-turning,
Guide us through the longest night.

Pagan heirs of old mysteries,
Keeping faith through Winter's dark freeze
With ale wasailling, our God hailing,
We bid the world blessed be!
Oh, oh!
Sun of wonder, Sun of light,
Sun with royal beauty bright
Ever-burning, season-turning,
Guide us through the longest night.

Lights

Most books will point out that “decorating” with lights has been a theme common to Winter holiday celebrations for thousands of years. Of course, early on, the lights came from the Sun's reflection from polished surfaces, and from oil lamps and candles, and they weren't really decorative: they were ritually lit. It took some time for holiday lights to move out of temples and into private homes, and only relatively recently have they been secularized. Indeed, followers of some religions still reserve Winter lights to ritual use and display.

We read, too, that fires and candle light were used to keep negative energies and evil spirits at bay. Most Wiccans ascribe a different meaning to the lights that shine at Yule; many of us don't believe in evil spirits, leaving that cosmology to Christians and Qabbalists. When we trace the origins of “our” Yule customs back to their long-ago origins, we must bear in mind that we share customs, but not necessarily their significance, with the ancients.

Not only do we live out our interconnections, we make them intellectually as well. We notice similarities, and find ways to integrate the stories that contain these similarities. The plots of our dreams are often surreal because we're trying to forge connections between elements and incidents that, by the linear standards of waking life, are unconnected; so it is in our religious lives, too. A custom can start anywhere, and if it reminds us of another practice, or can be explained in ways we already understand, we'll pass those associations on with the custom when we share it. That may make it difficult to sort things out historically, but historically isn't the only way things are important.

Stocking- and Cauldron-Stuffers

I can give you a very personal example of this. When I was a little girl, my family celebrated Christmas by opening our “stocking presents” before breakfast, and our “tree presents” after we’d eaten. Growing up, that custom was one of my favorites, and I wanted to keep it alive when I had a child of my own. But by the time our son was old enough to appreciate any holiday customs, we were Wiccan, and Christmas stockings seemed inappropriate.

Did we give up my family’s tradition? No; we allowed it to evolve. Now, using the small plastic ones you can get at party stores around Halloween, we open “cauldron presents” before Yule breakfast, and “tree presents” after. The custom means more to me and my family than it did to my parents, not only because my perspective on the holidays is different from theirs, but because for me, it has the additional significance of honoring their memories. If he continues it with his family, it’ll have more and different meaning for our son than it does for us.

Indeed, now that really huge plastic cauldrons are available, I’ve been putting our “tree presents” in those, and arranging the cauldrons under the tree. When guests for whom we have gifts are visiting, we rummage through the cauldron to find their presents. That makes a nice allusion to Celtic lore, recalling the bottomless cauldron that fed everyone. Eventually, when and why our family added these customs to our Yule celebration will be lost (except to readers of my books!). Our grandchildren and great-grandchildren will recognize a similarity between “cauldron presents” and “stocking presents,” and maybe they’ll wonder about it.

There’s undoubtedly a Pagan origin to filling stockings with gifts, but we don’t know the story. Dorothy Morrison, in *Yule: A Celebration of Light and Warmth* (Llewellyn, 2000), says that it began when St. Nick took pity on three spinsters who, for lack of dowries, had little hope of marriage. They’d hung their stockings to dry by the fire, and he filled them with gold. (We don’t know when or where these women lived, but if a saint was succoring them, they weren’t Pagan.) We bought a stocking for our 10-month-old son, at a (small-c) craft fair, because the elf appliqué on it looked exactly like him...so maybe the Pagan origin of the custom has something to do with faerie/human encounters!

When we read, hear, and talk about the ancient symbolism of evergreens and Winter fires, the ancient origins of singing carols, gift exchanges, and feasting, we're experiencing not just the Wheel of the Year, but the Wheel of the Eons. The perspective enriches us. We are, in many cases, giving new meaning to old customs, building on ancestral foundations, just as fields reseed themselves and beasts beget new generations of their species. Humans are, as far as we know, the only species to grow through mental as well as physical generations.

Calling the Winter Solstice "Yule" borrows from Old Norse: *Iul* means *wheel*, and according to Gundarsson, one of Woden's (Odin's) names was *Jol*. Santa's reindeer are Northern animals, and many Neo-Pagans associate them with the stags that drew Freya's chariot. The theory that Odin, riding his eight-legged horse and bestowing blessings, is the original model for Santa might not be too far off! That horned and antlered creatures represent the Horned One has always been true—on the Gundestrup cauldron (found in a bog in Denmark, depicting a number of Celtic deities and dated to approximately 100 B.C.E.), His horns are very much like a reindeer's!

Wassailing

Wassailing is something I think too few of us do now. Quite a few of us sing Yule carols—many of us have "filked" a few (written Pagan words to already-familiar Yuletide tunes)—but though it involves singing, wassailing is more than that. It's an Anglo-Saxon word and it means to hail or to salute. (The Asatru greeting and farewell, "Hailsa!" is a related word.) Wassailing is a ritual through which apple and other orchard trees were hailed and made hale—healthy—for the coming year.

Most of us have heard that in the very old days, kingdoms were sanctified and made fertile with the king's blood. Blood contains the life-force, and blood sacrifice (which doesn't have to involve a death, as anyone who's ever been a blood brother/sister or blood donor knows) is a way of transferring the life force from one being to another. Wassailing echoes this ancient fertility custom.

With wine to which eggs, apple juice, and other ingredients were added, the trees were sprinkled as blessings were spoken or sung.

This protective fertility rite evolved into others: singing and toasting each other's health with mulled wine, for instance, and taking this blessing from house to house, raising more glasses and gathering more singers at each door. The consecrating aspects of this custom have been forgotten, but when our glasses and voices are raised in love, the effect is still upon us.

Wreaths

I must admit that wreaths aren't just for Yuletide anymore. But even though I use wreaths to decorate at other Sabbats, I associate them first with Yule. I grew up in the Pacific Northwest, where evergreen wreaths could be made from yard clippings. On my great grandmother's farm (now a freeway exchange) there was a holly hedge, though making wreaths from those clippings demanded the use of gloves!

Wreaths, being round, symbolize the circle of life, which has no beginning and is never ending. Yule's evergreen and holly wreaths show us how life's spark is always present, even in the Winter, when so much appears to be dead and when any signs of life may well be covered in snow. And even the square wreaths gaining popularity in home decorating catalogues form portals—gateways of welcome from one realm to another. A wreath on a front door, welcoming travelers from the dark and chilly realm of Winter weather to the warm and hospitable realm of camaraderie, always makes guests feel welcome.

The Yule Log

One of my favorite elements of the Yule celebration is the Yule log. In ancient Greece, to ward off the mischief of a prankster god, whole trees were burned, but Wiccans have no need of warding off mischievous gods, so for us, the Yule log has a different significance.

What is it? The Yule log is a part of the trunk of last year's Yule tree. (This makes some difficulty for people who use artificial trees. If you stop at a tree lot, though, you can get a few discarded boughs, probably for free and certainly for very little, and you can first use them to make a decorative swag, and then save them for next year. They'll serve symbolically as your Yule Log.)

In some places, you can buy, and otherwise fairly easily make, a Yule Log cake, too; sometimes the cake is known as le Bûche de Noël. It's a half-round cake about a foot long, often with a cupcake frosted on, to represent the stump of a bough. It's frosted in chocolate or coffee to represent tree bark, and sometimes decorated with real or frosting greenery. Wiccan ones are usually presented with three candles spaced evenly along its length: a white one, a red one, and a black one, for the Goddess's Maiden, Mother, and Crone aspects. The log itself represents the God and another form of His willing death to sustain us through the Winter. When the Yule Log takes the form of a cake, the symbolism includes the idea that by eating something, you make its essence part of you.



This Yule Log candleholder came ready-made from a thrift shop. Instead of candles for Maiden, Mother, and Crone, it burns one for the Goddess and one for the God. (Never leave any burning candles unattended.)

The Yule Log that comes from last year's Yule tree is rich with symbolism, too. The tree itself represents life's survival of death. Saving a bit of the Yule tree's trunk for next year expresses an understanding of life as an eternal cycle which includes, but does not

end with, death. The Yule Log is often drilled with three holes, to take white, red, and black candles like those that decorate the Yule Log cake. As a candleholder (drill three holes in it and slip tea lights or votive glasses into them to hold white, red, and black candles, again, representing the Maiden, Mother, and Crone), the Yule Log makes a lovely altar decoration, or a centerpiece for the Yule feast, for it's another way of representing the God's rebirth through the Mother. (You do need to take a lengthwise slice off the bottom of the log, so it'll sit flat, as you sometimes have to slice bumpy parts off the bottom of a pumpkin before you carve it.)

Whether or not you burn candles in the Yule Log, the Log itself is burned as part of the Sabbat celebration. Wait until you take this year's tree down, and burn last year's Log when there's another to replace it. Some traditions wait until Bride to burn the Yule log, for Bride's the end of Winter and the beginning of Spring, and the right time to burn all leftover Yule greenery (and wrapping paper).

But why would we wait until Imbolg (also called Bride) to burn the Yule Log or the last of Yule's greenery? In the old days (and maybe in some places still) one "significance" of bringing evergreen boughs inside during the Winter is that they're quite pleasantly scented. (One year, we saved some Yule greenery for several months, knowing we'd want to use it in an Initiation that we had to conduct indoors, and though it had been drying in the sun, it was still fragrant in August!) Imagine being cooped up in a one- or two-room house with your whole family, often snowbound, seldom able to bathe, and not often able to air the bedding, either; don't forget that your most valuable animals might be inside with you. The scent of pine would mask, or at least mitigate, less pleasant odors.

These days, most of us aren't stuck inside *all* Winter, nor do we have to rely on pine boughs to keep our homes smelling fresh. But in most places, it's really not until Imbolc that we notice the days getting longer, and quite often not until Imbolc that anything begins to sprout again from the mud. If it's not until Imbolc that you can see for yourself, this year, that Spring has come again, it doesn't do any harm to keep a bit of greenery to remind you that the Wheel is turning, if slowly.

I like the Yule Log because it reminds me of the woods, where my coven celebrated as many Sabbats as we could. I grew up camping, and though Arizona's very different from Oregon, I enjoy spending a few days in the high country's pine and scrub oak lands as much as I liked camping near the beach in my personal old days. By Yule, we're usually too busy to camp; most years, our latest trip is at Samhain. We don't get out again, most years, until Ostara—so between October and March, it's nice to keep a bit of the woods around.

In addition to representing the annual death and rebirth of the God in His vegetable aspect (in May, regrown, He's the Green Man again), the Yule Log represents the sacred mystery of the woods, the Forest. The Forest has long been the questing ground, on the material and psycho-spiritual planes: one of my Tradition's mottos is "enter the forest where the trees are thickest," and the lines comes from a medieval troubadour's song about Arthurian-style questing. Reconnecting to *that* cycle, the Yule Log symbolizes the inner work we have time (and obligation) to do in the Winter months, too.

Imbolc



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Wiccans have many names for this holiday: Imbolc and Bride are the most common. Imbolc (sometimes spelled Imbolg, and pronounced with the last letter more breathed than spoken) comes from the Gaelic and, referring to lambing season, means “in the belly.” The God was reborn in His solar aspect at Yule; He’s reborn at Imbolc in His animal and some plant aspects.

The Druids, you’ll remember, consider each goddess and god as individuals rather than as aspects of “the Goddess” and “the God.” Imbolc is, for them, the feast of the Goddess Brigit (and the Sonoran Sunrise Grove’s Kirk Thomas offers two variant spellings, *Brighid* and *Brid*). “She, as you know,” he says, “is a Goddess of fire, of hearth, healing, and metal working. She also has a strong fertility aspect, being the daughter of the Dagda. We celebrate Her festival as the first sign of spring and new life—Imbolc is nine months after Beltane, after all!”

(The Dagda, literally translated “the good god,” is usually depicted as “a man in rustic clothes, dragging an enormous club on wheels,” according to Arthur Cotterell’s *The Encyclopedia of Mythology* (Anness Publishing Limited, 1996). It was a formidable weapon, that club: One end could slay his enemies, of course; with the other, he could restore the dead to life. The Dagda is a lover—usually paired with the Morrigan—and a fighter, the leader of the Tuatha de Danaan in war. He’s associated with abundance, too, for he could feed everyone from his wondrous cauldron, one of the treasures of Ireland.)

For the Asatru, Frigga rules Imbolc. Frigga is “the life-giving mother who gives birth to Baldur, thus initiating the yearly cycle again,” Freya Aswynn says, in *Leaves of Yggdrasil* (Llewellyn, 1992). Northern mythology’s quite different from Wicca’s; there are nine distinct realms in the Asatru Otherworld, while in Wicca’s Celtic heritage, the Otherworld is less hierarchical. Yet, Aswynn assures us, at Imbolc, “A ritual kindling of the fire would be appropriate....”

Gamlinginn, an Asatru gothi (Priest), remarks that “the word Disablót is found in the old texts, but only as a Blót for the Disir at no particular time of the year.” But, he tells us, the Disablót, also called Disfest, is generally held on January 31st, coinciding with the Wiccan Sabbat of Imbolc.

By Imbolc, though it may not feel much warmer until we do kindle those fires, the lengthening of the day is evident. Astronomers have noticed that it's harder to see the stars now that our cities light up the night nearly as brightly as the Sun lights up the day. A lot of astronomy and optical work for the space program is done in Tucson, so our streetlights are shielded and our telescopes can see the night sky pretty well. But even in places where the stars are obscured, the days are noticeably longer by Imbolc.

Following this natural lead, the emphasis on our Imbolc celebrations is usually on light, rather than on heat—and to that end, many of us celebrate with candles or, now that we can, even with electric lights. (Yes, enough candles or electric lights will create a fair amount of heat; consider this sympathetic magic to encourage the Sun to get warmer as the year waxes.) The Sabbat's also called *Bride*, after the Goddess Brigid, and celebrated with fires and candles for Her sake—for the fires of the forge, the fires that brew healing medications, and the fires of inspiration—as well as for the Sun's.

As the days are getting longer, wild sprouts are pushing through the snow and fields are thawing and can be ploughed and made ready for seed. On the Wheel, a calendar that recognizes four seasons, it's the end of Winter and the beginning of Spring. Reckoning but two seasons, Imbolc's the third of the Winter Sabbats. No matter how you track it, though, the Wheel turns.



ore

Although Their sacred marriage (the *heiros gamos* that is celebrated in every Wiccan rite when an athame is used to consecrate Wine in a cup or chalice) is celebrated later in the Year, many Wiccan Traditions anticipate fertility at Imbolc.

Some of Imbolc's customs that have come down through the generations have to do with the "corn dolly or biddy." The first thing to realize here is that, in the British Isles, "corn" is what we'd call "wheat" or "grain," not the new-world crop of corn that developed from maize. So while, for Native Americans, a corn dolly might be a corn husk doll, in Britain and in Wicca, a corn dolly is a vaguely humanoid figure woven of wheat stalks.

You may have a corn dolly leftover from Lammas or Mabon. It's customary then to use a few stalks of wheat or other grain from the harvest—most properly, the last stalks to be cut—to weave a dolly. The seeds in the heads of these stalks are for planting in the Spring. Using the harvest dolly at Imbolc foreshadows the success of the coming crop even more strongly. Making an offering of the Lammas or Mabon dolly at Imbolc, along with the last of Winter's greenery, reinforces the relationship between harvest and planting seasons. At Imbolc, the New Year we've been celebrating since Samhain is clear enough to be visible in many ways, and making a new dolly for Spring recognizes this. (Traditionally, last year's dolly is burned, rather than buried or simply thrown out.)

Coming so early in the season, when it's too cold to plant in many places, and in most, too cold to cavort in the woods, Imbolc is a time when we can focus on courtship. One way we represent the courtship of the maiden-again Goddess and the precociously growing God is by putting representations of the Them in a specially-made "bed," which is then left before the fire or in some other significant place.

Our coven used a Bride Dolly and a beribboned Wand made from a curly-headed plant stalk. (See page 127 for some “small-c” craft ideas.) Now, in the old days, you left the bidy and the wand in the bed—in the ashes of the hearth fire!—and if, in the morning, you found the ashes disturbed, you could take it as a good sign for the coming year. But not everyone has a fireplace with ashes the Sacred Couple can leave in disarray, and not all of us leave ashes when we build fires at South. When we left the bidy and the wand alone overnight, we hoped to see them undisturbed the next day—if the small creatures that prowl our yards in the night (ranging from stray cats to ground squirrels, rabbits, and rats) respect their privacy, then, we believe, the Year’s crops and harvest will be good.

Thus, we all bring the old customs forward in new ways, and with new meanings. Through the generations, our lives change, and so do the ways we celebrate. It honors the Goddess and God when we remember what the Sabbats meant to our ancestors, or what the old customs meant to the first generation of Wiccans; it honors the God and Goddess and our ancestors when we adapt the old customs to our modern lives and understandings of the worlds. We can’t always use what we inherit the same way those who left it did. We still honor them, though, when we cherish what we inherit enough to find new ways of making it relevant in our lives.

One way we can carry on older customs is to save our leftover Yule greenery to burn at Imbolc. In addition, we can save a few leftover Yule wrappings for the Imbolc fire. It’s not a good idea to burn ribbons inside (or outside, in heavily polluted areas), but papers are usually safe. Some of them color the flames, too.

The idea behind burning leftover greenery is both symbolic and practical. Symbolically, it means that there’s enough new growth now to convince us that the Wheel has turned, so we can comfortably let last year’s growth go. In practical terms, by Imbolc, when we can enjoy the occasional breath of fresh air, the greenery’s served its purpose of pleasantly scenting the indoors, where perhaps the air has, while we’ve been cooped up inside, gotten a little stale. Until just a few generations ago, people believed that the strongly scented fir, pine, balsam, rosemary, and so on, not only sweetened the air, but purified it of germs. We know now this isn’t true, but, symbolically, we burn the Winter’s frustrations, annoyances, and fears with the greens.

Our coven gathered from all over the city, and not all of us could decorate with real greenery, so we always saved enough for everyone. During our ritual, each of us had a chance to feed a branch or two of the Yule tree, along with scraps of Yule wrapping paper, into the chiminea (a terra cotta fireplace) at our Circle's South. Because the mouth of the chiminea is relatively small, we had to take turns doing this, which made it a private mini-ritual for each of us. If we wanted to offer to the fire the remnants of our feud with Cousin Wilhelmina, or our disappointment about not getting that promotion, or the frustration of having gained a few pounds over the holidays, we could do so! Mostly, though, we found ourselves giving thanks—yes, even here in Arizona—that warmer weather was on its way around again, and celebrating Spring's return.

With the warmer and longer days, the snow begins to melt and we can come outside again. Alright, in most places we've been able to get outside when we need to—few of us are literally housebound all Winter. But most of us get at least a touch of cabin fever, and since the Fall we've been focused on “inside” work—coming back from vacations, getting back to school, planning for the holidays, and so forth.

We can stretch; we can run and gambol (as the newborn lambs do). Spring cleaning begins now: we can leave our doors and windows open for at least a little while without freezing the house; air the bedding and wash our clothes properly with some hope they'll dry! As we unfold ourselves from our hearths, adjust to the growing levels of light, and get back into outdoor work, we feel almost like new people. From what's going on in the natural world and in our own lives, we derive the main themes of Imbolc: the return of light, Spring cleaning (inside and out: our hearts and minds as well as our houses and yards), and rebirth—in lambing and calving and sprouting, and in our own initiations (of people and projects).

Despite our modern, technologically assisted lifestyles, we share with our ancestors a great joy when we notice Spring's return. Among our Asatru cousins, the Festival of Vali is a blot (pronounced to rhyme with boat) celebrating the restoration of order. (Vali sacrificed himself to avenge the slaying of Baldur, another and much-beloved god.) Disting-Tid, also known as the Charming of the Plow, is a closer equivalent to Imbolc, though.

Before you can plow the fields, you have to make sure your plough is in working order—its fastenings tight, its blade unruined and sharp. Blessing the plough ensured a good harvest, and honored the magical beings—smiths (and in Norse mythology these were dwarves)—who made the ploughs. Metalcraft was, for all of Wicca's ancestral cultures, a great gift from the Gods; iron ploughs worked more land more effectively than wooden ones. Plowing the ground brought the earth back to life again, and a charmed plough brings it back to even more abundant life.

Imbolc's not the only appropriate time to consecrate tools or to initiate people or projects, but it's a good time, just as the new Moon is a good time to work growing magic. The plough's entry into the earth and the plants' emergence from the earth both represent a special magic. It's in the earth that animals hibernate for the Winter, in the earth that seeds germinate—and in the earth that we bury (or used to) our loved ones to prepare them for reincarnation. At Imbolc, we witness the rebirth we profess.

When the plough opens the earth, it makes a womb of the tomb. When plants sprout, life emerges from the grave. In Wiccan Initiations, we die to our old lives and are reborn to new ones; our blindfolds are symbolic of our journey through the Underworld, paralleling the God's journey through death to rebirth. The plough opens the earth to light. The seedling bursts from darkness into light. As Initiates, we come from symbolic darkness to see our lives in a new light. And so, we celebrate Imbolc with light.

Rituals

Imbolc's a nice time to make a labyrinth with tea lights. You can imagine that this is a labor-intensive task—setting out a labyrinth is no easy thing to begin with, and lighting all the candles at just about the same time requires a lot of people with strong backs, who can bend over, rather than squat, to light the tea lights, because squatting down puts clothing and hair at risk of catching fire. But walking a candlelit labyrinth is truly magical.

Tea lights burn long enough for a solitary to make a smaller labyrinth—one that follows the same pattern, but with fewer turns—light it, take 5 minutes to ground and center, and then come back and see the lighted path as if for the first time. In the center, it's nice to put something special—a gazing ball, a specially scented candle, a bit of chocolate...whatever serves to encourage meditation.



Tea lights in paper bags make a dramatic nighttime labyrinth, this one at 2003's Pagan Unity Festival in Burns, Tennessee.

You can also use this same design, enlarged and traced on a piece of poster board or foam board, or painted or burned onto a nice piece of wood, to make a finger labyrinth.



Use this pattern to make your own labyrinth, with fewer turns if you like. Transfer it to the floor or the ground, onto a tabletop or tile, or into your Book of Shadows.

That's one you trace with your finger instead of walking. Finger labyrinths have a long history. The oldest ones, in stone, started out drawn (perhaps in chalk or charcoal) or delicately traced with chipping stones and have become engraved by the generations of fingertips that have traced them. They also have some advantages: Obviously, they take up less room than one big enough to walk; they're portable; and you can enjoy a lovely cup of tea in one hand while a finger of the other hand traces the path. (Tracing the

labyrinth path with a finger of your "other hand," your left hand if you're right handed, is also an interesting experience. Try it and see!)

A Labyrinth Walking Rhyme

*Round and round by left and right,
Spring turns from Winter as day turns from night.
I'm turning away from all worry and fright,
And turning around to walk in the light.*

Another way to celebrate Imbolc involves wielding a broom—remember, Imbolc is the beginning of Spring, and where better to start Spring cleaning than in our Circles? The first thing to be sure of is that the broom itself is clean, both physically and magically. Here's a Broom Blessing you can use, before and/or after you decorate the broom for the Sabbat.

Broom Blessing



*Staff and besom, tightly bound,
let no dross in you be found!
Let your twigs their buds recall;
your handle be a strength for all.
Be you worthy of the chore
of sweeping Earth's bewintered floor.*

Sprinkle the broom with salt and say,
 “Sweep clean and no ill retain!”
Pass the broom through incense and say,
 “No ill o'erlook; sweep clean!”
Pass the broom through fire and say,
 “Sweep clean, I ordain!”
Sprinkle the broom with water and say,
 “No corner forsook, sweep clean!”

Though some Traditions, covens, and solitaries use it routinely and some seldom, a broom is a tool, akin to a staff and a wand, and so it may be consecrated to its holy purpose, which is to rid a sacred space of any malice, ill will, or distraction. You may use the blessing to charge the broom with these responsibilities, or you may further consecrate it as you see fit.

Our coven had a 6-foot decorative broom decorated with early Spring garlands to commemorate its use in our Imbolc ritual. But a Witch's broom can be large or small, mundane or crafty, decorated or plain. Sometimes it's best to wait to decorate a broom (or any tool, for that matter) until you are inspired to do so, for doing it as an unimpassioned chore, or in a panic for fear of fouling up a ritual, will drain your power and the broom's.

Typically, an Imbolc rite involves sweeping the ritual space in a deosil spiral from the center to the outside of the Circle, and it's fitting to go around the Circle three, six, or nine times in honor of the Triple Goddess this holiday honors.

Imbolc marks the beginning of Spring, when, no matter how subtly, life begins to emerge from its Winter hibernation. Animals that have slept through the snow awaken; those that have gone South think of returning to their Northern homes. Early plants unwind from their seeds and bulbs, and trees begin to bud.

Icicles are melting and the ground is softening. The hours of daylight are noticeably longer. The Goddess resumes Her Maiden aspect, with all its sprightly energy. As She stretches to dance in the open air again, after Winter's confinements, She breathes endless possibility into the worlds. Earth is alive, and growth is afoot.

Not yet do we see the profusion of Summer, or even the exuberance of mid-Spring, but looking around, we realize that, before there can be such abundance, there must be the delicacy of beginning growth. The very name of this Sabbat reminds us that, before the meadow can be luxuriant with sheep, it must first be dotted with lambs. And before lambs dot the meadow, they must grow "in the belly."

Imbolc rituals often include a young woman wearing a crown of candles, acting the role of the Goddess in Her newly resumed Maiden aspect. (Such a crown can be made of birthday candles set in a tinfoil crown decorated with a metallic garland, or even with battery-powered mini-lights—the young woman playing the role of the Maiden can hold the battery pack hidden in a bouquet of silk or fresh flowers.) Here's a suggestion for covens that might like to perform such a ritual. It should be celebrated in Circle; in this case, beginning with the invocation of the Goddess, which is performed by the High Priest.

The Maiden's Return: An Imbolc Rite

For various reasons, many covens meet in the evening for Sabbats as well as for Esbats, but not all do. Our coven liked to celebrate Bride in the late morning, to take advantage of the daylight we were welcoming back. But this ritual is most effective in a darkened room or just after the sun has set.

For this ritual, the altar should be in the center of the Circle, or at the North Quarter. On the ground in front of the altar should be a cauldron. If it is a metal cauldron, a fire should be laid in it, large enough that the coveners will all be able to see the flames. If it is a

ceramic or plastic cauldron, it should contain a white, pale yellow, or pale green pillar candle tall enough to be seen over the rim of the cauldron.

Depending on how the coven chooses to finish this rite, you may also need upon the altar a single fresh or silk blossom attached to the middle of a 3- to 4-inch long piece of clear tape. This may later be attached to the cup or the athame, whichever tool the High Priestess uses in the consecration of Cakes and Ale. If possible, there should be a screen behind which the covener taking the role of the Maiden Goddess can stand concealed as the Circle is cast and the rite begins, and behind which she can disappear later, so that she can, at certain times, be out of sight of the Circle.

The covener portraying the Goddess in Her Maiden aspect should be dressed in white or pale yellow or green, or some combination of these colors, and she should be wearing a veil under her crown of lights. If she is wearing a crown of real candles, there should be some plastic wrap, or even artfully arranged tin foil, between her veil and her hair to forestall any accidents. (Remember the First Practical

Rule of Wicca: *Do not set the Priestess(es) on fire!*) Her crown should be lit just moments before she is to appear to the coven.

She may be carrying a bouquet (fresh or silk) of early yellow and white flowers and budding stems—pussy willows, forsythia, daffodils, and so on, and needs to carry a wand decorated with ribbons, faux pearls, and similar flowers. It is particularly effective if silk flowers tip the wand, and are filled with glitter or confetti;

if you do this, make sure she holds the wand upright until she needs to spill the glitter or confetti.

The High Priest invokes the Goddess, saying, “Gracious Goddess, You resume today Your maidenhood. Forgotten are the pains



of Winter! Light is Your step, delicate is Your touch. We invoke You, Bride, in the aspect of innocence and wonder. In the spark of Your newness, we invoke You, and ask You to be with us in our Circle to celebrate this rite in Your honor.”

The covener playing the part of the Maiden Goddess steps to the Northeast of the Circle and waits.

The High Priest says, “Though the memory of Winter is still strong with us, that season is passing.” He lights the fire or a candle in the cauldron in front of the altar and says, “I light the fire of Spring to show you that the Wheel has turned. Today we celebrate the return of Spring, the restoration light; today we welcome the Goddess of Spring. Huzzah!” (The assembled coveners repeat his cheer.)

“From the Northeast, through the Door of our Circle, the Door of the World, the Goddess returns as a Maiden, and we greet Her gladly and most sincerely! Hail, Maiden, and welcome!” As the rest of the coven echoes the welcome (“Hail, Maiden! Welcome, Maiden!”), the High Priest strides dramatically from the altar to the Northeast and cuts a door as theatrically as possible.

The Maiden Goddess enters the Circle. (She may be attended by female coveners, especially if Her veil is long and can be carried.) She moves gracefully to the altar, where the High Priest welcomes Her, anointing Her with oil, saying, “I anoint You, Goddess, in Your own name, and bless You with the love of this coven.” If the Maiden is carrying both a bouquet and a wand, one in each hand, She now transfers one item so She is temporarily holding them in the same hand. The High Priest then kisses Her on Her free hand, as romantic gentlemen do in old movies. She nods to him in acknowledgment, and then She turns once in place, deosil, surveying the altar, the Circle decorations, and the coven. She may want to make this moment a bit suspenseful.

“You have made the world well ready for my return!” She exclaims, when She is satisfied, “and I will share with you my blessings!” She touches the High Priest with her wand, letting a bit of any glitter or confetti it holds fall upon his head or shoulders.

Now the Maiden Goddess moves to the edge of the Circle, and waves Her wand over each covener in turn, or touches each one

with it, as She passes them in an elegant deosil circuit. If there is confetti or glitter in the flowers, tipping the wand should cascade a little bit over each covener, so that Her blessings are visible. As the Maiden blesses each covener, She says, “Feel no more of Winter’s chill, but feel now the stirrings of Spring in your heart; and bring the hope of Spring into the world as I do.”

The Maiden Goddess returns to the altar, and will consecrate the Cakes and Ale with the High Priest, or will hand the athame (or the cup) to the High Priestess, attaching a single flower to its hilt (or stem) as She does so, to convey her authority on the Priestess.

If the covener portraying the Maiden Goddess hands the athame or the cup to the High Priestess to consecrate the Cakes and Ale, She will then move deosil around the Circle until She reaches the North-east, where she will remain for the rest of the rite. She partakes of Cakes and Ale as an ordinary covener.

When the Cakes and Ale have been consecrated and shared, the High Priest offers a last sip of Ale and a last bite of Cake to the Maiden Goddess, and thanks Her for Her blessing upon the coven, and bids Her hail and farewell. As they did when he welcomed Her, the coven echoes his salute of “Hail and farewell!” and “Go in peace and blessed be!” He cuts another door for Her, and She leaves the Circle. The covener playing this role continues away till She can no longer be seen, and when She has disappeared, the High Priest and High Priestess thank the God and conclude the Circle in their usual way.

Of course, not everyone celebrates the Sabbats with a coven. A solitary Wiccan can certainly make a candle crown, but unless she or he is working in front of mirrors (not impossible!) he or she won’t be able to see or appreciate the effect of the candle crown. There are aspects of the Returning Maiden rite that a solitary can very well appreciate, though, so here’s a variation.

Although a female solitary could well take the role of the Maiden Goddess, it’s not appropriate for a male solitary to do so. This version of the Returning Maiden rite, therefore, uses a large and beautifully decorated candle to represent Her. As this candle will be so large that it will burn a tea-light-sized well in itself, rather than melting down as it burns, you can decorate it more lavishly than if the

decorations were going up in flames. Set the candle on a wooden or ceramic plate, or place it in a cauldron in front of the altar.

The altar can be in the center or at the North, according to your preference. Upon it you will need a flowery wand, and if you can arrange to fill the blossoms with confetti or glitter, do so! You will also need a single fresh blossom—don't use a silk one here, for it will float in your cup when you consecrate the Cakes and Ale. Another nice but optional touch is to cover the candle with a dark veil (symbolizing Winter) until you are ready to light it.

After you have cast the Circle as you usually do (or according to the directions in Appendix A), invoke the Goddess, saying, "Gracious Goddess, You resume today Your maidenhood. Forgotten are the pains of Winter! Light is Your step, delicate is Your touch. I invoke You, Bride, in the aspect of innocence and wonder. In the spark of Your newness, I invoke You, and ask You to be with me in my Circle to celebrate this rite in Your honor."

Remove the veil from the candle. Say, "Though the memory of Winter is still strong with me, that season is passing." Light the candle and say, "I therefore light the Fire of Spring to affirm that the Wheel has turned. Today I celebrate the return of Spring, the restoration light. Today I welcome the Goddess of Spring. Huzzah!"

Now lift the candle (on its tray or in the cauldron) and carry it to the Northeast of your Circle. Say, "From the Northeast, through the door of the world, the Goddess returns as a Maiden, and ushers in the Spring. Hail, Maiden, Hail, Spring, and welcome!"

Raise the candle above your head (being quite careful not to drip wax in your face). Say, "I have made the world well ready for Your return and for Your blessings!" Carry the candle back to its place before the altar, and set it down. (If there is room on your altar, and you'd rather, set it on the altar instead.)

Now pick up the wand, and move deosil to the East. Make a pentagram in the air with the wand (allowing a bit of glitter or confetti to spill from it) and say, "Blessed be the East with Springtime's inspiration!" Move to the South, make the sign of the pentagram and spill a bit more glitter or confetti, and say, "Blessed be the South with Springtime's joy." Move on to the West, make the sign of the pentagram

again, let a little more glitter or confetti fall, and say, “Blessed be the West with Springtime’s innocence.” Now move to the North, make the sign of the pentagram, let the rest of the glitter or confetti sprinkle from the wand’s tip, and say, “Blessed be the North with Springtime’s fertility.” Walk back to the East and make the sign of the spiral (move the tip of the wand three times around deosil), and say, “So mote it be; the Maiden Goddess has spoken.”

Return the wand to the altar. Pick up the candle again, and hold it toward the North. Say, “Now I feel no more of Winter’s chill, and within my heart Spring stirs.” Carry the candle to the East, and say, “I shall bring the hope of Spring into the world as the Goddess has brought it to me.” Carry the candle deosil around the Circle and back to the altar.

If you have not done so already, pour your “Ale” into your cup. Pick up the single blossom from the altar. Sprinkle it with the barest amount of the salt and water, pass it through the incense smoke, and finally, pass it through both the Goddess candle on your altar *and* the Spring candle’s flame. Say, “Blessed by salt and blessed by sea, blessed by Goddess-breath and Fires, this blossom brings the Spring to me, and with the Spring my Ale inspires.” Now let the blossom fall into the cup, and proceed with your consecration of the Cakes and Ale.

When you have partaken of the Ale and the Cakes, drop a crumb into the Spring candle’s wax well, and anoint the candle with a fingertip of Ale. Say, “Gracious Goddess, in Your restoration of Spring to the world, Winter’s pains are forgotten. Light is my step, delighted is my heart. I thank You, Bride, for blessing me with Your spark of the Maiden’s newness. As I have paid You honor in my Circle, I now bid You hail, and farewell.”

If you can safely leave the Spring (Maiden) candle to burn itself out, do so. Otherwise, wave it out with your hand, or dip your thumb and forefinger in the salt and water, and pinch the flame out. Recover the candle with its veil, and close the Circle in your usual way.

You will notice that I have not provided rhyming invocations for this ritual. At Imbolc, it is more appropriate for you to write your own. Let Maiden energy inspire you!

Welcoming the Maiden: A Solitary's Imbolc Ritual

For this ritual, you can use the Sun candle left over from the Rite of the Sun's Rebirth, or get a new gold or yellow candle, but the one you choose needs to be at least 3 inches in diameter, and 6 inches tall is a good height. You will also need a smaller white candle. The white one, too, can be a pillar, but it must be smaller in diameter and shorter in length than the Sun candle. A packet of yellow or white birthday candles would be a nice addition, but it's optional. Don't forget something with which to light the candles.

Set your altar at the East, and decorate it with white or pale yellow flowers and pale green leaves (silk is fine), garlands, or ribbons. Your Cakes should be sweet; if you don't make the Imbolc Lemon Goodies (page 129), use something frosted or sugared. Wear a white robe, and if you're a female, a white scarf or veil is a nice touch; men might like to dress up with a white headband.

As you prepare the salt and water, light the Sun candle and set it on or in front of your altar. (If you have birthday candles available, carefully melt the bottoms of several of them, one at a time, and arrange them at an angle around the top of the Sun candle, so that they make a ring inside which the white candle will fit later.) When you've called the Quarters, invoke the Gods. Here are invocations you can use if you haven't written your own:

*Maiden Goddess, child renewed,
with innocence and youth imbued,
I invoke You and all Spring's virtue,
and with my rite I honor You.*

*Youthful God, oh sprout renewed,
growing Sun of Springtime mood,
I invoke You and Your waxing glow,
by this rite to honor show.*

Light the white (Maiden) candle from the Sun candle. Carry the white candle around the Circle, welcoming the Maiden at each Quarter.

At East, raise the candle and say, "Welcome, Maiden, from the East, bright of eye and clear of thought."

At South, say, "Welcome, Maiden, from the South, and the passion that You've brought."

At West, say, "Welcome, Maiden, from the West, and the trust You demonstrate."

At North, say, "Welcome, Maiden, from the North, and the fertility You anticipate."

When you come back to North, set the white candle into the well of the Sun candle (without extinguishing the Sun candle first) and say, "As the Springtime now begins, and the world sheds Winter skins, so the Goddess youth reclaims, and declares Herself in flames!" (If you have arranged birthday candles around the Sun candle, light them now.)

Pick up the piggy-backed candles and carry them around the Circle once more. Stop at each Quarter and say, simply, "Hail, Maiden, and welcome!" Carry the candle set fully around the Circle and set it down at the East. Then proceed to consecrate your Cakes and Ale, and complete the rite "in the usual way."

*Maiden Goddess, child renewed,
with innocence and youth imbued,
Farewell I bid You, if go You must,
in perfect love and perfect trust.*

*Youthful God, oh sprout renewed,
growing Sun of Springtime mood,
Farewell I bid You, if go You must,
in perfect love and perfect trust.*

(The invocations and blessings in this ritual already rhyme because that Maiden energy got into my fingers!)

The Imbolc Vow

We have all dreamed and planned through the Winter; now it is time to deliver those dreams and plans into reality. No matter how small the first steps we take toward realizing our dreams, they are important steps, and we must make them. The lamb just dropped certainly can't take to the high mountain pastures yet, but she does not let this stop her from rising to her feet. Our plans may be too grand or complicated to achieve quickly, but we must not let this stop us from taking the first steps toward our goals.

The Imbolc Vow turns what we might fear to be self-indulgence into a sacred promise to the God and Goddess. Take this vow before a candle you've made yourself, or in the chilly dawn of an Imbolc morning as soon as you can see the sun.

The Vow

The Wheel turns again and Spring returns.

Warmer's the rain; Sun brighter burns.

The daring sprout its thrusts does make;

And I, devout, so undertake.

From the belly, from the mind,

Imbolc's spell as a vow shall bind.

*What once I sought I now shall bring,
and make, from thought, a certain thing.*

Activities

As we know, Imbolc rituals often involve a corn dolly (really a wheat dolly), or “Biddy,” and a phallic Wand, set together in a “bed” near a real or symbolic fireplace to invoke and encourage the Year’s fertility and creativity. Making the Biddy and decorating the Wand and the Bed are pleasant activities that the whole family can enjoy—as a folk custom (when acknowledging it as religious it will be contentious).

A Bride Dolly

If you have stalks of grain, you can use them to fashion your new dolly—but not many of us do have grain left over, so if you can’t find wheat stalks at a craft shop, you can use raffia instead. Sometimes you can find already-braided segments, and you need two or three of them to fashion a dolly.

To make one of raffia, leaving some fringe at each end, braid two sections, one heftier and longer than the other; fasten the ends with rubber bands, or tie them with string or yarn. Fold the bigger one over, so that the braided section can be the Biddy’s head and torso. The shorter, thinner braid will cross between the stands of the braid, and form the arms. Using a bit more raffia (a different color is fine), tie the pieces together securely. You should have a bit



Making a raffia Bride Dolly is easy, as long as you have rubber bands or ties close at hand.

of fringe at the end of each “arm” and a longer, thicker fringe to make the Biddy’s skirt.

Now you can dress the biddy. Make a small garland of tiny silk flowers (the ones they sell in the bridal section of craft stores are good for this, and the narrow cloth ribbons that come decorated with tiny ribbon flowers are appropriate, too) for her head. Make her a shawl or a cape of pretty scraps of lace, and fasten it with a pretty pin or with a faux jewel glued in place. You can, if you like, add lacy or floral decorations to her skirt as well.

The Wand

You hardly need directions for this. You can use a wide range of materials: the cardboard core of a paper towel roll, a drumstick, and various dried plant materials. Ideally, one end will be slightly larger than the other—this is a phallic symbol, after all—but you must use your own discretion about how obvious to be. The ends of the wand can be distinguished just as easily by decoration. Twining green and white ribbon up the stem and tying a bow at the top is fine. Some people like to glue a pine cone to one end of the wand stem, and that’s fine too. The only cautions I will offer is to mind that nobody puts an eye out with it, and to keep the Wand proportionate to the Dolly, rather than vastly smaller or larger.

The Bride Bed

In most of our rites, after preparing the ritual space, we invite the Goddess and God to join our Circle. In addition to showing respect to our deities, this is another expression of the hospitality that is so important in the Celtic cultures from which Wicca developed. When we make a Bride Dolly and a Wand, we’re inviting the Goddess and God to bless us at Imbolc, and we must then also offer Them the hospitality of our homes and hearths. To do this, many Wiccans make a Bride Bed.

Just as there are many ways we can accommodate our overnight guests on the material plane—on the living room couch, on a sofa bed in the den, or in a guest room—there are many ways to make a Bride Bed. How you make yours will depend in part on the size of your Dolly and Wand. Anything from decorated shoe boxes to furniture-like constructions from twigs or hand-worked wood will do.

Our coven used a flat, oval flower basket, its handle decorated with ribbons, bits of faux fir swags, silk buds, and tiny decorative birds. Every year we redressed our Bidy, and freshened up the Bride Bed. We didn't always have a fireplace at the covenstead, so our custom was to set the Bride Bed at the South Quarter of our Circle. (Kitties don't intend any disrespect, and I'm sure the Gods don't take offense when Their symbols become cat toys, but even when we moved to a covenstead that did have a fireplace, we continued to place the Bride Bed in the Circle, where the kitties wouldn't be able to disturb it.)

Candles are another important feature of many Imbolc celebrations. Following are a few candle-oriented activities that the whole coven or family can share; solitaires can enjoy them too. (Read on and you'll find another idea for making a Bride Dolly, and a Wand to keep her company—out of candles!)

Blessing the Cakes' Ingredients

Before we get started on any projects, let's make sure we have some snacks on hand. Here's a little blessing for the ingredients—which will, of course, work for the ingredients of any recipe, for any Sabbat:

*Milk and egg, flour and spice,
Harvest grains and willing meat:
Blend ye all to scoop and slice,
Make the food that I [or we] will eat.
Blessed by reverence, shared with mirth,
Affirm the promise of rebirth.
Pinch and measure, dish and meal,
Cook with my love, and turn the Wheel!*

Imbolc Lemon Goodies

Wiccans do consecrate and share Cakes and Ale in ritual, but we appreciate feasts almost any time, and (small-c) crafting can also build up an appetite. Here's a recipe for what we call Imbolc Lemon Goodies:

(You can get a box mix for lemon bars, and they even come in fat-free versions, and there's nothing wrong with using a prepackaged mix. You still have to put some energy into its preparation, so it's not completely impersonal; even the goodies you buy from the grocery or

the bakery require your time and attention to select and serve. But they don't scent the house with such wonderful smells, and, no matter how good they are, they never taste quite as good as homemade.)

This recipe is modified slightly from one we found in *200+ Recipes for Longer Life*, by Gloria Rose (Avery Publishing Group, Inc., 1994). We like this cookbook. When Canyondancer had his heart attack, we cleared our shelves of any cookbooks that didn't include the recipes' "numbers"—calories, fat, cholesterol, fiber, protein, sodium, etc. *200+* is one of the several we got to fill our shelves up again, and it's one of our favorites. Here's our variation on "lemon mousse bars":

Sprinkle one 1/4-ounce envelope of unflavored gelatin into 1/3 cup of fresh lemon juice—this softens the gelatin. When it is soft, add 1/3 cup of brown rice syrup, 1/4 cup of an egg substitute, the grated peel of one lemon, and 2 teaspoons of cornstarch. Whisk until the lumps are gone.

Once it's "lumpless," cook over low heat until it thickens. Then dump it into a food processor (use the metal blade); add 1/2 cup of part-skim, no-salt ricotta cheese; and blend it until smooth. In the meantime, whip the whites of 2 eggs until they form stiff peaks. When the egg whites are stiff and the lemon mixture is smooth, gently combine the two completely.

In the bottom of an 8 × 5-inch loaf pan, sprinkle some branny cereal and then drizzle some apple juice concentrate over the cereal. Spoon the lemon mixture into the pan. Refrigerate for at least 3 hours—longer is better—and then cut it into at least 12 bars.

(The numbers for this one are pretty good. Per serving there are 43 calories, which includes not quite 1 gram of fat, just 6 grams of carbs, only 29 milligrams of sodium, and 3 milligrams of cholesterol. Canyondancer and I love it when we don't have to break our low-cholesterol, low-fat diet, even though we're willing to for the Sabbats.)

These make good, if a bit gooey, Cakes for your Circle, and of course (wink, wink) it's only right that you should make at least one batch ahead of time, just to make sure they'll be perfect. Once you've made them—hot tea is really good with them, by the way—you can snack on them while you work on some Imbolc crafts.

Making Candles

This can be a very messy business, so be sure to spread out newspapers, or inexpensive plastic table cloths, on the tables, countertops, or floors where you're working, and don't wear your best clothes—or put a smock over them.

Poured Candles

You can buy candle-making kits at craft stores, and you can buy everything you need separately, as well. Candle molds come in a variety of shapes and sizes, and a wide range of wicking is available as well. We've always found it more fun to find pretty glasses and glass or ceramic jars at thrifts shops. Remember: If the mouth of the container is smaller than the body, the candle stays in the container; if the mouth is as wide as or wider than the body of the container, the candle can come out. If you plan on taking the candle out of the container you're using as a mold, be sure to lightly spray the inside of the container with non-stick cooking spray.



These homemade candles include some multicolored candles poured into glasses, some poured into paper cups, and some rolled from beeswax.

We position lengths of cloth or wire wicking in the center of the candle container, suspended across the top on a shish kebob skewer. For wax, we save candle stubs all year, and melt them in double boilers, also from the thrift (or craft) shop. (If you haven't any candles in a color you'd like to work with, or if your candles only had a layer of color on the outside, you can use melted crayons to tint your white wax, or intensify or even blend other colors.)

You don't want to let children pour the hot wax themselves, of course, but they can certainly choose what containers they want to use, and what color wax. If you pour about 1/2 inch (or less) of wax at a time, it dries relatively quickly, so that another layer, perhaps in another color, can be added. If you swirl the container (gently, so as not to displace the wick too badly) you'll end up with layers of delicate color along the side.

We always enjoyed making "treasure candles." All year, we'd collect pretty stones, tiny bells, miniature figurines, carved beads, pretty buttons, sequins, metallic confetti shapes, and other such things. Then at Imbolc, we'd set them between the layers of our candles as we poured them. It's lots of fun to make a set of Quarter candles for each upcoming Sabbat, too.

Rolled Candles

Many craft shops sell sheets of beeswax, usually about 9 × 12 inches. These sheets come in several colors; to us, white, pale yellow, and pale green seem most appropriate for Imbolc, as these are the shades of melting snow and budding sprouts. You can make slender 12-inch candles or fatter 9-inch candles with whole sheets, or by cutting the sheets, make smaller ones. Just position a length of wick along one edge, and roll carefully from there.

You can combine two or more sheets to make plump two- or three-color candles. When you make multicolored candles, you can shape the top edge of the outside sheet of wax, or cut see-through patterns in it, for more decoration and to let the other layers of color show through. You can glue other decorations onto finished beeswax candles, but you need to fill the little cells with a dab of glue before you affix the decoration.

It's easy to turn these rolled beeswax candles into treasure candles, too. You can lay the "treasure" anywhere along the length of the candle, but confine them to the first three or four rolls so that the bump they make can be disguised by the outer layers. Another good thing about rolling candles is that kids can do it too—safely, if not always effectively.

Decorating Candles

If you don't mind a bit of mess, young children can enjoy this activity, too; any children who are still tasting everything they touch need very careful supervision, though. Because it doesn't involve burning the candles, it's safe for most children. Wearing old clothes is a good idea, and long-sleeved shirts from the thrift shop, worn back to front, make excellent smocks. Preschoolers have a dandy time with this, and of course, it's perfectly alright for older people to enjoy it as well.

White "emergency candles" are good for this project for several reasons. They're available in more stores, they're less expensive than votives, pillars, or tapers—and they're not tapered, which means they roll more smoothly, and take other decorations more easily.

You also need white glue and decorations. Glitter; small faux jewels; strings of tiny faux pearls; small silk, paper, or ribbon flowers; narrow satin ribbon; yarn; and even fabric paints are good for this project. The bottles of fabric paint with long, thin necks are easier to use, though you may need a pin or a toothpick to keep them from clogging.

To glitter a candle, spread a thin layer of glitter on a paper plate. Leaving the bottom inch clean, "anoint" the candle with glue and roll it across the plate. Now you can set it in a candle holder while it dries.

To decorate a candle with other materials, dab the glue on the back of the faux jewel or flower, or dab it on one of every 3 to 5 pearls on the string, or at 1/2-inch intervals along the ribbon. If you're applying individual decorations, work on one side at a time, and lay the candles on wax paper, decorated side up, to dry. Candles wound with ribbon or a string of faux pearls should also be laid on wax paper to dry.

With fabric paint, be careful not to apply it too thickly; it could run and spoil the design. Leave an inch or so at the bottom of the candle undecorated, so you can put it in a candle holder to dry. (If you're not using "emergency candles," and you have a pair of candles connected by the wick, you can hang them over your shower curtain rod to dry.)

Candle Wands and Dollies

It's not all that uncommon for Wiccans to update and combine old customs to create new ones. While some folks think it's disrespectful of the old ways to do so, others (myself included) think it shows great respect to make older traditions even more meaningful, and to understand the symbolism well enough to express it in original ways. In that spirit, here's an idea for combining the traditional Biddu with Wicca's love of Imbolc candles.

Use a sheet of white beeswax for your dolly, and a sheet of yellow or pale green for the Wand (they usually come in about 9 × 12-inch sheets). Roll the dolly's candle from the short side of the sheet; roll the Wand candle from the long side and a little more tightly. The Wand should be taller and a little thinner than the dolly. Decorate the Wand with faux crystals, clear or green, or with small silk leaves. Decorate the dolly candle with lace and other pretty scraps, just as you might decorate a wheat or raffia biddu.

You might like to include in each one a small "treasure," something to symbolize the Goddess in the dolly candle and the God in the wand candle. Shells, faux pearls, and faux gems are suitable to roll into the dolly; coins, thorns (for protection), and tiny pine or fir cones, and so on, are appropriate for the wand candle.

Set the two candles 1 to 2 inches apart (the closer together you set them, the greater the chance that the flame of one will reach the wax of the other) on a fire-proof surface—your hearth, a cement patio, a tile, an iron trivet, a cookie sheet—and let them burn down together.

When you burn any of the candles you make, be aware that the decorations will burn too. Glitter melts, and faux jewels will just fall off. Faux pearls and fabric paint may melt *and* fall off. Ribbon may burn, so it's best to burn ribbon-decorated candles outdoors, on

flame-retardant surfaces, protected from the wind. Even though there's not usually much fire danger at Imbolc, it's best to err on the side of caution. If little children think their candles are too pretty to burn, that's okay, too—wrap them in wax paper, and then in tissue, and save them with other mementos. Maybe you'll bring them out annually and they can decorate the Imbolc feast table for years to come!

Some people use battery-powered candles, and those, too, can be decorated. Unscrew the base and take the batteries and bulbs out; cover the top and bottom with masking tape squeezed together over the ends, and carry on. These can become family heirlooms, too, without any danger of their melting or going crooked in the closet; and if you use them as Quarter candles for your Imbolc rite, you won't have to worry about their blowing out!

Although many Imbolc rites call for the use of candles, it's not always feasible to light large numbers of them. If you don't have the opportunity to show the Sun how it's done with real flame, try using candle fingers instead!

Candle Fingers

Candle fingers offer a way for even toddlers to join in a celebration of Imbolc without risking any harm from actual flames. Preschool children will be able to sing the song and learn the dance—and it's okay if older people, including grown-ups, want to sing and dance too. With a little help, people whose movement is restricted can modify this project and activity; it works even if you're confined to a wheelchair or bed and can only move your fingers a little.

To make candle fingers, you need little white stretch gloves, one pair for each person; one square of yellow felt and one square of orange felt for every two people (or yellow and red, or red and orange), scissors, craft glue (be sure it will work on fabric/felt—read the label), and, optionally, sequins and glitter.

For each set of gloves, cut out 20 large flame shapes from orange felt and 20 small flame shapes from yellow felt. Glue the yellow shapes onto the orange shapes and let dry. When they are dry, glue on sequins and/or glitter if you're using any. When dry, glue one compound flame shape to each side of each finger of each glove. Once the gloves are dry, you're ready to do the candle finger dance!



Everyone might like to have a pair of candle finger gloves if the Imbolc rite is held outdoors on a chilly day!

The candle finger song is sung to the tune of “Goddess Loves Me,” and goes like this:

Out of darkness comes the light;
Just like daytime comes from night.
And as Spring’s return we feel
My candles help to turn the Wheel.

Sing the first line with your candle fingers behind your back. Cross your hands across your chest while you sing the second line. Raise your hands over your head on the third line, and on the fourth line, wave your hands or wiggle your fingers and turn around in place. If there are enough people dancing, stand in a circle, and to make the dance even more active, take a side-step to the left at the end of the last line. (Stepping to the left lets the circle move to the right, deosil or “sunwise.”)

Symbols

Our symbols for Imbolc will vary slightly from region to region, just as the weather does. In some climates, daffodils bloom around Imbolc; in others, they don't bloom until closer to Ostara. And our individual experience of Spring influences what symbols we recognize, too. If you're a solitary, you should work as much with the symbols that are meaningful to you as you do with those that are common to most Wiccan Traditions. (You should, of course, be familiar with every Sabbat's symbols-in-common, for they connect your individuality with the whole of Wiccandom and the Craft more broadly.)



Though neither Anglo nor Celtic, Pan's a familiar symbol of Imbolc's happy cavorting, too.

Broom

The broom is, of course, a symbol of Wicca generally. I associate it with Imbolc particularly because it's my Tradition's custom—borrowed years ago from a book I can no longer identify—to sweep our ritual Circle at Imbolc.

Now the Wiccan calendar recognizes Spring as a season unto itself; in the days of yore that this book recalls, it was Winter through Ostara, until the other season, Summer, began at Beltane. As Winter begins to fade at Imbolc, it's time to begin cleaning Wintery things aside to make room for Spring's and Summer's approach—and for Wiccans, cleaning begins and ends with a broom.

The broom anticipates Summer's fertility and abundance in this way: the broomstick represents the phallus, and the besom (the bushy part) represents the female genitalia. Together, they form a useful tool, which isn't literally fertile, but which facilitates creativity in the world.

Burrowing Animals

We can associate burrowing animals with Imbolc because many of them surface around Imbolc. They live underground year-round, but stick closer to their burrows during the Winter. Metaphorically womb-like, burrows are warm and dry, and mostly safe, and in them are stored plenty of seeds for those half-waking moments of hunger that can interrupt hibernation. An animal's emergence corresponds with the Sun's light coming back into the world, growing since Yule.

There's a secular correspondence, too: Groundhog Day! As most of us know, if the groundhog sees his (or her) shadow, it predicts another six weeks of Winter. Six weeks from Imbolc brings us quite close to Ostara, by which time, in most places, Spring is well and truly sprung, and Winter's really ending.

Candles

Candles are symbolic in many ways—and of all the Sabbats, too, but most especially of Imbolc. Obviously, their flames represent the spark of life, or creativity; the little flame in the darkness represents hope, too, and faithfulness, and safety. Made from beeswax, the candle itself can represent beauty, purity, and even the industry that bees symbolize. (For the Anglo-Saxons, bees were also symbols of “the Wyrð Sisters,” aspects of a triple Goddess who are a little like a combination of Norns—the Fates—and Valkyries, who escort souls to their destinies.)

We can make much more of candles, though, because whether we make them or buy them, we both choose their colors and scent or anoint them with oils; the colors and the oils have their own meanings, which we can transfer to the candles.

Colors and Scents

Nearly every book about Wicca includes a set of correspondences and this one is no exception. There are some things you should

remember about any correspondence chart. The meanings assigned in any category vary—usually only slightly from Tradition to Tradition, but more significantly from culture to culture. Use this chart as a starting point. Take notes in your journal, and if colors and scents have different meanings for you, work with those as well as with the conventional correspondences.

It's said that smell is the most powerful of our senses when it comes to evoking memories and impressions. Even smells we can't quite identify can inspire us to recall places, voices, faces, events, and moods. Some are common to many of us. For instance, lavender and roses are "old lady" scents, and the smell of certain furniture polishes often evokes libraries or colleges. But precisely because scent is so strongly associated with our personal experiences, what it symbolizes for each of us can be quite different. One reason Wiccans rely on correspondence charts is to make it easier to understand each other and for our work to be complementary.

| | Love | Protection | Health | Prosperity |
|----------------------------|-------------|-------------------|---------------|-------------------|
| C O L O R S | red | black | green | green |
| | pink | brown | red | gold |
| | lavender | green | blue | silver |
| S C E N T S | rose | bay | sage | cinnamon |
| | peach | wintergreen | mint | pine |
| | strawberry | licorice | sandalwood | almond |

Lambs

In some understandings, lambs symbolize gentleness and innocence, and that's fine; but lambs are also well-known for gamboling across grassy pastures, kicking up their heels and prancing about. For Wiccans, lambs are symbols of the cute and fluffy, of innocence and of youthful energies. In the early Spring, it's appropriate to symbolize our God as a lamb—so long as we remember that lambs

do mature, and the males become rams, just as our God matures and takes on the more assertive and lusty aspects we associate with male sheep. Nothing stays cute and cuddly forever, which is, actually, one of the main points of celebrating the seasons.

Hearts and Flowers

We celebrate Imbolc just a couple of weeks before Valentine's Day, and some Traditions reckon that Wiccan holidays are a couple of weeks early (due to some secular calendar fumbles centuries ago), so it's quite common for Imbolc festivities to share some of Valentine's symbols. Hearts and flowers are the best known.

People used to think that the heart was the seat of human intelligence and the home of the soul. Most of us acknowledge now that the brain is where our mental activity takes place, but most of us still associate the heart with our emotions, even though we know that, at the Newtonian level, feelings originate in the brain, too. "Brain and flowers" or "brain and soul" doesn't have the same ring to it, though.

So the heart—and not an anatomically correct rendering, either, but the familiar ♥ (which is a symbol in its own right)—symbolizes love and other passions. We've trivialized it in modern times—we've all seen bumper stickers proclaiming that the driver ♥s his hometown, or her dog, or the local sports team. For Wiccans, the ♥ can mean even more. It can symbolize our love for the Goddess and God, and for the Craft, and of course, the love we hope to attract and keep in our lives.

"The language of flowers" isn't just the floral industry's marketing ploy, though florists take advantage of it the way the greeting card makers play on our sentiments with the heart symbol. The language of flowers has been part of our culture since Victorian times, and, for Wiccans, extends to herbs as well. A whole book about the symbolic meanings of flowers and other plants—herbs, trees, wild grasses, roots, and even mushrooms—wouldn't exhaust the subject, but there are some commonly accepted associations that many Wiccans use. The following list is an example.

| Flower | Old Significance | Wiccan Associations |
|--------------------|-------------------------|---|
| almond | hope | calmness, prosperity |
| bay | honor | strength, prosperity |
| blue violets | faithfulness | healing, love, luck |
| broom | humility | protection |
| cyclamen | diffidence, caution | serenity, protection |
| daisy | innocence | cheer |
| forget-me-not | remembrance | intellect |
| ivy | fidelity | health, protection |
| lavender | emotionally valuable | serenity, protection, love, travel |
| lily of the valley | return of happiness | ease, intellect |
| morning glory | affection | emotional comfort |
| myrtle | peace | love, prosperity |
| pansy | thought | intellect |
| periwinkle | friendship | intellect |
| poppy | divination | love, lust |
| primrose | youth | love, protection |
| purple hyacinth | sorrow | love, protection, psychic skill |
| red or pink rose | love | beauty, love, prophecy protection |
| rosemary | remembrance | beauty, healing, love, prophecy, protection |
| snowdrop | consolation | purification |
| tulip | love | love, prosperity, protection |
| yellow rose | jealousy | joy |
| white rose | silence | fertility, purity |

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Ostara



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On the equator, at the moment of both the Vernal (Spring) and Autumnal (Autumn or Fall) Equinox, the lengths of night and day are equal. In Latin, that's what the word *equinox* means: equal (*equi*) night (*nox*). Humans have been aware for thousands of years that light and darkness balance at the Equinoxes; this balance, and, by extension, the balance of other aspects of our lives, have long been a focus of Spring rituals.

My coven celebrated Ostara with another coven for many years, and the Ostara rituals they created for us generally involved crossing a line from the Winter side of our Circle to the Spring side—from the “dark” to the “light,” from the contemplative to the active. Once or twice we stepped through a Bride's Belt—woven from the previous year's meadow grasses, and fastened into a circle big enough for us to step through, one at a time. Most years, the Priest stood as guardian to make crossing the line a bit difficult—to make us work to bring light from darkness. Against him, it was sometimes hard, literally, to keep our balance (but he usually caught us if we started to fall). As we made it past him, we joined him, so that the last person to come across the Circle had the hardest time!

Though Ostara and Easter don't fall in the same month every year, they share at least one custom every year, and it's a custom that predates both Wicca and Christianity. We know that the Romans dyed eggs, using bright colors to encourage the growing Sun to keep growing, to tip the Equinox's balance from darkness to light. I'm sure the custom is even older than that! Natural dyes have always been available. Dandelions and onion skins make orange, carrot tops make yellow, heather makes pink, madder root makes red, and several berries make blue—and that's without much technology to change or fix the colors. Some coloring of eggs occurs if they're boiled with other foods, too.

(By the way, there is an answer to the old question, “which came first, the chicken or the egg?” The answer is the egg! Reptiles are older than birds, and reptiles lay eggs. We still ask the question rhetorically, though, probably to remind ourselves that the cycle of life itself has no beginning and no ending—chickens come from eggs come from chickens come from eggs come from chickens....

(Even our understanding of evolution doesn't dim this magic—we could just as well say that snakes come from eggs come from snakes come from eggs, and ask which came first, the *serpent* or the egg. Indeed, serpents were and are in many cultures symbolic of eternal life, for not only do many snakes lay eggs, but they shed their skins. Chickens do molt, but it's really not as dramatic.)

You've probably heard the phrase "mad as a March hare!" and if you watch any nature shows on PBS or cable, or live near a "bunny meadow," maybe you've seen just how mad they can seem. The mating habits of hares can be quite spectacular—and remind us that Ostara falls in the middle of the mating season.

Human mating rituals can be inspired by the warming weather and lengthening days, too, and are sometimes just as amazing as the antics of hares. But our fertility rites extend beyond the enhancement of making of our own babies. Romance is often reserved for Beltane, so that at Ostara we can focus on Spring planting. There's work to be done in the fields; livestock can be brought out to their first pastures of the year. It may be too early to take them to the high country—that happens around Beltane, too, when Summer begins. Ostara's mid-Spring, and while it's still too chilly in some areas for much crop growth, Summer's coming, and preparations must be made.

Some of us have gardens—and know we have to loosen the soil, make sure there are no leftover roots or frozen clods or chunks of rock, and that any stems or leaves from last year's crop, and any animal potties, need to be removed to the compost pile. We know we might need to add fertilizer to the soil, mixing it in carefully, before we make the rows or holes or mounds in which we'll plant this year's seeds. If we're using flower pots on the balcony, we know we need to change out last year's dirt so that no soil infections hurt this year's plantings. And if we don't have flower or herb or vegetable gardens, we know we still have *ourselves* to prepare for "planting" the seeds of this year's dreams and projects.

A Sabbat ritual is included on page 161, but it doesn't have to be the only Ostara rite you perform. Many Traditions of Wicca include elaborate personal purifications as part of Sabbat (and Esbat) rites, but you can make yourself ready to receive the gifts of the

Goddess and God even if there's no other ritual to follow. Spring began at Imbolc, and you may have started Spring cleaning projects—but maybe you're not finished, and maybe you *haven't* started; and don't forget that your heart and mind deserve the same attention.

At Ostara, we all need to rebalance ourselves. Our Winter concerns have been “interior,” with house and home and family, perhaps with keeping the peace among generations or the in-laws, making sure that no one felt slighted on gift-giving occasions, or when the time came to clean up after the feasts. We've noticed whether the furnace still works or the roof leaks, and whether the car needs work or new parts; we've probably taken a look at our bank accounts, too. At Ostara, we're noticing the sunshine and we're bringing the lighter-weight clothes to the front of the closet; school will be out for the Summer before we know it, and there are plans to be made! (Sometimes when the Wheel turns, we get dizzy!)

Because fertility is evident now, in the growth of plants and the mating of animals, some Wiccan Traditions hold that the Goddess and God are married at Ostara. Other Traditions save the marriage for Beltane. Either way, sex is sacred to Wiccans, even though it's just one form of the fertility (more broadly, creativity) we hold holy and honor in our rites. There are many ways to participate in the world's increasing fertility. Gardening—including preparation for planting—is one, and the God's Green Man aspect has been recognized and respected all over the world for thousands of years. Animal husbandry is another—some beasts are mating now, and some have been aborning since Imbolc.

Symbols of fertility are many, and many are embellished with creative acts that are meant to encourage growth and development. Eggs represent the never-ending cycle of life. Hares, those prolific breeders sacred to Ostara, and snakes that, in shedding their skins, leave ghosts of themselves without dying, have long spoken to us of fertility and immortality. Baskets, woven of greenwood and filled with new grasses, and with eggs and flowers (more symbols of youth, fertility, and growth), are traditional gifts at this time of year. They're blessings, really, that the God and Goddess give to us and we share with each other.

A serious note: exchanging live animals may once have been a custom to honor and encourage fertility. Many a dowry consisted of livestock; cattle raids figure prominently in more than one myth cycle. Offerings of live animals, for sacrifice, food, or as Priests' and Priestesses' familiars, were undoubtedly made to temples. In more than one culture tithes of livestock have expressed subservience. But giving bunnies or chickies to children as Ostara gifts is usually ill-advised. Some people do successfully keep rabbits, and chickens or ducks, but in many places, keeping such "pets" violates zoning laws, and in many cases, children are unable to provide for the animals' needs. (Yes, with some exceptions, until they're close to teen-aged, kids are much better at loving animals than actually taking care of them. Buying an animal to teach your children responsibility is *irresponsible*.) The gift of a plush toy and a family or coven donation to an animal shelter is much more appropriate in most cases.



ore

Ostara (sometimes spelled Eostara or Eostre) is named after the Anglo-Saxon goddess of Spring. Her sacred symbols are eggs and hares. Not surprisingly, She's a Maiden Goddess rather than a Mother or a Crone. In some Pagan myths, the idea is that the Goddess has been taken, or takes Herself and Her buds and flowers and fruits, into the Earth, to the Underworld for the Winter, and is rescued or returns of her own accord in the Spring, which explains why everything sprouts and buds again.

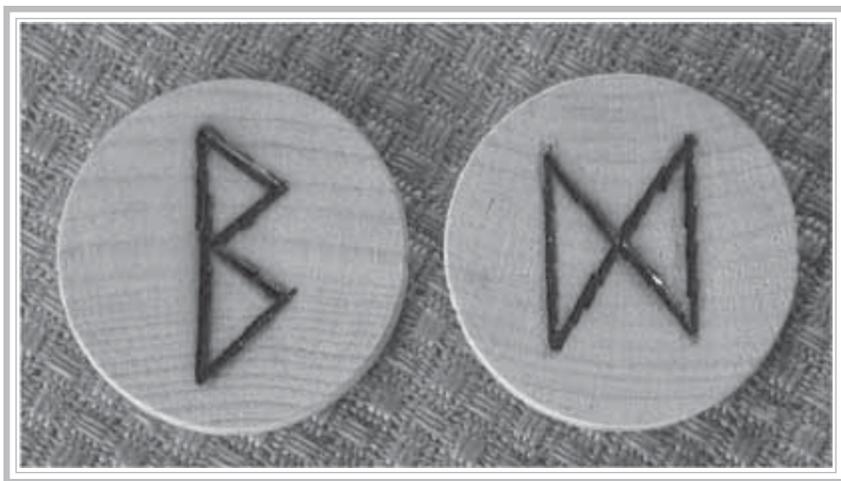
Wiccans tend to acknowledge the role of the Sun (God) in all of this: as the days get warmer from Yule, the Earth thaws, and there's enough light and warmth and water for things to grow again. Wicca respects the myths that come from other cultures, but we know that ancient Paganisms were often state religions, with a strong and elite priesthood, and we also know that our religion grew from Anglo-Celtic culture, and so we look first to Anglo-Celtic myths and pantheons. We also tend to see various goddesses as aspects of the Great Goddess, so we're more likely to speak of the Goddess resuming Her Maiden aspect than of, to borrow a Greek example, Demeter recovering her daughter Persephone from Hades' arms

Many of us are reasonably familiar with an assortment of Celtic stories; fewer of us are familiar with the Teutonic side of our Wiccan heritage. Indeed, many of us think that the Asatru, followers of "the Northern way" are sole proprietors of Norse and Teutonic legends. But in England, in the Danelaw (the northern and eastern parts of the country that was overwhelmed by invading Vikings when they raided in the Middle Ages), Northern Paganism had a strong influence. Odin became Wotan, and there were some other changes, but our English forebears were familiar with Teutonic stories, and so should we be. Ostara being a time of balance, it's appropriate to balance our Celtic bent with some of the richness of our "Anglo" heritage now.

Sadly, not much is known about Ostara, save that She was a goddess of Spring. The runes Berkana and Dagaz are associated with her Sabbat (called a Blot in Asatru; “blot” rhymes with “boat” and means “blessing”).

Berkana (in Anglo-Saxon, Beorc, pronounced “birch,” like the tree similar to the poplar the Anglo-Saxons associated with this rune) is a rune of the Earth, associated with several Norse Goddesses and Their qualities. Dagaz (in Anglo Saxon, Daeg) means “day,” in the sense of the 24-hour period, not just the daylight hours. It’s easier to understand the ways in which these runes might relate to Ostara as a Goddess of Spring if we take a look at them.

Berkana, fairly obviously, can look like a woman’s breasts seen from the top, or if she’s in profile, her breasts and pregnant belly. According to Freya Aswynn, Berkana symbolizes “the emergence of an agricultural society, based on settled villages, which replaced the hunting and gathering society.” Kveldulf Gundarsson, an Asatru law speaker and rune teacher, is the author of several articles on the runes and other Teutonic subjects. In *Teutonic Magic* (Llewellyn, 1994) he notes that the Earth “receives the sacrifice/seed and holds it within herself, guarding and nourishing it until the time has come for it to return to the worlds outside again.” He calls Berkana a rune of “bringing-into-being,” which relates it well to Spring.



Berkana and Dagaz (Beorc and Daeg in Anglo-Saxon) are two runes that are significant at Ostara.

Dagaz represents a staff, and a staff helps us keep our balance. Clearly, this Rune is balanced symmetrically, too: it's neither invertible nor reversible—it looks the same whether you flip it horizontally or vertically. Either way (and whether the outer lines are extended or not) one side can represent dark, and one side light, the 24-hour day, and the Winter and Summer halves of the year. It can also represent dawn, a symbolism that also fits its association with Ostara.

We're focusing on the Anglo-Saxon elements and the heritage Wicca shares with Asatru in our discussion of Ostara not to leave the Druids out, but because, as liturgist Kirk Thomas says, "Spring Equinox—you call it Ostara—has no historical basis in Celtic mythology." The Sonoran Sunrise Grove here in Tucson does hold an open Ostara ritual, for the ADF works to restore a custom of open Pagan worship to our modern lives. But how they celebrate Ostara varies from year to year, because there is no "traditional" Druidic Ostara rite.

So, how do the Asatru celebrate? It's important to understand that, although there are a couple of different branches of Asatru, there are certainly general guidelines for celebrating each holy day. Though the Wheel of the Year is distinctly Wiccan, and the Asatru observe well more than eight holy days through the year, several of them historical anniversaries, many Asatruar do celebrate the Sabbats that Wiccans recognize.

For the Asatru, Ostara usually falls in the month following the actual Equinox—Gundarsson thinks that traditionally, it may have fallen on the full Moon of that month. Freya Aswynn tells us (in *Leaves of Yggdrasil*) that in Asatru's homelands, Norway and Iceland, there were three main festivals in the year: "Thorriblot at Yuletide, Siggiblot in Spring, before they went 'a-viking,' and a harvest festival...." But in Germanic and English cultures, she says, the festivals corresponded with the celebration of Solstices and Equinoxes.

An aside to answer a question that may go unasked: In Old Norse, "vyk" means "stream" or "river," and "viking" is actually a verb, meaning to go up a stream or river. Literally translated, "vikings" would be the journeys up the inlets and fjords that landscape the North. In English, though, the word refers to the people who took the

journeys—the sailors and soldiers who went out exploring, raiding, and claiming new land for their people

We know that, as in most Pagan religions, Asatru Priests led processions through the fields, to bless the newly sown crops. Gundarsson says that “the giving of colored eggs was also a part of this ritual, and still is.” Aswynn recognizes Ostara as a “festival of birth,” focusing on physical fertility, leaving, as Wiccans do, the more metaphysical aspects of union and creativity for Beltane.

ituals

At Ostara, it's likely that we need to catch our breath and our balance. (If we look carefully, we see that most Ostara customs are concerned, one way or another, with balance.) We need to take some time to breathe deeply and relax, to reorient ourselves toward the waxing light, to set worries and wish-we-hads aside and think about what we *can* do with what we have, and how what we do now will affect what we have to work with later on. Our inner gardens need tending as much as the ones in our yards or on our patios. Our minds need clearing as much as our closets and garages and basements need cleaning; our hearts need encouragement as much as the dining room needs a new coat of paint.

This very simple, very personal ritual can be as easy as it is here, or you can make it more elaborate. You can do it every day for the whole week of Ostara (three days before the Sabbat, the day of the Sabbat, and three days after the Sabbat), just once, once a week from Imbolc to Beltane, or on any other schedule that meets your needs.

Finding Your Balance

For this ritual, you'll need two pieces of paper; a Winter-colored pen, pencil, marker, or crayon; a Summer-colored pen, pencil, marker, or crayon; a piece of ribbon, twine, string, or yarn long enough to make a two-foot circle on the floor and to run back through the middle of the circle; and a piece of cloth to use as a blindfold. You can make the preparations a few days ahead of time if you want to.

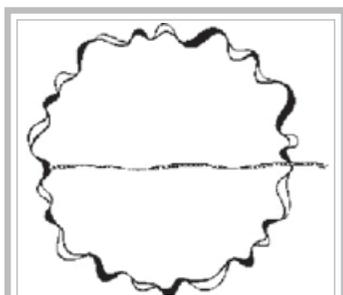
On one piece of paper, writing with the Winter color, make a list of all the worries and concerns that have occupied your mind in the last few weeks. Maybe these are past events you wish you'd handled differently, or projects you finished but still worry about.

Maybe they are circumstances you have no control over, or problems you still need to solve. Limit your list to five or six items; you might have to group some concerns together in a single broad category.

On the other piece of paper, with the Summer color, make a list of things you can actually do to make your life easier. On this list you might write, “take brainstorming notes without worrying about complete sentences,” “ask coworkers/family members for advice,” “take a vacation,” or “use a calendar to keep appointments straight.” This list needs to be more practical than romantic, but don’t let that keep you from thinking big! Limit this list to five or six items, too, using the same grouping technique if you need to.

When you’re ready to do this ritual, arrange your circle on the floor. The center line should go from West to East; the end of the length of string or ribbon that bisects the circle should be in the East. Place your Winter list in the North half of the Circle, and your Summer list in the South half. Stand in the middle, facing the North. Crouch down if you like, and study your list. Think about how important all the items on it are, and how much of your time and energy they take. Now stand up, and blindfold yourself.

Say this (or something like this), “I’ve been facing my Winter tasks, working through the darkness. Now light balances the darkness.”



Your ribbon circle for the balancing mini-rite should look like this, and the loose end of the ribbon should point toward East.

Breathe slowly, in through your nose and out through your mouth, 10 times. As you do this, relax your body, especially your neck and shoulders; do *not* lock your knees!

After your 10th breath, turn toward your right until you’re facing South. Breathe 10 more times, still relaxing, still not locking your knees. Focus on your breathing, and on relaxation. At the end of these second 10 breaths, take off your blindfold.

Say [this or something like this], “Now light balances the darkness. I’m facing my Summer tasks, working in the light.”

Crouch down and read your Summer list. Think about how easy the ideas you've written are to do and cross off the list. Realize that, with just a little creativity and determination, you can accomplish all of these things and that they will, in fact, make your other obligations easier to meet. Turn deosil (to your right) in place, all the way around until you're facing the East, and pick up the end of the string that bisects the circle. Turn (again, to your right) back toward the South and pick up your Summer list. Still holding the end of the string or ribbon, walk away. Walk toward the South, and keep going until the circle is all unwound. (If you have cats, you may feel a little resistance here as they chase the string or ribbon. Count it as a sign that you can overcome any difficulties.) Once the circle-string is unwound, do something that helps you complete one of the items on your Summer list.

One way to enhance this ritual is to use, in addition to your lists, objects that represent the concerns and tasks and solutions to problems that you've listed. If you do this, put the symbols of Winter's concerns on a table outside the North half of the circle, and the symbols of Summer's activities on a table outside the South half. Then, when you leave the circle, you can go and pick up one of the objects that symbolize a solution, and begin to work with it right away.

Notice that there are no directions for casting a Circle or invoking the Elements or the Goddess and God. This is because this is not a religious ritual in the same way that a Sabbat rite is a religious ritual. This is an act of creative play, and of sympathetic magic. It's your inner child, young like the year is at Ostara, that translates this rite into reality. In most cases, we want our children to know the difference between play and reality, but in some cases—and this is one of them—we need our *inner* children to blur the distinction for us, so that an act such as this, a magical statement, has a real effect in our lives.

We can also consider this little rite to be a guided meditation, in the sense that we are combining materially real images with psycho-emotional intent for the purpose of changing our perception. As you will, so mote it be, remember—but first we have to clarify our will, and this rite articulates an intention to regain your balance and reorient yourself properly toward the waxing year.

We've been fortunate to be able to celebrate Ostara in the woods for the last several years. Even before Campsight was a coven, it was our custom to go camping as near to the Spring Equinox as we could. From our experience, we offer suggestions for two different, but equally appropriate, Ostara activities.

For a long time, my coven didn't have a formal Ostara ritual, and this was because we substituted a much more dramatic offering: we descended into a cave. We laced up our hiking boots, made sure the lights on our helmets were working and that we had extra lights and batteries in our packs, and wound our way up a steep trail to the mouth of what its discoverers called the Forest Cave.

There's one place where the rock overhangs the footholds a bit, and you have to reach over the top to find the handholds, and that's pretty sobering. Years ago we dropped a water bottle making that traverse, and we stopped hearing it bounce off the walls before it hit the bottom. Not quite the same as taking off your veils and jewels as the Goddess does, but it sure does make you think about your mortality.

Not many of us could go in at a time—the Forest Service limits the size of every caving party to protect the cave, and to make sure no groups get out of hand. But it doesn't matter how many people are with you. When you turn off all the lights, you're alone.

And we did, every trip, turn off all our lights. First we'd read a blessing that I translated into Anglo-Saxon (the language both Arthur and Robin Hood might have spoken, if their traditional dates are accurate). And then the few of us there would turn off our helmet lights. It was very dark. No sunlight reached that deep. There's no phosphorescence. You see absolutely nothing. No shadows, no outlines, no hint or fragment of light.

For most of us, this felt more womb-like than tomb-like. It was an outer-space-like darkness, where some Wiccan liturgy says the "Dread Lords of the Outer Spaces" dwell, yet we were cradled by the Earth itself. Granted, the ceilings of caves are not soft like a mother's rocking arms—indeed, if you bang your unhelmeted head against a crystal once, you will be *very* careful not to do it again—but there's no mistaking the smell of rock, of deep earth, of primal source.

And I'll tell you, coming back out, standing there before the entrance, blinking in the sunlight, getting your bearings on the mountain, was glorious. It was, quite simply, an experience of rebirth. A cave makes an excellent "cosmic egg" from which the world—from which individuals and groups, too—can be hatched anew every year.

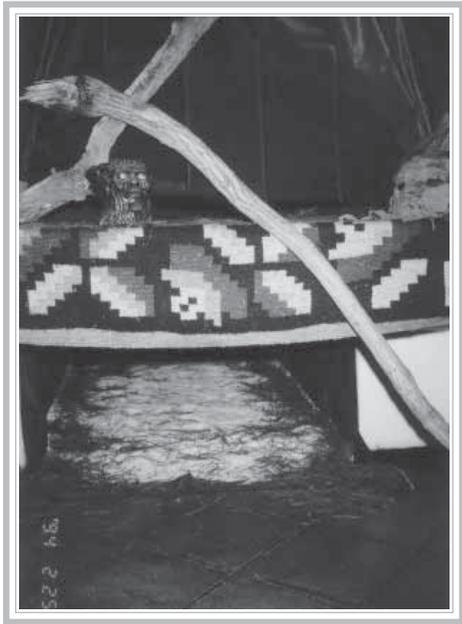
Most people don't have the option of taking their coven (or going by themselves) to a cave. But nearly anyone can create a cave in their home. It'll take some work, sure, but so does any rebirth.

Emerging from the Indoor Cave

By rearranging the furniture—a dining room table with any leaves it has put in is a good start, but a couch and some chairs set up back to back a few feet apart will work, too—and covering it with blankets, you can create a cave. If you draw the curtains in the room, turn off all the lights in the house, wait until after dark and leave any visible porch lights off for the duration, you'll have a fair approximation. Maybe you'll need to use blindfolds, too, or pull a knitted cap over your eyes to heighten the effect.

In the photo, you see sticks crossed before the entrance to a makeshift cave, and play sand sprinkled with pine needles spread on a tarp that covers the floor between two pieces of furniture. Blankets form the top of the cave, and black plastic tablecloths (about \$5 each at a party store) help keep the interior very dark.

Depending on the time you have, and how big a cave you



This indoor cave has a tarp floor with sand sprinkled over it to add realism. Sticks brought home from camping trips mark its entrance under a table, and the cave continues between two pieces of a sectional couch.

can make, you may be able to give everyone 5 minutes on his or her own in there; maybe you'll want to have the experience together, or in pairs. If you are not alone, try not to touch each other. Chanting together is nice, but take some time to appreciate the silence, too.

Perhaps each person who goes into the cave would like to carry a stone; perhaps you'll be able to arrange some stones in there so that everyone who enters can find one to bring out. (In the indoor cave on page 157, we used cedar-scented balls to lend a sense of woodsiness to the experience, and they made nice souvenirs of the experience.)

When you're ready to descend into your cave (perhaps by climbing over an extra piece of furniture, or just by getting down on your hands and knees), you may choose to cast a Circle around your creation, but it's not absolutely necessary. Even if you don't cast a formal Circle, you might like to set a ritual tone before you descend into your cave. Reading a version of the *Descent of the Goddess* would be appropriate. (See page 33 for one example.)

Upon emerging from the cave, enjoy a formal acknowledgment of rebirth, of the new balance you've found between life and death, between fear and confidence, between your inner or solitary life and your public, communal life. Recognize that you have come, that you have journeyed, that you have brought yourself forth, from the darkness of Winter, the darkness of the womb, the creative void, into the bright world of light and activity, of growth and purpose.

A Declaration of Rebirth

I have been into the darkness, and now return to light.

I relied on inner vision when I had no mortal sight.

I returned unto the Mother and I did not feel forlorn.

I have braved the womb of death, and now I am reborn.

On the Wiccan calendar, Ostara is mid-Spring; the next Sabbat, Beltane, marks the beginning of Summer. But in the cultures from which Wicca draws upon and recalls, Spring is not distinguished. There were but two seasons then, Winter and Summer; and in that memory, it's still Winter as the Wheel rolls to Ostara.

In many places, there's still snow on the ground—even in Arizona, in the northern part of the state, at the higher elevations. Summer's on the horizon, though, and light greets our eyes when we emerge from the cave, just as the light of life greets a newborn child emerging from the womb.

Not up for the cave experience? I can relate to that. After Canyon dancer's heart attack, we went into the Forest Cave only once more. I worried too much about how we'd get him out if he had any more problems, so our coven and the rest of our "camping contingent" looked for other ways to celebrate Ostara.

Most of another coven usually camped with us, and they took up responsibility for our Ostara rituals. There's a lovely little meadow just off the trail that heads northeast from the campground we frequent, and that's where we usually hold our rites. If you can't get to the woods, a yard or a park would do just as well, and if that's not feasible either, a living room or a garage can be made to do just fine.

"Wearing" Bride's Belt

Our companion coven's High Priest is a creative man, and for several years he managed to find different ways of making a Bride's Belt large enough for us to step through. That coven made taking that step the central feature of their Ostara ritual, but it can be undertaken as a separate activity, too.

He braided dead grasses together, but those of us who don't camp or live near a meadow can use raffia, or macramé jute. Wired silk or tinsel garlands might not need braiding, although the twining of the three strands does honor and symbolize the Triple Goddess rather nicely. It takes a lot of braiding—or should I say honoring?—to make a "rope" or "cord" long enough to create a circle 5 or 5 feet in diameter!

Dead grasses tend to be pretty stiff, and will keep a mostly circular shape with only one or two people holding the tied-together braided cord. Raffia or other materials need a little more support. You can use all sorts of things—untwisted metal coat-hangers, or even a hula hoop!—as a base for a Bride's Belt made from raffia. Even a portable metal garden arch can be used.

Once the Bride's Belt is ready, the officiating Priestess and Priest can step through it into position to hold it for others. If you have a few people, they can dance through it in procession. If you like something more serious or somber, you can process slowly and with great dignity. You can keep a bowl of salt and water on the Winter side, so that those who pass through the Belt into Spring and toward Summer can purify themselves; perhaps you'll put oil on the other side, so they can anoint themselves once they've made the passage.

Can you use a Bride's Belt if you're a solitary? Yes! You can lay it on the ground, step into it, and lift it over your head to step through. Passing through the Bride's Belt is not something that has to be done horizontally, either: you can pass through it vertically, just as you "pass through" any piece of clothing you put on over your head!

Another idea we've used involves a small metal cauldron with a wee fire going. When we've stepped through the Belt or crossed another sort of line (our rituals vary a bit from year to year in that respect), we drop into the fire a piece of paper on which we've written what Winter-born idea we want to manifest during the more active Summer months.

Sometimes it's a project, such as finishing a Ph.D. or remodeling the bathroom; sometimes it's completely letting go of something, such as giving up smoking for good or losing 20 pounds. The point is that it's an idea we've nurtured, a goal we've planned for through the Winter, and in our turning of the Wheel, we affirm our intention to bring the plan to fruition by our actions in the new season.

Another option, if burning descriptions of your projects doesn't appeal to you, is to write down several projects, on separate pages, fold them up and tuck them into the Bride's Belt. Once you're through the Belt, reach back and pick up one of those bits of paper—and commit yourself to finishing that project this Spring. This is a way of balancing decision and chance, flexibility and determination.

In this day and age, it's not always true that our lives literally depend on finishing what we start. A few of us do grow our own food, herd our own meat, build our own houses with our own hands—but most of us don't. We work for a paycheck, and with the money we earn, we buy food at the grocery, rent an apartment

or pay a mortgage. Most—not all, but most of us—buy our clothes instead of making them, and of those who do make their own clothes, hardly any weave their own cloth. So, most of us are not used to the idea that what we do directly matters in our lives.

In ritual and magic, we remember that what we do really does matter. When we bring a plan through the Bride's Belt, or across a "defensive line" formed by our fellows, who offer some resistance and make us work to get from one season to the next, we're doing more than carrying a piece of paper from one side of a Circle to the other. We're making a commitment to the Goddess, and to ourselves; we're accepting the responsibility for making that plan come to life.

Unless you follow a Tradition that's strict and strictly enforced by the High Priestess, there's no Circle cops—nobody who's going to come and check your Book of Shadows to make sure you do what you say you're going to, or punish you if you don't. Why not? First, because that's way too authoritarian for most Wiccans; second, because it's as near to impossible as anything; and, third, because we don't need to police each other.

The God and Goddess, often through our consciences, takes care of it. Even if nobody else in the world saw what you wrote on the paper you offered to the Fire (the Gods Themselves, in the sort of ritual we've been talking about), *you* know what was on it. You know how you're obligated, and you know whether or not you meet your obligations. Meeting them is joyful and strengthens you; neglecting them is discouraging and diminishes you. No need for Circle cops; if that which you seek you do not find within, you shall surely never find it without.

An Ostara Rite

This Sabbat rite is meant to be part of a Circle you've already cast and called. If you belong to a coven, your group will have its own way of casting, its own Quarter calls and invocations. If you're working on your own, that's alright, although it will require you to change a bit of the wording and turn the traditional Spiral Dance into a solitary Spiral Journey. Like most authors, I'll suggest that you cast your Circle in your usual way, and do this Ostara rite after you've invoked the Gods and before you consecrate the Cakes and Ale. If you don't have

a “usual way” of casting a Circle, there’s no need to pause and find another book that shows you how—just turn to Appendix A for a suggestion.

This rite requires a phallic wand (anything from a drumstick to a specially made and decorated wand will be fine), a yellow taper, and a cauldron with a small wood fire laid in it; make these things ready at the North. The altar, too, should be moved to the North, for it will be in the way anywhere else.

The Sabbat may be introduced by the High Priestess, the High Priest, or someone else; it can even be presented by more than one person, sequentially or in unison. The introduction makes a nice segue from the invocations, reinforces everyone’s concentration, and, if your Circle includes students or non-Pagans, it’s a courtesy. It also demonstrates the aphorism “as above, so below” by relating the day’s astronomical reality to its spiritual significance.

Whoever’s introducing the Sabbat says, “We are here to celebrate the Sabbat of Ostara, mid-Spring on the modern Wheel of the Year, and from the days when the Year was divided only into dark and light, we remember Ostara as the final Winter Sabbat.

“This Sabbat is named after Eostre, who is a manifestation of the Triple Goddess’s Maiden aspect. She balances now on the cusp of the Mother aspect She’ll assume at Litha. This Sabbat is a balance point. Mundane calendars call it the Vernal, or Spring, Equinox, and at the equator, the hours of day and night are equal.

“Tomorrow, the Year will have turned, out of Winter’s darkness, toward Summer. As the Sun grows stronger, youth leaves childhood and grows toward maturity and fertility. In our spiritual lives, we step out of the last introspective shadows of Winter into the sunlight of creativity and action.

“There is only turning forward; there is no turning back. In our rite today, we honor this step in the Spiral Dance. We rejoice in the Sun God’s and our own growing strength, and we acknowledge and cherish the Earth Goddess’s and our own growing creativity.”

The High Priestess hands the wand to the High Priest, who waves it over the cauldron, saying, “We call upon You, our Solar God, the Light of Life, to be a bright beacon before us, a guiding star above us, the shining beam upon the grass at our feet.”

The High Priestess lights the yellow taper from the God candle, and with the yellow taper lights the fire in the cauldron, saying, “We kindle this fire today in the presence of the Goddess and the God, and all the Witches here gathered, with no fear in our hearts, and no harm in our intent.”

The High Priest says, “O Son of the Mother Goddess, kindle in our hearts this flame of love and trust, and spread with its warmth blessings upon our friends and foes alike.”

Now the High Priest and the High Priestess together bring the cauldron to the center of the Circle, where everyone present has the opportunity to “jump” it. When all who wish to jump the Ostara Fire have done so, everyone reforms the circle, and joins hands. The Priestess or Priest leads the group in a Spiral Dance (to the center and out again without stopping). Depending on the dexterity of the group, the cauldron may or may not need to be moved back to North before the Spiral Dance begins.

After the Spiral Dance has become a circle once again, a kiss is sent around the Circle, with the words, “You complete my Circle as I complete yours.” If for any reason someone does not wish to share a kiss on the lips with the person to his or her left, it is fine to kiss the first two fingers of one’s hand and to pass the kiss on to the next person’s lips or forehead. If you have done this ritual on your own, blow a kiss to each of the four Directions and speak the words each time.

Speaking of balance...a very long time ago, on my first trip to Hawaii, I wanted to try my hand—well, my feet—at surfing. I could swim, the water was warm, the waves were gentle. I had money to rent the board, but not for even a quick lesson. It was obvious, though, that you had to be balanced on the board. I thought I should practice balancing first, before I even tried to catch a wave.

Anyone who has surfed knows—and I soon learned—that it’s infinitely more difficult to balance when the board is still upon the water than when the board is moving along before a wave. I wasted a few hours trying to achieve a completely inappropriate balance, although I believe that I did make a few other beginners feel better about their own efforts.

Eventually, I began to get the hang of it—even the hang 10 of it!—and had a few good rides before it was time to go back to the hotel. I

tell you this story not because *surfing* has much to do with Ostara, but to illustrate that knowing what balance to look for, much less finding it, is not always easy.

When we talk about emotional balance, for instance, we don't mean feeling equally confident and doubtful, or passionate and indifferent, at the same time. Indeed, we tend to think that people who can't fully embrace their emotions are a bit unbalanced. Trying to stand on an unmoving surf board isn't the right kind of balance; neither is trying to get through life unaffected by any emotions. No, the balance we're looking for is in relation to the rest of the world. When we're surfing, we learn to feel the proper position to keep the board moving across the wave and ahead of it. Psycho-emotionally, we learn to feel "in the moment," and to balance the moments of our lives so that we don't waste precious hours, months, or years not going anywhere.

Who knows how many good waves went by while I was flapping my arms about trying to stand on the floating surfboard! How many days or weeks of your life have rolled by while you were trying to make your stand in anger, or fear, or denial? I chuckle at my surfing memory, but I don't berate myself for having made an honest effort, even if I was "wrong" about what effort to make.

And yes, I've wasted some time in anger, and in fear, and in other unsatisfying emotions that had my wheels spinning instead of keeping me rolling on through my life. I'm not proud of those moments—you're not proud of them in your life, either, are you?—but I do give myself credit. Eventually I paid enough attention to how other people were making their boards go to catch a few waves and be "really surfing" myself; and whenever I've been angry or frightened, I've eventually looked at the situation from a wider perspective and been able to move on.

The Ostara Vow reminds us that we all need to look at our lives from wider perspectives, to see which way the Wheel's turning, and turn with it, away from whatever's stalling us. The Ostara Vow commits us to doing just that, and reminds us that constructive self-criticism is sacred, not shameful. Just before we get to making vows, a solitary endeavor even when we're in a group, let's look at a solitary Ostara rite.

The Solitary's Spiral Journey

A Spiral Dance needs at least several people, and preferably many, to work well. There are many ritual elements that a solitary can modify to achieve an effect similar to what a group will feel, but, alas, a Spiral Dance is not one of them. A labyrinth can't be walked with a group; it's perfect for a solitary, but it does take a lot of work to set up, and because it's a more personal journey, its significance is slightly different than the spiral's.

Whether we're dancing with friends or journeying on our own, we can all benefit from the direct symbolism of the spiral: right in, and right back out. Nothing says rebirth any more clearly. In the Spiral Journey described below, you're not exploring your own individuality as you do in a labyrinth; you're connecting directly with the universal journey through life, into death, and back through rebirth.

If you have a round altar, place it at the center of the space you'll be using. If you don't have a round altar, set a plate, a rug, or anything else round at the center. On it, set a bowl of salt, a bowl of honey, and some long-burning incense. At or near the point where you'll be starting and ending your journey—and this should be at the Northeast—set up another table to hold “Cakes and Ale.” Decorate this table with lots of Spring flowers. Using silk ones is alright, but it's even nicer if you can manage a few fresh, fragrant ones too.

You don't have to cast a Circle unless you want to, but it's a good idea to call the Directions, just to keep yourself oriented as you circle inward and out again. Calls like these will work well if you have none of your own you want to use.

“Hail, East, where breaks the dawn, where dawns the day of journeying.”

“Hail, South, where bright is noon, where midday balances midnight.”

“Hail, West, where sets the sun, where dies the day, trails vanishing.”

“Hail, North, where shines the rune, where rebirth is my soul's birthright.”

Most Spiral Journeys I've been part of begin to the dancer's or walker's left, which makes you go deosil to the center. This is appropriate: Mortal life does indeed follow the sun to its end. When we are reborn, we are coming away from death, not banishing death, but shedding death, leaving it behind—as a newborn baby doesn't banish the womb, but sheds its amniotic skin, or as a young adult doesn't banish the family home, but leaves it behind when she or he moves to a new apartment.

However, doing it the other way around (so to speak) may make sense to you: You are shedding this life as you return to the womb of the mother at the center of the spiral, and taking on a new life when you walk back to the outer edge. This ritual will have more meaning for you if you think about the significance of the direction you'll walk, and make your own decision. Think about it ahead of time, though, so that you're sure of yourself when you start out!

You should walk your Spiral Journey slowly, and you should circle the center at least four times (once for each season). Instead of thinking about the details of your life that make you unique, think about all of your connections to life, the universe, and everything as you walk. Hum if you like, or beat a drum in a heartbeat rhythm, or, before you start, put music on, very softly, in the background. (You should not be “grooving to the beat” of the music while you walk, you should be grooving to the beat of life's cycles.)

When you reach the center, do not stop. Walk around the center at least three times, once tasting salt (the bitterness of death), then wafting the incense around you, and finally, before you start back into the world again, tasting honey (the sweetness of rebirth).

There's really nothing you need to say. You're at the center. You're in the womb of the Goddess, where you experience death and life as the continuum they make. Their symbols, salt and honey, are on the same “altar” before you, and you partake of both, metaphorically in the same breath (of incense). Words are unnecessary. *Being* is enough.

Now, just as slowly as you walked in, turn around and walk out again, following the same spiral path. Again, go around at least four times before you emerge from the spiral path. Again, think not about

your personal rebirth—there’s time to contemplate that later—but about life’s rebirth. The Sun was “reborn” at Yule, the God began to leaf out again at Imbolc, and now, at Ostara, the complex cycle of rebirth is complete as the animal kingdom adds its experience to the rest. Think about this “grand scheme of things,” and how wonderful it is to be part of it.

When you reach your starting point, take a moment to appreciate that your original starting point has become the “end” of your journey, while just a few minutes ago, what seemed at first to be the “end” of your journey became your starting point. That’s how it works, every time, and it just worked that way for you, right there in your own living room or basement or backyard.

Now, consecrate your Cakes and Ale, and have something to eat and drink. You may need to ground, and Cakes and Ale will help. Eating and drinking also reorients you: You’re back in the phase of life’s cycle where you do need to eat and drink, and at the time of year when your physical powers are growing, waxing like the Sun’s powers. Remember to share some of your feast with the Gods, whether you have invoked Them or not.

When you’re finished—and take a few minutes, if you need to—you can acknowledge the Directions again. It’s always best to speak from your heart or to prepare your own calls and dismissals, but it’s alright to borrow those you read and like, too.

“Hail, East, the rising sun, the sun that lit my journeying.”

“Hail, South, where strength was bright, where noon was balance for the night.”

“Hail, West, where set the Sun, where rested life, replenishing.”

“Hail, North, where shone the rune, where rebirth was my soul’s birthright.”

This done, take one of the fresh flowers from your “altar” and put it with the portion of Cakes and Ale you’ve offered to the Goddess and God. Take another one and pin it in your hair, or tuck it in your shirt pocket or a buttonhole, and wear it for at least an hour. If you can, go outside and enjoy the day now; if it’s too late for that,

get up early and spend some time outside tomorrow morning. Tomorrow morning would be a good time to take the Ostara Vow, too.

The Ostara Vow

*The Wheel turns on; 'tis Ostaratide:
Dusk and dawn abreast now ride.
Bright and dark, quiet and clamor;
tinder and spark, reserve and enamor.
This balance I vow to make my own;
poise will allow my pow'r to be known.
From balance, the Wheel now turns toward light.
With grace and steel, I affirm the same right.*

ctivities

As we've seen, Ostara is named for a Teutonic goddess of Spring. The Asatru, inheritors of the bulk of Northern Pagan traditions (including the Teutonic and Germanic along with the Norse) celebrate a Wheel similar to Wicca's. They hold Blots at the Solstices and Equinoxes. Taking Ostara as an opportunity to balance Wicca's emphasis on Celtic mythology and custom with information about our Northern heritage, let's see how the Asatru celebrate at this time of year.

In the old days, people processed through their fields, blessing the newly planted crops, probably with mead sprinkled from drinking horns. (As Wiccans consecrate ritual "Ale" with an athame, so the Asatru consecrate their mead with a Thor's Hammer.) Today, a Priestess called the Valkyrie carries a great mead horn around the Blot Circle three times, sprinkling all assembled, first with the blessings of Odin, next with the blessings of Freyr, and finally with the blessings of Freyja or Frigga, each time shaking the mead from a leafy twig. In the old days, an exchange of colored eggs probably completed the ritual; dyed eggs are still exchanged today.

I have seen some gorgeous mead horns, some of them quite large, and I very much like the idea of blessing the assembled company from a communal vessel. For Wiccans, it might be more appropriate to use a cauldron, but our Anglo-Saxon heritage entitles us to use a horn if we prefer. Once the Ale—mead on this occasion—has been consecrated, we might share with each other the blessings of Ostara.

Very often when we talk about "activities" for a Sabbat, we're talking about crafts that pertain to the seasonal theme, or that express the significance of the Sabbat on the Wheel. This book has suggested a number of such activities for Samhain, Yule, and Imbolc—and will suggest some for Ostara, too. Just let's not forget that activities can go beyond crafts; let's talk about that for a minute.

In looking at activities for the first three Winter Sabbats, I've concentrated on indoor activities that are fairly quiet. This is because in Wicca, Winter's usually a time for a least a little introspection, for considering how well last Summer's enterprises turned out, and for planning what we'll be doing next year. Imbolc marks the end of Winter and the beginning of Spring, but for many of us, Spring can be slow to take off, and in many places, Imbolc still looks and feels like Winter. By Ostara, though, in most places, it's obviously Spring. In fact, secular calendars call Ostara, rather than Imbolc, the start of the season. Our emphasis on balance at Ostara makes it a transitional Sabbat for most of us. It's mid-Spring, balanced between Winter and Summer. Winter's not yet forgotten, and Summer's barely glimpsed, but much anticipated.

So our activities at Ostara are moving away from the dining room table or the rec room, and into the yard or a park. The most obvious example of an Ostara activity is...the Ostara Egg Hunt. Adults and older children can have a great time hiding eggs for the younger kids—but adults and older children can participate, too, if everybody hides a few eggs and looks for the ones other people have hidden.

Ostara Egg Hunts

It's fun to hide real eggs, or chocolate eggs, but they can prove problematic if they're not all found and no one can quite remember where those missing two or three might be. Wee beasties will probably eat them eventually, but picnickers, campers, joggers, or children playing won't appreciate discovering weeks-old boiled eggs, not to mention that chocolate can be toxic to some animals. Brightly colored plastic eggs, the kind that come in two halves that you can mix and match, are an excellent alternative.

You can hide pennies or nickels in them, or small, sealed mini-candy bars or bags of peanuts (if you're *sure* no one hunting is allergic); or you can hide fortunes or blessings inside. Writing messages on rice paper makes them even more environmentally friendly. And that way, if one or two escape the hunters and are found later by strangers, there's less worry for those who hid them, and those who find them later have a pleasant surprise.

If you're quite sure you'll be able to find them all, though, you may prefer to hide real hard-boiled eggs...but of course, you'll want to dye them first.

Egg Dyeing

Egg dyeing is fun we can share—with families, covens, and non-Pagan friends. There are some pretty neat egg dyeing kits on the market these days, and we've had a lot of fun taking them camping with us and dying real eggs before we hid a few (and along with a lot of plastic ones) for the kids to find. But you can use natural dyes, too, and get some very delicate colors from onion skins, for instance, and paprika, carrot tops, vanilla extract, and turmeric. These pantry-items all give you yellow or yellowy-orange shades, except for paprika, which makes a sort of orangey-brown. That's fine. The old intent behind dyeing eggs is to encourage the sun to get brighter and brighter, and yellow's a good color for that. (If you want a little more variety, try red cabbage to get a light blue, and beets for a darker blue; cayenne will turn them a rusty color.)

Once they're dyed, the eggs can be displayed in baskets for a few hours—don't risk letting them go bad, though—or admired for a little while and then eaten! Everybody has their own recipe for “deviled” eggs, though we Wiccans might not like to call them that, especially on a Sabbat. We can call them “Goddess eggs,” if we want to, or “stuffed eggs.” But rest assured—“devil” anything in the kitchen only means spicing it up. Deviled eggs aren't anything to do with that guy some people accuse Wiccans of worshipping. They're called “deviled” because they've usually got some hotness to them, in the finely chopped onion or paprika or cayenne pepper that goes into a lot of deviling recipes.

Ostara Breakfast

Ham and eggs is a lovely Ostara breakfast. I'm delighted that we find egg substitutes to be just as tasty as real eggs—probably because they are real, or real-ish, anyhow (only the yolk and its bad cholesterol are removed). Given that the Goddess asks naught of sacrifice, I'm sure it's not offensive to use substitutes instead of whole eggs, even on a Sabbat. (We don't mind breaking the diet for ham because

we can sure taste the difference between the real stuff and the low-fat deli version; but omelets made with substitutes are too tasty to tempt us to break the diet with whole eggs.)

Another yummy morning treat is hot pentagram buns. If you have a favorite bun or roll recipe, use that; you can also use the break-open tubes of roll or bun dough you can find in any grocery store. The “trick” is to use icing to trace a pentagram on the top of them—do this after they’re baked or heated.

Celtic Toast

A favorite at our house is French toast—and feel free, because the Celts were well-settled in what’s now France, to call it Celtic toast. As you might guess, we make it with egg substitute. In a bowl big enough to hold a slice of bread, mix some egg substitute (or two real eggs, beaten), and a little milk. We use skim; use whatever’s in your fridge. How much should you put in? It really depends on two things: your taste, and how many slices of bread you mean to make. This egg-and-milk batter mix has to soak every slice. (Two to three slices should be enough for each person; somebody really hungry might want four.)

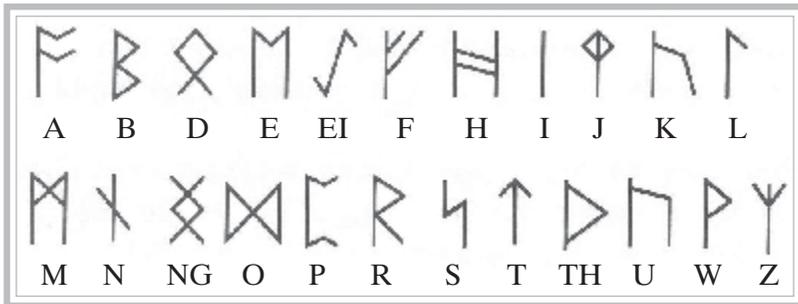
Heat your electric skillet up to 250 degrees (or put the frying pan on low). I can put four slices of bread in my skillet, which means I can make breakfast for me and Canyondancer in one go, so nobody has to wait while the rest of the “toast” is cooked. I use non-stick spray in the skillet, and then sprinkle a bit of cinnamon in it. If Ostara morning’s at all chilly, I add a bit of nutmeg, too. Then I plop the batter-soaked slices of bread—wheat works just as well as white—into the pan. I cook each side until it’s golden brown and serve the slices with a little syrup, honey, or powdered sugar, as you like. (We usually have faux sausage patties, too. Luckily, there are several brands that taste much better now than they did a few years ago when we gave up the real thing.)

For snacks, or for Cakes to share in ritual, you can use a bread-stick recipe or ready-made dough to shape runes. For Ostara, Freya Aswynn suggests using Tir (Teiwaz in the Elder Futhark), Beorc (Berkana), and Eh (Ehwaz). They’re all pretty easy to make and bake.

Tir/Teiwaz is shaped like an arrow; Beorc/Berkana is like a regular capital B, except pointy instead of rounded, and Eh/Ehwaz looks like a capital M. They represent, respectively, the male principle, the female principle, and the product of their union—physical fertility, the diversity of life on Earth, in all its Springtime profusion and abundance.

Runes

Ostara, being named after an Anglo-Saxon goddess, is a good time to make yourself a set of runes, too. We've been referring to the Anglo-Saxon runes because they were developed in England, and because, therefore, they represent the sounds of English better than the Elder Futhark does. I prefer and recommend the Anglo-Saxon runes for use as a magical alphabet, and include an illustration of one form of the Anglo-Saxon Runic alphabet that you can use.



O'Gaea learned this version of Old English or Anglo-Saxon runes years ago for use as a "secret" magical alphabet. It's handy for making private notations in your Book of Shadows, or doing Wiccan spellwork.



Canyondancer made this set of Elder Futhark runes using a wood-burning tool and wooden discs from a craft store.

However, I personally prefer the Elder Futhark for divination, and the set of wooden runes that CanyonDancer made for me follows the Elder Futhark. The Anglo-Saxons more often used sticks from 3 to 6 inches in length, collected from trees such as birch and ash. The runes were carved on the sides of the twigs, and one end of the twig was often fringed. Runes like this are not only difficult to make and tricky to cast, but hard to store and carry, and most Neo-Pagans use wooden disks or tiles, or, sometimes, stones.

The set CanyonDancer made for me are 1-inch-wide disks that we bought at a craft store (It was \$1.29 for seven, and we bought four sets, as there are 24 runes; besides, it's nice to have some choice among the disks, on which the color and grain does vary a bit). As I finish this book, he's planning to make another set out of disks he'll cut from a branch that was trimmed from our mesquite tree. Not a traditional Northern wood, but here in the Southwest, a cultural equivalent of oak.

To carve them, you can use a penknife, but our tool of choice for such work is a wood-burning wand. They're relatively inexpensive, but you must take great caution with them, for they can inflict nasty burns on people and furniture if they're not handled carefully. Pencil the rune-forms onto your disks first, and then carve or burn them.

Rune Pouches

Once you've got a set of runes, of course you need something to keep them in. Rune pouches are easy to make. Here are two ways of going about it.

Look at a pillow case. See how it's made? It's sewn on three sides, with one of the short sides left open, usually with a wide hem. One way to make a pouch is to make something a little like a pillow case. Instead of sewing the hemmed end all the way, though, leave it open so you can thread narrow ribbons or cord through the ends. That will allow you to close the pouch tightly, and not risk losing any of your runes.

While you're sewing (this is a small project, so plan on doing it by hand, with a needle and thread; save your sewing machine for making robes), you can put a little magic into each stitch. Here's a rhyme that will help:

*Magic in this pouch I sew,
to hold the runes by which I know,
To keep them safe and show respect,
not runes nor Wyrð shall I neglect.*

Another way to make a rune pouch—one I like even better—uses a square (usually, actually, a rectangle) of felt, a half-yard or so of narrow ribbon, a bit of craft glue, and whatever decorations you find appropriate. Cut the felt “square” lengthwise; you’ll want $\frac{2}{3}$ of the width for this project.

Apply a thin line of craft glue down both long sides of your strip, keeping about an 1 1/2 inches at one end clean. Now fold the bottom of the strip up to the top of the glue line. Already you have a little pouch; the spare 1 1/2 inches are the flap that will close it.

When the glue is dry, turn the pouch over and glue the ribbon. Apply a line of glue about an inch long, in the center of the ribbon, and press it down just above the middle of the pouch, centered from side to side. When it’s dry and you turn the pouch over again, bring the ends of the ribbon together on the front to tie the pouch closed.



Felt pouches can be used to keep a variety of Craft accessories safe and handy.

You can decorate the pouch in any of several ways. Use fabric paints, or glue additional ribbons on it. You can appliqué other pieces of fabric or make designs with felts scraps in contrasting colors. You may want to use a bit of faux fur, or feathers, or leather scraps to decorate it, too; small bells, miniature buckles, or some of the tiny wooden or metal ornaments sold at craft stores might suit you better. Everything you use should have some symbolic magical meaning, though, and the more personal the symbolism, the better.

A Garden Scrapbook

This interesting project, well-suited to Ostara, uses a disposable camera. These will usually take approximately 27 photos. Before you plant your garden, take a “before” picture of the area you’ll prepare. When you’ve prepared the space, take another. When you’ve planted the garden, take one picture every few days, and you’ll have a record of your garden’s early growth. Later, you can press a few flowers, and take another picture of the harvest. If you grow something you can eat, save a copy of the recipe, and take a picture of the dinner in which you share your produce. Make an album with those pictures and souvenirs—and save the seed packets to put on the first page.

Like the growth you’re documenting, this project begins at Ostara and continues through the Summer months; it’s ready to finish when the harvest is ready to be gathered. Work on a project such as this reminds us that growth is a process, helps us develop self-discipline, gives us a natural way to measure time, focuses our attention on the natural world, and shows us just how sure the turning of the Wheel really is.

Sowing Seeds

At Ostara, many Asatru rituals involve seeds, which may be sown, exchanged, or offered to the Gods. For most Western cultures, Spring is indeed planting time. Most of us don’t actually farm now, though some of us do. But any of us can have a garden, whether it’s in a pot in a sunny corner of the deck or balcony, in a window box, or in the ground out back or by the front door. Ritual blessings of our gardens are nonthreatening, too—everybody who grows anything wants it to grow well, no matter how they go about invoking the cooperation of sun, wind, and rain.

The colorful child-sized garden tools available at many stores are convenient for small gardeners, and for big gardeners with small gardens. These tools can be blessed and consecrated just as altar tools can be. For coveners or solitaries, children or adults, Pagan or not, here's an idea for doing that:

Blessing the Garden Tools

It doesn't matter whether you lay your garden tools out on the ground, or lean them against a fence, or hold them; do what suits you. Say to the tools,

*Little shovel, little rake,
tend the garden that I make.
Little trowel, little hoe,
you will help my garden grow.
I will use you carefully
and great abundance we shall see!
As I will, so mote it be!*

Then use each tool, preferably as part of actually preparing or planting your garden. Don't worry if small children can't use the tools properly. You need to make sure they don't hurt themselves waving the tools around, but the important thing is that they enjoy a good relationship with the earth, with the dirt itself, and with the idea of gardening. In fact, that's the important thing for any beginner. Get some dirt under your fingernails—it'll be fun!

Field Trips

Not forgetting that the God was reborn in His solar aspect at Yule and in His animal aspects at Imbolc, when the Goddess resumed Her Maiden aspect, at Ostara we can celebrate His rebirth in our crops. We can recognize and honor the practical return of light and life to the world by getting out into the world again. Not everyone can go camping, but...how many public gardens are there where you live? Nothing under such listings in your phone book? How about wandering through a nursery or two, even if you don't buy any plants? Are there any farms in your area? Did you go someplace (or could've gone) last year to pick your own pumpkins? Can you go there now and see if and how they plant new crops?

Nature's creatures are, shall we say, anticipating Beltane now. Is there a zoo where you live? Does it include an aviary? Make a field trip! Walk through your own neighborhood and look for birds' nests in trees and bushes. If you live in a seriously urban area, check out the parks—of course—and take a look at the skyscrapers, too. Hawks and other birds sometimes nest on window-ledges. In Europe it's considered good luck if a stork builds its nest on your chimney; here, we consider it lucky if any bird nests on or around our houses or where we work.

Think, too, about building birdhouses—or bat boxes. There are a lot of sources for patterns, so I won't include any here. Instead, I'll suggest that you call your local zoo and ask for recommendations, or check on the Internet or in the library. And I'll remind you that many (small-c) craft stores stock ready-made bird houses that you can decorate yourself. (Older children can turn this into an even more interesting project by researching the various species of birds and bats that live in your area, and perhaps even make extra houses to place in local parks.)

Sacred Play

Now that it's Ostara and we can get back outside, we can see life's new beginnings. It's hard not to notice the exuberance in the natural world—and, naturally, we feel it too. Romance is one thing that begins to bud, but many Wiccans associate romantic love with Beltane (see volume two, *Celebrating the Seasons of Life—Beltane to Mabon* [New Page Books, 2004]). At Ostara, most Wiccans see the Goddess and God as youthful and playful. We and our inner children want to play, too! And why not?

Take the kids to a playground. No kids, or no kids of the right age? Offer to take a friend's children, or go by yourself, or with grown-up friends and their inner children. Something to consider is whether it really matters whether anyone will think you're "weird" for spending a few hours at play—if they do make disapproving noises, maybe they're just jealous! (Do be careful, though, not to approach children you don't know, lest you set off people's "pervert alarms." If there are parents there watching their own children play, sit down and chat for a few minutes, and explain that you're there to give

yourself a therapeutic play break.) If there is a seesaw, make a point to balance on it. Swing on the swings, get dizzy on the “roundy-round,” and hang upside down on the monkey bars.

When you hang by your knees, remember Odin’s ordeal: He hung upside down from Yggdrasil, the World Tree, for nine days and nights, and came away from the experience with the runes. What can you understand better after a morning or an afternoon of play? Children’s observations of the world—whether they’re our offspring, young friends, or our own inner children—can bring a fresh perspective, a breath of fresh air, we might say, to our sometimes-jaded adult viewpoints.

In some cultures (including many Native American religions), there’s a place for sacred play. We “Western Hemispherers” are beginning to “get down” with that idea; our original version of the sacred clown is the court jester. A jester could say and do outrageous things: insult the monarch, behave shamelessly, and make outside-the-box suggestions. That was, in fact, a jester’s job, to question authority, and to challenge stereotypes and the status quo.

We have people to do that for us politically, but we can get so emotionally entangled with party politics or particular issues, or so cynical and demoralized, that those “court jesters” can’t help all of us anymore. Playgrounds can. There’s nothing like sliding down a slide and landing with a *ploomf* in the sand at the bottom, for putting things in perspective. (Don’t forget that the Goddess charges us to keep “mirth” *and* “reverence” with us.)

To put yourself in the mood for sacred play, make up a tune for this short rhyme:

*With a hey-nommy-nommy and a hi-de-ho,
off to the playground we shall go!
We’ll twirl on the roundy-round and swing on the swings,
and dedicate our giggles to the spirit of Spring!*

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ymbols

Butterflies

One symbol of Ostara is the butterfly. From the Winter-like “nest” or “cave” of its cocoon, it emerges from nurturing darkness into life’s light. A butterfly’s hatching is its own way of tipping the balance of the Equinox away from Winter, away from the emphasis on inner growth, to an emphasis on glorious emergence into the world of light and fresh air, of blossoms and nectar, of flight and freedom. Of course, the butterfly has no choice in the matter, and makes no conscious plans for its emergence; nor does it revel, as we can, in the beauty of its life. Consciousness and choice are left to us—and all unknowing, the butterfly, in its wonderful diversity of color and pattern, is one of our inspirations to make Spring as real in our own lives as it is on the Wheel of the Year.

Eggs

Dyed eggs are one of the best known symbols of Ostara, along with the bunny that delivers them. The egg’s a sort of self-contained womb, with a chicken (or another bird, or maybe a snake, a turtle, or an alligator) inside. The “cosmic egg” is an ancient symbol of infinite potential, and of the balance between potential and actualization. Eggs are not quite round, but like circles, they have no beginning and no ending, no entry point. In fact, their oval shape is vaguely reminiscent of Earth’s elliptical orbit.

And even dyeing eggs represents balance! How? I think the balance is between the essential nourishment that’s within the egg and the aesthetic contribution of the coloring’s beauty. Every creature’s primary concern is with survival, but humans, and maybe some other species, need more than that. Psychologists speak of basic needs: food, water, air, shelter, clothing, and sex; and “meta” needs: love and beauty, creativity and religion.

Yes, coloring eggs—fertility symbols themselves—has the ancient ritual purpose of encouraging the Sun to be stronger and brighter so that crops can grow and we and our livestock have enough to eat. But coloring eggs is an art, too, a creative expression, and so this old custom balances satisfaction of our basic needs with satisfaction of our meta needs.

Hares

Eggs are symbolic of Ostara the holiday; hares were sacred to Ostara the Goddess. (Rabbits and hares, by the way, are members of the same large family of rodents, characterized, dictionaries tell us, by long ears, soft fur, short tails, and long hind legs. The distinction usually made is that rabbits are smaller than hares.) Traditionally, hares were captured and released after a period of time, which no doubt differed according to the nature of the divination required. The manner, speed, and direction of their escape was the omen Ostara's Priestesses read.

Hares were among the animals sacrificed in the Pagan cultures from which Wicca draws, ritually sacrificed so that omens could be read in the patterns of their entrails, and we need to remember two or three things about such practices. First and foremost, animal sacrifice is *not* modern Wiccan, Druid, or Asatru practice.

Remember, too, that no animal sacrificed to divination—not hares, not bulls, not boars, and not any other creature—was ever disrespected or wasted. Any animal chosen for sacrifice was ritually blessed first, and every part of the animal was used to the benefit of the community. And don't forget that a skilled and diligent Priest or Priestess, Anglo-Saxon or Druid, could both sanctify and read from any of her peoples' everyday chores, which included killing animals and breaking eggs.

It's true that some of us do still raise and butcher our own livestock, and most do bless the beast before its slaughter. That's not "animal sacrifice" in the same sense, but it's acknowledging that life feeds on life, and taking responsibility for our participation in that natural process. The general public prides itself on being civilized for not practicing the B movie version of animal sacrifice (and for pretending not to know where those steaks in the freezer come from).

But something else to consider is whether our impersonal, secular, commercial, and often patently cruel relationships to our food animals actually merits any pride.

Seeds

The plant world's counterpart of eggs and butterflies is the seed. In addition to being a tiny, concentrated, self-contained microcosm of life that bursts forth from nothing that looks like its mature self, the seed helps us remember that life is a Wheel. Seeds are part of our harvests. Some go to feed us through the cold months, ground and mixed with water they make our everyday and our ritual breads. Some are saved to plant in the Spring—at Ostara.

The seed packets we can buy show us the colorful blossoms we'll see in just a few weeks as Spring turns to Summer. But we know that seeds came from such blossoms and crops, too. Seeds represent the same balance between Winter and Summer, death and life, that Ostara does.

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onclusion

It's difficult to conclude a book like this, for several reasons. One is that, in this volume, we've only looked at four Sabbats, and Wicca celebrates eight (this book is one of a pair that looks at the whole Wheel of the Year). Another reason it's hard to conclude a book—or even a pair of books—about the Sabbats is that the Wheel itself never stops rolling. For instance, Ostara is the last of what we're calling the Winter Sabbats, and Samhain was the first, and, throughout this book, I've been alluding to the Winter Sabbats' relationships with each other. In closing, I'd like to talk a little bit about Samhain's relationship to Ostara.



This simplified Wheel of the Year illustrates the Wiccan Sabbats in relationship to one another.

Samhain and Ostara

As I draft this chapter, it's October, and in my yard we've just scattered wildflower seeds, hoping that this year's winter rains will be good, and that the desert around our house will be vibrant with color come next Ostara. I do find it intriguing that at the same time I'm getting ready for Samhainville, our annual Samhain camping trip, I'm also doing "Ostara duty," planting seeds. But in a sense, this is perfectly symbolic.

Samhain is, as my Tradition sees it, the last harvest, and when the God's death becomes the promise of His renewed life. The grain's been cut, the beasts have been slaughtered; the dead God has been buried—and at Samhain, the grave becomes the womb. One way of looking at "things" is to recognize seeds as the body of the God, and to understand sowing them as burying Him—so to be planting seeds in October is a wonderful expression of the Wiccan truth that the grave is a womb.

We bury the God, and from His "corpse," from the seeds we scatter, as we might scatter the ashes of our own dead, come Spring's rebirth of flowers. Right now (and this is true every year) we don't know how many of which of the seeds we have scattered will sprout and bloom, having survived the mini-rivers that course across the yard, or the birds' scavenging. But there are marigold seeds among those we scattered, and marigolds are, to our Mexican-American neighbors, a flower for the dead. What goes around really *does* come around—and to get very personal for a moment, I really love that about Wicca.

I'll tell you something that hasn't come up in a long time: when I was in college, a friend Michael dubbed me "the Goddess of Everlasting Spring." There may have been some sarcasm behind it, because I was almost unbearably perky and cheerful in those days, and back then it was more fashionable to be ever-so-serious. Nobody else ever called me that, but every Spring, his voice floats up through memory, sometimes softly, sometimes gleefully.

We camp at Ostara, in one of several favorite places in the Chiricahua (pronounced *cheery-caw-wah*) Mountains, and there's always something just starting to leaf or bud or bloom, always some bright sprout of grass poking up through last fall's decaying leaves,

a bunch of bright flowers waving Sun-like against a cliff or along a stream bank. I take a deep breath when I see these signs of renewed life, when I see the woods strewn with these threads from the hem of Ostara's robe.

Of course, Michael was right, and I was, all those years ago, a goddess—we are all God and Goddess, so we say. I didn't understand then, for in my youth I was, as many of us are, too self-conscious, and not Self-conscious enough. Now, through Wicca, I do understand myself and everyone else to be Goddess and God, and I know, too, that Spring really is everlasting. That's something to celebrate, indeed.

Wheel Tracks

No book, no matter how in-depth its research, no matter how comprehensive its range, can say everything there is to say about any Sabbat. Does that sound like a limitation? It's not, really; in fact, it's a good thing. The reason it's true is that every season we celebrate adds more to the experience of life, and that means there is always more to understand, to do, to be—and, of course, to write about. By this time next year, you and I both will be able to say more about the Sabbats, and how we celebrate them, than we can right now.

By the time the Wheel rolls around once more to this point in the year, we'll all be aware of deeper symbolism, of greater meanings, more personal meanings, in Wicca's lore and symbols, and in the practices of our particular Traditions and ways. That's because everything we do actually matters in the world(s), actually contributes to the significance of life and enlarges the whole.

“It is a mistake to assume that events far apart in time are thereby separate. All things are connected as in the finest web of a spider. The slightest movement on any thread can be discerned from all points in the web.” So says Wulf, an Anglo-Saxon sorcerer, to Brand, the young monk who is his student in Dr. Brian Bates's *The Way of Wyrd* (Book Club Associates and Century Publishing, 1983). He is speaking of the Web of Wyrd, which some mistake for fate, and misinterpret as predestination.

Wyrd (from which our modern word *weird* does indeed come) is, Bates clarifies through Wulf, “present in everything, but Wyrd does not *make* things happen. Wyrd is created at every instant, and so Wyrd *is* the happening.” Wulf teaches Brand that “...the threads of Wyrd are a dimension of ourselves that we cannot grasp with words. The secrets of Wyrd do not lie in our word-hoards, but are locked in the soul.” Later he explains a little more: “Allow yourself to open up to Wyrd and it will cleanse, renew, change, and develop your casket [trunk] of reason. Your word-ward should serve your experience, not the reverse.”

Presaging what may be the best-known and most popular Wiccan chant, Wulf explains that “Thoughts are like raindrops....They fall, make a splash, and then dry up. But the world of Wyrd is like the mighty oceans from which raindrops arise and to which they return in rivers and streams.”

To Brand’s questions—well some of them, anyway—Wulf responds, “You may start at any point on the web and find that you are at the centre,” and “Wyrd existed before the gods and will exist after them. Yet Wyrd lasts only for an instant because it is the constant creation of the forces. Wyrd is itself constant change, like the seasons, yet because it is created at every instant, it is unchanging, like the still center of a whirlpool.” Or the hub of the Wheel of the Year, we might add. When we celebrate the seasons of life, we celebrate that ever-changing, yet ever-constant, Wyrd that is, in modern Wiccan terms, the Spiral Dance.

So, it’s nigh unto impossible to conclude a book about the Sabbats, about the turning of the Wiccan Wheel, about celebrating the seasons of life, because there isn’t an end to this subject. There’s no final season, no finale to the dance, no last shelf in the library of life. There does come a time, though, when you close a book and return it to your own bookshelves, and that time for this book has almost come.

Still, though you may be done with the book, you mustn’t think the book’s done with you! What you’ve read here will nestle in your mind, will nudge your thoughts now and then like a cat rubs against your ankles. Some of the suggestions for rituals and projects you’ll consciously make part of your life; some of the information you’ve

found here, some of the perspectives, will influence you more subtly. But as the Wheel and the seasons roll through your life, so this book has made a track in your thoughts and understanding. Close it if you will, but this word-hoard remains in service of your experience, and your experience is, by its very nature, a celebration of the seasons of life.

Brave heart and bright blessings!

*Winter's bright sword protects you,
Summer's bright crown endows,
celebrating the seasons perfects you,
as, by the Web, you make your vows.*

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Appendix A

Casting a Wiccan Circle

There is no “one right way” to cast a Circle. The way described below is based on a standard Order of Circle, derived from the Gardnerian (which was the first to be published, and is the basis for most Traditional and Eclectic rites). This illustration of an altar is not the only feasible arrangement, either, but is functional and familiar to most practitioners.



A common Wiccan altar arrangement puts items associated with the Goddess—the cup and the bowl—on the left, and those associated with the God—salt and incense—on the right. Cakes to share later are in the middle, flanked by athames. This altar, with its pentagram inlaid, was hand-made by Gardnerian/British Traditional Priest Rick Johnson of Tucson, Arizona.

Start by preparing the salt and water. Holding your athame (or sword, though if you’re using a sword you’ll be more comfortable with a lower altar) point down over the salt, inscribe a pentagram—in the air above the salt, or in the salt itself—and say, “Blessed be, you creature of Earth; your strength empowers us all.”

Now move your blade over the water, and above its surface inscribe a pentagram, and say, “Blessed be, you creature of water; all impurities are cast out from you!” Touch the tip of your blade to the surface of the water and flick out a few drops; do this three times, in different directions.

Next, use the tip of the blade to scoop some salt out of its bowl and into the water: You need to do this three times, and then stir the salt into the water, moving your blade deosil (sun- or clockwise) three, six, or nine times. You’ve just made holy water, and you’ll use it shortly.

Now cast the Circle. If you have a usual way of doing so, do it that way; if you don’t, here’s a way you can try or modify:

Begin at the East. Take one or two deep breaths, touch your sword or athame to the ground, and then raise the point above your head. Take another deep breath. Lower the blade as you exhale, until the blade’s pointing toward the ground at a 45-degree angle. Walk slowly deosil around the Circle, and keep the point of the blade slightly ahead of you. On your way to the South Quarter, say:

“I cast this Circle with Fire—the Fire of Brigid’s Forge, and the Fire that dances in Lugh’s eyes.”

When you get to South, pause and hold the blade (tip skyward) to your heart for a count of five heartbeats; if you like, you may turn (deosil) in place as you do this, for some say you must keep moving as you cast a Circle. When five heartbeats have passed, lower the blade to the 45-degree angle, and on your way to West, say,

“I draw this Circle with Fire—to be a fortress against harm or fear or failure.”

When you come to West, use the tip of your blade to three times draw a circle in the air; it is up to you whether to make the three circles in the same place, or beside each other. An alternative is to make ∞ , the infinity sign. When you have completed the design, lower the tip of the blade to a 45-degree angle again, and as you continue on toward North, say,

“I conjure this Circle with Fire—to be a threshold between the worlds we know and the worlds we have yet to explore.”

At North, use your blade to inscribe a pentagram in the air. When you have done this, lower the blade to 45-degree and continue around, back to East, saying,

“I complete this Circle with Fire—to be a field beyond mortal time and space!”

Now raise the point of your blade skyward again, and turn (deosil) in place toward the center of the Circle. Say,

“Cast with Fire, this Circle stands proud and free and holy. As I do will, so mote it be.” Stand in silence for the time it takes your heart to beat five times, then lower your blade and replace it, either in its sheath at your waist, or on the altar.

When the Circle’s been cast with Fire, it needs next to be cleansed with salt and water. From the altar, take the bowl with the salt and water in it, and carry it to East. Lower the bowl from your waist toward the earth, and then raise it above your head; then return it to waist level and make a circle with it, holding it out in front of you first and circling it to your right. You will do this with it at each Quarter before you sprinkle the salt and water over the Quarter marker.

At the East, as you sprinkle a bit of the salt and water over the marker, say, “I cleanse the East with salt and water.”

Continue to sprinkle fingertips of water around the circumference of the Circle as you walk around it deosil. Stop and cleanse each Quarter. Be sure to come back to East from North, and sprinkle once more; the second time at East, you do not need to speak. Return the bowl of salt and water to the altar.

Next, you need to charge the Circle with Air, which is represented by incense. Taking the incense from the altar, move to the East. If you’re using stick incense, inscribe a pentagram at eye level. If you’re using powder on a charcoal in a burner, do with it as you did with the bowl of salt and water. Either way, say, “I charge the East with Air.” Move around the Circle and do the same thing at each Quarter. As you walk, of course, the incense will fan out along the boundary of the Circle.

Don’t forget to keep going from North back to East, so as not to leave a gap. When the incense is back on the altar, you turn toward the center and say, “The Circle is cast. We are between the Worlds!” Others present may repeat this or not; they might prefer to say “Blesséd be,” or “So mote it be,” or nothing at all.

Now that the Circle’s cast with all the Elements, you may either use the incense to bless and “purify” everyone else in the Circle, or you may return it to the altar and take up the oil that is there to anoint

everyone. In most covens, the Priestess smudges or anoints the Priest first; then he smudges or anoints her, and goes on to do the rest of the women in the Circle before returning the incense or oil to the Priestess to bless the rest of the men.

You'll call the Quarters next. One person or several may do this; normally, whoever calls the Quarter to begin with also dismisses it when the Circle's ready to open. If there are candles at each Quarter, it's customary to light them as soon as the Quarter's called.

At East, make a gesture of salute at eye level or higher, and then say, "Hail, Old Ones of the East; welcome, Guardians of Air! We receive your blessing of clear sight and thought, and our Circle honors your inspiration."

At South, make a gesture of salute at eye level or higher, and then say, "Hail, Old Ones of the South; welcome, Guardians of Fire! We receive your blessings of love and courage, and our Circle honors your passion."

At West, make a gesture of salute at eye level or higher, and then say, "Hail, Old Ones of the West; welcome, Guardians of Water! We receive your blessings of empathy and intuition, and our Circle honors your compassion."

At North, make a gesture of salute at eye level or higher, and then say, "Hail, Old Ones of the North; welcome, Guardians of Earth. We receive your blessings of strength and loyalty, and we honor your understanding."

With the Quarters called, the Circle is properly prepared for the invocation of the Goddess and God. (Spontaneous invocations—and Quarter calls and other blessings, for that matter—always supercede scripted ones, but not everyone has the gift or skill for extemporaneous liturgy.) If the altar holds candles for the Gods, they're lit after the invocations are made.

In some Traditions, the Priestess invokes the Goddess and the Priest invokes the God. In others (mine included), the Priest invokes the Goddess, and the Priestess invokes the God. Any of us, though, are capable of invoking the Gods, inviting Them to be present in the Circle and to add Their power to the rite.

Invoke the Goddess first. Say, “Hail, Great Mother, Triple Goddess, Merry Maid, Mother Moon, Crone of the Crossroads. We are Your children, and we call to You to join us and bring Your power and blessings to our rites. Hail, Silver Lady, and welcome!”

To invoke the God, say, “Hail, Horned One, Lover and Son, Green Man, Hunter and Prey, Wise Sage of the Ages. We are Your brothers and sisters, and we call to You to join us and bring Your power and blessings to our rites. Hail, Golden Lord, and welcome!”

At this point, you’ll observe your Sabbat rites (or work your magic, if you’re conducting an Esbat; some Traditions and individuals don’t invoke the God at Esbats). The Sabbat rituals in this book are meant to be performed at this point in the ritual.

Now it’s time for Cakes and Ale. Again, different Traditions approach this portion of the rite in different ways. Sometimes the Priest holds the (projective, or “male”) athame and the Priestess holds the (receptive, or “female”) cup. Other traditions say that gender polarity alternates through the planes, and to represent this, the Priest holds the cup and the Priestess holds the athame. That’s the way the Adventure Tradition does it; as Canyondancer says, “we like to cross-pollinate the gender roles for balance.”

So, returning to the altar, the Priest takes up the cup and the Priestess takes up her athame (or her sword; if she’s using a sword, the Priest should kneel). As the Priestess holds the blade above the cup, she says, “As the athame is to the male...” and the priest responds, “so the cup is to the female.”

Both of them, and the rest of those present, if you like, finish as the Priestess lowers the blade into the cup, saying, “and together, they are one, and more than one.” A solitary holds the athame in his or her projective hand (the one she or he writes with), and the cup in his or her other hand. The blade is left in the liquid for a few seconds, and the Priest and Priestess visualize the contents of the cup glowing with energy from the blade. The Priestess then removes the blade—I shake mine off in the general direction of others in the Circle—and replaces it on the altar. (It’s good if you can wipe the blade clean before you put it down, but red wine will stain your robes; consider having a cloth hanging from your cord to protect anything you’re wearing.)

The Priest then offers the cup, often with a gesture of salute first, to the Priestess, bidding her never thirst. Some Traditions include a kiss following sips from the cup. A solitary raises the cup in salute and says, "I shall never thirst." When the Priestess has sipped, she offers the cup back to the Priest, with the same blessing: "May you never thirst." ("Blessed be" is often whispered too.) The Priest then starts the cup on its way around the Circle, and the "never thirst" blessing continues as the cup is passed from person to person. Anyone who does not wish to sip from cup may make a gesture of salute instead, or, if the Circle's outside, pour a tiny libation before passing the cup on with the blessing.

Cakes and Ale is called "Cakes and Ale," or sometimes "Cakes and Wine," no matter what is actually served. Some covens use non-alcoholic beverages, while some use actual wine, or actual ale; and it's not always, technically, "cake" that's served, either. Some groups, deferring to the order in which the elements are consecrated, call this rite "Wine and Cakes," too. These differences are less significant than the symbolism of the rite, which is that we are one with the God as we share the food and drink that comes from His willing death in the service of life. During this time in the ritual, it's alright to chat and joke, though most Traditions expect that topics of conversation will be at least loosely related to the Craft. Some Traditions permit photos to be taken at this time, too.

Where in the ritual the rite of Cakes and Ale is celebrated will depend on whether or not the Tradition requires its members to fast (usually 12 or 24 hours) prior to the Sabbat. Those Traditions that do require fasting often celebrate Cakes and Ale as soon as the Goddess and God have been invoked; and for those Traditions, Cakes and Ale is frequently a full meal rather than just a sip of "ale" and a bite of "cake."

When the Cakes and Ale have been shared with everyone present—and with the Goddess and God, by libation and offering (indoors, made into a bowl on the altar), it's time to open the Circle. This process begins when you thank the God and Goddess for Their presence and blessings. If Their candles have been lit, they should be extinguished (customarily *not* by blowing them out) after They have been "farewelled."

To bid the God farewell, say “Hail, Horned One, Lover and Son, Green Man, Hunter and Prey, Wise Sage of the Ages. We are Your brothers and sisters, and we thank You for joining us and bringing Your power and blessings to our rites. Hail, Golden Lord, and farewell!” Many Wiccans add the phrase, “Go in peace, and blessed be” to both farewells.

To bid the Goddess farewell, say, “Hail, Great Mother, Triple Goddess, Merry Maid, Mother Moon, Crone of the Crossroads. We are Your children, and we thank You for joining us and bringing Your power and blessings to our rites. Hail, Silver Lady, and farewell!”

Some Traditions dismiss the Quarters in the same order in which they were called, that is, deosil from East; others dismiss the Quarters widdershins (counterclockwise) from East. The Tradition I follow dismisses deosil *except* at Samhain. How you dismiss is up to you. In whichever direction the dismissals are going, usually the same person who called a Quarter dismisses it. If candles have been lit, they should be extinguished when the Quarter has been dismissed.

At East, make a gesture of salute at eye level or higher, and say, “Hail, Old Ones of the East; farewell, Guardians of Air! You inspired us, and we thank you. We take your blessing of clear sight and thought with us as we depart, and we bid you hail, farewell, and blessed be!”

At South, make a gesture of salute at eye level or higher, and say, “Hail, Old Ones of the South; farewell, Guardians of Fire! You impassioned us, and we thank you. We take your blessings of love and courage with us as we depart, and we bid you hail, farewell, and blessed be!”

At West, make a gesture of salute at eye level or higher, and say, “Hail, Old Ones of the West; farewell, Guardians of Water! Your compassion filled us, and we thank you. We take your blessings of empathy and intuition with us as we depart, and we bid you hail, farewell, and blessed be!”

At North, make a gesture of salute at eye level or higher, and say, “Hail, Old Ones of the North; farewell, Guardians of Earth! We share your understanding, and we thank you. We take your blessings of strength and loyalty with us as we depart, and we bid you hail, farewell, and blessed be!”

Some Traditions always undraw their Circles at the end of a ritual; for others, it depends on where the Circle has been cast. A Circle cast in dedicated-private space that will not be used for anything mundane or for anything that might disrespect the Gods, may be opened without undrawing it. A Circle cast in public space, where people might unexpectedly cross its boundaries, should be undrawn before it's opened. Otherwise, the leftover energy can have effects that might not be anticipated or appreciated!

To undraw the Circle after the Quarters have been dismissed, use the same blade that was used to cast it in the first place. You can undraw the Circle deosil or widdershins; either is appropriate. As you move between the Quarters, say, "I withdraw the Fire from this Circle. I return the Fire to Brigid's Forge, and release it to dance again in Lugh's eyes." (Of course you never removed it completely from her forge or from the God's eyes in the first place—you only borrowed a bit of that flame and spark; now you're returning it.)

As you pass the next Quarter, say, "I withdraw the Fire and open the fortress, unharmed, unafraid, and successful."

As you pass the fourth Quarter, say, "I withdraw the Fire and dissolve the threshold between the worlds, for our exploration is now adjourned."

As you continue your circuit and return to the Quarter at which you started, say, "I withdraw the Fire, and return this field to ordinary time and space." Now raise the point of your blade skyward again, and turn (deosil) in place toward the center of the Circle. Say, "The Fire withdrawn, this Circle is open but unbroken!" In most Traditions, everyone else will now join in saying, "Merry meet, merry part, and merry meet again!" Many groups follow the "merry meet" with a group hug—mind not to squish any little ones!

In those Traditions for which Cakes and Ale is only bites and sips, there's often a feast waiting—and more and more often, it's a potluck feast. This way, everyone's dietary restrictions are accommodated, and there's bound to be something even the pickiest children will enjoy, too. Remember to recycle whatever you can, and be sure none of the leftovers go to waste.

Appendix B

What's a Child Ready to Learn About the Winter Sabbats?

I believe strongly, for reasons that I explored in some depth in *Raising Witches* (New Page Books, 2002), that we should make an effort to include our children in the practice of our religion. The idea that not every form of celebration that's right for Wiccan adults is appropriate for children is obviously, but some of our concerns are based more on social and religious prejudice than on what we know about how children mature. So, when parents are trying to figure out how to include their kids in Sabbat celebrations, it's helpful to know something about how children learn and grow.

Raising children is the subject of a great many books; raising Wiccan children is the subject of very few, and the most recently published one is *Raising Witches*. Borrowing from "What's a Kid Ready to Learn About Wicca," a chart included in that book, I've put together some new information to give you some ideas about involving children—yours or your community's—in your Winter Sabbat celebrations. You'll find the same five age groups that helped to organize *Raising Witches*: infancy, early childhood, later childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood.



These ideas are based on several years of research about child development, and considerable thought about how to raise our children in

Wicca and other Neo-Pagan religions. I can't share everything I've learned, but I can affirm that, while it's important to have a handle on the general course their development will take, it's just as important to know your own children for the individuals they are, as distinct from whom we might hope or want them to be. The ideas here are meant as guidelines, not carved-in-stone curricula, for appropriately sharing the wonders of Wiccan Sabbats with our children—or with other “babies to the Craft.”

None of these sections mention every possible way of involving children—how can they include the ones you and your family or coven haven't devised yet!?—but they do recognize that you know your children, your community, your own talents, and your family's resources better than anyone. These suggestions are meant to stimulate your own creativity, and to reassure you that it's never too soon to celebrate the seasons of life.

The Winter Sabbats for Infants (Little ones younger than 1 year old)

Samhain

Jack-o'-Lantern happy faces, comforting candle flickers, pumpkin and gingerbread scents, giggly howls, plush owls and ravens, costumes. The idea here is to present the sounds, scents, and images of Samhain in comforting contexts—when it comes to costumes, don't make Mommy's face unrecognizable! Chants can be lullabies, candles can light the room at feeding time, incense and cooking smells can go along with cuddles and gentle playing. Peekaboo can be played with simple masks. Those younger than 1 year depend on parental reactions to model their responses, so be happy to see people who come to the door, and if the noise and costumes make Baby cry, retreat to less upsetting territory and focus on chants, colored mobiles, Jack-o'-Lantern night lights, and so on.

Yule

Tree lights are fascinating for babies, particularly if they make patterns on walls or ceilings, and especially if the patterns move gently. Chants and carols are wonderful to dance to, and some are good lullabies. There are always lots of tastes and textures to be explored, including snow and ice. Brightly colored packages and

ribbons are great fun—but while it may be alright for Baby to taste and feel paper and ribbon with his or her tongue, she or he shouldn't be allowed to stuff wrapping paper in her mouth to the point of dissolving it or swallowing. Make some cloth napkins and cloth ribbons available for “chewing” on, and keep careful watch so he or she doesn't choke. Cotton balls, which are like giant fluffy snowflakes, are fun to play with inside (but not good to eat, so be careful). If you have a very mobile “month-old,” consider putting only the tree and the presents in the playpen, where they're easy to look at and hard to reach from outside the pen.

Imbolc

Imbolc means “in the belly,” and refers to lambing season, so it's a perfect time to give Baby a stuffed lambie to cuddle! Another name for the Sabbat is Bride [breed], after the Goddess, and by either name it's often celebrated with lots of candles. The dancing flames can be ever so intriguing for infants; rocking a baby to sleep by candlelight is a wonderful experience for everyone involved. Brooms, practical or decorative, offer interesting textures for exploring fingers. Peekaboo games with colored veils (white, red, and black for the Maiden, Mother, and Crone) are fun. Babies don't understand Imbolc's new sprouts or lengthening days, but they will appreciate their parents' joy in the warming weather. Teach them to associate gentle breezes and light rains with happy moments with Mom, Dad, and siblings.

Ostara

In many places it's warm enough to play outside by Ostara, and babies enjoy relaxing on the lawn as much as grown-ups do. Flowers and their scents are intriguing, though exploration needs to be limited to fingers, and should not include tasting most flowers (some can be poisonous). Nasturtiums and some other blossoms are edible—research the types that are in your yard. Stuffed animals, perennial favorites, are very appropriate now—especially ducks, chicks, frogs, and—the goddess Ostara's own symbol—bunnies. As at any season, chants are fun to dance to, and some are quiet enough to be lullabies. Flowered blankets are good for this time of year. If Baby is incense-tolerant, flowery scents are fun to try out. Babies don't get into Ostara eggs the way older children can, but large plastic or wooden eggs, or

even plush eggs, make nice toys. You must inspect them first to make sure there are no dangerous, sharp, or loose parts, and then oversized Ostara baskets give babies a chance to work on their fine and gross motor skills.

The Winter Sabbats for Early Childhood (Ages 1 to 5)

Samhain

Children begin to understand the idea of costume when they're about three years old, and they often have firm ideas about what costumes they'd like to wear. They can also help decorate, at least in their own rooms. They'll enjoy pumpkin pie and gingerbread, and the scents that go along with those goodies. Faces are among the first images children draw, and Jack-o'-Lantern faces are both easy and seasonal. Some little kids are able to help harvest pumpkins and other gourds, from fields or supermarket bins; at the store, the mini-pumpkins are perfectly child-sized. The harvest can take place at home, too, as the small, colorful gourds are gathered from (or from under) couches and chairs, and carried to the kitchen or the dining room in baskets or bags. Remember, if trick-or-treating is on the agenda, children should NOT eat anything you haven't checked out first.

Yule

What are some of your favorite Yuletide memories? How can you recreate them for your children (or for your inner child)? Young kids can not only help decorate, they can help make the decorations. Sometimes they can help make and wrap presents, too. Can you find a way to let them help with any seasonal baking you do? Children can also notice how much earlier it gets dark; maybe it feels like staying up longer! Choosing the family's Yule tree is exciting for many children. Most tree lots will let youngsters pick up broken or discarded twigs or boughs, and then you can explore scent and texture as well as how pretty the greenery looks. Making up songs and beginning to learn the family's favorite carols and chants happens in early childhood, too. Little ones can enjoy being chilly, but love to know there's a safe and warm inside waiting for them, too.

Imbolc

Are there any sprouts poking through the snow where you live? Is the snow beginning to melt? For young children, these humble events are fascinating, and worth some time to observe and explore. Valentine's Day is fun for most little children—they can still make doily-and-construction-paper Valentines and give them to the Goddess and God as well as to family members and friends. Are there local farms or a livestock exhibit at the zoo? Imbolc means “in the belly,” and refers to lambing, so if there's a chance to see newborn lambs, or hatching chicks, plan a field trip! Imbolc is often celebrated with lots of candles, and children can spend hours (under careful supervision) watching the dancing flames. We can also caution them that fire is beautiful *and* burns. The burning function has its uses—burning wood helps us keep warm, and fires cook our food—but young children need to learn not to get close to flames without a grown-up at hand.

Ostara

The days are getting longer and warmer now. If you go to the zoo, you'll see animals being “perkier.” Birds are making nests and singing for mates. To celebrate Ostara, perhaps you'll want to color some eggs. You can do that with egg dyes, or with younger kids, by mixing and matching the halves of colored plastic eggs. Making Ostara baskets out of construction paper and filling them with eggs is fun; use paper “grass” rather than the plastic kinds, for it is biodegradable and won't hurt animals if it's dropped outside. Making “deviled” eggs is something older little kids can help with, too—and they might have ideas for other names for these sunny snacks. Dressing up to celebrate the Sabbat is fun—after all, Mother Earth's starting to dress up Her trees with leaves and buds, and some flowers are blooming now, too. Make a bouquet of paper flowers for the altar!

The Winter Sabbats for Later Childhood (Ages 6 to 11)

Samhain

If you had a chance to plant pumpkins earlier in the year, you'll have fun harvesting them now, and with supervision and maybe a

little help, older children can carve their own Jack-o'-Lanterns. Tell them what those candlelit faces mean while they work. Kids at this age can understand why Samhain, which means “end of winter,” is an agricultural event, the final harvest. Now they can begin to understand why it is Wicca’s New Year and a family reunion, too. Kids who are still trick-or-treating can make a donation to the food bank in proportion to the candy they collect. If they’re interested, they may be able to help plan the Sabbat rituals—and if someone they love has died, perhaps they’d like to say something in memory of that person or pet.

Yule

If your family cuts a Yule tree from the woods or selects one from a tree lot, your older children are ready to learn how to make the selection. Older kids can understand much of what the Yule tree symbolizes, too, as well as the recent history of decorating customs. Some older kids will want to help decorate the tree, or perhaps do it on their own. It’s also time for them to learn about the astronomy of Solstices (and Equinoxes—Ostara’s not far off). How other Pagans celebrate the Winter holiday and how Christian celebrations developed from ancient Pagan customs are interesting to many older kids. Wassailing your garden can be fun, and so can discussions about the real nature of Santa Claus. Older kids can join in and sometimes take a role in the Sabbat ritual, and can help prepare the feast that follows.

Imbolc

Is it time to prepare plantings spaces—in the yard or on the windowsill—where you live? Older children can help, and maybe even take responsibility for one corner of the garden. Imbolc marks the end of Winter, and Spring cleaning can start now. Getting rid of the last bits of holiday greenery, older kids can notice that it still smells fresh. Because Imbolc means “in the belly,” a trip to a local farm or the zoo to see pregnant beasts and/or newborn animals might be fun. Imbolc’s also known as Bride [breed], and as a Fire festival, it’s often celebrated with candles. Buy a few sheets of beeswax and some wicking, and older children can roll candles for the Sabbat altar. As Winter winds down, begin to articulate Summer plans, and find hope for the future even if things still look dark and gloomy.

Ostara

Egg hunts are still fun, and some older kids enjoy organizing hunts for younger children, too; older kids can understand eggs' symbolism. A trip to the planetarium might be interesting now, for the Equinox is an astronomical event as well as a religious occasion. (Shows at some planetariums actually mention that the Equinoxes are religiously significant for some faiths.) Plant reproduction cycles are an appropriate topic now, and so is the traditional "language of flowers." Is it time for The Talk at your house? Ostara's a great time to open a discussion about the "birds and the bees," and the natural world is full of pertinent examples now. Nature walks are good pastimes, too—do you know the names of the plants that grow in your yard and your neighborhood and the animals that live among them? If so, teach your kids; if not, learn with them!

The Winter Sabbats for Adolescence (Ages 12 to 15)

Samhain

All of our Sabbats are important, but Samhain has a triple significance, and one of its themes is family reunion. Genealogical research, including interviews of grandparents, aunts, and uncles makes an excellent project. Adolescents can memorialize any friends and relatives who've died, and start to understand death as a part of life rather than as an end. Recognizing Samhain's harvest theme, adolescents can organize a food bank donation. For the Wiccan New Year, it's appropriate to make resolutions, too—maybe short-term ones that can be achieved by the end of the calendar year. Kids this age are ready for more of Samhain's history, and to learn about other Pagans' harvest customs. They may want to help plan part of the ritual, perhaps focusing on the aspect of Samhain that's most important to them. If your community has a costume ball, adolescents can design and create their own costumes—and maybe yours, too!

Yule

The history of Yule (it's from a Norse word, *Iul*, which means "wheel") and its relationship to Christmas and Hanukkah are of interest now. With schools on holiday, there's time to write songs

and poems. Computer-savvy adolescents who grasp Yule's symbolism can design their own greeting cards. They can also help the family or the coven figure out how to share the mid-Winter feast with those less fortunate—perhaps with a food bank project or by baking for residents of a nursing home. Singing to the God as He rises in the Sun on Solstice morning is fun for kids who have enough energy to stay up all night—and while they're up, they can make bird feeders with pine cones and peanut butter, or make “rustic” kings' swords from wrapping paper tubes, colored paper, ribbons, and bells.

Imbolc

Imbolc's what we call a “cross-Quarter day”—midway between a Solstice (Yule) and an Equinox (Ostara). It's also the beginning of Spring on the Wiccan calendar. How do other Pagan religions celebrate Imbolc? The Sabbat is also known as Bride [breed] and it's a Fire festival. Besides the physical sort of fire that cooks our foods and keeps our homes warm, adolescents can think about what other sorts of fire we use. They can notice the days getting longer now, and burn candles they've made to encourage the Sun to get even stronger. They'll be able to come up with other ways to encourage budding life, too. Adolescents can build simple cold frames to keep early sprouts from freezing, build birdhouses, and encourage each other through various difficulties, too, remembering that seasons turn in our lives, not just on the calendar.

Ostara

It's the Spring Equinox, and kids this age can easily understand the astronomical aspects of the Sabbat. A trip to the local planetarium is one way to learn about it; a trip to the library is another. There's more interesting “stuff” to learn about Ostara, too: The Ostara bunny is really a hare, for instance, sacred to the goddess Ostara. What else can your adolescent children find out in a few hours' research? Equinox means “equal night,” when, on the equator, the hours of light and darkness are balanced, and many Ostara rituals focus on tipping that balance toward the light as the year waxes. It's good to think about the steps we're taking from childhood to adulthood—adolescence is in between infancy and adulthood as Ostara's between Winter and Summer—and our individual growth is something to celebrate, too.

The Winter Sabbats for Young Adults (Ages 16 and Older)

Samhain

Young adults can begin to study what Jung and other authors have to say about archetypes, and to read other scholarly works on Samhain and its significance. They can also begin to study other religions comparatively, especially with regard to people's misconceptions about and fears of Samhain/Halloween. Young adults can take a larger role in helping to plan Samhain rituals; this is particularly appropriate if they intend to be initiated. Of course, they'll want to continue traditions from their younger days, such as organizing harvest-sharing projects such as food bank donations, and making New Year's resolutions. This is an appropriate time to study various forms of divination, too—card reading, gazing, and scrying are well-suited to this Sabbat.

Yule

Writing Yule stories and songs is fun, especially for young adults who play an instrument. Learning how other faiths' Winter celebrations relate to Wicca is a worthwhile research project that can deepen understanding of Wicca and of other religions. Most Yule rituals offer ample opportunity for participation, and young adults can help plan not only the ritual, but the festivities that follow. As young adults find their first jobs and begin to learn firsthand the "value of a dollar," focusing on handmade and symbolic gifts can be the starting point for interesting discussions. With time off from school, a young adult's study of folk and fairy tales set in the Winter can broaden his or her perspectives in several ways. And there's always family Yule traditions to carry on and even update.

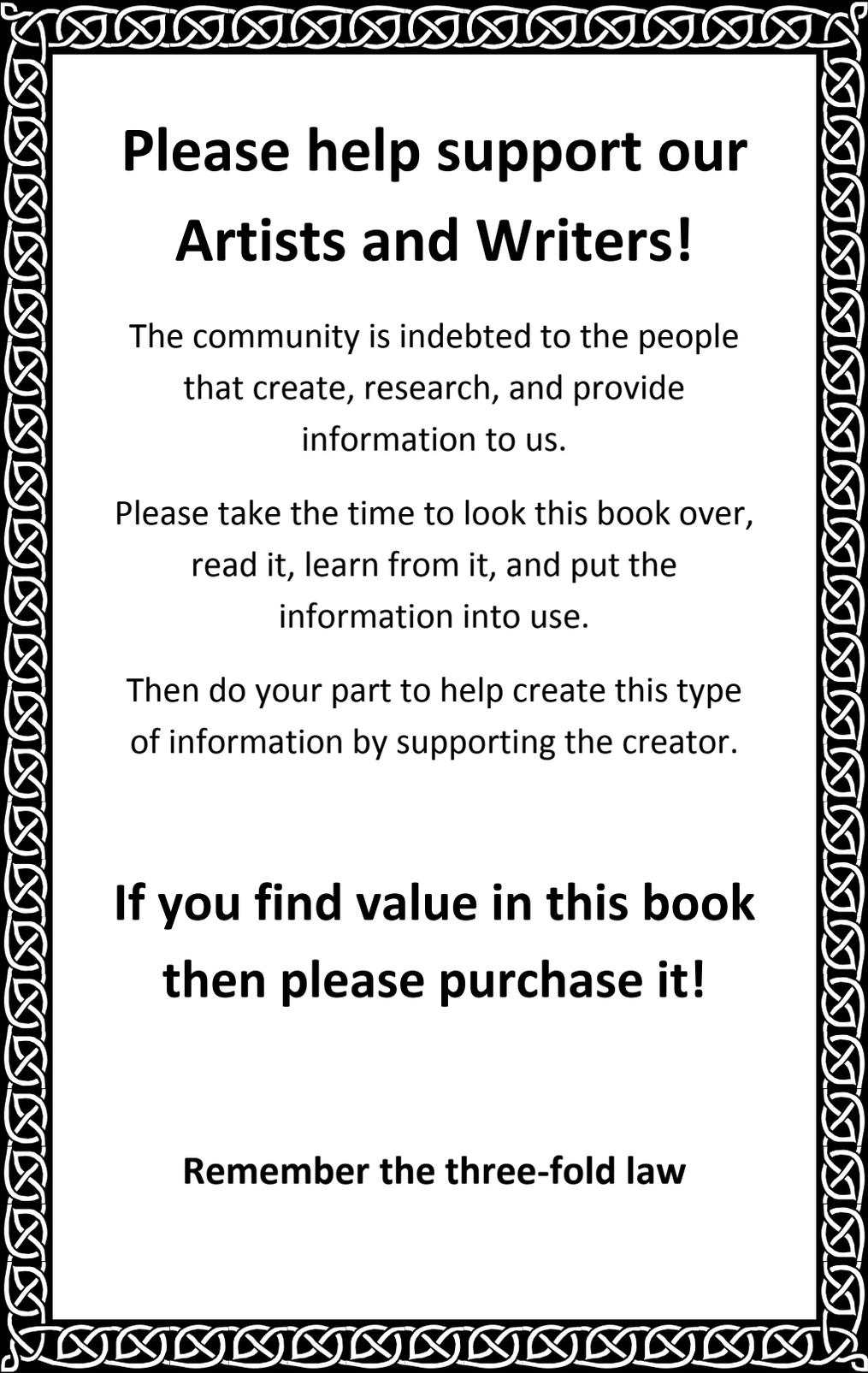
Imbolc

Imbolc is a good time to see "the birds and the bees" in perspective—as more than hormonal gratification, part of the cycle of life and death. On the modern Wiccan calendar, Winter ends now as Spring begins, and the Year is turning toward light and abundance—yet the reality of Winter is still vivid, and the relationship of death to rebirth can be clarified. Writing stories and songs can be a good way to express strong feelings about life's fragile tenacity. Young

adults can experiment with a variety of “advanced” candle-making techniques. If a large enough space is available, a labyrinth, outlined with tea lights, can be constructed. Naturally, traditional Sabbat celebrations from earlier years, such as baking for Cakes and Ale, will still be important. Participation in ritual, and the creation of new rites (what about a ritual for melting icicles?) is also appropriate.

Ostara

In some climes, it’s warm enough for the first camping trip of the season, and it can be planned to coincide with Spring Break. Studying the relationship of other Spring celebrations to Ostara is interesting: Easter is not only named after the goddess Ostara, but is celebrated on the first Sunday following the first full Moon after the Spring Equinox! Nature walks to learn more about natural history make fine pastimes. Simple egg-dyeing can become more intricate, and young adults can participate more significantly in Ostara rituals. It might be time for some young adults to think about the future—consider colleges, summer occupations, and so on. Rites of passage will be on some young adults’ minds too, and Ostara is a good time to hold them or start planning them for a later Sabbat.



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ppendix C

Correspondences

There are a lot of sets (tables and charts) of correspondences available. Virtually every Tradition of Wicca has its own, and each derives from the history of the Tradition and the experience and preferences of its founders and followers. It can be both annoying and confusing that these sets of correspondences don't all work with the same categories, and even when they do, Wicca's many sets of correspondences don't always, well, correspond.

There is general agreement on some points, such as the Directions, seasons, and times of day to which the Sabbats correspond. On other points, such as colors and metals and tools, there's wide variation.

The chart on page 211 is meant as a starting point for those new to the Craft, who haven't yet developed their own sense of correspondence, and who don't follow a Tradition that provides one. You'll also note that there are no explanations for the correspondences. I will say that I developed this chart with help from Rick Johnson, a British Traditional priest in Tucson, Arizona. He's been teaching for years, has volumes and volumes of notes, and was kind enough to share several pages of correspondences with me for this book and its companion. His kindness extended beyond that: he gave me permission to make any changes I felt were appropriate.

I did make some—and so will you. Although the correspondences here make sense to *me*, in terms of my experience and my own intuition, they may not feel right to you. It's not only okay, it's right and proper for you to change these—and add categories—as you see fit, letting your own research and practice of the Craft guide you. In the meantime, you not only have some material to work with, but you have a good example of what a correspondence chart looks like.

Other appropriate categories might include flowers, trees, musical instruments, and chants. Some people find it a useful (and entertaining—mirth and reverence, remember?) exercise to add categories such as specific animal breeds (Wolfhounds at North, Persian cats at the East), academic disciplines, literary genres, natural forces, food groups, and so on. What clerical duties would you assign to each Sabbat? What make or model of car?

These exercises may sound frivolous, but they're not only good icebreakers for social events, and good coven games, but they also deepen our understanding and bolster our effort to think about the world in Wiccan terms. Correspondences are meant to help us relate various aspects of our lives, to help us see and work with the connections we hold holy. It's not disrespectful to extend that understanding to the mundane world; indeed, I think it's a good thing to remember that even the seemingly most secular parts of our lives can be reclaimed by recognition of their relationships to what's obviously holy.

Don't feel limited by the form this chart has taken, either. Draw yourself a circle, if you prefer, and divide it into quarters, one for each season of the year, and make your associations that way. After all, our calendar takes the form of a Wheel, and looking at correspondences from that perspective can be quite helpful. The best perspective is always one that sees the connections, the correspondences, between your own experience and that of others. In one sense, those correspondences are both the reason and the way we celebrate the seasons of life.

| | Samhain | Yule | Imbolc | Ostara |
|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|--------------------------|------------------------|------------------------------|
| Activity | divination | storytelling | gathering stones | reading omens |
| Animal | bat, cat, dog | bear | robin; lamb | hare (bunny) |
| Color(s) | muted shades; black, orange | bright: red, green, gold | pastels; white, yellow | pastels: pink, yellow, green |
| Direction | West (N.W.) | North | North (N.E.) | East |
| Element | Water; Salt and Water | Earth (Salt) | Earth | Air |
| Elemental | Undine | Gnome | Gnome | Sylph |
| Gem(s) | jet; obsidian | ruby | clear quartz | agate |
| Goddess | Morrigan | Cerridwen | Bride | Eostre |
| God | Jack-o'-Lantern | Herne | Dianchecht | Cernunos |
| Guardian creature(s) | Banshee, salmon | bear | gryphon | hawk; eagle |
| Inner focus | return; meditation | change; introspection | plan; prepare | open; begin |
| Metal | copper | lead | pewter | silver |
| Mythical beast(s) | pookah | phoenix; troll | dragon | pegasus |
| Season(s) | Autumn/ Winter | Winter | Winter/ Spring | Spring |
| Time of Day | twilight | midnight | midnight | dawn |
| Tool(s) | pentacle; cauldron | sword | cursor | wand |

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 **about the Author**

ASHLEEN O'GAEA is the author of several books about Wicca, including *Raising Witches: Teaching the Wiccan Faith to Children* (New Page Books, 2002). She and her husband/Priest Canyondancer were among the founders, and are Board Members Emeritus of the Tucson Area Wiccan-Pagan Network (T.A.W.N.), and, while leading Campsight Coven for 13 years, developed and articulated the Adventure Tradition of Wicca. O'Gaea is a founding Board member and the senior corresponding Priestess for Mother Earth Ministries-ATC, a Neo-Pagan prison ministry based in Tucson, Arizona. She and Canyondancer offer presentations about various aspects of Wicca and share their home with a loveable Aussie-Chow-Idiot mix and three young, affectionate cats.