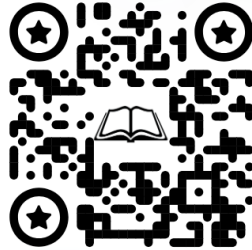


*May you find a path that fills your heart,  
and sanctuary wherever you go.*



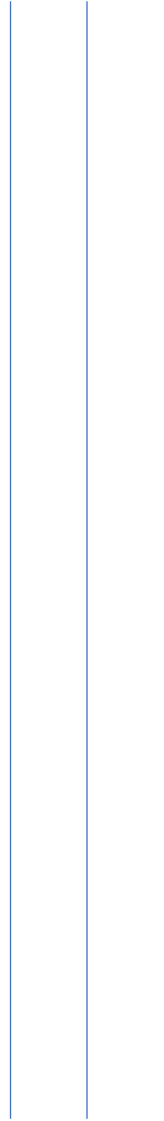
*Bright Blessings, and Safe Travels!*

Samhain  
Samhain  
Samhain

Samhain



By Ryan Robinson



**The Near Edge of Twilight**

The road back is easier to walk than the path into shadow. The way has been opened, the only struggle is the weight of that which you bring back from your time beyond.

As you see the first glimmer of the waking world’s lights you may wish to pause and rest for a time. To linger at the edge of shadow and reflect on what you have seen and where you have been. There is nothing to fear here, only acceptance and comfort.

This is a time to go through your memories, one by one, as through a large and beloved book. Pore over them. Savor and own each one, good and bad, without judging. Take this time to just remember, and find acceptance.

Examine the Veils and the Wraiths. To take into yourself the gifts they brought for you. Let yourself float in the dark, as if you, too, had become a Wraith awaiting rebirth and the recollection of your future Selves.

When you are ready to return to the light and the living, proceed toward the gate and all that waits in your days to come.

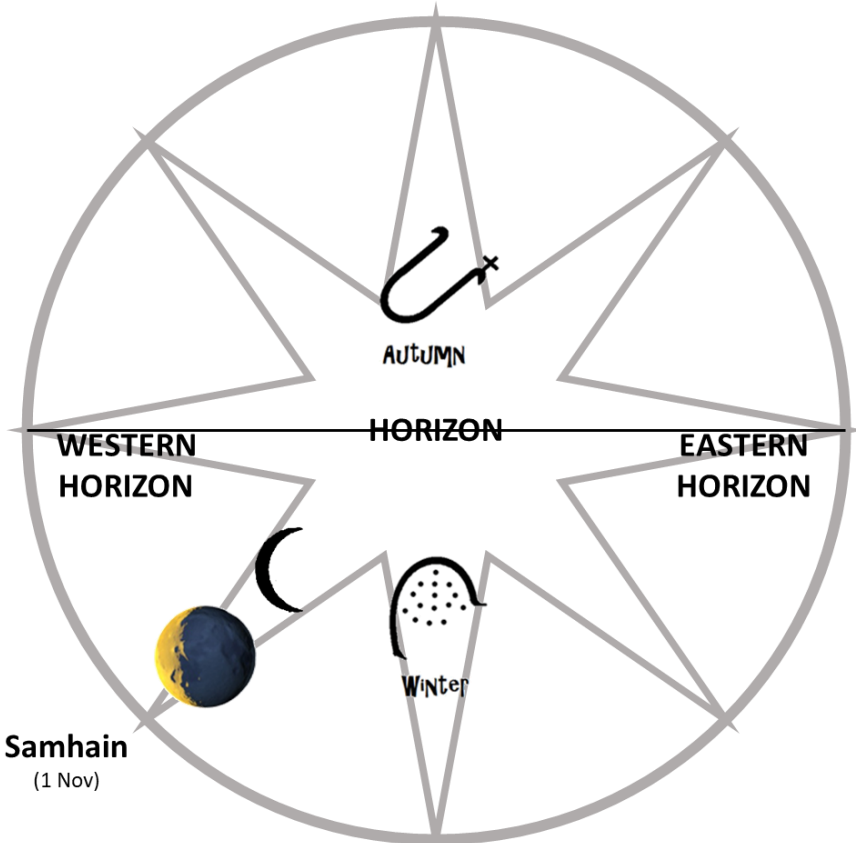
**Return**

You have returned to the lands of the living.

The light of the bonfire may blind you after so much dark, but it beckons you into warmth and fellowship.

You may look backward if you wish to reflect on where you have been, but be careful that you do not stay lost too long in those shadows.

Take yourself a measure of bread and water, to remind your mind and body that you are alive and not yet ready to depart this world. Hold fast to the knowledge that you still live, that the shadows here are past and done, and seek the light and fellowship that awaits you.



**Samhain** – Old age, ancestors, endings, passings, sacrifice, slaughter and butchery, winnowing, and wisdom"

Samhain (pronounced sow-in, with “sow” rhyming with “now,” “how,” and “wow”) is the third and last harvest festival. This late harvest is the smallest, focused on storing gathered food and the brutal truths of the season turning towards winter.

This is one of the most significant holidays on the Pagan calendar. With the growing hours of the evening, it focuses less on the agrarian harvest and more on paying respects to those who have come before. It is seen as a liminal time when the veil between the world of the living and the worlds of spirits, especially the dead, is thin. It is also a time for shedding the things of the past year that no longer serve us in preparation for the cold winter to come.

This time of year is often referred to as the Season of the Witch. The harsh truths and growing dark can be terrifying for those who do not wish to face them. But it should be a celebration and homecoming for participants.

## What is Samhain?

Coming late in the year, Samhain represents the end of the harvest season. It celebrates the last of the produce from fields and orchards being collected. The work of threshing grain, drying fruit, and otherwise preparing the harvest for winter is a part of the entire harvest season. However, as Samhain arrives, work focuses on ensuring the collected food is properly laid in for storage.

As the stores of produce that will see families and the entire community through the winter are fully accounted for, a grimmer harvest begins. At this time livestock are as fat and healthy as they will get in the year; so a decision must be made which among them will eat from the stores through the winter, and which would better serve as part of those stores.

By this festival, the hours of night have grown noticeably longer. Among the growing shadows, this is a time of winnowing, passings, and sacrifice. It is a liminal time after the long days of the growing seasons are done, but urgent work still remains before the stillness of winter falls.

During this time Pagans reflect on those who have gone before. Ancestors who set the foundations on which our lives are built. Loved ones who made the threads of our experiences, but are now gone from them. Those who have sacrificed themselves, in whole or in part, for us and our communities. For those who believe in such things, the veil is thought to be thin. Spirits of all types are believed to draw close, seeking visits. Once we are done with our remembrances and commemoration, it is also a time for shedding the things of the past year that no longer serve us in preparation for the cold winter to come.

Pagans often like to think of ourselves as children of love, light, pleasure, power, joy, and beauty. But Samhain is the long shadow of death. It is a reminder that every light casts a shadow and every dance ends. People instinctively draw back from the unknown in fear. But to live in harmony with the world requires not simply turning away from the things that make us uncomfortable. It requires taking up the weight of knowledge willingly, and finding a way for our time with hard truths to give us wisdom.

Samhain is a time when we acknowledge those shadows for being as much a part of our world as the light.

### The Crossing

When you come to the last of your beloved dead you find there are still veils beyond and with those veils more wraiths.

While those you have met before have been those you have known and loved, these shadows are you. They are who you have been, but are no longer. These are your former lives. The people you were in your younger years. Those you had to be to learn the lessons you bring to this life.

As you meet each, they come to impart a lesson, to remind you of their experiences.

They come to give you a key to this life from a life before. Some of them are beautiful, wise, and kind. Some are cruel, despairing, and afraid. And some do not even know that you and they are one and the same.

Talk to them. Admit them to your heart; they are part of you.

Embrace them; accept their lessons and let them go.

### In the Deeps

You find yourself beyond the veils through which you traveled. This open space feels equally like a cavern or clearing in an ancient forest. You have descended into the shadowed depths of the underworld.

The lands of the dead are places of remembering and forgetting.

The lands of shadow are places of the lost, and thus where we may find.

Take time in this dark space to be conscious of your own thoughts. Keep your mind clear, able to see far deeper into yourself than you ever have in the worlds of light above.

### Path Back

You have walked an ancient path of wisdom and insight. A journey taken by those who know that darkness is as much a part of the divine as the light and are not afraid. You have found your way beyond the veils, and now your journey turns back towards the lands of light and life.

Before you depart the depths, you are offered pomegranate seeds; the food of life and return. A promise that you may seek in shadow, and renew the bonds of death and rebirth.

### Into the Woods

As you take your first steps into the shadows feeling the edge of the woods begin to gather about you. The dirt beneath your feet and the trees that tower over us. This is a place that has seen countless seasons. Feel the night air brush your skin.

If you listen, you can still hear the sounds of the waking world behind you. Hear them fade away as these woods enfold you. Start to feel the noises of the wilder space; the creak of the trees and soft rustles in the leaves below.

Be careful and cautious with your tread; the steps here are crude, leading ever downward into the darkness that awaits.

### Into the Veils

You reach a turn where the path levels out. The way before you is hung with veils in the gloom. With a few steps, you reach the of these sheer curtains wavering in the air and you find a pale wraith at your side.

This ghostly form is an echo of the first death that touched you; the first loved one that was, and then was not. Look into their face. Greet them. Say words to them that you never did. Let them tell you what they never got a chance to say. Take the time to embrace them before they are gone.

### Through the Veils

You push it aside the first veil and approach another with a few short steps. Again, you find a friend and loved one gone to the Summerland. You have another chance to speak and to be spoken to. Tell them what is in your heart. Let them gift you with what was in theirs. Embrace them. And let them go.

As you walk here you find as many veils as there have been passings in your life. Each one has shaped you a little, carving some things away and leaving others behind. Acknowledge those who graced you with joy and sorrow.

## **Samhain and Mabon**

During the arc from Mabon to Samhain, the night becomes noticeably longer than the day. Mabon celebrates the culmination of harvest and the rush of a life well lived with family and friends. Samhain marks the turning from abundance to introspection, remembrance, and the mysteries of shadows and darkness. Both festivals share opportunities for reflection, gratitude, and connection with the cycles of nature. But, we turn our attention from the celebration of those who still stand with us and toward those who have passed.

**Mabon** – Maturity, fullness, completion, plenty, gratitude, gathering, harvest, family, and community.

## **Samhain and Yule**

The space between Samhain and Yule is one of the larger gaps between the eight holidays. Different Pagan traditions count each of these as the beginning of winter. Between them, they hold aspects of death and dying – both are tied to the gates of the afterlife. Samhain is a place of passing into, while Yule is the stasis and stillness that waits. In the darkness both call to us to celebrate the past, those that came before, and the fact that we are still alive. In the depths of winter we acknowledge the eternal tug of entropy and stillness – making the choices that will turn the dance and bring us again into life and light. To have faith that brighter things are to come.

**Yule** – Waiting, remembrance, stillness, and patience.

## **Samhain and Beltane**

Beltane and Samhain are echoes of one another; times of transformation and change outside the experience of most of our lives. The flocks taken out to the summer fields at Beltane are brought back at Samhain, passing cleansing fires on their return. These are liminal times, when veils between worlds are said to be thin. Ancestor work is common during both, as is working with other types of spiritual beings and forces.

**Beltane** – Youth, fertility, unions, exploration, discovery, new beginnings, purification, and transition.

## Decorating for Samhain

The most common decorations for Samhain are those shared with Halloween. The main colors are black with highlights of greys and oranges. Common decorations include ghosts, skeletons, graveyards, as well as other eerie things and spaces that feature in common seasonal decorations. It's easy to lean into the fact that most of the West sees this as a spooky season already.

Carving jack-o-lanterns is a standard tradition. Painting faces, rather than carving them, is another option for those who have younger children, who want their gourds to last longer, or just like the additional color. It does take away the ability to put a candle inside. The origin of the jack-o-lantern was a carved turnip, so some décor with that root vegetable is fitting.

There are numerous ways to decorate with natural aspects that fit the season without leaning into the unnerving. Autumn leaves are a great way to fill a space with warm autumn colors. Other items from nature that make great parts of decorations or basis for crafts include pine cones, nuts like acorns, berries, dried flowers, cattails, cornhusks, red and yellow apples, and pomegranates.

With all the eerie and unnerving aspects of the season, symbols of protection are also a common aspect of "decoration." However, one person's protective talisman may be another's creepy accent. Black candles, for example, feature in many types of settings for a variety of purposes during this season.

A small ancestor shrine or altar can serve as both a place for ritual and fitting decoration. These can be simple or incredibly elaborate and may honor recently departed loved ones, extended family, ancestors of craft or profession, or any other ancestor you wish to honor.

Many symbols of death fit the season. Grave rubbings, bones, and skulls found in the wild or on nature walks can be used for various purposes. Old chicken bones or rib bones can be used to build chimes and mobiles or accent seasonal wreaths and objects.

With the end of the harvest season, tools like scythes and sickles would be hung on the walls for storage. In modern times these farm implements are more associated with death as well.

## Descent Ritual

This decent ritual was written to be used as a guided walking meditation; where guides take individuals and small groups through the steps of the meditation. You can, instead, record yourself; leaving pauses based on walking a path you intend to use or your best guess at the timing of the visualizations.

### Introduction

One of the traditions in many mythologies is the descent into the underworld, the worlds of shadows or the dead. Examples of these stories include those of Orpheus, of Persephone, of Ishtar / Innana, and Odin's journey to the well of Mimir. These days such descents are often discussed as a type of "shadow work," of looking into the darkness without and within to come away changed.

Throughout the year we find over and over that the hours of twilight and darkness are a time of reflection. We find that away from the glare of civilization and the light of day hidden parts of ourselves are drawn forward to be heard and shared.

The wheel turns. Long ago the grip of winter broke. Seeds were sewn in spring, and through the summer they grew. Now, the last harvests have been taken. Season follows season, and we descend again into the hours of shadows and darkness. The nights are long, so we pile the fires high.

This is the season of dying, of saying goodbye, and of falling away. In this season the shadows grow deeper and the veils thinner. We invite you into those deeper shadows. We invite you to say farewell to the things that have served you, and the things that have not. To those that have passed from your waking life, and to the parts of yourself that have passed away.

To the north stands a gate. If you wish, a guide will take you into the shadows and, when you are finished, you return you to the light.

### Preparation

You have come to a gathering at the edge of civilization, the sun wheels low, the gloom of night grows longer, and the year draws to its end. You stand within the veils, at the edge of the lands of the living and the waking world.

If you wish to journey into the shadows beyond, into the cycle of death and rebirth through which life renews itself know that there is nothing to fear from the darkness beyond. The old must pass away to feed the growth of the new, but light and fellowship wait for your return. Take a measure of mead, a drink of life, and return, and follow your guide.

## The Witch's New Year

The last of the Harvest festivals marks the end of the year for some traditions. The end of field labor or most travel for the year it marks the beginning of a time of relative peace and rest. The word Samhain itself is Irish Gaelic for "Summer's End." In many ancient civilizations, the day was marked from sunset to sunset so the end of summer would mark the end of the year. This is parallel to how death is the end of one life.

In modern Western civilization, we are accustomed to the end of one year marking the immediate beginning of the next. Other traditions have an interim period between years. The Egyptian system is well recorded as having a set of five days between calendar years to keep their lunar calendar in line with the seasons driven by the solar cycle. In modern Wiccan tradition, the season of winter is sometimes represented as gestation or some other period awaiting rebirth.

## The Closeness of Death

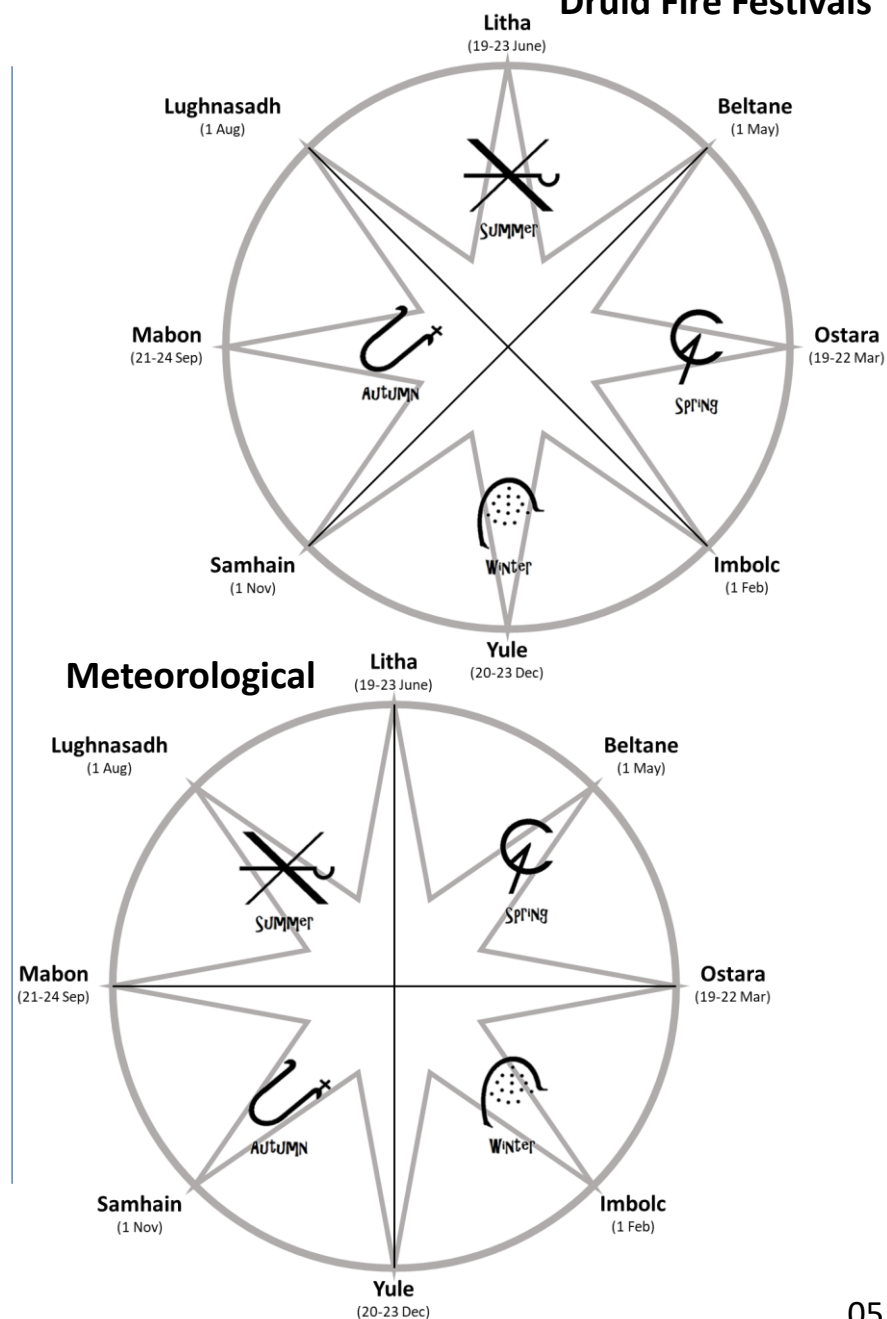
Most modern Western thought treats death as a thing of dread and horror. The act of dying is treated as an irrevocable parting and graveyards are places mostly forsaken by the living in fear.

This thought was not always the prevailing idea, however. In many places the dead were buried close to the home and remained part of the family. Heathen stories talk of sitting on the graves of ancestors seeking their wisdom. In many places, those who were buried farther away would still be visited. These traditions can still be found across Asia and Africa. While the movement in medieval Christianity to need burial in sanctified church yards was a major made such places fearsome and crowded, at other times graveyards have been made into public parks and green spaces to be shared.

## Faerie

While visitation and communication with the dead is emphasized during this season, they are not the only spirits that are thought to travel abroad at this time. Many forms of fae were also considered to use this liminal time to travel and interact with the mortal world. Different cultures and traditions tie "faeries" to various aspects of the world – some are seen as nature spirits, others as former mortals who have transformed through action or death, and some are considered to be more alien spirits like the Christian angels and demons.

## Druid Fire Festivals



## Celebrating Samhain

Celebrations of the liminal nature of the season can take many forms. We honor endings and parting of ways, those who have traveled with us, and that which has been left behind or sacrificed. At its core this is a time for reflections. To measure the choices made and what we have achieved before the harsh winter arrives and demands harder choices.

Trick-or-treating is a modern activity generally reserved for kids on Halloween. However, there are many stories of ancient practices that have been woven together to make this new celebration. One of these traditions was the performing pranks or tricks that would typically be blamed on fairies. In Ireland people would go mumming in the days leading up to Samhain; putting on costumes and going door-to-door while singing songs to the dead. The owners of the houses would give cakes as payment.

Activities that help reflect on life over the past year are another tradition. Reviewing journals, planners, and photographs created during the year can help in reflecting on how you have grown, challenges you have overcome, accomplishments you have achieved, as well as other adventures, journeys, and lessons.

This is a good time to perform a deep cleaning of your home and other spaces. In places where cold and ice may lead to being stuck inside, this is a good way to make that space will be cozy and comfortable. In hot climates, this may be an opportunity to clean out the dust and dirt in a type of “spring cleaning” as the weather cools. These activities can extend to renovating; choosing an area of your home or life to examine and re-organize or re-structure. Celebrate renewal and transformation by releasing or removing whatever is no longer needed to make space for patterns that will serve better.

This return of vital materials to the whole is the difference between symbiosis versus parasitism and of conservation versus exploitation. The ability to harvest what one part needs and then return that renewing and regenerating the system. Even better is when one part produces something even more useful, where each provides some component that creates a greater whole. This is the foundation on which multicellular life like plants and animals exist. These same considerations expand out to form societies and civilizations as well as the interconnected webs of functioning ecosystems.

If a single part of the whole takes too much or fails to return enough to the system it causes an imbalance. Predators overhunt prey. Animals over-graze pastures and plains where they seek food. The individual cell that does not die in its time is the literal definition of cancer. Even if these things are normally part of healthy webs and cycles their unrestrained excess damages the system on which they rely. Ultimately, causing their own death as well as potentially greater destruction.





## The Circle of Life

The modern world is built on a consumerist mindset. It whispers every moment that we should buy new and dispose of the old. It insists we should never consider where the new has come from and where the old must go.

However, the truth is that the world we live in is a bubble. It is a small terrarium floating in the vast hostility of mostly empty space. While, someday, the resources that exist in the worlds floating nearest to us might come within reach; for the moment we have only the things already within our bubble. Everything we breathe out will be inhaled again. The Earth reduced, reused, and recycled long before humanity stood upright on its surface.

Senescence is the natural process that drives what we call aging. This is the progression in living things of biological processes deteriorating. In individual cells this means they stop growing and dividing. The result for plants and animals is reduced healing and ultimately death. Different creatures of the same species may experience senescence at different rates due to genetics or environmental factors. Different species experience senescence at different rates; redwood trees may live thousands of years and sea turtles live hundreds of years, while other creatures live hours or days. But nearly all living things die, and having done so they decay and feed the larger cycle of life. Very few living things have been discovered that do not experience some sort of senescence – but the most complex of these is a jellyfish, and even that has its own cycle, reverting to its larval stage to regenerate.

The soil in which we grow our crops was made from the bodies of things that once lived, converted to soil by their consumption by other living things. In the season of twilight, we focus on that dissolution. The ending of what was and its decay, that it may become fuel for the next generation. And, through this process, regenerate and renew the whole system.

One of the major themes of most celebrations for this season is the honoring of ancestors. The building of a shrine or altar for ancestors is can be a touchstone for other activities. Learning about family history and ancestor stories by contacting older relatives and ask them to share memories. Making records of such stories is a way that many pieces of folklore were created and survive.

For those who live in the same areas as their ancestors, this is a good time to tend gravesites. Spending time in resting places while considering memories of the lives of those you've loved and the ways they continue to live on within you. While few people in the west recognize it, the headstone of a gravesite functions in many ways as an altar to that ancestor. It is common to place offerings such as fresh flowers, dried herbs, small stones, or libations.

Some honor the dead through a Dumb Supper or Mute Supper. A fine dinner is made and served, with at least one seat kept empty. Often the food prepared includes favorites of those who the participants particularly want to remember. The event may begin with an invocation specifically inviting the loved ones who have passed to join, or it may simply begin in silence with each participant making their own silent offer. The living diners eat in silence and reflection, seeking to commune with their departed.

## Other Celebrations

One of the most common myths told by Pagans at Samhain is the story of Persephone's descent to Hades. In Ancient Greece the Thesmophoria festival was held to honor the goddesses Demeter and Persephone. It commemorated the third of the year when Demeter withdrew from her role of goddess of growth and bounty in mourning for her daughter who was in the Underworld.

Held in late autumn, either when late crops were sown or at a late harvest, this festival celebrated human and agricultural fertility. A distinctive feature of these festivals was the sacrifice of pigs.

Yoruba and related religions and practices like Santería recognize days of celebration for the Orisha throughout the year. On October 15 Oyá is celebrated. One of the major Orisha, she is associated with winds, lightning, storms, death, rebirth, transformation, and destruction.

With the impacts of colonization and Christianization, Filipinos often celebrate "Undas," which is thought to be a shortening of "Un Dia de los Muertos." The Christian holiday was introduced to the region with Catholicism, and these celebrations share many practices such as attending masses, holding vigils, and visiting graves.

Before colonization, the region already had the Tagalog folk tradition of "pangangaluluwa." In this tradition, children and teenagers would go house to house in the role of hungry spirits. They would sing songs, and the residents would "pacify" them by offering kakanin (rice cakes) or foods made with sweet potato or yam. This practice has been tied to October 31 or November 1.

Diwali is a five-day Hindu celebration around mid-September to mid-November. One of the major holidays of the year, it originated in India as a harvest festival. It has evolved into a festival of lights, specifically celebrating the "victory of light over darkness, good over evil, and knowledge over ignorance." The first day of the celebration is called "Dwali Day."

## The Stages of Grief

When we talk about the processing of trauma or loss we typically describe it as the emotion of grief. However, one of the things that has been found is that grief is often not a single emotion, but a range that are experienced as we work through the process of understanding the new reality in which we exist.

This process is often described as being comprised of different stages. The problem with this description is that it gives the sense that an individual will pass through each of these like climbing a set of stairs. Often, the experience of grief is not a straight line and people will experience the different aspects repeatedly at various times. Even long after having "healed" from the experience, a reminder of a departed person or awful event will remind us of them.

A common description of this process lists 5 stages of grief as; denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. Other lists may expand these aspects into more individual emotions and experiences, include different experiences, or collapse them into fewer, broader categories.

- **Denial:** Many people react to events that will cause them grief with shock, which includes a state of numbed feelings. This can make disbelief seem easier than acknowledging the situation. Rejecting a situation feels like it can keep the pain and hurt distant.
- **Anger:** When reality forces someone to face a situation they find intolerable, a natural reaction is to lash out. Such events trigger many of the same physical and psychological reactions as personally being in a life-threatening situation, leading to the same types of fight-or-flight thinking to change the unchangeable.
- **Bargaining:** This is a less visceral reaction than anger but, in some ways, it is a similar impulse. The grieving person reaches out to any power, natural or supernatural, to make a deal or find a way to alter facts. They will promise anything to get relief from their situation or feelings.
- **Depression:** A period of isolation and loneliness during which the individual processes and reflects on the loss. They may feel that the loss is unbearable and that they're making other people's lives harder because of their feelings and needs.
- **Acceptance:** This is a very gradual acceptance of the situation. The grieving person begins to put the pieces of their life together; working through the experience, and constructing an understanding of their new reality and their existence within it. This is a very gradual regaining of hope and feeling there are possibilities for the future. At this point, aspects of anger and pain have subsided letting the survivor experience more calm and relaxed states.

## Grief

Throughout our lives most people will experience grief more than they care to acknowledge. The greatest experiences of grief are expected to come with the death of close family; mothers, fathers, brothers, sisters, spouses, or even children. Losses of grandparents, cousins, or even close friends to illness or accidents may also be expected to bring a measure of pain.

What we rarely acknowledge is that we experience grief for a far wider range of experiences than this. The death of a beloved pet may strike us more keenly than that of some relatives. The ending of a relationship, whether romantic or a friendship, may cut us as keenly as any death. The ending of a job or the need to move from one place to another may cause similar pain.

All of these things are experiences of change, transformation, and dislocation which cause us pain. In short, they are things that bring us grief. Even things we choose, such as deciding to leave a job for a better opportunity or leaving home to chase our dreams, make us feel the things we are leaving behind.

As a society, we do a poor job of acknowledging these losses and types of pain. We minimize and negate it for ourselves and others. When we do this, we compound that pain and make it harder to heal from. Like with physical wounds, these injuries to our psyches need to be acknowledged and treated appropriately. Like any cut or scrape they almost certainly need cleaned and probably covered. But, perhaps, they need more attention and care. However, like a physical wound, the type and amount of care is impossible to tell without first acknowledging that it hurts.

Samhain is the season of dying; of parting, sacrifice, and transformation. This is not a time not to wallow in the things that we have lost. But it is a time to acknowledge those things. To acknowledge and inspect how we may hurt, how we have mended, and what we might need to do for further healing. And, sometimes, to face the fact that we will never again be “whole” in the ways we once were, and can only be the people those experiences will someday make us.

The Anglo-Saxon scholar Bede recorded the month of November as Blōtmōnaþ in his treatise *De temporum ratione* (*The Reckoning of Time*), saying "Blod-monath is month of immolations, for it was in this month that the cattle which were to be slaughtered were dedicated to the gods."

Rodnover, a reconstructed pre-Christian Slavic religion, celebrates the Festival of Mokosh on the last Friday in October. Mokosh is the Slavic Mother Goddess, protector of women including their work and destiny, as well as fertility and childbirth. In later ages she began to be recognized as ruler over death. She is a key figure in the Slavic folklore, a companion of both Perun (God of sky) and Veles (God of Earth), and some authors believe her to be the reason for these two figures' eternal conflict. Her children were Yarilo, a son who became the god of fertility, springtime, and vegetation, and Morana, her daughter who was goddess of winter, death, and dreams. Mokosh has a second holiday again in the spring.

There is a Japanese (Shinto) tradition on the Sunday nearest November 15 called Shichigosan. On this day parents take their children – sons aged three and five and daughters aged three and seven – to the local shrine to thank the gods for a healthy childhood and ask that they be blessed with a fortunate and successful future.

Poland is known for its celebrations of All Hallows Eve, All Saints Day, and All Souls day, with the graveyards renowned for being covered in candles until they appear to be entirely on fire.

However, before the Slavs and Balts of the region adopted Christianity, they already had the celebration of Dziady (pronounced: 'JAH-dyh'). An ancient tradition for honoring one's ancestors. Like other celebrations, the turning of the autumn season was seen as a time the dead drew close to the world of the living, making interaction with ancestors easy. Feasting at burial places was seen as a way to spend time with the departed and honor them, along with leaving offerings, often food like bread and honey, as well as clothes and other useful items on their graves as gifts.

The burning fires were meant to draw in friendly spirits and allow them to get warm, while others were used to ward away malicious spirits. A part of these celebrations was the use of Karaboshka masks. Made from clay or wood, these masks were worn to impersonate the deceased and help guide the spirits back to their afterlife.

Many rituals and beliefs from before Christianization were lost. One way Dziady traditions were incorporated was for a priest's missal (book of services) and stole to be left in an empty church where the soul of a deceased clergyman was said to take them up and lead a midnight Mass for visiting souls.

25 November is the Catholic Feast of St Catherine. This saint is one of the most popular early Christian martyrs, known as one of the "Fourteen Holy Helpers;" saints venerated for their power of intercession. The holiday shares many features and celebrations with the feast of St Martin, recognizing the coming of winter and making sacrifices. As part of its relationship to winter, it is marked as the beginning of the Advent season. A major difference from Martinmas is this holiday's focus on women - particularly older women. Catholic Francophone countries use it as a day for unmarried women concerned with becoming "spinsters" to seek husbands. However, it is not hard to see this as a connection to the season of the Crone.

## Bonfires

While we're familiar with the term bonfire as a word for large blazes, it comes from the Middle English bone fyre. The term originally denoted a large open-air fire on which bones were burnt, sometimes as part of a celebration. Related terms are banefire, while the Irish term for a bonfire is "tine chnámh," which literally means "fire of bones."

The ashes from such fires were often spread on the land as a rite for the fruitfulness of crops. This makes sense when you consider that wood ash is a good source of potassium and magnesium as well as many micronutrients needed in trace amounts for plant growth. Bone ash carries calcium and phosphorus, also highly beneficial to plant growth. If treated with sulfuric or phosphoric acid, the quality of this fertilizer can be improved.

When building a fire, wood will ignite at around 300°C (572°F) in typical conditions. The temperature of a bonfire gradually heats up to around 600°C (1112°F), but bonfires can reach 1000-1100°C (1832-2012°F). Bone blackens due to carbonization of the organic compounds at 400 °C (752°F). At 500°C (932°F) and above calcination occurs, which is required to produce bone ash, and is characterized by a grey and eventually white color.

## The Blessings of Fire

Fire is a key component in several types of ecosystems. Prairies rely on regular wildfires to help return nutrients to the soil and prevent trees from invading. Many types of forests similarly rely on fire to clear underbrush. Some individual plants have evolved to have such fires as a specific part of their life cycle, such as certain types of pine cones which must be burned before they will open and release their seeds.

In nearly all climates, natural fires tend to come at the height of summer, when the rush of spring growth is dried out by heat but before later rains come. As human civilization has tamed the wilds we have put great efforts into preventing these fires, seeking to prevent damage. We have learned from that experience how necessary these fires are. Some parts of the world have paid a steep price as nature has worked to reset itself resulting in extremely violent infernos. From this, we learned to use controlled burns to mimic the natural cycle. However, we prefer for these fires to be set in the Autumn, when the weather is less dry and thus less likely to go out of control.

Humans have long used fire as a tool to interact with the natural world. We often think of humanity's relationship with fire in terms of the relatively small flames of the candle, hearth, and campfire. But slash-and-burn farming is an ancient practice that allowed humans to easily clear fields while creating a layer of nutrient-rich ash to help fertilize the soil and eliminate many weeds and pests. One type of this is stubble burning, where the remains of harvested plants, especially grasses like wheat and rice, are burned. We have learned that this technique creates many problems, including producing large amounts of smoke which hurts air quality immediately. It also damages the soil, and requires land rest for years to be restored.

However, the relationship of this Samhain season with the larger fires set to field and forest remains.

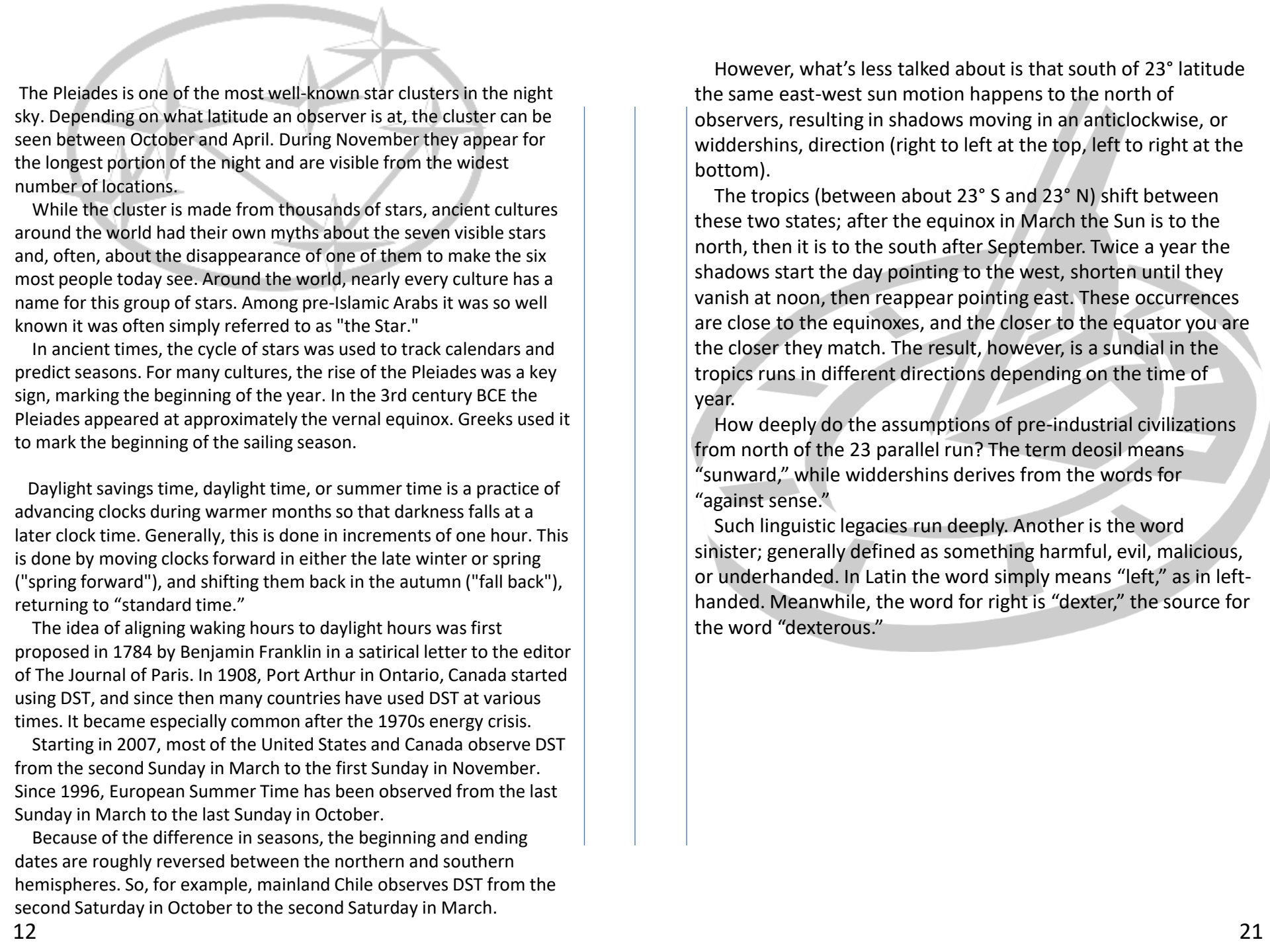
Martinmas, or Martlemas, is the Catholic feast of St. Martin of Tours. Celebrated on 11 November, it has many parallels to pre-Christian rites for the season. Some believe that November 11 reflects the original date of Samhain – a shift created when the adjustment from the Julian calendar to the modern Gregorian calendar was made in 1582 by Pope Gregory decreeing ten days annulled so that October 5 became October 15.

Throughout the Middle Ages, this festival date was marked as when the year's agricultural work was completed. Autumn-sewn wheat was planted, pigs and cattle that could not be overwintered were slaughtered, geese were sent to market, and new wine would be ready for first tasting.

In Ireland and Scotland, a household might sacrifice an animal and blood use its blood to anoint parts of the house and barn as a way to keep evil spirits such as the restless dead or sidhe away. They would put it on doorways, the back of the door, lintels, the four corners of the house or farm, and sometimes even the foreheads of members of the family. Families who didn't have an animal to sacrifice might draw blood from a finger, as local folklore stated that blood would be drawn for the household on this night. Folklore said that bloodshed on Martinmas would also grant health benefits. Variations of this practice can be found elsewhere in the British Isles, such as the Devonshire tradition of "bleeding the mill," where a cock would be killed and mill stones covered in its blood to help those who worked the mill to avoid injury.

In the United States, November 11 is Veterans day. In much of Europe this is celebrated as Armistice Day and Remembrance Day, marking the end of the First World War. In the US it is a holiday to commemorate the service of all U.S. veterans, while Memorial Day in May honors those who have died while in military service.

The Leonids is a prolific annual meteor shower that occurs roughly between 3 November and 2 December, and peaks around 17 November. While the meteors are the result of the Tempel–Tuttle comet, the Leonids get their name from the appearance from earth that they come from the direction of the constellation Leo.



The Pleiades is one of the most well-known star clusters in the night sky. Depending on what latitude an observer is at, the cluster can be seen between October and April. During November they appear for the longest portion of the night and are visible from the widest number of locations.

While the cluster is made from thousands of stars, ancient cultures around the world had their own myths about the seven visible stars and, often, about the disappearance of one of them to make the six most people today see. Around the world, nearly every culture has a name for this group of stars. Among pre-Islamic Arabs it was so well known it was often simply referred to as "the Star."

In ancient times, the cycle of stars was used to track calendars and predict seasons. For many cultures, the rise of the Pleiades was a key sign, marking the beginning of the year. In the 3rd century BCE the Pleiades appeared at approximately the vernal equinox. Greeks used it to mark the beginning of the sailing season.

Daylight savings time, daylight time, or summer time is a practice of advancing clocks during warmer months so that darkness falls at a later clock time. Generally, this is done in increments of one hour. This is done by moving clocks forward in either the late winter or spring ("spring forward"), and shifting them back in the autumn ("fall back"), returning to "standard time."

The idea of aligning waking hours to daylight hours was first proposed in 1784 by Benjamin Franklin in a satirical letter to the editor of The Journal of Paris. In 1908, Port Arthur in Ontario, Canada started using DST, and since then many countries have used DST at various times. It became especially common after the 1970s energy crisis.

Starting in 2007, most of the United States and Canada observe DST from the second Sunday in March to the first Sunday in November. Since 1996, European Summer Time has been observed from the last Sunday in March to the last Sunday in October.

Because of the difference in seasons, the beginning and ending dates are roughly reversed between the northern and southern hemispheres. So, for example, mainland Chile observes DST from the second Saturday in October to the second Saturday in March.

However, what's less talked about is that south of 23° latitude the same east-west sun motion happens to the north of observers, resulting in shadows moving in an anticlockwise, or widdershins, direction (right to left at the top, left to right at the bottom).

The tropics (between about 23° S and 23° N) shift between these two states; after the equinox in March the Sun is to the north, then it is to the south after September. Twice a year the shadows start the day pointing to the west, shorten until they vanish at noon, then reappear pointing east. These occurrences are close to the equinoxes, and the closer to the equator you are the closer they match. The result, however, is a sundial in the tropics runs in different directions depending on the time of year.

How deeply do the assumptions of pre-industrial civilizations from north of the 23 parallel run? The term *deosil* means "sunward," while *widdershins* derives from the words for "against sense."

Such linguistic legacies run deeply. Another is the word *sinister*; generally defined as something harmful, evil, malicious, or underhanded. In Latin the word simply means "left," as in left-handed. Meanwhile, the word for right is "*dexter*," the source for the word "*dexterous*."

# Legacies

All of the things we do are built on the actions and choices of those who came before. Whether we are following the paths laid down on purpose, without thought, or deliberately seeking to break free of them, we are the legacy of all the good and ill that we have inherited.

A story that is sometimes told links the width of the space shuttle rocket boosters to the width of a standard horse in ancient Rome. The chain of inheritance is said to have been the use of chariots sized to be drawn by two horses side by side setting the sizing of Roman roads. These roads, centuries later, would set the gauge of railway tracks, and consequently the tunnels for those railways. Those tunnels would then be a hard limit to the maximum size of the space shuttle boosters that had to be moved by rail.

A less-told story talks about how we came to have the term "clockwise." The movement around a circle from left to right at the top and right to left at the bottom. This motion can also be called deosil while the "counter-clockwise" or "anticlockwise" direction is sometimes called widdershins or tuathal. However, it came to be commonly called clockwise because it is the direction in which hands for analog clocks move. But why do the hands move deosil and not widdershins?

Legend says this is because, before the invention of mechanical clocks, the most common and similar method of time-keeping was a sundial. North of about 23° latitude, such as throughout Europe, most of Asia, most of the Middle East, and Northern Africa, the east-west crossing of the sun happens to the south of observers and produces a shadow that moves north of a standing object. Observing that shadow, this motion is left to right if you stand south of the object (with the shadow reaching away from you) and right to left if you stand north of it (with the shadow reaching toward you). The result is it moves in a clockwise, or deosil, direction.

# All Hallow's Eve and Día de los Muertos

The rituals of modern Samhain are closely tied to those that have become Halloween and Dio de los Muertos (the Day of the Dead). The contrast between the approaches of these two holidays emphasizes two major spiritual practices.

Early Christians continued various ancient pagan rites and festivals to ease conversions. Among those they adopted were a series of celebrations found around Europe which would become All Hallows Eve on October 31, All Saints Day on November 1, and All Souls Day on November 2. These pre-existing rituals would continue to syncretize as Christianity spread around the world. Over the centuries the animistic, ancestor-focused aspects have found many expressions.

Halloween, or All Hallow's Eve, focuses on the darkness of facing death and the dead. The suffering of the process, the pain of separation from loved ones, the fear of not knowing what is to come for the spirit, and the horrors of the bodies to which we are attached decomposing. The jack-o-lantern and wearing of masks serve to drive away ill spirits and conceal one's identity. Trick or treating comes from any of a variety of ancient traditions where spirits need to be appeased.

By contrast, the Mexican celebration of Día de los Muertos is perhaps the best-known of many ancestor celebrations around the world. These focus on reconnecting with loved ones who have died. Honoring the joys their life brought, the treasured memories their shared experiences left behind, and the blessings they have left in this world by their passage through it.

These two extremes in approach to the same idea of recognizing our mortality and those who have come before are echoed through different holidays worldwide.

The stylistically distinctive *Calaveras* is one of the most recognizable symbols of the Mexican celebrations of Día de los Muertos along with the use of Marigolds, or cempasúchil flowers.



## Threshing and Winnowing

When wheat or other grains are harvested, the process begins with reaping. Reaping is the cutting down and gathering of the entire plant. Historically, this would be done with a tool like a sickle or scythe. They would then be allowed to dry.

While reaping the entire plant, humans only eat the smallest parts, the “fruit” (grains). To separate the grain from the stalks requires threshing. The gathered plants are beaten against a hard surface, typically the ground and preferably rocks. This breaks the grains loose from the stalks. These loose grains are then gathered.

In addition to grain, the process of threshing breaks loose various debris, and the grains themselves have thin, paper-like coverings that aren't useful. To separate the grain which is wanted for food from this chaff requires winnowing. A common method is to let wind pass through the mixture sifting it apart. Handfuls may be tossed into the air or it may simply be allowed to fall in slow streams. Regardless, the various types of chaff are much lighter than the grain and, if there is sufficient wind, the unwanted things are carried away.

All of these processes have been mechanized over the last centuries. In places and times without those machines, the human effort to do this is backbreaking and time-consuming. Because threshing and winnowing require the grains to dry out first, Samhain is one of the high times when grain gathered closer to Lughnasadh and Mabon would be processed.

In the modern day most of us will never reap, thresh, or winnow grain. However, Samhain is still a time of winnowing. Sorting through what we have harvested and gathered, reflecting and meditating on it to break it down, and letting go of those parts that do not have use for us going forward.

## Live Sacrifice

At some point, nearly all Pagans come to raise questions about live sacrifice. This may happen because of questions being asked by others, historical reading, or some other method. The shortest and most direct answer is;

### ***Do not use live sacrifices.***

It is true that many historical religions sacrificed live animals. This includes the range of Pagan religions, several Abrahamic religions, and many others. Even today, there are religious traditions that involve live sacrifice.

The vast majority of modern Pagan paths, traditions, and credible resources **do not** include live sacrifice of any type. Other possible activities have been substituted in place of live sacrifices for a variety of reasons. Modern practitioners have repeatedly determined that the value of live sacrifice is **not** worth the exchange compared to its costs. The few modern practices that do still involve animal sacrifice are generally from closed religious traditions which require direct instruction and initiation.

Live sacrifice is far more difficult than most people realize. Killing an animal cleanly takes significant skill and may require special equipment. The vast majority of people **do not** have the practical experience to do this. It is **not** an activity an interested person can learn through simply reading instructions or watching videos. Without proper direction and training it is far more likely that a ritualist will end with a traumatized animal than a sacrificed one.

**Even if successful, the activity is highly likely to be considered animal cruelty by legal authorities.**

**Performing or observing live sacrifice can be traumatizing, even if all individuals present are affirmatively aware and consent prior to the ritual. *Performing live sacrifice in the presence of unsuspecting bystanders is far beyond the realm of acceptable behavior.***



## On Sacrifice

The word “sacrifice” is used often. We give sacrifices as offerings to the divine, but we also sacrifice for our jobs, our families, and other parts of our lives that we consider important. But we rarely stop to think about what it means to sacrifice.

The most basic definition of sacrifice is the act of giving up something valued. This basic idea can be developed in various ways. Sacrifice means different things if we think of it as simply suffering a loss rather than something actively being given up. We don't generally think of the time sacrificed to our work as something we have renounced or destroyed. We may consider it “set aside for a special purpose,” but it should give us pause when we realize that is the definition of the word “sanctified.” However, these are what it means to sacrifice. The ideals, beliefs, or ends we claim to make these sacrifices for say something about us. The ways we make those sacrifices say just as much, however.

When we give offerings and we pay costs, we should be thinking about whether what we are giving up is worth what we seek in return. We most often think of sacrifice in terms of the resources we expend; candles, incense, herbs, and crystals. When we light a candle or spend a moment in prayer without weighing these things it is a measure of what we value. But, at its core what we sacrifice are parts of our life in time and energy. The time we spend to earn the money we buy these things with. The time we spend to assemble them.

We should be considering and questioning the nature and purpose of our sacrifices. This is true whether we give them to gods or spirits, in the inner sanctums of therapy, on the altar of employment, or in some other way. In theory, we will only make a sacrifice because we think something else is more important or worthy. But have we truly considered them?

In ancient times animal sacrifices were common. Animals for slaughter were enormously important. They required significant investment to breed, feed, raise, and make ready for slaughter. And, to be clear, sacrificed animals were generally those that fed the owner and family. Often only a portion of the animal was given up to the flames. Sometimes an entire animal was forsaken to be slaughtered at a temple. However, only rarely was the entire offering destroyed. More often it was used to feed the keepers of the temple or the poor in the surrounding society.

## Meat

While many Pagans are vegetarians for various reasons, Samhain is inextricably tied to meat. While there is often a focus on plants and dirt, the cycle of life and death clearly extends into the animal kingdom.

At our best, humans use the entirety of the creatures we kill. Bone and sinew have been used to craft tools throughout history. We have used leather for its durability in clothing and equipment, even armor. Some books were made with parchment pages, crafted from the skin of slaughtered animals. In some places, this was done because they did not know how to make paper from plants. However, the use of parchment occasionally continues into the modern day because parchment does not break down as easily as plant-based paper; providing better preservation of documents written on it. But, it is meat that we most use; consuming it to fuel ourselves.

For those who manage animals, Samhain is a time of slaughter. Historically, butchery needed to be done when the outdoor temperature was cool. This helped prevent the meat from spoiling before it was fully processed.

Even in the modern age, many types of animals are slaughtered in the fall and winter, generally between September and December. Grazing animals such as cows and sheep must be brought in from pasture. Hogs gorge themselves on autumn acorns. The shortening days encourage turkeys to start retaining more fat. Even in the days of eternal bounty, this is the season to harvest meat, which can be frozen and saved for other times in the year.

While ancient hunting was a year-round affair, the dominance of humans has created a need to manage when animals can be hunted to keep from driving them to extinction. As a result, many places limit the dates and times that certain animals can be hunted. These modern “hunting seasons” are driven by many of the same considerations as the ancient slaughtering seasons; including maintaining healthy herds and reducing waste.

## Into the Shadows

In the cycle of life, Samhain represents old age. The summer of life is fading and with it the physical power of adolescence and maturity. In all things; that which no longer grows will begin to die. In this phase of life we become elders; full of the experience from lives lived and lessons both learned and taught.

From the moment of our birth, we find ourselves on a collision course toward the only certain event in our life: death. The specter of death haunts all mortals, but as the vitality of youth fades we begin to feel its closeness keenly. This loss of physical power can be difficult for those who have exulted in the tangible prowess. Even the least physical, most intellectually focused person feels their physical form slowing and a loss of energy. This creeping sense of our own mortality is one of the most primal forms of terror. The sense that we are being stalked by the most implacable and unescapable hunters.

As the shadows of life grow long, it is easy to let ourselves succumb to fear and despair. It can become hard to think of the growing fields and blooming flowers when we are unsure how many more springs we will live through. It is hard to hope for a future we know we will never see.

It is natural to feel fear as the nature of our mortality weighs heavy. For many, death does not come easy. Facing the idea of not existing in this world and the unknowns of what comes after is a horrible experience for most. To feel our bodies and minds cease to behave as we expect them to – to fail us – is an unfathomable betrayal.

In this season we become most familiar with loss. In the ending of friendships, the passing on of those we've loved, and the withering of strengths these twilight days of our lives generally hold more about loss and pain than the entire rest of our existence.

But, as in so many things, courage is not the absence of fear, but the overcoming of it. Where our more vital selves might carry through on foolhardiness and bravado, here we learn the measure of courage is knowing down to age-worn bones there are prices to failure – and choosing to carry on. Fear is healthy if it becomes a source of contemplation and consideration, and does not overcome us. And so, the closing of chapters and completion of stories gives us perspective on our experiences and – if we are thoughtful and meditative – this too may become wisdom.

## Altruism and The Grandmother Hypothesis

For most of our lives, we think little about the meaning of old age. In the blush of our youth and the fullness of adulthood, it is easy to simply see it as the decline of our later years. Viewing the twilight of our lives through this lens ignores how strange this period of our lives is among living things. Virtually no other creature continues to live such a large percentage of its life after its ability to produce offspring significantly declines.

In our more noble views of age, we talk of the wisdom and experience of elders. The knowledge and insight that can be passed from one generation to the next. The pressures of evolution seek any advantage to passing on genetic material, so biologists have sought to understand what advantage there is to this extensive period of post-reproductive survival.

In both biology and philosophy, "altruism" describes behavior by one individual that increases the fitness of another while decreasing their own. Altruistic behavior appears most obviously in relationships between related individuals. The most common example is parenting. However, other relationships have a high correlation in genetic material, such as full siblings. Even aunts and uncles represent enough of an overlap that genetic advantage is considered.

The theory that one generation will support those more distant altruistically, called the "grandmother hypothesis," has not been proven. Many aspects have been called into question by attempts to prove it. The involvement of previous generations does not have a consistent positive effect on fitness; survival, success, and reproduction. Further, its application in modern times has been called into question. With the astonishing speed of technical advancement, the practicality of knowledge gained by one generation being valuable to the next sometimes seems laughable.

However, humans are humans and whatever tools we use, we repeat the same stories. The human experiences of growth, survival, friendship, conflict, and love are constant in many ways. They have little to do with the technical features of our lives that have changed so much and everything to do with aspects that have changed very little. The idea that not all members of previous generations learn the same useful lessons speaks to the variability of lived experience and learning.

"A man has made at least a start on discovering the meaning of human life when he plants shade trees under which he knows full well he will never sit." - Elton Trueblood, *The Life We Prize*