

A CELEBRATION OF HALLOWEEN, SAMHAIN, & THE DAY OF THE DEAD!

PART I: SAMHAIN AND HARVEST FESTIVALS

According to Starhawk, *there's a deeper spiritual meaning that underlies the holiday (Samhain) for Pagans and real Witches—those who follow earth-based Goddess traditions that predate Christianity. As we in the northern hemisphere move into the time of cold and the dark of winter, we celebrate our New Year, and honor both death and regeneration.*

(Describing the Tradition) *In Northern Europe, (Starhawk tells us that) Samhain (the Celtic term for Halloween, pronounced sow-in as in 'sour') was the time when the cattle were moved from the summer pastures to winter shelter. It was the end of the growing season, the end of harvest, a time of thanksgiving, when the ancestors and the spirits of the beloved dead would return home to share in the feast. Death did not sever one's connections with the community. People would leave offerings of food and drink for their loved ones, and set out candles to light their way home. Those traditions gave us many of our present day customs. Now we set out jack-o-lanterns and give offerings of candy to children—who are, after all, the ancestors returning in new forms.*

(Starhawk continues) *Death and regeneration are always linked in Goddess theology. Birth, growth, death and renewal are a cycle that plays over and over again through natural systems and human lives. Embracing this cycle, we don't need to fear death, but instead can see it as a stage of life and a gateway to some new form of being.*

So Samhain is a time to remember and honor those who have died, to celebrate their lives and appreciate their gifts, to tell stories about them to the next generation so their memory will not be lost.

Harvest Festivals of various kinds have been celebrated for thousands of years all around the globe. They have offered a time of thankfulness for all the blessings of the year and a time to share those blessings with others. They often have become a time to remember those who are no longer with us as the year is ending and the wheel of time is spinning.

Now listen to this meditation by *the OlyCUUPS and MJ Marsh*:

Tonight we observe the Sabbat of Samhain. This is one of the most holy days for Wiccans and Neo-Pagans. The year is dying. We see this all around us. The leaves fall, the light shortens and cold replaces warmth. And in this crack of time between old and new, the veil between the living and the spirit fades and thins. At this time it is possible for the spirits of the beloved dead to visit the living and for the living to remember and to send messages of love and welcome, and sometimes a wondering or a question to the dead. We set upon our altars pictures, names, objects, candles, and food to remind us of those who have passed through the veil and to honor their memory. For none of us is truly alone or independent. We have drunk from wells we did not dig, warmed at fires we did not build, eaten from trees we did not plant. The present arises out of the past. Our present becomes the past for those who are coming through us and after us. Everything is connected. Tonight we remember our beloved dead. They have passed through the veil, yet they are never truly lost. They live in our hearts and memories. They live in the cells of our bodies. They live on in our culture and art and all the labors of their lives. Death is an ending but it is also a doorway. The old year is followed by the new; those that die may be born again. This is our belief, and it is the meaning of the cauldron that sits upon our altar. The cauldron represents that cosmic womb from which all creation is drawn forth, and to which it returns at it's death in order to be drawn forth again. We remember our beloved dead and we remember too, death awaits each of us.

SERMON (PART II)
THE DAY OF THE DEAD *LOS DIA DE LOS MUERTOS*

According to Starhawk, *In Latino cultures, Dia de los Muertos, Day of the Dead on November 2, is a time to visit the graves of loved ones, to feast there and honor their memory with altars and prayers. We set up altars in our homes, with pictures and mementos, and in my house (says Starhawk), we like to invite friends and family to an ancestor dinner, where we cook traditional foods and share our family stories.*

An online article by Judy King describes the Day of the Dead celebration:

At first glance, Day of the Dead decorations, colored paper garlands, little skeletons performing daily tasks and sugar skulls inscribed with names remind visitors of Halloween. Families visit, clean and decorate graves of loved ones for the November 1 and 2 holidays. Many families honor their ancestors and dead with home altars, laden with harvest fruits, traditional bread with crossed bones on dough on top, all to greet the spirits as they return to the home for 24 hours each year.

This holiday is a perfect example of the complex heritage of the Mexican people. The beliefs of today's Mexican are based on the complicated blended cultures of his ancestors, the Aztec and Maya and Spanish invaders, layered with Catholicism. The origins of the Days of the Dead reach into the ancient history of Europe and Mexico. In the eighth century, the church decreed November 1 as All Saints Day. Setting aside the day to honor the martyrs and saints was an attempt to replace the 2000-year tradition of the Celts and their Druid priests who combined harvest festivals and celebrated the new year on November 1.

The Celtic dead were believed to have access to earth on Samhain, October 31st, when the boundary between the worlds of the living and the dead relaxed. The Celts danced around huge bonfires, wearing animal heads and hides to confuse the spirits and burned crops and animals as offerings to the returning dead.

Around the end of the first millennium, the church reinforced its attempt to cover the Celtic celebration by designating November 2 as All Souls' Day to honor the dead. All Souls' Day was celebrated with parades, big bonfires and the people dressed as saints, angels and devils. In the language of the day, All Saints Day and All Souls' Day were known as All-hallowsmas, and October 31 was "All Hallowed's Eve" or Hallow'e'en.

When the Spaniards arrived in Mexico they encountered two-month celebrations honoring death, the fall harvest and the new year. For more than 500 years, the goddess Mictecacihuatl (Lady of the Dead) presided over Aztec harvest rituals using fires and incense, costumes of animal skins, images of their dead and offerings of ceramics, personal goods, flowers and foods, drink and flowers.

The church attempted to transform the joyous celebration to a suitably tragic image of death and a serious day of prayer focusing attention and reflection on the saints and martyrs. The people of Mexico did not fully adopt the early priests' ideas, and by keeping their familiar ceremonies, All Saint's Day and All Soul's Day evolved into the celebrations that today honor the dead with color, candles, joy

The Aztec, Mayan and other indigenous traditions have enriched the Mexican's attitude about death. From these ancestors has come the knowledge that souls continue to exist after death, resting placidly in Mictlan, the land of the dead, not for judgment or resurrection; but for the day each year when they could return home to visit their loved ones.

Daily life in ancient Mexico was so uncertain and difficult that death was expected at every turn. Death, in fact was revered, believed to be the ultimate experience of life, life's own reward, even welcomed as a better option when people are struggling for survival. The Mexican still views death as a transition of life, a normal stage in the circle of life on earth, a natural progression, not an ending.

Writer Octavio Paz commented about his people's relationship with death saying, The Mexican is familiar with death, jokes about it, caresses it, sleeps with it, and celebrates it. It is one of his favorite playthings and his most steadfast love."

A Wikipedia Article on the Day of the Dead also lists Similar traditions

Many other cultures around the world have similar traditions of a day set aside to visit the graves of deceased family members. Often included in these traditions are celebrations, food and beverages, in addition to prayers and remembrances of the departed.

The [Qingming Festival](#) ([simplified Chinese](#): 清明节; [traditional Chinese](#): 清明節; [pinyin](#): *qīng míng jié*) is a [traditional Chinese festival](#) usually occurring around April 5 of the [Gregorian calendar](#). Along with [Double Ninth Festival](#) on the 9th day of the 9th month in the [Chinese calendar](#), it is a time to tend to the graves of departed ones. In addition, in the Chinese tradition, the seventh month in the Chinese calendar is called the [Ghost Month](#) (鬼月), in which ghosts and spirits come out from the underworld to visit earth.

The [Bon Festival](#) (O-bon (お盆[?]), or only Bon (盆[?]), is a [Japanese Buddhist](#) holiday held in August to honor the spirits of departed [ancestors](#). It is derived in part from the Chinese observance of the Ghost Month, and was affixed to the solar calendar along with other traditional Japanese holidays.

In [Korea](#), [Chuseok](#) (추석, 秋夕; also called *Hangawi*) is a major traditional holiday. People go where the spirits of their ancestors are enshrined, and perform [ancestral worship](#) rituals early in the morning; they visit the tombs of immediate ancestors to trim plants, clean the area around the tomb, and offer food, drink, and crops to their ancestors.

During the [Nepali](#) holiday of [Gai Jatra](#) ("Cow Pilgrimage"), every family who has lost a member during the previous year creates a *tai* out of bamboo branches, cloth, and paper decorations, in which are placed portraits of the deceased. As a cow traditionally [leads the spirits of the dead](#) into the afterlife, an actual or symbolic cow is used depending on local custom. The festival is also a time to dress up in costume reminiscent of the western Halloween, with polar subjects including political commentary and satire.^[32]

In some [African](#) cultures, visits to ancestors' graves, the leaving of food and gifts, and the asking of protection from them serve as important parts of traditional rituals, such as one ritual that is held just before the start of the hunting season.^[33]

In this country we also remember our war dead on Memorial Day each year!

SERMON (PART III) HALLOWEEN

We have shared some of the European Celtic history of Samhain behind Halloween as well as the Mexican celebration of the Day of the Dead with its mixture of European Celtic and Christian influences with Aztec and Mayan practices. One can still see some of these influences in modern American Halloween celebrations.

Halloween, the holiday that has come down through western Christian tradition as All Hallow's Eve, the night before all Saint's Day and the 2nd night before All Soul's Day has taken on a more playful character over the years and also has become a significant commercial opportunity for selling candy and costumes, lights and decorations. Halloween has become a favorite holiday for many of us in Western Society who have become disillusioned with other religious holidays. Halloween among other things provides us with an opportunity to become someone else for a day, to try on different personalities, to let out our alter egos! Beyond everything else, Halloween is fun! And we need fun in our lives. We need time to dress up and to play!

These days, though, I think that it is the more serious part of this combined celebration that I most appreciate. For Samhain, Dia de los Muertos, and Halloween, we can take time to remember those who have died as part of the celebration. I don't know whether those who have died are really as close as some believe in this season when the veil is thin between this world and whatever lies beyond, but I like the opportunity to think about my parents and grandparents, uncles and aunts that have died over the past several years. They each touched my life in many ways, and I was sorry to see each of them pass from this life. They live on in my memory and in the memories of all their friends and family members that still walk the earth. One of the great gifts that we give them, is to remember them as they were and appreciate all that they taught us of life and love.

Enjoy the candy and the costumes, and the playful decorations! Also savor the memories! Remember those who have gone before and who no longer walk with us other than in our memories. Merry Samhain and Happy Halloween!

Amen and Blessed Be!