

Samhain Ritual by Selena Fox

The framework for this ritual began taking form twenty years ago. Although the sequence of sections has not changed much over time, each year the ritual has had variations, such as in chant selections, meditative images, and those performing roles.

As the Circle Sanctuary Community continues to evolve, so has this rite. From 1980-1992, we held our Samhain rite at a rented historic building, known as the "Gates of Heaven," in downtown Madison, Wisconsin. We outgrew that space, and since Samhain 1993, we have held it at our land, Circle Sanctuary Nature Preserve, in southwestern Wisconsin, USA. This move made it possible to begin and follow the rite with a Samhain bonfire and to extend post ritual activities longer.

Preparations

We begin our Samhain Ritual preparations in our own homes, days before departing for the festival. Each of us, through private meditation, reflects on the themes of this sacred time, which is our spiritual New Year. We each take stock of ourselves, our lives, and our past year. We connect with inner guidance to help us decide upon some outmoded, dysfunctional, or other problem pattern of behavior, thinking, feeling, and/or being we wish to change. We choose a word or phrase that names this pattern (examples: "procrastination," "depression," "resentment"). We write it on a piece of paper or give it some other burnable symbolic form which can be cast in our Samhain fire of release. We also gather other things for the ritual -- mementos of departed loved ones, votive candles in votive glasses, ritual clothing, offerings for the dead, rhythm instruments, and potluck contributions for the feast. Those with special roles in the ritual do additional preparation for this work.

At the festival itself, during the hour before the rite begins, we do our final preparation. We don ceremonial attire and bring forth our ritual items. We set up three Samhain altars, each covered with a black cloth. These altars are aligned along the southern wall of our Temple Room, the great hall in the remodeled barn which is our center's main building.

The central altar is the Spirit World Gateway, which contains a faceted polyhedral lead glass crystal atop a magic scrying mirror known which serves as our Otherworld speculum. These are covered with a black velvet cloth.

To the right is the Feast of the Dead altar, with a large ceremonial plate and chalice, plus a large votive candle which is lit in honor of the Dead. A bit of each contribution of food for the potluck feast to be eaten after the ritual is placed on the plate and a bit of each type of beverage brought for the feast is poured into the chalice. Also on this altar are acorns and leaves from the forest, pumpkins, gourds, a corn dolly, Crone Witch images, antlers, and other holiday symbols

To the left of the central altar is the Shrine of the Dead. On this altar, Community members place photographs, heirlooms, and other mementos of loved ones in the Spirit World. They light votive candles in their memory and place them by the mementos. Pumpkins carved earlier in the day are lit with other votive candles and placed around the rest of the Temple Room.

Attunement

The ritual begins at dusk outdoors as we gather around our Samhain Fire in our Bonfire Circle. With drums and rattles we make sacred rhythms to align ourselves with the Divine within and to attune ourselves to the Land and to each other. Upon a blazing fire of Oak logs burned for protection, strength, and renewal, we add dried Mugwort stalks, leaves, and flowers, and mudge ourselves with this Mugwort smoke to enhance our psychic perceptions. Then, as we chant and dance widdershins (counterclockwise) around the fire, we cast into the flames our prepared symbols of the outmoded in our lives that we have chosen to dispel. We also burn dried rosemary, sage, yarrow, and other herbs of purification and transformation to aid this release process. Our group energy peaks and we become silent, scrying in the embers for a time.

Transformation

We begin our processional chant. Carrying our offerings for the Dead, we spiral out of the Bonfire Circle and process to the bottom of the stairs to the entrance of our Temple building. One by one, each of us climbs the stairs and stands before the Samhain Gateway of Spiritual Transformation, which is formed by crossed long swords held by two Guardian Priests. In order to pass, each must speak the word or phrase of what has been cast away with the passing year. After speaking this, each moves through the Gateway and is blessed by two Healer Priestesses, one smudging with Frankincense smoke and the other asperging with sacred water collected from Brigid's Spring on our Land.

Divine Encounters

Entering the northern doorway of the Temple Room, each processes widdershins to the place of the Samhain Tableau Vivant in the southwestern corner. Placing our offering for the Dead in large baskets there, we receive blessings of Deities through Their presence called forth in living representatives in this sacred scene. Enthroned a few steps up the corner stairway is the Crone Goddess of Death and Rebirth. Holding a sickle, she is veiled and dressed in black. Offering baskets are by Her feet and on Her lap. By Her side stands the Horned God as Lord of the Wild Hunt and Guardian of the Dead. Dressed in black, he is crowned with a pair of stag antlers and holds a large staff. Death as Grim Reaper, wearing a black hooded robe and holding a large scythe, stands next to the Feast of the Dead altar to remind us to face Death as part of the Circle of Life.

Sacred Circle

As Samhain Priestess and Ritual Director, I transform our Procession into a Sacred Spiral Circle Dance. We process widdershins around and around the Temple Room ever spiraling into the center until all have assembled. Then the northern door is sealed. Seven Invokers, each in turn, guide us in calling the Sacred Directions: Earth in North, Air in East, Fire in South, Water in West, Cosmos Above, Planet Below, and Interconnecting Spirit in Center. Then, as I encircle deosil (clockwise) the Temple Room with salt and sword, all join in casting the Sacred Circle with sound (toning) and light (visualization). Because of the Spirit World components of

this rite, the circle is tightly cast, and once this is done, no one is permitted to enter or leave the Temple Room during the rite until it is uncast at the end.

Divine Alignments

We do deity invocations and chants. The Crone Priestess guides us in honoring and aligning ourselves with the Goddess. The Horned One Priest guides us in honoring and aligning ourselves with the God. We then celebrate Balance and the Unity of All that Is with a toning chant.

Spirit World Communication

The Community then sits facing the altars. I uncover the crystal and mirror and activate them as focal points for the Spirit World Gateway. Together, we chant the portal open, and, once formed, we call out the names of ancestors, dead family members, friends, pet companions, and others in the Spirit World we wish to honor, remember, and possibly interact with during this sacred time. The spirit communication approach we use is a telepathic meditation in which one's self intentionally and intuitively dialogues with loved ones through a silent imaginative process. This is a distinctively different approach than possession and channeling methods in which a spirit force temporarily takes over consciousness and the self is suppressed or unconscious during contact.

Put another way, the opening of the portal in our ritual is like establishing a "psychic telephone" connection with a dead loved one. When we call out a name, it is like "ringing up" that loved one. When the portal is open, communication between us and our departed ones can more readily take place. However, as with actual telephone use, not all connections are of the same quality. Some connections are excellent and communication is very clear, while others have static that interferes with communication.

Although this part of the ritual has a highly structured beginning (portal opening) and ending (portal closing), the process that unfolds during the intervening communication period varies from individual to individual and from year to year. For some, this is an opportunity to mourn more completely the loss of a loved one who has died in the past year or in the more distant past. On the other hand, some experience a joyful process of reunion instead of grief. Many receive new insights and understandings about self and others. Others do not get specifics, but instead experience a general sense of inner peace. The process, whatever form it takes, can be very therapeutic, not only helping with bereavement, but in providing a means to normalize and come to terms with death and the finiteness of life in a human shell.

When I intuit that the group as a whole is nearing completion of this part of the ritual, I begin preparations for the closing of the portal. I do this by first facilitating a Community Keening time in which those in sorrow can express their grief more loudly with wails as well as tears, and others can support this by joining in the sounds. The intensity of this lamentation is one of the reasons we do not permit participation in our rite by young children and by those with severe mental illness. This Community intensification of grief helps release it more completely. After group catharsis peaks, I begin leading a chant. We start by singing this chant slowly and mournfully as a dirge. Then, gradually we increase its pace, and begin rising up. Adding some

rhythm sounds, we transform the chant into an empowerment chant celebrating the continuation of life. We join hands in concentric circles and sway back and forth together, sharing loving support. Our chant builds and peaks. We become quiet. We each silently thank departed loved ones we encountered during this part of the rite, and then we chant the portal closed. I deactivate the crystal and mirror and cover them again with the black velvet cloth.

New Year's Divination

We now shift the focus of our psychic work in this ritual to personal divination for the year to come. We sing a guidance bringing chant as we move deosil around the Temple Room. Divination baskets also circulate deosil around the room. Each basket contains a mixture of multiple photocopies of Major Arcana cards of Tarot, with symbol images facing downward. Each ritual participant intuitively draws a card from one of the baskets and then begins meditating on its imagery to receive guidance for the coming year. We conclude our divination with an empowerment chant.

Cone of Power

We then turn our attentions outward to the future of the larger Pagan world of which we are part. We join together in a deosil dance to raise power for the protection and well-being of the Craft, Pagan culture, and Nature religions. Sometimes our focus includes directing spiritual support to specific individuals, groups, and projects as well as to the larger goal. Our chanting, dancing, and rhythm making increases in intensity until it peaks, when it stops and we release the energy we have raised through focused visualization. We ground and center, and then prepare to end the ritual.

Thanksgivings

We give thanks to the Deities, Spirit World, Sacred Directions, and to each other. We give thanks for the food and beverages we will later consume at our Samhain feast. We give thanks to the Land and the Nature Spirits here. With sound and light, we uncast the Circle, as I move widdershins around with the ritual sword and scatter the salt that has lined the circle. The ritual ends with a closing Wiccan benediction.

Closure

During our post-ritual process, we each check-in with at least one other participant to aid in centering. We informally share some of our insights with each other. As needed, Community members help each other process and integrate experiences that emerged during the ritual. We gradually turn up the lights in the Temple Room. Kitchen Witches and helpers go forth to set out the great spread of dishes and drinks brought for the feast. Others return to the Bonfire Circle, add wood to the Samhain Fire, and begin celebratory drumming. Our celebration of Samhain goes throughout the evening and into the next day. We feast, we make rhythms, we sing, we converse, we take Nature walks, we meditate, and we place the baskets of offerings for the Dead and the Spirit plate and chalice outdoors in the center of the Stone Circle.

When we return to our own homes after the festival, we continue our integrative process as we reflect on our experiences and make manifest the personal renewal supported by this rite.

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