

A Turning on the Wheel of Life: Wiccan Rites of Death

Nikki Bado-Fralick

Death, with its attendant lore and rites, plays a prominent and significant role in the Wiccan religion. Death's ultimate power to transform is invoked as an aspect or dimension of many Wiccan deities in order to help its practitioners effect some critical change in their lives. Death is annually celebrated as a seasonal aspect of the Wheel of the Year, taking its place among the harvest rites, which reap not only fruits of the field, but fruits of the spirit. Death forms a central part of Wiccan initiation, both in terms of the perceived transformative process of death and rebirth, and in its personification as the Challenger on the Threshold of the Circle.

I first became introduced to Death-the-Challenger during my own initiation into Wicca some 25 years ago. Therefore this is written, at least in part, from the perspective of one who stands "inside the circle."¹ While this provides certain advantages in terms of an intimate description, there are also limitations. Wicca, as my coven's lineage practices it, is a religion of initiates; it is a private and esoteric religious path. Keeping within the bounds of ethical fieldwork practices, as well as personal oaths as a priestess, I cannot reveal identities without permission, specific details as to gesture, or exact wording of specific narratives. While I will not provide such details, what I cite will be quite close in both spirit, or perhaps texture, and text. I am aided in this respect by a number of books that have made public some aspects of Wiccan ceremony, including suggestions for the creation of specific rites of passage connected with Death.² The description of Wiccan ceremonies performed by my own coven and others well known to me is meant to be typical of Wicca, but it is by no means universal because of the extremely localized and decentralized nature of Wiccan practice.

Methodology

My approach to ritual as a scholar is pluralistic, drawing from the analysis of the structure, function, and performance of rituals within both the immediate and the larger context of a particular ritual event. Numerous scholars have influenced my understanding of ritual, among them Mircea

Eliade (1958), Arnold van Gennep (1960 [1909]), Victor Turner (1969, 1987 [1967]), and Bruce Lincoln (1981), who have all written classic texts on rites of passage, especially initiation, with its often attendant themes of death and rebirth.

Eliade sees initiation as a means of symbolic and cosmic transformation in which humans as *homo religiosus* universally participate. However, his focus on universal archetypes overlooks important dimensions of meaning that can only be discovered by attending to specific rituals in specific cultural contexts. Van Gennep, Turner, and Lincoln are also interested in cross-cultural understandings of ritual, but in ways that are more directly framed in specific contexts. Each attends to some aspect of structure and spatiality, understanding ritual as an active process.

Van Gennep's stages of ritual—separation, liminality, and reincorporation—are well defined and usually interpreted as connected to social status. Lincoln, analyzing specific women's rituals, begins with structure, but incorporates context, function, and meaning. In so doing, he arrives at an unusual understanding of spatiality within women's rituals, starting with a lack of true, physical separation and arriving at a model of enclosure, metamorphosis, and emergence—an excellent example of allowing a model to arise from the material, rather than the other way around. Lincoln notes that women's rituals have more to do with cosmic change in status than social, which is similar to Wiccan initiation rituals.

While these works do not figure prominently in this particular paper, they frame my exploration of a very specific ritual in a specific cultural context that I nevertheless hope will shed light on what we do in general when we perform religious ritual.

The Wiccan Religious Tradition

A brief introduction to Wicca will better situate the discussion of particular rites and attitudes concerning death. Wicca, variously known as "Witchcraft" or simply "the Craft," is a Western, polytheistic, nature religion. Its practitioners usually characterize it as a modern day revival or re-creation of practices rooted in the shamanic techniques and indigenous religious practices of pre-Christian pagan Europe. It is sometimes called the "Western Mystery Tradition"³ because of its emphasis on initiatory processes and a perceived similarity to what we know of Greek initiatory or "mystery" religions.⁴

While Wiccans may base their practices on a variety of European mythological pantheons, the Wiccans with whom I am most familiar have incorporated much material from Celtic or British pantheons and practices. In fact, the resurgence—some might say creation⁵—of modern day Wicca owes much to the repeal of the last anti-Witchcraft laws during the 1950s in Britain. This freed Gerald Gardner, a retired British civil servant and writer

of occult fiction, to publish *Witchcraft Today*, *The Meaning of Witchcraft* and to proclaim openly the existence of "The Old Religion" as an ancient pre-Christian religion that had been forced underground for several hundred years to avoid persecution.

Almost immediately the question arose as to how "old" was The Old Religion. Did the Craft even exist before Gardner? In the early stages of public revival, the Wiccan community placed emphasis on the need for a connection to tradition and to ancient practices traced in an "unbroken line," in order to validate the authority of the religious experience. Although some controversy continues, by now most Wiccans are thoroughly familiar with the nature of the revival and reconstruction of their religion and have come to embrace fully the liberating aspect of a self-authoring and authenticating approach to the human religious experience.

The consciously constructed nature of Wiccan praxis provides a significant departure from religion and ritual as it is normally perceived in the West. Religion is something into which you are born, while ritual is a static and repetitive experience provided to us by authority and/or tradition and performed for us or on us. Rituals must therefore be *followed*; occasionally they must even be *endured*. This general perception focuses on a prescriptive, rather than a creative dimension to religious ritual and contains an embedded sense of tradition as essentially static and authoritative rather than dynamic and adaptive.

Pursuing lines of reasoning followed by folklorist and anthropologist Barbara Myerhoff in her work on secular forms of self-generated ritual, we see that significant attitudinal changes occur concerning religion and ritual when people create religious rituals for themselves. By claiming the self-consciously constructed nature of their religious praxis, Wiccans understand religion in general as a creative *activity* rather than a label, even one consciously chosen. Religion itself becomes a lived process, not a product. It is a *human* creation, a living experience, an activity that is performed, and not merely a body of inherited texts. We, all of us, constantly reconstruct and reweave our understanding of the sacred; and so the search for the "ultimate origin" or who has the "most ancient" texts or practices is rendered nonsensical or beside the point. Myerhoff states:

It requires some suspension of the knowledge that ritual has been made rather than given, and along with it, the realization that we are dealing with interpretations, not mutable, externally provided truths. But given the times in which we live, perhaps it is easier to maintain this paradox than hold out for unqualified, sacred axioms which may so easily slip into someone else's totalitarian program. An approach which maintains belief alongside critical consciousness is ultimately more imaginative, more responsible. (1982:131)

Although her work deals with secular forms, Myerhoff eloquently provides insight into the significance of understanding religious rituals as constructed and created affairs.

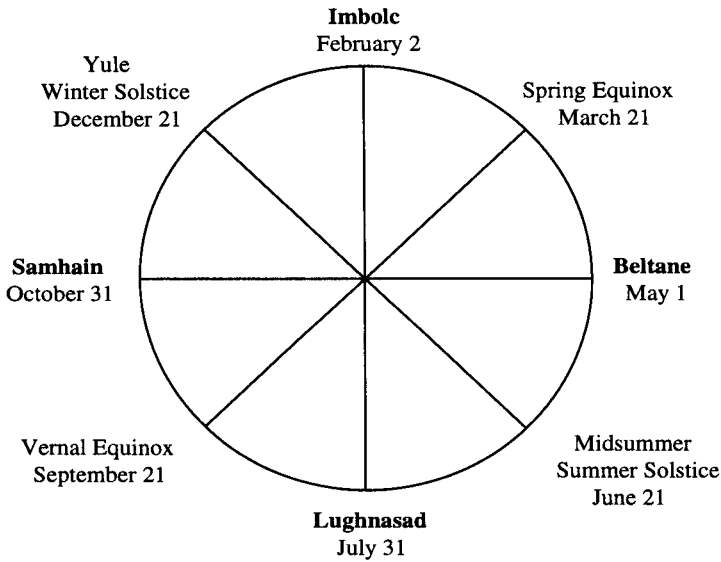
Today the Craft has many national spokespersons,⁶ but there is no central group of "church elders" who establish religious dogma or implement a regime of standard ritual practices. Witches emphasize personal and individual experience of the sacred, a widening of perception through initiatory processes that create a plurality and state of rich diversity in approach, structure, and ritual. Ultimately, this results in an emphasis on *praxis* over dogma among most Wiccan groups.

The Craft is practiced locally by single individuals or in small groups called covens, which have a great deal of autonomy and vary widely in composition, size, and structure. Some groups admit both men and women equally to the priesthood. Others, usually working within what is called a "Dianic tradition," consist only of women. More rarely, there are also covens that consist only of men. Certain covens favor a balance between the worship of female and male deities in their rituals; others concentrate on female deities. Coven structures range from minimal to highly organized patterns of training and degree advancement. Ritual takes on a wide variety of forms as well, from the elementary to the most sophisticated patterns of ritual behavior and expression.

Within a localized context, coven members speak in terms of the "tradition" or "lineage" of their particular groups. Usually these include some reference to the background and training of the group's immediate founder(s), or perceived historical founder—as in the Gardnerian covens, which trace their practices back to Gardner. In this paper, tradition and lineage refer to the training and experience of the immediate founders of a particular coven, rather than a more distant, historical figure.

A few things can be safely said about Wiccan praxis and worldview despite its diversity. Wicca is a nature religion. Witches draw many of their insights from the seasonal cycles of nature, which are celebrated in a calendar of eight sabbats or holy days called the Wheel of the Year (see Figure 1).⁷ Each holy day has two dimensions of activities, one of which occurs in the natural world, such as the celebration of the time of year for planting or harvesting crops. The other dimension is a reflection of what is going on in the natural world, but its field of activity is located within the personal lives of Wiccan practitioners. So "planting" and "harvesting" occur in the personal life as well as the natural world. In other words, there is an optimum time for "sowing seeds of new ideas and habits" and an optimum time for "harvesting" those seeds. In celebrating the sabbats, Witches express and experience the never ending cycle of change, honoring equally times of planting and harvest, seeing in every ending a new beginning, in every death a rebirth. Given this perspective, it should not be surprising that a belief in reincarnation is a central teaching of the Craft.

The Wheel of the Year: The Eight Sabbats*



*Dates are approximate, especially for solstice and equinox celebrations.

Figure 1

Although certain Wiccan groups focus solely or primarily on female deistic images, Wiccans typically worship both Gods and Goddesses, with the emphasis on the plural. Deities are worshipped within the context of the seasonal cycles of Nature and, through these cycles, are invoked into worshippers' lives as transformative catalysts for change and growth. Deities are conceived of as having "aspects" or "dimensions" that are directly connected to the Wheel of the Year or the Lunar Cycle. Male deities are sometimes understood in terms of the dual aspects of summer and winter, balancing cycles of growth and decay, activity and rest, within worshippers' lives. They are also frequently understood as having a tripartite dimension in the form of solar, vegetative, and forest/animal aspects that are worshipped within the Wheel.

Following the solar cycle, Witches celebrate the returning sun—the spark of life—at Winter Solstice. This is the time of year when the worshipper is at rest, contemplating the success or failure of last year's activities and planning what changes she will make in the year to come. As the sunlight grows in intensity until its height at Midsummer, the worshipper plans for the coming year, planting "seeds of change" in the spring, working hard to establish her goals through the summer, and looking forward to fruitful harvest.

The other aspects work much the same way, each having a relationship not only to the seasonal cycles, but also to cycles within our lives. Although it is evident that aspects of deities function as important metaphors within worshippers' lives, it must be understood that the Gods are not *merely* metaphors, but exist as real members of the spiritual community. Our relationship with the Gods is primarily experiential; we see our Gods as present and alive *in the world*, not removed from it on either a disembodied, nonearthly plane or a purely symbolic or abstract level as a mental construct.

While there are other points of commonality to Wiccan praxis, I will now present specific examples of rituals that illustrate the Wiccan understanding of the nature of death along several dimensions: personification as Death-the-Challenger during initiation, powerful catalyst and metaphor for change and transformation, and cessation of life.

The Coven

In my lineage, a coven is essentially a group of initiated clergy in various stages of training and expertise. Everyone is either a priest or priestess, so a clergy/lay dichotomy does not exist within the group. Our coven recognizes two levels of training and expertise. The first level, that of priest or priestess, is reached upon initiation. The second level, that of High Priest or High Priestess, is acquired only if the individual chooses to pursue additional training that would effectively enable her to start and train her own covens. Many of us have had occasion to serve within the broader Pagan community in some priestly function, by performing marriage or "handfasting" rites, blessing babies ("Wiccanings"), practicing divination, performing healing rituals, visiting hospitals to comfort the ill or the dying, performing funeral ceremonies, and so forth.

"Lauren" and I were initiated into the same parent coven 25 years ago and founded our particular group about 12 years ago. The clergy live in northern and central Ohio and recently divided the coven along geographic lines. Witches call this practice "hiving off," and it usually occurs when a coven gets too large, too spread out, or where there are personal differences that cannot be resolved. The groups may or may not continue to work together on occasion, depending on the reasons for hiving off. The northern division of the coven subsequently split into two, one of which keeps to a Wiccan practice, while the other explores American Druidism, which is a similar but distinct pagan religious path.⁸ For the purpose of this article, I will describe the ethnographic characteristics of the coven prior to hiving.

Our coven is composed of six priestesses (four of whom are High Priestesses) and three priests. We come from a range of European ethnicities and socio-economic backgrounds from upper middle to working class; we

are all white. Our ages range from mid-twenties to mid-forties. We vary a great deal in education, from high school graduate to Ph.D. candidate. The following list represents just a few of the labels we might use to describe ourselves: parent, real estate agent, astrologer, graduate student, secretary, metalsmith, musician, herbalist, farmer, employee of the Clerk of Courts, artist, and factory worker. We run the gamut politically, from leftist "Deadheads" to moderate Republicans, which makes conversation around election time *very* interesting.

Our lineage draws from Celtic and Welsh mythology and folk traditions. The deities we invoke into the circle during our rituals generally come from these pantheons, and some of our ritual practices are rooted in the folk customs of the Celts. Although a few, but not all, of our members are ethnically Celtic, none of us has a problem working with a European tradition that is not specifically represented in his or her particular ancestry.⁹

In terms of the balance of power between male and female, our coven worships both Goddesses and Gods, favoring neither over the other. Both women and men have equal access to the priesthood. There is little, if any, distinction between the roles of priest and priestess within the coven; both are accorded equal power and value. Each initiate learns how to "cast" the circle, or to create the ritual space, and invoke both Goddesses and Gods. On a technical level, our rites could be conducted equally well with only priestesses or priests attending. We expect each initiate to contribute to the rites according to his or her training and years of experience.¹⁰

The Ritual Setting

In ritual, Wiccans work with elemental forces, known symbolically as earth, air, fire, water, and spirit. An important beginning part of the ritual experience is casting the circle, or the creation of the sacred space. This seals off the ritual area from the mundane world, usually through the symbolic invocation of the five elements. As do many Witches, we conduct our rituals literally within a circle large enough to contain comfortably all who are present. The circle's directions have correspondences to elements, seasons, colors, animals, ages of life, and so forth. For example, in our tradition the element of air is associated with the east, fire the south, water the west, and earth the north, while spirit is associated with the center, from which point the Gods are usually invoked.

The elements are also represented on the altar and in the personal ritual tools of each Witch.¹¹ The typical altar is a rectangular table about the height of a coffee table and large enough to hold candles for fire, a small bowl of water, incense for the element of air, and a container of salt or earth for the element of earth. More symbolic forms of the elements may also be

found on the typical altar in the form of the ritual tools: the chalice or cup for the element of water, the pentacle (a disc or small plate on which a five pointed star is engraved or drawn¹²) for earth, the athame or sword for fire, and the wand for air. The altar is often decorated with statues of Gods and Goddesses and is usually decorated according to the season, for example spring flowers or autumn harvest arrangements of leaves, dried flowers, corn, gourds, and fruits.

Our rituals are generally performed at night and, whenever possible, outdoors in nature. However, it is often difficult, especially for urban Witches, to find a suitable outdoor location that would be relatively private and free of intrusion. For this reason, indoor ritual spaces are common, taking the form of a spare room or part of a room dedicated and decorated for that purpose with the altar, statues or pictures of our Gods and Goddesses, flowers, incense, and other significant objects.

The initiates make an outline of the ritual, determining questions such as who will do what part of the ritual and what chants we will use. Each Witch takes or has taken a bath of purification and dons robes before going to the circle. While some groups work "skyclad" or in the nude, ours works in full length, black cotton robes that are cut along much the same pattern. The robes serve a symbolic as well as practical purpose: their similarity helps create a sense of group identity, and their color is both symbolic to us and quite practical for working outdoors in the dark if one wishes not to be seen. After the sacred space is created and blessed with the elements, the purpose of the rite is stated, and the ritual is begun.

The invocation of the Gods helps establish the ritual's purpose and raises the participant's energy levels within the circle. The Gods are invoked into the circle through prayer and song or chanting, often accompanied by dancing or drumming. Everyone participates within the circle. There are no nonparticipatory observers who stand outside. Guests who are invited as potential members or as visiting religious specialists from another path are briefed on what will happen during the ritual and participate in the circle's activities to the best of their abilities.

Our coven has a patron Goddess and God who are always invoked and whose names are known only by the initiates, but other Goddesses and Gods may also be invited to the circle, depending on their nature and the specific activities of the rite. For example, if the circle involves healing, Gods and Goddesses particularly known for their healing powers will be invited. In the summer, we invoke the Goddess first, and in the winter, the God first.

After the invocation, the "work" or purpose of the ritual, such as seed blessing, healing, celebration of a sabbat, or initiation, is then performed. When the work has been accomplished, we sit down on the ground or floor and relax, sharing our experiences of the ritual with one another, teaching each other new songs or chants, telling jokes or stories, or maybe doing some special divination to help with a member's problem. The ceremony of

“cakes and wine” takes place at this time. Served in a communal chalice, the wine is blessed with the athame to symbolize the sacred union of the Goddess and the God. The chalice itself represents the female, and the athame the male. The cakes are crescent-shaped oatmeal cookies specially baked by one of the members, whose success or failure with the recipe usually forms the basis for the beginning of the aforementioned jokes.

If there is no other work to be done at this point, we enter the stage of what I call “circle deconstruction.” Whatever has been called or invoked into the circle must now be released or asked to depart. The Gods and Goddesses who have been invited to the circle are bid fond farewell and given leave to depart. Any energies that have been raised during the ritual are now either sent on to fulfill their purpose (e.g., healing) or harmlessly grounded. Circle deconstruction is an important step in the ritual process. It not only brings a sense of closure to the event, but illustrates the degree to which Witches approach ritual as having experiential reality—serious and real physical and psychological effects on our lives—rather than merely as metaphorical abstraction.

Death: Challenger at the Threshold of Initiation

The birth of a priest or priestess begins with a series of “ordeals” that leads up to a literal confrontation with death during the ritual of initiation. The ordeals start long before the actual day of initiation. The initiate-to-be, called a dedicant in our coven, must formally ask to be initiated. This is seen by the dedicant as no small task and usually involves a great gathering of courage. After asking, the initiates meet with the dedicant in a semi-formal setting to question him about his understanding of the Craft as we practice it and his reasons for wanting to take on the responsibilities of clergy. If the answers are satisfactory and all agree that they can work with this person, we accept him for initiation.

Preparation for the actual rite now begins in earnest. Each dedicant must make or obtain a suitable robe and begin the process of acquiring and selecting ritual tools. The dedicant must choose a new name, to be used only in the circle, that reflects the person’s sacred identity. Usually this means intense soul searching coupled with deciphering the arcane spelling and pronunciation of names from an appealing and appropriate mythology in order to discover the name that will truly fit. Each day brings increased anticipation and heightened levels of anxiety as the dedicant approaches the big day. Of course, the excitement and anxiety are shared by the initiates, who offer their support and encouragement, having been through the process themselves. On the actual day of the initiation, anticipation, excitement, and anxiety are at a fevered pitch. Again, this is often as true for the initiates who will take part in the ceremony as it is for the dedicant.¹³

The ordeals of initiation reach a peak when the dedicant confronts "Death itself" at the entrance to the circle. Personified as Death-the-Challenger and ritually *embodied* in the form of High Priest/ess, Death stands at the entrance to the circle—hooded, silent, armed with ritual sword—barring the way and ready to deliver firm warning. Once met, there is presumably no turning back from Death's challenge. Death is not only present, but foregrounded as metaphor *and* reality in both its embodiment within the High Priest/ess as Challenger and its potentially literal presence in the sword point being held to the dedicant's chest.¹⁴ Death warns that, unless the dedicant comes to the circle with two passwords—"perfect love" and "perfect trust"—he may not enter Death's realm. "It would be better for you to throw yourself on my sword than to make the attempt with fear or doubt in your heart." After the dedicant delivers the passwords, he is dealt a *symbolic* death stroke and immediately blindfolded and loosely bound so that his feet can move enough to walk without falling. Witches call this state "neither bound nor free," and we feel it symbolizes the human condition quite nicely.

The dedicant continues to meet challenges at each quarter of the circle until he arrives again at the beginning. Here he is given by Death the third password and finally "reborn" across the threshold and into the circle with a firm but gentle shove. Still blindfolded, he is positioned by one of the initiates before the altar and read a long passage instructing him, among other things, to love all things in nature and allow no one to suffer by his hands or in his mind. After this, the blindfold and bonds are removed, he is asked his new name, swears an oath on the sword, and is presented to each quarter of the circle as a new priest of the Craft.

The tension and anxiety of the ordeal of initiation immediately deflate as all members rush to congratulate the newly made priest. At this time, the cakes and wine are blessed and shared as everyone sits down to relax. The new priest, still very much aglow with his experience, is told that he will now be read an important story. He is instructed to pay close attention, as the story will reveal things that he will come to understand upon reflection. This is the story of the "Descent of the Goddess to the Realm of Death,"¹⁵ a portion of which is presented below:

"Lady," replied Death, "it is fate that all who are born must die. Everything passes; all fades away. I bring comfort and consolation to those who pass the gates, that they may grow young again. But You are My heart's desire. Return not, stay here with Me."

But She answered: "I feel no love for Your cold comfort."

Then said Death: "Since You will not receive My wisdom in the spirit of love, You must suffer the purification of all who come to My kingdom."

"It is better so, to learn what all must learn." And so She received the ordeal of purification—by earth, and water, and fire, and air—and was made wise in the mysteries of death. Through Her ordeal She attained wisdom and knew love for the Lord of Shadows.

And Death welcomed Her and taught Her all His Mysteries. She took up His crown, which he had laid at Her feet. And it became a circlet which She placed around Her neck, saying: "Here is the Circle of Rebirth. Through You all passes out of life, but through Me all may be born again. Everything passes; everything changes. Even Death is not eternal. Mine is the mystery of the Womb, that is the Cauldron of Rebirth. Enter into Me and know Me, and You will be free of all fear. For as life is but a journey into death, so death is but a passage back to life, and in Me the circle is ever turning."

The story's very presentation and performance mark it as something important, as it stands out from the more relaxed ritual context of the sharing of cakes and wine. As the new Witch hears the story, he is instructed to make connections between the events in the myth and the events of his initiation. The new priest must learn to see in the words the pattern and key to his own experience of initiation.

The performance of the myth at this point in the ritual is not merely to impress similarity of the experience upon the new Witch, but ultimately to promote *identification* with the Goddess, who has undergone a cosmic transformation, a change in status, bestowing in Her, in Lincoln's words, "a defined place in the universe, and a place of importance and dignity" (1981:105). It is significant to note here that both female and male initiates are presented the same text in the same way. Not only does the Goddess's descent to the Underworld provide a model of cosmic transformation for women, but for *men* as well.

From the moment of the challenge at the gateway to initiation, Death is immediately foregrounded in the very first experiences of the new priest; its transformative power is manifested in the ritual and impressed upon the new priest as a teaching of central importance. Initiation is quite literally *performed* as a transformative process of symbolic death and rebirth for the Wiccan practitioner. In order to begin a life as a priest of the Craft, he must first die to his old life. Death clears the way for the birth of a new being—one who has met the challenge with perfect love and perfect trust, who has passed through the ordeal of initiation, and who is now ready to begin a new life with a new name. Death is performed as a transformative process *in relation to* life, a process of change more fully understood nonlinearly: death and birth on a never ending circle, death understood as an ending only so that a new beginning can occur, which in its turn will also fulfill its journey to an end and another new beginning.

Death as a Dimension of Deity

The Descent narrative also introduces to us the configuration of death as one of the aspects or dimensions of the divine. While the God more or less represents death and the Goddess life (in the narrative), both male and female deities have aspects or dimensions of understanding that are connected with a nonlinear understanding of death as the positive power of change and transformation, one in which Wiccan practitioners participate through ritual. A short example from Wiccan practices serves to illustrate this point.

Practitioners often understand female deities in Wiccan cosmology as having three major dimensions. This tripartite nature is called the Triple Goddess and is usually keyed to the cycles of female human life and framed as "Maiden, Mother, and Crone." The Crone aspect participates most directly in the power of transformation identified with Death in the Wiccan worldview.

The ritual practice I wish to cite comes from an Imbolc ritual, celebrated annually during the beginning of February. Imbolc is a time for purification and rededication. While the hours of daylight are increasing and early thaws may occur, it is not yet the time to embrace spring, but rather a time to continue to reflect, to plan, and to prepare for the coming season's activities. Our coven usually dedicates this ritual to the Goddess Brigid.¹⁶ Brigid is a Triple Goddess understood as having jurisdiction over the realms of inspiration or poetry, healing, and smithcraft. While Her three aspects are not normally conceived of in chronological terms, She is used in the following ritual to identify with the Maiden, Mother, Crone format of the Triple Goddess.

For the Imbolc celebration, the circle is cast in the normal manner, beginning with the consecration of the sacred space, the invocation of the elements, the statement of the purpose of the rite, and the invocation of the appropriate God(s) and Goddess(es). At a certain time in the rite, three candles—white, red, and black—are set, in that order, in a special holder on the altar. We have found this ritual to be most effective in performance when three of the High Priestesses (parts determined by us beforehand) stand behind the altar, each behind one of the candles, facing the other Witches in the circle. Each of the Witches holds a candle that has been specially prepared for this part of the rite before the circle is cast. The three priestesses standing behind the altar each represents an aspect of the Goddess Brigid and speaks to that dimension. For example, the performance may go like this:

First Priestess lights the white candle. "I am the Goddess of inspiration. Mine is the power of new beginnings. I breathe life into words, that they may take on new meanings and reflect new understanding. Light your candle here to partake of my gifts."

Second Priestess lights the red candle. "I am the Goddess of healing. Mine is the power to sustain, to nurture. My color is the red of the blood of life. I bring vitality, healing, and strength. Light your candle here to partake of my gifts."

Third Priestess lights the black candle. "I am the Goddess of smithcraft. Mine is the power to transform. All who come before my forge die and are made anew. I am the courage to bring an end so that new beginnings may occur. Light your candle here to partake of my gifts."

Each of the Witches comes to the altar with his or her candle and lights from one (or more) of the glowing tapers on the altar. Those who light their candle from the black taper hope to participate in the transformative powers of the third, or death, aspect and bring closure or ending to a (presumably negative) situation so that a new and more positive situation may be ushered in. The situation may be anything from asking for help in getting rid of old, bad habits in order to replace them with new, good habits, having the courage to end lingering negative or abusive relationships so that there can be room in one's life for new and loving relationships, or even asking assistance to bring an article, dissertation, or book project to its happy final closure. The emphasis in any case is the function of aspects or dimensions of deity as a key to their transformative powers and the accessibility of those powers for practitioners. The Witches' candles, having been lit in the flame of the desired taper, are blown out during the circle and taken home to be burned until consumed.

Death on the Wheel of the Year

To this point, I have examined the Wiccan understanding of death as a transformative process standing in cyclic relation to life. While this understanding has applications on both a symbolic and experiential level during initiation and during personal rituals of celebration and transformation for the individual Witch, it also has more literal applications in the form of rites for the dead.

Wiccans believe in reincarnation and that they will be united with their loved ones again in other lives. Many of us have no fear of personal physical death, understanding it as a part of the never ending cycle of life, death, and rebirth. We remember the story of the Descent of the Goddess and Her sacred promise to us: "Even Death is not eternal. Mine is the mystery of the Womb, that is the Cauldron of Rebirth. Enter into Me and know Me, and You will be free of all fear. For as life is but a journey into death, so death is but a passage back to life, and in Me the circle is ever turning." Each life is but a "turning on the Wheel," and nothing is ever actually lost.

Although we feel the truth of this deeply, we are nevertheless human, and so we grieve for the loss that occurs in our own lives when a loved one dies. Like many people, Wiccans participate in funerals to share their sadness and loss with others, to find healing, and to honor their dead. In terms of public funerals, Wiccans are necessarily constrained by both political and practical circumstances. Sometimes the person who dies may come from a family that is not Wiccan, or that may even be opposed to the Craft. In that case, Wiccans respect the wishes of the family and the Witches participate in whatever funeral practice the family deems appropriate, perhaps having later an additional, private ceremony with sympathetic friends and practitioners. If the community is quite conservative, it is unlikely that many Witches will be open practitioners or otherwise in a position to officiate at a public funeral as priests and priestesses. At this point, public Wiccan funerals are still a rarity in Ohio, and doubtless in other parts of the country.

Witches not only honor their dead at funerals, but within the context of the cycle of seasons on the Wheel of the Year. Nowhere can this be more directly seen than in the annual celebration of Samhain at the end of October. On the Wiccan calendar, Samhain is the third and final harvest festival, the first being the celebration of Lammas or Lughnasadh in early August. Samhain is associated with death more than any other sabbat. In the natural world, anything not harvested by Samhain is left to die in the fields as "food for the spirits" and for the animals. In the realm of the personal, Samhain is the season to reap the final harvest of work done during the year and to reflect upon both accomplishments (bounty) and failure (dearth) as lessons for change and future work.

Samhain is essentially a time of thanksgiving and sharing harvest bounty with others who are less fortunate. It is also a time of sharing food and companionship with the dead, a time of honoring relatives and friends who have died and gone to the Realm of the Dead to await being reborn. A central part of every Samhain ritual is the Feast of the Dead, the sharing of the harvest meal with dead loved ones. I will give a brief synopsis of the activities that relate directly to communion with the dead.¹⁷ This will also serve as an illustration of the ways in which Wiccans would structure a funeral.

The Samhain ritual begins with the casting of the circle in the customary way, except that another, smaller altar is set up in the north alongside of the usual altar. This second altar functions during the ritual as the Altar for the Dead. The Witches place on it an attractively arranged plate of harvest fruits and vegetables decorated with autumn leaves and end of season flowers. In addition, each Witch brings momentos of their dead friends and loved ones—a favorite piece of jewelry, a photograph, or perhaps even old letters—to establish a link to or the presence of their dead at the rite. The altar must also be large enough to hold individual offerings to the dead. While these offerings

can take any form, the most common include flowers, favorite foods or drink, crystals, feathers, or other pretty things which the honored dead may enjoy. Some of the more artistically daring of us share songs or poems written for the occasion, to be performed only in circle and shared only once—ever after remaining an offering to the dead.

The Feast of the Dead begins not long after the circle has been cast and the appropriate Gods and Goddesses have been invoked. As might be expected, these are deities with aspects that relate to death. The arrival of the dead is signaled by the movement of two of the High Priestesses to the north of the circle, behind the altars. These priestesses will ritually open the Gates of the Dead, which are located “behind the north wind,” inviting the spirits to enter the circle and join once more in the warmth, companionship, laughter, and, occasionally, tears of the living. The plate of harvest foods is blessed by the High Priest/ess and passed around the circle. Each Witch is encouraged to take something from the plate and pass it to the next person. When all have a part of the harvest plate in hand, wine and cakes are blessed and the Witches sit down to eat, drink, and talk of and with their dead.

This part of the ritual varies tremendously each time. There is no particular script or story that is followed or recited. There is only that which comes from the heart, which moves each Witch to speak or keep silent about the memories of their dead. Sometimes jokes or funny stories are told about the dead and everyone joins in laughter. At other times, we weep together, moved by the loss of a mother or sister, a dear teacher or friend. Sometimes a Witch may be moved to speak of the death of an enemy, or of a troubled relationship with a now deceased parent or spouse. During such occasions, it is customary to bring something that symbolizes the problematic relationship and burn it in the ritual fire at the center of the circle. The Samhain ritual then becomes a time of special healing for the living, a form of closure, a special sort of “release” both for and from the dead.

Conclusion: Turning on the Wheel

Many aspects of Wiccan rites and customs of death do not differ greatly from rites and customs practiced by other peoples. Certainly our understanding of death does not make us immune from the sorrows and regret that arise from the separation and loss of the immediate warmth and intimacy of friends and lovers. Samhain’s time of ritual sharing of our experiences of death—from the loss of treasured companionship to the bittersweet sort of regret that the loss of a parent with whom a troubled relationship was the “best” that could be said—weave and bind us together in a community of comfort and healing. It gives us a way to mourn our loss, to share our love, and to celebrate and honor the lives of our dead. This is

really not so very different from the custom of wakes found in other communities, or even a minister's invitation to the mourners to share stories about the deceased at a funeral service.

However, the most critical difference lies in the Wiccan understanding of death as a nonlinear and transformative process of death-*in-relation-to*-life. This conception of death lies at the very heart of both Wiccan worldview and religious praxis. It forms a central aspect or dimension of the divine. It lies at the heart of the ever-turning Wheel of the Year, with its passing seasons of death and life, harvest and renewal. It is what makes possible the transformation that takes place during initiation. Death is the ultimate transformation. For Wiccan practitioners, this understanding of death enables us to *use* death in a creative way, to use the powers of ultimate transformation to effect real changes in our lives—through our rites, through our practices, and through the stories we tell ourselves about the Turning of the Wheel.

Notes

I am greatly indebted to the journal's editors, my advisors Patrick Mullen and Thomas Kasulis, and my husband Eric Fralick for their helpful suggestions and constructive comments in the writing of this paper. However, any oversights or errors are mine alone.

¹ Witches use the term "circle" in various ways. It may mean the actual ritual space itself, a rite or ceremony which is being held—as in "are you coming to the circle?"—or the coven itself—as in "she's part of my circle."

² Some books that contain solid and useful information about rituals are those by Starhawk 1979, Farrar and Farrar 1981, 1984, Farrar, Farrar and Bone 1995, Valiente 1989, Clifton 1993, and Campanelli 1992, 1995.

³ For information about the larger Western mythological and magical tradition, often called the "Western Mystery Tradition," see especially Matthews and Matthews 1985.

⁴ Adler (1986[1979]:389) makes the comparison of the Craft to the mysteries of Demeter and Kore.

⁵ Kelly, both a scholar of religions and a Wiccan practitioner, maintains that Gardner literally created the Craft and that all Witches must necessarily trace their practices back to him. *Crafting the Art of Magic* (1991) is infamous in Craft circles not only for challenging the "ancient origins" of the Craft, but—as some see it—for misrepresenting Gardnerian practices and attacking its founder's sex life. Kelly's wild speculation about Gardner's sex life is mostly a distraction from the more serious flaws and leaps of logic in the book. While this is not the place to critique

Kelly's work fully, it may serve to situate the nature of the controversy within a scholarly context. Kelly makes some initially promising moves, demonstrating a sense of reflexivity and stressing that all religion is a dynamic, creative, ongoing process. Despite this initial thrust toward a more fruitful way of understanding the dynamic nature of religious tradition, he quickly becomes bogged down in a text-bound search for origins and actually employs a narrow and static view of tradition throughout his analysis. This becomes an absolute fixation on the written word—if it isn't written down, it isn't a tradition—completely ignoring the issues of orality and folk custom, as well as ritual praxis. This, along with the category mistake that ritual and written text are the same thing, ignores the dimension of ritual as dynamic, creative, and even spontaneous performance.

⁶ One source for information on Craft and NeoPagan national figures is Adler 1986[1979]. See also Harvey and Hardman 1995.

⁷ For information on the eight sabbats, see Farrar and Farrar 1984 or Campanelli 1992.

⁸ See especially Bonewits 1996. Bonewits has been a Druid priest for over 25 years and traces the flourishing of Druidry in America to the creation of the Reformed Druids of North America (RDNA) in 1963. He states that most American Druids trace themselves back to the RDNA via his group *A'r n Draí'ocht Fe'in*: A Druid Fellowship (ADF). The covenors who now explore Druidry are members of ADF.

⁹ The members of our group who are ethnically Slavic have noted interesting similarities between some old Slavic practices and those that have come to be classed among Wiccans as "Celtic." Curiously, this seems to reassure those of us who are Slavic that we "really are" following practices that have a basis in our own ethnic ancestry.

¹⁰ For a discussion of power, sacrality, and group dynamics within our coven during the early years of its formation, see Bado-Fralick 1989.

¹¹ Basic ritual tools include the athame, a black handled, double-bladed knife used for symbolic defense and to represent fire, but never used to cut physically *anything*; a wand for blessing objects and for the element of air; a chalice for water; a pentacle to represent the earth; and a white handled knife used in a practical fashion to cut or chop, such as herbs for incense. Additionally, Witches acquire a suitable incense burner, candle holders, and so forth. Information on the creation and use of ritual tools can be found in many books on the Craft. See especially Farrar and Farrar 1981, 1984 and Valiente 1978, 1989.

¹² The five pointed star, or pentagram, is a sacred symbol to many Witches and is often worn as jewelry or used decoratively on the altar. In symbolic importance, it would be equivalent to a Christian's wearing of the cross. In its "rightside up" position, the pentagram represents the cosmos: each point of the star is one of the four elements, with spirit on the top point as the overarching force guiding all. The

pentagram's misuse (sometimes in an upside down position) by media and filmmakers to represent suspicious, "occult" activity, such as Satanism, is deeply offensive to most of us. Wicca has nothing to do with Satanism, which many of us see as essentially an "offshoot" of Christianity.

¹³ In this regard, the work of scholar Ellis's "The Camp Mock-Ordeal: Theater as Life" serves as a particularly appropriate model for Wiccan ritual analysis. He focuses on the roles of both performers and audience in the "mock ordeals" and the reinforced feeling of community that he sees as the goal of a successful performance. His exploration of the liminality or ambiguity of the event—scary but not scary, real but not real—approaches nicely the tone of many modern Pagan performances, especially Wiccan initiation.

¹⁴ The mingling of metaphor and reality in religious practice is not limited to the Wiccan religion. The Catholic mystery of transubstantiation is a case in point. The host and wine are both *symbolically* the body and blood of Jesus and, through transubstantiation, *actually* the body and blood of Jesus.

¹⁵ Variations on the myth of the Descent of the Goddess can be found in several books on Wicca, including Starhawk 1979, Farrar and Farrar 1981, 1984, and Valiente 1978, 1989. This variant is quite close to the one we use in our circle.

¹⁶ See Farrar and Farrar 1981 for more information on lore connected with Brigit and the sabbat of Imbolc.

¹⁷ Examination of the performance of the Samhain ritual could itself be the topic of a lengthy paper.

References Cited

- Adler, Margot. 1986 [1979]. *Drawing Down the Moon: Witches, Druids, Goddess-Worshippers, and Other Pagans in America Today*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Bado-Fralick, Nikki. 1989. Changing the Face of the Sacred: Women Who Walk the Path of the Goddess. *Explorations*, 8(1):5-14 (reprinted in *Mezlim* 1991, 2(3):24-29).
- Bonewits, Issac. 1996. The Druid Revival in Modern America. In *The Druid Renaissance: The Voice of Druidry Today*, ed. Philip Carr-Gomm, pp. 73-88. London: Thorsons.
- Campanelli, Pauline. 1995. *Rites of Passage: The Pagan Wheel of Life*. St. Paul, Minnesota: Llewellyn Publications.
- _____. 1992. *Ancient Ways: Reclaiming Pagan Traditions*. St. Paul, Minnesota: Llewellyn Publications.

- Clifton, Chas S., ed. 1993. *Witchcraft Today, Book Two: Modern Rites of Passage*. St. Paul, Minnesota: Llewellyn Publications.
- Eliade, Mircea. 1958. *Rites and Symbols of Initiation: The Mysteries of Birth and Rebirth*, trans. Willard Trask. New York: Harper and Row.
- Ellis, Bill. 1981. The Camp Mock-Ordeal: Theater as Life. *Journal of American Folklore* 94(374):486-505.
- Farrar, Janet and Stewart Farrar. 1984. *The Witches' Way: Principles, Rituals, and Beliefs of Modern Witchcraft*. London: Robert Hale.
- _____. 1981. *Eight Sabbats for Witches*. London: Robert Hale.
- Farrar, Janet, Stewart Farrar, and Gavin Bone. 1995. *The Pagan Path*. Custer, Washington: Phoenix Publishing.
- Gardner, Gerald B. 1959. *The Meaning of Witchcraft*. New York: Magickal Child.
- _____. 1954. *Witchcraft Today*. New York: Magickal Child.
- Gennep, Arnold van. 1960 [1909]. *The Rites of Passage*, trans. Monika B. Vizedom and Gabrielle L. Caffee. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Harvey, Graham and Charlotte Hardman. 1995. *Paganism Today: Wiccans, Druids, the Goddess and Ancient Earth Traditions for the Twenty-First Century*. London: Thorsons.
- Kelly, Aidan A. 1991. *Crafting the Art of Magic, Book I: A History of Modern Witchcraft, 1939-1964*. St. Paul, Minnesota: Llewellyn Publications.
- Lincoln, Bruce. 1981. *Emerging from the Chrysalis: Studies in Rituals of Women's Initiation*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.
- Matthews, John and Caitlin Matthews. 1985. *The Western Way: A Practical Guide to the Western Mystery Tradition* (2 volumes). London: Arkana Press.
- Myerhoff, Barbara. 1982. Rites of Passage: Process and Paradox. In *Celebration: Studies in Festivity and Ritual*, ed. Victor Turner, pp. 109-35. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press.
- Starhawk. 1979. *The Spiral Dance: A Rebirth of the Ancient Religion of the Great Goddess*. San Francisco: Harper & Row.

Turner, Victor. 1987 [1967]. *Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in Rites of Passage*. In *Betwixt and Between: Patterns of Masculine and Feminine Initiation*, eds. Louise Carus Mahdi, Steven Foster, and Meredith Little, pp. 3-19. La Salle, Illinois: Open Court.

_____. 1969. *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press.

Valiente, Doreen. 1989. *The Rebirth of Witchcraft*. London: Robert Hale.

_____. 1978. *Witchcraft for Tomorrow*. London: Robert Hale.