

**A Brief Introduction to Pagan Traditions in America**  
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## **Roots in Ancient Cultures**

The many present-day American religious communities clustered under the name Paganism have roots in ancient cultures from all over the world. "Pagan" originally meant "country dweller," implying a life lived off the land, close to the seasons and cycles of nature. Today, the many congregations and communities of "Neo-Pagans" in America, different as they may be, would all describe their tradition as an Earth Religion, in which all life is seen to be sacred and interconnected. Many American Pagans are active participants in the environmental movement, seeking to live in a way that honors the Earth and the cycles and balances of nature.

With the twentieth-century resurgence of Paganism has come an attempt to reconstruct, historically and sometimes creatively, the long history of Pagan religious traditions. Through the lens of twentieth-century concerns, modern-day Pagans have made a serious attempt to reconstruct the history of the Earth-centered traditions maintained in ancient times without written records or scriptures. With a keen interest in ecology and in the Earth, Pagan movements pay special attention to the many feminine faces of the Divine. Both women and men are involved in Paganism, but the tradition is especially open to women taking on leadership roles.

The modern Pagan resurgence has been stimulated by highly speculative and imaginative research and writing. The work of folklorist Margaret Murray, beginning in the 1920s, caught the imagination of many with its theories of persistent Goddess worship and Pagan tradition in the Christianized West. In 1948, Robert Graves published *The White Goddess*, a massive compilation of theories about the worldwide presence of the Great Goddess. In the 1950s, the repeal of British laws prohibiting books on witchcraft allowed Gerald Gardner to publish the story of his initiation into a hereditary lineage of Witches. His work sparked a wave of Gardnerian covens in England and, through the work of Gardnerian Raymond Buckland, in the United States. While most doubt his claim of a continuous ancient lineage, he did inspire many people to practice ritual and follow a Pagan spiritual path.

Though academically flawed in their attempts to establish evidence for the continuity of ancient Paganism into modern times, the work of these writers was nonetheless influential in sparking a revival of Paganism in the West. Margot Adler, discussing these works in her examination of modern Paganism, *Drawing Down the Moon* (1979), states that most revivalists in North America today "accept the universal Old Religion more as a metaphor than as a literal reality--a spiritual truth more than a geographic one." Since the 1970s, there has been an explosion of Pagan writings, both in books and periodicals.

In America, the publication of Starhawk's *The Spiral Dance: A Rebirth of the Ancient Religion of the Great Goddess* in the same year as Margot Adler's book brought a wealth of information about Paganism to the public. *Drawing Down the Moon* documents the history, growth and range of contemporary Pagan religion, and *The Spiral Dance* explains the feminist philosophy and practice of Wicca, the Old English term for what has been called "witchcraft." While outsiders today, as in times past, have misunderstood witchcraft to be a malevolent practice, Wiccans use the term to connote the Goddess and Earth-centered practices of spirituality and healing.

Pagans of today's Earth Religion look back to early agricultural communities that experienced directly the

forces of nature and closely connected to the cycle of seasons. All over the world and throughout history, people have performed rituals to express this connection. Rites of birth and death, planting, harvest and thanksgiving are among the most ancient human religious expressions, involving singing, dancing and feasting. In the West, ancient practices connected to the cycle of life and the seasons of the year preceded Christianity: for instance, in England and Ireland, ancient stone circles were built and used in worship as early as the third millennium BCE.

The Earth, so central to these practices, was often considered a Goddess--generative and life-giving--and worshipped by people in many cultures. Martha Ann and Dorothy Myers Imel's book, *Goddesses in World Mythology* (1993), lists more than one thousand names for Earth Goddesses. There are as many for mother Goddesses and nature Goddesses. The destroyer Goddess, also almost universal, has around four hundred different names.

The ancient small figurine known as the Venus of Willendorf, named for the area of Austria in which she was found, dates as early as 22,000 BCE, in the Paleolithic era. Its ample female body may be an artifact of one of the earliest forms of worship. Images from much later in human history are more plentiful: those of the Minoan snake goddess, for instance, date to 1600 BCE. In Egypt, from as far back as the eleventh century BCE were found images of priestesses playing frame drums and worshipping the Egyptian goddess Hathor. Most ancient cultures honored a multiplicity of female and male deities, and different traditions of Goddess worship may have influenced each other, creating many similarities in the development of sacred images, along with much specificity in each tradition. Today, replicas of figures such as the Venus of Willendorf are found on the altars of America's new Pagan practitioners.

The derogatory use of the term "pagan" did not begin until the fourth century CE, when Christianity came to power in the Roman Empire and non-Christian religions were gradually outlawed. However, Christianity seems to have coexisted with Paganism in the villages and the countryside for many centuries, through a process of syncretism. Pagan shrines were installed with Christian images and later, had Christian churches built right over them. Popular Pagan festivals and holy days were taken over and adapted to Christianity, with Goddesses gradually incorporated into the world of Christian saints.

Despite these forms of syncretism, the Christian tradition explicitly proclaimed Pagan religious belief and practices to be false. The decentralized, pantheistic Pagan worship was viewed as heretical to the Christian understanding of God's oneness. As the Christian church grew in power, it tried to stop what it could not assimilate: Pagan practices were displaced from the public sphere, although some must have continued, privately, and in secret.

In the 14th century, the practice of Pagan traditions called "witchcraft" became defined as a crime of heresy, punishable by death. The rubric of witchcraft included a wide range of practices seen as magic, sorcery, even satanism. Herbal healing, which had long been practiced by women, was also suppressed as witchcraft. Between the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries, the burning of Western European women for the crime of witchcraft was widespread. While men were also convicted and burned, 85% of the victims were women who were tortured into confessions. Estimates of the number who died during the "witch-craze" range from 100,000 to several million. Homosexual men were also burned; the derogatory name 'faggot' comes from the bundles of wood used to fuel the fires. Rural communities experienced the arrival of inquisitors and witch hunters, and witnessed the public execution of neighbors. To protest was considered heretical, and with the possible result that the protester joined the victims burning at the stake. The American colonies of the 17th century saw outbursts of violence against those accused of witchcraft: in 1692 in Salem, Massachusetts, 12 women and 7 men were hanged as witches.

Women who were healers were particularly vulnerable to accusations of witchcraft. At that time, medicine

was in the process of being professionalized--to the exclusion of these female practitioners. Eventually even the practice of midwifery, long the domain of women, was deemed illegal if the midwife had no formal institutional training, and access to these institutions was available only to men. The use of women's skills, often the only ones available to the rural poor, was outlawed. Some healers persisted in their work at the risk of their lives.

Violent persecution did much to stop ancient Pagan practices. Today there is a lively academic debate over whether any traditions could have survived in a direct lineage of practice from medieval to modern times. How much has been lost, how much went underground, and how much can be reclaimed through ritual are all areas of exploration. Today, many are rediscovering and renewing ancient religious ways, obscured during the development of both Christianity and Judaism. While some Pagans search for ancient roots in myth, history and archeology, most are not concerned about a direct lineage to centuries past, and search within themselves and nature for a connection to the Divine.

Modern Paganism includes a wide variety of practitioners of nature religions, such as Druids, Eco-feminists, Gaians, and Wiccans or Witches. The broad spectrum of Wicca is also known as Witchcraft or, simply, the Craft. Among the many Wiccans today are Gardnerian, Minoan, Shamanic, Alexandrian, Faerie, Eclectic, Dianic, and Hereditary traditions. While many people define their path as Pagan, others feel the term is too broad. Some prefer to be called Neo-Pagans to acknowledge that they are adapting ancient ways to a contemporary context. Many Wiccans prefer the word Witch because of its historical connections to the wise women and folk healers who were persecuted, while others dislike the name because of the negative stereotyping it carries. Some Pagans claim ancient lineages, others freely chose new spiritual paths. Many do some of both.

There is no single standard, text, or scripture to which Pagans look for authority, yet the many strands of Paganism have a number of common foundations. The Divine is not separate from the Earth, but can be found in nature. The Earth is sacred, and human connectedness to nature deeply valued. The yearly cycle of the seasons, and the corresponding cycle of human life from birth to maturity to decline and death, is central to Pagan ritual. In most Pagan traditions, the Goddess is revered among the many aspects and faces of the Divine. Dianic practitioners tend to worship her exclusively. But whether as God or Goddess, the many faces of the Divine are not in conflict with one another. Other Pagans worship Goddess and God together, and some Pagans believe that since the Divine Spirit infuses all of life, there is no need for specific forms or images. Finally, Pagans acknowledge the Divinity within each person, which means that Pagan groups tend to be egalitarian. Each individual can experience and manifest the Divine directly, and each participant contributes to the power of a ritual.

Pagans are becoming more open in their practices in the twentieth century. There are public gatherings in many cities, and churches can be found in the Yellow Pages and community church directories. In 1992, thousands of Witches from around the world gathered on Gallows Hill in Salem, Massachusetts for a ritual commemorating the three-hundredth anniversary of the execution of Witches there. The town has erected a memorial to the victims.

In 1993, a number of Pagan groups participated in the Parliament of the World's Religions held in Chicago. Through panels and presentations, American Pagans were able to explain their faith in their own terms, answer questions, and disarm negative stereotyping. A large Pagan ritual was held in Chicago's Grant Park, with MotherTongue, a Pagan choral group from the EarthSpirit community, performing. Hundreds of participants came both the Parliament and from the public. The Pagan presence, while difficult for some religious groups at the Parliament, seemed to represent a new level of openness in the Pagan contribution to the American religious landscape.

## Current American Resurgence

Wicca is one of the major categories of contemporary American Paganism. The term comes from the Old English "wicce," pronounced "witche," which referred to the "Old Religion"--Witchcraft or the Craft. Many Wiccans in America today deliberately choose to call themselves "Witches," claiming the very name for which women and men of centuries past were persecuted.

Contemporary Wiccans or Witches cope with many stereotypes. In the popular mind, they are frightful, greenish old ladies with warts, or perhaps buxom, dangerous young women, who dress in black, have cats, wear pointy hats, concoct manipulative magic spells, and deliver hexes. In reality, they may in fact wear black and love cats, but they also may wear all the colors of the rainbow and prefer dogs. They come from all walks of life, and might be accountants, lawyers, or social workers. They live in the city, in the country, and in every state of the U. S.

During the last few decades, the U.S. Pagan community has multiplied dramatically, possibly quadrupling in size in the last fifteen years. Many Pagans attribute this growth to the attractiveness of a life-affirming path in an alienated society. Some people are drawn to Pagan ways because of the celebrations of the seasonal holidays, the participatory rituals, and the prospect of a living relationship to the elements of nature--the earth, air, fire, water and spirit. This is especially attractive for those who seek spiritual grounding for their growing environmental consciousness.

Modern Paganism also attracts many because of its reverence for the Goddess or Goddesses. "Goddess Spirituality" is one of the fastest growing movements in American religious life today, and Paganism is a strong contributor to it. Much contemporary Neo-Paganism contains a strong feminist perspective: many women came to this spiritual path through the women's consciousness raising movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s, when communities of women began to search for and, in some cases, to create a woman-affirming spirituality. Through experimentation as well as research into ancient mythology, women found that a connection with Goddess imagery was empowering and concretely helpful to their lives. In Pagan circles, they also found many opportunities for spiritual leadership.

Since Paganism is a grassroots religious movement, it is difficult to study comprehensively. None of the standard religious surveys includes Paganism, though a Pagan Census Project is now conducting statistical research to document both the size and diversity of this path. Pagans do not proselytize, and while classes and retreats may introduce people to the path, the initiative is with each individual. Some Pagans may also be part of another religious community, perhaps a church or synagogue. The source of growth in Paganism is through small groups--variously called groves, nests, covens and circles--forming on their own to cultivate a spiritual connection with Nature. The intimacy of small groups lends itself to real contact among the practitioners, which is a strength of this religious path.

Among the large public rituals is the San Francisco celebration of Samhain, the Pagan New Year, on October 31, which culminates in a ritual spiral dance led by the Reclaiming Collective. In 1994, over fifteen hundred people attended Samhain and more than one hundred and fifty participated as volunteers. The celebration was held in a huge indoor pavilion in San Francisco's Mission District, and structured so everyone could participate actively. The ritual began with "casting a circle," creating a circular sacred space within which people gathered in three smaller circles. Led by the priests and priestesses, the ritual moved through all three circles. They invoked the spirits of the four directions and the center, and then the spirits of God and Goddess. In this public ritual, as in many private ones, paganism guides people through the difficult passages of life: all those present were invited to remember and mourn their beloved dead and follow the priestess on a meditative trance-journey to encounter them. This was followed by the spiral dance, in which all participants held hands, weaving into the center, out to the periphery and back into the

center.

Some Pagans are open about their religious life, sponsoring public rituals in urban parks, attending week-long annual gatherings, and supporting numerous Pagan non-profit religious organizations. Many more, however, still keep their faith and practices private. Although the "burning times" are long past, misunderstanding and persecution continue. Many Pagans fear repercussions on the job or at their children's schools if their religious practices become known. Firings are not uncommon, and the threat of losing one's children in custody disputes is everpresent. Many work with public information to help dispel negative stereotypes; some groups are willing to talk to local churches and schools about their beliefs. Accurate information is seen by many to be the best investment in a peaceful and free future, while at the same time Pagans are involved in legal work to protect their right to religious freedom.

While in the past there has been a sense of mystery surrounding Pagan gatherings, today more groups are becoming publicly known in their local communities. There are many forms of Pagan networking. In many communities, a local Pagan supply store selling herbs, candles, and books also serves as a social center, where people meet, read flyers, exchange information, and publicize their gatherings, ranging from large holiday celebrations on the solstices and equinoxes to small, monthly full moon rituals.

Publications are an important resource for the far flung Pagan community. The Circle Guide to Pagan Groups, first published in 1979, lists hundreds of groups throughout the United States and facilitates access to them. A newsletter like Circle Network News of Circle Sanctuary in Wisconsin, provides an important sense of community for those, widely separated in their daily lives. Increasingly the Internet also links individuals and groups together and provides a forum for dialogue and exchange. There are many Pagan home pages on the World Wide Web. Information lines include an 800 number for information on American Druid groups. Today, as national and global organizations create bridges of communication, Pagans experience far less isolation than in the past. And as information on their traditions becomes available, they anticipate the diminishing of negative stereotyping as well.

Some Pagan groups have become organized at the national level, with branches across the United States connecting individuals with groups, providing training for practitioners and clergy, and doing public relations work. Most of them hold large annual gatherings, often week-long outdoor conferences or festivals that bring together the dispersed community. Perhaps the oldest of these is the Church of All Worlds, which began in 1962, incorporated in 1968 and now has groups across the nation. The Covenant of the Goddess, incorporated in 1975, is organized at the national level and dedicated to training Pagan clergy, with branches in Europe and Australia as well. The Covenant of Unitarian Universalist Pagans, or CUUPS, started in 1986, is now a national organization affiliated with the Unitarian Universalist Church. It represents a ground-breaking initiative to situate a Pagan fellowship within the context of an inclusive, truth-seeking church.

Many people who come to Paganism participate first as curious observers--part of the audience, at large public rituals. Some may feel alienated from mainstream values and find in Paganism a form of rebellion, since in Paganism conformity is not a unifying value. Some say skeptics make the best Witches. In time, however, many who have become Pagans recognize this path as something already familiar, and coming to Paganism is for them a kind of homecoming. While there are some hereditary practitioners brought up in the Craft, most find their way to Pagan circles as adults, though children are welcome at many rituals, and future generations may well see many more young people brought up as Pagans from birth.

## **Priestesses of the Goddess**

The feminist movement, beginning in the 1960s, provided an important impetus for the growth of contemporary Paganism. Over the course of the last thirty years or so, women began exploring religious forms that were empowering to them. Two modern movements grew out of this exploration: the Eco-feminist movement, which emphasizes the relation of environmental issues to the ancient honoring of the Earth and nature, and the Goddess Spirituality movement, which emphasizes feminine language and images for the Divine. Both movements have grown rapidly and been influential in shaping new American Paganism, which women have found particularly attractive for its religious perspective that honors the earth, respects the body, and emphasizes the interconnection of all things.

Through the exploration of ancient mythology, women also found connection with Goddess imagery to be empowering and concretely helpful in their lives. The diversity of Goddesses includes images that are powerful, nurturing, and protective images as well as wrathful, destructive, and warrior-like. According to those in Wiccan and other Pagan traditions, these images of the Divine have enabled women to embrace and honor the multiple aspects of themselves. For example, the Wiccan Triple Goddess embodies the Maiden, the Mother and the Crone, sanctifying each stage of a woman's life and knowledge. The Maiden is honored for her physical strength and initiative, the Mother for her generativity and nurturance, and the Crone, the wise old woman in the third and final phase of her life, for her sagacity and endurance. As a Crone, a woman may offer guidance to less experienced women and provide a positive model for the middle-aged, celebrating the wisdom of the old in a society focused on youth.

In the Pagan movement every woman can be a leader, for every woman embodies the power and creativity of the Goddess. Many feminist covens use a model of rotating leadership as they develop alternative models of power. Like many populist reform movements, the feminist movement begins with lived experience and strongly affirms that "The personal is political." The feminist Neo-Pagan movement goes on to insist that the personal and political are also spiritual. Many women are drawn to Paganism for precisely this, as it offers positive self-image, and calls for putting spiritual ideals into practice.

Pagan priestesses are women who have practiced a Pagan spiritual path for some time and have trained in group ritual. Some groups recognize High Priestesses, who have an additional level of training and experience. Priestesses may work on a local level, and might be well-known regionally or nationally. A look at several prominent Pagan priestesses today shows the range of their experiences.

Among the most well known American priestesses today is Starhawk, a writer, ritualist, activist, and teacher based in the San Francisco Bay area. Her 1979 book *The Spiral Dance* (see introduction) an instructive manual of the practice of Wiccan ritual, is considered a primary text on the Craft. She has also published *Dreaming the Dark: Magic, Sex, and Politics* (1982), *Truth or Dare* (1987) and a novel, *The Fifth Sacred Thing* (1993). She also works with the Reclaiming Collective, dedicated to "reclaiming" a spirituality that is both feminist and political. Her political activism has been a model for others on this path: she has protested the nuclear development of Diablo Canyon and led rituals for gay rights activists preparing to do civil disobedience in Washington, D.C. She was arrested for her role in trying to protect old-growth forest in British Columbia. As a leader, she works to enable others to find their own inner authority and ways of leadership.

Selena Fox is another nationally known spokesperson for Paganism and a leading advocate of religious freedom. She is the founder and priestess of Circle Sanctuary in Mt. Horeb, Wisconsin--a nature preserve, community, and organization offering a wide array of resources and services to Pagans. A peace advocate for thirty years, Selena travels to give lectures and seminars, and at home at Circle Sanctuary does private counseling and full-time ministry. Circle Sanctuary sponsors the Pagan Academic Network, the quarterly newspaper Circle Network News, and the Lady Liberty League.

Phyllis Curott is a lawyer living in New York City and a Wiccan priestess who officiates at large public Wiccan rituals, both in New York and around the country. As an attorney, she won the right for the Wiccan clergy of the Covenant of the Goddess to perform legally binding marriage ceremonies in New York. Beyond teaching introductory classes in Wicca, she and a circle of elders from the Minoan Fellowship have formed teaching circles where novice practitioners have the benefit of working with experienced practitioners. As the past First Officer of the Covenant of the Goddess, Phyllis Curott represented this group at the Parliament of the World's Religions in 1993, where she lead a ritual for more than five hundred participants and hosted an interfaith dialogue on the Divine Feminine. She also works internationally on issues concerning women's spirituality as a member of the United Nations Non-Governmental Organizations' Commission on the Status of Women. She is working towards establishing an international women's interfaith council. But while working publicly she also remains rooted in her own coven.

Born in Hungary in 1940, Zsusanna Budapest is a hereditary Witch who was born into a long line of traditional healers. In the 1970s she brought the double heritage of feminism and Witchcraft together to create the Women's Spirituality movement. She became the High Priestess of the Susan B. Anthony Coven #1 in Los Angeles, the first visible women's coven in the United States. Her arrest and conviction for reading Tarot cards served to politicize the local community, which fought for nine years to overturn the unconstitutional laws declaring divination illegal. She is also well known for her political activism on behalf of women, and her controversial use of spells to stop rapists. Her first book, *The Holy Book of Women's Mysteries*, (1989) a primer on Witchcraft, remains her most radical work; more recent books attempt to reframe the concept of the Goddess for application to mundane modern life.

Laurie Cabot was initiated into Witchcraft at the age of sixteen, but not until she moved to Salem, Massachusetts later in life did the negative rhetoric about Witches compelled her to speak out publicly as a Witch. She took vows to wear ceremonial clothing as an emblem of her spiritual path, and has fought for the freedom to wear black robes and Wiccan jewelry on the streets of Salem in relative safety. In 1986, Cabot founded the Witches' League for Public Awareness to re-educate the public. She also works with the Temple of Nine Wells, offering rituals to the public, and is the author of several books, including *Power of the Witch: A Witches Guide to Her Craft* (1989). Her current writing focuses on the commonplace use of magical and psychic techniques by women.

While women such as these Pagan leaders are active in the public realm, many more women are leaders in private ritual settings. In the Portland, Maine Feminist Spiritual Community, founded in 1980, the women rotate the work of leading ritual among themselves. All women are considered capable of creating, organizing, and taking the lead in ritual, with help from others when needed. The sharing of leadership is part of the empowerment that ritual offers; the Goddess is manifest in each individual woman.

## What Do Pagans Do?

Paganism is a lively ritual tradition, celebrating life and expressing reverence for the Earth through dancing, drumming, singing and chanting. Its ritual vocabulary includes terms such as "casting a circle" to create a sacred space, "raising energy" to invoke spiritual power, "grounding" to connect individual energy to the Earth, and "making magic" to achieve spiritual transformation. Wiccans often meet in small groups called covens, but ritual can also be done alone. Most rituals have at least one altar, and some large ceremonies may have altars for each of the four directions and the center.

Building an altar for oneself--a place for the Divine, and a sacred workplace for performing rituals--is one of the first ways a Pagan can begin spiritual practice. Many Pagans have an altar in their homes, perhaps in a corner of the bedroom. Pagans with yards, or those who live in rural settings, often build altars outside. The altar may contain natural objects, crystals, photographs of the beloved dead, ritual tools, and

objects of beauty, or personal power. At the altar one might invoke the Goddess, enter into meditation, create an herbal charm, or undertake a personal cleansing or healing ritual. Gazing at an altar is a reminder of one's spiritual life, and contemplating beauty at an altar can lead to spiritual insight.

Pagans perform a wide variety of spiritual exercises on a daily basis, though probably no two Pagans practice their faith exactly the same way. As is the case in all religious traditions, some people have a more active ritual life than others--some take part only in the great seasonal festivals, such as the summer solstice, most though realize that its meaning is immensely enhanced by regular daily spiritual practice. One's personal practice can be simple as lighting a candle at the dark of the moon and looking for visions on the surface of a bowl of water. Spoken intention is understood to be very powerful: Pagans believe that honoring the power of the spoken word must be maintained in daily life and not only in the ritual context. Respect for this principle leads many Pagans to choose their words carefully.

Among the important forms of daily practice is "grounding" meditation, which connects the individual with the energy of the Earth and helps to maintain balance and prevent exhaustion. Another is the practice of divination, which may take the simple form of asking about the day ahead, or inquiring about a specific question. Some Pagans consult astrology, others use Tarot cards, Norse runes, and pendulums as forms of divination. As a daily practice, some Pagans simply meditate on the sacred objects on the altar. In general, Pagans are attentive to nature throughout the course of the day. Since the Divine is embodied in all of nature, there are many ways for the Goddess to reveal herself.

Many Pagans wear sacred jewelry. To encircle oneself with a chain of gold or silver or a colored cord is viewed as an act of self protection. Pagan symbols of spiritual significance include the pentacle, an interlaced five-pointed star used for meditation, generally made out of silver and worn on a chain around the neck. The five-pointed star is pointed up so that it aligns with an upright human body, with points for the head, arms and legs. This symbol is life-affirming, not to be confused with the inverted pentacle favored by Satanists.

Pagan High Holidays are concerned with turning the wheel of the year, and there are many occasions for rituals. Pagans attune themselves to the processes of nature involved with each season, whether by celebrating springtime at Beltane with the Maypole dance or grieving the loss of loved ones at Samhain in October. There are wedding rituals called handfastings, and other rites of passage, such as initiations, namings, houseblessings, coronings, divorces, and funerals. Many of these rites involve purification, grounding, casting a sacred circle, invoking spiritual powers and deities, and raising energy. The energy raised in ritual may be celebratory, or more specifically focused upon the work of healing or transformation. At the end of a rite there is a formal thanking of the powers, usually followed by the sharing of food.

Most Pagans do not celebrate within a specific temple or building, though there are a few Pagan temple buildings in the United States. On the whole, they prefer to worship out of doors, or else in private homes and rented halls. Wherever they gather, they create sacred space by "casting a circle." This might be a physical circle drawn on the ground or floor, but more often is a spiritual circle drawn with a tool such as a ritual knife (athame), a wand, or a feather. Circles heighten the sense of sacredness and invite participants into a new space and a new consciousness. The circle also serves as boundary and container within which the spiritual energy will be generated.

Chanting is another important part of ritual. In Wiccan tradition, a large repertoire of short verses are sung or chanted in rituals and celebrations, that are easy for all to learn and join in on. The singing of rounds and verses often takes on a life of its own. Chanting is one way that energy is raised to seal the work of the ritual, and allows participants to enter a trance state that offers increased spiritual awareness.

The term "magic" is often associated with Wiccan ritual, and many Pagan forms of ritual and prayer are called magic both by outsiders and practitioners. While outsiders might associate magic with the dazzling or mysterious work of a magician or with the manipulation of powers for malevolent ends, Pagans tend to see it as the ritualization of one's religious intentions, for some similar to prayer. It is not about cultivating supernatural powers as much as aligning oneself with the powers that already exist. Phyllis Curott of the Covenant of the Goddess puts it this way, "Wiccan spiritual practices, often referred to as 'magic,' are in fact ancient techniques for changing consciousness at will in order to better perceive and participate in Divine reality."

The making of herbal charms is an example of the spiritual intention of magic. A solo practitioner might select a group of small objects and herbs to express his or her specific intentions for transformation or healing. Meditating upon the contribution of each item, the practitioner will tie the objects and herbs into a piece of cloth or a leaf, paying attention to all aspects of the charm, including the contents, the color of material and thread, the decorations, and of course the intention. The charm will be then ritually charged. Wiccans are bound by what they call the "Law of Three," meaning that any energy they direct outwards will return back to them threefold. This has the effect of eliminating abuses of power. Some practitioners of Wicca also believe that magic has a psychological component. For instance, a practitioner who has made an herbal charm to attract love will be open and receptive to a loving relationship. Making the charm helps her gain clarity about what she wants and what her own barriers may be.

In ritual, Pagans work with the directions of the compass--North, East, South, West, and Center--corresponding in to the elements of Earth, Air, Fire, Water, and Spirit. In contemporary Witchcraft, the North corresponds to the Earth, the physical body, and the power of deep healing, while the East corresponds to the powers of air, the power of mind, inspiration, communication, and the dawn of new beginnings. The South corresponds to the power of fire, the power of courage, passion, and transformation, and the West to water and the emotions. The Center represents spirit, or a unifying still point. The basic tools linked with each direction and element are the pentacle, the ritual knife or athame, the wand, the chalice, and the cauldron, all used in varying ways to concentrate, focus, and direct energy.

Ritual involves the use of all senses. Through movement, dance and rhythm participants are encouraged to move energy through their bodies. Smell is engaged through garlands of flowers, oils and essences. Hearing and sight are engaged through chanting or drumming, and through the beauty of the altars, the beauty of nature, and the beauty of the participants. While some Pagans wear black, many have brightly colored ritual garb, usually loose, flowing, and comfortable, and embroidered or painted with magical symbols. Most rituals end with a feast that is both pragmatic and celebratory. Whether honoring the Earth's gifts in the form of fruit, bread, cake, or lasagna, Pagans are also grounding themselves to the Earth after the work of the ritual.

## **Wheels, Cycles and Spirals**

Pagans consider the calendar year a wheel, its seasons following the agricultural cycle, and celebrate the annual movements of the light of the sun and moon, whose forces are as powerful as the ocean tides, though not as easily recognized. As the moon and the sun move through the seasons, the high, low, and midpoints of their cycles are marked by eight holidays called Sabbats--the winter and summer solstices, the spring and fall equinoxes and the four mid-points between them called Imbolc, Beltane, Lughnasad, and Samhain in the Celtic tradition. Many groups also meet on the monthly full and new moons.

Pagans attune themselves to the rhythms of the natural world and let the seasons of waxing and waning,

of birth, growth, death and renewal reverberate in their lives. The interconnectedness of all life is seen and celebrated in many ways. All life forms are connected to each other, and death is connected with rebirth. Growing old is an integral part of the life cycle. The mystery of life in all its diversity is respected. Because the individual microcosm is connected to the larger macrocosm, Pagans locate their spiritual life not only in the world of nature, but within themselves.

The ritual calendars of many American pagans today are based on old Anglo-Saxon and Celtic traditions. The winter solstice, known as Yule, is celebrated between December 20 and 23, the time of year when the nights are longest and the days shortest, and also the inception of the light that will begin to grow as days lengthen once again. Some Pagans stay up the entire night to greet the returning light, described by some as the Birth of the Sun God. The spring equinox, which takes place on or around March 21, is named for the Germanic Goddess Ostara, and celebrates the balance between the light and the dark. The summer solstice, called Litha, is the inverse of the winter solstice. The day of the longest light, June 21, often celebrated with all-night vigils and bonfires, is the crest of the summer and the forerunner of the harvest. The fall equinox, called Mabon, takes place on or around September 21, again a balance of dark and light. It is the Pagan thanksgiving harvest in many traditions.

Evenly spaced between these are the four other festival days. Imbolc is celebrated on or near February 2, a day in Celtic traditions dedicated to Brigid, the Irish triple Goddess of smith-craft, poetry and healing. Christianity imposed its holiday of Candlemas upon this ancient celebration, and, as in ancient times, candles are often lit on this festival today. It is a time of new beginnings, a time to make aims and formulate desires for the year to come, and a favored holiday for initiations.

The springtime festival of Beltane is celebrated around the first of May. In celebrating the abundant flowers and generative energy of springtime, Pagans also honor the energy of sexuality and the fruitfulness of union. Dancing in a circle while weaving the strands of the Maypole, they make evident through ritual the interconnection of all life. The dance is colorful and exuberant, with garlands of flowers and ribbons, songs and laughter. Following the Maypole dance, there is feasting, with fresh fruit and loaves of bread decked with ribbons, and baskets of flowers are often exchanged.

On the first of August is the summer harvest festival, Lughnasad, also known as Lammas, the wake of the Sun King. In one myth cycle, the Sun King comes into being at the winter solstice, achieves union with the Goddess at Beltane, and dies at the summer solstice so that the wheel of life can continue. This late summer harvest festival is his wake, at which fruits of the harvest will be honored and shared.

Samhain is observed on the eve of November first, the Pagan and Wiccan "New Year." This, like others, is an old Celtic festival, marking the beginning of winter and of the new year. Samhain and the eve of Samhain were widely observed even after the Christianization of the British Isles: Christian observance of All Saints Day on Samhain and All Hallows Eve (Halloween) on the eve of Samhain created a new context for this popular observance.

The beginning of the winter, the time of death and decay in the wheel of the year, is also said to be the time of year when the veil between the worlds of the living and the dead is the thinnest and most permeable. The night of Samhain, like Halloween, is believed to be the one night when the living are in closest communication with the spirits of the dead. The ghosts, spirits, and masks that abound in the popular celebrations of Halloween derive from the ancient belief that the spirits of the dead can become manifest in the material world on this night. For American Pagans today, meditations on loved ones who have passed away are then most powerful, and meditative trance-journeys to communicate with the beloved deceased are part of many Samhain rituals. Like other New Year observances, Samhain is also a time of divination for the new spiritual year ahead. This is the best night of the year for scrying--gazing into

the surface of water in a dark bowl, or into a crystal, a mirror, or a flame where images can be seen.

In addition to the solar calendar, Pagans also follow a lunar calendar, generally gathering at the full moon and the new or dark of the moon. Pagans affirm that energy can be drawn down from the moon and from the Goddess symbolized by it and that, this energy can be brought into a practitioner or channeled directly into a magical working. The cyclical beauty and mystery of the moon has been admired for centuries and for American Pagans, the rhythm of ritual life is still lived in this lunar perspective. The full moon is the time of fullness, of maximum increase, considered the best time for raising energy, consecrating spells, or for affirming bounty. The dark of the moon is the time for initiating a new beginning, or for exploring hidden matters.

As Pagans celebrate the wheel of the year, so do they celebrate the wheel of life, with its phases of birth, initiation, consummation, repose, and death. In some Pagan traditions a blessing and naming ceremony, called a "saining," is held soon after birth. In the Wiccan traditions, it may be called a "wiccaning," considered a formal blessing given to young children from the Goddess, or a rite of welcoming for a new participant. Wiccans also celebrate the first menstruation of their daughters with a coming of age ceremony.

Those who choose to be initiated into the Craft must undertake a period of preparation of at least one year. Since one can be a practicing Pagan without initiation, undertaking initiation is a profound step, expressing lifelong commitment to the spiritual path. All traditions require an internal readiness for initiation, and some traditions have several levels of initiation. Symbolically it is a rebirth, in which many Pagans receive a spiritual name. In the initiation ceremony, a Witch may be given tools by her coven or she may be challenged to get her own tools. According to practitioners, progress in the Craft takes time. It must be lived and internalized, not simply studied. Overcoming hurdles and challenges is part of the inner development necessary for initiation.

When two Pagans, whether of the same or opposite sexes, wish to be joined as life partners, they have a ceremony called a "handfasting." Along with other festivities, the handfasting ritual will generally include vows written by the couple, an actual binding together of their wrists, and the ritual of jumping over a besom--a broomstick made of twigs. Another distinctive ritual is the "crowning" rite, held to mark a woman's transition to the post-menopausal stage of wisdom, when she becomes a community elder or a crone. The last ritual in the life cycle is the passage from life to death. For Pagans, the ritual of death is one's final consecration to the Goddess in this lifetime. It is a passage to a spiritual world and to the mystery of rebirth.

In Pagan understanding, the wheel turns unendingly, but rather than repeating the same pattern, change is a constant. The pattern may be viewed as a spiral, mirrored in natural forms such as shells, circling winds, and whirling waters.

### **Contributing to the Common Good**

In English, the days of the week are named after the sun, the moon, and the gods and goddesses of ancient European mythology. For instance, the Germanic and Scandinavian god Thor gave his name to Thursday, and the Goddess Freyja to Friday. This is part of the generally unacknowledged legacy of old Pagan culture left to modern life. On Halloween, children dress in ghostly costumes and knock on neighborhood doors demanding "treats" or threatening "tricks." Adults masquerade in fantastic costumes and dance all night. Conscious or not, these community expressions are distantly related to the old Celtic holiday of Samhain. Halloween revelers experience the transformation that a mask can offer and explore taking on another form, even if it is just through a costume that renders them strangers to their friends for

a single night. This autumn holiday occurs at nature's annual season of death, which many people intuit even if they do not acknowledge it in the observance of Halloween with its ghosts and paper skeletons. Pagan ritual celebrates all aspects of life, including the descent into the dark.

Today's American Pagans can articulate many other ways their faith has contributed to contemporary society, such as the Pagan sensitivity to, and responsibility for, the Earth. Stewardship in Paganism does not rest on the claim to human dominion over the Earth, but on respect of all life as part of the web of life. It is a spiritual ecology, emphasizing that humans are intimately dependent upon the Earth and its ecosystems. A profound respect for the Earth and all of nature is at the heart of Paganism, and the pollution of the Earth is considered akin to the desecration of a sanctuary. Through the cycle of the seasons and the ritual calendar, Pagans celebrate nature and enact human interconnectedness with it. Not surprisingly, many are avid environmentalists, actively working on programs to halt the degradation of the environment. They insist that the empowerment of their Pagan ritual and spiritual path is directly connected to their responsibility to protect the ecological balance of the interconnected web of life.

A second contribution Pagans feel they can make to the world today is their holistic view. Just as the tides have both ebb and flow and as summer is no more sacred than winter, so it is with life, which includes both growth and decay. Light and darkness are both part of the cycles of the moon and the cycle of nature, each needing the other for completion. Some Pagans would affirm that honoring both life and death, age and youth, dark and light undermines the deep divisions, the alienation, and the racism of modern society. Treating all people, and indeed all living things, with reverence is rooted in this Pagan world view.

A third contribution, then, is the Pagan approach to tolerance, ethics, and diversity. Wicca, for instance, is a path to the experience of the Divine, but has no dogma, no scripture, no one absolute truth, and no single spokesperson. All Pagan groups emphasize the diversity of Paganism and the many different images of the Divine. The Church of the Sacred Earth based in Bethel, Vermont is one example of an organizational structure that provides a base for many different Pagan congregations without dictating common practice or belief. Three times a year the communities of the Church, dispersed throughout New England, gather to affirm their common bonds, but not their uniformity. Many see the spirit of respect and tolerance generated within the spectrum of Pagan communities as an important contribution to America's multicultural society as it struggles with the issue of diversity.

Tolerance is grounded in ethics, however. For Wiccans, the one foundational ethical precept is called the "Wiccan Rede" or rule: "If it harm none, do what you will." In this rule, Wiccans honor their deep commitment to religious freedom as well as their profound sense of responsibility for personal choices. Wiccans think about the implications of "harming none" in relation to questions of abortion, vegetarianism, religiously motivated violence, and all the economic and political issues of the day. As individuals they may reach different conclusions, but the Wiccan Rede helps them to balance the difficult issues of freedom and responsibility. The principle of "Threefold Return" serves to remind Pagans that every word and action directed outward, whether for good or ill, whether generous or miserly, will return to them threefold.

Finally, Pagans would emphasize the many ways in which their communities are actively involved in service, voluntary programs, and public affairs. Pagan groups are increasingly taking the risk of publicly participating in the civic and religious life of their own cities and towns, openly involved in local clothing and food drives, in AIDS action programs, in the Walk for Hunger, or in local Adopt-a-Highway programs. This openness has often meant dealing directly with the negative stereotyping that may exist in local communities. For example, in filling out permit applications for rituals on public lands, Pagans will talk with local police about what to expect and may provide public information and education. Many individuals

have made themselves available as educational resources for community, school, or clergy groups. Organizations like the Covenant of the Goddess, the Witches League for Public Awareness in Salem, Massachusetts and the Pagan Alliance of Central Texas believe that accurate information and exposure are the best tools to root out prejudices of all kinds, and the prejudice against Pagans is no exception.

Religious freedom is a critical issue for America's new Pagan communities, and many have long been actively involved in work to protect it. Like most Americans, they believe that freedom denied to any faith puts the freedom of all faiths at risk. In 1995 a Pagan couple in Palm Bay, Florida fought zoning laws that they believed were applied in a discriminatory manner against them for having held the annual Imbolc/Candlemas festival in their own backyard. Their slogan was "Keep Home Worship Legal" and they were joined by Christian denominations in their struggle to maintain this principle. The Lady Liberty League based at Circle Sanctuary in Madison, Wisconsin offers networking, resources and referrals to Pagans facing discrimination. The quarterly newspaper, Circle Network News, reports on the status of legal cases and informs the Pagan public about the work being done. While Pagans are obviously the direct beneficiaries of this work in defense of religious freedom, struggling to maintain that principle benefits a much larger community.

Many Pagans believe that American society needs new models for religious relatedness that honor the freedom of the individual, the freedom of distinctive religious congregations and traditions, and yet offer a larger sense of community. Groups like Circle Sanctuary, the Covenant of the Goddess, and the Church of the Sacred Earth provide models that might have applicability beyond the Pagan community as well.