

# Seasonal Reverence: Unveiling the Spiritual and Psychological Depths of the Wiccan Wheel

The Wiccan “Wheel of the Year” stands as a revered framework within the Wiccan and some other NeoPagan traditions, intertwining spiritual significance, psychological depth, and season rhythms. While rooted in ancient Pagan traditions, the adaptation is distinctly modern, embodying the ebbs and flows, and marking the journey of the changing seasons, and the life of individuals and communities. While it is, on the surface, a simple symbol, it contains complex layers of psychological introspection and spiritual symbolism. It offers a profound tapestry of meaning and understanding to those who follow it.

## **What is Wicca**

On one hand, this is a simple question, it is a specific tradition founded by Gerald Gardner in the 1940s, based on older traditions. There are clear signs he developed the traditions with the help of others and it is very clear where a number of things within it came from and how they developed over the coming years. On the other hand, how do we define a tradition? For instance, the Christianity of today is certainly not the Christianity of the 1st century. Does that make them unrelated? Does only direct person-to-person contact with an unbroken tradition count? Do we need historical and archaeological evidence to back up our claims? Yet others would ask, does it matter how it originated if it inspires and fills our souls? These are somewhat personal questions that one must answer for themselves. I will however endeavor to include my thoughts on the matter, but my path is not everyone's path.

It should be noted that there are three important terms that are related, but not synonymous. This is also complicated by modern publishing traditions. First is witchcraft, which is a nonspecific practice. There are witches in every culture and religion around the world, though they are known by many names. They practice various forms of magic and each

practitioner has their own ethics of what is allowed and not. Often in witchcraft, they will draw from a variety of sources and traditions. They also do not need to be religious at all. Paganism on the other hand is a somewhat tricky word. For some, everything not Jewish, Christian, or Muslim is Pagan. Many find that term too broad and includes a lot of traditions that would not call themselves Pagan. (insert a quote from Pagan Theology) (expand)

Wicca, traditionally, is an initiatory religion that traces its origin to Gerald Gardner. There were splits in traditions that started new branches, but there are also many who hold firm to the main branch. However, especially when it came to America, things changed. The idea of self-initiation, which is a complicated issue that not everyone can agree on, became popular in part because the few initiated were few and far between, but there was much interest in the tradition.

This however did lead to a mentality of doing anything you want and it is okay. I, and many others, would argue that is not Wicca though. Most Wicca books published in the USA I would classify as NeoPagan. There is nothing wrong with that. There is room in the world for vast diversity of practice. However, it has led to large numbers of initiate groups who lack an understanding and links to numerous traditions. We have people who claim to be experts who do not know traditions that have been part of Wicca since the 1950s and claim them to not be part of any tradition they have heard of. Personally, if you disagree with a tradition that is one thing and more power to you, but claiming to know a tradition but not even know the basic tenets is problematic. But I don't think I will expand on that because that is a problem in many religions.

Another difference between various practitioners of various pagan beliefs that should be addressed is the views of hard polytheists (the various gods exist independently and as unique beings), soft polytheists (the gods are aspects of more central power, like sides of a gem), the humanist approach (the gods are part of our collective unconscious and shared mythology) and animists (spirits inhabit some or all natural phenomena). Many practitioners have a more vague

notion of what they believe of the gods and may straddle between those concepts. Practitioners of different beliefs on the nature of the gods often work together within a single group. In general, it is the practice, not the belief that is an important part of community building. The world here and now often plays more of a part in practice than expectations of an afterlife. The main differences in practice between the different views of polytheism revolve around the ideas of reciprocity. The more one thinks that the Gods are literal and especially if they think they are individuals rather than aspects of one being, the more special offerings matter. We give to the Gods to honor and ask them for their blessings. Historically there are various links to foods, incense, and so on to different Gods. Things related to Owls for Athena or amber to the Freya, and so on. However, if you view the gods, as all aspects of a greater energy, then the distinctions matter less, but the intent is what matters. Some people work with a preferred pantheon; Norse, Greek, Celtic, Egyptian, and many others. Yet other people prefer an archetype and will worship the various Gods of wisdom for example calling on Thoth (Though that is his Greek name, the Egyptian is Djehuty), Odin (Norse), Athena (Greek), Enki (Sumerian), Lugh (Celtic), etc. Most practitioners have their practice they do at home that will be very specific to their ideology, but when we come together in groups we accept that there will be a wide variety of ideas held by others with us and that it is the community practice, not the belief that matters.

In the limit of keeping up with the turns of the season, the Wheel of the Year fairly well follows the same material as the Farmers Almanac. Many Pagans use that, but there are also Pagan Almanacs published that include myths, spells, and lore related to Pagan traditions. For further things in astrology, there is some divide among astrologers as to how things break down. What celestial bodies to include and how much astronomical knowledge to include varies. Most use an Earth-centered model more because this is where we are than an idea that we are at the center. However, things like the zodiac not being exactly as represented in the sky and where to

place the midheaven vary in interpretation. In most cases, this does not matter in ritual, though it does come up occasionally with the timing of initiations and similar rituals.

It should be pointed out not all Pagans use the Wheel of the Year and prefer either culturally significant holidays or ones involved with their specific group. There are groups that practice Greek, Roman, Celtic, Norse, Mesopotamian, and fairly much any historical tradition you can think of. Some are more modern interpretations, but many pride themselves on their scholarship and keep up with academic and archaeological research related to their tradition. That is beyond the scope of this paper.

Two common practices that commonly go along with rituals are divination and magic. Divination can take many forms, but even when not done intentionally, the synchronicity of unexpected symbolic happenings can have great personal meaning. Also, in the philosophy of religion, we see various approaches to magic. For some magic is a power within ourselves, for others it is the domain of the Gods that we work with them to gain what we want, yet for others it is subtle laws of nature, and even those who see it more as a psychological tool/metaphor for the work we must do on ourselves to improve our lives. The most common type of magic, both historically and across cultures, is sympathetic magic. There are two philosophies to this, first the Law of Similarity which is that things that are alike or resemble each other (for instance a walnut half and the brain) can be used to influence each other. Second, the Law of Contagion, which simply put, is that things that were once connected can still influence each other. For that think quantum Entanglement. This is also why in many stories, folklore, and spells you see things like hair or fingernails as being an important part of influencing someone, but the conversation on the ethics of magic is another topic that is quite complex. Regardless of the opinion we hold behind it, there are common practices that are used within various groups. In the context of rituals celebrating the wheel of the year, there are two main practices. Creating sacred space, which in Wicca is casting a circle to contain the energy and to protect the space from outside influence. We designate a certain space, temporarily, as a place between the

worlds and outside of time. In numerous other Pagan traditions, the formal casting of a circle isn't customary. However, owing to the prevalent democratic nature and consensus-driven approach within most modern Pagan groups, the ritual often adopts a circular shape to signify equality among participants. Additionally, the practical execution of the ritual resembles a theatre in the round, where no single perspective or individual holds hierarchical superiority. So both magic and divination often play a part in the ceremonies, though specific practices and views on the way the work vary widely.

### **Wheel of the year**

Wicca has 8 main holidays, called Sabbats. Some of these are based on traditional Pagan holidays, primarily Celtic, but while all of these were practiced at some time and place in the past, they were not all practiced at the same time and place within those cultures. There are lots of different ways in modern Wicca and Paganism to categorize the holidays. For some the eight Sabbats are high holidays and the Esbats (Full moons) are low. Then there are those who say the Equinoxes and Solstices are Low Sabbats and the quarter holidays between them are High Sabbats. There is some debate about the names, especially Mabon. Some argue that Mabon is a Celtic god that has no association with that holiday, Aidian Kelly, who created the Wheel of the Year as it is commonly used, defends his naming scheme because the Welsh myth in the Mabinogion, the story of Mabon ap Modron, correlates to the Greek and Hebrew stories of holidays around the autumn equinox. There is evidence of trade going to 2000 BCE between these regions, but possibly even further. Also, for the first nearly 30 years of Wicca, didn't include them. Gerald Gardner's earlier writing did not even include the solstices and equinoxes. He even called the four Celtic fire festivals of Beltane,

Lughnasa, Samhain, and Imbolc, by the names May Eve, August Eve, November Eve, and February Eve. The wheel of the year with 8 holidays was in use by the 1960s, but it wasn't until 1974 that Aidin Kelly gave them the names they are commonly referred to today. They were then promoted that was through the magazine Green Egg. It took time for them to become popularized by their new names.

While mainly drawing on British and Celtic traditions, there are similar traditions across Europe and even other parts of the world. While the seasons are not exactly the same wherever you go, there are general patterns and trade of information and folklore between cultures. Over time further myths were tied to the holidays and created a story of the year which also mirrors the story of our lives from birth to death, with a belief in rebirth.

The dates for the equinoxes and solstices are fairly standard by celestial movements, but the quarter days are set dates by some people's reckoning, and astrologically midpoints between the solstices and equinoxes. Arguments for both can be made historically.

There have been many myths associated with the Sabbats over the years. This is important for transmitting both the theme of the holiday, but also its spiritual nature, by which I mean the journey of the soul through the year and life. There are many theories of myth, but two are important to me in the study related to Wicca. These are the theories of Carl Jung and Joseph Campbell. There are certainly similarities, but a significant difference is that Jung thought the differences in myth were important, while Campbell thought all stories were telling one story. Both men indirectly played a big part in the development of Wicca and NeoPaganism from the 1960s to 1980s. They inspired

the development of explorations into the collective unconscious and an understanding of cultural myths from around the world.

Due to the spherical nature of the Earth and the apparent path of the sun through the sky, the Northern and Southern hemispheres have different dates for the holidays, which means shifting all the Sabbats 6 months. Also of note, since traditionally the ritual circle is cast in the direction of the sun, clockwise in the northern hemisphere, the sun actually moves in the opposite direction from the perspective of those in the south, so the circle is cast counterclockwise. We choose to honor these times in ritual and symbol through the cycle of the year.

Two of the holidays, Samhain and Beltaine, are more closely associated with the veil between the worlds being thin. However, this does not mean the same for everyone, though the distinctions may be confusing. Samhain is most associated with the dead and ancestors, while Beltaine for many is more related to the Fae/Fairy/Fair Folk. The confusing part is that in fairy folklore going back centuries the land of fairy is often linked with the land of the dead. They however are not quite the same thing, even if the main difference is a perception of them. There is no established and conclusive historical record regarding whether the fae are also spirits of the deceased. There are however many articles showing links and that at least some people historically viewed them that way.

## Yule

The Winter Solstice is a time when the daylight hours are at their shortest. In myth, we see this as a time when the Goddess gives birth to the sun god and returns light to the year. This is symbolic of our own births, the mothers around the world who birth the next generation, and also as rebirth in our spirit. In life, we symbolically go through many deaths and rebirths. Major trauma, life changes, and the birth of new projects all shape how we move through the world. This is a time when we let the fires die, to be relit to bring in the new beginnings.

In many ways, this appears similar to Christmas. Many of the symbols and trappings of ritual are the same. Lights, wreaths, decorating a tree, the Yule log, singing carols, gathering with friends and family, and a feast are all common themes you will see. Historically this time of year is tied to many religious traditions. We have the Birth of Mithras, a God whose worship began in Persia but spread across the Roman empire, especially among the military forces. Mithras was associated with the sun, so the winter solstice was important. Also among the Romans you have Saturnalia, which in form is similar to the Brazilian Carnival. Over time the festival took many variations, but gift-giving was always a big part of it. In the proto-Germanic areas, there was Yule (Jule or Jole). Culture to culture this varied but the return of the sun and a time of hope and faith through the hardest months was the theme. The Egyptologist, E. W Budge, believed that the Winter Solstice was celebrated 12,000 years ago. While his work was done with a lot of detailed research, he was from the late 19th and early 20th century, so understanding has moved some from his knowledge and writing.

For many, relating to how the ancients experienced this time is difficult. We have a fairly regular food supply, good heating in our homes, communication with far-flung



friends and family, and travel through the winter is easier than in times past. So this is a time for introspection and honoring the hardships that even some in our modern age still face.

One of the stories used to symbolize this time of year in Wicca is that of the Holly King and Oak King who battle for dominance. Robert Graves and Sir James George Frazer wrote about this battle and some see this played out in Sir Gawain and The Green Knight. This is the time of the Holly King, Holly stays green through the Winter months, while the Oak will return in the Spring and thrive in Summer. Both Graves and Frazer contributed to our understanding of myth and their related spiritual practices. Robert Graves's "The White Goddess" talks about the divine feminine and is poetic and mythic. His book is mostly used in Wicca, with those preferring specific historic cultural references pointing out that it is a modern interpretation. While Frazer's "The Golden Bough" covers a broader historical context, many more tradition-specific books are available today.

### **Brigid, Imbolc, Candlemas, Imbolg, or Brigid's Day: February 1 or 2**

Imbolc is often associated with the Goddess Brigid, who is an Irish Goddess of Spring. This is viewed as the midpoint of Winter and as such we have a noticeable increase in the light of days. As such this is a time of trust; trust in our communities, trust that Spring will soon be here, and trust that all is right in the cycle of the year. This is a part of the year when we make our plans for the coming year. We ask the questions "What will we plant", and "What new goals do we want to accomplish", and we prepare for the new life that will come with Spring. This is also a time when we honor our

children and their unique views of our world. They ask questions about things we take for granted in our understanding. Many of the rights involved in this holiday are a form of sympathetic magic to bring back the sun. For the Romans this was a celebration of Venus, and for the Greeks Diana. The central theme from these traditions is the coming of Spring, even the name means Ewes Milk because this was the time they began lactating in their last month of pregnancy. This is also a holiday closely associated with candles, though part of that is the Christian Candlemas. Some people will take time to make and bless candles, as this is still a time of rest in farming communities and the busier summer month would be hard to catch up on this chore. Also, much like St Lucia Day in Sweden (in Dec), the wearing of a wreath of candles on the head of a young maiden is fairly common. Another activity of this time that has always been popular, though in many different forms, is guessing how long till spring and we see that even in America as Groundhog Day.

### **Eostar, Spring Equinox, Ostara, or Oestarra: March 20, 21, 22, or 23**

Bede, a distinguished Anglo-Saxon monk renowned for "Ecclesiastical History of the English People" in the 8th century, mentioned Eostre. In his work "The Reckoning of Time," he connects Eosturmonath, an Old English calendar month, to the goddess Eostre or Ostara, signifying a spring festival celebrating renewal and fertility. This stands as one of the earliest documented references to the Eostre festival in history. The term "Easter," adopted widely, derives from this celebration, while in several countries, it is often referred to as variations of Pascha, originating from the Jewish Passover holiday. There are many myths of rebirth and resurrection that are placed here in modern the

Pagan community. It is quite common to link bunnies and eggs to the Pagan traditions is old, but not ancient. As the Spring Equinox, it has a long history of religious significance in significance traditions across the world and certainly to farming communities.

### **Beltane, May Eve, Beltaine, Bealtaine, or May Day: April 30 or May 1**

Beltane is a fertility celebration and being opposite Samhain is seen as another time the veil is thin. Here though it is sometimes seen as linking the land of the Fae, rather than the land of the dead. Though historically in folklore there is often a link between the land of the dead and the land of the Fae. In modern practice, this is seen as a time of romance, love, passion, and sexuality, a time where the Goddess and God come together, and is often a time for handfastings. Handfasting are weddings and varies widely in practice, but the central theme is that we are making a conscious choice to unite together in front of not only friends and family but the very cosmic forces of the universe and whatever Gods there may be. Some do a handfasting for a year or for as long as love shall last. The rituals themselves are very personalized and will reflect mostly the couple being joined, but also the traditions and community they are a part of. This is considered the beginning of Summer.

### **Litha, Summer Solstice, or Midsummer: June 20, 21, 22, or 23**

Litha, known as the summer solstice, signifies the peak of daylight hours. It's a time when nature flourishes, and the sun reaches its zenith in the sky. This is the time the God is at his full power and the Goddess is bringing forth great abundance. Pagans express gratitude for these blessings and seek bountiful harvests during this period. For

Wiccans, this marks the height of the god's strength. Litha holds a strong connection to the Fae or Fairies, partly influenced by Shakespeare's "Midsummer Night's Dream," although the extent to which he drew from ancient folklore remains uncertain.

Shakespeare did, however, redefine the perception of fairies within popular culture. We see many references in Shakespeare's works to a knowledge of folklore, for instance, his famous "Fillet of a fenny snake, In the cauldron boil and bake; Eye of newt and toe of frog, Wool of bat and tongue of dog, Adder's fork and blind-worm's sting, Lizard's leg and owlet's wing, For a charm of powerful trouble, Like a hell-broth boil and bubble." are often alternative names for herbs; the eye of newt is mustard seeds, the tongue of dog is houndstongue (commonly used for insect bites and internally to relieve sore throats), and so on. There are obvious references to the witches in Macbeth, Prospero's magic, and the Green World in "As You Like It" aligns well with the Pagan beliefs in the restorative and transformative power of nature.

### **Lughnasad, Lughnasadh, or Lammas: August 1**

Lughnasadh stands as the halfway point between summer and fall, heralding the inaugural harvest celebration. It's a moment devoted to reaping grains, expressing gratitude for the season's growth, and reveling in the lingering warmth and light yet to unfold. In Wiccan traditions, Lughnasadh signifies the waning strength of the god. Alternatively, for certain pagans, it symbolizes the Celtic Sun God Lugh's transition of power to the grain. As the grain is gathered and transformed into bread, it marks the culmination of his life cycle.

### **Mabon, Fall Equinox, or Harvest Home: September 20, 21, 22, or 23**

Mabon, known as the autumn equinox, signifies the second phase of harvest celebrations. Traditionally, it marks the gathering of fruits and vegetables, heralding the onset of autumn. For Wiccans, it symbolizes the transition of the Goddess from Mother to Crone, a time of deep wisdom and reflection. It serves as a poignant moment to express gratitude for the abundant provisions received.

### **Samhain, All Hallow's Eve, Hallowmas: October 31 or November 1**

Samhain, also recognized as Halloween, serves as the Celtic New Year's Eve and marks the culmination of the harvest season. It's a time when the boundary between the realms of the living and the departed is believed to be at its most delicate. Pagans view this as a period when spirits freely traverse the earthly plane, allowing easier communication. Samhain is a sacred occasion to honor ancestors, express gratitude for the year's gifts, seek guidance, and set intentions as the cyclical journey recommences. For Wiccans, this signifies the god's transition into the realm of death, while the Goddess reaches her zenith as the Crone, embodying wisdom and anticipation. She carries the seed of the god to be reborn at Yule, initiating the eternal cycle anew. Given the thin veil between worlds, this night holds profound significance for magic and rituals.

### **Dealing with modern problems**

Since most of the tradition of Wicca and NeoPaganism comes from a Eurocentric perspective, it is sometimes hard for people of color to identify with it even when they

choose to be part of this community. While there is a minority of outright racism, the usual problem is a lack of understanding of our own privilege and status in society. When the color of your skin does not draw attention to you in a negative way, it is easier to choose a path that does not conform to the perceived social norm. But that is mostly a problem for outside the community. We should absolutely stand up for the marginalized in our community and not just act like it's not our problem. What is a bigger problem for the community is when people of color are given lesser roles in the community, not given the initiations they trained for, not chosen to lead rituals or to lead workshops at festivals. There are many cases where people of color were allowed the training, but when it came to the initiation, because that is usually a group decision in a coven, they were either not allowed to advance or many of the coven would be absent from the ritual. Not all these decisions are made intentionally, there are internal biases that we are not always aware of. However, it is our place to constantly work on ourselves and strive to do better. Individual and community growth is a part of our traditions. Ignorance of our biases is not a legit excuse and part of the shadow work should be examining them.

Many of the ideas that apply to people of color, also apply in different ways to our LGBTQ+ community. Much of Wicca ritual is traditionally geared toward a polarity light/dark, masculine/feminine, god/goddess; but where do trans people fit in? The nonbinary? There is much work being done in that regard in the community, but so much of it is built into the tradition and some people refuse to adapt. Sadly at this time much of that work is left up to the individuals impacted, rather than the whole community. I have seen national organizations making strides to train the next

generation in a more inclusive manner. More work is being done to show that many of our Gods do not fit modern strict gender roles or even the historical ones of their societies. More indigenous knowledge of more than two genders is being promoted in the community as both historical knowledge and also as a way to practice in the modern age. Much of the work being done is to remove the regenerative reductionism of some of the myths and look at broader myths within history and modern interpretation. The deities are more than their genitals and so are the people in our society. This thinking also benefits more of society, for instance, if the main use of our myth is to discuss the reproductive aspects, then what of those who still identify by their assigned gender at birth, but can not have children? In some groups, they too have been excluded. Besides, no person should be defined by their genitals at birth. The genetics of sex is more complicated than that, as is the social aspect that makes up gender. Science and history are shaping our expressions of myth and ritual in the modern age.

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