

[A Year of Living Shamanically](#)

Part 7: Autumn Equinox – harvest and preparation

The Autumn Equinox, or Mabon, is on or around September 21st or 22nd in the northern hemisphere. It is the second time in the year when the day and night times are of equal length. It represents a turning point. From this time onward, the nights will be longer than the days, until the spring equinox comes around in six months time. The equinoxes divide the year into two halves. The six months from the spring to the autumn equinoxes is a time where light and solar energy are strongest. The six months we are now moving into is a time of darkness and of earth energies. We now are beginning a descent into darkness. If this sounds overly gloomy, then this article is for you! For I want to re-examine the idea of darkness, and reclaim our sacred relationship with it.



Since the coming of the (patriarchal and hierarchical) sky religions, the dark has been portrayed in a negative light (this is also true of the things we may also associate it with the dark, such as earth energy, the lower world and the feminine). In Christianity for instance, Christ is invariably associated with the light. For example: "When Jesus spoke again to the people, he said, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life" (John 8:12). God too is light: 'God is light and in Him is no darkness at all' (John 1:5). Similarly in the old testament: "You, O Lord, keep my lamp burning; my God turns my darkness into light" (Psalms 18:28), to pick just one of many possible examples. Hinduism and Taoism may take a somewhat more balanced view, and appreciate the darkness as part of the whole (interestingly, they are two religions with clearly shamanic roots and influences). Yet most religions talk of 'enlightenment'. This glorification of the light, and negative idea of darkness has been picked up wholeheartedly by many in the 'new age', who also frame things in terms of *enlightenment*, and people being light bearers, 'hands of light', visualising the light, and so on.

By contrast, shamanism has always embraced and understood the true nature of darkness. Shamans work with the darkness. Journeys are usually done with a blindfold. In some cultures shamans were even deliberately blinded, to help them develop their other senses. Some of our earliest evidence for people practicing shamanism comes from cave paintings, some of which are over 35,000 years old. These paintings are deep inside caves, where people have deliberately sought out places of total and utter darkness. In many tribal societies, shamanic rituals and ceremonies are always performed after sunset, and throughout the night.

For shamans, the darkness, by shutting off our outer visual sense, actually allows us to 'see' the reality that lies beneath surface perception. The physicist David Bohm said that there are two levels of reality. The surface reality we live in most of the time he called 'explicate' reality. Behind the explicate Bohm says lies a deeper reality which he called the 'implicate', where all things are connected together. Shamans have known this for tens of thousands of years. For example, the Toltec shamans of central Mexico talk of the implicate as the 'tonal', and the explicate as the 'nagual'.



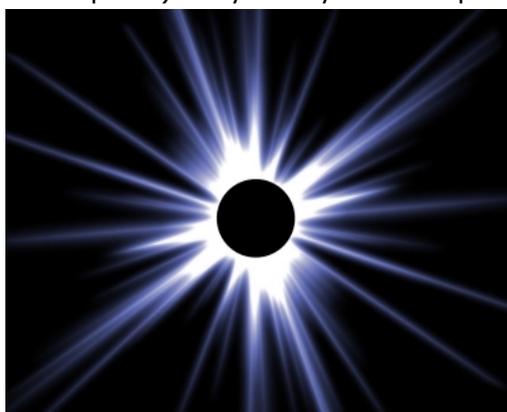
Shamans the world over have similar terms; it is a central concept of shamanism. Light, and external sight, tends to keep us focused in this, surface reality. Letting go of light and external sight helps us to let go into the deeper, implicate, reality. Potentially the darkness is a place of great richness and riches. Entering it draws us into introspection and contemplation. If we work with it it brings us a stillness of mind and an opening up of our other senses. We can open up to what we would otherwise have overlooked and not noticed, and we can 'see' the truth below the surface of things. Famously of course, the psychologist Carl Jung said: 'Filling the conscious mind with ideal conceptions is a characteristic of Western theosophy, but not the confrontation with the shadow and the world of darkness. One does not become enlightened by imagining figures of light, *but by making the darkness conscious.*' ("The Philosophical Tree", italics mine). So shamanism has always embraced and worked with the darkness.

This is not to say at all that shamanism values the dark more than the

light. In fact shamanism (unlike the western religions) stays clear of making any such judgments, and sees all as having its place and part in the wheel. The philosopher Pliny apparently said that every step towards the light needs an equal step towards the darkness; that each new branch of a tree needs new roots underground to support it.

On a psychological level, embracing the darkness means embracing our shadow; the bits of our self that we deny or have locked away, and which lie unresolved and unintegrated. Most people think they can ignore the shadow side. Many religions and new age beliefs support this, and encourage people to focus only on the light. In fact, we can never be whole by doing that. Instead, the shadow becomes stronger the more we deny it. At worst, we even project it out onto other people (hence the sky religions' willingness to judge and persecute others). To quote Jung again: 'Projections change the world into the replica of one's own unknown face' (Aion, 1955). And so many people are uneasy with the dark, as in it lies their own unowned issues, and so they find the decent into the winter darkness hard as it brings them into closer contact with their own unresolved issues and emotions.

In fact, the next six months of darker energy can be a time of great richness, growth and inner exploration. Whereas the spring equinox is a great time to launch plans and projects that involve outer work, the autumn equinox is a great time to set new goals that involve inner work and exploration. It is a great time to renew ones commitment to one's shamanic path or even to start one in the first place!). So you may want to spend some time setting some new goals for 'inner' work. It is also a good time to study and learn – an inward process (it makes sense that the new academic year starts around this time). If you have been following all these articles, and if you did set goals earlier in the year then, as always with each of the eight stages of the year, now is a good time to review how things are going, and work out the next six-week plan. What the medicine wheel does show us is what may be happening at this time. We are moving from the fire element to the water element. What this may signify is a running out of energy and enthusiasm with our plans. But that is the nature of fire. It tends to burn out, and needs to move on. Fiery people often have problems staying the course. Fire needs new fuel and to move on, and so goals often get dumped. If we still want to achieve our goals, at this time of year we can draw on the power and relentless persistence of water. Think of the way water perseveres to grind out a formidable result (the waves gradual affect on a coastline; the way a glacier carves a valley; the way water freezing and thawing will eventually and repeatedly shatter rock; the way a river always finds a path around obstacles).



Shamanically if you want to explore the darkness, then, along with your usual power animals and/or guides, working with animals that are comfortable with the darkness, such as Mole, Bat, Black Panther, Owl and Moth can be of great help. Crow and Raven too, although they are not active in the night as animals, know much about the hidden side of things. You can work with them through shamanic journeying of course, and/or by taking the relevant Power Animal Essences (see the link below).

Of course, the dark nights are not on us yet. The equinox just signifies a tipping point. What it also signals is a time to get ready. If the year were a day, then we are only yet at early evening (6pm). Traditionally it is a time of taking stock. What do we need to let go of or resolve, in terms of getting ready for winter? Traditionally this was a time of making amends; of sorting out any unresolved disputes; of getting things in order; and of putting finances in order.

The autumn equinox is also known a 'second harvest', the first harvest being Lammas some six weeks earlier (see previous article in this series), and the final harvest being on Halloween. All three harvests are a time of giving thanks to the earth for sustaining and feeding us, and particularly to the plant kingdom (as explored in the Lammas article). So shamanically, again it is a good time to journey to give thanks to the plant kingdom. Elementally, if you refer back to the Medicine Wheel (see the first article), you can see it is also a time of moving from Fire to Water. What this means, and how it connects with Halloween and the dead, will be the subject of the next article.

If you missed the previous articles in this series, they are available to download from [here](#).

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