

[A Year of Living Shamanically](#)

Part 8: Samhain – facing death

October the 31st is the next major point in the medicine wheel year. Now known to most of us as Halloween, the older pagan or Gallic name for this festival is Samhain (variously pronounced as SOW-in, SOW-eeen, SAV-en, SAH-win or SHAH-vin in different parts of the world!). Whatever the pronunciation, the word means 'summer's end'. 'Halloween' is a contraction of 'Hallow's Eve'. With the arrival of christianity, the church communing with spirits was considered evil. Instead, a day celebrating the saints of the church on November 1 was created on November 1st, in the hope of replacing the pagan custom (a tactic that largely worked with other festivals such as the winter solstice (Christmas) and the spring equinox (Easter)). The new festival was called 'All Saints Day', or 'All Hallows Day', and the night before it became 'Hallows Eve', or 'Hallow'een'.

In many places, this season was the beginning of the new year. As a time of major transition, the time between sunset and sunset on Samhain and sunset the following day was regarded as an in-between time. As such, it was regarded as a 'gap', a thin place where movement between the different worlds and realities was more possible. It is a time when it is easier to contact and connect with the other realms, and the beings and entities that live in them. Such activity was, of course, heavily frowned upon by christianity, and people were told that the spirits and entities in the other realms were dangerous and evil, in order to discourage people from seeking any such otherworldly contact.

In fact, of course, personal contact with the otherworld and it's inhabitants is the bread and butter of shamanic practice. In demonising the lower and middle world, and decreeing that contact with the upper world could only be done through the intercession of a church official, the church effectively seized power and suppressed shamanic practice. The result is that we have grown up in a culture where we have a lot of fear instilled in us



about the other realities. Even if not actively practicing as a christian, most people in this culture have a sense that dabbling in the otherworldly is dangerous. And in fact it *can* be. But in reality, it actually very rarely is, and with some simple precautions it is almost always fine. From a shamanic perspective, the lower world is anything but demonic. In reality, the worst one can encounter is occasional indifference; the rest of the time, it is a place of great love and healing. Both upper world and lower world journeys are absolutely safe. The middle world is a much more mixed affair, and to journey in it it is wise to have some basic protection (if you want a down-to earth discussion on this, with techniques and exercises, I really recommend reading the book '[Psychic Protection: Creating Positive Energies for People and Places](#)' by William

[Bloom](#). Far from it being bad to connect with the other worlds, it is precisely our *having* cut off from them that is the problem! Shamanism is all about feeling connected to each other, to our ancestors, to humanity, to other animals, to plants, rocks, spirit and life itself. Doing so helps to keep us well in soul and in spirit, to live in balance and harmony with each other and the environment.

Samhain is particularly a time when it is easier to contact the souls of ancestors. The idea of the 'day of the dead' is found in a surprising number of unrelated cultures throughout the world, from Mexico to Estonia and Lithuania, from Japan to Nepal. To feel a strong connection with ancestors is important in many cultures. Ancestors give us a sense of place and belonging, and also can be invaluable sources of accumulated wisdom and knowledge. In many, many cultures the world over, the dead are seen as skilful healers. And the friendly dead can help watch over the living and offer advice and support, free as they are from any petty concerns they may have had in their own living lives, and having a bigger, more detached perspective.

If you had a difficult relationship with your own parents or grandparents it may be worth mentioning here that we are talking ancestors in the wider sense here. In fact, if you do the maths, 2 parents, 4 grandparents, 8 great grandparents etc, if you go back just 8 generations (only around 200 years) and the figure is 256. If you add in uncles, great aunts and so on, you have hundreds of ancestors. If you go back to, say, Tudor times, you have literally thousands. In fact, if you go far enough back, we are of course *all* related. In respecting and honoring our ancestors, we are honoring and respecting those who have gone before us. It reminds us that we are human, and all connected. It reminds us that as individuals we are just a brief moment on a bigger process – the journey of Humankind - and that we will one day be ancestors ourselves, and so to think about what we

will leave behind for those who will be coming after us. As shamans poetically say: 'what we do now affects the next seven generations that come after us'.



Why is Samhain especially connected with the dead? With regard to the time of the year, Samhain is the third and last harvest. The berries and nuts would be gathered in. Hunting would become difficult, and domestic animals hard to feed, so animals were killed, and meat was cured and stored. Fuel would be gathered. And now nothing more could be done except hope that enough food had been prepared and saved to survive the coming winter. In our times of central heating, water at the turn of a tap, and year round supplies of food from supermarkets, it is easy to forget what the coming of winter really meant. And it is not just us humans. It is a time when most plants give up their leaves and either (a) hope that they have enough energy stored to survive the winter, or (b) in the case of annual plants, give up their lives entirely and trust that their seeds will survive and form the next generation. Animals too would either live off their food stores, and/or hope they had built up enough fat reserves in the summer to see them through till the next spring. It is not surprising then that at this time peoples' thoughts turned to mortality, and to those who had died.

*When your eyes are tired
the world is tired also.*

*When your vision has gone
no part of the world can find you.*

*Time to go into the dark
where the night has eyes
to recognise its own.*

*There you can be sure
you are not beyond love.*

*The dark will be your womb
tonight.*

*The night will give you a horizon
further than you can see.*

*You must learn one thing.
The world was made to be free in.*

*Give up all the other worlds
except the one to which you belong.*

*Sometimes it takes darkness and the sweet
confinement of you aloneness
to learn*

*anything and anyone
that does not bring you alive*

is too small for you.

David Whyte, 1998

Further insights about Samhain can be found in the Medicine Wheel and what it shows us is the energy of this time. Samhain represents 9pm on the daily cycle (see the first article in this series for more information). It is a time when things are really winding down and getting ready to say goodbye to the day. It is also a time when we are in the water element; fire is left behind, and we are moving towards earth. Water is about emotions, reflection and reviewing the past, and regrets. What is coming is earth: letting things finally go and settle. Earth is also the home of the dead; the majority of cultures place the body of the dead back into the womb of mother earth, and/or see the underworld as the land of the dead.

So, what needs to end in you? What do you need to start letting go of, to clear space for what needs to come in the spring? What no longer serves you? If you have been following these articles through the year and setting goals as the year unfolds, now is a time to take stock on how things went, what you have achieved, and what you can learn for the future.

Shamanically, this is obviously a great time to connect with your ancestral kin – your human, lower world helpers. If you don't have any yet, you can journey to meet them. They will appear as a human helper, or even a whole tribe, who you feel you belong to and who welcome you with love. If you do already know who they are, now is a great time to honour them and give them thanks, plus to explore and deepen your connection with them. It is also a great time to ask them for help with healing, particularly in terms of bodily dis-ease, and maybe ask them to show you healing techniques. Also particularly powerful to do at this time is a burial journey. This involves thinking about what you need to let go of, and what needs to 'die' in you, and then journeying to the lower world where your ancestral kin and power animal(s) help ritually to bury you in the earth so that you can let go and dissolve back into the rich compost of the earth mother, to then be dug up, reborn and remade.

If you missed the previous articles in this series, they are available to download from www.therapeutic-shamanism.co.uk.

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