

Scarred, Scared, and Sacred: Celebrating Samhain

The Rev. Dr. J. Carl Gregg

The Season of Samhain: Speaking to the Spark within the Darkness

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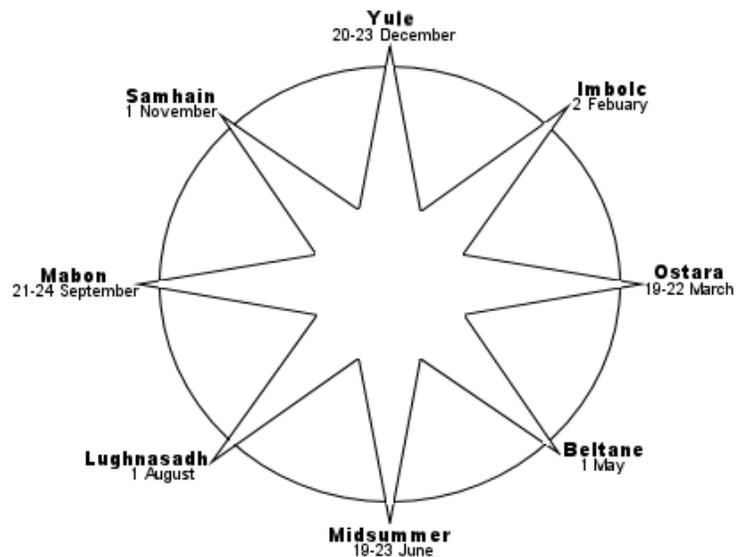
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Spoken Meditation

Can you feel the Wheel of the Year turning? Can you feel fall in the air — the chilling breeze and changing leaves, the tell tale signs of winter’s coming? In this season of each day growing incrementally shorter, can you sense our inexorable movement, here in the Northern Hemisphere, toward Winter Solstice, the darkest day of the year?

If you imagine the year as a circle, our Western, secular calendar marks *four* major seasonal turning points: Winter Solstice (the darkest day of the year) and Summer Solstice (the longest day of the year) — and in between the Fall and Spring Equinox, when the day is divided into equal parts light and dark. But the Sixth Source of Unitarian Universalism (“earth-centered traditions”) invites us to attune our sensibilities more finely to the turning of the seasons. In addition to these four most obvious turning points, **the ancient pagan traditions invite us literally double our sensitivity to the movement of the seasons: to notice, savor, and celebrate the midpoints (or “cross-quarter days”)** that lay between the solstices and equinoxes.



Today we find ourselves approaching one of these midpoints — Samhain or All Saint’s Day, halfway between the Fall Equinox and the Winter Solstice. The Christian liturgical tradition celebrates a three-day festival of All Hallow’s Eve (October 31), All Saint’s Day (November 1), which honors all the saints, the holy men and women who have died, and All Soul’s Day (November 2), which honors all the faithful departed.

All Hallow’s Eve (the day before All Saint’s Day) is so named because the word hallow means “to make holy” — as in the famous prayer of Jesus that begins “Our Father, who are in heaven, *hallowed* be your name.” Saints are those men and women who have been recognized as having lived *hallowed*, holy lives, so the day before their annual recognition day of All Saints is known as All *Hallow’s* E(v)ening, which over time was shortened to Hallow-e(v)en or “Halloween.”

And in both Christian and Pagan traditions, this time of year, halfway between the Fall Equinox and the Winter Solstice, has been recognized as a liminal space — a threshold time. And for this morning’s meditation, I would like to invite us to experience this “thin” time and space. If you want to go deeper, there are two prime opportunities detailed in your order of service. On Friday, November 1 at 6pm in the Chapel, there will be an extended Samhain ritual of deep reflection, led by Safrianna and Jake. And at 10am next Sunday, November 3, Deb Calhoun will be leading a UU Christian “All Saints”-themed service in the chapel.

For now to give you a taste of what those two services will explore in much greater depth, if you are comfortable doing so, I invite you to close your eyes. With your feet flat on the floor, and your hands resting gently in your lap, allow yourself to relax. Take a deep breath in...and out. Relax your shoulders and neck. In the silent meditation and musical meditation that follows, I invite you to remember one or two close friends or family members who have died before you. Allow yourself to perhaps be surprised by whose face emerges for you. Perhaps there is something you never got a chance to say to them, or something that has happened since they died that you can tell them now. (Whether this experience is for you, for them, or for both will depend on your belief system. And this may be an experience that you will want to continue later on your own.) But for now, in the silence that follows — in these days approaching All Hallow’s Eve — I invite you to remember those beloved ones who have gone before. Remember the gifts

and blessings they gave you. Then give yourself permission to respond silently to your beloved ones in the way that feels right to you.

**Scarred, Scared, and Sacred:
Celebrating Samhain**
(Rev. Dr. Carl Gregg)

Speaking of sacred time, today is me and Magin's sixth wedding anniversary. Although this year we celebrated last weekend with a visit to Berkeley Springs, West Virginia, six years ago, we took a weeklong honeymoon in Mexico immediately after our wedding. And since our wedding was on October 27, those of you familiar with Mexican culture will realize meant that were in the Yucatan Peninsula for *Dia de los Muertos* (the Day of the Dead), a three day commemoration of those who have gone before us that spans the U.S. version of Halloween, All Saints Day, and All Souls Day.

In Mexico, the ubiquitous homemade altars for *Dia de los Muertos* are both memorizing and macabre: flickering candle flames surround pictures of departed loved ones, along with flowers, food, and crosses. Fancifully dressed skeletal figures also abound. Thinking back on those homemade altars reminds me of the connection that is sometimes made in English between the words scarred, scared, and sacred. Although these words do not share a common etymological root in English, their similarity is striking, and worth reflecting upon.

Those *scary* Dia de los Muertos altars point to what is *sacred*: the memory of those who have died before us. And those memories are often scars on our hearts and psyches. Along these lines, Rudolph Otto gave a famous definition of the sacred as "*mysterium tremendum et fascinans*." He understood the sacred as that awe-inspiring, numinous mystery before which we both *tremble* and find *fascinating*, before which we are both repelled and attracted. And Samhain, All Saints Day, and *Dia de los Muertos* all recognize that death, which will happen to us all, is one of those aspects of the human condition that is "*mysterium tremendum et fascinans*": a mystery before which we both *tremble* and find *fascinating*, are both repelled and attracted.

Religion is one of our human attempts to make sense of such phenomena that are, at once, scarred, scary, and sacred. As the late UU minister Forrest Church used to say, "Religion is

our human response to the dual reality of being alive and having to die.” And there is arguably no better time of year to reflect on this existential reality than in the coming sacred, scarred, and scary days of Halloween, Samhain, and All Souls.

For now, I will conclude with some insights from one of my favorite contemplative theologians Cynthia Bourgeault.¹ She sees an intriguing parallel with the well-known Spring Triduum (which is Latin for “three days”) at the end of what Christians call “Holy Week,” which commemorates the final week of Jesus’ life and includes Maundy Thursday, Holy Friday, and Holy Saturday, which concludes with the Easter Vigil. The parallel Bourgeault sees is with what could be called the Fall Triduum of Halloween, All Saints Day, and All Souls Day. And for a few years now Bourgenault has been leading silent retreats structured around this Fall Triduum.

I’ve preached in the past about the unique characteristics of “[The Spirituality of Winter](#)” and “[The Spirituality of Spring](#),” and what is most interesting to me about this idea of a Fall Triduum is the difference in energy, focus, and theme from the spring version. And although Lent, the forty day period before Easter in the Christian tradition, is often observed as a solemn time, the word Lent comes from the root for *lengthen*, referring to the lengthening days of spring. So, rightly celebrated, one could argue, Lent should be less about penance and more about opening ourselves to potential transformation in our lives — opening ourselves to Resurrection energy, if that’s not too loaded a word — preparing for fruition in our lives, like the flowering of spring after a long winter.

In contrast to the outward, energetic fruition of the Spring Triduum, Bourgenault [writes](#) regarding Fall Triduum, through which we will pass this next week, that:

the movement is more inward.... The days are shortening, the leaves are fallen, and the earth draws once again into itself. Everything in the natural world confronts us with reminders of our own mortality.... And yet in the midst of this broody season of dark and inwardness, the days do offer themselves as a journey, a progression we can take.... In the quiet, brown time of the year, these fall Triduum days are an invitation to do the profound inner work: to face our

¹ Cynthia Bourgeault, “The Fall Triduum – another turn of the spiral,” available at <http://www.contemplative.org/blog/the-fall-triduum-another-turn-of-the-spiral/>.

shadows and deep fears (death being for most people the scariest of all)...then to move back into our lives again.... I encourage all of you who have the inclination to keep these days as best you can for this quiet but extraordinary rite of passage.

**The Season of Samhain:
Speaking to the Spark within the Darkness**
(Irene Jericho)

My name is Irene. I facilitate the monthly full moon labyrinth walks here, teach the Thursday morning yoga class and I'm a member of CUUPS – the Covenant of UU Pagans. As the natural world around us begins to shift toward darkness and the cycle of stillness, one of the Pagan high holidays is upon us. I'd like to talk to you this morning about Samhain.

When I was 13, one of my closest friends lost a lengthy battle with childhood leukemia. It was my first big death. The one that changes everything about how you see the world. I come from a wonderful family, but a bit of a WASP-y one. We are understated and rational. And like many families in our culture, we didn't really have a way to talk about grief. My experience of mourning within this culture was that you're given a month, maybe more, to be upset. And then you're expected to get on with it. To just get better. Get over it. And by that I think we mean repress our feelings so they don't trouble anyone else.

But my own experience of grief is that it doesn't end. It doesn't go away. It transforms, slowly, over time, but it never ends. It never just goes away.

I think part of what initially drew me to Paganism, to Wicca, at age 15, was the holiday Samhain. As a whole, Pagans believe the soul continues after death. We also honor the cycles of nature, the Wheel of the Year, and connect to its turning on a very deep level. At this time in the world around us, the leaves are falling, leaving branches to clatter in the wind like so many bones. The growing season is ending. Shifting into the season of death, and increasing darkness. We believe that at this time, as death appears around us, so too do the souls of those who have gone

before. We believe that the Veil between the living and the dead grows thin. Thin enough, that those who have gone before can hear us, can see us, and can sometimes speak across that great divide.

We build ancestral altars at this time. Both for our distant ancestors, and for the dear ones who have gone on ahead of us. Altars can be simple or complex. Sometimes it's just taking out the old photos and putting them on the mantle where everyone can see them. Sometimes it's a special table covered in pictures, decorations, objects we associate with our lineage. We make our loved ones' favorite dishes for family meals. We visit cemeteries to clean off the graves, and decorate them anew. And most importantly, we have a space for grief. For allowing those places inside us to breathe. A space to speak the words aloud: I miss you. And to know that they are heard. A chance to connect. Every year. A visit with the Other Side. I spend a lot of October talking to my friend, to my grandmother, in the quiet spaces of my day. I can feel them in the air. Sense them drawing near.

The night of the 31st is when the Veil is thinnest. It's why it's called the Witches New Year—our cycle ends, and then begins, at the death of the growing season. Samhain Night sees big rituals honoring those who have gone before. Some traditions do a Recitation of the Dead. A calling of names. Others create a Dumb Feast: a table laid out of doors, beautifully decorated for the season, and carrying the dishes our lost loved ones and ancestors most enjoyed. That they may eat, drink and be merry, in their own way, when they visit. Personally, I gather with a close group of Pagans. We stand in a circle, and we speak about those we wish to honor. We talk to our families, to our friends who have gone beyond. We pour out libations on the ground to each. We cry. We laugh. We tell the old stories, and sing the old songs. And every year, that aching place inside us that is grief has a moment to be soothed. A chance to breathe. A moment between one year and the next, between the worlds of time and place, when we come to stillness and communion.

It is that stillness, that inner quiet, that we carry with us into winter. For Pagans, the dark season is a time to go within—to do deeper, more personal work on ourselves. Like our furry, four-legged brothers and sisters on this earth, we hibernate. We turn inward, and seek our own illumination there.

It's easy to get distracted in the warm months—there's so much to do! Festivals to attend, projects to start, visits, vacations... When the light begins to fade, though, a different kind of work can begin. What did you lose this year? What quiet places inside you are aching from neglect? We expend so much energy on the needs of others. Have you remembered to tend your own flame? It's okay if the answer is no. I know it definitely is for me. That's the other part of why I look forward to Samhain so much.

This month, I'm redecorating my home altar and beginning an 18-day sadhana: a Sanskrit word for a spiritual practice with a specific goal in mind. I'm working on integration; on trying to get all the pieces of me to be a more cohesive whole. I have a sub-goal of deeper connection, on every level. To deity, to myself, to my life. During that 18 day sadhana, I will spend time every day focusing on my goal. I will use prayer, meditation and physical yoga postures to help me on my way. It's the beginning of what I think of as my Winter Work. My time to do some repair and upgrades on myself.

I realize that it may sound like a lot of work. I take the inner space exploration of winter pretty seriously. But honoring the energy of the dark season doesn't have to be so elaborate. It can simply be finding a little space in your morning to set an intention for your day. To choose stillness for just a moment. It could be turning off the TV and putting away the smartphone a little earlier in the evening to allow for some quiet time. A space away from distraction and discussion. You could start journaling. Or maybe it's time to read that book you've been meaning to pick up. The season of death is also the season of renewal.

You see, at Samhain, we go underground as well. Cycles occur in more than the world around us. It's so easy to forget, with all our technology, all our bread and circuses, that we are a part of nature; not separate from it. And like the trees and animals, we need time to rest and nurture ourselves for the next growing season. We too grow weary after a long summer. We tire and fade, and need to go into darkness for a time. We renew there, heal the wounds, tend the fire within. And then we emerge again. It is my hope to step out into spring as a better version of myself. A more authentic, more grounded Irene.

I think most of all, Samhain speaks to the spark within the darkness. The loved ones that exist beyond death. The light within us that shines on the darkest of days. The comfort of a warm hearth on a cold night. This is the gift, and the lesson, of this season. That the Wheel of the Year turns, and we turn with it. That a journey into the night is not something to be feared. It is simply a part of the cycle.

May this season see you blessed with space, with peace, with stillness. A blessed Samhain to you all. Thank you.