

# Modern Witches And Halloween

("White Witch" is a popular name for a member of a serious-minded organized religion.)

by Margaret Horton

"Halloween is when the veil between us and the spirit world is the thinnest," the white witch told me. "It's when we honor recently departed souls and speed them on their way. We don't try to communicate with them though — we must be careful not to tie them and hinder their journey to the other world where they will rest until their time to be born again."

Samhain or Halloween is one of the high holidays the witches celebrate near the midsummer and midwinter solstices and the spring and fall equinoxes. These special days herald the changing seasons and new phases in the cycle of natural life, especially crops.

Witches call their faith "The Craft," or "The Old Religion" because it is a relic of pre-Christian fertility beliefs dating from Neolithic times when agriculture and animal husbandry began. These cults aimed to understand and control the natural environment, especially to ensure fertility of crops and herds, and also of humans. They worshipped a Mother Goddess under many different names, as the fountainhead of the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth, along with the male principle which was often represented as a horned god.

Modern witchcraft inherits this faith. It is a mystical religion which believes that fertility is of paramount importance as the creative power of life. Witches honor the Mother Goddess whose name is secret, with rites to ensure her goodwill and homage to augment her creative powers. They often worship at night by candlelight within a circle, and the secret rites may include incantations and dancing, especially on May Day.

Mother Goddess like all women has three aspects — maiden, mother, and crone. At Samhain she enters the crone phase and goes to rest along with all nature, and the male element becomes dominant. In symbolic oneness with the goddess, the priestess who is the leader of every coven hands over to her male assistant. The coven itself becomes quiescent — for instance there are no handfastings (marriages) until spring. On May Day witches celebrate the goddess's return as maiden in her sexual phase, and the joyous rejuvenation of nature in spring. The cycle mystically lies with reincarnation of the human spirit.

The Anglo-Saxon name Wicca comes from "wit" — to bend or manipulate, and became wisecraft or witchcraft. It refers to witches' "special" powers. They believe humanity is part of nature and they try to be in harmony with natural forces. Thus, and by the discipline of learning to understand and control themselves, they plug into a power source. They release forces they believe exist in everyone's mind and body (akin to some aspects of psychiatry and parapsychology). Witches believe in free will and work to make their own and others' lives more satisfying. The combined minds of a coven can concentrate power.

Modern (so called "white") witches use their powers for good. Some are herbalists like wise women of the middle ages; some heal by laying-on-of-hands. Others tune in to natural forces for guidance through free writing or looking into the future. Members must reach out and lead useful lives in the community.

The Craft is an organized religion, with covens of ideally six couples and a priestess. Numbers are often fewer, and more women than men being. Novices must study and be initiated before attending closed ceremonies. Elders through the United States (and Europe meet occasionally at seminars.

The Old Religion has had a checkered career, from being almost universal, through Christian attempts to absorb its rites and festivals, to suppression and persecution. Now it's out of the closet and there are witches

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