

SAMHAIN: Down, Down, Decomposing, Recomposing

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It is the first weekend in November, time once again to enter the ancient, sacred circle of death and rebirth. I feel I have entered this circle (for every circle is the same circle) thousands of times past. My genes remember. My bones remember. As I robe (warmly, for we shall be outside for most of the night), I have a sense of timelessness, of deep connection to my ancestral roots. For did not our ancestors --- native peoples of Europe, Africa, the Americas, the fertile crescent of the Middle East, and Asia--- gather in circle to mark the passages in their lives and in the earth's cycles, for thousands of years before the coming of the missionaries and invaders?[1]

Archeological evidence indicates that masked, feathered priestesses danced funeral rites around the interred bones of their dead in circle, at Catal Huyuk, a paleolithic village in what is now Eastern Turkey, 9,000 years ago.[2] Thousands of years and miles away, pre-Celtic peoples circled their observances of sun and earth cycles surrounded by the mysterious stones of Stonehenge and Avesbury, in neolithic Britain. [3] Moreover, we know that indigenous peoples still do so, hidden from the eyes of official religion, on the mountain peaks of Peru, and the islands of the South Seas[4]. So we, too, gather to honor our passage through the wheel of the year, in the manner of our ancestors. My body remembers this.

For nearly a decade now I have circled with this motley tribe of goddess worshippers at least twice every year---in the spring and in the fall---to mark through ritual the passing of the seasons; to reaffirm our connection to the divine and the connection of our own lives to the cycles of Nature.

We are women and men together in this circle. We are predominately white heterosexual and bisexual adults between the ages of 35 and 55. Often, though not always, there are a few children present, and a scattering of teenagers, with their parents. We are writers, welfare mothers,

teachers, therapists, poets, students, computer programmers, healers, professionals, para-professionals, environmental activists, clerical workers, small business owners, musicians, craftspeople, and scientists. We are rural and urban dwellers. Most of us are voracious readers.

We of the elder generation were raised in a variety of traditions and none at all. Our backgrounds include Roman Catholic, born-again Christian, mainline Protestant, Christian Scientist, Jewish, Mormon, and humanist. Some of us rebelled against the religions of our childhood as the result of deep wounding. Others of us simply moved on, out of a longing that was not being satisfied, or out of irreconcilable theological or political differences with our childhood faith. For the most part we are serious about our religion and, once becoming committed, we remain so.

Some of our members have been worshipping together for as many as 25 years, and the ritual style that has evolved over that time derives from a highly creative synthesis of: Native American spirituality, Wicca, psychedelic experience, science fantasy, ancient texts and myths, feminist spirituality, deep ecology work, naturalism, humanistic psychology, the new physics, Western esoteric occultism, and Eastern mystical traditions, as well as our own deep longings and intuitions of the divine.

We refer to ourselves as Neo-Pagans, after the term *paganus* (“peasant” or country dweller), originally used to describe the rural people who continued to worship the old Nature deities long after most Roman subjects had been converted to Christianity [5]. We are Neo-Pagans in that we realize full well that we neither can nor wish to, recreate whole the Paganism of the past. Rather, we weave ourselves into its living tradition, as we augment, recreate, re-interpret, and transfigure ancient patterns in the light of today’s world, through our own needs and imaginations. Currently we are estimated to be the fastest growing religion in America, our numbers having doubled from an estimated 100,000 in 1985(6), to 200,000 in 1989(7) according to author and National Public Radio journalist, Margo Adler. If our own membership is at all representative, we have expanded nearly tenfold in the two years since Adler’s last estimate.

Because we are a Nature-based religion, most of our rituals take place out of doors, in Nature. From Halloween until May Day we emphasize and celebrate winter’s darkness by holding our

rituals at night around a fire. In the warmer weather we can be found dancing our circle in garden, meadow, or water's edge, glorifying the sun's warmth and light . Our major celebrations usually last all or most of the night, and sometimes into the next day, with between 30 and 100 people in the circle.

A woman and a man are chosen each season by the clergy to be the worship designers and leaders, or priestess and priest, for that season's ritual. If they are not themselves ordained clergy, they are supervised by ordained clergy. This is our way of trying to walk the fine line between our basic commitment to the notion of a non-hierarchical priesthood of all believers on the one hand, and quality control on the other. These two people then, acting as leaders and facilitators for the occasion, engage the active participation of the general congregation in a variety of ways, often with additional people selected in advance to lead particular segments of the ritual.

Because of the vast amount of planning and work involved in developing an original ritual of this size and scope, leadership tends to rotate. Seldom will the same priestess or priest preside at two holidays in succession. This allows for a wide range of liturgical styles to coexist, some more formal, some more spontaneous, some more verbal, and some more kinesthetic or auditory. A.J., for example, uses harps, flutes, choreographed movement, and rhyming couplets in rituals often based on ancient esoteric systems describing and/or intervening in, cosmic patterns. R.D.H. favors few words and lots of hypnotic chanting and drumming. Story telling and song prevail at O.S's rituals, while O.Z. and M.G. love to re-enact myth in an ancient form called the mystery play. I myself, tend to focus on global concerns with a prophetic tone and a rock n' roll beat, while D.J.'s style is more pastoral, focusing on issues of personal transformation. While all this might seem a bit confusing at first (and I admit to preferring some styles to others aesthetically), ultimately I think it a good thing that we have no "one true right and only way." It keeps things from ossifying. Liturgy remains infused with meaning because it is constantly in the process of being shaped and reshaped. Just like life!

Still, in our liturgy there are certain givens that remain more or less constant. These forms give consistency and coherence to our shared experience. Symbols become numinous only with

continued use, gaining in value as each accretion of meaning adds to their patina. They give shape. Their repeated use allows resonance to develop and deepen, along with our lived experience of the basic tenets that make up our religion.

Our major symbols include: the ever turning wheel of seasons of the year, the 4 directions (North, East, South, and West) with their corresponding 4 elements (Earth, Air, Fire, and Water), the marriage of God and Goddess, the dying and reborn God (dying in the fall to be reborn in the returning light with the new greenery), and the Triple Goddess (Maiden, Mother, and Crone). Our basic ritual structure consists of: casting a circle, calling on the four directions/elements, invoking Goddess and God, doing our ritual business, raising power, grounding the power, communion, announcements and sharing, thanking God and Goddess, dismissing the four elements/ directions, opening the circle.

Our most important celebrations are seasonal, commemorating not one-time events, but our place in the spiral of time/space that is ever turning, and the phases ever repeating themselves within that spiral. By focusing on seasonal cycles rather than on historical events, we are locating divinity primarily in Nature's processes and cycles, rather than exclusively in human history. Our liturgy reflects the fact that we celebrate our place in Nature, rather than placing ourselves and our god(s) outside of, or above, Nature. This creates problems for some feminists who, having reified Nature, have internalized a nature/culture polarity. They have gone on to identify Nature (as misapprehended within a substance metaphysic) as the source of woman's subordination, and culture as her liberator[8]. We, on the other hand, see the subordination and proprietorship of woman and of Nature by the patriarchy, as having gone, and continuing to go, hand in hand [9]. We do not identify or romanticize woman as being in any way "closer to Nature" than man in her basic make-up or essence.

We meet in a circle, symbol of the wheel of the year and leveler of hierarchy and difference. It is no accident that this is the same form that feminists have used for group meetings and consciousness raising. There is no face-off of laity and clergy here; we are celebrants together. When we enter the circle, it is said that we enter a "world between the worlds," a sacred, liminal

space where it is possible to enter into communion with the divine, step into the mythic, and actually alter the fabric of reality, if we enter it with perfect love and perfect trust. A song we frequently sing asserts “We are a circle within a circle with no beginning and never ending [10].”

Our circle, like the circles of all the indigenous traditions we have encountered in our research, has 4 orientation points describing its circumference: north, south, east, and west, usually with an altar placed at each point. We begin by calling or invoking the 4 elements, the basic stuff of which life is made, into our circle, identifying and situating each element in its particular, appropriate geographical direction, depending on our locale. Because my community lives in Northern California, we identify the element of water with the Pacific Ocean, and so place water in the west. We call forth fire from the warmer south, air from the east, bastion of airy intellect, and we situate earth in the cold, rocky north, according to Celtic tradition. (Were we in Maine or New York, this would all be different, of course, because we would have a large body of water to our east.)

There is one more piece of liturgical business that must be completed before moving to the substance of the particular celebration or working that has brought us together: that of calling forth and recognizing the presence and assistance of deity: invoking. In our tradition that means invoking or evoking the female, biological life-giving force we call the Goddess. Anything that can reproduce itself is, by biological definition, female. Let me be perfectly clear about this: the Goddess is primary in our theology. She is the *sine qua non* of biological existence on this planet, and our theology and liturgy first and foremost honor and celebrate physical, biological life on Earth.

This is not to say anything about superiority or inferiority. These concepts are superfluous in Nature. This is simply to say that there is no life on Earth without reproduction and birth. There is no reproduction and birth without the female. Since we primarily honor deity as creator and devourer immanent in Nature, in other words, as that mysterious regenerative process known as evolution by which life creates and recreates itself, we primarily honor the Goddess as our deity.

With the introduction of external genetic material come death and difference. This is the biological contribution of the male to evolution. Therefore secondarily but equally we honor the God, Her counterpart and equal, as embodiment and sire of that force and process. It is usual, therefore, to recognize and call both Goddess and God into our circle. But it is imperative to call the Goddess. The following invocations, written in the aftermath of the Gulf War in the spring of 1991, reflect this bio-theological distinction.

INVOCATION OF THE GODDESS

(W.H.R. R.D.H April 1991)

Canto:

She is the Mother

She is the Lover

She is the Dancer ...

And...

She is the Devourer

Through her body all things are made new

Response:

Oh Lady give us new Life!

Canto:

She gives -

And she taketh away

She is the storehouse laden with grain

She is the famine ridden land

And she is the rain.

She flows in mountain streams and rivers

Her heart beats in the primordial seas' ebb & flow

She is the sandy river bottom blown away on summer's wind And the starry skies spinning constellations

and swallowing them whole

Through her body all things are made new.

Response:

Oh Lady Give us new Life!

Canto:

She is all into all

She is our wildest dreams

And our worst nightmares

She is all in all

We ride her tail like a dragon

She is all unto all

She is before all

And she is after all

Through her body all things are made new

Response:

Oh Lady Give us new Life!

Invocation of the Wounded God

(W.H.R. R.D.H. April 1991)

Oh wounded god come home

How much longer must you wander in your fear and pride?

Don't you know that you are part of me?

You are my wildest dream and my worst nightmare.

You are difference my ecstatic whim.

Wounded god come to me

Be my sweetness and surprise.

Take me where I would never venture alone.

Touch me.

Change me.

*Let me feel your galloping hooves vibrating across my damp meadow
Your crash of thunder your flash of fire*

Inundate my banks with your rushing waters

Blow your pollen deep into my waiting blossom.

Come wounded one come foolishness

*Place your kiss of madness upon my lips
Your bloodroot thick with yearning between my thighs
Fear not.
Be the tender stroke upon my cheek
the sweetness in my breast
And I shall call your name Pleasure
And I shall call you home.**

(* These invocatons reflect a heterosexual symbology, as they were wrtten for a rite in which the marriage of god and goddess s traditionally enacted. This has been a matter of ongong discussion from feminists: See “The Lusty Month of May” for further discussion.)

This physical, biological force has nothing at all to do with metaphysical notions of male and female principles or gendered essentialism, currently being popularized by Jungian psychology. Unfortunately there is a tendency to confuse the two. There is a theological and liturgical bent within our tradition that comes dangerously close to posing a Gnostic spirit/matter dichotomy in which the

masculine stands for the active, animating spirit, while the feminine, according to esoteric patriarchal tradition within a substance metaphysic, is said to embody the principle of the receptive, or inert matter [11]. This idea has always been lethal to women, as it places both us and Nature in the position of being passively acted upon, or animated, by male/spirit. Its reintroduction within a Goddess-worshipping subculture is no less dangerous. Attempts to wiggle out of it with sloppy afterthoughts of women being imbued with an “inner male” only serve to obfuscate a wildly inaccurate and sexist “ghost in the machine” metaphysic in which the so-called male principle is the (no doubt holy) ghost, and the so-called female principle is---you guessed it!

There are many ways of doing these basic liturgical steps. There is not a single set of words we mouth each time we cast a circle or call an element. Often our invocations are inspirations of the

moment, but equally often they are written by a group member, a favorite author, or taken from an ancient text. We might choose to invoke without words at all, by making an auditory circle with the sound of a Tibetan singing bowl or an Aboriginal bull-roarer, for example. And there is no such thing as a generic invocation of an element; the flames of transformation and the warm glow of the hearth are very different kinds of fire, and a worship leader is well advised to consider carefully which kind she wants invoked in her circle.

Likewise, the Goddess has many faces, and we consider it prudent to choose or be chosen by some particular aspect of Her nature to predominate in a given ritual, depending on the season and the nature of the occasion. Remember, the Goddess is the body and soul of Nature in the changing year. As a rule, therefore, in the spring we would honor a maiden goddess by some name: Persephone or Artemis, for example. In the summer and at harvest time, we would celebrate the Goddess in the full bloom of maturity, perhaps calling on Demeter or Asherah. In the late fall and midwinter, we would honor the death crone and wise woman, asking Hecate, Cerridwen, or Nekhbet to help us reconcile the need for death in life. None of this is absolute, however. A priestess might, on rare occasion, have good cause for invoking Kali, Hindu devouring mother, on the Night of Madness preceding a spring fertility celebration, as I did in May of '91. In this particular case, there had been such rampant death and destruction that winter that it had to be honored, mourned, and offered before truly celebrating new life at the Maypole. All good worship in any tradition begins with deep truthfulness.

Having put these liturgical pieces in place we proceed to the particulars of the given ritual. Before we “open the circle” at ritual’s end, to return to chronological or secular time, we must remember to thank those forces whose attendance we requested by our invocations.

The ritual I am choosing to examine here is the one my congregation performed last November for our internal Samhain celebration. I believe it to be more or less typical of our ritual style, in its strengths and weaknesses. Also it is fresh in my mind, as the congregational—as opposed to public—ritual I most recently attended. Finally, I had nothing to do with the planning or leadership of this ritual, so I am somewhat more objective in my evaluation.

Samhain (“Summer’s end”) is the Celtic name for the holy day honoring the year’s entrance into the winter cycle of death and darkness, leading to spring’s rebirth. In the secular culture of the United States, we know this time as Halloween, from the British All Hallow’s Eve. The Mexican people celebrate it as Dia de los Muertos, or “Day of the Dead.” The Anglican and Roman Church call it “All Souls’ Day.” According to all these traditions, this is the time, when the year is dying, that the veil between the worlds is thinnest, the time when we honor and communicate with our dead. (To the best of my knowledge, as no basis for the holiday can be found in Hebrew or Greek scripture, there is no Protestant equivalent. The Jewish tradition fulfills some of the same ritual functions nearer to the autumnal equinox, at Rosh Hashana.) It is one of our two highest holy days, the other being Beltane or May Day which ushers in the summer cycle of fertility and rebirth. Samhain is our most solemn sabbat, and our most intimate. It is our New Year, the time when trees drop their seeds before the winter frost, to wait in darkness for germination. Therefore it is the time we lay down the seeds of what we wish to see taking root in the coming year. This ritual is a recognition of the core bio-theological principle that light and life emerge from death and darkness.

We begin after dark, with half an hour of silence. Then 30 of us (all adults except for 3 adolescents who have completed their rites of passage, and one insistent girl of eleven, with her mother) process, single file, across the rickety, wooden bridge under the big tree, into a circle that is sheltered from wind by a tall fence. The circle is cast by the priestess, who walks around the circumference chanting:

“Magic, Magic everywhere, in the earth and in the air, How to hold the magic here? How raise it up and bring it down?”

She returns to the North altar, and seals the circle with the vow of perfect love and perfect trust.”By the Earth that is Her body,” she declares, holding up a rock. Then she raises her chalice of water, and spills some upon the ground, saying “by the Water that is Her womb and Her flowing blood.” She lights a candle so that it flares, and vows “by the Fire that is Her quickening

spirit,” and finally, fanning the air broadly and spinning with a bird’s wing,”by the Air that is Her sacred breath,” declares our circle cast.

The elements of Air, Fire, Water, and Earth are called by members of the congregation. Then the priest steps forward and evokes the Goddess as wise woman/crone in the priestess. The priestess is well chosen. She is a gray haired woman recently croned, having lost her mother and begun her menopause. She is a psychotherapist by profession. She removes her ritual cloak to reveal a purple running suit beneath it. She comments humorously on the pleasures of being a modern crone, dressed for comfort, and ready for action. She is obviously comfortable in her body. Her voice is clear and natural, easy to listen to.

The priestess then evokes the Lord of the Underworld into the priest, who is, appropriately enough, a geologist by profession. He is beseeched to overcome his shyness, to remove his helmet of invisibility and preside over our ceremonies as he presides over his own realm of departed souls. The congregation follows the invocations with a chant which invites the dark lord to guide us “down in the darkness, where we go alone... where we cry our tears...where we face our fears.”

Another priestess takes the circle now, one who is experienced in such matters, to lead the next section of the rites: welcoming the beloved dead. She invites us, one by one, to call out the names of those we would have with us, rebuking us to leave behind good Aunt Elsie if she would be uncomfortable at such an event. The litany begins: Gene Roddenberry, Bill Graham, Dr. Seuss, Miles Davis, friends and relatives lost to AIDS and other illness, Iraqi children and marine life, plants and wildlife as well as human life, lost in the Oakland Hills fire, all dead this year; then those friends, lovers, teachers, and family members we still remember and mourn: Gwydion, whose ashes are scattered on this land he left us 7 years ago. We add the names of those long dead whose inspiration we seek in these times: Hypatia, librarian of Alexandria, Martin Luther King, Gandhi, Crooked Fox Woman, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Margaret Sanger, Chief Seattle, Emma Goldman, Enheduanna. These are hard times and we need a lot of inspiration. We call on our foremothers and guides. At last, after nearly half an hour of naming, the priestess rings a bell,

inviting those named to break bread with us in silence. As we pass around specially prepared food, we feel a sense of communion with those named. This completes the first section of the ritual.

There is quite a bit here worthy of examination from a feminist perspective. There are several obvious ways in which our liturgical style and tradition are deeply feminist and empowering to women. The basic equality of female and male is explicit and built in at ground level, as shown by the equal roles of priestess and priest, and the invocations of Goddess and God. Women carry a strong liturgical role, as priestesses of the Goddess. This should not be underrated in its importance. Being able to see oneself and ones religious leaders as a reflection and embodiment of the divine, is inestimable in its value to women's self image[12]. It is very different in its impact from a theology of having a neuter soul in a body of "otherness"[13]. Our deity is embodied, hence our bodies are divine in all their phases and forms. In this case, there is a strongly feminist affirmation of the Goddess embodied in aging women, not just in nubile maidens or nurturers, but in a strong, active, mature, independent person. The gray-haired priestess of our Samhain circle is for herself and w/holy. Our Goddess is powerful in all of Her changes.

This sets up a relationship to ones own sexuality and to sexual union as sacred. These principles are fundamental to goddess worship, and certainly override the criticisms, contradictions, and complaints expressed herein. Still, contradictions do exist and sometimes even flourish in an atmosphere in which we easily become complacent to the subtleties of sexism in language and practice. These are more quickly noticed by vigilant feminists in a more traditionally patriarchal environment, such as the Roman Catholic Church. Sexism can slip by in Pagan groups. And there are other "ism's" that grow in an all too often self-congratulatory atmosphere.

Let us take, for example, the location of our retreat center. It is important to us to worship in as wild and private a place as possible, especially for our highest holidays. We are fortunate to have inherited a 55 acre land trust in the hills of Mendocino, a few hours' drive from San Francisco, where we can meet, frolic, and worship undisturbed among the trees and deer. We have occupied,

loved, planted, and circled on this land since it became ours in the mid '70s. We are, after all, Nature worshippers.

On the other hand, it is remote, difficult to reach without 4-wheel drive, much less with a wheelchair. It would be extremely difficult for a person with physical disabilities to negotiate its rugged terrain. Its primitive facilities can only support a limited number of worshippers without taxing the land we are committed to healing. These factors mean we cannot be as inclusive as some of us might like to be, which becomes more of a problem as we grow.

There is a limit on the number and kind of people who can attend any land-based celebration, and the question of how to determine who those will be is always a difficult one. Of course it is not only the land that limits our numbers. There is also the concern about the quality of participation and how a sense of closeness and safety will be possible if the group is allowed to become too large.

These same questions plagued the early women's consciousness-raising movement: How do you maintain group intimacy, integrity, and safety while building a broad-based, inclusive movement? How do you stand for equality while maintaining an in-group and an out-group? How do you maintain your core ideological/theological/aesthetic identity while allowing others full participation? We attempt the same solutions as did the women's groups: we create spin-offs. We have held open rituals in accessible locations on the prior weekend. Attendance at the closed ritual depends on membership, length of involvement, depth of commitment, and promptness of registration. We try to be fair, but for the most part, it is a core group of initiates, those who have been around for years, who are permitted to enter the "holy of holies," our sacred land, at this most sacred time of year. This creates another, even more disturbing problem: those of us who have been around for years are all able-bodied Caucasian heterosexuals and bisexuals. As both cause and effect of this, our symbol system and mythology is predominately heterosexual, our deities predominately European. Of course, it is theoretically possible for a literate person of any race or sexual preference to move progressively through the church hierarchy into the "in group,"

and it does happen occasionally, but as we have no affirmative action program, we are likely to remain largely homogenous.

Another problem is that as we expand to let new people into the inner circle, I notice a subtly New Age anti-historical, anti-feminist (so-called “post feminist”) bias creeping in, couching itself in therapeutic jargon and the language of the men’s movement, advocating “men’s liberation,” which translated usually portends a self-justifying refusal to deal with feminist issues or critique [14].

One of the limitations of our highly participatory ritual style is that, because there is no sermon form, there is no prophetic voice within our liturgy. There is no place within a worship context for our clergy to call us to accountability for racism, sexism, hypocrisy, or the just plain pettiness to which all churches, including this one, seem to fall prey. Should anyone try to do so, they will likely be accused of being anti-male, judgmental, laying a guilt trip, or, goddess forbid, preaching. Thus we disempower our implicitly feminist moral imperative by not allowing it to be made explicit in sacred space. The voice of clergy is confined to the priestly and pastoral modes. Without a scripture and a prophetic voice holding us accountable to our theology, it is easy for us to fall into mushy moral relativism, and for our diversity to disintegrate into mere individualism.

The question of children’s attendance at rituals must also be broached. There are arguments that have gone on for years revolving around whether or not it is appropriate for children to attend our rituals. Reasons given for their exclusion include their being a distraction (especially to their parents), legal concerns about our sexually explicit symbol system, the oftentimes late hour of our celebrations, and their possible boredom. I suspect Pagan anti-child bias can also be attributed to the tradition of secrecy in our Wiccan roots. If one’s way of worship is outlaw, one is certainly hesitant to pass it on to one’s children, however innocent one’s practice may be in reality. Lives have been lost for less.

Ironically, the tendency to exclude children from worship may also be traceable to our feminist roots and women’s need to experience themselves and their spirituality outside of their identities as mothers, lovers, or wives. Many of us are still trying to heal ourselves spiritually and

emotionally from the wounds of our own childhood, and often there seems to be no emotional room in this for real children. Certainly it would be nearly impossible to participate in shamanic trance work, for example, with a small child pulling at your sleeve. It is true that we need sacred space apart from children.

But what, then, becomes of our children? How do we pass our values and traditions on to the next generation? How do we form a genuine worshipping community as distinct from a healing circle, a coven, or therapy group?

In spite of, or perhaps because of, not being a mother, I hold children's religious education and their inclusion in most community events, especially worship, to be a primary responsibility of the worshipping community. In some ways we do rather well. I would say that the men in our community do better than most when it comes to taking equal responsibility for childcare. We have several single fathers among our members. But as a whole we do not take our responsibilities to the next generation seriously enough. In part this may be because we are only beginning as a movement to fully recognize our values and practices as a religion to be passed on, rather than merely as a personal pastime or spiritual path to be enjoyed in our leisure. In part it may also be that we, especially those of us from the "me generation" have taken on the rampant narcissism of our society, and are busy "spending our children's inheritance," spiritually speaking, and simply don't want to be bothered.

Certainly in part it is because, having abandoned the forms and values that forced women into the roles of caretaker, mother, and educator, we haven't figured out the best way to take up the slack. I would recommend that for starters, we could hold a regular women's circle, during which the men would take responsibility for childcare. Perhaps it could even be reciprocal, with women doing childcare for a regularly scheduled men's circle at which no children below the age of puberty are present. But it is vital that teens be present at these same-sex circles, if they are to have the help and role models they need for dealing with the complexities and mysteries of their developing sexuality in loving, safe, and non-sexist ways. And it is equally vital, if our children are to become responsible adults and community members, that the community as a whole take

responsibility for their well being and religious education, welcoming their presence and active participation at community worship events.

Withal the above concerns raised, however, the single most important thing from a feminist perspective about this ritual, and the thing that distinguishes it from any patriarchal liturgy, is its theological purpose. We are ritualizing and honoring the difficult and troublesome entry into the dark time of year, and with it, into the dark parts of our selves. It is fundamental to feminist theology and liturgy that we honor darkness and death, alongside light and birth, as intrinsic to the regenerative process[15]. We do not light a candle against the darkness. We enter with fear and trepidation, to be sure, for we cannot see our way, but we enter, because it is the only way to transformation and rebirth. We know this from our own bodies. This is woman's way-and Nature's way -of creation. This is our act of supreme faith in the regenerative power of our Goddess.

This does not mean we are entering the realm of evil. Darkness has taken on a sinister, as well as racist, meaning in the last several millennia. It was not always so. Archeologist Marija Gimbutas tells us that in the gynocentric religion of paleolithic and neolithic Old Europe, black was the color of fertility, like the earth, while the white of bleaching bones signified death. It was at the time of the Indo-European invasions during the 5th and 6th millennia, that (male) deity began to be identified almost entirely with light. At that point the artifacts and images representing deity show a startling transition from predominately female embodied images, to male warriors holding thunderbolts. This was the beginning of the worship of the god of light, who claims to create by word, or idea, alone[16]. Through the mythology and artifacts of numerous ancient cultures, it is possible to follow the banishment of the Great Goddess of All That Is first to the underworld and eventually into oblivion, being gradually replaced in the heavens by gods of thunder and light. Simultaneous with the subordination of the goddess and of women, was the systematic profanation of all the fleshy processes that happen in the dark[17].

We see good and evil residing in both darkness and light. When we say we enter the darkness we do not refer to anything daemonic or inverted; we refer to the place where the old, worn out

forms break down in decay, making rich compost for the fertile womb of the earth to renew life. We refer to the restful darkness in which the inchoate gestates until it is ready to take form. This is an intrinsic part of a feminist view of creation.

The circle casting is worth noting in this regard. It is clear from the first spoken words of this ceremony, that we hold all of life as sacred. “Magic magic everywhere, in the earth and in the air.” We are not trying to get someplace else. It is clear that deity is here, embodied in air and rocks, in water and fire, in female and male persons. Our priestess and priest are easy in their roles. It is all very human. We are sanctifying our life on earth, not in order to gain some reward elsewhere, but for the purpose of aligning ourselves with that magic, putting ourselves and our lives in the flow of divine will. Tears and laughter have a place in our liturgy. We do not fear the expression of feeling. Our practice is fleshy. We celebrate the privilege of being alive and embodied.

The next section of the ritual is this year’s version of a fine old Samhain tradition: letting go of the old to make room for the growth of the new. Upon our return to the circle we find Hecate sitting in its center, her features shrouded by a dark scarf and cloak, stirring a cauldron on her lap. Though we know this person as our friend and priestess, for us in this moment she is Hecate, the ancient Crone Goddess, reclamer of lost and broken souls. She is the wise woman, able to see into all our dark secrets. She is kind. There is no need for harshness. There is nothing to hide. She is introduced with “The Crone Song” song, sung by its author, accompanying herself on guitar,”...Come to us now, Great Queen of the Heavens/Kali, Binah, Hecate/We dance your circle in pairs and sevens /and ask your magic to show us the way/To begin/This difficult transformation/From within/ We chant your invocation/ Come to us now Grandmother Crone/ We call you home.” [18]

She is here. Hecate takes the circle. She tells us what she has come for, what she can offer us. “Now is the sacrifice of souls, now is the giving up, the stripping down to the bone. The time of bones is the time of no-compromise. Throw it all into Hecate’s soup, let Her stir it up, and we shall see what will be born anew. Come,” she invites us, indicating her cauldron, “throw it in.

This is the womb of rebirth, the cup of immortality. Give yourselves freely. Do not hold back. This is the moment. I can use it all. Oh, what a spicy soup this will be!”

Last year’s May King begins by offering his crown as symbolic sacrifice for all the life that comes to an end in the winter, that it might in exchange be reborn in the spring. One by one we step forward and place ourselves before Her, addressing Her for all to hear. By our own volition, we offer dysfunctional and worn out parts of ourselves and our lives to be composted in Her cauldron of rebirth. We feel the weight of old habits and attitudes dropping from our shoulders. What relief that she will take them! We offer self-doubts and self-hatreds, addictions, self-deceptions, and self-sabotage, fears, prides, shames, all into the soup. A welfare mother says she wants to give up poverty. A child gives up the pretense of perfection. A timid young woman throws in her fear of saying what she thinks. I feel the girdle around my soul growing tighter. I walk toward the cauldron, unsure of exactly what I will say. “I have grown so small and tight,” I begin,”I have become so negative, so bitter, I hardly recognize myself.” She beckons me forward. “I want to give you my rage, my suspiciousness. I find I am looking at everybody with suspicion. I have built a shell around myself, and I can’t even laugh or love freely anymore.” I place my head on Her lap and begin to sob. “Yes, that’s it,” She assures me gently. She strokes my hair and invites me to place my head over the cauldron and put it all in. A roar forms in my belly, catches in my throat, then tears its way out through my vocal chords. Again. I feel the tightness leaving me. The bitterness so long with me begins to evaporate. I feel able to breathe for the first time in years. I am released. “Thank you, Grandmother,” I whisper, before returning to my spot in the circle.

The letting-go continues at its own pace, peppered with wise comments from Hecate about Nature’s ways of breaking down even the most stubborn of substances. It is all grist for her mill, food for her worms. This is not the tragedy of life, but a part of its Mystery. We take our time. We have all night.

The natural cycle of life (decomposition, conception, gestation, birth, growth, reproduction, maturation, decomposition) provides a language and paradigm which lend depth to our liturgy,

when used well, as occurred in the section of Hecate's cauldron, where we were dealing with predominately personal material. In a Nature centered paradigm, rather than confessing to a transcendent god, then being granted absolution through penance or grace, we shed parts of ourselves and our lives to be decomposed and recomposed. Nothing is ever lost to the Goddess. It is important to realize, however, that this ritual moment is part of a longer spiritual process. It is effective in the transformation of sin and/or suffering only if it takes place in the context of genuine repentance, in its original meaning: to turn around and walk the other way. The cauldron can only transform what we genuinely release to it.

When all who wish to have added their ingredients to Hekit's soup, it is time for us to personally enter the underworld. This is the night of all the year when we can best complete old business, reclaim lost memories or exiled parts of ourselves. Hades, our priest, induces a trance state, and takes those of us who wish to follow down past layers of humus, rock, molten lava, down a dark narrow corridor, into our own unconscious. We find ourselves in a setting our conscious minds may have long forgotten, if indeed they ever knew it. It is a fragile moment. Suddenly a song begins, jolting me out of my reverie. It is a song of which I am very fond, appropriate for the season, but the timing is wrong. Rather than "taking me down," as the song requests, it yanks me out of my most private inner world, leaving me feeling violated. The process is not completed in any effective way, and I feel frightened of being left in the underworld, just as I was approaching an image I since have forgotten.

This has happened before with delicately induced trance states in other rituals, I recall. I feel angry about insensitivity of timing, with people in such vulnerable states. My background as a psychotherapist makes me aware that this sort of interruption can be more than annoying; it can be dangerous, leaving people unable to integrate the material that has been elicited. In our rush toward egalitarianism, we too frequently violate the trust of the congregation by allowing amateur psychotherapists to lead complex processes without adequate knowledge or training. As we learned painfully in the early feminist movement, equality does not mean we all have the same level of skill and expertise in all areas. Unfortunately our rituals sometimes suffer from our reticence to admit that.

Somehow we move on. We are asked to name those things that have been taken from us against our will which are already in the cauldron. This year has been a hard one for many of us. One member lost her home, her extensive art and mythology library, and her book in progress in the Oakland fire. Another lost her brother-in-law, her cat, her son's grandfather, and the hard drive in her computer, all in the same week. One member's marriage dissolved. Several of us lost jobs and economic security. We say good-bye to all that has been shattered and lost, never to return, and release it, along with our suffering, to Hecate's cauldron of changes. "Cauldron of changes, blossom of bone, arc of eternity, hole in the stone."

Now for the final ingredients: What would we like to see go back to its elemental beginnings to compost, releasing its energy to be used for something new? Here the ritual moves from the personal to the planetary. Our personal material is already in the soup. What needs to decay in our larger world and system? We stand and form our hands and bodies into a D.N.A. spiral in reverse. We are a wand of decomposition. We move as one (counter-clockwise for unwinding) to the altar of each element and call out the names of things we wish to see disintegrate: rigid stances, unforgiving self-righteous attitudes, greed, corruption, nuclear weapons, clearcutting of forests, addictions, the budget for building more highways, John Sinunu's job, uncontained emotions, acid rain, rape, hatred of women, hatred of men, sloppy thinking, lies, "airy-fairy" ungroundedness, battering, child abuse, pollution, the AIDS virus. Be gone! "Down, down, decomposing, recomposing."

We are in the null space between what was and what will be. This is the moment of limitless possibilities, out of which we may weave reality anew, if we dare. What will we dare? People wander off in silence to contemplate and envision the possible future.

When we reassemble, the D.N.A. wand of hands is re-formed, this time moving clockwise, the direction in which energy naturally moves in this hemisphere. Again we move from altar to altar, naming what we wish to see restored or brought into being: clean air, the ozone layer, caring, commitment, deep feeling, compassion, patience, perseverance, grounding, peace, safety, health, RAIN! In general, our words are more abstract than in the previous section on disintegration. It is

easier to be specific about what already exists that we would like to see gone, than it is to be highly specific about things that do not yet exist that we wish to bring into being. My partner and I are noticeably more concrete. We have big plans and need tools. “Funding!” we call out, “funding for The Great Earth Survival Revival! And video toasters. And a new audio mixer. A Green television network. And railroads. Miles and miles of railroads, replacing highways. Birth control clinics throughout the world.”

Why are we invoking railroads, clinics, and video toasters instead of peace and clean air? Because it is we humans who are causing the problems. It is we humans who need to wake up and learn to live on this earth in harmony. And it is we humans who are going to have to create the tools and institutions necessary to support the transformation of our relationship to one another and to the planet. How else can we get clean air except by replacing the need for cars with energy efficient, accessible public transportation? How else can we limit the human population except by providing women with real choices about childbearing? How else will we get the word of the planet out to enough people, except with video and 16 channel audio mixers? After years of participating in such rituals, I have observed that specificity of imagery increases the odds on the magic’s efficacy. Sending John Sinunu’s job to the recycling bin was a prime example of magic that worked.

The problem that becomes apparent as we try to envision a future of our making, is that we lack the moral, theological vocabulary to translate our Nature-centered paradigm into concrete images and actions at the level of larger systems. How do we get from here to there? Our own lives and work must form the bridge. Just as throwing personal pain or problems into the cauldron is but one step in a larger process of self transformation, magical envisioning is just one step in the process of social transformation. By itself, it is merely wishful thinking.

We speak of the Goddess within, yet we seem unsure how to be Her hands in co-creating the large-scale changes we desire. By envisioning the outcome we want, but not the tools or resources we will need to create it, we seem to be asking for change, rather than guidance, from

“above.” This comes dangerously close to equating the Goddess with the feminist’s nemesis: belief in a magic mommy who can and will fix every little thing.

Where are we humans in this mix? Some Pagans seem to have doubts about our moral right to impose change in any realm beyond the strictly personal, even though at the root of an eco-systems based world-view is the knowledge that we can’t avoid it. There is no such thing as not involved. This understanding has not permeated our liturgy, however, as thoroughly as it might. Too many of us refugees from the New Age mouth platitudes about only being able to change ourselves, about transformation lying solely within and through each individual. This common wisdom does not address the nature of social institutions or the reality of the systemic, institutionalized evil that is devouring our Mother Nature and all her children. Nor does it empower the moral authority that logically derives from a theology of immanence. Unless we can claim the authority of the Living Planet to say what we believe to be good or evil, unless we use our visions to sustain and inspire our work of fighting evil and healing our world—within and beyond ourselves; unless we seek resources, strength, and guidance; unless we understand our visualization to be one part of our sustained effort at co-creation, our visions will remain disincarnate within a patriarchal model of creation in which idea gives birth by word alone, instantly and without the pain of labor. This is far from a feminist, embodied view of creation or change, and far also from Nature’s way. Furthermore it gives us no ground from which to address the objective realities of oppression.

Unfortunately, we lack a well developed theology of good and evil, a common ground from which to speak and act. Having forsaken the traditional theological language of salvation, sin, and sacrifice, we too often find ourselves in the untenable position of trying to rewrite reality with only visualization and the barrenness of subjectivist psychological vocabulary and paradigm to help us.

This vocabulary and paradigm cannot adequately explain why things are as they are, or how we might be instrumental in changing them, except within a narrow, personal field, because it is based on an atomized view of the individual psyche as causal, at the center of reality. It claims that the

social is a mere reflection of the individual. In its inversion of basic feminist theory, it reduces the political to the merely personal. It cannot give us direction because it is morally neutral, patriarchal, and implicitly system-supporting. By reducing rich and complex theological concepts like “evil,” “goddess,” “grace,” and “co-creation” to simplistic half-truths like “projecting our shadow,” “the inner feminine,” or “creating our own reality,” we frame ourselves into an ethic of narcissistic individualism bordering on solipsism. This language and paradigm gives us no moral, conceptual ground from which to judge and intervene in our world. At its worst it is a sort of cosmic or karmic Calvinism in which success proves worthiness, thereby blaming the victim for creating the reality of her own oppression.

We need a vocabulary of reciprocal relationality and co-creation with the divine, if we are to find in our liturgy a meaning and understanding of our relationships (to the universe and to one another) that is liberating for women, and an ethical system coming out of that understanding that helps us to know how and where to act. It is not our theological ground that is lacking; it is our theological language. The language and symbol system of organic evolution, which is inherently relational and processive, as well as diverse, needs to fully inform our understanding of our role in large, systemic change.

It may also be time to selectively reclaim traditional theological language. We need to be able to speak of the redemption of Gaia from those who have her in bondage and are exploiting her unto death. This language shift would redirect our consciousness and actions, putting the onus of liberation on us. We might speak of humanity in this time as a people in need of salvation, having become estranged from our Mother Nature. This language has depth and power. It gives direction that is not simply self-absorbed. Our magic would automatically become more concrete, our petition more responsible.

Now that we have completed our major work, we want just to be with each other. We have new stories, poems, and songs to share, as well as insights and visions from our descent that night. And we are monstrously hungry. It is by now about 4:00 a.m. The pot-luck food is brought out

from the house, blessed, and we sit comfortably in the circle, eating, drinking, singing, talking and listening.

This is a remarkable event, this informal sharing in sacred circle. One of the greatest attributes of Pagan theology and practice is that it does not separate the sacred from the secular. We do not cast outside the circle certain aspects of life not deemed sufficiently holy. We hold all of life as sacred. Life is whole-y. We honor the sacred in the ordinary. Our laughter, our fellowship, our remembrance of Samhain's past and friends not present, all are sanctified by their inclusion in our circle.

After a sufficient time of relaxing and informal sharing, we are ready to complete our ritual work: weaving a web of protection. A large web made of many cords is carefully unwrapped in the center of our circle by our church founder. He explains to us that this web was originally woven exactly one year ago in Peru, in a Samhain ritual shared by some of our group members with the indigenous medicine people there. After wearing them for several days, hosts and visitors had woven their cords together into a symbol of the unification of indigenous, earth loving people in both Northern and Southern hemispheres. Since then, knots have been added to the web at various conferences and festivals around the country. Each knot in the web stands for a wish or hope for a better world. Now we are invited to add our own wishes to the web's power. Each of us holds one string. This time we are weaving protection into its magic, for what has already been a year of hardship and suffering promises to continue through the winter. Magic alone does not create reality, but like any form of prayer, it increases or decreases the odds on certain occurrences. By weaving an umbrella of psychic protection, we hope to prevent some of the fall-out and backlash from landing on us.

What is it, then that we request protection from and for in this elaborated benediction? Do we ask for protection from the growing plagues of immune disorders and environmental diseases around us, from the devastation of the crashing economy, the increasing dangers on the streets to ourselves and our children? Alas, the solipsistic world view referred to above once again frames many prayers in such a way that some of our newer members ask for protection from

themselves, as if to say, if I can protect myself from myself, all else will be fine; only my own thought forms can harm me. (Our more seasoned members have a more fully developed theology and vocabulary, and are far less reliant on New Age psycho-metaphysics for their cosmology.) This denial of evil and of existence outside the self is both dangerous and arrogant. Women lose ground as the language of feminism and interdependence is replaced with the language of addiction and co-dependence.

One woman asks to be protected from the fear that interferes with her relationships; another asks for protection from her addiction, a third from her anger. There is no mention of the real and objective causes for fear and anger, or protection from these. I call out for protection of the goddess' people from the wrath of right-wing fundamentalists and their god. One feminist petitions for protection of our right to reproductive choice. Another speaks to the increase of violent crimes against women, and asks that she and her sisters be protected. A masculist predictably responds by asking for protection from male bashing and blame, as if this were comparable. A mother prays for the protection of children from all forms of abuse. Someone else puts a protection on the old growth Redwoods of California's North Coast. And so it goes, until we complete the circle and everyone has had an opportunity to speak. In spite of our shortcomings this is a powerful exercise ingroup prayer and participatory magic.

When all present have had the opportunity to add their prayers, we visualize a dome of protection surrounding us. We hold the web high above our heads and begin circling clockwise, singing "We are weaving our power, we are weaving our magic, we are weaving our lives." We circle and sing until the spell is strong in energy, then we ground it in the earth.

The light will return soon. We must finish our ritual and return to the upper world. It is time to thank the God and Goddess of the Underworld for gracing our circle, time to say good-bye to our honored guests and ancestors, time to turn things back around. A new year is beginning.

Whatever was done tonight is done. The year will tell us what our magic wrought.

We thank the spirits of Earth, Air, Fire, and Water for helping with our magic, and take down the magic circle between the worlds. "All from Air into Air, let the misty curtain part/ All is ended,

all is done, what has been must now be gone!/ What is done by Ancient Art must merry meet and merry part and merry meet again.” {Faery Trad.}

The circle is open, the ritual is over.

What have we done here, and what have we accomplished? We have honored the deities, both female and male, and our departed ancestors. We have offered the old and the decaying to the Goddess for breaking down and regeneration. We have retrieved lost parts of ourselves. We have shared food, drink, stories, and laughter. We have sung the songs and prayed the prayers. We have honored and said good-bye to the old year and planted seeds for the new one (but we will not know which ones took root until well past Winter Solstice). We have woven a web to surround and protect us. We have worshipped and communed, touched and been touched, reflected on our lives in the framework of community and of the greater whole.

As I write I am once again struck by the ancient familiarity of our ritual and by its humanity. It truly reflects us as we are and as we hope to be, in all our frailty and beauty. This is a liturgical tradition that has room for the people in it. Perhaps that is because it is still fresh, in the bloom of its youth, not yet having been codified into doctrine. Perhaps the early Christians told stories and laughed, too, as they broke bread in communion. I am sure, however, that pre-Christian people in caves and roundhouses around the Mediterranean and in Northern Europe did so. My bones remember this. They remember too the invasion of the patriarchal hordes, the destruction of the temples, the appropriation and then the defaming of the Goddess’ name and Her priestesses. Now we are returning.

Is the return of the Goddess, then, good news for women? My answer is: it could be. Or it could be another means by which women are kept in their place, told to be sweet and nurturant, like “Her.” It all depends on whether we allow narrow, patriarchal, male-created definitions to circumscribe our ideas about Her. Unless feminists are vigilant in insisting that archetype not be confused with stereotype, Her worship will just become more grist for the patriarchal mill, as happened long ago in patriarchal Greece and Rome [19], as continues today in India. The patriarchy will grind out ever more subtle and insidious propaganda on the soft power of the

inner feminine as an obfuscation of the same old saw of the woman behind the man. Patriarchy will, until its dying breath, which I pray will be soon, use every weapon in its—and our—arsenal to prevent women’s power from gaining a foothold. If its agents can turn the movement to reclaim feminine deity in their favor, as an agent of sexism, they will do so, and with the help of many women, in the name of reconciliation, in the name of “balance.” If they cannot wipe out all memory of Her, they will try to tame Her, and us, and all the wild, fecund and fetid, unmanageable, holy life that whispers Her name.

If on the other hand we recognize and honor the Goddess in all her aspects and changes, as did our most ancient and gynocentric forebears, if we honor Her solar as well as Her lunar persona, warrior as well as midwife, devourer and virgin (woman-for-herself), as well as mother and lover, perhaps our love of Her will give us the strength we need to continue to fight for the freedom and dignity of all women and all life, as embodiments of Her.

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