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Samhain: the origin of Halloween

By Emily Wilcox

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- You probably celebrate Samhain, and you probably don't know it.

If you and your kids dress up in costumes, light a fire, hollow out a gourd and place a light inside it, think ghostly thoughts and get the shivers, you are tapping into a Celtic festival as old as the dirt beneath your feet.

Thousands of years ago, Celtic tribes in Ireland, the United Kingdom and continental Europe celebrated their new year Nov. 1. The Celts believed that, on Oct. 31, the eve of the new year, the veil separating the world of the living from the dead dropped, allowing them to commune with their ancestors and ask them advice for the coming year. It was also a time of mischief; when ghosts of the dead would cause trouble, damage crops and the like.

They called it Samhain (pronounced 'sowen') and many scholars believe it was the most important Celtic festival because it marked the beginning of the year.

To celebrate, some Celts dressed in animal heads and skins while others dressed as ancestors they wanted to emulate. Celtic priests, known as Druids, built enormous sacred bonfires the Celts gathered around, offering crops and animals to the Celtic gods. After the festivities, Celts lit a branch with fire from the sacred bonfire to relight their hearths at home. Druids with their long robes, staffs and painted faces must have looked a bit like today's stereotypical witch.

Centuries passed, and Christians incorporated the festival into their own holy days. In the 800s, Pope Boniface IV declared Nov. 1 All Saints' Day, what later became known as All-hallows or All-hallowmas, a time to honor the saints and martyrs. It was a natural progression to dub the night before this holy day All-hallows Eve, which, in time, became Halloween. In 1000 AD, the Church made Nov. 2 All Souls' Day, proclaiming it a day to honor the dead, and putting the finishing touches on the transformation from pagan to Christian festival. All Souls' Day was celebrated much the way the Celts celebrated Samhain - with huge fires. Christians even dressed up in costumes as their favorite saint, angel and even as the devil.

Patrice Hatcher, of the downtown witch shoppe Ishtar's Avalon, is a successful businesswoman and a witch who celebrates Samhain.

"Everyone celebrates Samhain, they just don't know what they're celebrating," Hatcher said. "This is a time to honor those who passed before you."

Hatcher led the way to a personal altar she has created on a tabletop, complete with pictures of dead relatives.

"My grandfather is my guardian angel; he watches over me," she said, gesturing to a black and white photo.

Another picture depicts Hatcher's grandmother, who made her feel like a princess for one week out of every year.

Praying to these and other ancestors is Hatcher's way of honoring them on Samhain, but she said she asks them for guidance all year.

And other ancestors receive her attention as well.

Hatcher's bloodline traces back to the Warren family, who used to own the very building that houses Ishtar's Avalon on Court Street. She is also a direct descendent of a handful of Mayflower passengers, like Henry Sampson, John Alden and Stephen Hopkins. The Sparrow family, which settled in Plymouth hundreds of years ago, is also counted among her cousins.

For Hatcher, the Samhain celebration kicks off at 10 a.m., Oct. 31, when she and other witches will set up tables outside her shop and give sidewalk Tarot and Rune readings for \$5. Proceeds will benefit the Winslow Farm in Norton, an animal sanctuary that saves abandoned and abused animals.

The downtown Spooktacular event will be held from 4 p.m. to 7 p.m., when merchants like Hatcher will hand out treats to children who parade down Court Street in costumes. It's fun and safe trick-or-treating, and a great excuse for parents to shop and enjoy the downtown area.

After the Spooktacular, Hatcher and friends will form a drumming circle for a while before performing a hilarious finger puppet show at her shop.

What many folks like about paganism, Hatcher said, is that it isn't dominated by one particular sex the way Christianity is, and, yet, it embraces many tenets embraced by Christians. Pagans believe in balance between the male and female and believe the energy you emit comes back to you, much the way Christians embrace the concept of reaping what you sow. Pagans also believe in doing unto others as you would have them do unto you and do not embrace prayers that send out negative energy of any kind. Curses and hexes are out of the question. Again, the feeling is, you get back what you send out. Hatcher's friend and coworker Dennis Callahan explains that spells are simply prayers with props.

For this reason, Hatcher and other pagans cannot understand why some Christians continue to confuse paganism with devil worship.

"It's hilarious," Hatcher said, laughing. "The devil is a Christian deity, not a pagan one."

But the stigma against witches and paganism is real and is broadcast by a local witch who did not want his identity revealed for that very reason.

His Russian ancestors were Jews who fled pogroms to the relative safety of America. He said he embraces one God, but is essentially a witch in his belief in humanity's ties to nature and the influence the dead have upon the living.

"I believe we are carbon-based; that we are, basically, one with nature. We're affected by the moon – we're affected by nature," he said. "I believe the spiritual world is a continuance and is an extremity of this world. I believe our spirits continue on."

For this witch, Samhain is a harvest festival, when people gather to celebrate the fruits of the earth. Like Hatcher, he said he shies away from the major organized religions because they encourage elitism and narrow-mindedness toward others who live or think differently.

"I have to be an independent thinker," he said. "Anything that attacks my open-mindedness I walk away from. I think your conscience should be open-minded and you shouldn't allow someone else to think for you. I don't think we should be locked into anything. We are evolving and changing and adapting. We should be constantly adapting our thoughts."

Like other witches, he said compassion, kindness and inclusiveness define his philosophy. For him, Samhain is a time to reflect on mistakes he's made in the past year and to vow to improve himself in the coming year. He prays to his ancestors, privately, outside in the open, where he can feel his oneness with nature.

"You are your church. You are your temple. Look up at the stars. The whole world is a church," he said. "To me,

the earth and the universe are the same.”

Hatcher’s oneness with this pagan season of rebirth comes to a fore at 11:45 p.m., Oct. 31, when she and her friends gather at the shop, pop the cork on a champagne bottle and usher in the new year.

“This is a time to get together and celebrate our ancestors,” she said. “It’s always been my favorite holiday.”

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