

Communal Worship, Rites of Passage

Summary: Many Pagans emphasize physical practice, often through rites of passage and regular or seasonal communal rituals. One particular place of focus for a plethora of Pagan practitioners is the lunar cycle, with the full moon serving as a time to meet and perform rituals together.

Pagan worship and devotion takes many forms. Just as the Pagan movement as a whole is diverse, so are Wiccans, Druids, and Heathens. Within each of these groups, there are many paths and traditions, each with their own variations of ritual and liturgy. The Pagan emphasis on practice, however, is nearly universal, as is the emphasis on physicality. Engaging the senses with movement, music, incense, flowers, colorful costumes, beautiful altars, and delicious food and drink, Pagan ritual celebrates the experience of being embodied in a sacred world.

For regular worship, some groups meet on a regular weekly or monthly schedule, according to the availability of the members; other groups time their meetings with a lunar calendar. Wiccans and other Pagans believe that energy can be drawn down from the moon and that this energy (often associated with feminine divinity) can be brought into a practitioner or channeled into a magickal working. The full moon is a time of increase and abundance, considered the best time for raising energy or consecrating spells. The dark of the moon is considered a time for initiating a new beginning, exploring hidden matters, and contemplation.

One typical Wiccan ritual is the full moon circle. Wiccans begin by purifying themselves and the space with water and incense. Next, a boundary is formed around the group by “casting a circle,” sometimes a physical circle on the ground or floor, but more often a symbolic or spiritual boundary drawn with a ritual knife, wand, or other object. The circle sets the place apart from ordinary space and time, and serves as a container within which spiritual energy will be generated. Next, the participants invoke spiritual powers and deities and may share a meditation, poetry, or story that relates to the ritual’s intention. Finally, the group dances, chants, and/or drums to raise energy. This activity may be merely

celebratory, or the energy may be directed toward healing or transformation. At the end of the rite, the spiritual powers are thanked, and the participants share food.

Druid rituals are somewhat different. As in Wicca, a typical Druid ritual often begins with cleansing and purifying the participants and the ritual space. Instead of casting a circle, however, a “sacred center” is created around key symbols of Druidry (often the world tree, the fire, and the well, or in other groups, the tree, the stone of destiny, and the holy mound). The participants may then engage in a guided meditation or reading of liturgical poetry to frame the ritual’s purpose. For the centerpiece of the ritual, offerings in the form of food and drink are made to various deities and spirits, after which divination is performed and interpreted for the group. To close, a cup of blessing is passed, and thanks are offered to the spirits and deities.

In Heathenry, the typical ritual observance is called a *blót*, which translates as “offering.” The ritual leader usually begins by blessing and warding the space with a hammer (symbol of Thor). Readings from traditional texts may follow, as well as a statement of intention for the ritual. Next, deities are invoked, and a cup of mead or other beverage is blessed, as are the participants. The cup is passed around the group, and each person toasts to honor the gods or their ancestors, or to express other sentiments. The leftover drink is poured out as an offering to the gods before a formal closing. Pagans also celebrate a variety of rites of passage. In some Pagan traditions, a blessing and naming ceremony is held soon after birth. In Wicca, it may be called a “wiccaning,” considered a formal blessing given to young children from the Goddess or the gods. Some Pagans also celebrate coming-of-age ceremonies for their adolescent sons and daughters. For young women, this rite may be timed with first menstruation. In New Hampshire, the Temple of Witchcraft offers specifically queer rites of passage to the Pagan community in addition to other services such as prison ministry, military outreach, and spiritual healing. The Temple’s co-founder, Christopher Penczak, is author of *Gay Witchcraft* (2003), one of only a few Pagan instructional books to focus specifically on the spiritual needs of queer Pagans.

Some Pagan traditions have tradition-specific rites of marriage and partnership, but one common ritual practiced for couples of all genders is a “handfasting.” Handfasting rituals will generally include vows written by the couple and an actual binding together of their wrists with colorful cords or scarves.

Among Wiccans, it may involve the good-luck ritual of jumping over a *besom*, a broomstick made of twigs. Another distinctive ritual among feminist Pagans is the “croning” rite, held to mark a woman’s transition to the post-menopausal stage of wisdom, when she becomes a community elder, called a “crone.” The last ritual in the life cycle is the passage from life to death. For some Pagans, death is one’s final consecration in this lifetime. It is a passage to a spiritual world, and in some traditions, to rebirth and reincarnation. Pagans hold a variety of funeral rites, which may include telling stories about the deceased, toasting his or her memory, and rituals intended to ease the deceased’s transition into the next world.