

# About the Sabbats

by Judy Harrow

The word "religion" means "re-connection." What has been severed? What connections need to be re-woven? How does our particular set of religious practices help us reconnect what was wrongfully and tragically torn apart?

Each Sabbat is a multivocal symbol. Sometimes you'll see the word "symbol" used to mean by definition a multivocal statement, as contrasted with "sign" a word, phrase or picture that has one simple and commonly understood meaning. Thus is the *Wheel of the Year* taken as a whole (a multivocal meta-symbol?). Multivocal symbols mean many things -- there is no one right and true interpretation -- but normally the set of meanings is interrelated, a cluster of associations branching from some common point. The *Wheel of the Year*, as we celebrate it, has associations both with the seasonal cycle of Nature and the normal developmental phases of human life. Thus it connects them.

1. Modern technology mediates and cushions the impact that Nature's cycles make on our lives. Most of us are warm in winter, cool in summer, have steady and reliable access to light and to food. We are safer and far more comfortable, but our awareness of Nature is no longer inherent in our lives. We have to work much harder to stay in contact with Her. This work is utterly essential. Even though it's not as immediately apparent, our lives are still wholly dependent on Hers. People and institutions that have lost conscious awareness of that connection are daily putting Her life and ours at significant risk.
2. The Sabbats were originally about the changing of the seasons. But the seasons change differently in different bio-regions. For example, one of my friends is eloquent and adamant that the Greek festivals speak better to her than the Celtic because the seasonal cycle in Southern California is much more like it is in Greece, an alternation of dry and rainy. Here in the Northeast, things are pretty similar to the way they are in Ireland.

If we work with myth systems that grew up where we live, or in a place much like where we live, our ritual work will help us notice and stay connected with the local climate and ecology. One of the core goals of geocentric religion is to increase our conscious contact with Nature. That means that not all Protean covens will be working with the same myths or symbols, nor even necessarily with the classic Wiccan *Wheel of the Year*, although certainly all our students should be familiar with it.

3. The Sabbats, as multivocal symbols, are not **only** about the Earth's seasonal cycle. There are cycles and changes within human lives as well. Some of those are fairly universal and predictable, and so they are like the seasonal cycle, while others are more personal and idiosyncratic. Humans have a need for "passage rituals," in which we mark, honor and integrate our own changes. Partly we celebrate them when they happen: a coming of age, a handfasting. But by also celebrating the cycle in an ongoing way, by mapping the human life cycle onto the Wheel of the Year, we tell ourselves several important things:
  - We are part of Nature. Our lives reflect the life of the Earth, and Hers reflects ours.

- We are part of the human community. There is a certain similarity in the broad outlines of our lives, basic experiences that all or almost all of us share. So even if we are not at that particular point in our own personal life, by remembering or anticipating the common passages, we contemplate our common humanity.
- We have a chance to anticipate and prepare for changes yet to come. Specifically, I think that many years of celebrating Samhain cuts through the general culture's denial of death, and allows us to enter later life with something more like equanimity.
- We have a chance to re-examine the issues of life stages already behind us, and perhaps to come to new insights and better integrations.

So, the *Wheel of the Year* is an effective metaphor for understanding life, a valid part of our psychospiritual path. The Sabbats place us on the Earth, in the human community, and on the time-lines of our own lives. The seasonal cycle is inherently sacred and is also the Great Model, the framework for celebrating the longer cycle of human life. Thus we connect the two, as we so desperately need to do. Although this may sound very modern, it is identical with the very ancient Celtic understanding that religion is about negotiating and maintaining right relationship between Land and Tribe.

---

written by: Judy Harrow, March 1998

updated: January 19, 2000; © 1998, 2000, 2001 by Judy Harrow

---