

The Quartered Circle: A Wiccan Mandala

by Judy Harrow and Mevlannen Beshderen

Nearly all neo-Pagan rituals begin with casting a Circle and calling the Quarters, although different Traditions do this in different ways, and even the attributions of elements to quarters may vary. Similar symbols, such as mandalas and Medicine Wheels, show up around the Earth. The two very basic ideas that are represented by the quartered Circle are so nearly ubiquitous that they might be trans-cultural, intrinsic to the way humans make sense of our world.

1. **Orientation in space:** the traditional Navajo home is built so the first rays of the rising sun enter the door. Muslims face Mecca to pray. We call the Quarters. All of these are variations on a theme. There are some very different cultural explanations given for some remarkably similar behaviors. The actual source of this behavior seems to be more natural than cultural. It may come from observation of the way the sun travels across the sky, the way the sun's path changes as the seasons change. Or it may actually be more basic than our humanity, a subtle "wired in" sensitivity to polar magnetism that we share with other animals.
2. **The model of wholeness:** Whatever the qualities or energies attributed to the quarter points; you can bet they are those that are considered most important by that particular group. The quartered Circle is a way of making sure everything really important is honored for itself and brought into a balanced relationship with everything else that is really important. Its meta-message is the fundamental polarity between unity and diversity.

Drawing correspondences is the Wiccan national sport. As you go along, you will find more and more things mapped onto the basic glyph of the quartered Circle: seasons, colors, altar tools, Tarot suits.... Some of them will make more sense than others. Some are highly debatable. Some vary from Tradition to Tradition, even from coven to coven at times. In the fact that these attributions are not immediately obvious and are not universally held lies a very important lesson:

Our symbol systems are human-created vocabularies, models, not facts

It will work best for both your training and our group bonding if we use the same attributions within the coven, even for our own private workings at home. Even though those attributions may be our way, they are not the Only Right Way. Throughout history, people have caused each other unspeakable suffering by confusing those two things. By holding our metaphors lightly, we can avoid repeating that stupid and tragic error. So remember that none of our models and metaphors are anything but our own human and imperfect attempts to make sense of an infinitely large and complex Reality that will always be greater than our capacity to take it in.

That being said, Proteus Coven uses the most widespread generic Wiccan Quarter attributions. These are the ones that allow us to work most comfortably with other groups when we visit or gather:

- **East is the place of beginnings**, associated with the element Air. This is the Quarter of intellect: of research, logic, critical thinking. Contrary to popular notion, we neither reject nor disrespect science - we only seem to do so because we hold it in balance while the culture around us grants it supremacy. You will also find the East associated with spring, dawn, childhood, and the color yellow.
- **South is the place of peaking**, associated with the element Fire. This is the Quarter of passion: of courage, will, lust, drive, desire, action. In older texts, the word "emotion" is associated with South, but in reality only some emotions are fiery, while others are watery. So we substitute the word "passion," to avoid confusion. Energy, in the physical sense, is a function of the South, and other associations include summer, high noon, adolescence, and the color red.
- **West is the place of deepening**, associated with the element Water. This is the Quarter of wisdom: of compassion, intuition and insight. Dreamwork is here, and divination, and all other spiritual practices and their fruit, balancing the intellect of the East, each essential to inform and correct the other. West is associated with autumn, dusk, maturity and the color blue.
- **North is the place of transformation**, of death and birth and the nothingness in between, associated with the element Earth. This is the Quarter of the body: of doing, skill, stability and the pleasures of the senses. The form of the North balances the force of the South. North is also traditionally the Quarter of silence, balancing with its stillness the South's high energy. North is associated with winter, midnight, both elderhood and infancy, and the color green.

More recently, some groups, including our own, have been calling a fifth Quarter:

- **Center is the place of magic**: of balance and integration, of choice and responsibility, of consummation and change, the place where we stand and to which we draw the powers and qualities of the four quarters in accord with our needs and desires of that moment. Center is also the Witch him- or herself. All things come together at Center and from Center the Mystery emanates outward to fill all the worlds. For Judy, the color of Center is iridescence, the shimmering rainbow. Mevlannen sees Center as silver.

The spatial metaphor for wholeness is incomplete without mentioning the two remaining directions. Although we do not usually formally invoke them as Quarters, it's important to at least be aware of Up and Down. Many indigenous and shamanic peoples envision some sort of vertical world axis - our Maypole is likely an echo of these - and a three-level universe.

This is not a description of Heaven and Hell. Those are later accretions. We do not conflate higher with better or lower with worse. Instead, in a Pagan world view, down and up are both good and both necessary, although different enough to look like opposites: nature and culture. Life-giving power flows in both directions, spiraling like the Maypole's ribbons, which wind in both directions, forming the double helix of life.

What lies below us are sheer natural forces and capacities, which may be conceptualized as power animals. This includes internal qualities like speed, cunning, strength, and also such external natural forces as mountain, ocean, hurricane, sun, moon. Some cultures represent these

as a separate family of Gods, such as the Formorians, that are more alien than the others. These powers are the foundation of our lives and of all life. The color of Below is black.

What lies above us are the great ideals, which may differ from culture to culture. This is why the Gods of one culture never correspond completely to those of another -- different cultures, and subcultures, uphold different core values. Also, there are a lot more than one way of categorizing Reality. Cultural ideals may include love, courage, wisdom, generosity, firmness. Cultural groups create stories and symbols to transmit these values and to inspire people to live by them. The color of Above is gold.

Polarity is a word you'll hear a lot around the Craft. Our working definition is "two things, both good, both necessary, but which are perceived to be opposites." Sometimes the perception that they are opposite is just plain wrong, and the way to resolve a polarity is to insist on "both, and." Sometimes the two things really are reciprocal, and the goal is to be unfrozen along the spectrum, free to choose from minute to minute what balance point will best serve your purpose. You will run into quite a few classic Wiccan polarities as you pursue your training. The three that are represented by the spatial metaphor's three axes are not the only ones, but they are quite important, and well worthy of your attention. They are:

- The Receptive Axis: knowledge (East) and wisdom (West)
- The Active Axis: force (South) and form (North)
- The Axis of Power: nature (Below) and culture (Above)

Poised between these is a place of great wonder.

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