***Samhain***

*In the season leaves should love,*

*since it gives them leave to move*

*through the wind, towards the ground*

*they were watching while they hung,*

*legend says there is a seam*

*stitching darkness like a name.*

*Now when dying grasses veil*

*earth from the sky in one last pale*

*wave, as autumn dies to bring*

*winter back, and then the spring,*

*we who die ourselves can peel*

*back another kind of veil*

*that hangs among us like thick smoke.*

*Tonight at last I feel it shake.*

*I feel the nights stretching away*

*thousands long behind the days*

*till they reach the darkness where*

*all of me is ancestor.*

*I move my hand and feel a touch*

*move with me, and when I brush*

*my own mind across another,*

*I am with my mother's mother.*

*Sure as footsteps in my waiting*

*self, I find her, and she brings*

*arms that carry answers for me,*

*intimate, a waiting bounty.*

*"Carry me." She leaves this trail*

*through a shudder of the veil,*

*and leaves, like amber where she stays,*

*a gift for her perpetual gaze.*

*- Annie Finch*

**Circle Eleven: Samhain**

Of course I have always loved this season. How could I not? From my earliest memories in that small town in the Minnesota River valley, before the age of technology and the internet, we wove a different kind of web. Our threads were made of tradition, and lineages we didn’t understand at the time. Dressed up in ghost stories and false idolatry of the evil witch, and her minions: the bat; the black cat; broomstick and cauldron.

They were simpler times; felt safer. So when Hallows hit, our parents never chaperoned us from house to house. They never drove us along the route in warm, plush cars to avoid the sometimes-freezing winds that would cut through our multitudinous layers of clothing. We knew the costumes we chose might need the ability of expansion to accommodate our bundling. Despite bitter cold, our hands always felt the warmth from the ever-growing mountains of candy inside our jack-o-lantern pails. We stayed out well past dark, on our own; entire towns overrun by their children; stopping home only for a quick warm up, and to empty our treasures to make room for even more. There were the houses we knew would offer the full-sized candy bars; and those with the terrifying legends, to be avoided at all costs. We were weaving these mythologies, together, unaware that beyond our masks and the bedsheets we wore, were the thousands of souls who had birthed us into being, now tagging along, invisibly, behind us.

Here at midlife, even as my own child has begun to weave his newly discovered traditions and mythologies, mine have changed. The years have helped me to learn a few things along the way.

Now, I awaken in Autumnal darkness, approaching the altar to my ancestors, their faces smiling at me. I am mindful that this ritual, this luxury, honoring each new day of life, is no longer theirs. I do my best to nourish them, placing their favorite foods, drinks, cigars, flowers, sweets, and other libations upon the altar, acknowledging them, finding ways to continue to serve them… just as I know they continue to watch over me, supporting my life in ways they were unable while they were in physical form. While these veils are thin, and I can be sure they are ever near, I offer this communion to say “thank you,” and “I have not forgotten you,” and “I miss you so much,” and “I love you.”

I spend these days in nature, taking in the last of the light, savoring any remaining glimpses of green, and warmth. This is where I feel them most: in the Earth; where their bones, which once supported limbs that embraced me, fed me, and wiped away my tears, call to me even now. Feeling their presence brings me to my knees, and I am overcome with gratitude to have this very human sensitivity. My grief is comforted by memory. My tears are now wiped clean by the wind. I have finally realized it was not I, nor my little friends, who wove this web; rather I was born into it, and am eternally of it. Along with all of them, and all of you, together, forever. Blessed be.

**An Introduction…**

We have arrived at our final cross-quarter sabbat of the year, the halfway mark between Autumn and Winter.

The origin of the word Samhain is not entirely known. However, Samhain is originally believed to derive from the union of the words *sam*, meaning "summer," and *fuin* meaning "fun". Samhain is usually pronounced in its Irish version. So the correct pronunciation of Samhain in Irish is Sau-ihn. The first part, *Sau*, is pronounced like the "sow", the female of a pig. The second syllable, *-ihn*, contains an "i" that is pronounced somewhat midway between an "i" and an "e" sound. It must be noted that there is another sound at the end of the word that is nearly imperceptible, which is a sort of elided "ye" sound. Adding that sound, the pronunciation of Samhain becomes Sau-ihn(ye), where the -ye is basically just the initial pronunciation of the "y". It resembles a shorter "ñ" sound like the word "piñata". So if you pronounce the "n" in -ihn as an "ñ", but stopping midway through it you achieve the proper pronunciation of Samhain in Irish, which would equate to Sau-ihñ.

Samhain is the counterpoint to Beltane, the halfway mark between Spring and Summer. At Beltane, the natural world is coming to life after the long Winter. Symbols of fertility are abundant, and it is said the veils between the human world and that of the little people, the *Fae*, are at their thinnest.

At Samhain, the natural world around us is dying. Persephone has once again descended into the Underworld. We honor the final harvests of the season, putting our gardens to bed. The greens of the abundant Summer have now faded to yellow, gold, orange and red - Fire colors, burning up all that which cannot sustain enough energy, enough life force, to move forward.

As we release and let go, like the trees and the vines, we remember all of the letting go we’ve endured in our lives. For this reason, we feel the veils between the living and the dead are at their thinnest.

This is the season of the Ancestors, a time to honor our beloveds who have crossed into the world of spirit. A moment wherein we acknowledge the thousands of Ancestors from whom we have descended. A potent window to offer our love, memories, grief, forgiveness, compassion and healing for all our relations - sometimes not only of our blood lineages, but of others: human; plant; animal; mineral.

At Samhain, these energies reach their zenith, leading us to the final turn of the Wheel of the Year, when we truly surrender, accepting the cycles of time and space, the losses of loves and seasons, clearing us wholly and completely... that we will once again bring light from the darkness, birth the new from the old, and manifest our dreams into reality. And so it goes.

**A Herstory of Samhain**

**​​**Samhain is believed to have ancient [Celtic pagan](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Celtic_polytheism) origins, even dating back to [Neolithic](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prehistoric_Ireland#Neolithic_(4000%E2%80%932500_BC)) [passage tombs](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Passage_tomb) in Ireland aligned with the sunrise at the time of Samhain. It is first mentioned in the [earliest Irish literature](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Early_Irish_literature), from the 9th century, and is associated with many important events in [Irish mythology](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Irish_mythology). The early literature says Samhain was marked by great gatherings and feasts, and was when the ancient burial mounds were open, which were seen as portals to the [Otherworld](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Celtic_Otherworld). Some of the literature also associates Samhain with bonfires and sacrifices.

The festival did not begin to be recorded in detail until the early modern era. It was described as the time of year when cattle were brought down from the [summer pastures](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Transhumance), and when livestock were slaughtered. As at Beltane, special [bonfires](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bonfire) were lit. These were deemed to have protective and cleansing powers, and there were specific rituals involving them.

Like Beltane, Samhain was a [liminal](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Liminality) or threshold festival, when the boundary between this world and the Otherworld thinned, meaning the [*Aos Sí*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aos_S%C3%AD) (the 'spirits' or '[fairies](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fairy)') could more easily come into our world. Most scholars see the *Aos Sí* as remnants of pagan gods. At Beltane, they would be offered special items they were known to horde, while at Samhain, they were [appeased](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Propitiation) with offerings of food and drink, to ensure the people and their livestock survived the winter. The souls of dead kin were also thought to revisit their homes seeking hospitality, and a place was set at the table for them during a Samhain meal, the “Dumb Supper.”

[Mumming](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mummers_Play) and [guising](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Guising) were part of the festival from at least the early modern era, whereby people went door-to-door in costume reciting verses in exchange for food. The costumes may have been a way of imitating, and disguising oneself from, the *Aos Sí*.

In the 9th century, the [Church](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Catholic_Church) had shifted the date of [All Saints' Day](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/All_Saints%27_Day) to November 1st, while November 2nd later became [All Souls' Day](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/All_Souls%27_Day). Over time, it is believed that Samhain and All Saints'/All Souls' Days influenced each other, and eventually [syncretised](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Syncretism#Religious_syncretism) into the modern [Halloween](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Halloween). Folklorists have used the name “Samhain” to refer to Gaelic “Halloween” customs up until the 19th century. At that time, [John Rhys](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Rhys) and [James Frazer](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_George_Frazer) suggested Samhain was the "Celtic New Year", but this has been widely disputed. Most modern-day pagans consider Yule to be the true Celtic New Year, when the light of the Sun is reborn.

Since the late 20th century, [neo pagans](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Celtic_Neopaganism) and [Wiccans](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wicca) have observed Samhain as a religious holiday. Other cultural celebrations around the world also honor this time as a sacred tribute to the dead.[[1]](#footnote-0)

**The Ancestors and Common Descent**

*“There is grandeur in this view of life, with its several powers, having been originally breathed into a few forms or into one; and that, whilst this planet has gone cycling on according to the fixed law of gravity, from so simple a beginning endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful have been, and are being, evolved.”*

*- Charles Darwin, 1859*

All living beings are in fact descendants of a unique ancestor commonly referred to as the [last universal common ancestor](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Last_universal_common_ancestor) of all [life](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Life) on [Earth](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Earth). That is to say, all life on Earth shares a single common ancestor.

Common descent is a concept in [evolutionary biology](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Evolutionary_biology) applicable when one species is the ancestor of two or more species later in time. It is an effect of [speciation](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Speciation), in which multiple species derive from a single ancestral population. The more recent the ancestral population two species have in common, the more closely they are related.

All currently living organisms on Earth share a common [genetic](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Genetics) heritage. 6,331 groups of [genes](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gene) common to all living animals have been identified; these may have arisen from a single [common ancestor](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Animal#Phylogeny) that lived [650 million years ago](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cryogenian) in the [Precambrian](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Precambrian). The most recent common ancestor of all currently living organisms is the last universal ancestor,which lived about [3.9 billion years ago](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Timeline_of_the_evolutionary_history_of_life). The two earliest pieces of evidence for life on Earth are [graphite](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Graphite) found to be [biogenic](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Biogenic_substance) in 3.7 billion-year-old [metasedimentary rocks](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Metasedimentary_rock) discovered in western [Greenland](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Greenland) and [microbial mat](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Microbial_mat) [fossils](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fossil) found in 3.48 billion-year-old [sandstone](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sandstone) discovered in [Western Australia](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Western_Australia).[[2]](#footnote-1)

Because all of life is connected by our very own DNA, we are therefore also connected to all the life that has ever existed on the planet. All Ancestors - plant, mineral, and animal - are *our* Ancestors. Regardless of species, family, race, or any other cultural distinction, we are truly all related, and have been throughout all of time.

When we forsake the true and natural interconnectedness and interdependence of all living beings - our true relatives, not just in theory, but by our actual chemical make-up - we are, in effect, fragmented within ourselves. This fragmentation is the cause of all manners of mental, emotional and spiritual dis-ease… and in the larger sense, is the cause of war, oppression and domination.

To heal humanity, we must first heal our own fragmentation. To become whole, we must recognize and honor our common-unity. The Earth Mother holds us all as her beloved children. Returning to Her is to return to the Circle of Life, honoring all the Ancestors as our Grandelders, and endeavoring to become good Ancestors and Grandelders for all the descendants to come.

**Honoring the Ancestors**

Although all living beings share common ancestry, most of us identify with the cultures of our closest relatives rather than our farback peoples. Of course, this makes sense, for as we begin to calculate our ancestral mathematics, we find that even looking back over the past few hundred years, we have literally been born from *thousands* of Ancestors:

**ANCESTRAL MATHEMATICS**

IN ORDER TO BE BORN, YOU NEEDED

2 Parents

4 Grandparents

8 Great-Grandparents

16 Second Great-Grandparents

32 Third Great-Grandparents

64 Fourth Great-Grandparents

128 Fifth Great-Grandparents

256 Sixth Great-Grandparents

512 Seventh Great-Grandparents

1,024 Eighth Great-Grandparents

2,048 Ninth Great-Grandparents

For you to be born today from 12 previous generations, you needed a total of 4,094 Ancestors over the last 400 years!

For most of us, researching our genealogies can prove to be a difficult and frustrating process. Despite technological developments with services provided by sites like Ancestry.Com, accurate records simply don’t exist - either because our forebearers were poor, or pioneers, or enslaved.

In addition, vital records from every generation prior to the late 20th-century were taken by hand, and kept on paper. Records have worn away from the weathering of time, or were destroyed - either intentionally or by accident. Therefore, many of us only know the cultural lineages of our most immediate family members, and mainly identify with those cultures, even though we likely carry many other bloodlines in our DNA. This is where new resources such as 23andMe or AncestryDNA can be helpful in guiding us to our more farback Ancestors through our genetics.

Regardless of what we know about our own genealogy, we can learn from cultures all around the world, as Ancestor reverence has been part of spiritual practices everywhere, and throughout all of time. It seems to be a common human understanding that acknowledging our forebearers is of great importance.

In West African traditions, Ancestor altars are created by the largest tree on a property or in the kitchen of a home, where offerings are placed.

In Rome, they would have Spirit Houses by their front door for their Ancestors to protect the family and home from evil entering.

In Cambodia, monks chant sutras while people make offerings to temples for deceased relatives.

In Buddhist culture, the Hungry Ghost Festival is celebrated as a time when the deceased come out from the lower realm and elaborate meals are prepared to satisfy their hunger.

In Nepal, families who lost a relative in the past year walk through the streets of Kathmandu leading a cow (or a child dressed as a cow) during the Gai Jatra festival.

In Japan, lanterns are hung to guide spirits, traditional dances are performed, and offerings are made at private altars and temples.

In Mexico and the Americas, people build private altars and offer flowers, food and beverages to Ancestor spirits over several days celebrating Dia de los Muertos.

In China, on the 104th day after the winter solstice, celebrants remember and honour their Ancestors at grave sites. Young and old pray before the Ancestors, sweep the tombs and offer food, tea, wine, chopsticks, joss paper accessories, and/or libations to the Ancestors.

Reclaiming or creating your own ancestor reverence helps ground you in your cultural roots and give you a strong base to grow from. Rediscovering the traditions practiced by your very own spirit relatives creates a direct connection between you.

But you also needn’t subscribe to any particular tradition - you can start your own. For those who may not identify with their lineages in this lifetime, or others who feel deeply connected to ALL lineages as part of their common ancestry, creating new traditions might feel more appropriate, and might inspire deeper connection with this work.

This is where an altar serves as the perfect starting point. It is a special, reverent place that belongs only to the Ancestors. It is a gift in and of itself, even as we place other offerings upon it.

*“Walking, I am listening to a deeper way. Suddenly all my ancestors are behind me.*

*Be still, they say. Watch and listen.*

*You are the result of the love of thousands.”*

*- Linda Hogan*

**Altars for the Ancestors**

An altar is created with the intention of designating a particular space for spiritual work - whether it is used for prayer, ritual, or meditation, our altars become the spiritual center of our homes and environments. We tend to them and honor them lovingly and respectfully.

We are careful to build them in areas where they will not be disturbed by others. We make sure to clean them and rearrange them with some frequency (each season is a good mark). Most importantly, we spend regular time in communion there, building upon our connection with our Unseen Allies, becoming more and more fluent in the unique language we share with them.

People create altars for many different purposes. Most of us have a main altar, central to our spiritual practice, located in our homes. Many people also create smaller altars in their workplaces, outdoor environments, and even in their cars! An altar is another way of sanctifying space, or bringing the holy and sacred to a particular setting.

Other altars are created for special purposes, such as marking major passages in our lives: births and deaths; weddings; new beginnings; milestones; or other formal ceremonies.

As such, during this auspicious time of year when the veils are thin, we make altars to specifically acknowledge and honor our Ancestors. These altars will serve as the central focus for our continued ritual work around our far back peoples, and the lineages of our nearer relatives.

As the veils between the world are at their thinnest around Samhain, building our altars 2-3 weeks before, and leaving them up for another 2-3 weeks after gives us a lunation or so to honor our loved ones with this special area in our homes and environments, allowing us ample time to return to the altars again and again with our prayers, our questions, our offerings, and our love.

**Building the Altar**

Although there are many cultural traditions around building altars to honor the Ancestors, there are no hard and fast rules. Like all of the work on our spiritual paths, the most important elements are *intention* and *devotion.* Altars may be as simple or elaborate as we personally prefer, and either way, they can be powerful and potent.

Here are some common elements included in Ancestor Altars:

* **Table -** it is often recommended the altar be constructed upon a table or platform of natural materials like wood, stone or even metal
* **Altar Cloth -** this is a piece of fabric that has been blessed, and upon which you will place your altar items
* **Pictures** - place photos of your loved ones on the altar, or (if you don’t have photos), you may write their names upon a piece of paper or in a book. Remember that regardless if you have pictures or know their names, ALL your Ancestors will receive your blessings
* **Personal Items -** any items which belonged to deceased family members or represent their passions (a particular perfume, book, tool, or other symbolic item)
* **Plant -** this could represent your family tree
* **Water -** placed in a vial, chalice or small dish, water is a universal symbol for communicating with the spirit world
* **Candles -** representing the element of Fire, lighting candles signals to the spirits that we have something to offer them (prayers, songs, food, gifts, etc)
* **Flowers -** these are beautiful gifts to bring the living to the deceased, and also gives them physical energy in the spirit world
* **Incense -** incorporates the element of Air, and the smoke carries our thoughts and intentions to our loved ones
* **Treats/Vices -** sweets, cigarettes, alcoholic spirits, and other earthly pleasures our Ancestors enjoyed while living are offered as signs of love, and gives them energy to use to bring blessings to your life
* **Food -** many spirits are hungry, and offering them food is a way to boost their energy
* **Crystals, Stones, and Items from Nature -** these represent the element of Earth, but also remind our Ancestor spirits of the beauty in the living world
* **Ancestor Money -** Joss paper (also known as ghost or spirit money) are sheets of paper that are ritually burned in Ancestor worship ceremonies (traditionally of Chinese origin). The concept is that the ancestors leave a debt behind that trickles down among the living. Because their debt was not settled in the flesh, they are limited on the other side. This limitation is also extended to us, the living. The limitation is usually financial strains and trouble. Be sure to have a cauldron or small vessel on the altar for this purpose.

An ongoing ritual as you come to learn more and more about your Ancestors, lineages, and farback peoples is to always be on the lookout and collect items which you can add to your altar each year in their honor.

It should be mentioned that some people also choose to keep their Ancestor Altar as a permanent fixture in their homes. Other people choose to take their Ancestor Altars down after the Samhain season, but maintain a practice of regularly honoring the Ancestors. Some pour an extra cup of coffee or tea in the morning, offering their Ancestors to commune with them. Others hold special rituals around the times of their loved ones' births and deaths. There are also many who believe we are here at this time on the planet to heal our Ancestors. As such, this work is ever-ongoing, helping to release ourselves and future generations from passing on trauma.

To build the altar:

1. Collect all the items you wish to add to your altar. Cleanse and purify them in a ritual smudge, or sprinkle sacred water on them, or hold each item one by one and bless it.
2. Cleanse and bless your table or platform by: blowing the smoke from incense, herbs or resins across the top and around all sides; anointing the table with flower water or sacred oils; or praying over the platform in your own way.
3. Begin by laying down your blessed altar cloth, and then add all your other items one by one, with reverence and intention.
4. When all the items are in place, light a candle, and make your first food offering, along with a prayer to let your Ancestors know of your love, your reverence, your gratitude, and your desire to commune with them.

In many traditions, offerings are made daily. Whether they be food, sweets or vices, or gifts of other kinds, the old offering is left on the altar until the next day when it is refreshed. The old offerings may then be offered to a place in nature - by a tree, to the Earth, or even to a source of natural Water. In some traditions, the offering is burned in a Fire, as the smoke then carries the remaining essence of the gifts to the spirit world.

For those who choose to incorporate Ancestor money, new paper can be burned daily as well.

However you choose to create your altar, the energy you put into it will determine the energy you receive from it, and from your Ancestors. Show up at your altar. Keep it clean and fresh. Light the candles. Make your offerings. Tell stories, and sing songs. Listen. If you continue to show for them, they will show for you.

When you feel it is time to dismantle the Ancestor Altar, be sure to remove each item one by one with great care and focused attention. Wrap your photos lovingly in blessed cloth or papers. You might offer one final smudge, or cleansing, to the items before storing them. You will come to think of the Ancestor Altar as a living being of its own, and a tradition your family will cherish, throughout all the many generations, backwards and forwards.

*“I am bound to them, though I cannot look into their eyes or hear their voices.*

*I honor their history. I cherish their lives.*

*I will tell their story. I will remember them.”*

*- Author Unknown*

**Feasting the Ancestors**

To feast, in the traditional sense, is to eat and drink sumptuously. It is to give someone a plentiful and delicious meal. It is something that gives unusual or abundant enjoyment. It is to experience something with gratification or delight.

We feast to celebrate, whether it be the harvest, a holiday, or other social communion. We feast to nourish ourselves, but more importantly, to nourish our loved ones. In preparing for a feast, we take care and diligence to prepare the best of what we have to offer, and we offer all that we have with great generosity. A feast is symbolic of joy, abundance, revelry and love.

Across the globe, cultures have rich traditions around feasting. Depending on the holiday or season, specific food and dishes are incorporated. The very ingredients used are often symbolic, and in many communities, there are even specific ceremonies, prayers and rituals dedicated to the foods before they are consumed.

Likewise, in the many traditions around the world which honor the Ancestors, feasting is customary in nearly all, and for various reasons:

In honoring our Ancestors, we offer their favorite foods, or favorite recipes they were known to excel at cooking while they were alive. In the process of preparing these foods, we remember our loved ones, and recount our memories of feasts shared with them while they were Earthside.

Other times, we prepare foods specifically to nourish what are referred to as “hungry ghosts.” These are people who may have died in violent ways, or whose own Ancestors may have left them (a belief in some cultures). They may also be spirits who were unsatiated in their lives, who hungered for status, power, money, and other addictions, and continue to hunger in the afterlife. We feast these hungry ghosts to nourish and heal them, just as we endeavor to do with our loved ones still living.

We also feast our Ancestors as an energetic offering, for it is widely believed that spirits may consume the essences of food and drink, and these essences can truly nourish their souls. Even as the food or beverage appears to be untouched, we know they have partaken and had their fill… and can then offer the remains to the Earth, and other living creatures who will be happy to receive this gift.

Much the same way we offer a feast to our beloved living, we do so similarly for our beloved dead. Whether we are feasting to offer our care and gratitude, or with the intention of nourishing spirits that desperately hunger, we set forth in this ritual with clear intention and love.

**Altar Offerings**

Perhaps the easiest way to offer sustenance to the spirits is by utilizing the altars we have created in their honor. We can place two small dishes - one for water, and the other for food - upon the altar, and see to their tending daily, or with regular frequency. We might choose to place specific food items in the dish: foods which our loved ones enjoyed; foods which are culturally or religiously symbolic; or foods which will also make sweet offerings to the Earth and critters outdoors once the Ancestors have feasted upon the foods’ essences.

Dried or fresh fruit, nuts, seeds, gourds, and breads are common food items used on Ancestor altars for feasting purposes. You might choose a favorite food of one of the Ancestors on your altar, or food to feast them all. However you choose to feast with your altar, bless and sanctify the food, add your loving energy to it, and replenish the dishes as needed.

**The Spirit Plate**

A common practice in many Indigenous communities is the making of a Spirit plate.

Typically after a ritual or ceremony, a feast for the living has been lovingly prepared. However, before anyone partakes of the dishes, a special plate is made incorporating small amounts of each of the foods which will be served. A pinch of tobacco is also placed on the edge of the plate (not on top of the food, for we would not care to eat food with tobacco sprinkled over it). Then the plate is prayed over either by the plate’s preparer, or passed around for each person present to offer their words of blessing.

After the Spirit Plate has been blessed, it is then either placed outdoors (by a tree, large stone, or other natural element) or burned ceremonially in a fire. Once this offering to the Ancestors has been made, the guests are welcomed to begin feasting themselves.

This is a practice which could be incorporated with your daily meals during the season when the veils are thin.

**The Dumb Supper**

Many Irish and Scottish Celts appeased their dead with a traditional Dumb Supper. On Samhain Eve, supper was served in absolute silence, and one place was set at the head of the table “for the Ancestors.” This place was served food and drink without looking directly at the seat, for to see the dead would bring misfortune.

Like the tradition of the Spirit Plate, the untouched dishes were taken outside afterward “for the pookas,” and left in the woods.

In preparing an All Souls Feast like Dumb Supper, we would take care to select recipes that were much enjoyed by the Ancestors we wish to honor. Or, those recipes made famous by our loved ones in spirit.

**Vices**

Another way we feast our Ancestors is to give them those things they longed for most when they were alive - often considered to be addictive vices. Cigars, cigarettes, alcoholic spirits or beverages, sweets, sodas, and other taboo items may be included. Sometimes, they may even be the very vices which resulted in our loved ones’ deaths.

It may feel counterintuitive, as we are aiming to heal and nourish our Ancestor spirits, but it is important to remember that in the world of spirit, we have left our physical bodies behind. Therefore, spirits can enjoy and feast upon the very things they craved while alive, and we can offer these items to them guilt-free and with great generosity.

**Other Items**

Sometimes, we might choose to feast our Ancestors with items not pertaining to food.

Offerings of music, reading a loved one’s favorite book or poem, planting seeds in a loved one’s honor…. These are all beautiful examples of how we can give to our Ancestors in meaningful ways.

If we know of a particular hobby or passion, or other pastime our beloveds enjoyed, we can engage in the activity ourselves, on their behalf: snowshoeing through the winter snow; doing a crossword puzzle; taking a painting class; stitching a sampler.

The metric for feasting: in whatever way, give of yourself generously for the pleasure of another.

It is important to note: in our commitment to this work of healing the Ancestors, we may very well encounter the Hungry Ghosts seeking sustenance. Through feasting, we have the opportunity to help provide the nourishment these spirits seek. Of course, it may be wise to create barriers of psychic protection, if you are concerned about entities consuming that which you are not readily offering.

**The Ritual Bonfire**

Similar to Beltane, traditional bonfires were lit on hilltops at Samhain and there were rituals involving them.However, by the modern era, they are now most common in parts of the [Scottish Highlands](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Scottish_Highlands), on the Isle of Man, in north and mid Wales, and in parts of [Ulster](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ulster).

A [force-fire](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Force-fire) (or [need-fire](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Need-fire)) was the traditional way of lighting them, made by a wheel that would cause friction and start flames. The wheel was considered to be a representation of the Sun, and this force-fire was accompanied with many prayers for the return of the Sun. Only certain kinds of wood were traditionally used, but later records show that many kinds of flammable material were burnt.It is suggested that the fires were a kind of [imitative or sympathetic magic](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sympathetic_magic) - mimicking the Sun, helping the "powers of growth" and holding back the decay and darkness of winter. They may also have served to symbolically "burn up and destroy all harmful influences".Accounts from the 18th and 19th centuries suggest that the fires (as well as their smoke and ashes) were deemed to have protective and cleansing powers.

In [Moray](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Moray), boys asked for bonfire fuel from each house in the village. When the fire was lit, "one after another of the youths laid himself down on the ground as near to the fire as possible so as not to be burned, and in such a position as to let the smoke roll over him. The others ran through the smoke and jumped over him". When the bonfire burnt down, they scattered the ashes, vying with each other who should scatter them most. Sometimes, two bonfires would be built side by side, and the people - sometimes with their livestock - would walk between them as a cleansing ritual. The bones of slaughtered cattle were said to have been cast upon bonfires.

People then took flames from the bonfire back to their homes. In parts of Scotland, torches of burning [fir](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Scots_pine) or turf were carried [sunwise](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sunwise) around homes and fields to protect them.In some places, people doused their hearth fires on Samhain night. Each family then solemnly re-lit its hearth from the communal bonfire, thus bonding the community together. The 17th century writer Geoffrey Keating claimed that this was an ancient tradition, instituted by the Druids. Dousing the old fire and bringing in the new may have been a way of banishing evil, which was part of New Year festivals in many countries.

The bonfires were also used in [divination](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Divination) rituals, although not all divination involved fire. In 18th century [Ochtertyre](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ochtertyre), a ring of stones—one for each person—was laid round the fire, perhaps on a layer of ash. Everyone then ran round it with a torch, "exulting". In the morning, the stones were examined and if any was mislaid, it was said that the person it represented would not live out the year. A similar custom was observed in northern Walesand in [Brittany](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brittany). This may come from an older custom of actually burning them (i.e. [human sacrifice](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Human_sacrifice)) but most likely has always been symbolic. [[3]](#footnote-2)

**Sharing the Wisdom: Preparing Your Ritual**

Use this space to consider how you would honor this sabbat in a ritual way, whether for yourself or for others. This is meant to be a loose guide to inspire you, and to build confidence in your own intuition, vision, and abilities to incorporate more ritual in your life.

1. **What would your ritual space look like/what environment do you envision?**
2. **What items would you include on your altar? What do they represent to you?**
3. **What Elements would you include? How will you include them? And why?**
4. **What words do you feel should be spoken or sung? You might jot down your ideas, and create a loose outline to follow.**
5. **What is the best way for you, personally, to connect with this sabbat? How will you demonstrate that through ritual action?**

**Reflections and Integration**

Going back through your life in increments of 5 years, reflect upon this season/sabbat in the Wheel of the Year and what it has meant to you in those various stages of life. Use these questions as a guide:

* **What memories stand out to me the most about this season in each stage of life?**
* **How did this season/sabbat make me feel emotionally? Physically?**
* **How do my past experiences of the season/sabbat correlate to the present?**
* **In my highest vision, how would I best connect with this season/sabbat?**
* **From this year forward, what changes might I make to align myself more with the energies of this season/sabbat?**

1. From Wikipedia [↑](#footnote-ref-0)
2. From Wikipedia [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
3. From “Samhain: The Celtic Roots of Halloween” [↑](#footnote-ref-2)