THE WITCH’S SABBATH

In the Craft, we consider nature to be a great teacher. The Goddess is our mother and her wisdom is infinite. In nature everything exists in cycles. The moon waxes and wanes, the tides ebb and flow, and very importantly, the seasons move from winter to autumn, to spring and to summer. All life is cyclical and thus eternal. In celebrating the seasonal changes, we tap into the incredible power of nature and find our place in it. We use the seasonal festivals as an opportunity to recharge and rededicate ourselves.

There are eight sabbaths (or sabbats) that witches celebrate each year. The four minor sabbats occur at the beginning of each season (these are called the solstices and equinoxes), and the four major sabbats occur at the peak of each season. The solstices occur on both the shortest day of the year (the winter solstice) and the longest day of the year (the summer solstice). The two equinoxes occur when night and day are in perfect balance (spring and autumn). The major sabbats are times when the power of each season is at its highest expression. These are the four days...
each year that witches have considered to be of prime power and importance.

If you are working with an established group, participation in the festivals will probably be a required part of your training. If you are on your own, please refer to the books Eight Sabbats for Witches by Janet and Stuart Farrar, and A Book of Pagan Rituals by Herman Slater to get ideas for creating your own celebrations of these important festivals. Let us now turn our attention to each of these sabbats and explore their meanings both historically and metaphorically.
WINTER SOLSTICE - DEC 22

This, being a solstice point, is a minor sabbath. It is also known as Yule. This is the shortest day of the year, and the longest night. At this point in the year, the days begin to grow longer, thus, it marks the birth of the new born sun god. It is important to understand that all of our holidays were being celebrated long before the advent of Christianity and served as the prototypes for all the Christian holidays (Yule being Christmas).

Some ancient cultures lived in places were the winters were so severe that it was a miracle to make it to spring alive. Therefore, evergreen trees, which stay fresh, green and healthy through the winter, symbolized an awesome power of survival. Many ancient tribes gave reverence to this power by decorating these trees, and thus was born the “Christmas tree.” Fire was another very important element during winter, for without fire death was inevitable. In the days when
there were no matches or lighters, no one took fire for granted like most people do today. On the night of the winter solstice, a large log (a Yule log) was blessed and lit to invoke the presence of the new sun god onto the land and to keep the people warm until the spring thaw.

At Yule, the waning year no longer lingers. The mother gives birth to new life. In the palest of darkness there is the promise of light.

CANDLEMAS - FEB 2

Also known as Imbolg, this sabbath is the peak of winter - a major sabbath. All of the major sabbats are known by the Celtic traditions as fire festivals. This means that, when possible, a sacred bonfire is built and blessed for the occasion. On Candlemas, the emphasis is on light rather than heat because the ritual is usually held indoors due to the weather conditions of this time of year. As such, participants have always used candles to represent the sacred fire. The Christian festival of Candlemas commemorates the time when the young christ child was presented to the elders in the temple. This is probably when he received his circumcision as well, which isn't surprising since this has always been the most popular time for witches to be initiated.

In Ireland, Candlemas was known as Brigid's day, being sacred to the main goddess figure of that region. Brigit was made into a saint by the Church, yet there is little evidence that Brigit existed as a human. More probably, the local people refused to give up the worship of their goddess, so the Church compromised by giving her status as a saint. Brigit (also known as Bride), was the three-fold Goddess of all creation. She gave birth to the year, nursed it and helped it grow into fruition. A common practice on Candlemas was to wrap a sheaf of oats in baby's clothing and place it into a basket and cry out three times "Bride is come, Bride is welcome!" This represented the invitation by the people to Bride to take refuge with the new-born babe.

By Candlemas, all the evergreens and other Yule decorations are put away or burned. Legend says that Yule decorations left out after Candlemas turn into demons. This is just a recognition that winter is passing, and if we don't let go of the past, it will haunt us!

Candlemas is groundhog day. This means that bad weather on Candlemas is an omen of spring coming more quickly. Conversely, good weather points to a delayed spring thaw. (if it is cloudy, the ground hog won't see its shadow and if its sunny, it's shadow will scare him and he will run back in his hole).
SPRING EQUINOX - MARCH 21

Robert Graves remarked "The Sun arms himself at the Spring Equinox." There are two equinoxes in the year, when the light and dark are exactly equal. At the Spring Equinox, the light is waxing and the dark waning. The celebration of the solstices and equinoxes is not a part of the true Celtic calendar, but with the migration of Mediterranean peoples, and the Roman invasions, eventually all eight seasonal festivals were recognized and celebrated. The Christian holiday of Easter is timed each year as the Sunday after the full moon that follows the Spring Equinox. In fact, most of the Easter symbols are ancient spring-tide fertility symbols. The name Easter itself is adapted from the Teutonic fertility goddess Eostre. The story of the Crucifixion is, in fact, the story of the grain god, which is the Pagan mystery of which rites of Spring are primarily concerned.

The Green Man is the god of the vegetation. He is cut down at the harvest, planted (descending into hell, or the underworld) at the end of winter, and is resurrected in the spring. The salvation of people in ancient times was not an esoteric activity at all; it was about food, shelter and
survival. Some Modern day witches still feel that Jesus, the savior, is none other than our beloved Green Man.

One interesting spring custom, was to light a wheel on fire, and send it rolling down a tall hillside. If it made it to the bottom without toppling over, it was an especially good omen. This obviously symbolized the bringing down the light of the sun into the fields to give the crops power and fertility. The custom of hiding brightly colored eggs in the fields for the children to find is really quite old, the egg being a common fertility symbol. Also the "Easter Bunny" is a holdover from pre-Christian times. The Goddess' totem animal of the spring was the rabbit. A person dressed as a rabbit delivering scarlet colored eggs throughout the town symbolized the blessing of the mother.

BELTAIN - APRIL 30

The Celts celebrated Beltain and Samhain as the two greatest and most important of all the festivals. Beltain means 'Bel-fire' or the fire of Bel, an ancient Celtic deity also known as Beli, Balor and Belenus. Bel means 'light', and is often called a sun god. Rather than being a sun god, in the Roman or Greek sense, Bel was the god of sunlight made manifest on the earth. He was sort of the god of photosynthesis.

The bel-fires were lit on top of high hills, and blessed. These fires were supposedly highly charged and quite magical. They were believed to have the ability to give fertility. Couples jumped through the flames to ensure a large family. Cattle were driven through the ashes, these ashes then being sprinkled throughout the fields. Couples mated in the fields thereafter to be sure that the harvest would be plentiful.

The dance of the Maypole is danced by many children to this very day with no knowledge of its roots. The pole symbolized the phallus of the god. The ribbons were tied to the tip, and a
large garland hung on the top to symbolize the sexual union of god and goddess. The participants each held a ribbon and danced merrily about the pole in opposite directions, weaving in and out and creating a pattern down the pole, and sympathetically stimulating the phallus. I wonder if certain good Christian parents would think twice before allowing this seemingly harmless game to be played by their children if they knew more of its history.
SUMMER SOLSTICE — JUNE 22

Remember that the two solstice points, summer and winter, mark the longest day and the shortest day of the year respectively. At the summer solstice, or midsummer as it is commonly known, the sun god is at his peak and begins to wane as the tide turns. This sabbath is one of the most easy going and celebrative of all. Our European ancestors had very little time for just laying back and enjoying life, as there were no machines, no central heating, no automobiles and no electricity. There were only the fields and a whole lot of hard work. At this time, the crops were growing, yet not ready for harvest. The days were long and the nights relatively temperate. Here was an
opportunity to sit back and relax!

Even though the attitude is relaxed, one can’t deny the underlying theme of darkness as the God of the waxing year dies and gives reign to his dark brother. The wise ones of old understood that the only constant is change. They would light a wheel ablaze on the top of a high hill and roll it down into the deep valley to send the sun into the underworld and bring the winter in.

LAMMAS - JULY 31

Also called Lughnasadh (pronounced ‘loo-nus-ah’), this major sabbath marks the hottest time of year: the middle of summer. The days are getting shorter, yet the temperature has reached its peak. The ancient agricultural peoples began their first harvests at this time. The first harvest was always given to Lugh, or whatever the local name for the god of fire happened to be. Fire, in all traditions, represents the divine. It is the closest physical manifestation of “God” on the earth. Giving to the fire that for which one is grateful is probably the oldest religious and magical ceremony on earth. The concept of cause and effect is obvious, what is given to the fire, is returned to the tribe multiplied. Thus were the first harvests sacrificed to the fire.
Often, the offerings were placed into a giant man of wicker (representing the god of fire and resurrection) before being placed on the pyre. Livestock and human beings were also valuable commodities, being that disease usually killed off at least one third of the population of a given generation, and livestock was difficult to keep throughout the winter, Animal and human sacrifices were added to the fire as well. Unfortunately, fear and pain were given to the flames in addition to animals and people, especially if the sacrifices were not prepared properly. This is possibly a magical reason why the old tribes perished: a simple misuse of a powerful ceremony.
AUTUMN EQUINOX - SEPTEMBER 21

Equinox, remember, means equal. Night and day are in perfect balance at each equinox. The Spring equinox is youthful and exuberant, whereas the Autumnal equinox is mature and tired. The harvest has been completed, and it is time to rest in order to ready for the winter’s preparations. Whereas Lammas highlights the sacrificial themes of the harvest, the Autumn equinox marks its more gluttonous tones. It is a time of thanksgiving and most of all, food! The preserving of the food to prepare for the winter began now, yet this was the only time throughout the year that so much food from the fields was ready to be eaten.

Another important theme of this sabbath is that of the decline of power of the sun. this is the time of the dark lords descent into the underworld, when the whether gets cold, and the evenings
come sooner and sooner each day. The old chant “weep not, yet rejoice as we say fare thee well O Sun” is common at the Autumnal Equinox. They understood, and so must we, that the wheel must turn. To embrace the oncoming darkness is to be powerful in it. To weep about the hard winter that approaches destroys our ability to withstand it!

SAMHAIN - OCTOBER 31

Samhain (pronounced soh-ahn) marks the fourth major Sabbath of the Witch’s year. It was (and still is) commonly believed to be the night when the veil that separated the world of the seen and the unseen was threadbare. This was the time of year when the weather became abruptly cold. The trees were shedding their leaves, and the harvest had been completed, thus leaving the fields dead and barren. The old tribes could not afford to keep all the livestock throughout the winter, so they kept a small breeding stock, and slaughtered and preserved the rest. No one was ever sure who would make it through the winter alive, if it got too cold in those days, many people just perished.

Some legends tell us that on Samhain night all fires, save for those of the Druids, were extinguished, and from whose altars only these fires were purchased by the households at a certain price. Spirits of dead friends, family and ancestors were said to seek the warmth and light of these sacred fires as well as communion with their loved ones.

Criminals who were doomed to die for their crimes were promised forgiveness if they died in the Samhain fires. Once in the world of spirit, they were to plead the cases of their tribe with the other side. If the sacrificed victim betrayed the tribe, they would not be granted reincarnation.

Food was plentiful. A portion of food was always set out for departed loved ones, as it was believed that they could actually join in the feast of Samhain. Samhain, being a very somber time was always a lusty and wholehearted feast, in order to everyone’s spirits raised (so to speak). Music, dance, games and mischief all played a great part in this festival. Samhain is called the Witches’ new year and thus the wheel turns!
PERSONAL INTERPRETATION OF THE SABBATS

As you work with the changes that come with the Wheel of the Year you will notice that particular Goddesses and Gods will be associated with particular Sabbats. We have seen Brigit associated with Candlemas, and the Green Man with Ostara. But there are many other possible combinations, such as Ostara with the Spring Equinox or Lugh with the Lammas. You are really only limited by the findings of your personal research. Each Sabbat can be personalized to represent the learning and strivings of each Witch. You can personalize the Goddess and God that you relate to and you can change aspects of the ritual to relate to the spiritual concerns that you are dealing with. Meditations can be written to explore and deepen your personal involvement with the Sabbat and the changes in the Wheel of the Year that the Sabbat commemorates.

You are perfectly OK if you work with the writings and explorations of other Witches or Priestesses and Priests you are working with, but you also have personal freedom to explore each Sabbat in your way. Your teacher can assist you in these explorations. You are not limited by anything but your own willingness to explore spirituality in your unique and personal way.