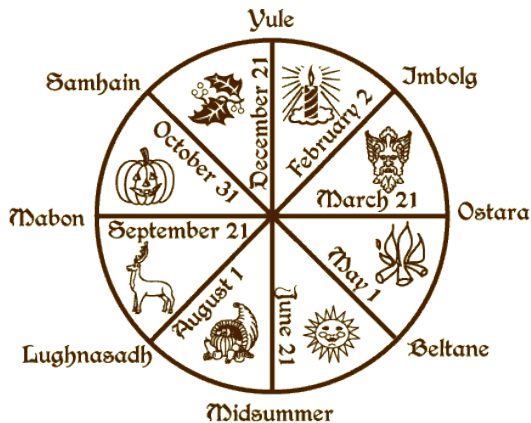


# *The Wheel of the Year*

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**Session From Oak and Willow Coven's**

**Intro to WICCA Series**

Good afternoon ladies and gentlemen, my name is Harriet, I'm a member of the coven of Oak and Willow and I've been attending Sabbats with them for three years. I've actually been a member of the coven for about a year and a half.

First of all, before we get started, I want to say thank you for taking the time out of your lives to attend our Wicca 101. In this day and age, particularly this time of year, it seems to get really hard to make the time to do things just for yourself, and certainly broadening your mind by exposing yourself to new experiences, and maybe even new philosophies, is something you do just for yourself, and returning to the role of the student can be particularly hard for some of us, so give yourselves a little mental pat on the back. I'd also like to take the time to let you know how much I appreciate the opportunity that's been given to me to lead this talk, since in researching this subject I've learned some new and interesting things, myself (which was a very unexpected benefit) and I hope you'll find the information both interesting and entertaining. So, let's get started.

First of all, does everyone know what a Sabbat is?

*A Sabbat is the name of one of the 8 seasonal festivals which collectively are called the Wheel of the Year. These festivals mark a season, time of harvest, or time of planting. There are both Greater and Lesser Sabbats. The Greater Sabbats which are Imbolc, Beltane, Lughnasadh and Samhain are agriculturally based and the Lesser Sabbats which are Ostara, Litha, Mabon and Yule are astronomically based.*

Why do we have Sabbats?

*Obviously anyone of us can think of several reasons but the primary reason is one of harmonizing ourselves with the world around us. In ritually acknowledging the turns of the wheel you'll find you yourself feel more in balance. If you keep an altar up at your home change up the decorations according to the sabbat, it's surprising how it reinforces the atmosphere and even giving a thought to the season as you pass that altar in your days activities has a reinforcing effect on you energetically, sort of psychically striking the note again. And even if you don't have an altar but just change the decor of your home you'll find the same is true. I truly believe at our core all humans actually want to be in harmony with their environment and the world around them, and ours is a cyclical world, not a linear one. We have the dark times that lead into the light times and back into the darkness again.*

Now, I'd like everyone to close their eyes and I'm going to read something I think sums up the wheel of the year beautifully. This isn't a meditation or a pathworking, just a daydream, so to speak:

*Reading a passage from Kirk White's Book Adept Circle Magick, Chapter 4*

Okay, you know the basics of the Celtic wheel of the year, class dismissed!

The Celts were an interesting people. There didn't have a written language, so they left none of their own documentation. The Romans, the civilization who seems to have had the most contact with them, had no respect for them, so what mention they made of them generally wasn't very flattering (as an example, they begrudgingly respected the Celts enough in battle not to underestimate them but they still managed to insult the inferiority of the Celtic weapons technology). The only thing we really have of the Celts are several places of standing stones that no one is **really** quite sure what they were erected for, what other civilizations documented about them and bardic tales, and we're not sure how much of those old songs have been changed or evolved over time. One of the facts that has come down through history is that the Celts believed all things began in the dark. Seeds germinated in the darkness of the soil, baby's grew in the darkness of the womb, and the day began the night before. Since everything begins in the darkest times, this is where we begin our wheel, Yule, the longest night of the year which occurs sometime around December 21. Yule actually marks midwinter, and in ancient times, in the darkest hours in the coldest nights, the sun must have seemed very far away yet the Celts were not mourning the cold and the dark because Yule is about celebrating the anticipated return of the sun, the victory of the Oak King over the Holly King, the return of light and life. One of the symbols of Yule is Mistletoe, one of the most holy of plants to Druids. The only known classical reference describing the ritual gathering of mistletoe was the following account written in the first century by Pliny the Elder in his *Naturalis Historia*:

*For they believe that whatever grows on these trees is sent from heaven, and is a sign that the tree has been chosen by the gods themselves. The mistletoe is very rarely to be met with; but when it is found, they gather it with solemn ceremony. This they do above all on the sixth day of the moon, from whence they date the beginnings of their months, of their years, and of their thirty years cycle, because by the sixth day the moon has plenty of vigour and has not run half its course.*

*After due preparations have been made for a sacrifice and a feast under the tree, they hail it as the universal healer and bring to the spot two white bulls, whose horns have never been bound before. A priest clad in a white robe climbs the tree and with a golden sickle cuts the mistletoe, which is caught in a white cloth. Then they sacrifice the victims, praying that the gods will make their gifts propitious to those to whom they have given it.*

*They believe that a potion prepared from the mistletoe will make barren animals to bring forth, and that the plant is a remedy against all poisons.*

So as you can see, this plant was believed to be extremely magically potent, yet it's this, the darkest of holidays, that this plant came to be symbolic of.

The lesson here is without the darkness there can be no light, without rest there can be no growth. The darkness is as necessary in the scheme of things as the light is and our energies, psychically and spiritually, correspond to the energies of the earth:

*Reading from Kirk White's book regarding Yuletide pg. 100*

At this time of year it's also said the Robin kills the Wren, which was known as king of all birds, and if the Celtic wheel of the year or Yule in general interests you I would strongly urge you to look this up yourself because there are many layers to the symbolism. The wren was both a divinatory bird the protagonist of a widespread folktale that is believed to be the remnant of a very old mythology. How it acquired the title of "the King of All Birds" is that in a contest of who could fly the highest, the wren stowed away on the eagle's head and, once the eagle had reached the limits of its strength, the wren emerged from hiding and flew up higher than any other bird, thus winning supremacy over all the feathered folk, despite its tiny size.

Although the mistletoe is the smallest of trees, it grows in the crown of the tallest of trees, the oak. The eagle is therefore paired with the wren and the oak with the mistletoe, both pairs corresponding to each other in the realm of the bird-tree imagery.

Why is the wren killed? Look to the mistletoe which, too, is cut, and hung from the rafters. In this situation you need to look to an earlier tradition of sacrifice and satisfying the land spirits whose fickle ways often endanger the survival of the tribe.

Some of the other sacred symbols of Yule that could also be attributed to the Druids are Holly and that's another symbol that has more than one meaning because the ancient Romans associated holly with the Sun god Saturnis, and HIS festival took place at this time of the year. Layers within layers. The Druids revered holly because it was an evergreen and all such plants were viewed to be sacred among them. They kept their leaves and color in the winter. That's magical. But you also have the Roman festival of Saturnis that took place around December 25, too. Remembering that the Roman and Celtic cultures were deeply enmeshed, whether they liked it or not, you can see how certain associations crossed cultural borders but frequently creating a linear timeline is virtually impossible.

Let's move from midwinter to the beginning of spring with Imbolc. Depending on whose definition you choose to read, this either means "in the bag" or "bagging up" or "ewe's milk." What's important is the reference to milk. This is the time when sheep began to give birth. And in the milk that they produced for their kids humans found hope, because that milk also meant milk and cheese for them. It is the festival of the Maiden, for from this day to March 21st, it is her season to prepare for growth and renewal. The Maiden has been honored, as the Bride, on this Sabbat and home hearth fires were put out and re-lit, and a besom is placed by the front door to symbolize sweeping out the old and welcoming the new. Candles were lit and placed in each room of the house to honor the returning light.

The deities of Imbolc are all the virgin goddesses and the symbolism of Imbolc is purity, growth and re-newal, the re-union of the goddess and the god, fertility, and dispensing of the old and making way for the new. This holiday, in particular, is one to honor the goddess Brighid, who became Saint Brigit. In Scotland, the Old Woman of winter, the Cailleach, is reborn as Bride, Young Maiden of Spring, fragile yet growing stronger each day as the sun rekindles its fire, turning scarcity into abundance. Of her, it has been said "Bride with her white wand is said to breathe life into the mouth of the dead Winter and to bring him to open his eyes to the tears and the smiles, the sighs and the laughter of Spring. The venom of the cold is said to tremble for its safety on Bride's Day."

Brigid is an ancient deity whose name means "The Exalted One," she was queen and mother goddess of many European tribes. Some scholars consider her name originated with the Vedic Sanskrit word brihati, an epithet of the divine and she was so beloved by the people that the Catholic Church was forced to turn her into a saint, they simply couldn't eradicate her worshippers.

Brigit was a fire goddess and the daughter of the Daghdha, the "Great God" of the Tuatha de Danaan. A "woman of wisdom ... a goddess whom poets adored, she was seen as the great inspiration behind divination and prophecy, the source of oracles. She is seen as a triple deity, and all three were aspects of the one goddess: poetry, healing, and smithcraft. Elsewhere she is described as the patron of other

vital crafts of early Celtic society: dying, weaving and brewing. A goddess of regeneration and abundance, she was greatly beloved as a provider of plenty who brought forth the bounties of the natural world for the good of the people. She is closely connected with livestock and domesticated animals.

The wheel turns again and now brings us to Ostara. As Spring reaches its midpoint, night and day stand in perfect balance once again, now with light on the increase. It is a time of great fertility, new growth, and newborn animals. Ostara is sacred to Eostre the Saxon Lunar Goddess of fertility (from where we get the word estrogen, the so called female hormone), whose symbols were the egg and the rabbit.

At the equinoxes (Ostara and Mabon) the energies of the sun's outward, vital expansion and winter's inward, nurturing contraction are in balance. These are the times to finish up and put away the work of the previous phase and begin the next. Traditionally, this is reflected in "Spring Cleaning" where we clean out the dust and accumulations from winter (perfectly reflected in all the yard sales that start happening in the late spring) and in the fall we tidy up our yards and gardens and button up our houses in preparation for Winter. At Yule our tradition has a ritual that symbolically "lets go" of emotional baggage, so we have a clean slate for the coming cycle. Psychologically and psychically we need to clean house spring and fall.

I'd like you to notice something when you take time and examine the diagrams included in your handouts. Even though mainstream culture calls the Summer Solstice as the first day of Summer, and the Winter Solstice as the first day of Winter, the solstices and equinoxes actually mark the midpoints of the seasons of light, dark and between times. Actually, summer solstice is midsummer, with Beltane being the end of spring/beginning of Summer and Yule is midwinter with Samhain being the end of fall/beginning of winter.

The wheel turns through Ostara and comes to Beltane in the lusty month of May. As summer begins, weather becomes warmer, and the plant world blossoms, an exuberant mood prevails. In old Celtic traditions it was a time of unabashed sexuality and promiscuity where marriages of a year and a day could be undertaken (but it is rarely observed in that manner in modern times). In the old Celtic times, young people would spend the entire night in the woods "A-Maying," and then dance around the phallic Maypole the next morning. Older married couples were allowed to remove their wedding rings (and the restrictions they imply) for this one night. Think of the May pole as a focal point of the old English village rituals. Many people would rise at the first light to go outdoors and gather flowers and branches to decorate their homes. Women traditionally would braid flowers into their hair. Men and women alike would decorate their bodies. Beltane marks the return of vitality, of passion. Ancient Pagan traditions say that Beltane marks the emergence of the young God into manhood. Stirred by the energies at work in nature, he desires the Goddess. They fall in love, lie among the grasses and blossoms, and unite. The Goddess becomes pregnant of the God, to be giving birth nine months later at Imbolc.

Beltane is exuberance manifest in a Sabbat. It is earthy, and lusty and joyful. To me Beltane manifests all that's truly wonderful on a physical level about being human and loving the experience.

We've now come fully halfway around the wheel and have reached Litha, the midsummer or the Summer solstice at around June 21. Remember, this is another balance point, the polar opposite in a way, of Yule. The Holly King conquers the Oak King and from here on out the days begin to shorten. Even though it may not seem it with everything fully expanded and the summer at it's height of lushness, we have entered the very beginning of the cycle of darkness and contraction. But for this moment as we celebrate Litha we celebrate being alive and interacting with the world at large.

Lughnasadh, however, marks the first of the harvests, reaping the bounty of our earliest plantings at spring. Lughnasadh means the funeral games of Lugh (pronounced Loo), the Irish sun god. The funeral is not his own, but the games he hosted in honor of his foster-mother Tailtiu, the last queen of the Fir Bolg, who died from exhaustion after clearing a great forest so that the land could be cultivated. When the men of Ireland gathered at her death-bed, she told them to hold funeral games in her honor. As long as they were held, she prophesied Ireland would not be without song. Tailtiu's name is from Old Celtic Talantiu, "The Great One of the Earth," suggesting she may originally have been a personification of the land itself, like so many Irish goddesses. In fact, Lughnasadh has an older name, Brón Trogain, which refers to the painful labor of childbirth. For at this time of year, the earth gives birth to her first fruits so that her children might live. This day originally coincided with the first reapings of the harvest. It was known as the time when the plants of spring wither and drop their fruits or seeds for our use as well as to ensure future crops.

As this time, as autumn begins, the Sun God enters his old age, but is not yet dead. The God symbolically loses some of his strength as the Sun rises farther in the South each day and the nights grow longer.

Mabon, (pronounced MAY-bun, MAY-bone, MAH-boon, or MAH-bawn) is the Autumn Equinox. Once again, day and night are divided equally, and we take a moment to pay our respects to the burgeoning darkness. We also give thanks to the waning sunlight, as we store the second harvest of this year's crops. The Druids called this celebration, Mea'n Fo'mhair, and honor the The Green Man, the God of the Forest, by offering libations to trees. Offerings of ciders, wines, herbs and fertilizer are appropriate at this time. We honor the aging Goddess as she passes from Mother to Crone, and her consort the God as he prepares for death and re-birth.

This festival is for the drawing to and of family as we prepare for the winding down of the year at Samhain. It is a time to finish old business as we ready for a period of rest, relaxation, and reflection. Mabon is symbolized by the Second Harvest, the Mysteries, Equality and Balance and it's no surprise that the astrological sign of Libra falls at about this time, as well. This Equinox mirrors dwindling of life (and eventual progression to rebirth).

As you'll notice by the symbol I've brought for Mabon, it is very much like Thanksgiving. Most of the crops have been reaped and abundance is more noticeable than ever. Mabon is the time when we reap the fruits of our labor and lessons, both crops and experiences. It is a time of joy, to celebrate that which is passing and looking joyously at the experiences the year has shared with us. It is also a time to gaze into the bright future. We are reminded once again of the cyclic universe; endings are merely new beginnings.

And with the thought of new beginnings we are brought to the Witches New Year, Samhain. One meaning for the word being "End of Summer." It is the third and final Harvest. The dark winter half of the year truly commences on this Sabbat as it was understood that in dark silence comes whisperings of new beginnings, the stirring of the seed below the ground. Whereas Beltane welcomes in the summer with joyous celebrations at dawn, the most magically potent time of the year is this festival, which is November Eve, the night of October 31<sup>st</sup>. Samhain is generally celebrated on October 31st, but some traditions prefer November 1<sup>st</sup> (if you remember that the Celts traditionally believed the day began on the night before you can see why either is appropriate). Samhain is one of the two "spirit-nights" each year, the other being Beltane. It is an interval when the mundane laws of time and space are temporarily suspended, and the Veil between the worlds is lifted. Communicating with ancestors and departed loved ones is easy at this time, and it is a time to study the Mysteries and honor the Dark Mother and the Dark Father, symbolized by the Crone and her aged Consort. Samhain was also a significant time for divination, perhaps even more so than Beltane or Midsummer's Eve.

Originally the Samhain was celebrated in Celtic countries by leaving food offerings on altars and doorsteps for the "wandering dead". Today a lot of pagans still carry out that tradition. Single candles were lit and left in a window to help guide the spirits of ancestors and loved ones home. Extra chairs were set to the table and around the hearth for the unseen guest. Apples were buried along roadsides and paths for spirits who were lost or had no descendants to provide for them. Turnips were hollowed out and carved to look like protective spirits, for this was a night of magic and chaos. It is believed that the Wee Folke, the Faery or Fae, became very active, pulling pranks on unsuspecting humans. Traveling after dark was not advised. People would dress in white to appear as ghosts, wore disguises made of straw, or dressed as the opposite gender in order to fool the Nature spirits.

This was the time that the weaker cattle and other livestock, having been brought down from their summer fields, were slaughtered for eating in the ensuing winter months. Any crops still in the field after Samhain were considered taboo, and left as offerings to the Nature spirits. Bonfires were built, (originally called bone-fires, for after feasting, the bones were thrown in the fire as offerings for healthy and plentiful livestock in the New Year) and stones were marked with peoples names. Then they were thrown into the fire, to be retrieved in the morning. The condition of the retrieved stone foretold of that person's fortune in the coming year. Hearth fires were also lit from the village bonfire to ensure unity, and the ashes were spread over the harvested fields to protect and bless the land. Various other names for this Greater Sabbat are Third Harvest, Samana, Day of the Dead, Old Halloween, Vigil of Saman, Shadowfest. Samhuinn. All Hallow's Eve, and Martinmas. The symbolism of Samhain is the Third Harvest, the dark mysteries, and Rebirth through Death.

Beltane: Beginning of Summer Litha: Midsummer Lughnasadh: Beginning of Autumn Mabon: MidAutumn  
Samhain: Beginning of Winter Yule: Midwinter Imbolc: Beginning of Spring Ostara: Midspring

**Resources:**

*Adept Circle Magick: A Guide for the Advanced Wiccan Practitioner* by Kirk White

<http://www.wicca.com/celtic/akasha/holindex.htm>

<http://www.thewrenandthemistletoe.com/>