



UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST

CONGREGATION OF FREDERICK
Spirituality · Community · Justice

Samhain

Frederick Covenant of UU Pagans (FCUUPS)

31 October 2021

frederickuu.org

“From Pagan to Christian to Unitarian Universalism”

- Sea Raven Morse

This time of the year – Samhain – Halloween – is celebrated world wide as the Day of the Dead. It is a time to honor the ancestors, to celebrate the dead who have gone before.

In pre-Christian times, Northern European folk faced their last chance for harvest; the beginning of the hunting season; the time of dread looking into the coming Winter of cold, hunger, danger and death.

Without going into an extended treatise on the history of Christianity, I will just say that after the Emperor Constantine declared Christianity to be the religion of the Holy Roman Empire in the 4th century, converting so-called Pagans to the new religion became paramount. But what happened was – in the very early days – traveling Christian priests or monks encountered the prevailing earth-based religions of the local people. The pre-Christian northern European – or Celtic – tribes divided the year into agricultural cycles, based on the journey of the Sun across the sky, and anchored by the Winter and Summer Solstices, the Fall and Spring equinoxes, and four cross-quarter days that are halfway between the Equinoxes and the Solstices. Samhain --

Halloween -- is the cross-quarter day between the Fall equinox and the Winter Solstice.

The Catholic church – and the later Protestant version of what became Christianity – was so successful in its appropriation of local Pagan spiritual experience, that the African diaspora, brought about by the slave trade, developed its own Catholic-based traditions in the Americas, incorporating West African, Yoruba, and other traditions into what became Vou Doun, and Santeria, to name just two.

Present-day Unitarian Universalists may be somewhat unhappy about tracing ancestry of the Unitarian movement to Christian origins. But be assured that those origins were anathema to established Christian or Catholic dogma. We can claim a saint – Michael Servetus – who described the Trinity as a “three-headed Cerberus” and “three ghosts.” Worse, in the eyes of John Calvin, Servetus expanded his ideas on the nature of God and Christ in his major work, “The Restoration of Christianity,” which resulted in Calvin ordering him to be burned at the stake in Geneva in 1553. He was also burned in effigy by the Catholic Inquisition in France.

The Anabaptist Council of Venice in 1550 started an underground antitrinitarian movement in Italy, led by men such as Matteo Gribaldi. The Italian exiles from Catholic dogma spread their antitrinitarian views to Switzerland, Germany, Poland, Transylvania, and Holland.

All of this is to say that from the beginning, Unitarians – and Universalists of the 19th century – have been devoted to intellectual argument that leads to religious liberty and free thought.

Before I wind this up, the Protestant Reformers had the gall to declare October 31 Reformation Day, and November 1, the Feast of All Saints – anything to misappropriate ancient ways that honored the earth and its seasons.

When you came in this morning, you brought with you, or were given, a bit of ribbon. One of the pagan practices that is readily available to all of us is knot tying. A knot, at its most basic, is a way to remember. It marks an intention, a moment, a fixed point in time. This morning, I invite you to tie the first knot in your ribbon in honor of the roots of Unitarian Universalism. We come from somewhere, and without the work and vision of the ancestors of our path, we would not be here today.

"Samhain of Old"

- Jack Park

History of Samhuinn

News for you:

Hear the stag's cry,

Snows of winter, summer has gone.

Wind high and cold.

Low the sun, short his track.

Heavy the sea.

Deep red the bracken; its shape is lost;

the wild goose cries its accustomed call,

Cold takes hold

On birds' wings;

an ice-time,

This is my news.

-Anonymous, 9th Century Irish

The harvest begun at Lughnasadh is over. As the first frosts arrive, the cattle are brought in from the fields, and the final harvest of the year begins: the culling. A whole herd cannot be kept fed and warm through winter, and so the excess is slaughtered,

their meat dried and salted to keep the people fed through the long, dark nights of winter and the bright, hungry days of early spring.

The time of Samhain was once, and still is to some of us, the most sacred of the Celtic holy days— “the heathen Easter”, as the Christian commentators put it. Specific traditions vary, of course, across Ireland, Wales, Scotland, Cornwall and Brittany. But the heart of the tradition goes back a very long way; potentially well over two thousand years, to the Three Nights of Samonios observed in Gaul, although the evidence that far back is scant, fragmentary, and much debated.

The Celtic peoples reckoned a day from sunset to sunset, and as their days began with the coming darkness so too did their years begin with the coming winter.

Samhain is the Irish name for this day— indeed, in modern Irish it is the name for the entire month of November — and it marks the day that the summer half of the year dies and the winter begins. On Samhain eve, this world and the other come close, and the shades of the dead walk the earth unseen.

For this reason, we dress in masks, so that the newly dead do not get confused and linger among us. We leave out candles and lanterns to guide the dead along their way, and carve frightful heads from turnips to ward away evil. We give offerings to those who come to the door, for fear of the mischief the dead might make, or else children on their behalf. And we prepare our hearths. We leave food and drink out for our own dead, who will come as shadows about our homes and hearths. It is a spirit-night. Shades and fair folk walk the earth this night, and spirits ride the high, cold winds.

I invite you now to tie a knot in your ribbon, and breathe into it remembrance of the ancestors of this holiday— the Celtic peoples whose holy day lies at the root of our own Halloween.

“Ancestors of Blood”

- Irene Glasse

When we hear the word ‘ancestors,’ the first thing most of us think about is our family of blood: the people whose DNA shapes the very bones within our bodies. Most of us can recall a beloved grandparent, aunt, uncle, or parent that we would give *anything* to sit with again. The beautiful part of celebrating Samhain as a holiday of the ancestors is that it offers us that very opportunity. We create space for connection. We pay attention to the voices of the loved ones that live within us. And, for those of us who follow a more mystical path, sometimes we encounter signs that our loved ones are near.

Samhain season at my house becomes a parade of small signs - the scent of a familiar perfume drifts momentarily through the air. Funny things happen with the lights. Sometimes I’ll swear I hear a voice or sense a presence in the next room only to find no one there. It’s not scary when you know what’s happening. I liken it to passing a friend while driving. You honk your horn and wave, but your travel keeps you from stopping to visit longer than that. I’m just getting honked at from the other side, and I’m so grateful for it, because I miss them all so much. Knowing that my beloved dead are trying to pass a greeting is a true gift.

The culture of the United States has an unhelpful and often toxic relationship with death and grief. We’re expected to move on and push our grief from our thoughts. Samhain counters that narrative. It reminds us that grief is the proof of love and it gives us space to touch both those emotions and the spirits of those we mourn. It allows a specific time of year for communing with those who have gone beyond this life. It’s an opportunity to sit with the good memories as well as the pain, and to allow both wells of feeling to breathe.

I invite you to take this moment to think about a family member you miss. It's okay if it makes you sad - there's nothing wrong with sadness or grief. And in this holy space that we share together, I invite you to tie a knot in your ribbon in honor of *your* beloved dead.

“Ancestors of Milk and Honey”

- Raven Rauth

Although the first thought upon hearing the word ‘ancestors’ is often of blood relatives, in modern practice the ancestors are a broad group that includes more than just people with whom we share DNA. One group of ancestors we honor are those who took us in as though we were their own. People who loved us, or who loved our family and shared the bond of kinship. Most of us can think of someone who acted as a sibling, aunt, uncle, cousin, or grandparent, but who did not share a bloodline with us. Likewise, many of us have adoptions and relatives by marriage in our family lines, and those ancestors are no less our family than the ones related by blood.

Family created by choice is a powerful thing, and those bonds do not diminish in death. We call these ancestors the Ancestors of Milk and Honey. They shared both their nurturing with us as well as their sweetness, and we carry the mark of that connection whether we realize it or not. Expanding the idea of the ancestors to a family of love as well as blood connects us more deeply to those who have gone before. We are truly the product of the love of thousands.

I invite you to think about your own ancestors of milk and honey. Who took you in and loved you? Who mentored you or shared their life with you? Take a moment to tie a knot in your ribbon for the family that chose to love you and yours.

“Ancestors of the Order”

- Tamara Curry

One group of ancestors we honor within Frederick CUUPS is the Ancestors of the Order. We honor those who forged the paths we walk, those whose footsteps we shadow and whose words we quote. Ancestors of the Order are those with whom you share a life path or consuming purpose, even if they are people you never meet in person. Scott Cunningham is an example of an Ancestor of the Order of modern witchcraft. Freddie Mercury is an Ancestor of the Order for musicians. Michelangelo is an Ancestor of the Order for artists.

Our Ancestors of the Order can also share our oppressions and challenges. They include those people who broke the ground that we now walk on. Marsha P. Johnson, a self-identified drag queen and a prominent gay liberation activist, is one of the most well-known participants in the Stonewall uprising. The Stonewall Riots of 1969 were solidified as a key moment in the LGBTQ+ civil rights movement by the marches that began a year later. Today, June is celebrated as Pride Month in commemoration of the event. But Marsha’s life did not end in glory - it ended with her body being found floating in the Hudson River, most likely a victim of violence. And so we can also honor the struggles of the Ancestors of the Order. At Samhain, we honor those who fought, suffered, and died to bring about the world we live in now. Though they may not rest in peace, may they rise in power.

Take a moment to think about those who inspired you, or those who paved the way you follow now. (pause) I invite you to tie a knot in your ribbon in honor of your own Ancestors of the Order.

“Challenging Ancestors”

- Layla Kruse

I have struggled with the concept of ancestor worship and incorporating that into my personal practice. I find the idea of venerating or exalting ancestors that I wouldn't ... invite to my barbeque to be difficult to reconcile.

I want to share a bit of my family's history today.

My grandmother was the oldest daughter, second oldest child, of a family of eight children. Her father was a World War I veteran. I can only speculate about the reasons, but I know that her mother left her father sometime after her 8th child was born. Her father left shortly after that - he may have gone to find his wife, to try and convince her to come back, or may have gone into a VA hospital. He left some money with his children, obviously thinking he wouldn't be gone that long. His oldest child would have only been 12 or 13, and my grandmother would have only been 11 or 12, taking care of 6 younger siblings, the youngest only a few months old. When both parents had been gone for longer than a week and the money for food had run out, social services finally became involved and separated the 8 children among distant family. My grandmother's last memory of her siblings involved a social worker forcibly taking her baby sister from her arms screaming and crying as they reached for each other. My grandmother did not see her siblings again for 50 years.

My grandmother never really recovered from those experiences. She tried to make a family of her own to make up for that loss, but her trauma lived on in her children. They never learned how to have healthy boundaries. They never learned what a healthy relationship was supposed to look like. And they never learned how to apologize. What they did learn was anger, they learned to yell...to hit...to punish each other for every little thing. I no longer speak to my family because they haven't reached a point of being tired of holding all that anger, like I have. I have an uncle that I've never even met.

The dysfunction of my family is like a cancer that eats away at each generation. And most of them don't even know why they're mad. For me, this is a recent part of my family's legacy. Two generations removed. But, looking further back, I have ancestors that were slave owners. I know exactly who they were, where they lived, and exactly how many slaves they owned. I can almost guarantee that there are things we all carry that aren't about us. Things that we inherited from our ancestors whether recent or long ago.

So, if the idea of worshiping or honoring your ancestors doesn't quite sit right with you, I want to give you an idea of what incorporating this practice into your spiritual life might look like without that element:

At least for me, understanding some of the history of my family, allows me to offer them some grace. When I am able to see my ancestors as whole, complicated, hurt people, I am better able to forgive as I get to know them. And I'm also better able to offer myself some grace as well, as I work on healing those legacies of pain that were passed down to me.

I invite you to take a moment to consider your challenging ancestors, and to tie a knot to remember that all beings are deserving of grace, including us.

“Ancestors Yet to Come”

- Ursa Sylvest

We have talked a lot about the ancestors who have gone before us, but there's one group we've left out. It's the one sitting right here, right now. We are the ancestors yet to come. The river we sail on continues after us. What we do now influences how the tapestry will unfold. We are the ancestors of the ones yet to be - of blood, of milk and honey, of the order, or of culture and history.

Just as our ancestors shaped the world we live in now, we are shaping the world yet to come. The Seventh Generation Principle is based on a Haudenosaunee (hoe-dee-no-SHOW-nee) philosophy that the decisions we make today should result in a sustainable world seven generations into the future. Knowing that we can send both blessings and challenges to our descendants can inspire us to do better now. Think about the patterns that you do not wish to share. Working on ourselves, our communications skills, and improving our relationships to each other means a healthier family for those who are yet to come.

Take a moment to think about the world you wish to create for your descendants. Imagine what you would like to bless them with. And then, tie a knot in your ribbon to seal that blessing in place.

“Ancestors in Spiritual Practice”

- Robyn King

There are many ways to include our ancestors in a spiritual practice, particularly around Samhain. One way to honor them is to build an ancestral altar. A simple version would be to put out some photos and memorabilia where they can be seen. You can add flowers, a candle or two, or a cup for making offerings. Ancestral altars can be more elaborate as well. The one here today is an example of the kind we use as part of the Frederick CUUPS Samhain ritual every year. It includes memento mori as well as

familial objects and photographs, and is an elaborate focus point for visiting with our loved ones. Once you've set up your ancestral altar, spend some time there. Talk to your beloved dead. Tell their stories if you have family members who did not know them. Stories are a wonderful way to keep people present in our minds and hearts.

Another tradition is a silent supper, sometimes referred to as a dumb feast. We make the dishes our loved ones liked to eat. Then, we set a beautiful table with places laid for those we wish to join us. We invite our beloved dead to join us, and eat in silence so that we can better commune with them.

If your friends or family are buried nearby, visiting and tidying up their graves is also a wonderful way to observe the holiday and to demonstrably show your ancestors that they are loved and remembered. Spend time at the last earthly holding of the ones you are honoring. Say their names aloud - there's extra potency at this time of year. Depending on the graveyard, leaving an offering of autumnal flowers may be a good option as well.

Samhain is a season as well as a specific holiday. Today is Samhain, the holiday, but it doesn't mean you've missed the bus if you'd like to get started. Within the Pagan wheel of the year, this time of connection with the world of the dead lasts until the days grow longer at Yule, the winter solstice.

I invite you to take a moment to think about how you'd like to honor your ancestors this year, or how you already honor them in your practice. (pause) Then, tie a knot in your ribbon to mark the ways you honor your beloved dead.

“Invitation to Visit Ancestral Altar”

- Irene Glasse

Earlier this morning, many of the speakers you’ve heard here today gathered to build an ancestral altar to share with you. We have a collection of tealights with us, and after the service, if you are so moved, we welcome you to place one on the altar in honor of your ancestors. We’re happy to help you do so. Several of us will also remain for a while to answer questions and hear your reflections if that would be helpful to you.

We wish you a very blessed Samhain. May you feel the love of the ancestors, today and every day.