

### Witches Misunderstood

“Witch” is a very strong word with many meanings attached to it. Different people think of different things upon hearing it. Some might think of pure fantasy, while others think of the Christian devil and then there are those who think of the Wiccan religion. Though there are Wiccans who do not like to be called “witch” because of the negative history, there are quite a few who accept the word with pride. They accept it in order to try and erase the bad press associated with witches. There are so many aspects and layers to Wicca but one only needs to know a few things to understand that a witch isn’t someone to judge right away. Wiccans have rules like any other religion, they worship a Divine Being (often more than one), some of their more recognizable symbols need to be brought to light, and they have holy days and rites of passage just like anyone else. First, one must know the rules.

The most important rule of Wicca and really the only one expected to be followed is “Harm None.” It is our Golden Rule; it basically means the same as “Do unto others”. Most of the Wiccan Rede which can be compared in some ways to the Ten Commandments is really more like advice or guidelines if you will. It is not necessary and certainly would be very difficult to follow it to the letter. However, the last eight words should be followed if one wants to be a good person. Those words are “An it harm none, do what ye will.” The precise wording varies but it means the same. As long as it harms no one, yourself included then you may do as you like. This is not a free for all—far from it. You have to think about every possible outcome, consequence and repercussion before you do anything.

There is something else attached to this and that is the Law of Three or the Threefold Law. This means that whatever you do will come back to you threefold. If you do something good the reward will be three times greater. If you do something bad then the punishment will be three times worse. It is that whole karma thing in action. Of course, sometimes the rewards and punishments will not be obvious. Patience is an important trait or skill to have in Wicca. If a spell does not work then you should not be doing it. There is something else that you should know about Wicca; witches do not proselytize. “Most Wiccans consider it unethical to impose their beliefs on others, let alone tell them how to worship” as said

in Exploring Wicca (Lady Sabrina 25). This is very true, it is highly unethical to tell someone how to worship, not to mention highly annoying. A person should be free to choose his or her own path. It shouldn't matter what it is as long as the person is truly happy with their decision and chosen deity, if they in fact choose one.

Wicca is a nature based religion and therefore sees deity everywhere in the natural world. However, some put a face or faces on a supreme being or beings. The main deities of Wiccan Witches are the Mother Goddess and occasionally the Father God also known as Mother Earth and Father Sky, Sister Moon and Brother Sun. Scott Cunningham in Wicca: A Guide for the Solitary Practitioner states that "Every deity that has received worship on this planet exists with the archetypal God and Goddess" (9). This of course means that some only believe in the two instead of believing that all the pantheons are not made up of individuals, that they are aspects only. Now, some Wiccans believe the God is the Goddess's consort only, and others believe they are equal partners. Goddess religions though have been around a lot longer than today's patriarchal ones. This is why Wiccans, great deals of whom are female and/or feminist prefer the Mother. Actually, that is not the only reason. A lot of Wiccans are converts, "born again Wiccan" if you will and they were disillusioned by the patriarchal religion they were brought up in.

There are of course those who believe that the Divine Being is genderless and capable of many faces and places. In other words there are monotheistic Wiccans who don't define themselves as Pagan, though they are few and far between. According to Margot Alder in Drawing Down the Moon these people are often scoffed at by the more traditional Wiccans and are told that they should call their religion something else (125-126). So, we will not focus on those monotheistic people.

Now, instead we will go over some of the symbols of Wicca that you may or may not have heard of. These symbols are the pentacle, the wand, the cauldron, everybody's favorite, the broom and the Book of Shadows.



The pentacle first of all is in no way related to the Christian devil—not originally anyway; it is only the inverted pentacle that Satanists use. Wiccans don't even believe in a devil. "Their perversion of our sacred symbol doesn't make our symbol evil any more than their inversion of the cross makes that Christian symbol evil" (Holland 37). I just want to make sure that's clear before continuing. Now, the proper pentacle stands pointing to the sky and its five points represent the five elements that witches like to work with. These elements are spirit, air, water, earth, and fire. The pentacle can be used for such things as protection, meditation and other positive things.

The wand is an iconic symbol of magic users but I'm sad to say that unless you're a good illusionist wands do not make things appear. Nor can they be used to blast people with light shows and the like. A wand is just a tool in ritual kept on one's altar. It is used for casting circles (drawing a circle in the air) to keep magic from going haywire and can also be used to channel energy. If you want a light show, you're going to have to have a really superb imagination. Most witches will agree that it is better to make your own wand rather than buying one already made.

If you know anything about witches then you'll know that they make potions in cauldrons. Though cauldrons are often used for making potions no witch in her or his right mind would use actual newts and frogs and dogs. In fact, 'Tongue of Dog', a phrase I'm sure most people have heard is a folk name for the herb Houndstongue which is *Cynoglossum officinale* in science speak. In his Encyclopedia of Magical Herbs Scott Cunningham says that Houndstongue can be used to tie dogs' tongues "If placed in the shoe, this herb will prevent dogs from barking at you; in effect 'tying' their tongues" (128). Cauldrons are meant to be cast iron and have three legs; however, exceptions can be made as some witches can't afford a big ol' cast iron pot. They're not just used for potions by the way, you can actually cook food in them; they're great multi-taskers.

A witch flying on a magical broom before a full moon is probably one of the most recognizable

images there are, especially during the Halloween season. However this is impossible in real life. Brooms or besoms as witches call them are typically used for ritual cleansing of workplaces and the like. They are also used in some fertility rites. In the Encyclopaedia of Witches and Witchcraft it says "...the association between witches and brooms relates to pagan fertility rites to induce crops to grow high" (Guiley 33).

Rosemary Ellen Guiley also states that people would mount the brooms rather like hobby horses and danced in the fields leaping into the air (33). It is easy to believe that if viewed from a distance this could have been mistaken for flying.

Spells are indeed kept in a witch's Book of Shadows but it is so much more than a spell book. Some witches though prefer to call their Book of Shadows a Grimoire. "I prefer to call them grimoires, because they are in fact, Books of Illumination" (Holland 30). During the Witch Hunts of Medieval Europe, witches would write down their knowledge in books to help preserve the Old Ways. These grimoires of course, had to be kept hidden or it would mean the stake. Aside from spells, witches will also write down a plethora of other things including but not limited to: any magical experiences they might have, the magical properties of herbs and trees and they will write out rituals for holy days and rites.

Like anyone else witches have holy days. There are eight of them and they are called Sabbats or Cross-Quarter and Quarter Festivals; four major (Cross-quarter) and four minor (quarter). These are days of celebration, harvest and looking at life and the world anew. Imbolc on February second is the first of the major Sabbats. This day celebrates the nearing of spring when trees begin to bud and grass begins to push through the snow. There is a line in the Rede that says "When the time for Imbolc shows watch for flowers through the snows." Imbolc is sacred to the Celtic goddess Brighid and is a fire festival. It is also when Witches start spring cleaning. Beltane is the second of the major Sabbats, usually falling on the first of May. In the Celtic calendar this marks the beginning of summer, the days are longer and everything is full bloom (unless you've had a long winter). It is a festival of fire and fertility, the perfect time for fertility rites. In the old days men and women would dance and feast around a bonfire and couples would be formed. The third major Sabbat is Lughnasadh on August first when the Harvest begins. It signifies the

coming of autumn and Witches mourn the death of the sun but give thanks for what they have. The last major Sabbat is Samhain also known as Halloween the end of harvest season. This is the Witches New Year and the beginning of winter and when the veil between this world and the next is at its thinnest.

The minor Sabbats fall in between the major ones, why we call them major and minor I honestly have no idea. The first Quarter festival is Ostara which falls on March twenty-first, the spring equinox. The days and nights are the same length and Witches rejoice in the freshness of spring. This day can be called the Witches' Easter because we have many of the same traditions such as dying eggs and had them first by the way. But I do not want to get into religious politics. Litha or the summer solstice is the next minor Sabbat and marks the middle of summer. Why else would it be called Midsummer? Everything is in bloom and Witches celebrate the beauty of nature. According to Holland this is a good time for Handfastings (20). Even non-Pagans seem to like getting married in June. Mabon, the autumn equinox is third and the Harvest continues. Like spring night and day are in balance but the nights begin to grow. This can be called the Witches' Thanksgiving. The final of the minor Sabbats (or first depending on how one works a calendar) is Yule or the winter solstice on the twenty-first of December. This is the Witches' Christmas, a time to celebrate family and togetherness. The traditions such as mistletoe and wassail and evergreens are Pagan traditions that existed well before the birth of Christ. But like I said, I don't want to get into religious politics or we'll be here till the cows come home.

In a Witch's life there are certain important events that are called rites and are marked with rituals. However, according to Holland these are not obligatory, a witch can hold a ceremony whenever they feel it is necessary (17). I believe this to be true because sometimes something may just not feel right. A Witch can have a ritual to bless a new car or on someone's birthday. A Witch can certainly have a ritual on a Sabbat day if he or she so desires or they can just have some full moon fun. There are of course specific rites usually not involving a Sabbat day that Wiccans typically have rituals for.

Wiccan Rites are essentially rites of passage and are scattered throughout the person's life. If born into Wicca then the first rite would be a Wiccaning, which is rather like a Baptism. This would be a ritual

to place the baby under the protection of the Goddess. Usually, as the child grew he or she would be allowed to choose their own path. The next rite would be Initiation which simply marks a new Witch's dedication to the Goddess and the Craft (Holland 17). Handfasting is a rite that may not happen for everyone or a Witch might not choose to do it. A Handfasting is a Wiccan marriage ceremony where a couple could perform it privately or they could have a priestess or priest preside over it. They can have a set ritual or make up their own with their own vows. Typically handfastings last for a year and a day when the couple can renew their vows or go their separate ways.

The Great Rite is also something that a Witch might choose not to do. It represents the sacredness of sexuality, where the Goddess and God are evoked into the performing couple. No worries, the act is only symbolic (i.e. with clothes) when in front of a group but in private the couple may do as they wish. The Great Rite might be done at Handfastings. A Croning ceremony is for female witches only and it marks her transition into the last stage of her life. This typically takes place after or during menopause. Finally, there are the Funeral rites which should be fairly self explanatory. As Wiccans believe in reincarnation they see death as part of a cycle and the chance to continue on to the next life. So, this can be either sullen or a grand affair.

There is so much left unsaid on witches in this paper but hopefully what was said is enough to help understand them just a little better. "Witch" is still a strong word and will likely remain so for some time to come. However, as more and more witches no longer fear to come out of the "broom closet" so to speak, others are beginning to see that they or perhaps I should say *we* are not to be feared. It will be a slow process as most still don't recognize Wicca as an actual religion and the more stubborn of Christians will simply refuse to see that true witches are not evil. With any luck though as witches keep putting the word out, telling anyone who will listen about our beliefs and rules, then maybe one day we will be accepted (or at least left alone) by others. Wiccan witches are good decent people who deserve the respect that everyone else gets.

Works Cited

- Adler, Margot. Drawing Down the Moon: Witches, Druids, Goddess Worshippers, and Other Pagans in America Today. 2<sup>nd</sup>. New York: Penguin Books, 1986.
- Cunningham, Scott. Cunningham's Encyclopedia of Magical Herbs. 27<sup>th</sup>. St. Paul, MN: Llewellyn Publications, 1997.
- Cunningham, Scott. Wicca: A Guide for the Solitary Practitioner. 29<sup>th</sup>. St. Paul, MN: Llewellyn Publications, 2001.
- Guiley, Rosemary Ellen. The Encyclopedia of Witches and Witchcraft. 2<sup>nd</sup>. New York: Checkmark Books, 1999.
- Holland, Eileen. The Wicca Handbook. York Beach, ME: Samuel Weiser, Inc., 2000
- Sabrina, Lady. Exploring Wicca: The Beliefs, Rites, and Rituals of the Wiccan Religion. Franklin Lakes, NJ: New Page Books, 2001.