

# “Unmasking the Real Meaning of Halloween”

Rev. Annie Holmes

Double, double, toil and trouble;  
 Fire burn and caldron bubble.  
 Fillet of a fenny snake,  
 In the caldron boil and bake; Eye of newt and tongue of dog,  
 Adder’s fork and blind-worm sting  
 Lizard’s leg and howlet’s wing  
 For a charm of powerful trouble,  
 Like a hell-broth boil and bubble.

Has that been your idea of what a witch would sound like and do? No wonder. For thousands of years many people in our society and the churches would like you to think nothing but that, that a witch is indeed evil, vile, contemptible and corrupt, something and someone to be scorned and hated. And for thousands of years it has worked, but not any- more. The witches are among us again and this time for good.

In 391 CE or the Common Era, Theodosius I, leader of the Christian armies burned the great library in Alexandria, one of the last storehouses of ancient wisdom and knowledge. For hundreds of year, from all over the world there had been gathered the poems of Sappho, the rites and rituals of a thousand earth-centered traditions, all stored in this great library so all the world could learn and be renewed. Many priests and priestesses eager to save some of the ancient wisdom, at great personal cost, stole the remaining charred volumes and hid them all over the world so they might be preserved.

In that same year aided by the man who was later to be canonized St. Cyril the Christian bishop of Alexandria – Cyril and his monks barbarously hacked to death with oyster shells a woman, a remarkable woman, a mathematician, astronomer and philosopher of Alexandra’s school of Neoplatonic philosophy, a woman named Hypatia. According to Cyril this woman’s sin was that, as a female she was corrupt, unjust and immoral because she had presumed, against God’s commandments, to teach men. So, she had to die. Today she is recognized as one of the greatest scholars of that time. I guess you could say, the witch hunts had begun.

During what was called the Inquisition, which began in Rome in 1229 by decree the Council of Toulouse and lasted until 1834, it is estimated that over 8 million people were murdered many of them we would have called Pagans. Imagine, 8 million witches, warlocks, Jews, heretics and many

people just like you and who were found wanting in their Catholic Christian faith and were put to death. As far as the ancient indigenous religious, centered in the earth and the goddess were concerned, church authorities thought they had silenced them forever. Thinking that the old ways were taken care of for good, the Roman church went on to other matters.

It is indeed October, to me one of the most beautiful times of the year. I am sure many of you have pulled your warmest quilts out of the closet. There is a chill in the air not there a few weeks before. At every hour of the day now there is a distinct difference to the light. The shadows are not the same as they were only a couple of weeks before. Our thoughts at this time of year turn to pumpkins and falling leaves, warm sweaters to wear on our Fall walks, candy corn, apples and of course Halloween.

Bille' and I attended a United We Stand Rally one Sunday in 2005, in Mukwonago. Before the rally began a woman in front of me was talking to a group of people and she was saying how she loved this time of year and how her kids just loved Halloween. A man turned to her and said, "Don't you know that Halloween is a Satanic celebration of all that is evil. How dare you allow your children to be a part of that? Halloween should be outlawed in this country." I'm not sure if the woman knew him or not, but she commented to her friend that her children loved Halloween because they had a chance to dress up and pretend to be someone or something else. I was reminded in so many ways that night at the rally, how little the general public knows of its history. How easily we can be duped into believing things that have no basis in fact.

Halloween is probably my favorite holiday. But it wasn't always that way. It wasn't until I began reading and studying and learning that I began to see the deep significance of this holiday in this time of year for my healing. It is believed by Wiccans, the word is from the Anglo-Saxon root meaning to bend or shape, it is believed that at this time of year that the veil between the two worlds of the living and dead is at it's thinnest. Meaning, that on the night of the veils, Samhain, there is a chance for each of us to peer into the next world and what...maybe say goodbye to a loved one who died too suddenly. To say I love you to someone who you miss and still desire to have a connection. This is a time of mystery and truth. It is a time when you are challenged by the thought of your own death and a time to contemplate what may lie on the other side of death.

As to the objection that this time of year is a celebration of Satanism, the persona Satan, was by the way created in the 12<sup>th</sup> century by the church itself. His mission, by his creation, was easy to see. His presence as a fiend and the evil incarnate was to scare people back into their need for church for salvation. A beautifully transformative time of year was snatched away from the ancients and in its place we have what we must

go through each year, which to me is a gruesome display of horror and violence, mutilation and the living dead walking among us.

Is there another way to think about this holiday? Ancient pagans, the word pagan also from an Anglo-Saxon root, meaning the country folk, well these country folk would walk through the graveyards of their dead on Halloween night and carry with them pumpkins with scary faces carved on them to scare away the evil spirits and sit near the graves of the ones they loved and eat and drink and celebrate the lives of those now gone from them. They would wait as midnight drew near and the veil separating them from the dead who they loved growing steadily thinner to the point where they believed they could actually communicate with those who had died. A fire would burn near the graves to keep them warm. But the fire was also used, at the end of the night's ritual, to take a leaf that had fallen and to put into that leaf all the sorrows, the fears, the pains they may have been feeling and to toss that leaf into the fire and let the fire consume those negative feelings so they felt cleansed and renewed and ready to enter the coming winter with clean hearts. They danced and sang and celebrated the cycles and rhythms of the earth.

My personal association with the Pagans or Wiccans was with Margot Adler in Horicon Marsh, in Ripon, Wisconsin and Starhawk in Madison, Wisconsin, and with our own Covenant of UU Pagans at each General Assembly. These associations have done more to heal me and enrich my life and renew my connection with the earth, than most of the formal religious education I received for most of my life.

At the circle dance I was a part of in Madison when Starhawk was there leading a workshop, I had just completed my seminary training. I had my degree, I had seen the Ministerial Fellowship Committee, which was a very stressful experience and I had gone through my ordination. I had successfully completed an eight year project and a lifelong dream. I attended this workshop with a bit of apprehensive at what being with a bunch of Pagans was going to be like. Now, you would think I would have been on cloud nine having completed a lifelong goal. But as we were invited at one point in the workshop to lay down on the grass and close our eyes and feel the strength of the earth beneath us, I was surprised to find that I felt I was laying with my arms spread out as if I was nailed on a cross. The tears started to flow running down my cheeks, into my ears. I started crying very hard, seemingly uncontrollable sobs. I was afraid I wasn't going to be able to stop crying. But I couldn't help myself, all the struggle, all the fighting, the energy I had put out in those 8 years had come to a head.

I laid there a long time, afraid I would not be able to get up. And a strange thing happened to me, the first time I had ever felt anything like that, but

I felt the earth was absorbing my tears and in return I was being given back strength. An energy, so to speak, was entering my body and soul wherever my body was touching the earth. I realized for the first time the earth had the capacity to heal my tired, sore psyche because of the love and reverence and worship the Pagans had shown me during that week of my being with them. It was the first time I truly believed the earth was like a mother. They taught me to love and respect myself as a woman. They taught me that our earth is like a mother who loves and protects us and will, given a chance, heal us.

I walked among the witches that week and learned some startling facts. Ever wonder where this idea of a witch comes from? Ever wonder what the history of this fascinating persona was before Margaret Hamilton made the wicked witch of the north scared us to death of in the movie the Wizard of Oz? Let's start with the hat. It is believed that when women and men performed rituals of magic, that great auras of energy would fly up from their heads and from a distance it was perceived to look like the pointed hat we have come to associate as the witches hat. The broom was used to sweep away the debris of negativity when a circle was formed by closing the circle and opening it when the ritual was completed. Newly married couples would hold hands and jump over a broom to signify their passage from single life to married life. Witches always have cats, right? Cats were believed to be the ancient holders of history, so to have one around was a way to being open to remembering. Witches were often the older women of a community. The midwives, the unmarried, the wise grandmothers who often had put off marriage in order to learn of herbs and healing. But it is very interesting that throughout history whenever women were involved in leadership roles in the arena of religion or science or healing, there was a need by the growing male dominated patriarchal church to destroy women's leadership. Hence the midwives, the healers, the priestess were demonized, ostracized and systematically killed.

My pagan brothers and sisters helped me reclaim my past religious history. Because of my Roman Catholic background I love incense, altars, flowers, and statues. All these have been given back to me in a new way because of my associations with the Wiccans. I have an altar in my home, a sacred space. I continually have this urge to bring home pieces of nature and place them lovingly on my altar. I chanted 7 times a day in the Convent.

Chanting, with the added gift of drumming have been given to me as gifts for me to pursue as to their power in my life.

Wiccans have given me a new sense of the other holidays. I no longer see Halloween as all souls or even all saints day or a time for ghosts and

goblins. Rather, now it is a time for healing and renewal. Chilled by the first breath of winter, I focus within myself to look as though through a glass darkly. What a special healing time this can be. I take a leaf each Fall and put into a fire as it burns I burn away the anger, pain and frustrations of the situations in my life I have no control over.

So too has my celebration of Christmas changed. I view this time, with my pagan friend's help, as a festival of the lights. They have given me such a new, deep and abiding symbolism in the celebration of the winter solstice. When night becomes longer and longer, I light my lights earlier and earlier. I light candles and light my furnace and hibernate as the bears of the north and rest and dream of the spring days soon to come. I've been educated, that people long ago, long before the birth of Jesus, burned huge fires in the winter to lure the sun back, hence the symbolism of the Yule log. Unique spirits were believed to live in the pine trees, that's why they didn't turn colors or lose their needles in the Fall, so in order to have those good spirits in your house and bless your family, you invited the spirits in by bringing in branches of pines. How differently my celebrations are now than before, when I only worried about decorating, frantic shopping and a legacy of too much without enough thought.

In the spring I now celebrate the Vernal Equinox. At Easter, the name from the Roman goddess name Estre, also the root for the word estrogen, the goddess of fertility has taught me to rejoice with the earth and new growth and the birth of animals. I celebrate my own capacity to be reborn after the long darkness of the womb of winter. Eggs remind me of the new life and the fertile rabbit reminds me of the abundance of the summer season soon to come. All of these are old, ancient pagan symbols.

The earth is everywhere in this the oldest of all the religions. The pagans have taught me that the earth is crying out. She says she has waited long enough for her children to grow up. It is time, time to get smart or die. The pagans remind us to know that every step we take upon the ground is upon sacred ground. Look around the yard where you live. When was the last time you hugged a tree, or breathed a thank you for all the blessings you have received from the trees that hold the ground water and shade your house and the flowers that beautify, the vegetables and fruit from your gardens. The pagans remind us, it is not a sterile, barren, dead earth we walk upon, no it is like a mother.

Pagans in our UU churches have helped us as UUs to loosen up, learn to let the spirit move within us and around us. They have given us permission to dance and drum. They have helped us see the value in magic or creative visualization. They have reminded us that each of the

practices that we associate with every holiday we have, is from a deeper, more ancient source than we were ever allowed to believe.

Persecution has been part of a Pagan's world since the first invasions of Crete by the Northern peoples in and around 1500 BCE. And persecution still continues today. I have learned from my Pagan brothers and sisters that persecution can not, should not and will not stop them from believing in what they feel is right for them. They have taught me to expect persecution when I first started this journey of being a Unitarian Universalist. So far, I must say persecution has been minimal. But the fervor of the last couple of weeks of linking patriotism and Christianity has been alarming. I am realizing that persecution may be a very real thing in all of our lives when people begin to understand that we are a church who embraces Christians and Pagans, gays and straights, Buddhists and atheists. But, I refuse to panic.

I listen to a liberal Christian who shares that she is afraid that what she believes will not be honored or respected with the rise in fundamentalism in the religious world. She is not so different from many Christians I know. I listen to an atheist who is afraid to share who he is at work or to his extended family because he believes they will not understand the choices he has. He is not so different from many people I know searching for truth and meaning in their life. I listen to radical fundamentalist Christians who are afraid that if they don't coerce people into believing as they do surely God's wrath and judgment will come upon them, their children and our world. They are not so different from many people I know who are afraid and have let panic take over their life. And yet as I listen to each of them I am filled with awe and respect as each are struggling to find normalcy in the midst of war and terrorism. And I am reminded, my voice of reason and sanity can make a difference, because we are not so different.

I am beginning to get smart. I am beginning to construct a series of healthy responses that I hope will be of optimum value in helping people to remember that this country was founded by people who were Deists, not Christian, and that there still is a constitutional mandate calling a separation between church and state. I remind people that being loyal to one's country can still be done in context of one's own conscience and free choice of religious worship. I'm going to look more carefully at candidates for school boards. I'm going to support Public radio who has been a fierce defendant not only of UU churches but also the freedoms we seek. I'm going to talk to the Mukwonago Minister's Association and have them help me write up a draft that will put into words the church's role in this area of upholding the freedom of belief that is given to each of us as an inalienable right as a citizen of this nation. And lastly, I am going to openly support religious minority groups like the Pagans who are

already a part of this UU church and who may be persecuted for their faith.

As we approach Halloween, a very holy night indeed, let us be reminded that there are mysteries available to us far beyond the perversity we may have associated with this night. Know that the mystery of life/death/life is yours to explore if you will but open your And, happy Halloween, in a way you may have never experience it before.