



WHERE THE DEAD LIVE

FROM OUR WORLD
TO THE UNDERWORLD

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THE LIGHT WE SHINE

Death. It's one of the scariest words we know, often tied to bad news. As we live, forming friendships, building communities and weaving our lives ever closer with others, we inevitably encounter death.

When someone's time ends, it can feel like that's all there is: an ending. Like a lightbulb switched off, leaving us in the dark – except, of course, we aren't lightbulbs. The light we cast never dims. It keeps bouncing around, reflecting, warming, illuminating, long after we're gone. Our lives shine outward, beyond ourselves. We glow on.

To grieve a life gone by is, in its way, a privilege, even though it hurts and feels heavy. It's a testament to how much they meant to us, that they can leave so great and big a hole. It is our luck to have lived alongside them, and fortunately for us, we get to keep the very best parts of who they were: their actions, their words, their stories. Those who remain behind look after those things, and we find ways to preserve them.

We honour them with festivals, parades, and gatherings where we share and perform our feelings, year on year. We safeguard their remains, building monuments and markers. We tell stories of what they did and where they might be now. These stories echo, radiate and evolve – offering comfort to those who need them. We act, we build, we narrate, and through it all, remember.

Humans have been living and dying some 300,000 years, and we show no signs of stopping. Through all that time, in every corner of the world, we've found ways to keep the dead with us, knowing that one day we'll take our place among them.

This book is a guide to some of those places, those practices and the stories we tell to keep them close. Here is where the dead live.

Welcome, Reader, and breathe easy: they'll be so glad to see you!



SOULFUL CELEBRATIONS

There's no schedule for death. It doesn't care about the time of day, the day of the week or the month on the calendar. It comes and goes as it pleases. But to live is to mind the clock – we have things to do, places to be and time to keep...

So how do we confront something so unstoppable? We tell it, as firmly as we can, *this is your time*. We mark space in our year to face it, speak to it, rage and weep around it, or laugh, sing and dance to celebrate the lives the dead lived. We gather together – or sit quietly apart – to think on it awhile. And then, because we're still here, we carry on with what we have to do: live.

Whether ancient or modern, religious or secular, nearly every culture around the world sets time aside in their calendar to honour the dead – and, more often than not, serves up a marvellous feast to nourish our memories. In this chapter, you'll discover some of these traditions – their similarities and differences – and from their welcoming practices, perhaps find new ways of your own to give time to those you miss.

Before we uncover where the dead rest, let's start among the living and at our most alive. Dress up, mask up, paint your face! Pick up your instruments, play for your friends, pen poems for your family! Stomp joyfully through the streets – step softly through the graveyard. We're off to visit the dead – but don't worry, they're expecting us. After all, this is a tradition. We do it every year...



SAMHAIN

Originally a Gaelic festival in ancient Ireland, Samhain (pronounced *sah-win*) meaning 'Summer's End' was traditionally observed around 1st November by pagan communities. Though 'pagan' was once used as an insult for non-Christians, it is now embraced with pride. Paganism takes many forms, but often celebrates liminal spaces (places in-between) such as bridges, shorelines or the year's end. On Samhain, friends gather to ward off the cold, light away the darkness, and sing of death as simply a change in the soul's season.

LIGHT THE WAY

On Samhain, the wall between the living world and the next is thin, allowing the veer's departed souls to pass on to the afterlife, often called the Summerland. The living light fiery torches and bonfires to guide and warm them, keeping evil spirits at bay. In the glow of these flames, heartfelt rituals of chants and dances create a sacred space for the living to share their feelings with the departed, knowing their messages will be heard.

SUMMER'S END

The Celtic year is divided into two halves: light and darkness, each ruled by a powerful goddess. The May Queen governs the bright months, bringing growth, life and poetry. At Samhain, power shifts to the Winter Queen, *Caillieach*. She ushers in ice, death and darkness – but she is no villain. Representing wisdom, resilience and strength, *Caillieach* symbolises the virtues necessary to live through hard times. With her icy staff, she guides the dead to the afterlife, marking the transition of the seasons and the soul.

GATHER THE HARVEST

Samhain happens around harvest time when food is plentiful: crops are ripe, animals are grown. In the past, people would sacrifice livestock with the harvest, but the only offering nowadays is setting a plateful of food on a shrine for the dead to share! Bring along fresh, homemade foods and brewed drinks like cider or mead to help cook up a feast.

WILD MAGIC

If you chance upon a Samhain celebration in the wilderness, you'll follow the haunting sound of drums and pipes to a grand fire-dance of animals and mythical creatures; pagans in handcrafted costumes of natural materials with blazing, swinging ropes and sticks. You might see a costumed *Caillieach* telling tales of warring gods or leading chants. Elsewhere, antlered deer-people carve hefty vegetables into spooky lanterns, warding off evil spirits. If this all sounds a little familiar, you should know Samhain was the root of another festival: Halloween!

THE HUNGRY GHOST FESTIVAL

A driving idea behind the Hungry Ghost Festival is that the afterlife is much like our own: sometimes things run out and you need to go shopping. On this day, spirits return home to stock up and reconnect with family. While not all spirits are friendly – especially when hungry – this festival burns warm and bright to soothe those who have passed away and all of us still kicking around.

SNACK TIME

Families set out favourite foods and drinks for the ghosts they expect to visit. These are offered outside the house, by the gate or at the roadside, sometimes circled with chalk for protection (from both people and wandering spirits!). A small gap is left in the circle to let the spirits reach their treats.

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MANY MOONS AGO

The Hungry Ghost Festival, celebrated in Buddhist and Taoist traditions, has been held on the 15th day of the seventh lunar month since at least 554 CE. As the days grow shorter, nights draw in and so the living and the dead grow closer too. To ward off evil spirits, red flags are sometimes placed at the north, east, west and south of town; buffalo horns are blown; and whips are cracked in the air which would keep most beings away, really – spirit or otherwise!

PLAYING WITH FIRE

The Hungry Ghost Festival is all about feeding and honouring the spirits to prevent them from causing harm. But how do you feed a ghost? Joss paper is a key ingredient! It is crafted into representations of food, money or objects to appease the spirits and keep them full.

- Joss paper offerings are set alight because it is believed that the act of burning transforms them into a form that can be received and used by the spirits in the afterlife.
- To make sure the dead know which offerings are for them, people recite their ancestors' names and stay until the joss paper has completely burned.
- For modern festivities, you might see joss paper offerings folded into luxury goods like phones, tablets, handbags, houses and even little vehicles!
- Floating lanterns made with colourful paper, often lotus-shaped with candles inside, honour all souls – especially wandering spirits. This prevents them from causing any mischief, if they're feeling neglected!

OPEN YOUR EYES

The god Da Shi Ya rules the underworld and keeps all the spirits calm as they return to the surface, much like a cosmic symbolic manager. Effigies (sculptures, often made for symbolic purposes) are created in his likeness, with dots of cinnabar (a pigment used in paints and dyes) marked on the eyes using a calligraphy brush. This ritual, known as *kaiguang* or the 'opening of the light' transforms the effigy into Da Shi Ya himself. Careful: perform this wrong and an evil spirit may enter the effigy instead! As festivities end, the eyes are 'closed' by dabbing them with cloth and the effigy is burned on a paper boat.