Pagan Death Care and Funeral Guidebook

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Pagan Death Care Guidebook Overview

As in the case of all religions and belief systems, death holds a great deal of significance in Paganism. However, it is important to recognize that Paganism is not a single religion with one universally accepted set of beliefs or rituals. Contemporary Paganism includes many different religious and spiritual traditions, including Wicca, Druidry, Heathenry, Hellenic and Roman reconstructionist traditions, Kemetic traditions, eclectic Paganism, and many forms of Nature spirituality. Individual practitioners may also practice as solitary Pagans without belonging to a formal religious community.

Because of this diversity, ways of caring for and honoring the dead vary greatly. Some Pagans understand death as a transition into an Otherworld, an ancestral realm, reincarnation, or another spiritual state. Others focus primarily on the continuation of nature, the memory of the deceased, or the return of the physical body to the earth. Some traditions place particular importance on ancestors, deities, spirits of place, or the cycles of nature. Others may not have a specific belief about what happens after death.

Pagan death care is therefore highly personal and individualistic. The wishes of the deceased should be given particular consideration whenever they are known. Advance planning can provide an opportunity to document preferred rituals, religious symbols, music, readings, body disposition, burial or cremation preferences, and the people the deceased would like to participate.

A Pagan clergy member, priestess, priest, chaplain, ritual leader, elder, or trusted member of the person's spiritual community may be able to help create a ceremony appropriate to the deceased's particular path. Organizations such as Circle Sanctuary and the Covenant of the Goddess maintain clergy and religious resources for Pagan and Wiccan communities. Circle Sanctuary ministers, for example, provide funerals, burials, chaplaincy, and other rites of passage. Circle Sanctuary+2

This guide is intended to provide an overview of potential options and resources for Pagans preparing for death, caring for the body, planning a funeral, and processing grief. It is not comprehensive and is not intended to be followed exactly.

There is no single "Pagan funeral." A ceremony may be highly formal or informal, solitary or communal, solemn or celebratory, indoors or outdoors, and religious or largely secular with Pagan elements. The most appropriate ceremony is the one that respects the wishes and beliefs of the deceased and those who are grieving.

Please feel free to take any parts that feel meaningful and helpful and leave behind those that do not serve you. The process of death can be an overwhelming and difficult time, and this guide is one resource intended to help people navigate it.

For more information on independent or home funerals, consult the Home Funeral Alliance. Its current resources address home body care, vigils, disposition, planning, and state-specific legal requirements. Home Funeral Alliance+1

Paganism and Beliefs Surrounding Death

There is considerable diversity among Pagan beliefs about death. One common theme across many Pagan traditions is the understanding of death as part of the natural cycles of existence. Nature provides an important spiritual framework for many Pagans, and the movement from birth to growth, decline, death, decomposition, and renewal may be understood as sacred.

Some Pagans believe that death is a transition rather than an absolute ending. Depending on the tradition, the deceased may be understood as traveling to an Otherworld, joining the ancestors, entering the Summerlands, continuing through reincarnation, dwelling among the gods, or moving into another spiritual state.

Other Pagans may hold more individualized or uncertain beliefs. A person may believe that the spirit continues after death without having a specific understanding of where it goes. Others may understand the afterlife metaphorically, emphasizing the continuation of a person's influence through family, community, nature, memory, and the effects of their life.

Ancestor veneration is particularly important in some Pagan traditions. Ancestors may be understood as members of a continuing spiritual community who can be remembered, honored, and approached for guidance. Contemporary Pagan observances such as Samhain are frequently associated with honoring the dead and reflecting on the relationship between the living and those who have died. Circle Sanctuary+1

Some Pagan traditions also understand the physical body as belonging to the natural world. Burial in the earth, natural burial, cremation, or other environmentally conscious forms of disposition may therefore be meaningful choices. Circle Sanctuary's Circle Cemetery, for example, provides natural burial and cremation options for Pagan practitioners and others whose spirituality honors nature. Circle Sanctuary

There is no universal Pagan teaching that requires either burial or cremation. The appropriate choice depends on the person's tradition, beliefs, environmental values, family circumstances, finances, and applicable laws.

Death may also be viewed as a time of transformation. Contemporary Druidic funeral resources, for example, describe rites of passing as opportunities for acknowledgment, remembrance, release, and transformation, while emphasizing that the ceremony should be adapted to the needs and beliefs of the deceased and mourners. The Druid Network+1

Resources For Pagan Theology on Death:

- Paganism: Beliefs and Practical Tasks at the End of Life — Pagan Federation Community Support Team
- Rite of Passing — The Druid Network
- Rites of Passing and Remembrance — The Druid Network
- Celebrating Samhain — Circle Sanctuary
- Samhain Lore and Rituals — Circle Sanctuary

Preparing For Death

Calling a Pagan Clergy Member, Creating a Sacred Space, and the Deathbed Vigil

When death approaches, some Pagans may wish to contact a priest, priestess, clergy member, chaplain, elder, coven leader, ritualist, or other trusted spiritual person.

Because Pagan traditions differ significantly, the spiritual care provided at the end of life should be based on the individual's specific beliefs. A Pagan clergy member may help with prayers, meditation, ritual, music, invocations, offerings, readings, ancestor work, or other practices that are meaningful to the dying person.

Circle Sanctuary maintains a roster of Pagan ministers and has a chaplaincy program supporting Pagan and Nature-centered spiritual care. Its ministers may conduct funerals, burials, counseling, and other rites of passage. Circle Sanctuary+1

The Covenant of the Goddess is another resource for Wiccan and Witchcraft communities. Its clergy conduct funerals and other rituals associated with life transitions. Cog

A sacred space may be created in the room where the person is dying. Depending on the individual's tradition, this might include:

- Candles or an electric candle
- Photographs of loved ones or ancestors
- Religious statues or images of deities
- Sacred tools
- Crystals or stones
- Plants, flowers, or other natural objects
- A representation of the four elements
- Personal objects with spiritual significance
- Music, chanting, poetry, or prayers
- Offerings appropriate to the person's tradition

The dying person should be consulted whenever possible about what they want included.

Some Pagan communities practice a deathbed vigil in which family, friends, and members of the spiritual community remain with the dying person. The vigil may involve silence, conversation, music, prayer, ritual, meditation, storytelling, or simply companionship.

Some traditions have beliefs about the time immediately surrounding death. For example, some Pagans believe that the spirit may remain close to the body for a period of time, while others believe the spirit departs immediately. Because these beliefs vary, families should ask the deceased or their spiritual community about any specific practices they wish to observe.

Ethical Wills and Spiritual Legacies

Pagans may also choose to create an ethical or spiritual will.

An ethical will can be a written or recorded message intended for family, friends, spiritual community members, or future generations. It may include personal values, spiritual experiences, teachings, favorite rituals, family stories, hopes for the future, instructions concerning spiritual objects, or reflections on the person's relationship with nature and the sacred.

A Pagan spiritual legacy might also include:

- A letter to children or descendants
- Instructions for maintaining an ancestor altar
- Information about religious objects and their significance
- Personal poems, prayers, songs, or rituals
- A record of important spiritual teachers or communities
- A list of people who should be contacted after death
- Instructions for a funeral or memorial ritual
- Preferences concerning burial, cremation, or green burial
- Wishes concerning offerings, grave markers, or memorial gardens

Resources such as the Home Funeral Alliance can also assist families in thinking through practical and ceremonial aspects of end-of-life planning. Home Funeral Alliance+1

Resources on How to Prepare for the Death of a Pagan and Provide Spiritual Comfort:

- Paganism: Beliefs and Practical Tasks at the End of Life — Pagan Federation Community Support Team
- Circle Sanctuary Ministers Roster
- Circle Sanctuary Ministry Training Program and Ministerial Services
- Covenant of the Goddess
- Home Funeral Guidebook — Home Funeral Alliance

Caring for the Body

Rituals After Death

There is no single Pagan ritual that must occur immediately after death. Practices may be based on the deceased person's religious tradition, family customs, and personal wishes.

Some families may wish to spend time with the body after death rather than immediately transferring it to a funeral home. This may provide an opportunity for family and friends to say goodbye, perform prayers or rituals, wash or dress the body where legally permitted, and hold a vigil.

Some Pagan traditions may include ritual washing, anointing, dressing, wrapping, or blessing of the body. Water, oils, herbs, flowers, incense, stones, candles, and other objects may be used according to the person's tradition.

Any substances placed on or around the body should be compatible with the requirements of the funeral home, crematory, cemetery, or natural burial ground. Certain materials may be prohibited because of environmental, crematory, or cemetery regulations.

The body may be dressed in ordinary clothing, ceremonial clothing, religious robes, a shroud, or another garment that has significance to the deceased.

Some families may wish to place symbolic objects with the deceased. Examples could include photographs, written messages, flowers, jewelry, religious objects, or other personal items. Whether these objects can accompany the body depends upon whether the person is being buried or cremated and upon the rules of the cemetery or crematory.

Home Funerals and Family-Led Body Care

Some Pagans may find home funeral practices especially meaningful because they allow family and community members to participate directly in caring for the deceased.

The Home Funeral Alliance explains that home funerals can include body care, ceremony, family and community gatherings, laying the body in honor, and disposition. However, specific legal requirements differ by state. Home Funeral Alliance+1

Families should research the laws where the death occurs before making plans. Requirements can involve transportation, death certificates, burial permits, refrigeration or other cooling methods, and who may perform particular tasks.

Pagan Burial and Cremation

Both burial and cremation may be compatible with Pagan beliefs.

Natural burial is particularly meaningful to some Pagans because it emphasizes returning the physical body to the earth and minimizing environmental impact. Green burial generally involves practices such as avoiding embalming with toxic chemicals, using biodegradable burial containers or shrouds, and avoiding burial vaults where the cemetery permits. Green Burial Council+1

Circle Cemetery, operated by Circle Sanctuary, is an example of a Pagan-associated natural cemetery. It provides options for unembalmed bodies, biodegradable shrouds and containers, and cremated remains. Circle Sanctuary

Cremation can also be meaningful within Pagan traditions, particularly where fire is understood as transformative, purifying, or spiritually significant. A Druidic rite of passing, for example, may be adapted for a crematorium and incorporate symbolism connected with the transformative power of fire. The Druid Network

There is no universal Pagan requirement concerning embalming. Families should discuss whether embalming is desired or necessary with their funeral provider and consider whether it fits the deceased's religious and environmental wishes.

Resources on Body Care and Burial Practices:

- Home Funeral Guidebook — Home Funeral Alliance
- State Laws for Home Funerals — Home Funeral Alliance
- What Is a Home Funeral? — Home Funeral Alliance
- Circle Cemetery — Circle Sanctuary
- Green Burial Council
- Green Burial Cemetery Provider Map
- Green Burial Council Funeral Home Provider Map

Pagan Funerals

Funeral Arrangements, Attire, and Burial Proceedings

Pagan funerals can take many different forms. A funeral may be held at a funeral home, cemetery, crematorium, private residence, outdoor sacred space, Pagan community center, or another location that permits religious ceremonies.

The ceremony may be led by a Pagan priest, priestess, clergy member, chaplain, elder, family member, or friend.

Depending on the tradition, a Pagan funeral may include:

- Opening or closing a sacred circle
- Invocations of deities or ancestors
- Honoring the four elements or directions
- Prayers or chants
- Poetry and readings
- Music
- Eulogies and storytelling
- Offerings
- Lighting candles
- Passing a sacred object among mourners
- Ritual washing or blessing
- Calling upon ancestors
- A period of silence or meditation
- A procession
- Burial or cremation
- Scattering of ashes
- Planting a tree or other memorial plant
- Sharing food and drink
- A final farewell or release

Not every Pagan tradition uses all of these practices, and some traditions may not use them at all.

Druidic funeral resources emphasize that rites of passing can be adapted for natural burial grounds, crematoriums, sacred groves, memorial services, ash scattering, tree planting, standing stones, or other forms of remembrance. The Druid Network

The Pagan Federation Community Support Team similarly describes Pagan funerals as opportunities to honor the deceased, acknowledge grief, and mark the transition created by death. Pagan Federation Community

Attire

There is no universal Pagan funeral dress code.

Mourners may be encouraged to wear ordinary formal clothing, black or other dark colors, ceremonial robes, religious clothing, clothing in colors associated with the deceased's tradition, or clothing that reflects the deceased's personality.

The deceased may be dressed in everyday clothing or ceremonial clothing. Some practitioners may wish to be buried or cremated wearing particular religious jewelry, robes, symbols, or other objects.

Families should communicate any special attire expectations to funeral guests in advance.

Flowers, Offerings, and Symbols

Flowers are generally compatible with Pagan funerals, although particular traditions may have specific preferences concerning flowers, herbs, colors, or plants.

Offerings may be made to deities, ancestors, spirits of place, or the deceased depending upon the person's tradition.

Potential offerings might include:

- Flowers
- Fruit
- Herbs
- Bread
- Water
- Wine or another beverage

- Personal objects
- Written messages
- Candles
- Natural objects

However, offerings should not automatically be placed in a grave, cremation chamber, or natural burial ground. Cemeteries and crematories may have rules concerning what can be buried, burned, or left at a gravesite.

A Pagan funeral may also incorporate religious symbols such as pentacles, triskele symbols, runes, deity images, Celtic or Heathen symbols, stones, plants, or other meaningful objects.

Burial and Final Farewell

At the conclusion of the funeral, the body may be buried, cremated, or otherwise dispositioned according to the deceased's wishes and applicable law.

For a burial, family and friends may participate in placing flowers, earth, stones, or other permitted materials into or around the grave. Some natural burial grounds allow family members to participate directly in filling the grave. Green Burial Council

For cremation, a funeral ritual may take place before the cremation, at the crematorium when permitted, or afterward during a memorial or ash-scattering ceremony.

The final farewell may emphasize release, transformation, return to nature, reunion with ancestors, reincarnation, or another belief appropriate to the deceased.

Resources on Pagan Funerals and Burial:

- Funerals — Pagan Federation
- Rite of Passing — The Druid Network
- Rites of Passing and Remembrance — The Druid Network
- Circle Sanctuary
- Covenant of the Goddess — About CoG
- Circle Cemetery — Circle Sanctuary

Pagan Mourning Period and Grief

Mourning and Remembrance

Unlike Judaism, which has established mourning periods such as shiva and shloshim, Paganism does not have one universally recognized mourning timetable.

The length and form of mourning may depend on the individual's tradition, family, community, and personal beliefs.

Some Pagans may observe a formal period of mourning. Others may continue ordinary life while maintaining an ongoing relationship with the deceased through memory, ancestor practices, prayer, ritual, or visits to a gravesite.

The Pagan understanding of grief may coexist with an understanding of death as transformation. Recognizing death as natural does not mean that grief is absent or that mourners should be expected to "move on" quickly. Pagan communities may understand grief itself as a sacred part of the transition.

Vigils and Community Gatherings

A wake or vigil may take place immediately following death or before the funeral.

Friends and family may remain with the body, tell stories, share food, perform rituals, sing, pray, meditate, or simply sit together.

A vigil can be particularly meaningful for families who want more time with the deceased before burial or cremation.

The Home Funeral Alliance identifies vigils, grief, body care, ceremony, and community participation as important parts of family-led deathcare. Home Funeral Alliance

Honoring the Dead

Many Pagan traditions maintain an ongoing relationship with ancestors and the deceased.

A family may create an ancestor altar containing photographs, candles, flowers, personal objects, or other items associated with the deceased.

Some Pagans may honor deceased loved ones during Samhain or other seasonal observances. Contemporary Pagan Samhain practices can include altars, offerings, remembrance rituals, and reflection on ancestors and the dead. Circle Sanctuary+1

Other traditions may have different dates or practices for honoring the dead. For example, Heathen, Hellenic, Kemetic, Druidic, and other Pagan communities may observe traditions specific to their religious path.

Continuing Bonds and Memorial Practices

There are many ways a Pagan family may continue to honor a deceased person after the funeral.

Possible practices include:

- Maintaining an ancestor altar
- Visiting the gravesite
- Lighting a candle on anniversaries
- Observing Samhain or another ancestor festival
- Holding an annual memorial ritual
- Planting a tree or garden
- Maintaining a memorial stone or cairn
- Sharing stories and photographs
- Preparing the deceased's favorite meal
- Making charitable donations in their memory
- Preserving their writings, artwork, or religious objects
- Continuing spiritual practices the deceased valued
- Gathering with their Pagan community

A memorial does not have to be elaborate. A private ritual, a walk in nature, a candle, a meal, or a spoken remembrance can all provide meaningful opportunities for grief and remembrance.

The End of the Formal Mourning Period and Processing Grief Afterwards

Because Paganism does not prescribe a universal mourning period, families may determine for themselves when a formal period of mourning ends.

Some may mark the transition with a ritual of release. Others may hold a memorial at a later date, scatter ashes, plant a tree, establish a grave marker, or gather with their spiritual community.

The deceased may continue to be honored as an ancestor or remembered member of the community long after the immediate period of grief has passed.

It is important to remember that grief does not necessarily follow a fixed timeline. Pagan spiritual beliefs may provide meaning and ritual, but they do not eliminate the emotional experience of loss.

Resources on Pagan Grieving and Mourning:

- Paganism: Beliefs and Practical Tasks at the End of Life — Pagan Federation Community Support Team
- Celebrating Samhain — Circle Sanctuary
- Samhain Lore and Rituals — Circle Sanctuary
- Rites of Passing and Remembrance — The Druid Network
- Home Funeral Guidebook — Home Funeral Alliance

Complete List of Online Resources

Home Funeral Alliance

- Home Funeral Alliance
- Home Funeral Guidebook
- State Laws
- What Is a Home Funeral?
- Deathcare Practices Around the World

Resources For Pagan Theology on Death:

- Paganism: Beliefs and Practical Tasks at the End of Life — Pagan Federation Community Support Team
- Rite of Passing — The Druid Network
- Rites of Passing and Remembrance — The Druid Network
- Celebrating Samhain — Circle Sanctuary
- Samhain Lore and Rituals — Circle Sanctuary

Resources on How to Prepare for the Death of a Pagan and Provide Spiritual Comfort:

- Circle Sanctuary Ministers Roster
- Circle Sanctuary Ministry Training Program
- Circle Sanctuary Chaplaincy Information
- Covenant of the Goddess
- Covenant of the Goddess FAQ
- Home Funeral Guidebook

Resources on Body Care and Burial Practices:

- Home Funeral Alliance State Laws
- What Is a Home Funeral? — Home Funeral Alliance
- Circle Cemetery — Circle Sanctuary
- Green Burial Council
- Green Burial Cemetery Provider Map
- Green Burial Funeral Home Provider Map

Resources on Pagan Funerals and Burial:

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- Rites of Passing and Remembrance — The Druid Network
- Home Funeral Guidebook — Home Funeral Alliance
- Green Burial Council Resources