

Flowers and other plant decorations should be appropriate to the seasons. One of the pleasant old customs was the wearing of wreaths of seasonal flowers, leaves or grasses around the heads or necks of celebrants; or at the very least, a sprig of something tucked into the hair. Altar decorations are especially pleasing when they reflect the season.

The following eight ritual suggestions cover each one of the Eight Hinges in turn, with certain details that might be included in their celebrations. Please remember that these are only suggestions, and any group wishing to try something different should do so. Each one of the eight festivals should be a unique event, both its planned and unplanned parts dedicated to that particular time of that particular year. Think of the festivals as times of especially heightened creativity and freedom of expression.

## The Vernal Equinox (March 21)

Prepare four sheets of paper with the following question-and-answer series written on each sheet. After invocation and blessing of the space, let four people take one sheet apiece and a candle, and stand outside the circle, facing inward, one in each of the four cardinal directions. These four then read aloud in antiphonal style, one at a time, beginning with the person whose back is to the north (N). She is answered by south (S). Then east speaks (E), and is answered by west (W).

### ANTIPHONAL CHANT

- N: What is this night?  
S: It is the night of the Vernal Equinox.  
E: What is the meaning of this night?  
W: It is the night of balancing.  
N: What are the elements that balance on this night?

- S: Tonight the darkness and the light are equals.  
E: After this night of balancing, which will prevail?  
W: From this night forward, light will prevail over darkness.  
N: How do we recognize ourselves on this night?  
S: We turn away from darkness. We embrace the light. We find the light within ourselves.  
E: Who helps us?  
W: Our Goddess helps us.  
N: What is our Goddess?  
S: She is the shade and the brightness, the fire and the ash, the morning and the evening.  
E: Who is our Goddess?  
W: She is the Virgin of Light, the Crone of Darkness, the Mother of Time.  
N: Where is our Goddess?  
S: She is in our hearts in all seasons of the turning year.  
E: Who is our Goddess?  
W: Behold, she is ourselves.

There are five sections to this chant, each begun by North's question. If a pentacle is inscribed on the floor or ground, the whole circle may walk slowly around the pentacle, passing one point of the star through each of the five sections, returning to original positions at the end. Alternatively the speakers themselves may walk slowly around the outside of the circle during the chant, though they maintain the same directional characters. There will be a repetition of this ritual suggested, with slight changes, for each of the eight seasonal festivals.

The Vernal Equinox used to be considered the beginning of the New Year. It was a time of joy called forth by the resurrection of the "Light of the World" (sun god) from the underworld of winter. Its moon-bound celebration Easter was named originally for the Saxon Goddess Eostre, a northern version of Astarte, whose bud-time savior god arose when light first prevailed over darkness each spring.

Vernal Equinox rituals center around the annual warming of the earth and the renewal of her fertility; seeds sprouting in darkness after a winter of dormancy; and the rising of the spring con-



stellations in the night sky. Appropriate decorations are budding twigs, crocuses, willow catkins, the first shoots of grasses, or wheat sprouts in an earthenware pot, like the famous "Gardens of Adonis" that women planted each year for the resurrection of Eostre's vegetation god.

Ice can be melted in a sieve and allowed to drip over soil in the pottery bowl, representing the spring thaw. Mud is a good symbol for early spring, which is mud time in most of the north temperate zone. *Mud* came from the same root word as *mother*, because the womb of the Goddess who gave birth to the universe was sometimes viewed as a primal soup of the two female elements, earth and water.

Dances can pantomime the rising of new shoots from the earth, and the rising of the sun's path ever higher in the sky. Chants can be constructed on the spot from a combination of phrases about spring, one uttered by each person in turn around the circle, such as: "New light!" "Flowers to come!" "Virgin Spring, we greet you!" "Sap rising!" "Lady Earth lives!" "Hail dear sun, shine brighter!" "Bring us softer days!" And so on.

A special candle can be passed around the circle, as each person makes a wish over the flame for renewal of something—hope, creativity, health, goodwill, wisdom, success in some project, better relationships. Specific wishes for one's self or others may be expressed. The wish candle is allowed to burn all the way down by the end of the evening. To make sure of this, start with a candle that is small or short.

The Vernal Equinox is also a good time to make vows. "This summer I will lose five pounds." "Before Beltane I will clear out my attic." "This month I will finish *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*." "From this day forward I will not turn on television until after the dinner hour." "By Midsummer I will finish the two dresses and three blouses that I bought material for." "Whatever it takes, I will make peace with my estranged sister-in-law."

As this is the pagan New Year, some of the observances that our society has relegated to January 1 might be transferred to the Vernal Equinox: noisemaking, confetti, perhaps even a communal sip of champagne. It is a time of regeneration and expectation. It is the festival of freshness. Let your creative rituals reflect this idea.