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The Spiritual Essence: Remembering Our Dead at Samhain

As the great wheel turns, we are coming into the time of shadows. The veil between life and death is thin and we remember those who have passed on before us. Six million or more have died thus far in the great witch burnings that have dominated the Christian Era.

Samhain is the witches' new year. It occurs when the new moon is in Scorpio and it is traditionally celebrated in this country on October 31, Halloween. It is the time when we remember the ancestors who have gone before us and move joyfully into the future and the rebirth of the sun at the Winter Solstice. The Corn King, who was sacrificed at the Harvest Festival of Lammas, has made his way into the underworld to the nadir of his journey. He will be reborn from the womb of the mother goddess at Yule but for now he must rest with the dead. The veil is thin. If we pay attention our beloved dead will rise to greet us, comfort us and assure us that our own path through life is cyclical – we too shall have the opportunity to rest and to be reborn.

Several years ago, I participated in the Reclaiming Collective's Samhain ritual in San Francisco. Over three thousand men, womyn, and children participated in the ritual calling of the directions, the spiral dance and the invocation of god and goddess. In each of the four directions, a magnificent altar honoring the elements was built high into the ritual space, 10-15-20 feet into the air. In the north, honoring earth and ancestors, was built a tremendous structure covered with hundreds – if not thousands – of names of the dead. At that time, queers were remembering Matthew Shepard, brutally beaten to death some months before. Two women, Julie Williams, a Burlington resident, and her girlfriend Lollie Winans, slaughtered by a misogynist homophobe on the Appalachian Trail, were also in our thoughts. Princess Diana, one of the first public figures to openly call out for an end to the brutal official silence surrounding HIV and AIDS, had died tragically two months before.

This year at Samhain, I remember and honor Marsha Burnett, an African-American woman, a founder of ACT UP Springfield and Arise for Social Justice and a mother of four, who died from complications of AIDS in February of this year at the age of 47. I also want to celebrate the life of Sylvia Rivera on this Witches' New Year. Sylvia was a transgender warrior, Stonewall rioter and tireless advocate for homeless queer youth. She died during the same cycle of the moon as Marsha, from cancer, in

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New York City where she had been fighting for justice for almost five decades.

Marsha was one of the most significant figures in my life as an activist from the time I met her in 1995, shortly after she moved to Vermont from Massachusetts. Her influence permeated virtually every aspect of Vermont's radical community. By 1995, she had long ago tested positive for HIV and been diagnosed with AIDS. When she died in February, 2002 she was one of a very small community of long-term survivors. Indeed, she was a *POZ Magazine* cover girl in her last year, in a story on what keeps long-term survivors ticking. Marsha held onto her life and her

thought first of her fellow poor people, those who had been rejected by a materialist society.

I learned at her funeral that it didn't take infection with HIV to radicalize Marsha, she had been organizing against injustice from the time she was a little girl in the poor, black neighborhoods of Springfield. The funereal unification of her family and friends in Massachusetts, mostly black, mostly Christian, with her anarchist family and friends from Vermont, mostly white, mostly atheist, pagan or pantheist, was a sight to behold. In death, Marsha brought together a group of people who almost certainly would have found it difficult to be together under different circumstances. Her *POZ Magazine* cover photo was placed carefully against the urn that held her ashes. Her thirteen-year-old twin daughters looked radiant as they spoke with everyone at the funeral.

I never knew Sylvia Rivera, but she will forever be linked in my mind with the last lesson in solidarity Marsha Burnett taught me. When I came

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activism with a tenacious grip, pulling back from the brink of death time after time. Her activism revolved around making connections – to Marsha there was no difference between classism, sexism, homophobia, economic oppression and militarism. All oppressions of the human spirit were to be resisted with a force of will that belied her small frame and increasingly wasted body.

In the time that I knew her Marsha taught sex workers in Nicaragua how to put on condoms with your mouth, and she organized women in the U.S. and Colombia to fight the Reagan / Bush / Clinton / Bush "war on drugs" (to Marsha, U.S. drug policy was a direct attack on poor people the world over). She fought tirelessly for political prisoner Mumia Abu-Jamal and against the racist death penalty. She refused to allow the Massachusetts foster care system to place her kids in abusive foster homes. In her spiritual life, Marsha proudly claimed a Christian identity and always wore a small gold cross around her neck. Like Christ, Marsha

out and began focusing most of my activism on work with the Radical Faeries and later on my job at Outright Vermont, I lost track of a lot of my other work on economic and racial justice. I was queer and I was doing queer work. Even my spiritual practice had taken a distinctly faggot bent – my ritual life was restricted to Faerie magic.

Shortly before Marsha passed on, I began receiving e-mails about Sylvia Rivera, her illness and her impending death. Sylvia had participated in the Stonewall rebellion and since that time had struggled to maintain a radical transgender presence in an increasingly assimilationist gay and lesbian political movement. Sylvia organized with young, homeless sex workers on New York's Christopher Street Piers. She worked to provide emergency and long-term housing for transgender youth. She was, apparently, an endless thorn in the side of New York's mainstream gay rights groups that just wanted the straight world to accept them as "normal."

When Sylvia died, the New York Faeries and many >>