Most of our life, a shifting lantern of cold light hangs and slowly sweeps across the night sky. It is a light we “moderns,” living in densely-packed cities illuminated by electric lights, rarely see or even think on. Yet for almost all the entire history of humanity, it was this light and its rhythms which set the course, pattern, and meaning of everyday life.

This is why the first advice I give anyone who wants to understand what being a Pagan is about is to look at the moon. Perhaps it is the only advice needed, since all else springs from this. Our disconnection from nature, our alienation from the rhythms of the earth and its seasons, and most of all our collective sense of meaningless can all be seen most clearly when we contemplate the moon.

Consider—when is the last time you’ve really looked at the moon? I don’t mean the last time you’ve seen it, though that is also a relevant question. When have you last given the
moon your attention, seen it for the distant, incomprehensible, yet ever-present light that it is?

When have you even had the time to do so?

When has your life not been filled with other things to look at, other things that demand your attention? Evenings after work for most are filled with the tasks of cooking, then eating, then staring at back-lit screens under artificial lights until it is time to sleep. When out-of-doors at night, we are usually in automobiles, driving from one place to another, with rarely any reason and definitely no apparent need to look up.

And here we should remember that the moon isn’t only visible at night, but is also visible during the day. In fact, it is there just as often as it is at night, and can be seen on many clear days even in its thinnest crescents. But how often do we really look at the sky during the day except to see whether it is about to rain? Besides, we are mostly indoors during the day, in houses or offices or shops, with rarely much more than a few windows through which to see the entirety of the sky.

The Time of The Moon

The English word month (as well as in almost all modern languages) is derived from the same word as the moon in those languages. There is a simple reason for this: the very concept of “month” comes from the patterns of the moon.

While both the sun and the moon make predictable appearances in the sky, the moon does not look the same each time rises and sets. Every 29 and a half days, it is full. Every 14-ish days after each full moon, the moon is invisible (“new”). And in-between those new and full moons, it waxes (grows) and wanes (diminishes) in a regular and predictable rhythm.

While it is very difficult for us to fully imagine, consider how the easily observable pattern of the moon’s phases would have been for our ancestors the most obvious reference point for the passing of time. The sun rises and sets every day, but the moon cycles, shifts its face and form on each rising before returning—thirty risings and settings of the sun later—to the same face.

Before there were days of the week, there was the month, the moon’s cycle. This cycle closely matched two other cycles important to humans, both related to water. The first of
these is the menstrual cycle of women, the average length of which is 29.3 days\textsuperscript{1}. While in our modern age we minimize and sometimes see as regressive the importance of menstruation, humans since our very beginning have understood sex and birth as a core part of survival. Without sex, there is no birth. Without birth, there are no more humans. When this regular, predictable pattern of bleeding does not arrive with the moon, a new human—roughly nine moons after the last bleeding—would likely be born. That is, by being able to predict the moon, humans could also predict the arrival of new life.

A second natural pattern important to human survival could be accurately predicted by the phases of the moon: the tides. The oceans—now severely diminished and poisoned—have provided humans with one of the easiest-gotten sources of food and thus our survival. Even without tools for fishing, the tides leave scattered upon the shore veritable feasts for anyone who come upon them. Fish and crustaceans stranded temporarily in pools of water created by the receding tide, unable to rejoin the great oceans until the tide returns, are easily gathered with bare hands and carried joyfully back to a village to be eaten.

\textsuperscript{1} Not 28 days, as is usually thought. Bull, J.R., Rowland, S.P., Scherwitzl, E.B. \textit{et al.} Real-world menstrual cycle characteristics of more than 600,000 menstrual cycles. \textit{npj Digit. Med.} \textbf{2}, 83 (2019). https://doi.org/10.1038/s41746-019-0152-7
The tides sweep in and out daily in a rhythmic pattern, twice out, twice in, pulled by the moon’s gravity. The differences of these tides, however, is greatest twice each moon—on the new moon and the full moon—because of the differences in the moon’s pull on the oceans during those phases. So, on a full or new moon, the tide sweeps in farther on the land and recedes farther from the shore than it does during other times.

This makes these two days per moon the most fruitful for the gathering of sustenance from the ocean. Along many shores of the world, it also makes these two days the most dangerous for humans, since the ocean rushes in with more force from low to high tide. In such places, a long stretch of beach or rocky crags can be suddenly inundated in the matter of an hour, sweeping away anyone unable to get to higher ground on such short notice.

In both cases, humans had an ally in the heavens above them, the moon, foretelling to them which days the shores would be most scattered with food and also most dangerous. All a human would need to do was to look up into the sky to the moon’s face to know what the oceans were doing.

There are other more subtle patterns the moon predicts to those who know how to read it. Anyone who has ever shared their home with a cat, for instance, has seen that many animals are more active during the nights of the full moon than they are other nights. Humans, too—we sleep less during full moons and sleep longer during new moons.

Before electric lights, people who hunted needed the moon’s light at night to see their prey—and also their predators—whose eyes glint in its light. Man-made sources of light, fire and all the early implements we have made to carry it, have the unfortunate downside of illuminating the bearer more than what is beyond. The closer you are to a fire, the less open the pupils of your eyes are, making it more difficult to see things just beyond the flickering circle of fire’s illumination.

The moon, however, illuminates everything in a distant, cold light, making it easier to see over distances. If you spend several days camping in the wilderness, far from artificial lights, you have seen how much you can truly see. When the moon is in its half-full phases, you can walk along a clear path without stumbling, and when it is full, you can see all the features of another person’s face clearly and even (if your eyesight is good, but mine no longer is) read the text of a book.
Rather than some mere astronomical oddity or mere backdrop in the sky, the moon for humans has always been an ancient and ever-present guide to our lives. This is not an esoteric statement, though the moon also has been associated with occult and spiritual knowledge in many cultures as well. The moon has been our light, our lamp in the darkness. It has also been our calendar, our clock, the primary way by which we measured the passing of time and the cycles of nature long before we divided our days into hours and used numbers to date our lives and activities.

Now the moon means little to us. The people of industrial cities no longer use the moon to see by, and we consult tide tables and menstrual charts to predict the patterns the moon dictates. Few of us—except in the non-industrial world—gather food along the shores when the tide rushes out, nor do we sit patiently in forests or fields waiting for the moon-illuminating silhouettes of animals that might feed us. We buy our sustenance in hyper-lit supermarkets, walk through city streets flooded with garish lights, and have become so far removed from the moon’s patterns that we often see it as mere symbol, if we even see it at all.
People who know the moon know certain things about it that, to us, may seem like magical or occult knowledge, impossible to access now without special training or supernatural senses. Read most popular witchcraft books and you’ll find no end of rituals to help you “draw down the moon” or use the moon in spell work. Many now recommend you download popular apps for your phone which will tell you when the next full and new moon is, apps which will “alert” you when these phases are about to occur.

If you know the moon, however, you need none of this. It’s humorous—and a little tragic—to imagine a modern witch going back in time to explain the amazing technological advances industrial capitalism has given us, showing a common person 400 years ago how to know what phase the moon will be in on any given day.

One imagines that person shrugging, shaking their head, and merely pointing up. Such a person would not only intuitively know which phase the moon was in, but also where the moon was about to rise that night, and how soon it will do so.

It is something I know, also. I can point to precisely where in the sky the moon will appear tonight, what phase is will be in, and how close to sunset or sunrise it will appear. This is not because I have some mystical connection to the moon, nor because my spiritual senses are more attuned than anyone else’s. I know all of this only because I have been giving attention to the moon.
The moon exists for me as part of my consciousness and world, because each day I make a point to look at it. I saw it rise gold and rose in the waning edge of its fullness behind the great oak outside my kitchen yesterday. I knew where to look and what phase it would be because I saw it the day before, and the day before that, and every day it was visible in almost all the previous days of this year.

By looking at the moon, the moon has become part of my life, something that exists in my world rather than something that rests outside of it. And because I have been doing this for so long now (I’ve made looking at the moon a regular part of my life for most of the last six years now), I’ve noticed other patterns and rhythms in my life that match the moon’s faces.

For instance, I always feel my absolute lowest when the moon is new and just before it is new. Sometimes I am depressed during those days, the way you feel when you are in a draining bath tub and the water is just about to run completely out. Doing complicated tasks, or projects that involve a lot of effort, feels a lot like trying to run through mud.

I only recognize this pattern because I also now know how other days feel. I know what it is like to try to do something complicated after the moon has waxed to half its face, how much easier it is to apply effort to things.

I know what happens in the days just before, the ‘unraveling’ phase as I sometimes call it, when the moon has just increased to half and my shoelaces often come undone. In that phase, I’m also most likely to misplace my keys or wallet, or to have other apparent mishaps occur.

The reason for this is hardly supernatural, however: in this phase, when all the activity of my life increases and there is suddenly a lot more to do, I’m more likely to skip over certain details (tightly knotting my shoelaces, for example, or making sure I put my wallet back in my pocket after buying groceries). This happens in the same way any other excitement or sudden surge of movement sweeps us up more into our minds and less into practical things.

I know how difficult it can be for me to sleep during a full moon, or to remain focused on only one task. I now understand it’s much better to be with friends those times, to talk about things with many people and enjoy their company rather than do something in
isolation. Trying to do otherwise is often fruitless, since my friends will often interrupt what I’m doing anyway because they are responding to the same moment.

Noting how certain things are easier to complete as the moon wanes, I now try more often to plan my writing, gardening, social, or housework projects around those latter phases instead. It’s easier to rest the closer the moon is to new, easier to clear out things, to wrap up something or to experience benefit from something I started a few weeks before. Because I know that I am often more tired and feel less initiative during the new moon, I try to avoid scheduling too much for that time and instead try to rest.

By giving attention to the moon’s patterns and its apparent relationship to my own patterns, I find my life is much more grounded and anxiety is rarely something that can overwhelm me. This became true especially for the patterns around the new moon, because for years before (and even sometimes still) I would waste hours and days trying to do some task that I just couldn’t seem to do. I kept personal journals for years, and once went through them to match the dates of my repeated complaints about having “no energy” or being depressed with the moon phases. Sure enough, these occurred most often during the same period of waning crescent moon to new moon, followed by a sudden feeling that “everything is better again” a day after the waxing crescent.

Whether these patterns are universal or personal, I do not know. Anecdotes from my friends match my own experiences, and the traditional lore of many cultures likewise seems to confirm certain patterns, but universal claims are almost always untrue. It seems impossible—and useless—for humans to say “this is how it is for everyone,” and such claims are anyway quite far from a pagan mindset. What can be said is that the moon itself is a universal for humans, regardless of any of its effects, because it can be seen anywhere in the world, by anyone with sight.

Just like the sun, it shines on everyone, and the moon pulls on us and the oceans with the same gravity regardless our size and form. And unlike the sun, which shines more warmly on half the earth than on the other half, when the moon is full it is full sometime that same night for everyone in the world, regardless if clouds obscure its face.

---

2 It’s always best, I find, to keep a partial sense of doubt on conclusions I’ve come to, which I really mean curiosity. When you are absolutely certain about a cause and effect relationship, you are no longer open to new information that will help you correct any mistaken conclusions. Knowing we might be wrong is how we learn to be right.

3 (and reported on by those with sight to those who are sightless)
Knowing this, and knowing the moon, can act as a gate into a completely different and very ancient way of seeing the world, ourselves, and our relationships to each other. There is nothing ‘magical’ about being able to do this, yet it is also the very foundation of any magical, enchanted way of seeing the world.

The time of the moon is a natural time, by which I mean it is not a time humans have created but rather one they have noted. For most of the history of humanity, in fact all of it until the rise of mechanical time, we have scheduled the activities of our lives not around an imposed standard but by these natural rhythms.

Consider daylight. The sun rises and the world is light. Things can be seen well, and clearly, even on the darkest of stormy or wintry days. So we do most of what we need to do during the day, all those core activities by which we survive. Before agriculture, this was gathering, and hunting big game, and migration, and building shelters, making clothes from fur and leather, weaving baskets, carving tools, burying the dead, and playing. Once humans began to stay in one place, to sow seeds and tend herds of animals, farming (an impossible task at night) and feeding animals, as well as all the new tasks involved in building and maintaining villages, were added to the work of day.
Night before humans settled into farming, on the other hand, was for gathering together, cooking and eating and telling stories and making love around firelight, and staring up into the sea of endless stars and the great changing faces of the moon. Once we became also farmers and herders, night still meant closeness, but now often together in small houses around simple hearths.

Day for us now? For most, it begins waking not to the morning calls of birds and animals, nor even the rising of the light, but to an electronic alarm on a phone. Stumbling into the bathroom to shower groggily, to the kitchen to down coffee, and then to the car or the bus to rush to work.

And night? Well, when does night really start for us? When we have arrived home from work, turned on all the electric lights in our homes, and cook (if we even still do this) on electric stoves, eat, care for children, or when we stare at screens in our hands or placed prominently where hearths might have been in another age? And then we go to sleep, not according to the night outside but to the hour of our clocks. And each night is like the next and the one before, regardless the face of the moon or the patterns of the stars.

A crucial natural rhythm most of us have lost in our modern age is that of seasons. With few exceptions, the work we perform and the schedules of our days are the same whether the land is wintering or summering.

For our collective ancestors, the ancients of all peoples, what the work of life entailed changed with the warmth of the air and the cycles of growth and decay of nature around them. In spring, new leaves sprout from branches or stem from the earth. For the farmer, spring was for sowing seeds, tending seedlings. For the herder, spring was the time of milking, when goats, sheep, and cattle birth their young and their utters are full. For all of them and also for their ancestors which hunted and gathered, spring was the time after the long winter when the earth began again to be full of things to eat: the tips of trees and ferns, early mushrooms, onions and other alliums.

When the summering began, the work of farming and herding became more a work of maintenance rather than the harder spring work of plowing and sowing. There was more time for larger tasks such as building and repairing, with many a day too warm to do much else but play or rest or think. The longer days meant more light in the evenings, more time after all the work of life was finished to instead enjoy the company of others.

As autumn would come, the harder work of farming and herding began anew. Harvesting sown crops and gathering fruit from vines and trees, culling and butchering animals from...
the herds, fishing and more hunting. Yet though the work of the autumning was hard, those days were also days of extreme abundance, days of fattening upon the culmination of the work from spring and summer. What wasn’t eaten was stored or preserved: meat salted, fruits, beans, and seeds dried, grains stocked up, oils pressed, barleys and wheats boiled for beer brewing, grapes juiced and left for fermentation.

And winter? Though sometimes the hardest few months, winter was just as often the easiest few months. Little work can be done in the winter, thus little work is done. There is no farming to do, nor harvesting, only hunting. The wintering time was a time of togetherness, short days and long nights spent together with family (and often with the animals in the house as well), telling stories, doing sedentary tasks such as sewing by firelight or candlelight. Fortunately, by winter the beers and wines started in late autumn were ready to ease the chill and the long darkness.
The Patterns of Sun, Moon, Star, and Life

The year, like the moon, waxes and wanes with predictable patterns, just like the pattern of increase to decrease of trees and plants. Thus, it is unsurprising that so many cultures saw these patterns linked, and chose circular symbols reflecting the shape of the moon and the sun as sacred icons of these patterns. The sunwheel or suncross, circular symbols with radiating arms in numbers often divisible by four to represent the four seasons is one of the most widespread of these motifs. Versions of this symbol continue to be part of the sacred iconography of peoples on every continent.

These symbols began to arise throughout the world at the same time that humans began to build structures and monuments aligned with the sun. Throughout the world, massive stones and mounds were raised in patterns which still accurately predict the winter or summer solstices, as well as stellar and lunar events. One of the most well-known of such monuments is Stonehenge, a ring of tall stones set in alignment with both the summer solstice and (formerly) the winter solstice. Stonehenge is hardly the only such monument, though it is one of the oldest still intact. Across the Irish channel is Newgrange, a circular mound through which a lance of sunlight enters through a small box window only three mornings each year. To the southeast in Bretagne, raised 2000 years before Stonehenge, the massive Carnac stones stand in long alignments that predict not just solar events but possibly also star cycles.

Such monuments are scattered not just across Europe but upon almost every continent. In the Americas reside series of burial mounds—some shaped as serpents—which align with solar events. In Kenya on the African continent are basalt pillars (the Kalokal Pillar site) raised in patterns which appear to create a lunar calendar and possibly also predict the progression of certain constellations. Older than any of the aforementioned monuments are the standing stones of the Nabta Playa in Egypt, raised 7000 years ago to align with solstices and predict the annual flooding rains. North of these are of course the pyramids, many in alignment with each other to mark solstices and equinoxes. In China, the Taosi Observatory, part of a religious complex built over 4000 years ago, was ringed with stone

---

4 A notable exception to this is the Celtic Triskelion and its many variants, which has three radiating legs. Three may have symbolised birth, life, and death. But since it is a cycle returning to birth, there are technically four, with one of them repeating: birth is also rebirth.
towers that aligned with the sun and other celestial bodies. And the oldest known monuments in world, Göbekli Tepe in Turkey, built over 12,000 years ago, may also reflect solar, lunar, and stellar patterns.

So, for as far back into the past as we have structural evidence, humans have not only lived their lives by the movements and patterns of the sun, moon, and stars, but have also built earthly reflections of those patterns. This was the meaning and the pace of time for our pagan, animist ancestors, not the time of ticking clocks and digital alarms but the time of the world in relation to the sky and what shone there.

Being pagan, therefore, means reconnecting to these patterns and conceptions of time—not out of some sense of mystical nostalgia, nor hope for magical power, but rather as the beginning work of all else. This is hardly a difficult work, by the way: you need only do one thing.

Look at the moon.

Each day or night, look up into the sky to find the moon. No smartphone application nor chart are necessary for this; in fact, their use will actually prevent the mystery of moon knowledge from ever occurring. The goal is not to correctly guess where the moon is but to no longer need to guess or consult anything but your own sense of knowing.

To do this, look at the moon. Notice where it is, what phase it is in, where it seems to have risen, where it appears to be setting. Notice how certain phases of the moon only ever seem to appear at night, while other phases seem more likely to occur during the day.

Glance at it daily for months—literally for several moons—and you will soon find something surprising. You will always know when it will rise and when it will set, where in the sky it will do so, and which nights during which no amount of looking will reveal its face. Do this long enough, and you will no longer have to think about it, just as the learner of a foreign language eventually no longer translates words in their head.

Look at the moon and you will know the moon. Perhaps you, like I, will find you also have a favorite moon. Of course I adore when it rises gold and massive just over the horizon in its fullness, but I live particularly for the thin silver crescent in its earliest waxing. When it appears I feel most hopeful, most inspired, and most thrilled to be alive.

This knowledge will change much in you. It will awaken certain understandings about your own human abilities and capacity for perception, crucial aspects of our existence as humans seen as useless and unprofitable in our modern world. We are encourage and
disciplined to forget we can all intuitively know certain things, and we are instead taught to rely on external sources for what is freely available to us all.

Start with the moon, and these other rhythms will become clearer and easier to know, too. The patterns of the seasons are easier to feel only after feeling the moon’s patterns. Seasons are longer and slower, longer and slower than the moon’s faces yet not as long or slow as the earth’s orbit around the sun. Feeling the pattern of waxing and waning moon light makes it easier to know intuitively the seasonal patterns of waxing and initiating life (spring), abundant life (summer), fulfilled and waning life (autumn), and diminished, hidden life (winter).

And from this knowledge and these rhythms comes a deep truth about our own lives: we pass through such phases, too. I have lived 44 years on this earth. While I do not know how many more years I will continue to live, I suspect I am just at the mid-summer moment of my life, or perhaps a few weeks later. Reckoning this, seeing my own rhythms connected to these vaster and ancient celestial and earthly patterns, places me in time. Not in the time of clocks and human calendars, not in a particular month in a particular year, but in an ever-expanding moment of all of life’s existence.

Rhyd Wildermuth

Rhyd is a druid, a theorist, and a writer. He lives in the Ardennes.