

“But I haven’t a thing to wear!”

by Margarian Bridger

Every social or cultural group has a dress code, subtle though it may be. If you’re new to the Craft, you may be wondering how to dress for ritual. Here are some suggestions:

Appropriate street clothes: In almost every ritual that is open to newcomers to the Craft, street clothes are an acceptable alternative, but some types are appropriate, some are not.

Is the clothing comfortable and does it let you move easily? During the course of a ritual, you may spend time standing, sitting on the floor or ground, or dancing. If you are wearing high heels or a short, tight skirt, if your jeans are too tight to breathe in, or if you’re worried that your expensive silk shirt may rib if you raise your arms too suddenly, your clothing may be a distraction to you. If you’ll be dancing and working up a sweat indoors, a heavy sweater may not be appropriate; for a cool outdoor rite, the same sweater may be necessary. Jeans and a clean T-shirt are always suitable (except, perhaps, for a major formal celebration like a handfasting; dressier clothes may not be.

Is your clothing likely to be a visual distraction to others? Sequins and neon chartreuse are obviously things to avoid, unless you’re wearing that costume as part of your assigned role in the ritual. But there are other ways clothing can be a distraction.

At one of the first rituals I ever attended, one young man was wearing a T-shirt with a picture of a skier riding a big wave and the slogan “Ski Hawaii.” Innocent enough, no?

He was sitting directly across from me. We settled in to begin a guided meditation; as my eyes drifted closed, his shirt was the last thing I saw.

I’ll never know what the meditation was about. I can only assume it had something to do with climbing a mountain. I spent the entire time surfing up a steep, rocky slope on a huge breaking wave, feeling warm snowflakes splash against my face. I suppose I should be grateful he wasn’t wearing a shirt featuring a mushroom cloud and an antinuclear slogan.

In general, shirts with slogans or pictures – unless they’re specifically appropriate to the ritual – are best avoided. You’ll never go wrong with neutral, solid colours, or quiet plaids or prints.

Wear lots of deodorant; you’ll be in close proximity to other people. Avoid cologne; some people are allergic to it.

Shoes: Are others wearing them, or did most people leave theirs by the door? Heavy boots or sharp heels may be a danger to the person who dances barefooted alongside you. In some groups, going barefoot or sock-footed indoors is expected unless the floor is very cold.

Robes: If you’ve been doing rituals for a while, you may want a ritual robe. The process of changing out of street clothes and into a robe becomes a little pre-ritual ritual by which you begin to clear your mind for the rite to follow. Or perhaps you will have started even earlier, with a meditative salt-water bath at home.

Any basic closed-front bathrobe or caftan pattern will do as a template for a robe. A simple cloth sack with head and armholes and perhaps short tube sleeves, is quite adequate.

Your robe should be loose enough to let you move comfortably. Most experienced ritualists prefer a very loose, full robe, belted at the waist by the traditional nine-foot long cord. Somewhere between knee and ankle-length is best: long enough to look reasonably graceful when you sit, but not so long that you'll trip over it if you climb stairs or kick up your heels dancing. Loose, trailing sleeves are pretty, but impractical. They can sweep objects off the altar, dangle in candle flames, and in general get in the way. If you must have flowing sleeves, make them no longer than your elbow, and don't let the tips hang lower than your knees.

Big pockets are a very good idea. Many people like hooded robes; a loose hood can be pulled up around your face to shut out distractions while meditating.

Natural fabrics are best, because rituals usually involve candle flames. Cotton is practical, and by far the most popular choice. Linen and wool also work. Silk feels wonderful against your skin, but may give off cyanide fumes if burned. Avoid polyester and other synthetics, even in blends. If they catch fire, they don't just burn. They melt and stick to the wearer's skin, increasing the severity of injuries, and they emit toxic fumes as they burn.

For your first robe, some quiet neutral or dark colour is most versatile. You can always dress it up with coloured tabards. (A tabard is a one by two-metre piece of cloth, with a slit at the midpoint for your head. Tuck the ends through your belt.) Later, you can make additional robes in other colours.

In some traditions, certain robe or belt colours have particular connotations of rank or job title. Eclectic Wiccans don't usually worry too much about this, but before you spend the money for a piece of fabric, it's best to ask.

Jewellery: Many Pagans wear truly amazing quantities of jewellery to a ritual. Some consider a necklace or pendant, a graphic representation of the Circle which frames our rituals, an essential item. If you are working in street clothes, putting on your ritual jewellery can serve the same mental function as changing into robes.

Pagan jewellery is loaded with symbolic meanings. Some symbols, such as the pentacle, are almost universal. Others denote particular traditions or ranks. Amber or jet beads are markers of rank in some traditions, and are best avoided by non-initiates. (In the commonest system, amber marks First Degree, jet Second Degree, and mixed amber and jet, Third Degree.) Tiaras or crowns are usually reserved for the ritual leader(s). Even the most unlikely things can be subtle recognition signals. If, for example, you notice that many of the people at a Circle wear identical strings of rose quartz and malachite beads, don't rush out and buy yourself one on the assumption that this is a good witchy combination; it's probably the membership marker for some particular coven or lineage. Ask before you adopt, and don't be offended if you get an evasive answer. Some things are private.

Watches are one kind of jewellery that doesn't belong at most rituals. They are a reminder of the everyday flow of time and the pressure of mundane concerns that we try to leave behind when we enter sacred space. If you must bring your watch into Circle, or even leave it just outside in your coat pocket, turn off the beeper. The same goes for cellular phones and pagers; some have loud beepers and can be intrusive even if they ring in the next room.

A few Wiccans don't bring metal of any kind into sacred space, except for their athames.

The Skyclad Question: Yes, ritual nudity is part of modern Wiccan practice. But don't panic, it doesn't mean what you probably think, and you're not likely to run into it any time soon. According to one estimate, only about 10% of North American Wiccans work skyclad and even these folks reserve it, most of the time, for private coven work. It's not something you're likely to meet for a while.

Skyclad is not, as outsiders tend to assume, primarily about sex. It's about vulnerability, and about trust. Si it's not likely to be used in relatively open ritual groups you're invited to during your first few months in the Craft. You may encounter it if you travel to festivals, but if ever it will be the required dress code for a particular ritual, you'll be forewarned well ahead of time, and can choose whether to skip that one rite.

Some Pagans will try to tell you that you aren't a real Witch if you don't work skyclad, that it's the only way to go for serious work. Myself, I've tried it and it usually doesn't do much for me. I find skyclad an impractical way to dress. It has no pockets. It leaves me open, variously, to sunburn, rug burn, and the distracting cold draft that blows along the floorboards of even the best-insulated covensteads. It doesn't even have particularly sacred connotations for me; it's too similar to the way I dress around my home during hot weather. On the other hand, I'm glad I've tried it a few times, and I expect I'll occasionally do so again.

If you are a member of an established or newly forming circle that's thinking of trying skyclad work, there's only one thing to remember. It must be by unanimous, active consent, or else it doesn't work at all. If even one person agreed reluctantly, or discovered after trying it a couple of times that it makes them uncomfortable, then instead of increasing the level of mutual openness and trust, it will only increase the tension. Every member of the group must have a veto.

On the other hand, if you're invited to join an established coven that already works skyclad, you as the newcomer mustn't expect major changes for your sake, in this or in anything else. Accept or turn down the group's invitation as you will, and let this be one of the factors when you decide. No one can ever force you to work skyclad and no one will be offended if you turn down the group's offer. This isn't the army, after all.

Whatever you wear or don't wear to a rite, be comfortable in it. Clothing should be an aid to ritual, not a distraction from it. What's inside your skin is what's really important to your fellow ritualists and to the gods.