

# **Handfastings and Crossings**

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As a practitioner of Shamanism, I am often asked whether or not I perform ceremonies for weddings or funerals. People are pleasantly surprised to learn that Shamanism does indeed offer an alternative to contemporary ceremonies. Based on traditional and ancient practices these ceremonies are called Handfastings and Crossings.

A Handfasting ceremony can be performed at any time or location. Some couples prefer the tradition of having this done around Beltane (April 30<sup>th</sup> or October 31<sup>st</sup> in the southern hemisphere). This is the ancient celebration of the beginning of summer and the return of fertility to the land. It was thought to be most auspicious to have a Handfasting done around this time because it promised greater chance of fertility for the couple in their new life together.

Some couples prefer to arrange handfastings around the phases of the moon. The waxing moon, which is the period between the new moon and the full moon, is a special time for building strength and for expanding one's life and entering into new times of growth. This is said to have a positive effect on the relationship of the handfasted couple. The full moon is a time when inner emotions are at their peak. Handfastings done at this time will be charged with the power of love which will lead to rewarding experiences as a couple.

The Handfasting is usually performed with the presence of friends and family, but can be a more private ceremony. It involves taking deep spiritual vows with each other, which bind one to the other throughout the couple's future life together. There can also be a declaration of family ties involved, which include the many spirit and lineage links that each has. An example of this would be: I, **(name)**, of the **(sir name/maiden name)** family of the **(such and such)** grove, holder of the torch of **(name of one's particular camp/clan etc.)**, protected by the spirit of **(one's prime power animal or deity)** and so on, do take you, **(name of intended here)**... This can be as expanded or abbreviated as the couple wishes.

Some options after the vows are exchanged include tying the couple's wrists together with a gold cord (tying the knot) to symbolize the eternal interconnectedness of the two. Some like the tradition of jumping over the broom, which symbolizes the magical moment of crossing the threshold into a new phase of life with each other as well as the enhanced fertility of the couple. Some want the more ancient form of symbolism which involves the mingling of blood. This is achieved with a tiny cut to the fleshy part of the left palm of each, which is then held together. This is called the making of relations and is done along with the sacred statement which begins with the words, "You are blood of my blood, and bone of my bone."

This aspect of the ceremony declares to all relatives that this person, having mingled blood with a family member, is now officially part of the family and needs to be treated with honor and respect. There are other ways to accomplish this rather than the mingling of blood, but the message remains the same. The declaration of family is something I find lacking in current wedding ceremonies and I wonder if this is part of why there are so many in-law relationship issues in today's marriages.

The Handfasting is not a legal ceremony. It is a spiritual ceremony. The couple needs to take care of the legality aspect of their union at a separate time. This can be done either before or after the Handfasting ceremony.

Legally speaking, anyone can perform a funeral service. In Shamanism this is called a Crossing ceremony. This refers to the concept that the spirit of the deceased is eternal and simply crosses over to the other side of the Veil. This can be as simple a ceremony as a wake or more elaborate.

In a more elaborate version, there are certain rituals that are performed to assist the spirit of the departed to cross through the Veils to the Otherworld, or Summerland. A candle is often lit to honor the spirit and the life of the deceased, and sometimes a talking stick is passed around so that every person can share his or her thoughts and feelings about what life was like with the departed loved one. Stories can be shared at this time, happy, sad, or bittersweet. Tears are encouraged, as opposed to stifled, because they are part of the water element of the Medicine Wheel. The water element is the aspect of the emotions and is a natural part of our being as humans. That is why laughter is able to ripple forth and tears are able to flow.

Poems may be read by participants, either self-composed or taken from favorite authors. Prayers are said to invite Deity to help those left behind with their sorrow as well as to help the departed into Deity's warm embrace. There can be a meditation where participants visualize the departed in the Otherworld, surrounded by the Light and greeted by the spirits of friends and family members who have crossed over.

There are no steadfast rules in Shamanism regarding cremation or burial. This is a matter of personal choice that is arranged with a funeral home. Most funeral homes are open to the Crossing ceremony taking place at their location, but once again the location of the ceremony can be anywhere.

Ceremonies are an important part of life. They help us acknowledge and honour our many passages. Ceremony helps us attune with the cycles of the Wheel of Life, ever changing, ever turning, taking us through each part of the journey, through to the end and back to the beginning...again.