

## "Summer By Magic"

There was a time, back in the 1980s, when I spent a number of weeks between late May and early October each year attending Pagan gatherings all over the country. Along with the four major gatherings my own group, the EarthSpirit Community, organized and hosted, I traveled to other groups' gatherings in Maryland, Wisconsin, and upstate New York. I'd camp out in a tent and attend workshops, rituals, and late night bonfires for as long as a full week at a time. After 1987, I started saving money seriously to buy a house, and my cross-country treks to gatherings other than EarthSpirit's became a thing of the past. Our own gatherings were less merry and carefree for us than for our guests, since we spent the gatherings and the weeks leading up to them working very hard, and only when we got home could we finally get some rest and relaxation. I coordinated registration and programming for a number of our gatherings entirely on my own, and I was usually the Information department head on site. It was a big job—and this was back when computers were more rudimentary than the average cell phone is now.

After I parted ways with EarthSpirit in 1992, I only went to one or two more gatherings, and for a very long time I have not attended any. And yet, at this time of year, I still feel a deep nostalgia. The first few really warm days, when the air takes on just the right scent of fresh new leaves, the first time

the air is so heavy with moisture you can feel every breath, the way you feel a rich fruit juice on your tongue, the first time the breezes get lost in the trees instead of whistling through bare branches, something whispers to me, "get out your camping gear. Pack the duffle bags. It's almost time to hit the road."

That was certainly the impulse our ancestors felt at this time of the year. Beltane, at May 1<sup>st</sup>, is the ancient Celtic beginning of summer, when herds of cattle and other animals were moved from their winter folds to summer pastures, and the people generally went with them, adopting a more casual and temporary way of life. Beltane was literally the midpoint of the Celtic year, which began at Samhain on November 1<sup>st</sup>. Such a vital time of transition was seen by the Celts as magically enchanted, fraught with the greatest potential and the gravest peril. The natural world and the cycles of life were at a critical turning point, and the spiritual world echoed that crisis. It was a time when spirits and faery folk, goblins and ghosts might walk the roads or knock on doors.

When agricultural patterns replaced herding, Beltane marked the end of the grueling labor of clearing, plowing and planting. Now there was little to do but wait, and watch, and hope—and of course, to work magic, in ways great and small, for our ancestors believed that the gods and the natural world relied on human help. To them, fertility, prosperity, good fortune, and even the turning of the seasons or the rising of the sun and moon were not matters of impersonal chance.

The sheer vigor and urgency of the celebrations of the early Celts, whose influence stretched from Britain to Spain, left May Day customs that survived well into modern times in Scotland, Ireland, Wales, Sweden and many parts of Europe. From sunset to dawn on the night of May Eve, bonfires blazed on hilltops, as people for miles around feasted, danced, sang and courted in the greening woods. When the fires died down somewhat, celebrants would leap over the embers to attain good fortune and fertility, and farm animals were driven through the fire, or between two fires set close together, to protect them from disease and make them fruitful during the coming year. Celebrations continued on the following day, with processions, costumes, and rituals. A Lord and Lady of the May were elected, and houses were decorated with leafy green boughs and flowering branches. Sometimes the trunk of a large tree, stripped of branches and heavily decorated with fresh flowers and ribbons, was set up and made a centerpiece for the festivities. Couples danced around these Maypoles, although the well-known ribbon dance is a modern innovation.

The popularity of the Maypole tradition was so widespread and so strong, there was even a famous one in Puritan Massachusetts—the Maypole of Merry Mount. An area also known as Mount Wollaston, Merry Mount is now part of Quincy. In the 17th century, it was settled by non-Puritan radicals headed by a colonist named Thomas Morton. Morton took command of the outpost when he discovered that his

associate Captain Wollaston was selling indentured servants into slavery. Morton encouraged the servants to successfully revolt, forcing Wollaston to flee to Virginia. Many Algonquin Native Americans lived in the area, and Morton's colony got along with them very well. In 1627, Morton and his community erected an 80-foot-tall Maypole topped with deer antlers, and invited colonists and Native Americans alike to a three-day long Celebration of the May. Scandalized Puritans eventually managed to deport Thomas Morton and Merry Mount was dissolved. The land was acquired by an ancestor of Abigail Adams and was owned by the Adams family for two hundred years. As we all know, the Adamses were also progressive-minded people who rejected slavery, admired the Native Americans, loved the beauties of nature and urged equality and justice. Maybe there's something in the water there.

For us, here in twenty-first century New England, Beltane marks the full flush of true spring, with the sun as bright and strong as it will be in August. The trees are in flower, the grass is deep green and growing, and the dormant plants underground are pushing strongly up, shouldering aside old leaves and earth and unfolding in the light. Here in Massachusetts, gardeners are warned that the danger of frost is not over; our little tropical tomatoes and peppers still need to be covered up at night. But the chill of the nights simply adds a bit of poignancy to the excitement. When we look

around us, when we smell the air, when we hear the call of the birds in the mornings, we know that winter is over at last. The light has triumphed and life is victorious. It bursts out of every crack and crevice, green and moist and spreading out to claim its territory. Even though flowers and leaves provide us with the most visible evidence of life's return, we know that hidden away in safety are the year's new babies, as wildlife from deer to field mice give birth, and birds begin setting their eggs. Barn cats have their kittens, lambs and calves and kids have been born, and the hens are laying once more. The mating season came far earlier, when winter's snow still held its grip; Nature plans far ahead. This is the time of birth, when new life awakens to the warm sun and balmy air, and reaches out to be fed and to grow.

It's little wonder that our ancestors celebrated with such abandon. But our own society sorely lacks a way of commemorating high spring. Easter and Patriot's Day are too early; Memorial Day is too late. With no unequivocal acknowledgement of the processes of Nature at this time of year, we cut class or call in sick to work, or else daydream and stare out the windows, not always certain just what is distracting us. We call it "spring fever" and plan our summer vacations. We dig our gardens, rake our lawns, clean our houses, clear out our desks, take our cars to be detailed, send our pets to the grooming parlor and buy new clothes.

But despite the fact that everyone around us is engaged in similar industries, somehow there is something missing. We feel that mundane matters should just stop, that business as usual ought to pause and take a breather. At this time of year, more than any other, it doesn't seem fair that our society forces us to squeeze joy into evenings and weekends and the occasional day off. We want something more. Even if we're not consciously aware of it, we miss the bonfires and the shared merriment, the unashamed, enthusiastic participation in the fires of creation. The tides of life wash against us like the waves of the ocean, constantly drenching us with the energy that formed the worlds and which forms us minute to minute.

Our ancestors knew better than to take these tides for granted. They knew that the powers of Nature needed to be nourished, and encouraged. Spring was not a time to sit back and relax, but to move, to dance, to make love, to build, to sing. Life and warmth and summer didn't just make themselves, they had to be enchanted into existence. Our ancestors would have completely understood J.R.R. Tolkien when he said that every one of us is a co-creator of the entire Universe, working hand in hand with the Divine. Our thoughts and actions blend to make our world far more than the sum of its mechanical parts, and never can we see this more clearly than at Beltane, when the creation of new life is happening everywhere we look.

There is another aspect to creativity besides creating new life—the impulse to create beauty around oneself, the desire to make the world more complex, more richly patterned, and less laborious. This is the impulse that leads to art and music and poetry, to architecture and invention and innovation—in short, to civilization. This is the impulse that calls and calls to us as we go about our daily lives, and which, all too often, is denied.

Our ancestors created almost every day of their lives, because they had no choice. Their clothing, shelter, household goods and everyday tools were made by their own hands, or they didn't have them. Once made, these items were often richly decorated—wood carved and stained, metal wrought and engraved, fabric dyed and embroidered or elaborately woven, manuscripts illuminated. Colonial Americans stepped back in time in this regard, making by hand nearly everything used on their homesteads, long after people in Europe had taken to purchasing tools and housewares from craftsmen. The Shakers are admired because of their tradition of crafting their own goods.

But the Industrial Revolution changed the patterns of life, moving people into numbing, uncreative work and robbing them of the necessary time to make things of their own. The mechanization of many tasks, like spinning thread or sawing wood, was welcomed. But the onrush of industry took over the making of the finished goods as well as the tedious preparation of raw materials. And so the pattern of the modern

world was established: people have the money to buy mass-produced items, but no time to create and innovate for themselves. They pay professionals, using machines, to be creative for them. Along with a separation from the rhythms of Nature, the children of the Industrial Revolution are cut off from the creativity of the mind and spirit. We are taught not how to be co-creators of our world, but how to be good consumers and support the economy.

So perhaps the best way we can celebrate Beltane in the twenty-first century is to reclaim our creative power and the right to use it. Each time we make a tool, an article of clothing, a piece of artwork, or any other artifact that is truly ours and made by our own hands, we are releasing the same flow of energy that made the universe and pulses in the cells of our bodies. If we garden, arrange our home in new patterns, invent a piece of music, devise a better plan for storing the tools in the workshop, we are sharing in the work of the gods. Whatever the scale, from minute to momentous, we are called upon to bring something new into the world.

You hear some people say about themselves, "oh, I'm not very creative." They're comparing themselves to the highly gifted artists among us who are capable of accomplishing on a very advanced scale. But this is only one way to think about creativity. Many people over the years have written about their belief that existence itself is a continuous act of creation. We create ourselves, we create our lives, we create our

environments, we create our futures, we create our fortune for good or ill, through our thoughts and choices and actions, every minute of every day. To create is at the very core of our being, for creativity is an act of love, and we exist to emanate love in all its forms. The gods and we have this in common.

So right now, as we gratefully say farewell to a long, snowy, and very cold winter, and look forward to the seasons to come, let's make a place for creativity in our lives. We can decorate our clothing, and fingerpaint with our children, arrange flowers or lay out a vegetable garden, write a poem or build a sand castle. The only rule we must observe is never to deny ourselves a creative moment because we fear being frivolous, because the best creative acts of all are as joyous as any child's play. Follow your impulses wherever a sense of beauty and order and pattern take you. Rejoice in newness, both the new life of spring and new ideas and creations. If you should have an opportunity to dance a Maypole or frolic around a bonfire, by all means embrace the experience. But the seed of the Beltane fire lives in all of our hearts, and waits only to be manifested by the hand and mind and eye.

We may think that we're far too scientific and sophisticated to believe that summer will only come if we create it. Maybe—if we listen to some of our modern-day thinkers like Wayne Dyer or Deepak Chopra—we shouldn't be quite so sure about that. But every act of creation, however small, reverberates out into the Universe like the notes of a

song. We have to make our own worlds, one way or another. So, in the spirit of Beltane, as we stand at the cusp of summer born anew, let your creative imagination run riot. Don't be afraid to daydream and speculate and fantasize and wish—and then act on your dreams, large and small. At Beltane, with so much magic in the air, we can all be artists and visionaries and seers. The potential of spring blossoms into all the richness of summer and carries us along with it. Idle dreams can become prophecies, a passing thought can manifest into a marvel. All it takes is our determination and faith in ourselves, to make prophecies and marvels come true.