



James Reeb Unitarian Universalist Congregation

Sermon Notes: Beltane: The Wisdom of the Earth

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Beltane is wonderful time of year.....

It's about re-birth, about letting the old go and embracing the new, it's about going from hibernation to running free, it's about getting outside and many other things.

The traditions go back to ancient Celtic holidays celebrated during the beginning of May.

Lighting of communal fires to burn bedding, etc.

Cattle going out into the hills, to free graze

Visual tradition was the Hawthorn tree, *Crataegus Mogyna*, which was one of the trees/shrubs blooming the time.

They are gnarled and hardy, they're also thorny.

They make great hedges and provide protection

They also have little white to pale pink flowers, and the new growth is bright green and supple.

It became a tradition for the people to gather the new growth, with its blooms and soft foliage, to decorate their doorways, as a sign of the coming summer. This was also a time for fertility rites within Celtic culture, so the Hawthorn, was also used to represent the sap rising in people as well as in plants! The song, "here we go gathering nuts in May," isn't about nuts as we

know it, it's about nuts, or bunches of Hawthorn, collected, in May, to symbolize sexual urge. Young men would gather the young branches and wear them as a sign of their virility, and young women would put them around their windows in their homes, or wear a small bunch pinned to their clothing.

Some believe that the Maypole started out as a fresh cut Hawthorn, which was placed in the center of town, close to the communal fire.....

The idea of letting go of the old by burning winter bedding, old winter clothes, soiled clothes, etc. became linked with the sexual allusions of the Hawthorn. Dancing and singing around the communal fires became common place, as was stealing away with someone for an interlude.

The animals which had been kept in pens or barns to protect them from the winter, were taken out to graze in open pasture, and you can imagine what such freedom produced in the animals. May was the gateway for freedom, letting go of the old, re-birth, procreation, re-connecting to community, and so much more.

We have had a season of loss here at Reeb. In the past year we've had about a dozen people die who are connected to members of this community. In the past two weeks alone there have been 8 loved ones leave us; some members, some parents or grandparents, others close friends. We've also celebrated weddings, and planning for unions and weddings. We're also looking forward to an art show of beautiful digital photography of nature from one or our members who died recently.

We are experiencing in a very real way the idea of death, and new life. Of coming out of our protective areas and coming into the open spaces. It's a scary thing really.....even though it feels good, there's also some dangers to coming out and moving on. May is all about the tension of expanding one's self.....going beyond what is comfortable, letting go of old things we don't need, while the old.

The Hawthorn with its older growth is gnarled and thorny, it began to planted as hedges to border a town, protecting from wild animals and such. The old is good too. And once a year in May these gnarled hedges with its leathery growth puts on bright supple greenery and flowers. What an image.....

Another tradition from those times, was to take the remnants of last years harvest, usually oats or barley, and bake a flat cake.....it became known as a Beltane cake using spices like ginger, cinnamon, and cloves (associated with winter) and mixing them with the fresh milk and eggs of spring.....The Beltane cake is also a symbol of the old and new, young and aged, bitter and sweet.....

People would bring these to the bonfires, and the Hawthorn tree, which would later become only a pole----the Maypole---and people would come to the communal table pinch off a piece of cake, eat part of it, and throw the rest over their shoulder....sharing it originally with the spirit of the Hawthorn tree, or Green Man, which was Dancing around the fire getting further and further away, as the spirit from the cut tree got further and further away from it's body.....

Then people began to give to the animals, and such. Often to the ones they hoped to appease in someway.....

As they threw the pieces over their shoulders they might say something like, "This is for you fox, so that you'll stay out of my hen house this summer!" Today, some Neo-Pegans, might say, "this is for you IRS person, so that you stay away from my bank account!"

Can you imagine what our society would look like today if we planned our businesses and lives around giving something back to nature? It just might be our salvation if we could make the change.

Today we'll share this Beltane tradition out in our back area, where our Labyrinth is.....

Join me outside for this Beltane tradition-----and closing.....

Opportunity to honour those that have protected us, those who have left us and they are dancing further and further outside our circle.....

Letting go of things we don't need, or things which have become soiled and outgrown their usefulness....it might even be a bad habit, that got us through sometimes, like biting our nails, or working too much, but something that's not good in the long run.

Take this opportunity to do whatever you need to do...honour, let go, share with nature, come out of hibernation and go out into the world, into community....whatever your needs are.....