

Voices from the Grain –Beltane 2013

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With various authors contributing

SMASHWORDS EDITION

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Beltane and the Child Within

by Sean Thomas Gunnell

I wanted to write an article on the notion of “What Beltane Means to Me” without focusing on sex. (Or not entirely focusing on sex.)

When one thinks upon the Sabbat of Beltane, one’s mind turns to thoughts of sex. At least my mind does. When I found Paganism (back in the 80’s) it was branding itself as a fertility cult and the expression of the beginning of the growing season was renowned in legend by the couplings of young men and women going off into the fields to give the crops a helping hand.

A decade later, it had become a nature religion focused on all aspects of life. The erotic nature of Beltane was still there but not so focused on the hetero couplings. All sexual identities, preferences, and attractions were honored in this religion which had grown to be inclusive towards the LGBT community which made up an ever growing percentage of its members. Jumping the fire, dancing the Maypole, wearing bright and lively colors, all of these things were loving expressions of the most active of Sabbats in the pagan community. And they still are. Today the most popular of pagan themed bumper sticker is “Everyday is Beltane!”

So, the sex thing is a given. I’m not going to go into a tirade of how we should all go out and do as much as we can in that aspect. I do wish to say that in this expression of celebration that I wish you to be happy and safe.

After so many years, I’ve come to see the Sabbats as seasons instead of just holidays. (As I talk about the seasons and the things that happen, I am talking from the perspective of a man who lives in the middle of Illinois.) That is to say the “season” of Beltane exists from the first of May up to the twenty-first day of June (Summer Solstice). And I’ve wondered how we as pagans can celebrate this season of change and how it would differ from the Sabbat/season before it (Ostara) and the one that comes after it.

For this I look back to the mythological model for inspiration. In the early part of the year the Goddess is seen as coming out of the Underworld and looking to see if it is safe to emerge into our world with the new born animals (Imbolg). In the first of Spring we see the Goddess emerge from the Earth as the temperatures rise and the flowers start to burst and fill the previously barren landscape with beds of color (Ostara). So, when the first of May comes around I see it as the time of young children.

School starts early but you really don’t notice the kids until late Spring. The clouds pull back and it stops raining. The Sun peeks through and the kids are out running around in the playgrounds, going to parks, going to the bungee jump at the mall, playing in team sports outside, participating in activities and seeming to be everywhere.

This is what I’ve learned from kids: Kids are eager, they’re curious, they want to know and most impressively, THEY HAVE NO FEAR! That is to say they haven’t had enough experience to have the internal critic that we adults have that tells you: “You can’t do that! You’ll shoot your eye out!” Kids go out and they try. They reach and attempt and jump and fall and sometimes fail. But they get back up and try it again as if nothing happened. They literally don’t know the

meaning of failure and that allows them to try multiple times to achieve their goal. It's magic in its purest form! And it's awesome to watch.

A kid in soccer game will get tackled, kicked, punched, beamed in the head with ball, run headfirst into his own team-mates, eat several mouthfuls of dirt, and still continue to play until the last whistle blows. And if that same kid falls and cracks his ankle or sprains his elbow, his first thought will be: "I can't wait to get better so I can get back out on the field!"

Whenever I see these kids in action, I think of the hero or heroine sent on a mission from the Gods. And their attempts (whether successful or a small failure on the way to success) are inspiring!

So, for the season of Beltane, I encourage you try something new. Or retry something old that you've put off for a long time. And I dare you to try this new endeavor with the bravery of a child. Slip lose of the binding of second thoughts, fears, the internal critic, or whatever holds you back and go for it!

Dream of being an artist? Paint until you're covered pigment. What to be a musician? Play until both hands have calluses. Always wanted to be a writer? Start typing and don't stop until you're counting the pages in double digits.

For those of you that have children (or young grandchildren) it will be easy to find an example already living with or near you. For child-free adults like me, you may have to borrow your nieces and nephews to have someone to show you this fearlessness.

And the other hard part of this is that we don't have parental encouragement to lift us up should our own wind fail to help us fly. For this I would say tell your friends and spouses that you are trying something new, something you thought until recently impossible and would appreciate all the positive feedback that they could give.

Someone said that it's never too late to have a happy childhood. So for this Beltane, I invite you to come into that thing you always wanted to do. Be unaware of any voice that tries to trip you. Don't fear mistakes or momentary failures. Attempt it with the eyes of a child that are always filled with awe. Attempt it with the heart of a child that never knows fear. For this Sabbat, for this season, see that heroic child in you.

About the author:

Sean has been a pagan for 2/3's of his life (30 years). Starting out he was part of a wiccan tradition for 4 years before being introduced and fostered by a group of reclaiming folk. Just a decade ago he rejoined a branch of the tradition that he started out with. (How's that for coming full circle?) Living in middle Illinois, Sean works as a in-house caregiver for the elderly. Mead-maker, guitar player, artist, lover of live and the Earth under my feet. He hopes to learn something every day and laugh at the same time.

May Day Times Two

by Bart Everson

International Workers Day is celebrated on the first of May all around the world. It's an old holiday, with a history going back more than a hundred years. It is also known as May Day.

Beltane is celebrated on the first of May all around the world. It's an even older holiday with roots going back thousands of years. It is also known as May Day.

Spring is the season of desire. Urgency transforms our desires into action. Activated desire changes everything. Surely, then, there must be some relation between May Day and May Day. They must derive from the same impulse, share some intertwined history.

This made perfect sense to me, and why not? My politics went Green before my religion. I was involved in environmental activism and political organizing for many years without explicitly recognizing the spiritual dimension of such work. But of course it's there. It's our sense of meaning and purpose and values that drives all passionate political action. The worldview from which these spring is profoundly spiritual. Our sense of connection to the Earth and to humanity fuels our outrage at the manifest injustices in the world. I knew what I felt; I knew what was in my heart, but I lacked a name for it. I lacked a vocabulary to legitimize and formalize such feelings. I lacked an encompassing framework within which to extend and interpret it.

For a good 25 years it might fairly be said that my politics functioned as my religion. Political ideology can approach holism. Any philosophy that addresses the whole of human experience becomes indistinguishable from religion. My political philosophy was almost there.

The best example of this was my involvement with the Greens. The Green Party is hardly well-established in Louisiana. We felt we were building something new, but drawing on ancient wisdom. We felt we were on the fringe, but with a message that would appeal broadly. We met in small groups on a regular basis. We often began our meetings with a moment of silence, and it was not unusual for a member to lead a short reflection on one of our key values. We shared food and dreams together.

Any yet my Green perspectives were of the "blackened" variety — informed, that is, by anarchism. This political philosophy opposes all forms of domination and oppression. Anarchism is especially opposed to social structures by which humans dominate other humans, but anarchism also opposes the domination of the Earth. In fact, anarchism as a modern political movement might be said to originate in the 1840 publication of *What Is Property?* by Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, which argues that parceling up the Earth into sections to be controlled by remote entities in an abstract system of ownership is fundamentally immoral.

(I hasten to note that not all Greens are anarchists, nor are all anarchists Greens. Far from it. Anarchists are generally skeptical of the electoral system; many regard voting as fraud. As Howard Zinn said, "the electoral system is a great grave into which we are invited to get lost." I

can't speak for other chapters of the Green Party, but in New Orleans at least our group seemed to be infused with a healthy dose of the anarchic spirit.)

Anarchists are generally critical of Capital, the State, and the Church. Indeed, anarchism offers a general critique of all authoritarian social institutions, including a critique of organized religion. Arising as it did in 19th century Europe, it comes as no surprise that this is mostly a critique of establishment Christianity. The negations of anarchism, combined with my personal experiences with organized religion, contributed to a sort of blind spot in my thinking. I did not consider myself religious, despite having a deeply ingrained religious sensibility. I considered myself to be in opposition to the very notion of religion, which I saw as just another way to keep people in chains and justify the subjugation of wild nature. The very notion of God, the ultimate authority, seemed to represent everything I'd come to regard as wicked.

In a sense I still adhere to this critique. I continue to believe that some forms of religion, particularly mainline popular Western religions, do indeed function in a repressive fashion. But at the same time, as I've learned more about the diversity of religious experience, my perspective has become more nuanced. I've come to realize there's a lot more to religion and spirituality than the mainline popular religions.

There are, for example, forms of Christianity which emphasize political struggle against unjust social and economic conditions. The most familiar of these is probably liberation theology, which originated in Latin America. Less well-known is the Catholic Worker Movement, which was co-founded by Dorothy Day, an avowed anarchist. (Ironically, perhaps, Day is now under consideration for sainthood by Roman Catholic authorities.) Leo Tolstoy was arguably the most famous Christian anarchist, and his book *The Kingdom of God Is Within You* is considered a foundational text. Indeed, some think that Christianity started as an anarchist movement.

I also learned of traditions such as Buddhism which challenged my very definition of religion. Some forms of Buddhism do not make use of any theistic concepts. The Kālāma Sutta exhorts seekers to question everything, including all authorities, and the teachings of the Buddha generally emphasize liberation.

And so on. Many religions seem to begin with a sort of anarchic spirit which is quickly subverted, perverted, and institutionalized. We may wonder if the founders of the great traditions of the world would recognize their own teachings in the currently established practices of organized religion. No wonder anarchists are skeptical.

Thus it was a source of great personal delight to become aware of the insurgency known as contemporary Paganism. There is much about Paganism that is highly anarchic. As a broad movement, it is decentralized and without hierarchy. There is no Pope of Paganism, no one who can speak on behalf of all, no one who can command the masses. (Try it and see what happens.) There is a pervasive skepticism of authoritarian methods throughout much of Paganism.

Some qualifications are in order. Paganism is a big umbrella term for a broad-based movement, a tendency, a proclivity. For some, it is not a religion in itself but a category for many religions which share some loose similarities. But even this definition is flawed, as there are those who identify their religion as such: simply Pagan, with no further qualifications.

This confusion of nomenclature is just one of many similarities between anarchism and Paganism. Ask a dozen anarchists to define anarchy, and you'll get a dozen answers. Ask a dozen Pagans to define Paganism, and you'll get two dozen answers, or so I've heard. Further, anarchists have identified with a bewildering variety of submovements such as anarcho-syndicalism, anarcho-communism, anarcha-feminism, anarcho-primitivism, and so on. While anarchists generally revel in such diversity, this diffusion of effort has led some to call for "anarchy without hyphens" or "anarchy without adjectives." This dynamic is very similar to the discourse within contemporary Paganism today, where the meaning of the Pagan label is re-examined and questioned on a regular basis.

Within the broad umbrella of Paganism there could, presumably, be any number of authoritarian religious groups, but in my experience this is not the case. The anarchic model of decentralized autonomous groups seem to be the norm in the most well-known and well-established traditions, such as the various forms of Wicca and Druidry.

In fact, quite the opposite of being dominated by an oppressive hierarchy, the majority of Pagans in North America are both solitary and eclectic. Many Pagans communicate with one another solely via the internet and do not practice in groups at all. I suspect an anarchist critique of Pagan social structures would find fault with this extreme individualism as a product of the bourgeois consumerist mentality. We are so extremely atomized that we risk communal decoherence; we risk losing sight of a common good.

And what of the gods? The conception of the divine varies enormously across Paganism, but as a rule it's rare to find anything resembling the Final Authority of monotheism. It's much more common to see Pagans relating to gods and goddesses in a sort of flux of mutual reciprocity. And of course there are plenty of atheistic, pantheistic, and humanistic Pagans. All in all, there's plenty of room for the freethinking anarchist. Moreover, many Pagans revere the Earth as sacred and divine. This resonates with the aforementioned ecological dimension of anarchism. In fact, one of the most prominent anarchist publications from a hundred years ago bore the auspicious title of *Mother Earth*.

I'm not the first to note these parallels. No less a seminal practitioner than Starhawk identifies herself as both Pagan and anarchist. And yet, as Paganism has continued to grow, I have wondered why political discourse (to say nothing of activism) does not play a more central role in Paganism. It seems that a generation ago, when Paganism was much more underground, it might have drawn practitioners who were already staunchly counter-cultural. With information flowing more freely over the internet, perhaps Paganism now draws people who are less radical, and less political. These are simply my personal speculations.

I'm especially inclined to wonder about such matters around the first of May. It seems that few Pagans in America are aware of International Workers Day, and few anarchists are aware of Beltane. Which leads me back to my initial question: Do these two versions of May Day share a common root? Surely they must!

It's an unfortunate fact that most of my fellow Americans don't know a thing about International Workers Day. If they've even heard of it, they probably think it's some sort of communist holiday. They don't realize it was invented here in America and then repressed.

After the Civil War, the battle for freedom in America continued. Former slaves would fight for generations to achieve true equality in the eyes of the law. Likewise, supposedly "free" laborers still felt like wage-slaves. As Ira Steward, a machinist from Massachusetts, wrote at the time: "something of slavery still remains... something of freedom is yet to come."

This is when working people got really organized for the first time in America's history. A major campaign was mounted to press a radical demand: the eight-hour working day. This is something many of us now take for granted, but back in the 1800s longer hours were the norm. It was not unusual for people to labor from sunup to sundown. There was little time for leisure, for recreation or education. A vast effort went into organizing Eight-Hour Leagues across the country to advocate for legislation mandating shorter hours.

This was viewed by capitalists as a very real threat, a potential shift in the balance of power. The opposition to the eight-hour movement was significant and well-funded. The result was a protracted *battle royale* in which the very future of the nation seemed to be at stake.

I won't take the time here to get into the dirty details of this war, but it was long and bloody and absolutely essential to understanding how we got where we are now. It's a fascinating chapter of our history that every American should know. It's sufficient to our purpose here to note that anarchists played a crucial role in these struggles, and several key conflicts throughout the late 1800s centered on a significant day: the first of May.

We can look forward from that time and see that through the endorsement of the Second International in Paris, May Day became a global day of resistance and celebration, a day to remember those who have been killed, imprisoned, or otherwise oppressed in the ongoing struggle for better working conditions. But due to our nation's ambivalence toward the global labor movement, America has established May 1 as Loyalty Day (formerly Americanization Day) which has failed to gain traction in the popular imagination. While much of the rest of the world continues to observe International Workers Day, Americans celebrate Labor Day in September. The date was chosen specifically to deflate the power of May Day.

Looking backward, we can see the agitation around this particular day first began in 1867. That's when the Illinois bill for an eight-hour day was supposed to take effect. In support of this measure, working people in Chicago staged a massive but entirely peaceful May Day march through the city. It all fell apart in the days that followed, when the bosses refused to obey the new law. Nevertheless May Day gained symbolic force as a day for further demonstrations in subsequent years.

These later May Days were not so peaceful, but they were most certainly intertwined with the ancient pre-Christian celebrations that European immigrants brought with them to America. From that point on the two May Days were irrevocably linked. There's evidence of this in the political art of the era, which combines Pagan themes with proletarian concerns.

The question that intrigues me is this: How did May 1 happen to be chosen as the date for that legislative mandate in 1867? Was it selected because of its status as a popular Old World holiday? It seems entirely possible, perhaps even likely. There is ample evidence that European

immigrants to America celebrated May Day with some enthusiasm throughout the 19th century. A popular holiday might seem like an obvious choice for a popular reform.

I'm not a historian, but I know enough not to jump to such conclusions. The date might have been chosen without such considerations. I've searched the historical record to the best of my meager abilities, and I can find no evidence of what the legislators might have been thinking. For now I can only guess.

But ultimately, does it matter? Even if that particular date in 1867 was selected at random, it changes nothing that came after. We can still relish the richness of the intertwining histories of May Day. We can still transform our world, inside and out.

This is a time to celebrate the flowering of desire in all its forms.

About the Author:

Bart Everson is a writer, a photographer, a baker of bread, a husband and a father. An award-winning videographer, he is co-creator of ROX, the first TV show on the internet. As a media artist and an advocate for faculty development in higher education, he is interested in current and emerging trends in social media, blogging, podcasting, et cetera, as well as contemplative pedagogy and integrative learning. He is a founding member of the Green Party of Louisiana, past president of Friends of Lafitte Corridor, sometime contributor to Rising Tide and HumanisticPaganism.com, and a participant in New Orleans Lamplight Circle.

HENGE

by Haldour

Over hill and over dale I pulled my load,
From hill of blue I carved my stone,
Down mighty river I sailed my stone,
Around the coast of clay I sailed,
Till up Snake River, I sailed my stone.

Over dale and hill I dragged my stone,
And stands my stone so tall and proud,
Guards the land for a thousand years,
Making men scratch their beards,
Why did men sail and drag sail and drag them,
To stand here for years and years?
To stand so proud on barren hill,
For over a thousand years,
The devils carol once they called it,
Now it's just Stone Henge.

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