

Voices from the Grain – Ostara 2013

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With various authors contributing

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Spring in the Subtropics - Spring in the Self

For much of my life I lived in the Midwestern United States, an area where people recognize four distinct seasons. Winter can be long and hard, drab and dull. The natural world seems desolate, almost dead. But in fact, natural processes are wound up tight, coiled and hidden, waiting for the increase of sunlight. When it comes, life seems to burst forth from everywhere. Plants “spring up” from the soil — which is where the season of spring gets its name. One can get the sense that the whole planet is athrob with new life.

Of course, that’s not really true. It’s a big planet, and things are not the same all over. It’s been my privilege to have lived at several different latitudes, from subarctic to subtropical. Up by the arctic circle, winter is harder and spring comes later, but it’s even more intense and dramatic than in the temperate regions. The ice thaws, the snow melts, greenery erupts, the world seems to come back to life.

Here in New Orleans, where I now live, the contrast is not so great. We experience a winter, but frost is a rarity and a hard freeze is even less common. We rarely see snow at all, and ice is something people use to keep their whiskey cold. Many plants never lose their leaves. Our plentiful live oak trees actually shed their old leaves in spring, as new leaves emerge, which is confusingly similar to fall up north. They also shed plenty of pollen. I know it’s spring when my porch is covered with a thick layer of green dust.

Say you lived in the city of Pontianak, in Indonesia, right on the equator. You would likely recognize two seasons only: wet and dry. You wouldn’t notice a change in daylight hours, because it’s less than one second from day to day, with day and night roughly equal throughout the year.

You could still detect the first day of spring, however, through careful observation of the sun’s maximum altitude. On the day of the equinox, it’s going to be as high in the sky as it ever gets on the day of the equinox, as high as it ever can get anywhere on Earth: straight up 90° — directly overhead. This is, in fact, a defining characteristic of the equinox.

Even if you don’t measure the height of the sun, it’s hard to miss the fact that the days are getting longer, for those of us outside of the tropics. The days have been getting longer since the solstice, but back in late December the change was barely noticeable. As winter progresses, the rate of change from day to day gets greater and greater, reaching its peak around the time of the vernal equinox. Thus, even in the subtropics, we experience a sense of lively quickening. From this point on, day will be longer than night. After the equinox, days continue to get longer, but the rate of change from day to day recedes until the summer solstice.

At my latitude, the days in the month of March get longer by almost two minutes per day. Moving northward, in Indianapolis or Madrid, the daily gain is almost a minute more. Way up in Stockholm, the pace is a breathtaking five minutes and 19 seconds per day. Above the Arctic Circle, it gets weird. If you live in Murmansk, on the day of the equinox, you’d see a day eight minutes longer than the day before. But it seems that’s actually small change in those parts. While the rate of change speeds up for most of the planet, it’s slowing down there. In other words, everything’s inverted. Hey, the sun actually stays up all day there starting in May, so all bets are off.

The seasons are reversed in opposite hemispheres, so the vernal equinox in one hemisphere is the autumnal equinox in the other. The solstices are also reversed. But whereas the solstices mark opposite extremes of day and night hours, the equinoxes designate days when dark and light are (roughly) equal. In this sense, the equinoxes are the same no matter where you are on the planet. Thus, though the solstices invite celebration as global holidays, the equinoxes are even “globaller” — more truly global.

Perhaps this is why the Consultative Assembly of the Peoples Congress declared the March equinox as “World Citizens Day / World Unity Day.” It’s also observed as “World Storytelling Day” with celebrations around the world.

Given the poetics of the equinoctial moment, it's a natural time to reflect on the idea of balance. Ancient cultures esteemed balance as a value of paramount importance. Above the temple of Apollo in Delphi, these words were inscribed: ΜΗΔΕΝ ΑΓΑΝ (mēdēn ágan) — "Nothing in excess."

Our modern sensibilities might tempt us to poke at this aphorism. We might confuse excess and excellence. We might think a balanced approach to life is at odds with greatness. But in fact, moderation in the pursuit of excellence is no contradiction.

Great athletes provide a wonderful metaphor; they know the pursuit of excellence is a balancing act. In a paper on the philosophy of sport, Heather L. Reid writes:

"Winning would be simple if it was just a matter of training volume, the runner who trained the most hours would automatically win. We know it doesn't work that way, though, and indeed it is a delicate art for athletes to find ways of maximizing improvement without exceeding mental, physical, and emotional limits.... A winning athlete's ability to push the envelope of achievement without bursting it open is integral to his or her success."

In the same way, ordinary mortals can pursue the excellent life through the "delicate art" of "maximizing improvement" while knowing our limits. (This links clearly to another maxim carved into the stone of the temple at Delphi: ΓΝΩΘΙ ΣΕΑΥΤΟΝ (gnōthi seautón) — "Know thyself.") This isn't a call for some sloppy, half-assed approach to life, or to a stodgy conservatism. Moderation should not be confused with mediocrity or neutrality. Nor should balance be confused with stasis.

If I say that the current American political situation is "out of balance," some might object. They might say it's perfectly balanced: two sides in conflict with equal power, neither able to make headway. They might say balance is the problem. But that's not balance; it's gridlock.

There's an aphorism flying around the internet these days: "The saddest aspect of life right now is that science gathers knowledge faster than society gathers wisdom." (It's usually attributed to Isaac Asimov, but I can't find an authoritative citation.) In fact, it's much worse than that. While science gathers knowledge, society seems to be actively losing wisdom. This is a key example of how modern, Western, American life is out of balance. We have an abundance of cheap food, but we lack the wisdom to moderate our intake, and so obesity is a major health concern. We have the technology to extend life, but do we live well? We have an unprecedented ability to access the Earth's resources and exploit them, but we lack the wisdom to conserve, resulting in the colossal imbalance known as climate change.

We can find other imbalances if we look. We might consider the balance between male and female, youth and maturity, rich and poor. These social tensions often permeate our own psychologies, so that if we look within we may find similar unbalanced attitudes. As above, so below.

We all enjoy a break from the routine, some moderation in our moderation, a chance to cut loose, a holiday when some form of excess is permitted. Frankly, most popular American holidays seem to celebrate excess in one aspect or another. But it is good to have a holiday which enshrines the idea of balance. It's even better to have two such holidays.

Furthermore, the equinoxes represent the idea that balance is not static but flowing, especially when considered as a pair. The primary difference between the vernal and autumnal equinoxes is their valence, their charge, their spin. As the sun passes through the equatorial plane in March, the Northern Hemisphere moves into the light half of the year, while the Southern Hemisphere moves into the dark half. The equinoxes are not static dead-ends but transitional moments, tipping points.

As such, the equinoxes provide a perfect opportunity for making changes in one's life. Glenys Livingstone characterizes both equinoxes as a moment for "Stepping into Power." This resonates with me on an intuitive level. From a place of balance, we act. I find I often set myself longterm projects (half-year or full-year) from equinox to equinox.

The vernal equinox in particular, associated with notions of tender new life emerging, lends itself to rites of purification and cleansing. My body and my being are the fertile soil from which I hope to cultivate the fruits of creativity. I don't want to sterilize that soil, but I do want it to be healthy, free from toxins, conducive to growth.

Paradoxically, the best way to foster my own noetic fertility is through subtraction. Perhaps that is simply because I live in a land of abundance and relative affluence. Whatever the case, it feels right to me to give up something during this season. There's a parallel to Lent here, to be sure, and in this Catholic city that's nothing to sneeze at. (Believe me, with the pollen filtering down from our live oak trees, there's a whole bunch of sneezing going on here in the springtime.) But to me, it's not a matter of penance suffering, mortification or redemption. Rather, it's a matter of feeling good, staying strong, promoting vitality, and nurturing inspiration.

Coming off the excesses of our Carnival season, it feels natural to lay off the booze awhile. Last year, I found myself enjoying sobriety more than I'd enjoyed drinking. Imbibing had become habitual, an ingrained part of my daily life, and breaking that habit felt wonderfully liberating. Sobriety was, in fact, intoxicating. This year, I might just make a more permanent change of habit.

Alcohol isn't the only thing I've been known to give up. Last year I also found myself eating less as the equinox approached, cultivating my sense of hunger. (I thought about fasting but haven't taken that step yet.) I generally do go off coffee as the weather gets warmer, and I've found dandelion root tea makes a delightful coffee substitute, especially combined with chicory root. Dandelion has the added benefit of detoxifying the liver, or so the herb lore says.

These are all means of cultivating a "spring in the self," a season of renewal and rebirth within. I've talked about how spring and the equinox are experienced differently at different places. The body is, of course, the ultimate localization. All our dreams start here. Let's aim to change the world, starting with ourselves. And what better time than now?

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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 non-technological subjects such 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 a participant in New Orleans Lamplight Circle."

Lessons of Spring

Ostara is now here and soon to be past us. Down here, in Florida, where my family and I live it is already starting to feel like Summer. At least the early days of Summer, we are only going to get much hotter.

So with this in mind, I wanted to take a moment and talk about Springtime and the lessons I have learned from watching this marvelous season.

For me and my family the end of March and the beginning of April has been a time of rest and renewal. With six weeks between the Sabbats we can take a break and turn our focus onto resting and preparing for the work of the coming season.

Taking advantage of the early Spring in Florida we planted our garden a few weeks ago. And we took this opportunity to teach our children about the importance of hard work, perseverance and patience.

Hard work because planting and digging is not always easy to do. Although my youngest seems to enjoy it. I think it is the playing in the dirt thing.

Perseverance because they have to take it on faith that the work that they are doing now will show rewards in the coming months. Plus, here in Florida, the heat comes early so they get hot quick and tend to want to quit almost as soon as they started.

The final lesson is patience. There is a process to gardening. From preparing the soil and planting the seeds. To the waiting for sprouting and then the cutting back. My children want to do it all right away and at the same time. So I have to hold them back and make them wait for the right time. They get tired of hearing the words, 'Seeds don't sprout overnight'.

These lessons are important and are sorely lacking from the rest of the world. We rush and rush in our society. We want it all and we want it yesterday. If we were a little more hardworking and patience and stuck it out to the end, than we would all be better off.

This is also the season of burgeoning fertility. We celebrate, like so many others, by painting eggs. In our Family Coven's tradition this small act is an act of magick that will aid the Goddess and God in their bringing back the warmth and growth of the Spring. I also tell my kids that Coyote, the trickster steals the eggs and hides them. And so the egg hunt begins.

Of course the hunt also helps to spread the magick around. So my children learn from this that even though things may not always go according to plan and that bad things happen, that in the end they will work out for the best.

So as we go forward from here into Spring and the warmer weather comes take some time to go outside with your children and watch the world begin to waken from their long Winter slumber. Here in Florida one of the most common animals we see are cows with horses being a close second, and I know that in the next few months I will be able to point out the foals and calves to my children.

And maybe you can pass on some of these lessons of Spring to your kids as well.

About the Author –

Patrick McCleary is a PaganDad and as such he runs the blog PaganDad.com. Dedicated to the idea of raising up the next generation in faith. He is also the founder of The Pagan Village, the go-to place for Pagan families on the web to network and begin the important task of building their Tribes. Also started by Patrick is the columnist driven site The Pagan Household, started with the idea of beginning to define what exactly a magickal home is.

Poem for Ostara

by Haldour Greenleaf

As she walks through the land, flowers spring from her steps
Poets sing of her beauty and grace,
The trees shake their limbs and start to show green
Blossom is painted anew on the vine,
The earth is waking from her long winter nap.

Over mountains and valleys the warmth returns,
To the land, the lambs will soon be born
Springing on legs of Jelly across the grass,
Their mothers watching closely by,
The forest is carpeted with oceans of white anemones
Dotted with yellow celandine.
Birds call love songs to their mates,
The wheel of the year turns once more

Thanks so much to all the contributors to this edition of Voices from the Grain. If you are looking to contribute then head over [here](#) and let us know.

<http://pagandad.com/voices-from-the-grain>