

Beltane

This page was downloaded from www.ladywoods.org, the website of the coven of Our Lady of the Woods. It may be used for personal and educational purposes with credit to the author.

By Merlyn

Beltane is the Sex Sabbat just as Samhain, held six months hence, is the Death Sabbat. All other Beltane (also called May Eve or Walpurgis Night) customs are minor compared with those that explicitly celebrate human sex and fertility. Up to the Protestant Reformation in the 16th Century, marriage vows were conveniently forgotten at Beltane in many rural European villages. Newly formed 'couples' went into the plowed fields at night to lie down together and copulate in order to ensure the fertility of the coming year's crops. The Catholic Church could not stamp out this ancient pagan tradition. It took the dour Protestants who suppressed May Eve celebrations in England by passing and enforcing laws against public gatherings around Maypoles with their accompanying dances and fertility rites.

Other less 'licentious' Beltane customs survived and included jumping the Balfire in honor of the God Bel, Baal or Balder. Beltane Fires or Balefires were lit on hilltops to mark May Eve (April 30). Leaping through or over the flames of the Balefire is a more recent custom performed as an act of purification and to bring good luck.

The Goddess of May and Beltane was called Maya, Maia, May or Mai in Northern Europe. She was Flora in Rome and Kore in Greece. Raising the Maypole was a symbolic sexual act. The pole represented the lingam or penis of the God, and the hole it entered was the yoni or vagina of the Earth Goddess. Thus by raising the Maypole, the villagers symbolically fertilized the Earth's body so that She would be fruitful during the growing season and provide a bountiful harvest. After the erection, decoration and dances around the Maypole, the villagers continued their May celebration of sex in the fields.

It is worth asking if celebrating Beltane as the ancient Pagans and their Catholic descendants did over a span of several thousand years is an appropriate custom for modern Neo-Pagans. Other ancient pagan customs deemed too crude or at odds with our modern post-Christian Humanist values have been ignored by the Neo-Pagan movement. These include human sacrifice (universally illegal), animal sacrifice, and self-castration by the priests of certain ancient Goddess Cults including those of Attis and Cybele.

Three characteristics of the 1990s provide rational and non-moralistic arguments against having random sex, even for a brief time each year at Beltane. These are widespread personal alienation, the continuing spread of AIDS, and the world's ever increasing population (now doubling roughly once every 30 years).

The problems raised by AIDS and overpopulation can be partly solved by always practicing safe sex (males always wear a condom and no one exchanges body fluids via oral intercourse or other direct contact).

However, the decision to indulge one's sexual passions is not a rational left-brained decision. Current social studies recently reported on National Public Radio show that most young people know that condoms help protect them against AIDS and pregnancy, but there seems to be an informal taboo against planning in advance to use them. If you stuff a condom in your pocket or purse, it means that you expect to have sexual intercourse if the opportunity arises. According to Christian morality, this makes you a more immoral person than someone who spontaneously yields in a moment of sexual passion and thus does not take precautions, because they never really planned to have sex.

Demanding that a new partner either uses a condom or does not touch you requires tremendous resolve for people of all ages. Saying 'no' may mean the immediate end to the budding relationship that you avidly sought. Still the fear of AIDS and pregnancy could be

dismissed if most people actually began to practice safe sex or abstained from having sex with recalcitrant partners.

The question of personal alienation raises a much larger objection to random sex at Beltane. Many people are deeply unhappy today, because they are alone. The reason they are alone is that they have systematically destroyed all potentially meaningful relationships with family, friends, and partners. If you use others only to satisfy your desires, i.e. treat them like a bottle of wine to be consumed and discarded, your lovers and friends will respond in kind toward you.

If you are in a relationship and that relationship has any meaning for you, remember that the quickest way to turn your current partner into an ex-partner is to ignore their feelings, while you are lustily satiating your own desires with someone else. Multiple sexual relationships can easily turn into no relationships with anyone as the hurt partners leave you and look for someone better.

However, if at Beltane you find yourself in a place in life where you are free from all commitments and you are in a mood to explore, then having "safe sex" with interesting strangers may be appropriate.

In summary, remember to look before you leap at Beltane. Jumping prematurely into a sexual relationship can have lasting negative consequences just as bad as falling into the Beltane Fire. Make the Spring fertility rites of Beltane work for you. Plan to have sex with your partner as part of your own private Beltane celebration. Soft beds inside are just as good a place to celebrate as is the hard ground outside. One reason the European peasants coupled in the fields was because they lived in huts crowded with other family members. Today we each select those ancient rituals that have meaning for us. We, as individuals and not some religious elders, should decide how we will celebrate the Sabbats. To do otherwise would be to ignore the guidance provided by the Deep Self or immanent divinity residing within each of our Sacred Selves.

An earlier version of this article appeared in Lady Letter, volume 1. no. 6.