

Beltane, Another View

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By Genee

Beltaine (or Beltane) is one of two main Celtic fire rituals on the Wheel of the Year. It is opposite the other, Samhain. While Samhain honors and celebrates our connection with death and those who have passed on, Beltaine celebrates life and the fertility of the coming growing season. Taking place on April 30, Beltane also is sometimes referred to as "Cetsamhain" which means "opposite Samhain." The word "Beltaine" literally means "bright" or "brilliant fire," and refers to the bonfire lit by a presiding Druid in honor of Bel or Bile. According to the "Encyclopedia Mythica" Web site, "It has been suggested that the mythological king, Beli Mawr, in the story of Lludd and Llefelys in The Mabinogion, is a folk memory of this god. In Irish mythology, the great undertakings of the Tuatha Dé Danann and the Milesians -- the original supernatural inhabitants of Eiru and their human conquerors, respectively -- began at Beltane. The Milesians were led by Amairgen, son of Mil, in folklore reputed to be the first Druid."

In German legends, the first day of May is the day of Saint Walburga, (8th century AD), but "the night before, April 30 or May Day Eve (Beltane Eve), is called Walpurgis Night; formerly the date of the pagan festival marking the beginning of summer. According to German legend, this festival has been associated with a witches' carnival, and on this night it was believed that witches met with the devil. In these nights there were usually large bonfires in certain places in the Harz Mountains, Germany, with the purpose to dispel witches." (Encyclopedia Mythica).

According to Amber K in *Covencraft*, "the aspect of the Goddess paramount at Beltane is the Virgin--called Maya, Maia, Mai, or May (for Whom the month is named) in northern Europe, Flora in Rome, or Kore in Greece. She is of course 'virgin' in the old Pagan sense-- a woman who belongs to herself..." (p. 159)

Many modern Pagans and Wiccans celebrate the Sabbat by carrying on some of the traditions found in legends. In the Maypole dance for fertility and to raise power for a bountiful harvest, a tall Maypole is erected into the earth, symbolizing the male fertility being given to the female Earth. The men of the group bring the pole into the circle while the women dig the hole to place it in. Bright ribbons fall from the top of the pole, and are woven around it as dancers raise power. In ancient times, after the dance was completed, couples often wandered off to be alone and take advantage of the feelings aroused by the symbolism of the Maypole in the Earth. "In India, phallic pillars directly related to the maypole are still venerated." (*Covencraft*, p. 159)

Another tradition is that of the Balefire. According to Merlyn of Our Lady of the Woods, "Other 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."

Our Lady of the Woods traditionally starts its Beltaine ritual with the Garland Dance, which was introduced by a former High Priestess, Faellina Rose. She introduced the tradition from old England practices on May Day. We weave fresh flowers into braided ropes (garlands) with stuffed dolls (poppies) on each end. Some participants pair up and take a garland to chase and capture an individual. The person captured then must forfeit a piece of candy or a kiss, whichever she prefers. According to Tehom with Our Lady of the Woods, the Garland Dance is "fun, and kids enjoy it; it involves chocolate and candy; people decorating the garlands can put magickal intent into them; it gets everyone moving around and is a chance to mingle; it's sexual while being 'friendly'; the garlands traditionally show male/female joined, but we mix up the dolls (female/female, etc.) to show that we accept different types of relationships."

There is more to Beltane than sex, of course, but that is part of it. This dance is a "controlled" way of choosing partner after partner to share affection with that is freely accepted in terms of a kiss or a treat of candy; and, you don't play if you don't want to, that is, if it makes you uncomfortable."

After the Garland Dance breaks the ice, the garlands are placed on the altar, and we gather in the Circle to start the traditional ritual, bringing in the Maypole and dancing.