

“May Day” a sermon by Rev. Brian J. Kiely Unitarian Church of Edmonton May 1, 2011

“Tra la! It's May!
The lusty month of May!
That lovely month when ev'ryone goes
Blissfully astray.”

(from “The Lusty Month of May” in the Musical Camelot, sung by Julie Andrews as Guinevere)

There is something about May isn't there? Guinevere's happy song is not fiction. Indeed it is rooted in history. May 1st is a joyous part of the pagan traditions she references and, more lately, international labour traditions. And while paganism and labour may at first blush seem completely unrelated, I think there is a connection of passion and fire and earthiness. And because this is a sermon, I would add that I think the rowdiness of it all is a large part of what it means to be free, to be human and to be alive. And if Unitarianism isn't a religion that celebrates being free, human and alive in all our physical, emotional and spiritual splendour, then I don't know what we are all doing here.

So let me talk about these two streams of human history and then try to connect them with our church today.

Beltane and Walpurgisnacht

Like most pagan festivals, Beltane in the Celtic countries— also Walpurgisnacht in the rest of Europe - is a moveable feast tied to the celestial calendar. It marks the cross-quarter, which is to say the exact mid-point between the winter and summer solstice. It is opposite Samhain – which most of us know as Hallowe'en, and like that other festival, the veil between the worlds is said to be very thin. In fact in the continental Walpurgisnacht, this is the time of year for witches and goblins, not in the fall.

In those ancient agrarian cultures Beltane signified the start of the summer planting and pasturing season. Last week I spoke of Ishtar and Tammuz and how their resurrection legends predated the Christian story by centuries. Beltane and Walpurgisnacht are the European versions of those festivals that gave birth to those stories with their theme of fertility and renewal.

But where the Easter story was all about spiritual rebirth of a redeemed people, the pagan celebrations – as Guinevere suggests - are anything but spiritual in a traditional sense. They are lusty and bawdy, which, I suppose is spiritual in its own way. What was being reclaimed was fertility and the spring feverish rising of spirits that accompanies the end of winter.

Celebrations of the festival vary widely, of course, but commonly it is a night of bonfires. On the eve of Beltane, the village fires are allowed to go out, and then a central bonfire is kindled on the highest point of land. Then a second fire is lit a few yards away. Embers will be taken in the morning to relight the hearth fires of the village and bring good luck to all, but before that comes a long night of revels.

First there is a purification of the cattle as they are driven between the two fires before being sent out to summer pastures. Children and old people, too, will walk or dance between the pyres for luck. Dancing goes on for hours. At some point young

lovers will try to jump the fire, earning a promise of fertility. People wear garlands of the first spring flowers, young men adorn the windows of their sweethearts with live tree branches. It is all about the returning green, returning life.

Through the night, lovers melt away into the woods and fields to make love under the stars and close to mother earth. This is the night when the winter goddess and the summer god make love – balanced and equal to one another for one of only two nights in the year. The pre-Christian world had none of the moral repression of more recent centuries. Sex was healthy, fun and normal, one of the few pleasures peasants could enjoy, and the person you coupled with that night did not necessarily have to become your spouse for life.

In the morning the young people would come back to the village, no doubt somewhat the worse for wear, carrying a living tree to serve as Maypole. This tree was then erected in the center of town, in hopes the Tree Spirit would come forth to make fertile the women and animals. The people would join hands and dance around the tree to call forth its Spirit, which would make them fruitful.

In later years it was more often a prepared pole, but when the rituals began, it was the symbol of living renewal. Ribbons of red and white were attached to the top and then dancers circle and weave the ribbons into a symbol of the coming harvest.

The Beltane celebrations were festivals of common people, festivals of our commonality, our physicality and our sensuality.

Labour and May Day

About 120 years ago, in an age when all of that bawdiness had been drained by religious morality, something else upsetting to the ordered world began to creep in, a celebration of a different common theme: work.

That it coincided with Beltane was a bit of an accident, but one that was fitting.

By the 1850's the European influenced world had become heavily industrialized. Cities were growing, filled with wage labourers working in manufacturing and all of the related fields. The capitalism of that day had very little sense of social justice. The industrialist made enormous profits and paid the plentiful labourers (including children) peanuts for very long hours and six day work weeks. In many isolated areas the workers were housed in company owned housing and forced to shop in company owned stores. If the workers tried to protest, they were fired and evicted. Few in government saw any problems with that state of affairs.

In 1856 in Australia, the stonemasons organized and managed to win an eight hour workday mandated by law. It was the first national labour law anywhere. April 22nd was celebrated as Eight Hour day and was a holiday. A movement began to grow.

In 1886 the labour movement became tied to May 1st forever. The eight hour day effort had been gaining strength in the United States. Marches and strikes were called for the first days of May in most major industrialized American cities. Hundreds of thousands marched.

In Chicago the general strike and marches lasted three days with several violent incidents. In response to police brutality a final rally was called in Haymarket Square. Towards the end of the rally, as police moved in to disperse the event an unknown assailant threw a bomb into the crowd of police. One officer was killed immediately and some others were wounded. The police opened fire on the crowd killing a dozen (including police killed by 'friendly fire'). Scores were wounded.

Eight rally leaders were arrested. A sensational show trial ensued in which the defendants were openly tried for their Anarchist political beliefs, and not necessarily for any involvement in the bombing. The trial led to the eventual public hanging of four anarchists. The Haymarket incident was a source of outrage for working people around the globe.

May Day became the International Worker's Day, a time for remembering the "Haymarket martyrs" with various job actions and demonstrations around the world.

As a side note, Canadian Labour Day is celebrated on the first Monday in September, and like International Worker's Day, it has its origin even a bit farther back in history:

It can be traced back to December 1872 when a parade was staged in support of the Toronto Typographical Union's strike for a 58-hour work-week. The Toronto Trades Assembly (TTA) called its 27 unions to demonstrate in support of the Typographical Union who had been on strike since March 25. George Brown, Canadian politician and editor of the Toronto Globe hit back at his striking employees, pressing police to charge the Union with "conspiracy."

Although the laws criminalising union activity were outdated and had already been abolished in Great Britain, they were still on books in Canada and police arrested 24 leaders of the Union. Labour leaders decided to call another similar demonstration on September 3 to protest the arrests. Seven unions marched in Ottawa, prompting a promise by Prime Minister Sir John A. Macdonald to repeal the "barbarous" anti-union laws. Parliament passed the Trade Union Act the following year, and soon all unions were demanding a 54-hour work-week. Our Labour Day was chosen to remember the victory of that September 3 march on Ottawa.

Two themes

So here we have two seemingly unrelated celebrations. On the one hand there is the ancient festival marking the arrival of summer and fertility with a lot of feasting and dancing and a lot of good old fashioned sex.

On the other hand we have the commemoration of martyred labour leaders fighting to break the absolute control of industrial owners and to win decent wages and working conditions for themselves and their families.

Now you might think I am forcing a connection here, and maybe I am, but here is what I see:

May Day is about life and hope for a better and more prosperous future. For the ancients that prosperity was tied to fertility: fertile cattle and a healthy herd, fertile fields and a good crop, fertile people and large families to work the farms. Winter was a time of death and, in bad years, starvation and hopelessness. Summer brought the promise of starting fresh, of embracing life and making the world good again, at least until the wheel turned once more.

The efforts of early labour leaders weren't much different. In the 19th century the life of a working person was hard, dangerous, filled with uncertainty and without freedom. I have done some family history. My maternal great-grandfather, Thomas Gibbons, fled Ireland as a child for Scotland during the famine. He became a coal miner. In researching the birth records of his nine children I learned that no two of them were born in the same town or village. Every year or so, Tom was forced to pack up his family and seek out new work deep underground in some other hellish place. He was

two years younger than me when he died worn out and broke.

The work of labour was trying to change that. They wanted to give the Tom Gibbonses a future. In that they were no different from their Maypole dancing ancestors trying to convince the deities to make them fruitful and let them enjoy a little bit of pleasure. The battles of labour were messy and rude at times and marked by unbridled passions. The cavorting of Beltane revellers were messy and rude and at times marked by unbridled passions.

I said at the outset: I think there is a connection (between Beltane and Labour) of passion and fire and earthiness. And because this is a sermon, I would add that I think the rowdiness of it all is a large part of what it means to be free, to be human and to be alive.

Sometimes life is messy. Sex is messy. Birth is messy. Death is messy and sometimes justice is messy. Sometimes we have to get dirty and sticky, lose our learned propriety and let the animal nature out for just awhile. Unitarianism celebrates our rational and reasonable side, but we are not one-sided beings. The Universalist part of our heritage reminds of those rural roots and the passions of loving without reserve. Principles and Sources tells us to experience life and, by implication, to affirm its inherent worth and dignity, even when it's messy and rude and impolite and dancing around a bonfire.

And if Unitarianism isn't a religion that celebrates being free, human and alive in all our physical, emotional and spiritual splendour, messy and rude as it may be then I don't know what we are all doing here.