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Title: Beltane's Fiery Blessings

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There is only a weekend between now and May Day, but the fires of Beltane have been stoking for weeks. If you're familiar with the former but not so much the latter, don't worry; the

two are all but intertwined, dating back thousands of years and undergoing nearly as many interpretations.

Poised on the cusp between spring and summer, Beltane is a solar cross-quarter celebration marking the sun's midpoint between equinox and solstice. Beltane, like many ancient Celtic sabbats occurring on the wheel of the year, harkens back to pastoral times when fertility was as crucial in the fields as it was in the womb. Rituals were held to mark the first turning of the herds out to pasture, with livestock lead in a procession between bonfires, or Belfires, to ensure protection and blessings from the sun. The people then "jumped" the bonfires (you can take that as literally or metaphorically as you wish, just please exercise caution if you choose to go the literal route in your own merrymaking) to invoke good fortune and abundance in the season to come. Music, dancing, and libations accompanied the rituals, with many handfastings (Pagan unions) taking place.

It's important to note that May Day beliefs and practices were not exclusively Druidic. The ancient Greeks dedicated May to the festival of Plynteria, which began in honor of the goddess Athena and concluded with tributes paid to Artemis, goddess of the moon and wild, as well as Hecate, ruler of death and the occult. The ancient Romans, never ones to pass up a good rager, celebrated Floralia, which was more or less (mostly more) a botanical themed three-day orgy. In Egypt, Sham El-Nessim was held to welcome the reemergence of life and strong, healthy babies, and is still observed today.

By the time Christianity swept through Europe, effectively abolishing the old faith, Beltane was adapted by the church and rebranded as May Day. Make no mistake, however; the Pagan remnants were everywhere. In lieu of jumping the bonfires, a singular service was held, followed by a priest-led procession outdoors. Rowan branches were strung up over hearths to ward off evil, and the unmistakably phallic maypole was erected, with bright young things adorning and dancing around it with ribbons and flower garlands. One Medieval tradition called for women to wake at dawn on the first day of May and wash their faces in the morning dew to instill beauty and youthful vitality; this practice is still carried out in parts of Romania to ensure good health.

Last month we discussed Ostara as a time for prepping and planting our seeds of intent, for turning the winter soil and stirring what may have lain dormant. If Ostara is a period of awakening, then Beltane is the time for nurturing what has begun to bloom. This is frankly a sexual time, when the union between God and Goddess is emphasized through our own couplings, regardless of gender or sexual orientation. This is a time for realizing one's own sensuality, both corporeal and creative, and the life that renews itself even when all seems frozen and fallow. Elizabeth Dillen, a longtime friend, mentor, and ordained High Priestess with the the NYC based group Novices of The Old Ways, as well as a teacher of Progressive Paganism, remarks on Beltane: "For me, and probably not unlike many others, I think SEX! PAN! and all those lovely nymphs dancing around a bonfire in the woods, one by one running off into the woods with partners and enjoying the

Great Rite. But that is just one picture in my head when I think of Beltane.” She continues, “I also think of cleaning the earth, connecting to the earth again, reconnecting with the good things in my life, and strengthening those bonds. Also, getting rid of things that do not serve me, very much like weeding a garden. We all know that what we call ‘weeds’ aren't bad--many are wonderful food sources, great for healing tinctures and salves--but they're not what we need in our garden.”

Anyone who is familiar with Stravinsky's “The Rite Of Spring” can attest that this time of year is anything but gentle. If you've been feeling like your blood is boiling, hormones raging, and are ready to hurl yourself out into the world again, you're far from alone. After all, there's a reason many modern societies calendar May Day for worldwide political protest and activism, with May 1st recognized as International Workers Day. Thomas Gordon writes for [Dazed](#): “The anarchist and socialist roots of May Day run deep in countries like Germany. In Berlin, Kreuzberg marks May Day with an annual protest that can be traced back to civil unrest that hit the district on May Day, 1987. On that particular day over twenty years ago, left-wing groups battled police for hours during a street festival and forced them out of the borough. Now, anti-fascist and anarchist groups use the day as an opportunity to gather, demonstrate and confront the police.”

Just as childbirth is anything but a breezy romp through the meadow, cultivating what we sow during times of transition can be an arduous but ultimately life-affirming process. A bud must break through its encasement before it can erupt into bloom, and so transformative change does not happen without the willingness to get one's hands dirty. As Anaïs Nin famously acknowledged, “And the day came when the risk to remain tight in a bud was more painful than the risk it took to blossom.”

One needn't be a strict follower of the Pagan way to honor Beltane in his or her own fashion. Dillen reflects, “There are simple rituals that work well during this time of year, particularly in regards to divination: meditations to connect with the earth, planting, fixing up your garden, walking through the woods and meditating. If you can't meditate while walking, bring a trash bag with you and pick up the trash you find along your hike. It's good to do all of this silently, and welcome any messages you receive.” She concludes, “Beltane lines up with the other cross Quarter-Sabbat of Samhain, and the veil thins during both these times. Being mindful of what you do, how you treat others, and the intentions you set will largely determine your year ahead.”

For more information on the history and modern celebrations of Beltane, as well as other wonderful insights into the Pagan community, you can check out [The Beltane Fire Society](#)



