

Spiritual Essence: Tied to the Maypole

*Tra-la! It's May! The Lusty
Month of May!*

*That lovely month when every-
one goes blissfully astray!*

— From *Camelot*, by Lerner and
Lowe

Sex, Sex, Sex! Yes, this column is all about sex and spirituality, so if you aren't interested in reading about ritual orgasms you can stop right here and move on to the Mostly Unfabulous Social Life of Ethan Green.

Beltane is the most popular of the ancient Celtic festivals that survived the onslaught of Christianity into Scotland and Ireland in the first centuries of the Christian Era. Why is it so popular? Well, it's all about orgies and orgasms, sweeties.

In popular American gay culture Beltane is perhaps most



signified by a sun symbol. By the traditional festival date of May 1st, Spring has really kicked off in many parts of the world, even if we're still suffering mud season here in Vermont. Everyone is throwing off their winter garments and letting the sun shine on their naked bodies. There are any number of traditions associated with Beltane, and virtually all of them are designed to get you horny and rutting.

When I was newly hatched pagan, having thrown off the hard shell of Catholicism, Beltane was one of the first pagan holidays that I learned about. All these poles and holes just seemed like so many penises and vaginas. It appeared as though hetero-normativity was the way to go in the pagan tradition, just as it was in Roman Catholic doctrine. But, I was in the closet pretty deeply at that time. It still wasn't very safe

to openly question the seeming biological rigidity of the May Queen and her consort, the King Stag, rutting in ritualistic sexual frenzy.

The most well known Beltane tradition is, of course, the May Pole. The May pole is made from the trunk of the Yule Tree that is decorated at the Winter Solstice, the darkest day of the year. We put small lights on the Yule Tree to indicate that the sun will return. We celebrate the birth of the new God at the turning of the year. As we move to Beltane, the branches of the Yule Tree are removed to leave us with a long pole that is upended into a large hole in the newly thawed and fertile earth.

The May pole represents the fertility of the King Stag, born at the solstice and hitting his sexual stride at Beltane. The May Queen is chosen from among the maidens, and she gives her virginity to the God to help ensure a fertile harvest come Lammas.

The pole has long ribbons tied to the top and a tradi-

tional maypole dance has men weaving in one direction while women weave in the other, creating a fancy braid down the length of the tall phallus.

When I was first learning about the Maypole tradition in College, we took it very seriously. Women and men did not mix in the dance, there were equal numbers of male-bodied and female-bodied in the ritual and the weave had to be exactly right. Goddess forbid that anyone should mess with the tradition. I remember creating a headdress of stag antlers for the young man that was chosen to represent the King Stag. But many of us shy types found ourselves a little left out of festivities.

These days, the Radical Faeries of the Northeast celebrate Beltane with a little more anarchy and a much looser definition of what constitutes Male and Female, God and Goddess, Maiden and Horned One. Up in the hills of Lincoln, Vermont, the Faeries and the Witches celebrate Beltane together, one of the few times during the faeries' year when bio-women and bio-men mix in relatively equal if gender-fucked quantities.

A Maypole is set up and the traditional dance is held but there is no pre-occupation with who has a penis and who has a vagina. Usually part of the weave is beautifully and symmetrically braided. But there are also big spaces where it's a colorful jumble, or where some wacky faerie or butch witch has decided to go her own merry and anarchic way, making a mess of the whole thing.

And, of course, what silly Queen can resist letting themselves get tied up to the base of the pole? She's always there, year after year, screaming for rescue by her Knight in Shining Armor, or perhaps hoping for flogging from some leather-clad medieval inquisitor.

What I've learned in fifteen years of Beltane Celebrations and the struggle to come out as a queer pagan, is that fertility, creativity and productivity are not based in biological sex but rather in spiritual commitment, community building, self-love and the ability to live fully in our bodies, made in the image of both god and goddess. In each of us there is both Maiden and King Stag, Mother Earth and Father Sky, Raven Goddess and Sun God. Sometimes we may manifest one aspect of the divine more strongly than another aspect but we all are part of the May Pole dance, however we chose to weave in our colors. ▼

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well-known in Julie Andrews's delightful Broadway portrayal of Queen Guinivere in lusty pursuit of Sir Lancelot in the Lerner and Lowe musical *Camelot*. (Admit it, Queens! You probably have the tune running through your head right now!) Now, of course, Guinivere practically gets burned at the stake for her trouble. But at least she gets that fabulous dance number with all those butch Knights in Shining Armor before it all goes horribly wrong.

On the other end of queer style, there was a fad a few years back for Stalin-era Soviet regalia. To this day, communists and other labor activists around the world celebrate May Day with huge parades honoring the productive labor of the working class.

When you dig out that trendy red star cap, you are hearkening back to pre-Christian European paganism. (Alright, that wasn't so much about sex, but you know I had to work politics in here somehow!)

So what exactly is Beltane? Beltane is the festival of the god Beli, a fertility god, often

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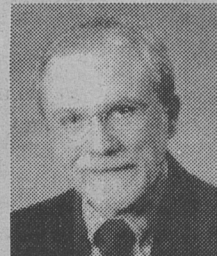


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