

2nd May 2021 – ‘A celebration for Beltane’

led by Rev Kate Whyman

GATHERING MUSIC ‘Blooming heather’, by Kate Rusby

<https://youtu.be/Y3B2mntKAZo>

WELCOME AND CHALICE LIGHTING

Come, come whoever you are
Wanderer, worshipper, lover of leaving.
Ours is no caravan of despair.
Come, yet again come.

And welcome to this beautiful, bounteous month of May. Perhaps you are full of the joys of spring this morning, and your spirit is responding to the sunshine and the burgeoning of creation. Or maybe your mood is quieter, more attuned to the coolness of the air. Perhaps you are sitting with sadness, or worry, or despair.

However you find yourself feeling right now, you are welcome here, just as you are.

I shall begin, as is our custom, by lighting our chalice flame, the symbol of our free Unitarian faith. *If you have a candle you might like to light yours with me now.*

May we light our flames as symbols of our presence and our togetherness in this moment. Even as we are apart in space, we are together in time and

attention. May we share an intention to be here both open-mindedly and wholeheartedly. May it be so.

Yesterday was May Day and the Celtic festival of Beltane (Bealtaine) and this is the inspiration for our service this morning. It's a time of year and a festival traditionally marked by Maypole dances, May Queens, Green men, gods and goddesses. It's a celebration of creation, fertility and of fire.

Let's pray...

PRAYER for Beltane

Great earth mother!

We give you praise today
and ask for your blessing upon us.

As seeds spring forth
and grass grows green
and winds blow gently
and the rivers flow
and the sun shines down
upon our land,
we offer thanks to you for your blessings
and your gifts of life each spring.

HYMN 147 (P) Spirit of earth, root, stone and tree
Spirit of earth, root, stone and tree,
water of life, flowing in me,
keeping me stable, nourishing me,
O fill me with living energy!

*Spirit of nature, healing and free,
spirit of love, expanding in me,*

*spirit of life, breathe deeply in me,
inspire me with living energy!*

Spirit of love, softly draw near,
open my heart, lessen my fear,
sing of compassion, help me to hear,
O fill me with loving energy!

*Spirit of nature, healing and free,
spirit of love, expanding in me,
spirit of life, breathe deeply in me,
inspire me with living energy!*

Spirit of life, you are my song,
sing in my soul, all my life long,
gladden and guide me, keep me from wrong,
O fill me with sacred energy!

*Spirit of nature, healing and free,
spirit of love, expanding in me,
spirit of life, breathe deeply in me,
inspire me with living energy!*

Words by Lyanne Mitchell, traditional Scottish melody arranged by David Dawson

STORY: ‘The Beautiful Tiger’ by Christopher Buice (UU minister in Knoxville, Tennessee)

There once was a beautiful and powerful tiger.

One day she was captured by a mean and cruel man who put her into a cage. The man kept the cage in the jungle not far from his house. Everyday he would bring out a bowl of water and some food for the lonely tiger.

Sometimes the tiger would see her own reflection in the bowl of water and she would say, “My, I must be a beautiful tiger.”

When the man heard her say this he would lie and tell her, “No, you are not a beautiful tiger. You’re very ugly. You’re a pitiful creature.” Sadly, the tiger would believe the man.

Some days, after she ate her food, she would walk back and forth in her small cage and feel energy and power moving through her body, and she would say, “My, I must be a powerful tiger.”

When the man heard her say this, he would lie and tell her, “No, you are weak and puny. You’re a pitiful creature.” Sadly, the tiger would believe the man.

Then one day, when the man was nowhere around, a lion happened to walk by the cage. The lion saw the tiger inside and spoke to her, “Beautiful and powerful tiger, what are you doing lying about in that cage?”

“Do not make fun of me,” replied the tiger. “I know that I am neither beautiful nor powerful.”

“I’m not making fun of you,” said the lion. “You are surely the most beautiful and powerful tiger I have ever seen. I am only surprised to see you lying here when you are clearly strong enough to break out of that cage.”

“You really think I could break out of here?” asked the tiger.

“Quite easily, I should think,” replied the lion

The tiger was not so sure at first. She had been told so many times that she was a weak and pitiful creature.

But suddenly it seemed that she could feel energy and strength moving through her body. She began to pace back and forth in her cage and then, almost

without thought, she leapt against the cage door and it flew open without any resistance.

Once outside she seemed dazed. "That cage didn't even have a lock on it," she said. "I spent so much of my life stuck in there and the door wasn't even locked."

The lion looked at her with soft brown eyes and said, "Those kinds of traps don't need locks, for it is the lies we believe in that keep us in our cages...and it is the truth that sets us free."

READING from a book called 'Sacred Earth Celebrations' by Glennie Kindred (Can that be her real name? If so, how wonderful!)

Beltain is a Fire Festival. The word 'Beltain' originates from the Celtic God 'Bel', meaning 'the bright one' and the Gaelic word 'teine' meaning fire. Together they make 'Bright Fire', or 'Goodly Fire' and traditionally bonfires were lit to honour the Sun and encourage the support of Bel and the Sun's light to nurture the emerging future harvest and protect the community. Bel [it was thought] had to be won over through human effort. Traditionally all fires in the community were put out and a special fire was kindled for Beltain. "This was the Tein-eigen, the need fire. And people jumped the fire to purify, cleanse and to bring fertility. Couples jumped the fire together to pledge themselves to each other. Cattle and other animals were driven through the smoke as a protection from disease and to bring fertility. At the end of the evening, the villagers would take some of the Teineigen to start their fires anew."

REFLECTION

And so Beltane is associated with passion, blossoming, creativity, new life and fertility. And it's celebrated through rituals of fire.

Today, in the spirit of Beltane, I invite us each to light a candle, if we have one – or imagine one in our mind's eye if we haven't. To light it for something we would like to let go of, or for a leap of faith we might wish to take.

MUSIC 'Down by the Salley Gardens', Philip Croft

<https://soundcloud.com/fingersphil/down-by-the-salley-gardens?in=fingersphil/sets/upper-chapel-meditations-1>

ADDRESS

This time of year is literally a time of blossoming in the northern hemisphere. We only have to look out of the window to see that that's already happening. The season is in full swing. In fact Beltane is the peak of spring – the mid-point between the spring equinox and the summer solstice. Of course the cycles of nature don't always chime with our own emotional cycles of being, but they do remind us that there is a wheel of life, and that everything is constantly in motion, passing through it and with it, and that if our own blossoming isn't quite ready yet, then its time will surely come, in its own way. So there is hope in the air, and of course this year that's coinciding with our shared, gradual, cautiously hopeful emergence from lockdown, which gives *this* May and *this* Beltane more poignancy and resonance than ever. The opportunity to blossom, and the encouragement to do so, is there in the ether and in the whole symphony of creation opening up around us, of which we are an integral part.

I myself am experiencing a feeling of spontaneity and serendipity at the moment. On Thursday evening I made a last-minute decision to join a Zoom conversation with Phil Waldron who is minister at Ullet Road Unitarians in

Liverpool. I visited Phil there a couple of years ago and attended a service. It's a huge church, a massive red brick building with pews and arches and lots of different rooms and spaces. So it's very different from our church, and their possibilities are correspondingly different from ours, too. But hearing Phil talk about how their congregation is flourishing was inspiring. He had three top tips. Respond to ideas with a big 'Yes'; put your energy into building relationships in the community; and take opportunities as they arise, which means taking leaps of faith (or we also might say, leaps over the fire). For example, a chance conversation led to his congregation starting a football club for refugees and asylum seekers, which is now thriving. And they took the very bold leap of employing a Sunday School leader before they even had any children attending. That particular leap of faith certainly worked because they now have around a dozen youngsters and employ no less than three leaders to run their expanding activities for young people.

And another moment of spontaneity... Lisa, who's the new Pastoral and Spiritual Coordinator at the University, contacted me out of the blue and we met up for a very enjoyable cuppa and chat this week and she's interested in Unitarianism. Hello Lisa, if you're watching!

And so, what 'leaps over the fire' are you taking, or wondering whether you dare to take, in your own life right now? Some of them have been shared already.

They don't have to be huge – there are no medals for how far or high you jump. For you the 'fire' of Beltane might be a cleansing one, a chance to let go of clutter in your home or in your mind. I haven't set fire to the vestry yet, you'll be pleased to know, but I'm certainly going to give it a good clear out before we reopen, which will help me clear my mind too.

Or you might be ready for an act of courage, a willingness to give something new a go, particularly as we collectively begin to come out of our shells and the world opens up to us again. Or maybe you'll find your voice and begin to use it, to give expression to what matters to you and to make a difference to the world around you. It's never too late.

Beltane may be a Celtic festival, but its message is one that reverberates throughout all faiths. We are all, always, being called to 'jump over the fire'. To free ourselves from the fear and guilt and shame that limit us, and of the prejudice and judgment through which we would limit others. And to dare to dream and to commit to those dreams. To live in to this miraculous gift of life and to be what our hearts and souls and spirits – and our god - yearn for us to be.

May it be so.

Let's sing.

2nd HYMN 66 (P) How wonderful this world of thine,

How wonderful this world of thine,
a fragment of a fiery sun,
how lovely and how small,
where all things serve thy great design,
where life's adventure is begun
in God, the life of all.

The smallest seed in secret grows,
and thrusting upward answers soon
the bidding of the light;
the bud unfurls into a rose;
the wings within the whole cocoon
are perfected for flight.

The migrant bird in winter fled,
shall come again with spring, and build
in this same shady tree;
by secret wisdom surely led,

homeward across the clover field
hurries the honey bee.

O thou, whose greater gifts are ours -
a conscious will, a thinking mind,
a heart to worship thee -
O take these strange unfolding powers,
and teach us through they Word to find
the life more full and free.

Words by Frederick Pratt Green, music by David Dawson

CLOSING WORDS

The Carmina Gadelica features hundreds of poems and prayers collected by folklorist Alexander Carmichael from residents in various areas of Scotland. There is a lovely prayer in the Gaelic entitled simply Am Beannachadh Bealltain (The Beltane Blessing), which pays tribute to the Holy Trinity of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. This is a shorter version, which has been adapted into a Pagan-friendly format for the Beltane sabbat, and which perhaps also falls more gently on Unitarian ears. And by the way, 'kine' is an archaic word for 'cattle'.

Bless, O threefold true and bountiful,
Myself, my beloved, my children.
Bless everything within my dwelling and in my possession,
Bless the kine and crops, the flocks and corn,
From Samhain Eve to Beltane Eve,
With goodly progress and gentle blessing,
From sea to sea, and every river mouth,
From wave to wave, and base of waterfall.

Be the Maiden, Mother, and Crone,
Taking possession of all to me belonging.
Be the Horned God, the Wild Spirit of the Forest,
Protecting me in truth and honour.
Satisfy my soul and shield my loved ones,
Blessing every thing and every one,
All my land and my surroundings.
Great gods who create and bring life to all,
I ask for your blessings on this day of fire.

May it be so. Blessed be us all.

Extinguish chalice

CLOSING MUSIC

In the Plymouth church we have sometimes danced a maypole dance for May Day. Today we can't do that, but we can watch The Royal Ballet dance the maypole dance from the comic ballet 'La Fille mal gardée', which literally means 'the poorly guarded girl' but is often known as 'The wayward girl'. I make no comment on that. Nor shall I comment on the relative merits of the Royal Ballet's performance compared with our own.

I hope you enjoy it and will feel inspired to dance this again next year.

La Fille mal gardée – The Maypole Dance Act I scene II (The Royal Ballet)
The music is by Ferdinand Hérold.

<https://youtu.be/Mgn5pzV4HZI>