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Notes on Various Holidays

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Candlemas

Candlemas, February 2, is halfway between the Winter Solstice and the Spring Equinox and signals the beginning of spring in the Celtic calendar. It was called Imbolc in pre-Christian times, meaning "in the belly" of the Mother because seeds were starting to germinate and the sheep were pregnant. This time was sacred to Brigit, the Earth Mother and goddess of fire, water, healing, poetry, and fertility. Other Celtic names for Brigit were Brighid, Brigid, Briid, Brid, Brede, Bride, and Bridget.

Brigit, being the goddess of fertility, was especially important to brides or would-be brides. Young girls would make straw beds for Brigit near the hearth and leave milk and cookies for her, in the hopes that she would visit for a while and bless them with fertility in the spring. This association seems to have been incorporated into Valentine's Day, rather than into Candlemas.

Imbolc was a fire festival, celebrated with hilltop bonfires. It was also the day when people stopped using candles indoors because the days were getting longer. The fields were purified and blessed with candlelight processions, Yuletide greens were burned, and people cleaned and purified their homes. This custom lingers on as "spring cleaning."

Brigit was transformed into the Christian St. Brigit, who supposedly was converted from Druidism by St. Patrick. She remained associated with miracles and fertility.

So how did Imbolc evolve into Candle Mass, the Christian feast of purification?

February 2 is exactly forty days after Christ's birth on December 25. That was the time that Mary went to the Temple for the traditional purification bath after giving birth. She presented the baby Jesus at the temple, and Luke describes a meeting with an old man, Simeon, who called



Jesus "a light to enlighten the Gentiles." By the middle of the fifth century, candles were lit on this day to symbolize that Jesus Christ was the light, the truth, and the way.

Altar candles for the whole year were blessed at Candlemas. Candles distributed after the service were taken home and kept, as they were believed to have healing and protective powers.

And Groundhog Day? Imbolc was an auspicious day to forecast weather. If the day was cloudy and wintry, then winter was exhausting itself and spring could begin. The Celtic forerunners of the American groundhog were hibernating English hedgehogs.

Intrinsically, Imbolc/Candlemas is a lovely holiday. New beginnings, healing, baby lambs, light, purity, snowdrops, and crocuses. Like so many wonderful days, it was stolen by the cults, defiled, and perverted. Maybe we can remember what it was originally and reclaim a little bit of the day for ourselves.

Beltane

In the Celtic calendar, Beltane (May Day) and Samhain (Halloween) divide the year in half and are the two most important holidays. Beltane marked the start of summer -- the day the cattle were brought to their summer pastures. It was a time of rejoicing and unrestrained sexuality, whether between the god and the goddess or between mere humans. The sexual imagery of the joyously decorated Maypole being thrust into mother earth is pretty clear.

The Celts counted days from sundown to sundown, not dawn to dawn as we do, which probably explains why so many of us have a harder time the eve of a holiday than on the holiday itself. The ceremonies started on May Eve with the extinguishing of all fires and the lighting of bonfires by the priests. People stayed up all night and danced in the fields to ensure the crops' fertility or went "a-maying" into the woods to ensure their own. At sunrise, home fires were lit from the sacred bonfire and then there were games and feasting.

Beltane (Beltaine, Belltaine, Bealtaine, Beltain, Beltine, Bealteine, Bealtuinn, Boaldyn), means "god's fire," and Bel, the sun god, is related linguistically to Belinos, Balor, Belenus, and Baal. The actual astrological date varies, like the solstices and equinoxes, and is usually around May 5. If Beltane is celebrated then, it is usually called "Old Beltane." Usually, though, it is celebrated on May first.

The Saxons named May Eve after Walpurga, the goddess of May. The Church transformed this goddess into St. Walpurga, and thus we have Walpurgisnacht (Walpurga's night). They also substituted the cross for the maypole, renamed May Day Roodmas (rood means cross), and kept some of the traditions by having the congregation go into the fields after mass. The priest lit a fire and blessed the fields and the animals.

The Romans had a very similar three-day festival from dusk on April 28 through May first called Floriala, the Feast of Flowers. It seems that almost all ancient civilizations have a sexuality festival near the beginning of summer.

August Ritual Dates



Many survivors don't know much about the August holidays, probably because those days have not survived as Christian or secular holidays. I thought it might be useful to give some background about them.

8/1 – 2: Lughnasadh is named for the Celtic god Lugh, the fire god, and is celebrated with bonfires. Lugh is the son or maybe grandson of Baal; on his mother's side, he is the grandson of Balor. In Wales, he is called Llew Llaw Gyffes.

Lughnasadh takes place August Eve (July 31) and August first. It is still celebrated in some form in parts of the British Isles as Lunasa (August) in Ireland: Lunasda, Lunasdal, and Lunasad in Scotland; Laa Luanys and Luanistyn (August) in the Isle of Man; Gwl Awst (August Feast) in Wales.

Games in honor of Lugh's foster-mother, Tailte, who died clearing forestland for planting, occur on August first. In Ireland, this holiday is still sometimes called the Tailtean Games; year-long unofficial trial marriages arranged on Lughnasadh are called Tailtean marriages. These games were a gathering of the tribes and a mixture of business, horse racing, athletic contests, and ceremonies. They survived Christianity disguised as medieval craft guild festivals. Today, many country fairs take place around this time.

With the coming of Christianity, Lughnasadh became Anglo-Saxon Lughomass ("Lugh's Mass") and later Lammas (from Old English hlaf-mas or 'loaf mass'). Loaves of bread made from the first grain harvested were placed on the altar to be blessed.

August full moon (Lunasa): Lunasa is the Irish word for August. In Wales, the first August full moon is Arianrhod, "silver wheel." In Scotland, it is Gealach, the "bright white moon of the seasons."

8/24 - 8/27: Fundus Mundi seems to be a Greek/Roman mixture of Lammas and Halloween. It means "bottom of the world," or underworld, in Latin. It's a time of transition, when the gates of the underworld open for a few days. Mania is a festival in honor of the manes (Latin for ancestors).

Demeter was the goddess of grain and the harvest; she made the crops grow. (The first loaf of bread from the harvest was dedicated to her.) Demeter and Zeus had a daughter, Persephone, who was kidnapped by Hades to be his wife in the underworld. In her sorrow and rage, Demeter laid a curse on the world and made all the plants die.

Now Hades was Zeus' brother, and thus Persephone's uncle and Demeter's brother-in-law. He was the god of wealth and the dead, and he just loved mortals, who increased the number of dead in his kingdom. (Sound familiar? He is sort of Lucifer's counterpart.)

Zeus had the good sense to try and get Persephone away from Hades. Anybody who eats something in the underworld is not allowed to return, and Persephone had tasted a pomegranate. There was an attempted kidnapping and other drama, and Zeus managed to negotiate to have Persephone spend half her time with Hades, half with Demeter. That's why we have winter and summer.



8/28: Feast of Nephthys. So how did Nephthys, the Egyptian goddess of death, come into this story? Originally, of course, she didn't. In the nineteenth century, however, there was much interest in mythology of all kinds, Far Eastern and Egyptian as well as Greek and Roman, on the part of occultists as well as the general public. Some abusive groups incorporated as many "dark" gods as possible into their rites and holidays. Such groups are generally referred to as pantheistic cults, (pan meaning all and theist meaning one who believes in God or gods.) And yes, she was married to Set, as in "The Temple of Set."

The details of the myths are not important; the fact that they were an excuse to perpetrate the most horrible abuses is what counts. It can be helpful, however, to know that these practices came from somewhere and that they have a history.

The same year I figured out I was a survivor, I came across a 1967 book by Richard Cavendish called *The Black Arts*. It traces the history of numerology, alchemy, astrology, ritual black magic, and satanism in Europe. As I plowed through it, I gradually realized that my experience was not unique, and that my people were not the absolutely worst people in the history of the world. Ritual abuse is an ancient culture of darkness, not a rare modern aberration.

The Mysteries of Eleusis

Eleusis is the ancient name for Elefsina, a town about forty-five minutes from today's Athens. Here Demeter, the goddess of crops, was worshiped for more than two thousand years. Here also, supposedly, is the cave where Hades returned Demeter's daughter Persephone to earth.

Little is known about the Mysteries because participants were bound to absolute secrecy on the pain of death. We do know that there was a Hierophant, or High Priest, and a High Priestess of Demeter, who may have enacted a symbolic secret "sacred wedding." We also know that sacred objects were involved, including kykeon, a drink which probably was psychoactive and which purified the initiates and made them see death as a blessing.

Initiates (men, women, and slaves) had to speak Greek and had to have shed no human blood. They were promised a special life in the underworld after death.

Preparations for the ceremony and the rites themselves lasted for nine days and involved the sacrifice of pigs, a journey to the ocean, and fasting. (It is also possible that the god Dionysus was involved, in which case there would have been feasts, wine, and Mardi-Gras-like activities at some point in the rites.) The Mysteries were presided over by two families, which held hereditary rights to the position. A similar but less elaborate rite was held in the spring, when Persephone was kidnapped and taken to the underworld by Hades.

Samhain/Halloween

Samhain (pronounced SOW-wen) is derived from the Celtic root "samon" (summer) and means "summer's end." In modern Gaelic languages the festival is called Samhain (Irish), Samhuinn (Scots Gaelic), and Sauin (Manx).

In the eighteenth century some Christian writers assumed that Samhain was the god of the underworld. Pre-Christian Celts, however, had no god of death or the underworld. Winter and



death were seen simply as part of life.

The Celts believed that life grew from darkness and chaos, just as a baby grows in the darkness of the womb. Therefore the day started at dusk and the new year started at the beginning of winter. All things had their beginning in the fertile chaos that was hidden from the rational mind.

Beltane, the opposite festival six months later, marked the end of winter, and the two seasons reflected opposite energies within the year. What was explicit and active in one season was implicit and dormant in the other. The seeds of spring were already growing in the underworld on Samhain, and it was necessary to honor emerging life and make connections with the latent life energy in the underworld for the next growing season to be fruitful.

On Samhain, the veil between the two worlds was considered to be thinnest, and the dead could travel freely among the living. Strengthening ties with the dead allowed people to make contact with the dormant fertility of the underworld and was a sacred duty. People opened their doors and windows for the dead and prepared plates of food for them. In some places, the food was not to be eaten; in others, it was distributed to the poor in the community.

On Samhain, the ritual fires were put out and then relit, just as on Beltane. The cattle were brought back to the barns from the pastures. Offerings had to be made to the land spirits to thank them for the past season and replenish their energies for the coming spring. Some cattle were slaughtered for the winter in a ritual blood offering, and sometimes blood was sprinkled in the four corners of homes for protection.

Just as summer dissolved into winter at Samhain, so the usual social order dissolved. The lower classes could be rude to the upper classes. Gender boundaries were dissolved by cross-dressing and people in costume went from house to house singing and drinking. Things could get pretty rowdy.

The Church concentrated on honoring the dead (Christian dead, of course) and declared November 1 to be All Hallows, or All Saints' Day. The Benedictines in about 1000 AD started celebrated November 2 as All Souls Day to include all the dead of the community. Halloween (Hallow Evening) was reserved for "fun" and "mischief" before the solemn All Saints' Day.

Holiday Excuses

Many of us have families of origin who expect us to join them for holidays, both the traditional days when families gather and the secret cult holidays. Some of us still want to go, hoping against hope that this time will be different. It rarely is different, but it's really hard to give up this particular hope.

Many people, however, don't want to be with their families but don't know how to refuse the invitation. There can be a tremendous amount of pressure to "come home," especially if you live close by. Some would love to say, "No, I don't like you and I never want to see you again, for that matter," but are not yet ready for such heavy confrontation. It's okay to choose your battles and there's never any need to feel guilty for making excuses in order to protect yourself.



Here are some of the reasons that others have used to turn down unwanted invitations. Perhaps you will find one that looks useful or perhaps these suggestions will encourage your own creativity.

"I'm too broke." "My car is dying." This won't work, of course, if your parents are the type to send you money.

"I have to work that day." "I have to stay at school because I am behind and have three papers to write." "So and so is sick and is counting on me." "I think I might have to be hospitalized then." (Not so far fetched; you might be too regressed or too depressed to travel at that time.)

"I have to, at some point, become independent and learn how to celebrate for myself. I can't be dependent on you forever." Believe it or not, this was what worked for me!

"Oh, I am so sorry. I forgot." "I was out dancing and had such fun I lost track of the time." "I meant to come, but, well, um, well, I really don't know what happened."

Accept the invitation and then get violently ill at the last minute.

It's helpful to analyze your family and then guess what approach will work best with them. What's worked in the past? What are their professed values? Is there some way you can manipulate them into supporting your decision? Can you trade in on your reputation of being absent-minded or fragile?

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It's also helpful to look within yourself and see if you can be true to your own values. It's great to keep yourself safe; it's even greater to do it in a way that makes you feel good inside.

For myself, I don't like to lie. It's the old way of life, and I want no more deceit and untruths in my life. When my parents were alive, I managed to make my "excuses" the truth, if not the whole truth. Many times when I said I was sick, it was anxiety, not the flu, that was the cause of my illness, for example.

I wish each and every one of us safe holidays this year and in all the years to come.