

Halfway There

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Next week, furry rodents will emerge from ceremonial burrows in towns around North America, leading otherwise rational people to made predictions about the severity of the remaining weeks of winter, predictions that several studies by American and Canadian meteorologists agree are correct less than 40% of the time.

Punxsutawney Phil (of Pennsylvania), Sir Walter Wally (of North Carolina) and our own local celebrity, Staten Island Chuck are but three of the groundhogs that will be watched closely in days to come, by people hoping that these small animals will let us off the hook for late-winter snow.

As silly as it is, though, in our modern times, Groundhog Day has ancient roots in the Northern European celebrations of winter's midway point, known in different cultures as Imbolc or the Feast of Brigid, and later taken into Christianity as St. Bridget's Day and Candlemas (in which St. Bridget is replaced with the Virgin Mary, who conveniently replaces so many pagan goddesses in such holidays).

In ancient times, celebrations were closely tied to the Earth and its cycles. Around this time of year in Northern Europe, the ewes begin to lactate and give birth in response to the lengthening days. The Gaelic word "oimelc," meaning "ewe's milk" gave rise to the name Imbolc.

And among the stories associated with Imbolc and the other versions of this holiday is the Celtic story of snakes emerging from the Earth to test the weather. Another comes from Scandinavia, where the story tells about a bear emerging from hibernation and deciding whether to stay awake or go back to sleep. I guess we're lucky that Punxsutawney Phil is a groundhog, and not a snake or a bear.

Celtic peoples celebrate this day as the feast of the goddess Brigid, who brings with her the light of lengthening days. She is associated with the emergence of the first tender shoots of plants and the birth of new livestock—the creativity of spring, and the healing of the Earth. Because of this, she is also seen as connected to human creativity and healing. She is the goddess of poets and blacksmiths and physicians alike.

Psychologist Jonathan Young, who worked with Joseph Campbell, studies the symbols in folktales and mythology and their power to help us focus on psychological and spiritual struggles in our lives. He writes this of the feast of Imbolc:

"The divinity acknowledged in these early Spring rites is the goddess Brigid, the queen of heaven. She is the greatest of the Celtic divinities and is closely associated with the land. She is the protector of the wells and springs. She is the guardian of nature, and therefore agriculture. She is specifically associated with livestock. As a fertility goddess, Brigid is also the patron of the poets, artists, and others who create. Hence, her name is invoked at childbirth.

"When Brigid slipped into the world, a tower of flame rose from the top of her head to the heavens. Her fire aspect means she is the goddess of the hearth, and the forge. She is the guardian of those who worked with metal...." (Young)

He continues, connecting the details of ancient myths to common struggles in the present, using myth and story as archetypes of human life, and the qualities celebrated in Brigid as "symbols of inner mystery."

“The symbolism of wells and springs reflects the connection to the waters of life that emerge from unseen sources. In psychological terms, this could signify the wisdom of the unconscious that flows from mysterious origins. The key is developing a practice of receptivity. For example, contemplating our dreams can open us to an awareness greater than our conscious knowing.

“Brigid’s protection of agriculture and poetry underscores the need to tend our inner fertility. Tending our forms of creativity is crucial to a fulfilling life. The ancients believed that gifts of expression were only on loan. We are reminded to remain grateful, and to be good custodians of artistic talents.

“Her association with fire also pertains to the creative life. Finding passion in our work is a major achievement. Handling our energies well requires maturity. It takes effort to find a balance where we have vitality without being consumed.” (Young)

And thus, the ancient celebration of Imbolc, halfway point in winter, becomes not a silly exercise in watching woodchucks, but rather an opportunity for us to reflect on how we express our creativity, how we open ourselves to the gifts of the world around us, and how we balance our passion with maturity.

These are important spiritual lessons. The cultivation of creativity can get us through the rest of winter. Ancient Celtic people knew this so many years ago, and we can know it today.

As the reading of poetry is a traditional part of the celebration of Imbolc, I thought I would find an appropriate poem to share with you today. For poetry that celebrates the spiritual in nature, one need look no further than Mary Oliver, who wrote this, entitled, “The Winter Wood Arrives.”

*I think
I could have
built a little house
to live in*

*with the single cord--
half seasoned, half not--
trucked into the
driveway and*

*tumbled down. But, instead,
friends came
and together we stacked it
for the long, cold days*

*that are--
maybe the only sure thing in the world--
coming soon.
How to keep warm*

*is always a problem,
isn't it?*

*Of course, there's love.
And there's prayer.*

*I don't belittle them,
and they have warmed me,
but differently,
from the heart outwards.*

*Imagine
what swirls of frost will cling
to the windows, what white lawns
I will look out on*

*as I rise from morning prayers,
as I remember love, that leaves yet never leaves,
as I go out into the yard
and bring the wood in*

*with struggling steps,
with struggling thoughts,
bundle by bundle
to be burned. (Oliver)*

We began this month by letting go of things from the last year. Those of you who were here had the opportunity to write those things on magician's paper and watch them vaporize in a flash of flame.

It is only fitting, then, that as we bring January to a close, our month-long celebration of hope look not to the past, but to the future; not to the dark of winter, but to the warmth of spring; not to the bleakness of our current landscape, but to the colorful carpets of crocuses and bright green tree buds that await us in a few short weeks.

Like harvest festivals, Imbolc is a celebration of gratitude for the bounty of the Earth. The difference here is that the abundance of the harvest is still many months away: Imbolc is, instead, a feast of thanks for what is sure to come, a feast of hope, and of gratitude that winter doesn't last forever.

Today, we light a fire not to destroy the bad of the past, but to create warmth in the present. We celebrate the creative energy of fire—the ability of wood to give us light and heat—that creative energy that exists alongside fire's destructive power.

And as we warm our bodies in the fire's glow, let us ponder the spiritual questions of the season as well.

What is it that keeps you warm? The inner kind of warm, that is. Do you, like Mary Oliver, warm yourself with prayer, or love? Do you have your own ways of stoking the fire within you?

What is it that you are looking forward to?

How will you express your creativity in the days and weeks ahead?

How are you keeping yourself open to the possibilities that await you?

How are you healing the wounds of those things that have hurt you in the past? Are you taking advantage of the healing powers of community, of relationship, of companionship, of love? Have you given your soul, your body, and your heart time to rest and lay dormant before trying to plant new things in it? Are you engaging in your own personal practices of self-care and healing?

And what are you preparing to plant in the softening Earth of your spirit? What spiritual gifts would you like to be harvesting in a few months? How can you prepare yourself and your community so that those gifts will come to fruition?

All of these things are part of the celebration of Imbolc. We can light candles and fires, eat cakes and watch groundhogs, but the real work of this season, as always, is within us.

Joseph Campbell and Jonathan Young write that ancient rituals centered on the cycles and seasons of nature help us focus on different parts of ourselves at different parts of the year, leading to wholeness and inner peace.

At Imbolc, we are given an opportunity to bless the ground from which new life will emerge. We are asked to express gratitude for things we do not yet have. We are encouraged to hope, and then to create.

Let us create together. Blessed be.

Sharing Cakes for the Queen of Heaven

To the Celtic peoples, Brigid was known as the “Queen of Heaven.” As in many pagan traditions, the celebration of this goddess involved a specific feast.

One tradition is that specially-baked cakes are left outside on Imbolc for passers-by and the poor. Perhaps we can honor this tradition by giving to the Food Pantry.

Another is to partake of baked goods and dairy products—symbolic of the stores of flour from last year’s harvest as well as the new milk being produced by the livestock. The feast of Brigid also often involved fermented grains, symbol of ongoing creativity—we’ll skip that part today.

An 18th century Irish text “tells how every farmer’s wife made a special cake, the ale was brought out, the neighbors came round and a festive evening was had by all. Fresh butter was churned and always formed part of the meal; the more wealthy farmers gave gifts of butter to poorer neighbors, along with some roast meat, to celebrate the return of the bringer of bounty.” (The Wheel of the Celtic Year)

Today, I ask you to share in an offering of the modern-day equivalent of cakes and cheese: bagels and cream cheese, of course.

As we pass out our cakes for the queen of heaven, I offer you this traditional prayer:

*Blessed be the earth, and all who dwell upon it.
We give thanks for the season now departing from us,
For the blessings it has bestowed upon us,
And upon those with whom we share this world.*

*Blessed be the new season.
We pray that it will be a time filled with peace,
With abundance, with prosperity,
With wisdom,
With love.*

*Blessed be all who share this feast.
Let us now prepare for the time ahead
By opening our hearts, and our minds, and our spirits.
Blessed be. (World Spirituality)*

In partaking of this morsel of food, may we honor the creativity of our Earth, mother to us all, and to all living beings. May we honor the creativity of the farmer, of the smith, of the laborer, and of the physician, all of whom are celebrated at Imbolc.

And may we hold in our hearts hope for a better future. For as surely as winter passes into spring, warmth and love will come to all of us in time. Blessed be.

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