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Beltane (May Eve)

The Merry Month of May was one of the most joyous times in the ancient calendar. In old England, the whole month was devoted to outdoor celebrations, "May ridings," wearings-of-the-green, and periods of sexual license. It was believed that the green-clad fairies (pagan spirits) ruled the month of May, and in some way helped Mother Earth to clothe herself in green yet one more time, so life could go on for her human and animal children. As for the Vernal Equinox, prepare the Antiphonal Chant:

N: What is this night?

S: It is the night of Beltane.

E: What is the meaning of this night?

w: It is the festival of new growth.

N: What do we honor on this night?

S: We honor the refreshment of the life force, and the ever

renewed beauty of our Earth.

E: After this festival of new growth, what will we do?

w: We will work to bring forth good fruits from our labors.

N: How do we recognize ourselves on this night?

s: We dance with joy. We blossom with the flowers. We call

upon the Maiden who brings new life.

E: Who helps us?

w: Our Goddess helps us.

N: What is our Goddess?

s: She is the sweetness of the rose, the grace of the lily, the

breath of the south wind.

E: Who is our Goddess?

w: She is the Virgin of Light, the Crone of Darkness, the

Mother of Time.

N: Where is our Goddess?

s: She is in our hearts in all seasons of the turning year.

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E: Who is our Goddess?  
w: Behold, she is ourselves.

The primary symbol of Beltane was the Maypole, which Christian authorities condemned as a devilish obscenity, knowing full well that it used to represent a gigantic phallus planted in Mother Earth to fructify her womb. The people loved it and would not give it up. Even in Puritan times, when it was denounced from the pulpit as an abominable idol, the Maypole was still annually set up, decorated with flags and flowers and ribbons, danced around, admired, and worshiped.

A Maypole dance may be the most appropriate traditional Beltane ritual. Its sexual suggestiveness is not out of place even in an all-female group. On the contrary: ancient matrifocal religions were always much concerned with proper sexual relations between the Goddess and her male consort.

Outdoors, almost any tree can serve as a Maypole; or else a real pole can be planted in a hole dug in the ground. Dig deep, and fill in empty space with stones and soil so the pole will stand straight and firm. Indoors, a pillar, hat tree, or piece of lumber will do, if firmly propped in a vertical position. The pole must be free-standing in the center of an open space if there is to be any dancing around it.

The traditional Maypole dance starts with long ribbons attached high up on the pole. Each dancer holds the end of a rib­bon. The circle of dancers begins far out from the pole, so the rib­bons are kept fairly taut. There should be an even number of dancers, facing alternately clockwise and counterclockwise. All dancers move in the direction they are facing, passing right shoul­ders with the first, left shoulders with the next, and so on around (see description under "Dancing," page 56) to braid the ribbons over-and-under around the pole. Those passing on the inside will have to duck. Those passing on the outside raise their ribbons to slide over.

If circumstances make a Maypole dance impossible, then the altar can be decorated with green ribbons laid in circles or penta­cles. At the end, the ribbons may be cut up• and distributed to each participant, who later ties her piece of ribbon around any tree or pole of her choice.

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If there is to be no.Maypole, ceremonial planting of anything is an appropriate Beltane observation, whether it is in an outdoor site or an indoor pot. Any seed, bulb, slip, seedling, or young tree will do. Each group member may participate in the digging, and also take home a pinch of soil to add to a private altar planting.

A spring flower festival used to commemorate the classical drama of the Maiden's blossom-time return from the underworld. In token of this, a women's group might decorate its youngest member with flowers, and greet her as the Maiden under such names as Kore, Flora, Freya, Blodeuwedd, or Persephone. A doll or statue could also serve as an object of decoration.

Special foods might be served, such as candied flower petals, or pomegranates, the traditional womb-symbolic food of Perse-phone's underworld. Participants might also cut out and con­struct artificial flowers of colored paper, felt, or cloth. Other good things to share around the May circle are: flowery incense, per­fumes, sachets of dried flower petals, artificial flowers of silk or beads, flower-decorated notecards, green herbs, May wine, and rosebuds.