

THE WHEEL OF THE YEAR

To celebrate the Earth's yearly solar cycle, is to take part in an ancient tradition that has been handed down to us since before Celtic times. The old Celtic festivals fall at eight points during the solar year, and is a means by which we can connect to the Earth's passing seasons and acknowledge the way this resonates within ourselves, as part of the natural world.

I use the word 'Celtic' as a term which recognises this as a cultural lineage in the lands of England, Wales, Scotland and Ireland, as well as all over Northern and Western Europe. Many of their traditions have been lost, destroyed by the christian church which sought to establish a new patriarchal god, and destroy the worship of pagan gods and goddesses. Much can be rediscovered through folk customs, legends and folktales. Much has been kept alive through pagan tradition, druidic and bardic lore and pictish and celtic art. The christian calendar, on close examination, overlaid its own festivals to fall at the same time as the Celtic ones, but with a subtle difference of perspective. This was necessary, as part of the conversion process, which changed the whole spiritual experience of the people of these lands. The church also taught us to view spirit and matter as separate realms, and to fear the inner worlds, our intuition and the dark. This is so deeply entrenched, that even those without any religious belief are deeply influenced by it. We also feel ourselves to be separate from and superior to the rest of nature, and that men are superior to women. This fragmented state has brought great damage to the Earth's environment and to ourselves.

In order to change this perspective, there is a need to see ourselves and our relationship to the Earth, the Moon, the Sun and each other with new eyes. We need to re-learn what we have forgotten and re-find connections long buried or suppressed. We have been conditioned for so long to only use our logical intellectual minds, it is important that we begin to become aware of, and listen to our intuitive side. It is our conferred power and inherited right and without this balance we are incomplete as human beings.

Following the Wheel of the Year and the Earth festivals has no hierarchy of spiritual authority. We are each able to follow our own path, to break free of outworn attitudes, damaging dogma and concepts, and to transform and change as we listen to our inner voice and seek our higher visions. They helps us to learn to be part of the natural world again and feel ourselves to be part of creation and not somehow fragmented and separated. Everyone and everything is sacred. Every thing is connected. Every thought, and everything we say or do creates a resonance and a reaction within us and all around us. We do nothing in isolation.

Celebrating the Earth festivals brings a structure to our lives by consciously making a connection to the passage of time and our path within it. They help us to remember to

honour and celebrate the Earth and her seasons, ourselves and each other, our achievements as well as our losses. We can come together as a community, to share food and drink, to dance, sing, reflect and share our experiences and understanding .Or we can use this time to be on our own, to spend some time in sacred space or set off on a pilgrimage, to reflect and explore our relationship with the Earth and our evolving inner understanding. It is a gift we can give ourselves every 6 weeks, which helps us to become a more stable, balanced and connected person.

Each festival is celebrated with a different focus according to the prevailing season and the season yet to come. But celebrating the Wheel of the Year is not just a matter of changing from one season to the next. Beneath the manifestation of seasonal change, there is also change within the subtle energies of the Earth. These energy patterns affect us all (consciously or unconsciously) so that by understanding the flow and direction of this energy, we can move with it, as true inhabitants of our planet Earth: belonging, part of and flowing with it on all levels of our being.

The Eightfold sub-division of the year is marked by the four fixed points in the year forming a cross. These are called the Quarter Points and are the Winter Solstice (20th - 23rd December), the shortest day and the longest night; Summer Solstice (20th-23rd June) the longest day and shortest night; the Spring Equinox (20th - 23rd March), and the Autumn Equinox (20th - 23rd September) both of which are when day and night are of equal length. These are fixed points in the year, the exact day and time each year can be found in the EARTH PATHWAYS DIARY

These Four Quarter Points are then crossed again by what are known as the Cross Quarter Festivals. These are the four great fire festivals of our Celtic past. They fall at the seasonal peaks and are used to celebrate and participate with the power of nature. They are the point at which we can connect with the developing energy of the new season ahead.

Imbolc or Imolg is celebrated at the end of January/beginning of February, when winter has reached its peak and the first signs of spring are showing themselves. Beltain is celebrated at the end of April/beginning of May when spring has reached its peak and summer is becoming apparent. Lamma or Lughnasad is celebrated at the end of July/beginning of August, when summer has reached its peak and the first signs of autumn are showing. Finally Samhain, is celebrated at the end of October/beginning of November, when autumn has reached its peak, and winter is beginning to feel that it has arrived.

THE QUARTER POINTS

THE SOLSTICES

The great cosmic clock of the waxing and waning cycle of the Sun reaches it's peaks at each of the Solstices. Solstice means 'the standing of the Sun' (Latin). From Winter

Solstice to Summer Solstice, the Sun's influence is waxing, reaching its peak at the Summer Solstice, the longest day and shortest night. From Summer Solstice to Winter Solstice, the Sun's influence is waning and the darkness reaches its peak at the shortest day and longest night of the Winter Solstice.

The Solstices then are a time to stop, and to look back on where the half-yearly cycle has brought you, and a chance to look forward and see the direction in which the next half-yearly cycle may lead you; a moment to be conscious of your life's flow and direction; a time to express your hopes and fears, your intentions; to assimilate your learnings and celebrate your achievements; a time to celebrate the light; a time to celebrate the dark; a moment to be conscious of the way this waxing and waning of the Sun affects our lives, and to celebrate this influence and what it means to us.

When the light is increasing from Winter Solstice to Summer Solstice, all beings are influenced by the increase in light, expressing their own identity and uniqueness, expanding outwards into the material world, becoming more individual and independent. But as the light is decreasing from Summer Solstice to Winter Solstice, nature and life as a whole is expanding inwards, reflecting, becoming more intuitive, tapping into their inner wisdom.

THE EQUINOXES

At the Spring and Autumn Equinoxes, day and night are of equal length all over the world. The focus here is the balance of light and dark, the outer world is balanced by the inner world. Both are equal.

The Equinoxes fall at the beginning of the seasonal changes: spring with its promise of summer, and autumn with its promise of winter. The new season will affect all of life and bring changes within as well as without, as well as releasing new energy patterns. Times of transition are often chaotic and stressful, but out of this chaos, new ways, new ideas and new directions can manifest. The Equinoxes are a time to take action, transform, release the past, and move forwards. Use these points as a focus for the direction you wish to go in. This means you will meet the new energy poised and prepared.

THE CROSS QUARTER POINTS

The Quarter Points of the Winter and Summer Solstices, and the Spring and Autumn Equinoxes, are then crossed again by the Cross Quarter Points, known in the past as the Four Great Fire Festivals. These may have been celebrated in the past by lighting big fires on the hilltops, uniting communities by a common bond of celebration. These four Cross Quarter festivals fall at the seasonal peaks, at the point when the season is about to change into the next, and this is the best time to use this developing energy. Because of this, their application during the year's cycle is of deepest and significant importance to us if we wish to work with the Earth's energies, and participate in a process of positive change both for ourselves and the Earth.

Each of the Cross Quarter festivals offers a unique opportunity for us to celebrate and

be aware of the developing energy and what this could mean for us; to bring about manifestation through the power of our deepest wishes and positive intent.

IMBOLC is at the end of January/beginning of February. Winter is at its peak, but the days are lengthening slightly, and the first signs of spring are apparent. The active phase of life is beginning as the Sun's power returns. Our intuitive receptive energy is strong at this time and it is the right time to bring out what has been assimilated and understood on the inner levels during the winter months. It is a time for new beginnings, emerging ideas and the outer growth of personal seeds from their incubation period within.

BELTAIN is at the end of April/beginning of May. Spring is at its peak, the days are getting longer and warmer, and the first signs of summer are establishing themselves. The Earth's energies are at their most active now and brings an increase in manifestation and fertility. This is time when the life force at its most potent and powerful, and the right time to use this expansive energy to its fullest potential.

LAMMAS is at the end of July/beginning of August. Summer is at its peak, but the days are beginning to shorten slightly and the first of the harvest, the grain, is being gathered in. Here we can begin to assimilate and gather in our own personal harvest, the manifestation of our heart's desires, and the fruits of our active labour. It is a time to take a reflective look at ourselves and return to the spiritual inner world for deeper understanding of our actions.

SAMHAIN is at the end of October/beginning of November. Autumn has reached its peak now, the harvest is all gathered in. The days are getting shorter and winter is almost upon us. We return once again to the reflective spiritual realms inside ourselves, for regeneration of the Spirit, rest, and contact with our inner wisdom.

Each of these Cross Quarter festivals is influenced by one of the four elements through the four fixed astrological signs. The fixed signs are very energetic. Their energy endures, and they propel projects to completion. Imbolc falls in the middle of Aquarius, an Air sign; Beltain falls in the middle of Taurus, an Earth sign; Lammas falls in the middle of Leo, a Fire sign; and Samhain falls in the middle of Scorpio, a Water sign.

There are some who like to fix these Cross Quarter festivals by dates on the calendar: Imbolc eve on 2nd February, Beltain eve on 30th April, Lammas eve on 2nd August, and Samhain eve on October 31st. Others prefer to look at the position of the Moon and any other astrological information, and choose a time when these and other influences are at their most potent.

Each year the weather is different and the seasonal shifts are a subtle reflection of this. I like to put aside some time when the moment feels right for me. This is spontaneous thing! I walk the land, sit with trees, collect herbs, muse, write and experience the moment.

Celebrating the Cross Quarter Points may go on for several days. It is entirely up to you. There is no one telling you what to do or how to do it, just your own intuition and and desire to align your life's journey closer to the Earth.

Extract from Sacred Earth Celebrations by Glennie Kindred

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