

**MAY DAY HISTORY, TRADITIONS, & CELEBRATIONS!**

***Mixing Cultures & Making Choices***

One of the things I love most about being a citizen of the United States is that we are all mutts! Almost all of us are mixtures in our heritage by culture, nationality, language grouping, racial and ethnic origins. We also mix our interests. Some of us are scientists, some engineers, others are artists, some musicians, some teachers, some preachers, some retailers, some run equipment or work in factories, or work on yards or building things. None of us are the same, we each have different backgrounds, interests, skills, talents, and abilities! Together we comprise an amazing array of people, and that's without even considering the dogs and cats and other critters that we chose to be our companions!

May Day holds the kind of choices for celebrations that fits well this aggregated national reality, as well as our Unitarian Universalist penchant for celebrating holidays from many traditions. On one side there are the various Anglo-Saxon celebrations of the warming weather that came with what was once claimed as the start of summer, celebrations of fertility, love, and of course, the May Pole dances. On the other side, in more recent times, the organized labor remembrances of the Haymarket Riots in Chicago in May 1886 after the Federation of Organized Trades and Labor Unions began a strike for the 8-hour day. Violence broke out again after striking workers met near the McCormick Harvesting Machine Company, where organized workers had been locked out since early February. Police had fired at workers who were confronting strikebreakers on May 3<sup>rd</sup>, and a bomb was thrown at Police in the Riot on May 4<sup>th</sup>. The violence took the lives of several police and workers. Because of the deaths of police, organized labor came under attack, and seven workers described as anarchists were sentenced to death on little evidence, four were hanged, one committed suicide and two others later had their sentences commuted and then were pardoned. Labor, anarchists, and socialists were blamed but some suspected that agents of Pinkerton may actually have been responsible for the bomb. May Day became an important international day for marches and demonstrations for workers rights and is still recognized around the world.

Here in Stockton and elsewhere, Cinco de Mayo is also being recognized today so that festivities may be conducted on the weekend. Cinco de Mayo is the commemoration of the surprising victory of the Mexican Army over French forces at the Battle of Puebla on May 5, 1862. That battle began the eventual withdrawal of the French from Mexico, and likely helped to keep France from backing the Confederacy in our Civil War. Cinco de Mayo was at first more significant in California than in Mexico, but is now celebrated as a school holiday. It serves as an opportunity to highlight Mexican culture and is widely celebrated in Mexico and the United States.

The last of the major traditions celebrated around May Day is akin to the first. The ancient festival of Beltane, also connected with May Eve and Valpurgis, is celebrated April 30 and May 1<sup>st</sup>. Beginning at moonrise, it marks the beginning of the third quarter of the ancient Celtic year. Rituals are held to promote fertility and protect cattle from illness. Druids would light Beltane fires with special incantations. This is a holiday of union between the Goddess and the God and between man and woman. Handfastings are traditionally celebrated at this time. Flowers and greenery symbolize the Goddess while the Maypole symbolizes the God. The May Queen and King may be chosen from the youth and dancing and celebrations fill May Day.

And so, we have choices! We can dance and celebrate the season, or a surprising victory, or demonstrate for organized labor! In Russia, what had been a day for celebrating labor and holding political rallies and parades was transformed in 1991 into a somewhat less political holiday for Spring and Labor, perhaps combining several influences. I remember Maypole celebrations when I was a child, but had not been very aware of the labor issues and the Haymarket Riots even growing up around Chicago. For many in the U.S., it seems that May Day is just another day. Whether we celebrate the season or labor issues or Cinco de Mayo or Beltain, is entirely up to each of us, but I like having choices for the day that are meaningful!

Variety and choices are things that most humans throughout history have had to a far lesser extent than what we in the United States have enjoyed for most of our lifetimes. Like anything else, people here take our choices and variety for granted, but even compared with much of Europe, we enjoy a far greater variety by every measure along with the freedom to choose what we do, where we go, and what we

buy. We have become so accustomed to having whatever we want whenever we want it that we rarely stop to think about how amazing a country we live in, but for a few matters it is paradise in comparison with almost everywhere else in any time.

There are a few matters worth pondering that we don't have. We don't have healthcare for all, and we don't have complete equality between sexes or races. We also have failed to consistently protect the rights of those who are gender non-conforming, gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender. We have come so far and then seemingly been distracted by all the pretty things we can have. Our voting percentages are lower than those in far newer democracies and republics. We rarely demand substance from our political candidates, who delight in photo-ops and sound bites requiring little thought or effort. This year's Presidential Campaign has become the meanest I can remember, filled on one side with racism, sexism, heterosexism, anti-unionism and a contest to see who can promise the worst treatment for immigrants. Along the way, our society has revealed its ugly shadow side of still pervasive racism, sexism, xenophobia, and homophobia. I am glad that I have not traveled outside the US lately, for I could hardly defend the behavior of congress or several candidates for the presidency of this nation I love.

Immigrants from many cultures have struggled to find their place in American society, as various waves of immigrants came from Ireland, Italy, Germany, China and Japan, the middle east, Vietnam, Laos, and other places. We have been the greatest melting pot of cultures ever recorded in history, but now again many are trying to shut the door to Mexicans and others who are looking for a better life and the American dream. And of course, the indigenous peoples of America were long ago attacked, rounded up and marched onto reservations so the good Christian white folk could have the land, the forests, the waters, and the oil. And black slaves were captured and brought from Africa to work the fields in the south. The official histories are much cleaner than the realities of the development of America. But of course, the holocaust of women in Europe and America in the middle ages and beyond likely matches in numbers the holocaust of Jews killed by Hitler and the Nazis in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century.

Humanity has accomplished much, but has also incurred a terrible loss of life. We have choices, far more choices than did the people of other lands, cultures, and times. It is the best of times for many of us even while it is the worst of times for so

many others in this country and around the world. We can dance around the Maypole or we can stand up for justice for workers, we can enjoy the gifts of the Goddess, or we can work to make a difference, and we may even be able to do all those things if we have the energy! I would not want to live in the theocracy that some candidates seek, nor in the racially and sexually divided land that another promotes. There are a couple candidates I could live with, but will they be able to accomplish anything if the other party continues its obstructionist policy? I hope that people will choose wisely in this election cycle, for I fear the divisions that may come from some choices will lead us to a very dark place.

Choices make a huge difference. Not all choices are equal. Sometimes there isn't a perfect choice. Sometimes it seems like all the major party choices are bad, but there are differences. In our current two-party system, it is rarely possible for any minor party candidate to really make a difference other than occasionally as a spoiler. With all the stuff that we have, many of us are just too comfortable to demand the changes that would create a more equitable society. Why should we worry about the homeless, the unemployed, the impoverished, or the mentally ill? Politicians keep telling us it is their own fault, that we don't need to worry about those people, that we just need to cut taxes on the wealthy and corporations and the good stuff will trickle down to those who work. So many lies told so often, it is tempting to actually believe them. And if many of the people on the streets had the same choices as we do, there might be more truth in them. But we know that the array of choices we each have enjoyed are very different than the ones available to the poor, to undocumented persons, to those who have not succeeded in the educational system, those who have not come from stable families. To have real choices is everything, but to not have the right possibilities of choice leads millions of people down far more difficult paths in their life journeys.

I grew up believing that I could be anything I wanted to be, anything I was willing to work to become. How many families living in poverty can really help their children believe that? How many people living on the streets can see a way forward to a better life? How many women whose choices over their own bodies may be taken away will be able to succeed in a world still dominated by men? The freedom to choose is only meaningful when the array of choices has depth and breadth. Why shouldn't everyone have the right to free public schooling up to at least the Bachelor's Level or equivalent technical or skill training? Why shouldn't everyone

have free health care? What justification can there be to have such low corporate taxes and income taxes on the wealthy, and to still allow corporations and the wealthy to dodge most of those? Why do we allow so much to be spent on the military and so little on people? A little democratic socialism could make a world of difference if only the lies and obstruction could be ended? Will we ever learn? So many pretty things, let's just do a little shopping and not worry our little heads!

The holidays we choose, the pathways we follow, the journeys that we make in our lives make all the difference! We can live out our lives being comfortable, ignoring the dangers to others and to our planet, we can rest knowing that we have done a lot, or we can get back to work to save our nation and the world from all the dangers it currently faces. Many of us aren't young and energetic any more, many of us have already fought many battles for civil rights, peace and justice, and a healthy environment. But there is still so much to do and it is so easy to get distracted, to just be comfortable, to hope that others will do the work. If not us, who, if not now, when? There are still choices to make, work to do, and the future is still in our hands! May we rise up to make a difference!

Shalom, Salaam, Blessed Be, Namaste, and Amen!