

"Imbolc - In the Belly," Kwame James  
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Imbolc - a pagan feast day midway between winter solstice and spring equinox. Gaelic for "in the belly," referring to the pregnant sheep that begin to appear around this time of year, a signal of the coming of spring and the new year.

I say it's a pagan feast day. What does "pagan" mean? Different things to different people, no doubt.

For me, the term refers, roughly to the conglomeration of all the various traditions and ways of life, philosophies and cosmologies that were overrun by the advance of the so-called "Holy Roman Empire" as it did its thing from the mediterranean on up to the north of Europe. (If there are historians in the room, please forgive the breadth of my brush -- I'm trying to keep it brief.)

Though the christian usage of the word to describe (and perhaps to deride) those individuals and communities which continued to subscribe to beliefs that were older than, or otherwise beyond the pale of, the Catholic church, the Latin word "paganus" was used to mean, essentially, a hick. It was also used as military jargon to mean a civilian or, sometimes, an ineffective soldier. So a good christian was a miles christi, or "christian soldier," and those who were not were called pagans. Either or both of these earlier senses of the term seem to be at the root of the historical christian use of the term.

But it was that historical sense popularized and transmitted to us through the ages by christian culture that is at the core, I think, of the way the meaning typically shakes down in modern english. Pagan is basically equivalent to heathen, which is basically a simple way of saying, "those icky other folks that aren't like us and range in their appeal from 'kinda-sketchy' to 'watch-your-back-they-might-eat-your-babies'".

This is problematic because the word "pagan" then, as it has come down to us through the ages, refers to an array of different kinds of people. So before I pose the question of what all these different folks might have in common, I think it's important to point out that the relationship between all these different people and groups of people is based on the fact that they have been defined as non-christian by a christian social order. To put it another way, the main thing that pagans have in common with each other is that a particular politically powerful community has seen and treated them as barbarians for about a millenium and a half.

But beyond that, are there any unifying themes—or commonalities at least—among the so-called "pagans"? Perhaps. My sense is that the usual image that comes to mind when we mention "pagans" is of people for whom nature is sacred—but not just the "Every time I'm in the woods, I feel like I'm in church" kind of sacred. Pagans, we imagine, experience nature's sanctity in a ritual and ceremonial way. We imagine long traditions of practice—traditions that may go back even further than our records of them. We may expect that pagans attach some significance to astronomical, or even astrological, signs and symbols.

By now some of us might be asking, "Why not just see what Webster's Dictionary has to say about it, instead of all this circumspection and 'imagining'?" My short answer is that no one else does—at least not typically. When people talk about pagans (or anything else, for that matter) they don't consult a set of common standard definitions for the words they want to use then shape their thoughts accordingly. In fact, the reality is just the opposite; the "standard" definitions are the result of lexicographical specialists taking a look at the uses to which words are put and examining them to understand the meanings that the people using the words are trying to convey.

So to understand what the word pagan means, what it really refers to, we do well to attempt to understand it in the context of its actual use—or I could say contexts (plural). In our attempt to understand the word, we'll be closer to the source of its meaning if we forego the learned commentary and just deal with the thing itself.

(You may be beginning to sense a little irony.)

"So what's up with all the 'learned commentary,' Kwame? Aren't you a pagan, doing your Imbolc service or rites or seance or whatever the pagan word for it is? Why are we having this baroque, pedantic discussion of the meaning of the word when we could just see it for ourselves? Light a candle; cast a circle; wave your wand around or something! Let's get to it! I could see what pagan is for myself if you would show me some paganism already!"

Well... we'll come back to that.

Now I wanna talk about the womb. You remember that Imbolc (sorta) means "in the belly." I don't really have a womb, exactly, but I think they're pretty cool. I was inside one once. It was actually pretty warm, as I recall. I'm just kidding; I don't recall. I've heard stories though.

One of these stories is about people going back into the womb to reacquaint themselves with the deep nurturing of the mother—the grandmother, actually. They go in together and sing songs, offer prayers, experiencing a kind of reset or reinvention before reemerging back into life with a fresh perspective—born again, if you will.

This is the story of the sweatlodge of the First Nations—those who kept the land here, and were kept by the land here, before the European invasion. Or it's a sweatlodge story, I should say, because it varies a little bit depending on which group's tradition we're dealing with.

And this isn't even the story, really; it's more like the setup for the story. The story itself, you might say, is different for each person who enters the lodge. It's a personal story. It might even be said to be a different story every time one does a sweat.

This is important because these people were pagan too. At least they were classed as such by the christian "settlers" (which is our polite word for "invaders") who brought their culturally egocentric perspective to their new relationships in this land which has come to be called America.

Please understand that I don't mean that term, "egocentric," as an insult or condemnation of any sort. I use it because of its descriptiveness. It's egocentricism that is satisfied to define everyone who's not "us" as "them" and leave it at that. The Native people were hung with the same label as the Celts or Goths or whoever else the European Christians ran into in their political and cultural expansion across the centuries and across the globe. But this egocentric view is probably one of the more fundamental attitudes that human cultures assume all over the world. You know: "There's us; and there's them over there on the east, them down south, and them in the west, too. But they're all 'them.'"

If the indigenous tribes had cultivated an appreciation of their neighboring tribes as unique entities, it may only be because they had generations of interaction in which to learn to see and appreciate the things that made each different group unique from the others. But if the capacity for this kind of egocentricism exists in all people, in the time of the European influx, the newcomers did the best job of exhibiting that particular value in their relations with the various groups of the locals.

How many times, when thinking of the panoply of human values, does "egocentric" find its way into the mix? It fits though, if you ask me. You may want to know then, what is its value? What do we get out of being egocentric?

A number of things, I'd say; but particularly significant in this context, we get an expectation of commonality—among all of "them," at least. By the mere fact that we have created the categories "us" and "them," we set up the expectation that we will find in each class certain defining characteristics. We may not even know what any of those characteristics are when we first create the classes. But because there are these classes, now it becomes important to distinguish whether this person or that person belongs in the "us" class or the "them" class. So we look for ways to identify the class that a given person belongs to. It becomes important.

And I won't go into all the mechanics of how our definitions of these classes get built up over time and over drinks. Suffice it to say that it happens that eventually we come to a point of having a whole lot of characteristics that we expect members of each class to exhibit. So as soon as we see enough of a person to identify their class—"Oh, that's one of them from over there"—then we know everything we need to know about them.

They're not even here yet, but we see them come from over that hill, so they must be like that one I heard about before who would talk to spirits in the woods and turn into animals and put curses on people and the orgies! Oh, my god! I wasn't there, but I heard about how they do it (outside), and it is truly disgusting! We certainly don't want any of that around here, corrupting our pure-hearted young ones who wouldn't know what to do with a... Oh! Here he comes. "Hey, howdy, stranger. GET 'EM, BOYS!"

So we expect "them" to be all alike. Just like we expect "us" to be all alike. The trouble, of course, is that a lot of our expectations about what's supposed to be are, like, totally off base.

But strangely enough, some of that expectation of commonality manages to find itself some real, live, honest-to-goodness tendencies and trends to latch onto. We talked

before about expecting them pagans to have a certain reverence for nature, and the cultures who were saddled with that label, often enough, did become known by their christian foils for exhibiting some various kinds of cultural institutions that help to fortify this appreciation of the natural life. Everything from listening for and interpreting the wind to making medicine from plants and fungi to celebrating the turns of wheel of the year—the cycle of seasons—which is, in fact, an astronomical phenomenon, and considered as such, as evidenced by the fact that the annual cycle is explicitly linked to the movements of the sun and the moon; the observation of planets and constellations and the relevance of their movement in relation to all of us here walking the earth, or our movement in relation to them; all these considerations, which were widely present in the songs and in the ceremonies and the mores of so many of the people who were called "pagans," go toward building a deep understanding of cosmic community. It's all here with us, working together in every possible way.

Ego wants to say, "We're here, and then there's all the rest of it." Ego extracts itself from the creation. Maybe it feels like it was "kicked out" of the natural communion that everything else partakes of and has to fight for a stake in a world that it considers to be foreign to itself. Or maybe it's searching for an escape.

Pagans, on the whole, had ways of looking at the natural process of life and seeing cues to live in a deeper harmony, so that all of life becomes a ceremony.

But the trip of it is that this same appreciation for the cosmic community and our place in it exists and persists, even through the generations of an egocentric christian cultural diaspora. Certainly there was the continuance of the old practices of the many pagan peoples who were christianized due to the play of political forces. At least one pope was pretty explicit with his priests about letting these new recruits keep their festivals and what not, as necessary, "... just give 'em the right interpretation." (I paraphrase.)

But the real gem of understanding here is that even in all this commonality that—surprise, surprise—wasn't absolutely entirely made up, the exquisite uniqueness of each individual culture, each tribe, each individual, is woven into a tapestry of relationships that gives each of us an opportunity to understand ourselves with respect to everyone else. Whether we flow together or pull against each other, whether we feel our colors compliment the ones around us or are just gaudily out of place, we each have an individual, unique, perfectly designed function in the fabric of this universe.

So what does any of this have to do with Groundhog's Day? Imbolc! (My bad.)

Only this: We are in the belly of winter, but are RIGHT NOW preparing to pass out into a new life. A new turn around the wheel of the year. With this and every spring comes another chance for you to be born into your own personal, magnificent uniqueness. A new chance for Harbor UU to be born again into a beautiful new life of perfect service to all its relations.

We are one cloth; it is not cut.