

Lughnasadh Reflection

by Bonnie Ginger

Why are we as Unitarian Universalist gathering here today to celebrate an ancient Pagan holiday? We are here to give thanks for the fruitfulness of the Earth at this time of year. We are here to give praise to that which sustains us. We are here to share in community together the joy of the first harvest. We as UU's proclaim not only to accept various beliefs within our congregations but to celebrate them.

For it is our diversity and that makes us different and I would guess that is why we are all here. For me personally, finding a religious community that allowed me to explore my own spiritual path, which eventually led to Wicca and earth based practice and ultimately to share that path with those in my religious community was one of the most important moments in my life. Because I truly believe that by sharing our most sacred beliefs with one another we grow as individuals and as a religious community Lughnasadh is the 4th in a series of cross quarter holiday celebrations we have acknowledged here, beginning with Samhain in October where we honored the transformation of the natural world to its dormant time and the death of our own loved ones; Imbolc in February, with the coming of the perceived light and the early beginnings of the natural worlds awakenings, the birthing of lambs; then Beltane in May, where we sang and danced and reveled in the true return of spring.

Some here thought that Beltane was a fun celebration without a hint of worship, while others found it very meaningful. Are these wheel of the year services just fun celebrations or are they worship? For those who practice Wicca, neo-paganism, or other earth based faith, joyful celebration of the years turning is worship in its most basic form, as reverence for that which is deemed sacred, the earth and her natural cycles and how we as humans can use those cycles to reflect and inform our own lives.

The turning of the year, the natural cycles of the earth, the patterns of light and dark and back to light again, the great fecundity of our

natural world giving life displayed in the full richness of earth's bounty, and the inevitable turning to death, but with the promise of new life is what we acknowledge, praise and honor.

We learn from the wheel forever turning, turning. The wheel of the year is literal in that we watch the cycles of the natural world and know that without it we cannot live and it is also a metaphor for our own inner life. It helps us to remember there is a time to rest, a time to be in the world, a time to think, ponder and dream, a time to produce, a time to go inside our inner most being and reflect, a time to burst forth with creativity.

The cycles of the Earth tells us there is a season, a time for everything. We are at the midpoint of the warm half of the year. So today we gather to celebrate Lughnasadh, an agrarian feast acknowledging the first harvest, the ripening of the first fruits, and the baking of bread from the new grain.

Lughnasadh takes its name from the Irish sun god Lugh, one of the chief gods of the Tuatha de Danaan. He was patron of arts, crafts, and magic, considered the god of all skills. He was a poet, harpist, warrior and physician, able in smithing and metal working. In Celtic mythology it is said that Lugh initiated the festival to commemorate his foster mother, Tailtiu, who died from exhaustion after clearing a great forest so that the land could be cultivated. Her name comes from the old Celtic meaning, "The Great One of the Earth" suggesting she may be the personification of the land itself as were many Celtic goddesses. At her death-bed she asked that funeral games be held in her honor. The festival evolved into great tribal assembly, where agreements were made, political problems discussed and huge sporting events and races were held much like our modern day Olympics. Artists and entertainers displayed their talents, traders came from far and wide to sell food, farm animals, fine crafts and clothing, and there was much storytelling, music, and high-spirited revelry. Over the years the grandeur of the festival dwindled but it is still celebrated with much revelry on a smaller scale in some rural areas of the British Isles Later the festival was Christianized and called Lammass after the Anglo Saxon hlaf-mas,

"hlaf," meaning "loaf" and "maesse," meaning feast and became known as "Loaf-Mass," The sacred grain, a central symbol of this time, was harvested, milled and baked with reverent consciousness of the earth that provides our nourishment, into bread and presented at Mass for blessing. A book of Anglo-Saxon charms advised to divide the blessed bread into four pieces and crumble it into the corners of the barn to make it safe for storing the grain that was being harvested.

In rural areas, Lammas was often remembered as "Bilberry Sunday," for this was the day to climb the nearest "Lughnasadh Hill", hilltops were considered the center of the world where heaven and earth meet, where humans can encounter the divine, climbing to the top they would gather the earth's freely-given gifts of the little blue berries, which they might wear as special garlands or gather in baskets to take home for jam.

Dr. Keith Heidorn tells us that one traditional Lammas custom was the construction of the corn dolls. Corn dolls represent the harvest spirit.

The doll would be saved until Spring, when it was plowed into the field to consecrate the new planting and insure a good harvest. In other traditions, the corn dolly was fed and watered throughout the Winter, then burned in the fires at Beltane to insure a continuation of good growth. This mixing of pagan and Christian rites persists in the parts of the British Isles to this very day.

This is also the time of year to honor our skills and bless the tools we use in our work. As the grain is cut or sacrificed to make our bread, it is time for us to sacrifice bad habits and unwanted things in our personal lives, and to think about what we want to harvest in our own lives.

Lughnasadh is high summer but what is it about the light in late afternoon, do you notice it changing? Is it fading earlier each day, observe how its angle is changing and shadows are growing. Fall lingers closely by. But for now it is warm and we can revel in the

fruits of our labors in the gardens we planted, (and replanted) or enjoy the harvests of our local farms, smell the fresh hay (if it ever dries out), soon eat the vine-ripened tomato (it will happen), savor our freshly baked bread, and finally enjoy the lovely, local blueberries. Remember to relish all this with intention and reverence for it is Earth's sacred gift.