

**“May Day! May Day!”
The Unitarian Church of Lincoln
May 1, 2016**

“Spring is nature’s way of saying, “Let’s party!”
Robin Williams

Gathering of the Community

Ring of Bell

Welcome and Announcements

Prelude: Sonata, Op. 109 - Ludwig Van Beethoven
I. Vivace, played by Rebecca Seth

Stating Intent

Chalice Lighting: by G. Woods
read by Jamie Radcliffe

Opening words: by Jane Rzepka
read by Gretchen Woods

Hymn: #1072 “Evening Breeze”

Time for all ages

Story

Children’s Song: #402 “From You I Receive”

Deepening

Reading: “May Day: a cornucopia of holidays”
by Schmuell Ross

Musical Interlude: Sonata, opus 109 – LVB
III. Andante (Theme)

Sermon: “May Day! May Day!”

Offering and Offertory: Sonata, opus 109 – LVB
III. Andante (Var. 1-4)

Returning to Community: the work of the people
Sharing of Joys and Sorrows

Meditation

Integration and Release

Closing Hymn: #1068 “Rising Green”

Closing Words: “In Time of Silver Rain” by
Langston Hughes

Postlude: Sonata, opus 109 – LVB
II. Prestissimo

Stating Intent

Chalice Lighting: by G. Woods

On this fire holiday, May Day, we kindle a flame of
Celebration, for the return of spring,
Expectation, for the possibilities within our world,
Introspection, for the plight of those oppressed,
Action, to transform our selves and our world,
Into a place with greater justice and more peace.
May we burn with willingness to dare, to risk,
for that better place,
A place of light and love for all.

Opening words: by Jane Rzepka

O Spirit of Life and Renewal,
We have withered enough, mourned enough,
oppressed ourselves enough.
Our souls are too long cold and buried,
our dreams all but forgotten, our hopes unheard.
We are waiting to rise from the dead.

In this, the season of steady rebirth, we awaken to the power so abundant, so holy, that returns each year through earth and sky.

We will find our hearts again, and our good spirits.

We will love, and believe, and give and wonder,
and feel again the eternal powers.

The flow of life moves ever onward
through one faithful spring, and another,
and now another.

May we be forever grateful.

Alleluia.

Amen.

Hymn: #1072 “Evening Breeze”

Time for all ages

Story

Children’s Song: #402 “From You I Receive”

Deepening

Reading: “May Day: a cornucopia of holidays”

by Schmuell Ross

May 1st, often called **May Day**, just might have more holidays than any other day of the year. It's a celebration of Spring. It's a day of political protests. It's a neopagan festival, a saint's feast day, and a day for organized labor. In many countries, it is a national holiday.

Beltane was a Celtic calendar feast ushering in the start of summer. (It also went by a variety of other spellings and names in assorted dialects of Gaelic.). . .

In recent years, Beltaine has been adopted or revived by neopagan groups as a major seasonal festival. . .

Some cultures, such as those found in India and Egypt, had spring fertility festivals. The Roman festival celebrating

[Flora](#), goddess of fertility, flowers, and spring, was celebrated from April 28 through May 3. . .

In many countries, May Day is also Labor Day. This originates with the United States labor movement in the late 19th Century. On May 1, 1886, unions across the country went on strike, demanding that the standard workday be shortened to eight hours. The organizers of these strikes included socialists, anarchists, and others in organized labor movements. . . Labor Day is still celebrated on May 1 in countries around the world, and it is still often a day for protests and rallies. In recent years, these have often been targeted against globalization.

Various authorities have tried to ban or undermine May Day, particularly the communist observances during the Cold War. In 1955, [Pope Pius XII](#) designated May 1 as a feast day of [St. Joseph the Worker](#). In 1958, [President Eisenhower](#) designated May 1 as both Law Day and Loyalty Day. Each of these were specifically aimed at replacing the communist holiday with a religious or patriotic one.

As noted, **May 1st**, often called **May Day**, just might have more holidays than any other day of the year!

Musical Interlude:

Sermon: “May Day! May Day!”

Here we are, on May Day – and the day of the Lincoln Marathon – trying to make sense of this potpourri of things to celebrate, venerate, and, maybe, just perseverate. I know that Seattle is bracing for the onslaught of the Eugene, OR

anarchists, who will break the windows of the downtown stores, especially the big stores, as a protest against capitalism and, more generally, because they like to break things. I've not found them particularly interested in creating things as an alternative, but that's just my take on it.

But general riot on this spring day is not new. Let us begin with Beltane, generally celebrated from April 30 – May

1. It is associated with flowers, ribbons, and a priapic maypole. In ancient Celtic tradition, according to White Goddess/Stonewylde (web site):

This festival is also known as Beltane, the Celtic May Day. It officially begins at moonrise on [May Day Eve](#), and marks the beginning of the third quarter or second half of the ancient Celtic year. It is celebrated as an early pastoral festival accompanying the first turning of the herds out to wild pasture. The rituals were held to promote fertility. The cattle were driven between the Belfires to protect them from ills. Contact with the fire was interpreted as symbolic contact with the sun. In early Celtic times, the druids kindled the Beltane fires with specific incantations. Later the Christian church took over the Beltane

observances, a service was held in the church,



followed by a procession to the fields or hills, where the priest kindled the fire. The [rowan](#) branch is hung over the house fire on May Day to preserve the fire itself from bewitchment (the house fire being symbolic of the luck of the house).

This is a holiday of Union--both between the Goddess and the God and between man and woman. Handfastings (Pagan marriages) are traditional at this time. It is a time of fertility and harvest, the time for reaping the wealth from the seeds that we have sown. Celebrations include braiding of one's hair (to honour the union of man and woman and Goddess and God), circling the Maypole for fertility and jumping the Beltane fire for luck. Beltane is one of the Major Sabbats of the Wiccan religion.

We celebrate sexuality

(something we see as holy and intrinsic to us as holy beings), we celebrate life and the unity which fosters it. The myths of Beltane state that the young God has blossomed into manhood, and the Goddess takes him on as her lover. Together, they learn the secrets of the sexual and the sensual, and through their union, all life begins.

Beltane is the season of maturing life and deep found love. This is the time of vows, handfastings and commitment. The Lord and his Lady, having reached maturity, come together in Perfect Love and Perfect Trust to celebrate the joy of their union. This is a time to celebrate the coming together of the masculine and feminine creative energies. Beltane marks the emergence of the young God into manhood. Stirred by the energies at work in nature, he desired the Goddess. They fall in love, lie among the grasses and blossoms and unite.

The flowers and greenery symbolise the Goddess and the Maypole represents the God. Beltane marks the return of vitality and passion of summer. Another common focal point of the Beltane rituals is the cauldron, which represents the Goddess. The Welsh goddess Creiddylad is connected with Beltane, often called the May Queen, she was a Goddess of summer flowers and love.

May Day

May Day has long been marked with feasts and rituals. May poles, supremely phallic symbols, were the focal point of old English village rituals. Many people arose at dawn to gather flowers and green branches from the fields and gardens, using them to decorate the village Maypoles. The May Queen (and often King) is chosen from among the young people, and they go singing from door to door throughout the town carrying flowers or the May tree, soliciting donations for merrymaking in return for the "blessing of May". This is symbolic of bestowing and sharing of the new creative power that is stirring in the

world. As the kids go from door to door, the May Bride often sings to the effect that those who give will get of nature's bounty through the year.

In parts of France, some jilted youth will lie in a field on May Day and pretend to sleep. If any village girl is willing to marry him, she goes and wakes him with a kiss; the pair then goes to the village inn together and lead the dance which announces their engagement. The boy is called "the betrothed of May." (the White Goddess, Stonewylde - web site)

Bonfires, often created by rubbing sticks together, were common features of Beltane celebrations. Related rituals included driving cattle between two fires, dancing around the fires, and burning witches in effigy. Another tradition was Beltane cakes, which would be broken into several pieces, one of which was blackened. They would be drawn by celebrants at random; the person getting the unlucky blackened piece would face a mock execution.

Now Beltane is not only good fun, it was also serious business because the fertility of the land and the people was understood to be dependent upon the male and female being successful in their coupling. Throughout northern Europe these rituals were enacted every year, not only with celebration, but also with trepidation. It mattered!

Fast forward to the nineteenth century, when the Industrial Revolution, began its inexorable march toward creating the 1% - and the 99 %. The rising inequities of distribution of resources and the continued expectations of increased labor for miniscule pay, led to workers' rebellions and protests as energies rose and weather conditions improved in the spring:

The happy idea of using a proletarian holiday celebration (Beltane) as a means to attain the eight-hour day was first born in Australia. The workers there decided in 1856 to organize a day of complete stoppage together with meetings and entertainment as a demonstration in favor of the eight-hour day...At first, the Australian workers intended this only for the year 1856. But this first celebration had such a strong effect on the proletarian masses of Australia, enlivening them and leading to new agitation, that it was decided to repeat the celebration every year.

(Rosa Luxemburg, [What Are the Origins of May Day?](#), 1894)

In 1894, Walter Crane, an Australian Marxist, wrote this poem of protest:

...Let the winds lift your banners from far lands
 With a message of strife and of hope:
Raise the Maypole aloft with its garlands
 That gathers your cause in its scope....
...Stand fast, then, Oh Workers, your ground,
 Together pull, strong and united:
Link your hands like a chain the world round,
 If you will that your hopes be requited.
When the World's Workers, sisters and brothers,
 Shall build, in the new coming years,
A lair house of life—not for others,
 For the earth and its fulness is theirs.
Walter Crane, [The Workers' Maypole](#), 1894
 From the Marxists Internet archive

But the concerns were not limited to workers from “Down
Under.”

[Rioting in Chicago's Haymarket Square](#) on May 4th including a bomb thrown by an anarchist led to the deaths of a dozen people (including several police officers) and the injury of over 100 more. The protests were not immediately successful, but they proved effective down the line, as eight-hour work days eventually did become the norm. Labor leaders, socialists, and anarchists around the world took the American strikes and their fallout as a rallying point, choosing May Day as a day for demonstrations, parades, and speeches. It was a major state holiday in the Soviet Union and other communist countries.

In Eleanor Marx Aveling and Edward Aveling's book, *The Chicago Anarchists*, it was explained in similar terms, noting that Chicago employers were expecting workers to put in ten or eleven hours of work a day:

. . . Against this familiar device of the masters, many meetings of the men were held in Chicago in the earlier months of 1886. One of these meetings was called in the Haymarket, for the evening of May 4th. It was called by the Anarchists. A special protest was to be made against the killing of seven unarmed people a few days earlier, outside McCormick's premises, by Pinkerton detectives.
(Eleanor Marx Aveling and Edward Aveling, [The Chicago Anarchists](#).)

Though that protest did not reap an immediate harvest of justice, it inspired the workers to move forward with demands for an eight-hour work day and a five day work week. As is often noted, it was the labor unions that brought us the week-end, a blessed shabbat of much-needed rest.

As Unitarian Universalists, we have always been on both sides of these fights. In the 19th century, many of our New England Unitarians owned textile mills that depended upon workers keeping long hours and extra days of work. And many of our Universalist forebears were supporting the workers in their demands for better conditions in the sweat shops. Of course, those lines were not as clear-cut as the last sentence implies. Sigh . . .

These days, we again face the recognition that the rights so fiercely fought for more than a century ago, are again being chipped away by the many of the 1%. “Eternal vigilance is the price of liberty.”

So let us honor the planet with the rites of spring, and let us listen more deeply as it groans with the cost of the exploitation of all its resources in the name of prosperity for the few. As is often the case, I find inspiration in words from

Abraham Lincoln, though they might not come to mind for others regarding May Day:

“The Idea of Democracy” by Abraham Lincoln:

As labor is the common burden of our race,
So the effort of some to shift their share of the burden onto
the shoulders of others is the great, durable, curse of the
race.

As I would not be a slave, so I would not be a master.

This expresses my idea of democracy. Whatever differs
from this, to the extent of the difference, is no democracy.
Our reliance is in our live for liberty; our defense is in the
spirit which prizes liberty as the heritage of all people in all
lands everywhere.

Destroy this spirit, and we have planted the seeds of
despotism at our own doors.

Those who deny freedom to others deserve it not for
themselves, and cannot long retain it.

Why should there not be a patient confidence in the ultimate
justice of the people? Is there any better or equal hope in
the world.

Let us have faith that right makes might, and in that faith, let
us, to the end, dare to do our duty as we understand it.

Herein lies the message of many of our Unitarian

Universalist principals: the inherent worth and dignity of
every person; justice, equity, and compassion for all; and
the goal of world peace while honoring the web of

interdependence of all life. May our labors bring celebration
with justice and peace for all, with respect, with
responsibility and with relish for the process.

So Be It! Blessed Be!

Offering and Offertory:

Returning to Community: the work of the people
Sharing of Joys and Sorrows
Meditation

Integration and Release

Closing Hymn: #1068 “Rising Green”

Closing Words: “In Time of Silver Rain” by
Langston Hughes

In time of silver rain
The earth puts forth new life again,

Green grasses grow
And flowers lift their heads,

And over all the plain
The wonder spreads

Of life, Of life, Of life.

In time of silver rain the butterflies lift siken wings
To catch a rainbow cry

And trees put forth

New leaves to sing
In joy beneath the sky.

When spring

And life
Are new.