

The Celtic Lunar Calendar

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“Every society, every tribe has its calendar, its own particular way of taking bearings amid the endless flow of days, months and seasons. By taking these natural rhythms and imposing upon them a more or less arbitrary but *agreed* system of divisions, we get a calendar -- a framework for organising the past and planning the future. Human activities, events, celebrations can then be coordinated between different groups, and kept in step with the cycles of the natural world. So a calendar is a powerful practical tool, but it also has a deeper cultural significance. It embodies and sustains an important part of our world-view, and often quite subconsciously influences the way we perceive the passage of time and our place within the world’s rhythms.” (Keith Bailey, 1988)

The Cycles

I see seeds of the new Aquarian spirituality in the feminist goddess and pagan spirituality emerging now. And I do mean seeds because this movement is harking back to the old spiritualities, supposedly of the Celtic and Neolithic peoples. However all they can do is reflect what we think these ancient beliefs were because no one actually knows what these spiritual systems were. So these movements are creating something new, inspired by the megaliths of the neolithic peoples, or of various Aboriginal or other tribal peoples and their religions. The new that is emerging is primarily Earth centred (Pachamama, love the Mother, all the Earth is sacred, etc.) and so we tune in to the cycles and seasons of the sun, cycles of the moon, seasons of the Earth which are sun and moon related, and to the planets.

For the last ten years I have been using the Lunar Celtic calendar, as described by Keith Bailey, and in which he gives lunar dates for the cross-quarter festivals. These are festivals which have supposedly been celebrated by people in Britain since forever - no one knows. Growing up as a child in Scotland, I remember the cross-quarter days were still bank holidays. There are folk customs all over Britain relating to these festivals. Many of the neolithic megaliths, both stone circles and barrows, have their major axes related to the movement of the sun, particularly mid-winter and mid-summer sunrise and sunset, and some of them are cross-quarter day orientations. Glastonbury Tor and the Michael line is the most obvious line of sacred sites oriented to the cross quarter days.

This calendar is based on the Coligny tablets, bronze plates found in the South of France in 1897, which date from about 1st Century CE. Whilst using it, I have found that it runs on a similar lunar system to the Chinese calendar, although the Chinese system is a 12 year cycle. The oldest calendars are the lunar calendars because the moon rises one hour later each day and waxes and wanes changing its shape noticeably each day, making a perfect marker for the record keepers. The Moslem calendar is lunar, as is the Jewish, the Ethiopian and the Tibetan.

However, there is a problem with a lunar calendar in that the moon is very very wobbly, “th’*inconstant moon*” as Shakespeare calls it . It does not cycle, returning to the next dark moon or full moon, on an even number of days - its “month” is 29.5 days on average and this can change from one month to the next depending. “The moon phase cycle depends on up to about half a dozen different factors which affect the apparent motion of the sun and the moon. These factors can line up at different ways at different times, so the time from one full moon to the next is always changing, and can sometimes differ by more than a day between adjacent cycles” (Bailey). The Coligny system follows the average lunar cycle with great accuracy but is sometimes a day out because of these wobbles, but on average in any solar year by having six of the “months” 29 days long and six 30 days long it stays as close to the moon as possible.

However, the same applies to the year, the sun and the moon don't cycle together so there are twelve and a quarter "months" to each year, which means that two in every five years have thirteen lunar months and the rest have twelve, these two extra months being 30 day months. And this is only a rough adjustment, so an extra day is also added in the fourth year of each cycle. This is the basic five year cycle which keeps the moon, earth and sun roughly together in their varying seasons. According to Keith's reckonings, six of these cycles makes a 30 year great cycle - a "month of years" at the start of which one of the extra months is left out in order to fine tune the system, which needs further fine tuning by creating a month of cycles, five great cycles which is a 150 year semi-period. In the first cycle of each semi-period one of the months drops a day. This semi-period is doubled to make a full period of 300 years which begins with only half a month, thus every 300 years the order of the dark and light halves within the months is reversed. Four of these periods make up a year of 1,200 years beginning with a cycle in which one of the months has 30 days instead of 29. Whew! so you can see the difficulty involved in fine tuning the moon to the sun!!! Which makes me see red when people go on about there being 13 months in the year, because it is absolute rubbish put about by people who never actually go out and watch the moon.

Keith writes: "Western "civilisation" has increasingly lost touch with the immediate **immanent** side of reality and this is clearly reflected in our modern civil calendar. One whole set of very conspicuous cycles - those of the moon and tides - are totally ignored. Our months are a complete sham: we may as well number the days in the year from 1 to 365 (or 366) and forget about "months". Even our years and days are based on an abstraction, the Standard Mean Sun whose celestial longitude changes always at a constant rate. The visible sun that warms the earth and casts shadows on sundials has a far more interesting motion, now fast, now slow compared to clock time. It's not that one view is better or more correct than the other, the problem is that an abstract, "cold", analytical view of reality, essential to understanding the mechanical side of the universe, has come to dominate, almost to deny the immediacy and wholeness of existence. We have lost our balance."

The calendar that results is determined by the land in which one lives, for in the northern hemisphere the days are shortest in the season of winter and longest in the season of summer. This is not so in tropical lands which do not have such clearly defined seasons linked with changing day length, so their calendars, like that of the Mayans, have different constraints upon them. In Britain the old calendar with the eight quarters and cross-quarters is clearly linked with the movement of the sun. The solstices and equinoxes marking the maximum points in day-length and season, and the cross-quarter days, which are linked with the seasons of the earth and are primarily agricultural, defining the turning points from one season to the next.

During the year the rising and setting times of the sun at the solstices changes very very little over a two to three week period. They then slowly start to speed up until the cross-quarter days, after which they speed up to maximum change in rising and setting times around the equinoxes. Then gradually slowing again to the next cross-quarter day, after which there is only a very slight change until the next solstice. I think of it like the swing of a pendulum, when the pendulum is at its uppermost point it almost stops moving - this is like the sunrise and sunset times at the solstices; when the pendulum is in the middle of its swing it is moving at its fastest - this is like the sun rising and setting times at the equinoxes. And together with these times are the actual movement of the sun in the sky. In summer it is highest, gradually getting lower this speeding up to the equinoxes, then gradually slowing down till it is at its lowest in winter solstice. So the cross-quarter days are times when the sun noticeably starts to shift its movement, at Samhain when we are noticeably moving into the dark quarter - at Beltain when we are noticeably moving into the light half.

Having given you some idea of the difficulty of linking the movement of the moon with the movement of the sun and the seasons of the earth, let me now give you a little of the basic philosophy behind the lunar calendar of the Celtic peoples, or more likely of the neolithic peoples who built the megaliths, who we probably have to thank for this very beautiful system. Like the Chinese, the Celtic

lunar calendar is based on a world-view in which balance is central. "First there is the dynamic balance of darkness and light, warmth and cold, running through days, months, years and longer cycles. They are all arranged one within the other so as to closely follow the visible changes of the moon and seasons"(Bailey). The Celtic day begins at sunset because all the "divisions of time are founded on the principle of darkness before light." In the beginning was the darkness - then came the light. This means, according to Keith's interpretation of the Coligny calendar, that the day begins at sunset - going into the dark of the night, and the month begins at the last quarter of the moon when it is going into the dark half of its cycle. This is why all our major festivals are on the eve of the day, May Eve, Christmas Eve, New Years Eve, Hallowe'en, still kept to this very day as people's holidays.

At first it feels strange to have the next day beginning at sunset and the month beginning with the last quarter of the moon, but as you tune in to the principle of darkness before light so you learn to recognise that the dark half of the lunar cycle is best kept as a whole, so you go through all of the dark phase and then through the light half. I now light a candle for each month, and lighting the new candle as we go into the dark feels very good.

It's the same with the year. The Celtic year begins at Samhain, as we go into the dark half of the year. This marks the turning point from autumn into winter. By now we have collected all our blackberries, and cob nuts, the harvest is in - all our potatoes and herbs (you can tell I am a gardener, and one of the things about living this calendar is that one tunes in so much more closely to the cycles and seasons of the earth.) Midwinter is solstice, the birth of the new young sun in terms of the light, but the darkest point is Imbolc in terms of season, and yet the darkest point is also the turning so the first signs of the new are apparent. At Imbolc the first lambs are born and the snowdrops appear and this is the turning into the beginning of spring which reaches its high point at spring equinox with the great celebration festival of Easter, eggs are being hatched, hares are boxing and all the seeds planted, potatoes and onions in the ground ready for Beltain which is the turning into the fullness of the light, the beginning of summer, the growing period and so the wheel turns to Lammass, the beginning of autumn, the first harvest happening along with all the crop circles!! Thus every day starts with the night, every month starts with the dark half, and every year starts with winter.

The Festivals

There is a place for marking certain moments. We have roots in the old, and in one sense they are old, but the way we are celebrating them today is new - I am certain that our way of celebrating has not happened before because we are 20th century beings and we, for example, drive, or hitchhike to a special sacred place. I am sure that no one (or at least very, very few) four thousand years ago would have dreamed of going to Avebury if they lived in Devon, apart from a special pilgrimage that would have taken days or weeks. They would probably have gone to their local sacred site. Nowadays few people go to their local site, most go to the biggies, although often at dawn I am the only person on Chalice Hill and I see few people watching sunrise from the Tor.

One thing that amuses me is that at present you can celebrate any festival three or four times - for instance the traditional date, say the 21st of June, March, etc. for Equinoxes and Solstices, or you can take the precise astrological moment when the sun moves into the appropriate sign, or you can celebrate according to the moon, say Equinox full moon and so on. It's really great fun because you can spend about 10 days celebrating each festival and as they come round every six weeks that's a lot of time spent celebrating! And I have yet to see the same thing happening twice on any of these festival days. We are finding out ways of celebrating these times, and at present it is pretty chaotic, spontaneous; there are no fixed formulas, all is changeable according to the moment.

Following the lunar system, I celebrate Samhain as the moment when we enter the dark of the year and so this is the end of the old year and the beginning of the new. I celebrate Samhain when the moon enters her last quarter because at that moment she is going into the dark too and will be darker

from that point on. And I light the fire to mark the moment at sunset when the day is going into the dark. And so day, moon and season are all at the same point in the cycle. Its quite a moment and really feels the full essence of going into the dark. We normally put a stick of apple wood to burn on the fire representing everything which we wish to let go of so we do not take it with us to the new year.

At Imbolc the fire of ash wood, is lit at midnight when the moon is completely dark. Some people call this new moon, I call it dark of the moon because for me first crescent is new moon. Imbolc is the turning point when the earth is at ultimate darkness and from now on everything will start to get less dark - the first crescent will appear soon, the days start getting warmer and noticeably longer, snowdrops and crocuses appear and so on. At midnight we normally turn all the lights out and sit in the darkness for a while and then we call Bride to come in with us. A girl then comes in from outside bringing a candle, the first light. We then each in turn light a candle making a prayer, planting a seed for the new year. In Christian mythology this is the festival of the Purification of the Virgin when Mary takes her new born son to the Temple. This is the new sun that was born at winter solstice who has been held within the dark of the mother until now and is now strong enough and big enough to come out - and so the sun starts to ride noticeably higher in the sky, to shine with noticeably increasing warmth and the days to be noticeably longer.

At Beltain the fire is lit at dawn when the moon enters her first quarter, marking the shift into the light half of the cycle, into summer when the seeds have all been planted and everything is growing well. We normally jump the fire, through the smoke, raising energy high with lots of laughter and life. At Lammas, when the moon is full, the fire is lit at midday the moment of the fullness of the light, when the cycle turns so that from now on it is going to be less light, the growing time is over and the reaping time is here and the berries are collected for wine and jam and the nuts are ready and death makes its first approach. I make a wine for each festival and will always give thanks to the earth for all she has given, pouring the wine on to the earth as a way of giving back to her a token, to remind myself that we have so much, so much and we rely on her for all we have.

This gives a real rhythm to my life. I get to know all the phases of the moon and all the phases of day and night and tune into the seasons in a way I have never tuned into them before. I watch the animals and the plants. Snowdrops are light related in their growth, however hot or cold the winter they always flower around Imbolc. Daffodils seem to be heat related and in a warm winter they will flower around the same time as the snowdrops but with a cold winter they don't flower till nearer the equinox. The hawthorn always blossoms around the time of Beltain whatever the temperature, but the Elder flowers in May when winter and spring have been warm, and at summer solstice when they are cold.

To me there is a real magic in getting up in the dark and leaving the house before cockcrow to bicycle or walk to Chalice Hill and sit in the dark watching and waiting for the first tinge of less dark in the sky that tells that dawn is about to come. Learning which birds first start to sing: the cock comes first starting to crow about three quarters of an hour before first light, crows are about the last - you can hear a specific sequence of their waking and giving voice, the music of the dawn, each part of the orchestra coming in in its own time. This magic is of the moment of the beauty of nature. There is no hierarchical structure, no set pattern or form I have to follow, I am following my inner spirit. Perhaps there is some need sometimes for a certain amount of structure, of formalised ritual but I don't think we have found the right structures yet. People cast circles, invoke deities and guardians, use incense, candles and crystals, and these are all excellent tools to help create an atmosphere which can be magical. That is all. They are an excellent psychological ploy to help the mind shift into that special space in which the mystery is tangible. If we recognise this perhaps we can allow flexibility in, let our intuition seize the moment so that we don't have the deadness that is so often present at these sort of rituals. Because structuring and formalising is the patriarchal mode. It is power over, control over, making boundaries. I think we must go through our fear that without formality there will be nothing. We must learn to flow with the moment, with knowing when there is a need to hold energy, when there is a need to let it go. Trust our feelings and our intuition.

I feel that the emerging pattern of ritual is that of spontaneous experience, of attuning oneself to nature, to one's inner state of being - what is called immediate religious experience. This can happen at any time though it more often occurs if a stage is set, such as being at a sacred site all night of the full moon. There are techniques which can be done to help one shift into a state of consciousness in which one is more likely to have a profound mystical experience, such as using certain plants, fasting, lack of sleep, chanting, drumming, dancing, being in certain places at certain times, etc., but these are merely techniques - the actual experience can happen at any time and that is the lifeblood of this spirituality. It is deeply integrated with one's own personal development, one's own growth to living the whole of one's potential as a human being both spiritual and physical. And central to this is opening up to and being aware of the unconscious, working with our dreams, with creative imagination and visualisation, practising meditation, yoga, Tai Chi, Qi Gong breathing, using therapy to explore our shadows, our problems, our fears and insecurities, so that we can become much more whole, clear, happy people.

The holy is encountered as much outwardly as inwardly - we all long for wholeness for complete oneness of our being both inwardly and with nature. If we are struggling with internal problems these also tend to manifest in outward events. We must consciously take on the suffering that is invariably part of our personal growth. Spiritual self-development is not an easy process; in fact it is bloody hard, a tremendous burden, but it seems we are being pushed, kicking and screaming into forever ploughing on, ever striving to clear out all that which holds us back from being shining ones in true unity with the whole, living the Tao, or however else you visualise this aspect of walking the path. I can totally recommend living this calendar as an aid to growth on this path.p

References.

If you want the full details of the Celtic Lunar Calendar, please write to:

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