

Groundhog Day, 'Or Just a Taste of Spring'

UUCM, Jan. 31, 2010

Rev. Chip Wright

Next Tuesday we don't get the day off; banks aren't closed; the mail still comes; but it is a holiday, nonetheless. In fact, it is my favorite holiday as we honor the actions of that hibernating, heavy-bodied non-hero, rodent the groundhog. To me this has always been a special day. I used to cut school on Groundhog's Day and spend it at the beach eating crab, or on a mountain trail looking for bobcats, or just sitting in a local park. In fact my parents, with out me even asking, finally took to giving me notes to excuse my absence from school on Feb 2nds.

As clear as my observance of this holiday was and my parents' willingness not to interfere with me on it, the mythology of it has always been somewhat confusing for me. Think about it. If the groundhog comes out of its winter den and doesn't see its shadow, that would mean it was overcast, right? But if it does see its shadow that would mean the sun was out. So, which would you think, logically, indicates six more weeks of winter?

The story however goes that when the sun is out the groundhog is spooked back into its hole and then we get six more weeks of winter. Now is it just me, or does that seem weird? Actually I have often thought that maybe they got it all backwards because of some kind of contagious “early spring dyslexia.”

But as confusing as that has been to this Groundhog’s Day aficionado, I have come to understand that Groundhog’s Day is actually mostly about: just a taste of spring.

It may seem as if spring is a long way off on Feb. 2nd. It may still blow gray and pour rain, even turn real cold now and then. But by now you can’t miss the change that is approaching. Look around and you can feel that winter’s hold on the darkness has loosened, we can see the shifting.

In Northern temperate latitudes early February brings with it the first real messages from the dance of spring, that budding new season of the growing time, of blue skies and star-filled nights. This month sings of longer days that will bring with them the new greens and then the jubilee of flowers.

And I for one can't wait for the maple tree sap, which runs fastest and richest in February, to be boiled down to syrup for my waffles.

In fact for me the taste of fresh Maple syrup is a good enough reason to celebrate Groundhog's Day, a day which among other things marks the opening of the Maple bush harvest, and the start of the 'big flow'.

You know, maple syrup aside, I can't think of a better reason for a holiday than celebrating the closing heart of winter and the opening of the sleepy eyes of spring! And that is Groundhog Day it seems to me.

After all we humans have always paused between winter and spring to acknowledge the shifts in the flows, and changes that happen at this time on our planet. Watching animals to predict the swing of seasons or cycles is about as old a practice as there is. Much older than the mathematics that we use today.

For thousands of years and all over the world folks have looked to the animals, to the movements of fish, birds and insects to predict seasonal cycles.

For the majority of the time our species has been here on earth a primary concern has been recognizing the good times, and places to gather food or to hunt and fish; eventually to plant and grow crops.

The importance of knowing these cross quarter season lines was one key to success, and for the figuring curious ape that we are, it was natural to learn these times by the actions of other animals and plants. These cross quarter lines are in some ways far more important than the solstices and equinoxes which they divide.

The use of the groundhog, as an indicator of this cross seasonal time is uniquely American. It actually came from a European tradition which used hibernating or scarcely seen winter animals for their cross-quarter season's markers, usually bears or hedgehogs. When a group of German immigrants, we know now as the Pennsylvania Dutch arrived in the mid 18th century they had a dilemma.

In the 'old country' they had used the badger as their harbinger for predicting the winter-to-spring threshold. But when they got here the badgers didn't have the right timing, American badgers weren't the same. So their job went to the very commonplace and prolific

groundhog, sometimes called the woodchuck. This burrowing land mammal was one of the first dormant animals to start moving around after the winter solstice in North America. So their emergence in early February became the herald of the approaching spring season.

I grew up with numbers of stories about this time, having a Scottish grandmother. One of my favorite ones was of Brigid, which my Grandmother would tell around bedtime on the first day of February.

This was the story of Brigid, a Celtic Goddess, who was the protector of the sheep and cattle and the Goddess of the Creative. I can still remember my Grandmother's words weaving Brigid into my young and open mind and heart.

“Sweet Brigid, was born at sunrise right as her mother was crossing the threshold into the great house where she served as a druid slave. She was carrying fresh milk to the kitchen and just as one leg crossed over the threshold into the great house, Brigid was born—right exactly then: right between the outside and the inside.

And it was not just she, for she had a twin. Born that day and by her side was her brother, Imbolc, the god of the Spring equinox, the time of new lambs and sheep's milk right there with Brigid the goddess of healing, learning new things, writing poetry and stories, and making things beautiful.

So it was that Brigid was born on the crossroads, the threshold of the quarter season, between winter and spring. She was dropped from her mother's womb warm and beautiful at the side of Imbolc, her brother, the keeper of the growing sunshine. From that time on winter has always faded and spring has grown at this time'a'year."

Like all the stories told to me as a child by my parents and grandparents, I loved that one and still do. For me it is more immediate, connected to the seasons and the ways I experience this time. And my grandmother story is so much richer than the drier academic version that goes like this:

'Prior to the conversion of the Irish Celts, Saint Brigid's Day was known as Imbolc, one of four seasonal junctions in the pagan calendar of Ireland. It was the start of spring, and the name refers to "ewes' milk" and to the birth of farm animals.'

The Catholic Church eventually made Brigid, now called Bridgid a saint and created the Feast of St. Bridgid. Doing this was a real cue in the conversion of the Irish pagans to the Roman Catholic Church. They had recognized the power and sentiment behind this ancient story.

But even in pre Christian Rome they had observed the beginning of spring in early February. They had a traditional ritual of cleaning the farms and fields and building fires of purification to close out the past year.

Even to the east the Armenians held fire-god festivals on February 2nd and forecast the weather patterns as well; but they did it by looking at how the wind blew the smoke from the fires. And today they still set these fires in the church courtyards in Armenia, but only a few people know the reasons why.

And in Greece the first days of February are the Lesser Eleusinian Mysteries, festivals marking the transformation of Goddess Persephone, the Queen of the Dead, into Kore, the Queen of the Living. It was a time that the goddess would return to spend with her mother, the Goddess Demeter, or Mother Nature, until her return to Elysium, the land of the dead, across the river Styx.

And Persephone was not the only one to return from Elysium in early February. Dionysus, later to be known as Bacchus, came also prompting a time for ritual drinking and the pruning of the grapevines.

Now, if you listen closely in the next weeks you might hear the whistle of Bacchus and his flute along the barren vineyard rows as the sun climbs higher on our California hillsides.

Another one of these cross-quarter season's celebrations is Candlemas. Although like so many other rituals coming to us from animistic traditions, over time its animal totems, fish, birds or insects have been replaced with Christian overlays. This contemporary tradition of Candlemas or the purification of Mary after the birth of Jesus comes from a much older tradition of Jewish law relating to women's access to the temple after birth.

It is around the middle of the 5th century we first see the emergence of candles in any religious ritual, a new invention that used hard tallow rather than oil. So in alignment with the returning spring sun, the church started to use the association of flame to strengthen the meaning of their rituals.

And so we inherit a mixture of religious folklore all mixed into a common practice that ties us deeply to the dance of the seasons. Whether it has been a Groundhog's Day or the religious Candlemas ritual, these old and older celebrations have always been about providing us with an early taste of spring.

But what does all this mean to us modern and post modern folks. What's so important about these old and mostly forgotten, and sometimes trivialized, cross-quarter seasonal marks?

Well there is a sense of meaning and connectedness that comes with these celebrations. I know that is true for me. And I believe that in the world of meaning it is never too late to remember where we come from and to what we are tied back to, through hundreds of thousands of years on this planet.

It is never too late to remember that in the end it is we who are nurtured here; that it is we who were evolved here in complex relationships under the guidance of ancient cycles. It is wise to remember these things especially now, in this torn and at risk world we navigate.

Sure, in this post modern world of cell phones and wireless instant communications, few if any of us depend on a successful planting in our back yards, or a good catch when we go fishing. Instead, most all of our needs in this way are met by a trip to the supermarket or Costco, if not by a delivery made by an online order.

In the end what's important about all these stories and celebrations is remembering the qualities in life they speak to. There are things inherent in us which aren't about the swirling-and-busy-get-something-done world we all get caught up in. It's about remembering a grounded time and place that resides inside our collective histories. It's about remembering where deep connections live. It's about remembering our common place here on this little blue-white spinning ball we call earth.

Even if you don't resonate with the experience of this Groundhog's Day like I do, it should not exclude you. Even if you can't find its place in your logic and scientific assertions, please don't forsake it!

It is an ancient story and one that will always be a piece of our inheritance. It is an observance, a holiday unique to this land, our land, and tied to ancient human cycles and cares. This time, this

quarter season mark is infused with so much human energy over thousands of years that it is a shame to neglect it. Remember that we are each story tellers, weaving significance, into our everyday lives with special eyes that can call forth meaning through the dry and mundane academic reasoned world in which we mostly live, stories that go deeper than the words that make them.

For me, Groundhog's Day is a doorway, an opening, not only to a new season pregnant with potential, but to a place where I can see a piece of my legacy as a human being. The treasure of this rich time remains.

So what would be nicer at this time of year than to get a taste of spring; a little more light for our spirits, the greening of our horizons, and fresh maple syrup for our hot cakes? Not much I think.

Therefore, if you need an excuse to take this opportunity, this holy day off, I would be happy to write one out for you...Otherwise enjoy this week and the weeks to come and their bounty! So may it be.