

Last Monday was May Day and it passed mostly unremarked.

When did we stop celebrating May Day? As a child, I can remember making May baskets for my mother out of colored paper and filling them with flowers. May Day marked the coming of the warm and vibrant weeks of summer vacation that were soon to be. The green summer days spent in play and exploration, climbing trees and following creeks.

Although widely observed in much of the world, who celebrates May Day here in America anymore? Unions and pagans, that's who. May Day is International Workers Day, and it is a national holiday in more than 80 countries. May Day is an ancient summer festival that has been observed for centuries across the northern hemisphere. I personally think that May Day is a perfect UU holiday, a holiday we should reclaim and restore and passionately celebrate.

May Day has become a forgotten holiday. Or perhaps not so much forgotten, as suppressed and marginalized. After all, May Day represents two very subversive ways of thinking and being in the world, the red and the green. The red is for the struggles of working people to organize and have some control over their lives. The green is for life and our deep ties with the web of life on Earth.

Great forests and vast grasslands once covered the temperate north, and every spring they burst forth in green glory. The flowers blossomed, and the birds sang and the bees hummed as life pulsed in the warming earth and sky. And what could our ancestors do but emulate our animal cousins and celebrate the greening of the world?

They celebrated in May, named after Maia, the mother of all the gods and goddesses in the Roman pantheon. Fire and dancing and fertility and trees figured prominently. The Greeks had their sacred groves, and the Druids their oaks. In Scotland the herdsman formed circles and danced around fires. The Celts lit bonfires on hilltops to honor Beltane. I could fill pages with other examples.

People "went a-Maying" - going into the woods and fields and bringing back boughs and blossoms to decorate their homes, persons, and loved ones with green garlands and flowers. Maypoles – which represent the tree of life - were raised. Dances were danced. Music was played. Drink was drunk, and love was made. Winter was over, summer had come.

It was a day of revelry, of letting loose, of letting ones hair – and a few other things – down. A day of honoring the life that coursed through both the world and the people. With the coming of Christianity, the Earth rites were suppressed, but May Day survived in popular secular forms. Whatever form it took, May Day was clearly not a day of work. In fact, it is the most ancient workers holiday of all.

Naturally, there were those who frowned on taking a day off to frolic in the woods and fields. Like the people from our own religious lineage, the Puritans. While we have to give them credit for helping to

reduce the power of the Church and the Monarchy, Puritans were not exactly what we would call a fun-loving bunch. In 1550 an Act of Parliament demanded that Maypoles be destroyed, and it outlawed games as well. In 1644 the Puritans – who by then had overthrown the king and taken over England - abolished May Day altogether, to great public outcry and more than a little resistance. After the restoration of the monarchy, May Day was restored by Charles II, who was popularly known as the Merry Monarch, which referred to the bawdiness of his court and expressed the collective sigh of release after over a decade of severe rule by Oliver Cromwell and the Puritans.

Years earlier, in 1620, many Puritans had fled to New England, seeking religious freedom. In a rather ironic coincidence, these first Pilgrims sailed on the Mayflower.

In 1624, in a completely separate venture, a man named Thomas Morton settled on Mount Wollaston on the southwestern arc of Massachusetts Bay, accompanied by a few free men and several indentured servants. The land seemed a "Paradise" to him. He wrote, "there are fowls in abundance, fish in multitudes, and I discovered besides, millions of turtle doves on the green boughs, which sat pecking of the full, ripe, pleasant grapes that were supported by the lusty trees, whose fruitful load did cause the arms to bend."

Thomas Morton grew up in England's wild West Country, most likely in a Devonshire village. Village life was then a syncretic mix of Anglican rites and older pre-Christian rituals, like the Maypole Revels, that hallowed and celebrated people's relations with nature and each other. These were people with a deep antipathy towards Puritans. Two of their most important social values were a code of neighborliness that shared hospitality across social and other differences; and a code of quietness, which meant that general peace was more important than most reasons for conflict. Morton studied law in London, where he was exposed to Renaissance ideas, as well as to what was then called natural philosophy. He renamed Mt Wollaston, and called it Merry Mount, and set about creating a community that modeled the English village life he loved.

He was a smart man, so when he needed people for his colony, he offered to free the indentured servants in his care if they would join him - and I quote him here - "join me as my partners and consociates. So you may be free from service, and we will converse, trade, plant, and live together as equals, and support and protect one another."

He was an observant man, and one of the things he noticed was that the local Indians were also villagers with whom he might have many things in common. He got to know them as fellow human beings, and he thought far more of them than he did his Puritan neighbors. Again I quote:

".. I have found the Massachusetts Indians more full of humanity than the Christians....The more Salvages, the better quarter: the more Christians, the worser quarter, I found; as all the indifferent-minded planters can testify."

He sold the Indians guns and powder, which given the flintlocks of the day, was not a big deal. They were mostly smoke and noise. Bows and arrows were far more effective weapons. It was largely a gesture of trust in his allies. He set up a fur trade with many of the tribes. Some of the men of Merry Mount took Indian wives, and the village grew and prospered. It became a refuge for the discontented, runaway servants, and what the Puritan governor of Plymouth called "all the scume of the countrie."

On May Day, 1628, the colony erected a Maypole eighty feet high, decorated it with garlands, wrapped it in ribbons, and nailed to its top the antlers of a buck. They brewed a barrel of beer. And everyone for hundreds of miles around, Indians and Europeans alike, was invited to the party. Even a few Plymouth residents showed up. Morton attached to the pole the first lyric verses penned in America which concluded with these lines:

The great Earth Mother's call, none ever withstand!
And yet, that same Love points this land,
With Proclamation, friends! The first of May
Shall here at Merrymount be holy day.

This multicultural experiment was ended the next year when Puritan forces led by Miles Standish, who Morton called Captain Shrimp, destroyed the colony, cut the Maypole down, and scattered the inhabitants. Religious freedom, it seems, was not for other people. The Puritans then began a campaign of conquest and eradication that would set the pattern for English interaction with indigenous America for centuries to come. Morton was illegally sent to England in chains. He would return 13 years later with a writ revoking the charter of the Massachusetts Bay Company, but by then the damage was done.

Many historians believe that the Puritans did not destroy Merry Mount because of its lusty English country ways and its fraternization with the Indians, but because in a few short years it had come to dominate the fur trade and become an agricultural and economic power surpassing Plymouth. The reasons seem obvious. After all, if you were an Indian, who would you rather trade with – grim Pilgrims who flogged people in the public square and thought you were savages, or transplanted English villagers who treated you with respect and danced with you around a pole with antlers on it? And which community would you rather be a part of if you had a choice? Merry Mount prospered by Fair Means, as Morton would say.

We should not romanticize Morton and Merry Mount as being a rainbow utopia in the wilderness, but we should consider how different America might have been if his brand of “consociation” had become the norm. There were many such social experiments on the frontier, and all were eventually pushed aside by the forces of greed and intolerance.

The red of struggle is deeply rooted here in America. In 1884, the U.S. Federation of Organized Trade and Labor Unions passed a resolution declaring that as of May 1, 1886, an eight hour workday would be the full and legal workday for all U.S. workers. The employers had two years to recognize this new standard and put it into effect. They refused.

On May 1st, 1886, hundreds of thousands of workers took to the streets in a general strike throughout the country to force employers to recognize the eight-hour working day. On May 3rd, the Chicago police opened fire on the unarmed striking workers at the McCormick Reaper Works, killing six workers and wounding untold more. The next day, at a rally in Haymarket Square, the police again demanded the workers disperse. A bomb was thrown, and seven policemen died. The police retaliated by firing into the crowd, killing four and wounding hundreds. The bomb thrower was never discovered.

In a controversial trial, eight prominent labor radicals were charged with conspiracy. Despite a lack of evidence linking them directly to the bombing, seven of the eight were convicted of murder and sentenced to death, and the eighth was sentenced to fifteen years in prison. It was a dark time for the American Labor movement, and it nearly destroyed the movement, as public opinion was manipulated against them. But labor rallied, and kept the struggle alive.

Four years later, on May 1st, 1890, massive strikes were held throughout Europe and America, Peru, Chile and Cuba to demand the international adoption of the 8 hour work day. Since then, workers throughout the world observe the first of May as a day of international worker solidarity.

People struggled and fought and died so we could have an eight hour work day and a five day work week. We should never forget that. But what’s so important about an eight hour work day that people would die for it?

The workers cry was this: Eight hours for work. Eight hours for rest. Eight hours for us. Not sixteen hours working for the boss and eight hours for ALL the rest. Eight hours for us.

Eight hours to recreate. To dance around the Maypole if we like. Eight hours to educate ourselves and our children. To read. To write. Eight hours to be with family and friends. Eight hours to think and organize. Eight precious hours to dedicate to a better present and a better future.

People with the free time to think and organize are a threat to profits, so employers fought back hard. From the logging camps of Oregon to the mills of New England to the stockyards of Chicago, police and

private goon squads intimidated, wounded, and sometimes killed workers and organizers. And when the employers finally and grudgingly gave in, they fought against international solidarity. Labor Day in the US was moved to September. To keep citizens from heeding the populist call of May Day, in 1958 President Eisenhower proclaimed May 1 to be Law Day. Law Day is forgotten, as Trump's Loyalty Day will soon be forgotten.

For the struggle is not over. From the sweatshops of Bangladesh to the Fight for 15, people are still fighting for fair hours and living wages, for safe working conditions, and decent treatment. We who are better off must stand with them. The struggle for better present, and a better future, goes on. If we stop, we lose ground.

The red and the green twine together and strengthen and support each other in beautiful ways.

Leigh Hunt, an English essayist of the 19th century, wrote that May Day is "the union of the two best things in the world, the love of nature, and the love of each other."

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There are those who would deny us that holy union, who would deny us our consociation with each other and with the other life on Earth, who would deny us our lusty years filled with green life and love. Who would deny those eight precious hours and a fair wage, and the right to self determination. Because of this, green solidarity with nature and each other can only be realized through red struggle. But life cannot be, and should not be, only about work, and struggle. That sounds far too grim and Puritan to me... and we mostly gave up being Puritans almost two hundred years ago.

There should be dancing, and Maypoles, and green boughs and enough for all, north and south, east and west, no matter their station in life. There must be love and laughter, or what is living for?