

The Bear Tribe – 92Y's Challenge for a New Religion supporting document

One of Humankind's oldest spiritual impulses is Arctolatry. When we first came to the Northern forests, Bear taught us to find food and Bear flesh sustained us, staving off protein starvation in depths of winter with his fat meat. Teacher and Saviour, his corpse so human-like when stripped of its warm fur, mystery and taboo surround him. A child of the Sky-God, lowered from on high on a golden chain, he is both food and guest of honour at his own funeral feast. With thanks and messages for his Father, and other more mundane, even profane, amusements his spirit is entertained and sent back to the Sky that he may return and feed us again in our need time.

This ancient pattern of myth and worship is found all across the Northern Hemisphere, from Europe, Siberia, Japan, North America and the Sub-Arctic. It has left deep traces in our own myths. King Arthur (Arthur means Bear) sleeps in a hollow hill to return when he is needed, and stole from the Mound Fortress a sustaining cauldron. His wonder-working grail, which feeds all except cowards, descended from Heaven on a golden chain...

The Bear Feast has been extinct in Europe for 250 years, and had died out everywhere else by the beginning of the 20th century. However this was the mythos and symbolism we drew upon for our revived Bear Feast. Rituals that were once designed to ward off retribution from the powerful Bear Spirit are deliberately re-purposed to give us an opportunity to connect with all the other-than-human-persons (plants and animals) we have eaten through the year and express compassionate gratitude towards them. Oddly, although we hunt, entertain, commemorate and ultimately send to heaven the soul of a *mock* Bear in our rite, we are not the first to do so, judging by the life-size clay likeness of a Bear in Montespan cave, France, pierced by arrows and spears some 20,000 years ago, and a similar much older Bear Altar from Chauvet cave.

Adult 'play' is serious, yet the 'lets pretend' absurdity of all this is not lost on the participants, among other things Bear Feast has a tradition of vegetable-related-sport, many silly songs and a kind of Secret Santa ritual known as Secret Vainamoinen after the Finnish Poet-God. Humour and profundity are not mutually exclusive though, such is the nature of the dreaming mind that deep images, song, music and drama have the power to move us in spite of ourselves, even if we know it is pretend. It is an emotional connection to our food and in turn to wider nature that we seek to create using the tools of ritual. We have held 11 Bear Feasts in the UK in the last 8 years. Around 280 people have attended in total and we have a core of about 30 members who always attend. We are becoming international (though still small and woolly edged) group with members in Europe and North America and embryonic rituals planned for France and the USA in 2016/17. This is a practical new religion with an emphasis on doing more than believing. If we win this contest we will use the money to buy tents and cooking pots!

New Bear Feast can trace its origins to a talk given by academic and writer Graham Harvey in the mid 1990s. In this talk he gave a variety of examples of ways that people use ritual and religion to deal with the tricky idea that we have to kill things to eat, or use somehow. Its obviously bad to kill other animals, and maybe these animals belong to other people (forest spirits perhaps) or just to themselves. So how do we reconcile committing murder and possibly theft with the great imperative to be polite to other people, some of whom may be other-than-human-people? Well, some form of apology may be in order, and perhaps some gift to make amends. Or perhaps even a bit of sleight of hand, to persuade the dead animal it wasn't our tribe to blame for his death, but someone else. Maybe if the animal is brought into our kin group it might be persuaded that its gift of itself was voluntary, or at least that it has been compensated for the inconvenience of dying and having to be reborn.

On pilgrimage in 2005 Kate Fletcher and Corwen Broch had 2 two conversations which eventually became entwined; a conversation about what the oldest human religion must have been like, and a conversation about that talk given by Graham Harvey. They decided they would like to try to revive the old Bear Cult and at the same time use the ritual for its original purpose, to make us think about our relationship with our food and give us the opportunity to express gratitude.

BF comes from an understanding that we are a part of nature, and are dependant upon it for everything and in every way. It is now understood that a relationship with nature is essential for our mental health too. We recover from illness faster when we can see trees, and woodland air itself contains scents that increase our well-being.

Exposure to animals and earth in childhood protects us from allergies and illness later in life. This is not a one way street. Nature is also dependant on us. We have the power to harm the world and its community of living things, both through action and inaction. Sadly we have done such harm. The world, is suffering, and we suffer too, because as all good Druids know, the Land and the People are One.

The well-being and survival of ourselves and those other-than-human-persons we share this world with depends on a change in our relationship with nature. It depends on a change in our idea of self, away from the perilous individualism of belief systems that have long told us we have a secret, invisible, unique, eternal soul. We need an awakening to the realisation that we ourselves are multiple, our existence is braided with that of all others. Our very being is entwined with the fates of inanimate and animate nature, and we exist as persons more through our physical, emotional and dare I say it even dietary relationships with others than through a dependant relationship with some invisible, possibly non-existent deity. A realisation that our true self is an expanded, as Arne Naess described it, Ecological Self. We hope Bear Feast is a tool to help us a little way along the path to this realisation.

Bear Feast is essentially the ritual of a mystery religion, a sacred meal which attempts to explore artistically and spiritually that deep question of life; that life is precious, yet depends on death to continue, the death of those who are in reality our kin. Bear Feast is really made up of several connected mini rituals. Firstly we introduce ourselves and share food, then we learn and practice the songs for the ritual. There is a practical aim to this but more importantly it serves to bond the group, so people can relax and feel safe. The setting can add to the special mood, though we are not really in 'ritual time' yet. We do start to observe the taboo against speaking the word 'Bear' however, which is extremely difficult at an event called the Bear Feast! All sorts of amusing euphemisms must be concocted and forgetting the taboo will be met with mockery! Use of different language in this way also reinforces the specialness of the event.

The next day, before dawn, we wake sleepers with drumming, everyone speaks in hushed voices to preserve the liminal state between waking and sleeping. Drumming becomes chanting and the hunters assemble with their spears. They are smudged and blessed with an ancient hunter's blessing translated from a Finno-Ugric poem while we sing some of the songs we learnt last night. The atmosphere builds, the dawn full of incense, firelight, chanting, drumming and beautiful poetry, and there is a great sense of expectation. Everyone processes until they come to where the (person impersonating the) Bear is hiding. The bear is woken from its hibernatory sleep according to an ancient formula and is then 'killed' by the hunters, again in the way expected by tradition. In the dim dawn light the hunt looks quite convincing and although everyone knows this is 'pretend' the build up and the imagery is so powerful that people are moved in spite of themselves. We separate into hunt and hearth groups, the hunt group stay with the Bear to remove his skin and then hold a Symbel where we make boasts and promises. This is bonding time but also gives the others time to prepare the space where the later parts of the ritual will take place. They symbolically clean the space, smudge it and sing a special song. They light the fire, all these actions are explicitly carried out to honour our 'guest', the Bear. Then the hunting party arrive at the door singing, and there is a ritual exchange of words through the closed door. Eventually the door is opened and as the men carrying the Bear enter, they are sprinkled with water and welcomed with song. The Bear is taken to his place of honour whose surroundings are decorated with offerings representing the food we have eaten that year.

Later in the day we have a talk and then fun games, ostensibly to choose next years hunters but also to entertain our furry guest. We have a meditation which brings the last year of our lives and the coming year into focus and attempts to call up a sense of all those persons we have eaten, with the intent of honouring them. This serves as part of the preparations for our sacred meal. This meal represents the Bear's meat but is usually of local venison (with a vegan option!). There is music and song followed by the last part of the ritual, where the Bear skin is levitated with the power of our song up (at least that's how we describe it) into the Sky, while prayer sticks representing the prayers we send with him burn on the fire. Sometimes we have let off a firework as a sign of his ascent. The Bear will hopefully return from the Sky Father another year! Sunday morning ends with an exchange of gifts and extinguishing of the fire, each participant pouring a cup of water onto the fire resulting in a great cloud of steam and smoke, marking the end of that years Bear Feast.

Thank you for reading.