

Soul Matters Theme: Inclusion  
Pagan Holiday: Imbolc  
February 9, 2025

Inclusion: A Sacred Practice for All

- Imbolc season symbolizes
  - represents the first stirrings of spring
  - renewal, light, and the promise of new growth
  - midpoint between winter and spring
  - Celtic pagans honor Brigid, goddess of
    - healers, poets, smiths
    - childbirth and inspiration
    - fire and hearth
    - embodies creativity and transformation
    - sounds like there's a place at her table for everyone!
  - Seasonal metaphor: first signs of life stirring beneath the soil reflect the beginnings of inclusion—small, intentional acts that grow into flourishing relationships.
  - Bringing in the light
    - Embracing new growth together
      - creating space for everyone's unique contributions, much like the first signs of spring that emerge after a cold winter
    - Imbolc celebrates the awakening and nurturing of the earth
    - Inclusion symbolizes the awakening, nurturing, and cultivation of diverse ideas, identities, and experiences within a community
      - Seeds need warmth and care to thrive
      - people need support and inclusion to grow
- Ugly Reality
  - Tough to think about those things given the kind of darkness we see being cast by new national policies
    - Verified with IRS rules that political *issues* can be discussed in a church
    - What I can't do up here is endorse one candidate over another
  - Stuck for now with what we've got at the national level

- But we don't have to accept it or endorse it
    - Certainly don't have to practice it
  - Personal level
    - Not giving up my morals, nor my ethics
    - Also not shutting up
    - The more I stand up, the more I embolden others to dissent
    - Each of us needs to stand on principal
  - Local/Community level - plan to go on emphasizing themes of community, growth, and welcoming new perspectives or voices into the fold
    - The more we stand up as a group, the less power the other guys have
      - Because they're not as popular as they think
      - The more of us who speak up the harder it will be to persecute any single person who says trans rights are human rights or what's being done to immigrants is terrorism
    - Animal examples:
      - elephants, bison, reindeer, wildebeests
        - put the calves in the center and circle up, facing outward
- DEI under attack
  - What are Diversity, Equality, and Inclusion?
    - diversity: valuing the differences between people
    - equality: ensuring everyone can access the same opportunities
    - inclusion: measure of how safe and welcome people feel
  - Meme: which of these things are you standing against?
- Inclusion
  - accommodating different needs and perspectives
    - embraces and celebrates differences
    - promotes open and respectful dialogue
      - empowers individuals to bring their authentic selves to the table without fear of discrimination or marginalization
      - people feel they are valued, respected, and included regardless of their background or identity
        - have the same opportunities as others, and they are not overlooked or excluded
  - More than coexistence

- active practice of creating spaces where all are valued and belong
  - "Inclusion isn't just inviting someone to sit at your table. It's believing they belong there" (Mia Carella, Writer)
  - Reflection: "When have you felt deeply included? What made that experience meaningful?"
- Inclusion as a spiritual practice
  - honors shared humanity and connection to the divine in all forms
- Unitarian principles
  - inherent worth and dignity of every person
  - interdependent web of existence
- Pagan principles
  - interconnectedness, balance of diversity in nature, and sacredness of all beings
    - seasons embrace all phases of life — inclusion mirrors this natural cycle
    - Imbolc: returning light touches all, just as inclusion embraces all
    - Brigid's hearth fire symbolizes warmth and welcome for all, inviting us to extend that spirit in our lives.
    - Circle grows stronger/more beautiful as it widens to embrace diversity
      - connection to the sacredness of the circle in rituals
- Barriers to Inclusion
  - Acknowledging Challenges
    - Just as winter holds onto cold and darkness, barriers to inclusion—bias, fear, or ignorance—can linger
    - Unconscious bias affects all of us. Examples:
      - Affinity - people who act like us
      - Age - people our own age
      - Gender
      - Height, beauty, name
    - Self-reflection: What assumptions might we need to *unlearn* to be more inclusive?
    - Community dialogue helps
      - We are *better* than those who would set inclusion aside
  - Costs of Exclusion
    - Loss of

- perspective
- confidence
- creativity & innovation
- Inclusion helps
  - overcome prejudice & stereotypes
  - boost friendship skills
  - develop social skills
  - promotes equality
  - builds trust
  - addresses poverty
  - promotes tolerance and respect
  - fosters acceptance of differences
- The Elephant:
  - A group of people heard that a strange animal called an elephant had been brought to their village, and none of them knew anything about elephants; none had so much as seen a picture of one! Well, their curiosity got the better of them, so they waited until late at night and snuck into the tent where the elephant was said to be. They weren't supposed to be there, and didn't want to turn on any lights and get caught, so they felt their way through the dark until they each lay a hand on the strange beast.
  - The first, whose hand landed on the trunk, said, "This creature is like a thick snake"
  - Another whose hand reached its ear, spoke up and said, "No, it's like a great leathery fan."
  - The third lay their hand upon the elephant's leg, and said, "This animal is a pillar, like a tree-trunk."
  - The fourth placed their hand upon its side and said, "The elephant is a wall."
  - Another felt its tail, describing it as a rope.
  - The last felt its tusk, and stated, "The elephant is hard and smooth, sharp like a spear."
  - There in the dark, they started arguing about their impressions, each keeping their hand where they'd first touched the elephant and therefore certain they were right and the others were crazy.

- This led to the lights coming on and the elephant's handler entering the room.
- In that moment, all of them saw the elephant, and realized that they were all correct. Each of them had only a small piece of the whole picture.
- And they all got arrested for trespassing and elephant harassment.
- While one's subjective experience is true, it may not be the totality of truth.
- If we refuse to see the ideas of others, and see the world solely through our perception, we will never come close to understanding reality in its totality.
- The intellectual pursuit of truth necessitates us opening to the opinions and experiences of others, ideally those who are different from us and are experiencing a different part of the elephant.
- This approach of genuine curiosity will ideally lead to empathy and a greater understanding of others and of the world.
- Practices of Inclusion
  - To be more inclusive, you can treat everyone with respect and kindness, and make them feel welcome.
  - Use inclusive language
    - Avoid stereotypes and biases, and acknowledge diversity.
    - e.g. avoidance of the ableist language in the story, i.e. blind men
  - Deep Listening
    - active listening as a way to honor others' stories and experiences
    - the people touching the elephant were not listening
  - Making space
    - Sharing power and creating space for voices that are marginalized
  - Speak up about inclusion
    - Be authentic
  - Create safe spaces
    - where everyone feels welcome and included
  - Celebrate diversity
    - Make sure everyone feels included, not just that there is a diverse group of people.
  - Challenge stereotypes
    - Unconscious biases, cultural beliefs, and media influence can lead to exclusive and unfair actions.
  - Take diversity training

- helps people understand different cultures and learn to cooperate with others.
- Closing
  - Easy to grow disheartened in troubled times
    - But like Spring will always follow on the heels of Winter, so too will we prevail
  - Hávamál 127
    - poem written in Viking age, so between 900 and 1000 CE
    - two possible interpretations
      - 1: Where you know of evil  
declare it to be evil  
and don't give your enemies peace
      - 2. 'Where you know of evil  
declare it to be directed against you  
and don't give your enemies peace
    - Should we react to any injustice as if we ourselves have been the recipient?
    - The perpetrators of oppression—even if I personally am not directly affected by their oppression—are my enemies, and I am not to show them mercy
    - Call out lies, cruelty, fascism, violations of the constitution and human rights
- Call to Action
  - Let us, as a community, take tangible steps toward greater inclusion in our lives and the broader world.
  - May we walk together in the light of inclusion, carrying the warmth of this community into the world
  - Inclusion, like tending Brigid's fire, requires ongoing care and attention. The warmth it provides is a gift to all.
  - As the days grow longer and the earth begins to awaken, may the seeds of inclusion we plant today take root, grow strong, and bring beauty to our shared world.
- Elephant joke:
  - Six blind elephants were discussing what men were like. After arguing, they decided to find one and determine what it was like by direct experience.

The first blind elephant felt the man and declared, 'Men are flat.'  
After the other blind elephants felt the man, they agreed.

- Reading: We Are One by Marites C. Cayetano

the color of your eyes  
the color of your skin,  
the color of your hair  
may not be the same with mine...

the god you praise  
the language you speak  
the way you eat  
may not be the same with mine...

but we are one.

we cry  
we laugh  
we feel pain  
we feel hunger  
we feel thirst  
we feel love  
we feel hate  
we hope  
we dream  
we get tired  
and we rest...  
we are one.