

Celebration, as a Way of Life



By Barbara Swetina



“Everybody needs beauty like bread.”—John Muir
Easter Sunday in Eourres, and a sleepy little village in Provence wakes. But something is afoot! The night before, bands of marauding musicians and minstrels were seen moving through town, furtively putting up posters in the dark. “Villageois, tenez-vous prêts!” (“Villagers, be ready!”) was all the posters said. Ready for what, one wonders?

Word had gone 'round that there was to be a special celebration, similar to events that took place in the same village 20 or so years before....

Then, in the early '80s, a group of young hippies had just moved to Eourres, a remote mountain village in southern France, where only a handful of old people from the local population still remained. The young people were living close to the earth, picking wild lavender, keeping goats, making cheese, and rebuilding fallen stone houses. Beautiful gardens appeared, and long-abandoned irrigation systems were rebuilt and put to use again.

In those days, the village baker, François, allowed his imagination to roam during the long silent hours of the early morning, when he waited for the dough to rise and all the village was asleep. Drawing on inspirations from Buddhist New Year celebrations, German Carnivals, American Indian full moon rituals, as well as contemporary theatre like “Bread and Puppet,” he was dreaming of seeing the whole village engaged in celebrating the change of seasons with imagination and fantasy, using all the resources that were there. These dreams then took



All photos by Daria Sommer

Villagers and guests engaged in celebration of the change of seasons. Eourres, France.

form, with incredible celebrations that linked the villagers to the nature they lived in—mountains, forests, and rivers—in a different way than happened when they worked outdoors.

In those celebrations all the surroundings were enhanced in their natural beauty, as if the presence of people with bright costumes, musical instruments, dance, song, and theatrical moments brought a special energy into the land, helping to renew the life force in nature.

I was part of one of those celebrations. Going back to some of the places of our celebration the next day, I noticed that the whole area had a special glow, as if all living things, the trees, stones, and rivers were still filled with the joy and beauty they had witnessed the day before.

Twenty years on, François Monnet, the initiator of those early celebrations, has come back, and the villagers are gathering, curious.

And now we hear the musicians, playing and gesturing for the village to follow. A masked figure approaches, in bright colors. With only gestures she “talks” with the people, encouraging them along the way. More colorful characters appear along the road, some with musical offerings, some with riddles, some sharing glasses of wine and Easter eggs. A huge sun puppet appears on the hill, offering blessings.

In a wide clearing in the middle of the woods, two sleeping figures reveal themselves as the King and Queen of Winter. Adorned with the staff of the seasons and the water from the beginning of time, they talk of how they have been guiding the plants, animals, and people through the winter and are now ready to pass on the vestiges of power to the Prince and Princess of Spring. Two beautiful young people appear, dressed in brilliant vibrant colors. The bride is indeed pregnant and as she receives seeds from the Queen of Winter, she vows to share them with the land and with the animals and people!

Animal figures join into the play and the Prince of Spring leads the whole congregation to a merry improvised dance. Then there is a picnic where all share food, drink, and laughter.

While all this is going on, dark clouds have gathered all around the horizon. But nature has made it a priority to keep the clearing immersed in sunshine, and exactly as the celebration comes to a close, the first drops fall!

“In celebration we weave together the human, the natural and the

invisible world into a fabric of beauty. When we reach out beyond ourselves, to express our link with the natural world—with plants, seasons, elements, planets—we are feeling and feeding part of ourselves, we are re-connecting with the cosmos.”—François Monnet

We, the group who put together this celebration, call ourselves Celebration Activists. Forming a group of artists from many countries and from backgrounds in theatre, music, dance, fine arts, costume design, and more, we have been leading and animating creative projects, from family celebrations to large pan-European gatherings. Working with hundreds of people over the years, we were struck that there really is a need in our society to retrieve the magic road to celebration.

Therefore, for a few years we have been examining the possibility of a School or University of Celebration that would demonstrate, research, and apply the art of celebration.

Here we don't look at celebration as mere entertainment, a luxury, but as a necessity for the balance of humanity, the happiness of human beings. Just as we can teach mathematics or agriculture, or study psychotherapy, we can teach and study celebration. Celebration is an art, a craft that can be learnt. There are tools, secrets, and expertise to be passed on.

In 2009 we will form the Traveling School/University of Celebration (soon to be found on our website, www.celebrationactivists.org).

In this project, a team of musicians and teachers of theatre, fine arts, song, and dance will go from town to town, creating impromptu celebrations and trans-cultural rituals in the hearts of towns and cities. Our tour will culminate with the summer solstice celebration in the Findhorn Foundation Community in northern Scotland, June 13-21st. This year we welcome special guests from Poland, Jacek and Alicia Halas, who will bring a deep knowledge of Slavic and eastern European traditions in song, music, dance, ritual, and folk art. Findhorn, a multi-cultural spiritual community, ecovillage, and educational center dedicated to a holistic lifestyle and attracting visitors worldwide, is known for its pioneering work connecting with the intelligence in Nature.

If “Celebrations as a Way of Life” speaks to you, come and join us! ❁

Barbara Swetina, born in Austria, has lived in the Findhorn Foundation Community in Scotland for more than 20 years. She is also a world traveler, offering singing and dance workshops internationally in places like Europe, USA, Russia, Australia, and Japan. She plays the piano, flute, harp, and accordion, and has created several CDs and song books. With Ian Turnbull from the Findhorn Foundation and François Monnet, a multi-talented artist and fellow workshop leader, she is developing a vision for a university/school of celebration. www.sacredsongs.net, www.celebrationactivists.org, www.findhorn.org.

