

# [A Year of Living Shamanically](#)

## **Part 6: Lammas – beginning of harvest time**

August 1<sup>st</sup> is the next point in the medicine wheel of the year. In the Northern Hemisphere, we are now past mid-summer and heading towards Autumn. Known by the Anglo-Saxon name Lammas, or Lughnasadh, August 1<sup>st</sup> is the half-way point between the summer solstice (mid-summer) and the autumn equinox on September 21<sup>st</sup>. In earlier, more agrarian times, it represented the beginning of the harvest time, being the first of the three harvest festivals, the other two being the autumn equinox (or Mabon), and Samhain (or Halloween) at the end of October. In particular, Lammas represented the first grain harvest and the first fruits. In Britain, it is associated with the story of John Barleycorn, whose life, death, transformation, and rebirth were celebrated at this time. The origins of the John Barleycorn ballad are old, and there are many versions of the song. What he represents is the spirit of grain. In the song, he suffers attacks, indignities and then death, and that correspond to the various stages of grain cultivation. Barleycorn, as the spirit of the grain, encounters suffering and then dies. However, as a result of his death bread can be produced. So, Barleycorn dies so that others may live; his body is eaten as the bread.

What I find interesting about the Barleycorn story is its recognition of the grain as a living thing, that suffers and dies in order that we can live. I imagine most of us have some image in our heads of tribal people, such as the old native American tribal people for example, giving thanks to the spirit of an animal they have just killed; thanking it for providing food, and honoring the sacrifice it has made. The John Barleycorn story shows this same recognition being extended to plants as well; that even wheat, oats and barley are living things that feel, suffer and die to provide us with food. This is not to say that we shouldn't eat plants! But acknowledging their gift is very long way from where we are now, with modern factory farming, with horrors like battery chickens and veal. In many way we have lost recognition that the food we 'produce' and eat comes from real, *living* things.

I am not going to get on a soapbox here. If you are reading this, then I would probably just be preaching to the converted. I am going to take it as given that in many ways we have disconnected from, and lost respect for, the natural world. This has been a slow and incremental process. In some ways, it goes back to as far as 11,000BC, around the time that we discovered agriculture, and turned away from a hunter-gatherer lifestyle. Again I think the Barleycorn story is interesting here, in that it implies a recognition that, in the plowing and harrowing, the grain suffers in a way that it doesn't by being left to grow naturally. Similarly, some cultures that still practiced hunter-gathering lifestyles were horrified when they first saw

white people ploughing the land, as it seemed to them like an assault on mother earth, as even the land is alive. However, even after discovering agriculture, we still seemed to mostly live a balanced, largely peaceful, respectful and shamanic existence for several thousand more years. Around 4000BC however, massive climate change meant that agriculture began to fail. With a population now too big to go back to hunter-gathering, we faced starvation. What happened next is what we call the birth of 'civilisation'; the emergence of the city states. In fact, it was also a descent into a kind of psychosis that we are still suffering from. Basically, a handful of tribes organised and became warlike, and either slaughtered or enslaved the rest. It was the start of what has been six thousand years of continuous warfare and violence (prior to this time, the archaeological evidence shows virtually *no* evidence of warfare or organised conflict), injustice, brutality, the subjugation of women, slavery, and the exploitation of the natural world.

*There was three men come out  
o' the west their fortunes for  
to try,*

*And these three men made a  
solemn vow, John Barleycorn  
must die,*

*They ploughed, they sowed,  
they harrowed him in, throwed  
clods upon his head,*

*And these three men made a  
solemn vow, John Barleycorn  
was dead.*

Part of an early English version of the  
song 'John Barleycorn'



All this is the subject of the brilliant book called ['The Fall' by Steve Taylor](#). If you want to know more, I urge you to read it. It is not at all a flaky new age book, but an impeccably researched work written by an academic. What it does is blow away the (patronising) notion that 'civilisation' is about cities and states. In fact, it shows the last six thousand years to have been in many ways a descent into psychosis; hence, 'the fall'. This is not to say that there have not been amazing things come out of the last few thousand years too. I'm extremely pleased to live in a world that has things like antibiotics, running water on tap, the Internet and van Gogh. However, it is also true that all

the benefits have also come at a truly massive cost. The fall involved us cutting off; it involved us losing empathy, for other people (in order to be able to kill them and enslave them), which meant we also lost empathy for other species, and the natural realm.

Obviously, there isn't space here to go into this in detail, so if you are at all interested, then please do read the book! Personally, my only major criticism of the book is that he doesn't explicitly talk about shamanism, even though all the pre-fallen cultures he talks about practiced shamanism, and what the fall is actually about is a loss of shamanic awareness and practice. If I had to sum shamanism up, one thing I might say is that it is about really feeling connected; to each other, to other animals, to plants, to rocks, to everything. Everything is alive, and everything is sacred and deserves respect. Shamanism is not a religion. It is about experiencing that we are all part of a sacred web of interconnection. The fall was a fall from shamanism; from the experience of interconnection.



It is by no means all doom and gloom though! Steve Taylor's book also outlines how over the last few hundreds years we have begun to enter a post-fall era. There are many signs of this recovery, such as the emancipation of women, the abolition of slavery, the concept of animal rights, acceptance of minorities, the growth of the green movement, and so on. What fascinates me is that it also 'coincides' with the re-emergence (but also, and more significantly, the re-invention) of shamanism. It is no surprise that as we reconnect, and become more tolerant and empathic towards each other and towards other species, that shamanism is re-emerging for in many ways empathy and shamanism are one and the same thing.



But what has all this to do with Lammas? Basically, Lammas is a time of giving thanks; of recognising our debt and connection to the natural world, and in particular the plant kingdom, for food (and for our very survival). It is easy to disconnect from what food really is, in our age of cellophane wrapping and ready meals, and forget that the food we eat comes from living things, and that without them we literally would not be here. And not just the plants we actually eat. All life depends on energy. That energy on earth comes from sunlight. Without plants ability to photosynthesise then we, and all other animals, would not exist. Lammas is a time of remembering this, and giving thanks.

**GREEN MAN:** The power of regeneration, renewal and rebirth. The spirit, energy, presence, life-force, that is inherent in every cell of the plant realm.

Transmitted to the animal/human realms through the foods we eat, the flowers we smell, the grass we walk on, the trees we hug, the herbs we use. Being able to take energy from the sun. Strong connection with the plant world. Re-growth after too much 'civilisation'. Reconnecting with the wild. For those who have lost touch with the natural world.

In Pagan traditions, this would be a time to give thanks to one or more god or goddesses of nature. In Christianity one would give thanks to the Christian god ('We plough the fields and scatter the good seed on the land. But it is fed and watered by God's almighty hand'). Shamanism, as it is not a religion, has no gods or goddesses. In shamanism, we do not worship anything, but see the sacred in everything. We experience all things as being made of energy, and that energy is alive and conscious. All is a sacred web. Lammas is a time to recognise the support we get from other parts of the web, and to be grateful for that support and the gift of life it brings.

Giving thanks, and being aware of our interconnectedness and all the support we receive, makes us feel better. It is good for our souls! So, you could make a list of what nourishes you and what you are grateful for. Then do something to give thanks. If rituals work for you, then fine. You could also cook a special Lammas meal, or make jam or bread, and say thank you to the ingredients as you make it. Or say thanks to a tree or the plants in your garden. Shamanically, you could journey to meet the Green Man and say thanks. In shamanism we are used to bringing items, power objects and even power animals back with us from journeys. You can take things the other way too, as gifts from this reality into the shamanic realms. I will be taking gifts of food and objects such as crystals to my power animals and human guides on Lammas, to say a profound and heartfelt thank you to them for the riches they bring into my life.

Wishing you a bountiful Lammas.

Paul Francis.

If you missed the previous articles in this series, they are available to download from [here](#). Paul Francis teaches [shamanism](#) and [therapeutic-shamanism](#) in the UK, where he also works as a homeopath, polarity therapist and psychotherapist. He is the creator of the Power Animal Essences ([www.animal-essences.co.uk](http://www.animal-essences.co.uk)) and the Harmonic Resonances ([www.harmonic-resonances.co.uk](http://www.harmonic-resonances.co.uk)).