

# Thoughts on Michaelmas and why it may be time to reconsider its celebration

~ Aimee de Ney

Collectively we are deep in a time of reckoning and awakening as we move from the age of Capricorn into the age of Aquarius. For as long as we can remember white, Eurocentric, male, western religious images have been treated as the basis of culture in North America. Waldorf education is steeped in these traditions. When I stepped out of Waldorf schools and opened my own little school a decade ago, I was able to have agency and choice over the festivals I held for my students and families. Right away, I found myself unable to justify celebrating Michaelmas here in the Pacific Northwest. While the meaning behind the festival resonated—conquering our fears and taking courage as we step into the times of depths of winter—the symbology and customs felt antiquated and inappropriate for this time, place, and community.

It is now a decade later. After George Floyd's murder and the subsequent racial reckoning, I now look deeper into this intuition. What is the traditional Michaelmas story showing us and teaching our students, as schools continue to portray this medieval story and its festival images?

The gist of the story as I have encountered it is that through the help of the Archangel Michael, the soldier Saint George saves a helpless, white princess from the jaws of the evil dragon who is terrorizing the kingdom and countryside.

Here the dragon is portrayed as the embodiment of evil and destructive forces. Yet when we look around the world, dragons carry many messages and meanings. Most famous, of course, are the dragons honoring the Chinese New Year, who bring luck and prosperity to the people.

According to a creation story hailing from the Northern California Cahto tribe, all of creation was saved from drowning waters when an Earth Dragon, with the god Nagaicha riding on his head, came from the north and, with both his gaze and his body, created cliffs, islands, and a mountain range. His benevolence created the land of Indigenous Northern California.

In Eastern cultures dragons tend to symbolize water and the sacredness and freedom of water to sustain or end life. They symbolize strength and power; they rule the sky, the unknown aspects of the

cosmos, and the unconscious. They symbolize wisdom and riches deep within Earth's wells of wisdom. Snakes have long been associated with feminine wisdom, and the dragon is often considered to be in the same family as snakes.

Even in pre-Christian Europe, there were tales of benevolent dragons, respected and revered.

When the dragon is appreciated in this light—embodying earth, cosmic, and feminine wisdom and representing the life-giving properties of the natural world—what are the implications of the traditional Michaelmas story?

I understand the Anthroposophical view and sanctity of the Michaelmas festival. Yet teachers and school communities can celebrate the truths of the seasons and the festival life without centering on a story that is one-sidedly white, male, Eurocentric in its images. In seeking a deeper truth, we affirm the wisdom that lives in the earth, and is available for us to learn from when we make ourselves available.

In my community, during non-COVID times, we honor the time of the Autumnal Equinox with activities in celebration of the beauty and abundance of the land on which we live. This is a time to honor the land, the waters, the air, and to offer appreciation

and loving gratitude for the sustenance that the earth offers us. We come together as community and give thanks for this opportunity to connect and support each other before the darkness of winter envelops us in its close embrace. ♦

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### Resources:

- <https://www.ancient-symbols.com/dragon-symbolism.html>
- <https://www.worldbirds.org/dragon-symbolism/>
- <https://web.archive.org/web/20130204205517/>
- <http://www.pyramidmesa.com/ncal1.htm>

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