

Setting Imposter Syndrome Ablaze on Beltane (in Scotland!)

Jessica Hatch

The sun dipped lower in the sky, and the world breathed a collective sigh of relief that the earlier rain had relented. I peered out the window of my rented room on New Town's Scotland Street, waiting for the coffee that would keep me up all night to finish percolating. I tore a scrap of paper out of the notebook that had flown across an ocean with me. On it, I scribbled in ballpoint:

I release my imposter syndrome. It has never served me, and it will serve me no more.

It was the last day of April 2023. Back in January, I'd booked a flight to Edinburgh, Scotland, to celebrate Beltane, the first of three harvest sabbats in the Wheel of the Year. In pre-Christian Scotland, Beltane was part fire festival, part fertility rite, giving us legacy traditions like summer handfasting and Maypole dances that are still honored today. Farmers would light two bonfires in an open field, then drive their cattle between the flames to bless the herds as they moved from their winter pens to open fields for grazing.

Beltane in modern tradition represents a similar checking of the progress that stirs and sprouts at Imbolc and Ostara, a request for those fruits to be blessed. I often use the occasion to craft and cast spells related to my writing practice.

But if my cyclical year was at its first harvest, this would be one season where I stood in my field, leaning on my hoe, scratching my head. Why weren't my crops flourishing?

I'd gotten a book deal in 2022, and was even meeting with my editor while in the UK, so why didn't I feel more settled? Was it the speed with which my freshman and sophomore efforts had been yanked out of me? Was it my own isolation as a writer, having not attended a workshop in six years, that left me vulnerable to the more capitalistic corners of the art-versus-business debate?

These muddled questions ran their own circle through my brain. Beltane this year wasn't going to be about how far I'd come. It was going to be about burning away the weeds that were choking my creativity. It needed to be.

I downed my coffee, then strolled up Broughton Street, where witches were once purported to live and where a bakery had hung a chalkboard sign above its lintel declaring, "JK Rowling never wrote here."

The scrap of paper denouncing my imposter syndrome crouched in my peacoat's pocket, weighted by the red carnelian and golden citrine stones that TSA agents had thankfully been less than curious about. The stones would keep me company; the paper would go on the pyre.

For what better place to set my imposter syndrome ablaze than Edinburgh? The place is truly magical, from the crag-and-tail of Old Town to the private gardens of New Town; the colonnade of the National Monument of Scotland; the castle, of course, and Holyrood Palace; with Arthur's Seat, an extinct prehistoric volcano, overlooking it all.

When I learned of the festival the Beltane Fire Society has hosted there since 1988, I knew I had to go back. I had visited the city once, for an all-too-short stay as a high school orchestra student.

As I stepped off the train in Princes Street Station that April, Edinburgh itself had felt like it was running on cyclical time. Hazy ninth-grade memories of playing violin in the Great Hall of Edinburgh Castle, ones that didn't know the meaning of imposter syndrome, sprang to mind. My

orchestra had fanned across the chequerboard tile of the Great Hall's hearth, playing Scots folk songs for a crowd of tourists and locals. The hall's ceiling, a wolf's mouth festooned with thistle, had echoed our music back to us. I felt a sense of rightness as I drew my bow, a prompting to take in every incredible bit of that moment.

Now, I walked up a breath-puffing incline toward Calton Hill, where the festival would take place, a published author with a healthy dose of inferiority complex, who irked her friends with her *aw, shucks* lack of pride. Perhaps being here, where time stood still, I could find a footing in my past and enter a brighter future.

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As Calton Hill leveled off, it opened onto a gorgeous panorama, as though a fey realm had descended on its cool grasses for the evening. Like a pagan morality play, there were stations from the Tale of the Goddess and the Green Man, a Beltane legend with elements similar to those of other fertility deities. In this one, Flora, the May Queen, and the Horned God, Cernunnos, are wed but then separated by his untimely death. When he resurrects, newly antlered, they are reunited and light the Beltane fire, heralding the warmth of the coming summer.

Among the stations of the mummery play was a roped-off area with a large basket placed next to a dead sapling. If festival goers had written their intentions before they arrived, they could place them in the basket; if they hadn't, they could tie a scrap of cloth representing their wish to the sapling's branches. Later that night, the basket would be placed at the bottom of the ritual pyre and the sapling laid across its top. Then they would burn, igniting the magic of our intentions as they crackled.

I read my scrap of paper one last time and mouthed a quick "As above, so below" before placing it in the basket. Coming as I did from a solo practice, it felt incredible to not be hiding in the broom closet this Beltane.

The sun soon winked below the horizon. In the gloaming, a drum corps atop the national monument began a solemn tattoo. Their beat picked up with joy and brio as the first torchlight of the night flared along its colonnade.

If imposter syndrome relies on not being perceived, on eschewing our accomplishments, then the energy that comes from a community of bodies is its antidote. This is true even beyond ephemeral feelings of communal magic. Take the physiological phenomenon of "entrainment." A driving, external beat can impact the heart's tempo, increasing or decreasing its rhythm with the speed of the drums or chant, bringing it into consistent movement with all the hearts around it.

I did not know any of this on Beltane night. All I knew as the drumming grew in strength was that I could not stop smiling and that the warmth building in my chest was enough to make me whoop along with the other voices carrying over Calton Hill.

The drums had called us into community, into coven, and our Beltane rite had begun.

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The May Queen and her Green Man king journeyed through their story, accompanied by Beltane Fire Society volunteers in various amounts of body paint and states of undress, a reality I couldn't fathom in forty-degree weather.

The temperature on Calton Hill dropped as the night wore on, and I was very aware that life in Florida had stolen my tolerance for the cold. I huddled into my peacoat and scarf near the unlit pyre, its logs stacked taller than a man and just as broad, with a warren at the bottom for the wish basket. There was an achingly long hour till midnight, when the pyre would go up in flames. I shivered and settled in to wait.

But, literally brushing elbows against the railing, I found community in a young couple from Seattle. They had finished a tour of the Highlands, and this was their last night before heading home. They planned to stay up all night and, before heading to the airport, hike Arthur's Seat, where the May Day dew is said to grant youth and beauty for the rest of the year — rejuvenation with the dawn of summer.

The hour till midnight passed swiftly in their company. We discussed wordcraft and witchcraft. She had been raised by witches; he was her Christian but supportive partner. (The world is healing, as they say.) Before the blaze was even lit, I was setting fire to my isolation.

Here we were, far from our traditions back home, but united by this fire rite, lit up by our bond. In the year that has passed since that night, I've been fully sold on the truth that imposter syndrome and its related feelings of self-doubt grow in isolation. **It's when we share ourselves with creative souls that kindling sparks and warms us, coaxing us out of the dark, dank corners of our minds.**

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The stars peered down at midnight, as the festival's kilted chairman clambered atop a standing stone. He asked the Earth to bless us and beseeched us all to take care of her in kind. Then a great procession approached the pyre, led by the goddess and the Green Man.

Hand in hand, they lit their torch, then lit the warren at the base of the logs. Flames wrapped around the thirsty wood, around the wish basket and the sapling. I hadn't known fire could blaze so hot, burn so bright, leap so high. It became all I could see, the afterimage on my eyelids. The sky wheeled, the drummers drummed, and my new witchy friend taught me to smoke-scry while my declaration, now ash and ember, drifted down to the dark, cool waters of the Firth of Forth.

As a solitary practitioner who has begun to seek fellowship in her craft, I can attest to the collective power of hundreds of people focusing their energy on the same thing all at once. We see it in community organizing, in writing cohorts, and with the fire warming all our spirits, I saw it spark my intention that May Day eve.

I still feel it, in fact.

My declaration against imposter syndrome and toward my truth as a writer is still working and growing, a perennial plant whose seed was sown long before my time on that hill. There was a before, in which I did not question my right to create music in a castle's great hall, or doubt my ability to craft fiction in workshops the world over. Then there was an ugly after, in which questioning was all I did. The magic of Beltane was here to rid me of it, to create a new beginning.

My Beltane magic worked as it often does, bending the stiff joints of my thought patterns until they couldn't move anywhere but toward my intention. I don't doubt that the "disappointments" of the summer that followed — no second offer from my first publisher, an encouraging rejection from a literary agent — were meant to be.

I spent the winter months licking my wounds and pulling my cards, which reminded me that I am here. That the seeds I have planted may take time to grow, but — patience, Dear One! — they will thrive.

That discovery would come later. The following day, I would climb Arthur's Seat carrying my stones, emblems of prosperity and creativity, in my pocket. And on Beltane night, there had been nothing but joy.

As the rites ended, the crowds dispersed in a cheerful hum of conversation. At first, we all strode down the hill as a throng, then peeled off as we found our individual paths. My new friend, her partner, and I walked as far as we could together, down from the festival, onto the steep curbs surrounding the hill, until we approached the fork in our own road. We exchanged contact information and wished each other safe travels before turning our separate ways.

The last leg of my walk home was meditative and calm. The leaves on the trees of Scotland Street's square whispered new secrets to one another as I turned the key in the latch. My rented rooms didn't feel so cold now, warmed as I was by the afterglow of ritual.

Jessica Hatch is a writer and editor based in Jacksonville, Florida. Her work has been published by Bookouture/Hachette Book Group, *The Millions*, *Surely Magazine*, *Neutral Spaces*, and *Grimoire Magazine*, among others. Say hello at www.jessicahatch.com or [@JessicaNHatch](https://www.instagram.com/JessicaNHatch) on Instagram.

Captions:

Arthur's Seat: A carnelian and a citrine stone, representing passion and creativity as well as prosperity, rest atop Arthur's Seat on May Day 2023.

Broughton St. Witches: A plaque shows Edinburgh's pagan history, including that Broughton Street was "an area notorious in days gone by as a haunt for witches and followers of the 'Black Arts.'"

Colonnade/Drum Corps: The drum corps heralds the setting of the sun and the beginning of Beltane night.

Imposter Syndrome: A scrap of paper sits on a green notebook, next to a coffee cup. The paper reads, "I release my imposter syndrome. It has never served me, and it will serve me no more."

No TERFs Allowed: A sign in a bakery in Edinburgh reads, "J.K. Rowling never wrote here."

the pyre: The Beltane pyre is set ablaze on Calton Hill, midnight of May 1, 2023.

Wishing Glade instructions: A sign near the wishing glade invites attendees to “place your wishes or intentions in the basket at the base of the Goddess. They will be collected and put on the Beltane fire before it is lit.”