

Episode 47: The Fire Feast
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The world is big enough that you can never explore it all. And small enough that we can trust in finding our way home.

It's as though you were made to be here.

Funny that.

Welcome to The CryptoNaturalist.

[Theme Music]

Ah, winter. The time when so much of nature is tucked into bed, dreaming that wordless dream of wholeness shared by so much of the vast, lovely, silent universe. Meanwhile, us busybodies stay up past this sensible, seasonable bedtime and run around the dark house, giggling in the stark, echoing rooms, building snowmen and sipping hot coco in defiance of the restful dark.

I think this is good and proper.

Our species is young, after all, and perhaps we retain that joyful, unexamined, wisdom of children that says sometimes the habits of our elders are meant to be laughed at.

Joyful indeed.

Well, this time of year many of us are preparing to engage in rituals of joy, good ol' intentional merrymaking. Enjoying traditions new and old that allow us to perform some cheerful contrasts to winter's somber quietude.

After all, nature loves its contrasts and who are we to disagree?

So, when winter says, "somber," we answer, "bright."

When that snowy hillside says, "isolation," we answer, "togetherness."
When that ash-gray horizon, stitched with bare oaks says, "quiet," we answer,
"laughter."

It keeps things interesting.

Many of you folks listening no doubt have heirloom traditions, passed down with loving care through the generations. I think that is rich and wonderful.

As for me, I love my traditions with a maker's love.

I prefer my winter celebrations purpose-built for my own time and place, with the certain knowledge that I will forever be tinkering with them. In this way, my traditions become rambling fireside conversations that meets me in the moment, that ask me to hold up my end of discussion.

We each root in the soil that best suits us and, wherever you're planted, I hope you grow and thrive.

Today, I thought I'd tell you a little bit about my tradition, a warm gathering of family we call The Fire Feast.

To that end, I'd say this episode will be light on cryptids... then again I just fed a gingerbread cookie to my pocket crab and while the acoustic bats are technically on winter vacation from my studio, there are two crawling on my person as I speak. Their tiny claws are very sharp, but I'm just flattered they want to be near me.

Well, anyway, let's talk about The Fire Feast.

In fact, let's start with a poem, and why not go ahead and call this our hidden lore segment for today.

This hidden lore is a good introduction to part of the thinking behind The Fire Feast. It's a poem by me, from my poetry collection Field Guide to the Haunted Forest.

Candle Facts #1

If you whisper a secret to a candle flame,
then all fire everywhere will know that secret.

The words will crackle in every campfire
and churn like an ocean deep in the belly of the Earth.

Fire will translate your words to smoke and ash,
telling no one but the sky.

I think of this poem as part metaphor and part literal. A little tongue-in-cheek and
a little personal truth.

You see, to me, fire symbolizes a bridge. Is, in fact, a bridge. A bridge between
how you and I are alive and awake and how the mountain or the stars are alive
and awake.

In many ways, fire is an animal. It breathes. It eats. It requires certain shelter,
certain conditions for life.

And yet, it is not an animal. Its knowledge is not our knowledge. Its body is not
like our bodies. It is a primal force, but it can exist as a fragile single instance, an
individual, a lone candle flame.

This, I think, is a lovely metaphor for the way we are both alive as individuals and
also part of the unbroken whole of nature. The candle flame shines as an
individual point of light and is also, in a real sense, the same as all fire
everywhere.

The flame is animal and non-animal nature. The flame is an individual and a
representative of a whole that doesn't distinguish separate selves.

Plus, it is awfully convenient when a metaphor that powerful will sit politely on
your table next to a skillet of cornbread.

So, fire itself is a guest of honor at The Fire Feast. A guest that represents many other guests we invite to the table. Nature. Not just the sleeping violets waiting for the spring rains, but the grand forces of the universe, the forces that shaped us, that shaped mile-wide fungi in the Blue Mountains, the canyons of the ocean floor, the breathtaking filigree of a spider's web.

I suppose, put like that, a candle can be an intimidating guest. But, only if you lose sight of the fact that you, yourself, are part of that same family of natural wonders and cosmic forces. Reminding yourself of that, during this still, reflective time of winter dormancy is a big part of what The Fire Feast is about. That reminder is the message that the flame is at the table to deliver.

Of course, the fire is not the sole purpose of the gathering.

That fire, that connection to nature, well, now, that's about *what* we are. Yet, the physical reality of what we are is only part of the equation of a life.

We are more than matter.

We are also our choices.

Beyond what we are, there is also who we are.

Fire is a guest at the feast, but it is not the only guest.

My table, for example, is a gathering of found family. Or, as I like to call them, family.

The people who are invited to be a part of my life. The people I choose to make meaning with. To do ritual with, if ya like. Loved ones and kindred spirits in myriad ways.

A great deal of the most worthwhile human endeavors, art or poetry or crafting tradition, involves taking soft, ephemeral things like ideas and concepts and finding ways to translate them to the physical world.

It's the process of moving from *considering* a concept to *doing* a concept.
Performing it.

Paint on a canvas. Words on a page. People around a table.

Making meaning with action, not just thought.

It's an absurd thing, being alive. It can be disorienting. Challenging. Even scary.

To me, a big part of holidays is telling the people who walk life's paths with us that we treasure their company. That they are, in a real sense, part of who we are.

Nature gave us what we are and the people who we choose to love give us who we are.

The fire we invite to the table stands in for many grand concepts that won't fit in a chair, but the people we invite? Well, we can look them square in the eye and tell them we're thankful that they're with us.

Gratitude is a big part of my winter tradition.

On top of that, we like to go around the table and answer a few questions between fork-fulls.

Three questions to be precise.

What's something wonderful that I learned this year?

What is something outside my control for which I am grateful?

What is something within my control I hope to do in the new year?

That's it.

A bit about the past. A bit of present gratitude. A bit of looking to the future. All spoken and discussed in the presence of family and flame.

Not too complicated.

The Fire Feast always leaves me with a renewed sense of self and a profound feeling of togetherness, a feeling that no matter how strange or challenging life may be, I do not face it alone.

Well, I hope I have not been overly self-indulgent in sharing my tradition with you.

To me, making-meaning is a sacred act and all the better when done in collaboration with others.

I certainly feel that our current act of communication counts as making meaning, and I consider you a welcome guest at The Fire Feast.

Even now, sitting here in front of this microphone, I fancy I can feel the light of your kindred spirit as bright and warm as any kindled hearth.

I am indeed grateful for you.

Until next time, we're all strange animals. So, act like it.

Show Notes: Episode 47: The Fire Feast (00:15:10)

Credits

The CryptoNaturalist shares a homemade winter tradition.

Check out Field Guide to the Haunted Forest by Jarod K. Anderson wherever books are sold.

Reminder: Transcripts of this and every episode are available at cryptonaturalist.com.

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Exclusive stickers, pins, shirts, and access to bonus content and strange expertise on strange topics awaits you at our patreon page. Patreon.com/CryptoNaturalist. You'll find information about submitting your poetry or prose for our hidden lore segments in the about section of our website at CryptoNaturalist.com. The CryptoNaturalist is written and read by Jarod K. Anderson. Thanks to Adam Hurt for the use of his song Garfield's Blackberry Blossom from his album Insight. For more information on Adam's music, performances, and teaching, visit adamhurt.com.

Post Script:

The day of The Fire Feast, I like to keep a flame burning all day. And, in the evening, when the lights are low and the guests have gone, I tell the fire one secret hope for the new year. That hope stays between me and great, balancing forces of the universe.