

SOLSTICE TRADITIONS

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OPENING – I light this flame to honor the eternal light of Midwinter. May its warmth remind us of the Summer, and may its brightness be a guiding star to all kindly spirits who bless this season and this place with their presence.

Christmas time poses a dilemma for Unitarians. Should we celebrate a time that honors the birth of a god we don't believe in? Should we sing the carol whose words we can't bring ourselves to say out loud?

Christmas has always been a time of wonder and magic and excitement for me. I can't just give it up. So, I set about to try to resolve the conflict—should I celebrate it? Should I buy presents? Should I decorate my house? But I'm UNITARIAN!!

Rest easy—Christmas is just as valid for us as for all of Christendom. Let me tell you why....

December 25 is the day Christians chose, rather arbitrarily, it might seem at first glance, to celebrate the birth of their baby, child of a god and a mortal mother, who grew to be the Son of God and Saviour of the World. Strangely, they decided on that date 354 years after the event. But they chose wisely.

For a religion that was persecuted and not eagerly accepted by the pagan world, December 25th was a perfect date to select for the birth of a god. It is also the date on which the birthday of the Persian god Mithras is celebrated.

Mithras was the sun god, sent to earth by the God of Light to ensure fertility on earth. He was born in a cave, the darkest spot one could imagine, on the shortest darkest day of the year, and his birth was attended by shepherds.

According to Persian mythology, at the end of Mithras' time on earth, when Mithras returned to live with his father, he took a last supper with his followers in a communion of bread and wine.

It was then believed he would ascend to heaven, from where he would return at the end of time to raise the dead from their tombs for a final judgment. What a coincidence!

It was the Emperor Constantine, in 354 BCE, who was originally a believer in Mithras, who declared that December 25th would be Jesus' birthday as well. What better way to blend a large group of pagans into the Christian fold?

More coincidences regarding this date can be found....Osiris, the Egyptian sun god, was restored to life on December 25.

The Romans celebrated the Birth of the Unconquered Sun on December 25.

The Greek sun god, Apollo, was born in a cave in late December. Apollo's father was Zeus—the ultimate God—and his mother was mortal.

All these Wonder child births happened in a place of utter darkness, and at the time of the world's greatest darkness.

It is that which speaks to all of us, children of this planet Earth. The days of summer are gone. Each day the sun sets earlier and earlier. It's cold. The sun isn't there to warm us anymore. The crops die out. Trees lose their leaves. Animals hibernate and burrow deep into their holes. Snow blankets the ground. Water freezes solid. Nights are long and dark.

We need hope that the sun will return. That light and warmth will once again cover the earth and restore the comfort and safety to our lives. Early people felt that Nature needed help from humans to ensure that light would return.

We are no longer hunters and gatherers, worried about our food supply. Worried that we much live forever in darkness. We know better. Grocery stores are well lit all year round.

We know full well this old earth is gonna keep on spinning and sooner than we know, those pesky mosquitoes will be back and the grass will need cutting again.

But, despite this knowledge, depression is not uncommon in the long winter months. We cling to each other for comfort—witness the higher number of babies born in September and October than in other months.

It may just be that the human animal NEEDS something—a story that we can tell over and over again to reassure our inner primal instincts that life will go on, the sun will return, all will be well again.

And so, we have invented a Wonder Baby, who is born to be a sign to us that we can always count on the return of life and hope.

Are we Unitarians so reality based that we can't sense also a human need deep within us to create a myth of reassurance?

Maybe.

So, let's discuss reality for a moment. All these short days, long dark nights, cold, snow, ice, hibernation, is created for us by the earth, as it turns and tilts in the vacuum of space. We call it the Winter Solstice.

To remind you of your elementary school science class—the earth tilts slightly on its axis, sometimes its tilt points us here in Lancaster County such that the light and warmth from the sun strike us at a shorter angle than at other times.

In summer, the rays hit us at less of an angle and thus are warmer; in winter the rays hit us at more of an angle and so are less warm. The time of the shortest angle in summer is called the Summer Solstice and the time of the longest angle in winter is called the Winter Solstice.

Ancient would-be scientists noticed this phenomenon by perhaps measuring with a stick in the ground, or a stone standing upright, that the shadow cast by that stick or that stone changed as the year progressed, growing longer and longer as the Winter Solstice approached.

At first, the shadow lengthened at a steady pace each day. But, as the time of the Solstice drew near, the change in the shadows' length was less and less noticeable.

The word “Solstice” means in Latin, “the sun stands still”. That recognizes that for approximately six days in June and again in December, the sun appears to rise and set at more or less the same point on the horizon, appearing to stand still in the sky.

And then, once again, as it did every year, the shadows began to shorten at a steady pace and the light returned and the days grew longer and warmer. The people of the earth had survived another time of death and cold.

To the ancients, the boundary between summer and winter is mysterious and magical, belonging to neither this world nor the next, and therefore serve as gateways between dimensions, realities and states of consciousness.

This is why the Solstices, as hinges of the seasons, were always regarded as times when the two worlds were especially close. They were times of danger and opportunity; times for special alertness and aliveness.

As a historical note, let me remind you that the times when the earth is more or less tilted straight up and down is also a special time. These are the equinoxes—Spring and Fall. A time of planting and of harvesting.

But also important to history are the periods halfway between the equinox and the solstice.

Ancients celebrated the time halfway between the winter solstice and the vernal equinox as a special time of light returning. Today we continue that special observance and call it Ground Hog Day.

And, of course, in both ancient times and today, we celebrate Halloween as another quarter-day, halfway between the fall equinox and the winter solstice.

However, the Winter Solstice has always been by far the most important time of the year. If we, as Unitarians, cannot quite bring ourselves to celebrate the birth of a Wonder Child into our lives to chase away the fears of the long dark winters, maybe we can instead celebrate all those who are yet to be born, the hope of the continuing life.

Celebrate that which is yet to be born within yourself and the world about you.

As the Solstice observances spread, the rituals were added and elaborated upon. Each culture had its own traditions.

One of the early traditions was the use of holly. “The Holly and the Ivy” is a traditional song that celebrates the importance of the rising of the sun—the end of the dark winter and return to longer warmer days.

It celebrates the running of the deer—a favorite totem symbol of Northern tribal groups, and perhaps the origin of Rudolph the Red-Nosed. As the days lengthen, the deer, the source of food for ancient man, the deer would again begin running in the woods to supply us through another year. Magical reindeer that could fly is a story that has been told in the cold northern lands for centuries as part of the Solstice celebrations.

The holly and the ivy are ancient symbols of the continuity of life even during the dead of winter. These are both evergreen plants that continue to remind us that not all life is dead during the long winters.

Pagan tradition has it that the holly is the masculine symbol—tough, thorny, strong—and the ivy the feminine—clinging and circuitous and tenacious.

Remember, this is the time of year of the Winter Solstice—a time when there was much danger of unfriendly beings from the other world entering the world of humans. To protect themselves, people hung the prickly holly branches around doorways of their homes and around the fireplace to ward off unwelcome visitors.

The song has been appropriated by the Christians using the plants as symbols of Mary and Christ, so let’s sing only the first verse.

Sing “The Holly and the Ivy”

Another traditional Christmas song is Deck the Halls. Again the holly plants. But this song adds the element of the Yule log. The Yule log custom was important in pagan Scandinavia and celebrated the turning of the magical year. A time to celebrate the end of winter.

And, because this was time when the connection between the worlds of real and unreal was strongest, it was important to keep the fires lit and burning brightly all night long.

The earliest known burning of a Yule-style log was in ancient Egypt in about 5000 BC to honor Horus, their sun god. The Sumerians had a similar ritual.

The Celtic Druids burned oak logs to symbolize life—pine logs represented death. They decorated their logs with holly and pinecones. Then, after the burning, the ashes were given as medicine to cure plant rust, swollen glands and animal complaints.

In Celtic Britain and Gaelic Europe, they anointed the Yule log with salt, holly, wine and evergreens. Then it was lit and the women then kept the remnants to light the next year's log.

The ashes were highly prized—apparent protection against evil and lightning.

The pagan Vikings decorated their Yule logs with ribbons. People passing the Yule logs would tip their hats in a silent salute to the log.

For some strange Viking reason, a few people were excluded from burning of Yule logs—barefoot women, squinters and flat-footed people.

Sing "Deck the Hall"

The Christmas tree has a long tradition in pagan customs as well. These evergreen branches joined the holly and the ivy in the decoration of homes. I've already mentioned that pinecones were added to Yule logs.

Celtic Druids decorated trees with symbols of what they would like to receive in the coming year.

The evergreen trees were commonly recognized as representing the promise of renewed fertility, an important consideration for early herders and hunters and clan builders.

Candles are the most common decoration—a symbol of light and life. The candles sometimes replaced the bonfires as a symbol for the returning sun.

Plus, not only did the lighted tree assure a steady supply of light and heat from the returning sun, it had as a second aim the purification or destruction of the forces of evil that might enter the world during this dangerous time of transition.

I think it would be most appropriate to sing the song "O Tannenbaum" in its native German, even though we have to struggle with pronunciation. Thanks to Pirkko, here is a rough translation of the words.

O fir tree, o fir tree, how faithful are your branches.
 O fir tree, of fir tree, how faithful are your branches.
 Your leaves are green in summer's time.
 And also in winter when it snows.

O fir tree, o fir tree, how faithful are your branches.

O fir tree, o fir tree, you give me so much pleasure.
 O fir tree, o fir tree, you give me so much pleasure.
 How oft at Christmastime the sight
 Of a tree like you gives me delight.
 O fir tree, o fir tree, you give me so much pleasure.

O fir tree, o fir tree, the sight of you does teach me.
 O fir tree, o fir tree, the sight of you does teach me.
 Of hope and understanding,
 OF solace and strength to all times.
 O fir tree, o fir tree, the sight of you does teach me.

Sing "O Tannenbaum"

The Christmas practice of gift giving has certainly become an economic tradition in western culture. There is evidence, however, of gift giving as far back as the Roman festival of Saturnalia, which itself derived in all likelihood from the Celtic rituals of Midwinter.

The Romans added a more riotous mixture of fun and laughter and gift giving.

This celebration was in honor of the Roman god of agriculture and time. His feast was celebrated from December 17 the December 21, during which time all normal patterns of social behavior were abandoned. Masters served their slaves, law courts and schools were closed, and the whole community gave itself up to feasting, gambling, and drinking. You've got to love those Romans.

The seven days were given over to extravagant decadence and intense merrymaking. We carry that tradition over today in the form of the annual office party.

That these gifts were brought by Santa dates back even earlier, although this kind of twists the logic of which started first.

It is said that very early shamans of the far north, who were the first priests and magicians of the human race, would once a year, in the darkest part of the winter, climb up the world tree to reach the otherworld, and then climb back down with the gifts of prophecy and wisdom to give to the rest of the clan. Sometimes the world tree was the central pole of their skin tents.

Those shamen in the northern climes—Siberia to Lapland, often wore bells on their ritual red costumes, as noisemakers to announce the presence of the shaman as he enters the spirit world and to frighten off any unfriendly spirits who might be lying in wait for him. The red costume was red as the symbol of fire, that most powerful of magical weapons.

So—red costume, bells, land of cold and snow, climbing down from a high part of the dwelling with gifts. Sound familiar? HO HO HO!!

Yes, Virginians, there is a Santa Claus!

The next song I propose we sing is “Here We Come A-Wassailing”. The tradition of wassailing the trees in the cider orchards of the country has been going on since at least Saxon times.

Wassail means “good health”. The practice was intended to drive away evil spirits that might attach the trees, and to insure a good crop of apples for the coming year.

Sing “Here We Come A-Wassailing”

The traditions of Christmas are indeed the traditions of the Winter Solstice. The holly, the evergreen branches, the Yule log, candles, gifts, even Santa, are all ancient symbols that hold important significance to humans for thousands of years.

We are in incontrovertible part of this planet and her rhythms and cycles. Light and dark, warmth and cold, planting and harvesting, living and dying. We cannot escape it.

To deny our ties to these rhythms is to deny our basic nature. What better way to celebrate our human wonder, our human existence, than to light the fires, decorate the homes, reach out with gifts and feasting?

Happy Solstice, everyone!

And now, to celebrate the joy and wonder of the season, and to prove that we’re not too serious that we can’t sing show tunes in church, let’s sing “We Need a Little Christmas”