

## **From Darkness to Light Solstice celebrations, past and present.**

I thought I would talk a little bit about the time of the year when we change from fall to winter, and some of the traditional ways we mark this season of the year.

Surprising as it is, considering the weather we've had the past week or so; It is technically still fall! Winter doesn't start for another eight days. On December 21<sup>st</sup> at 10:47 a.m. Mountain Time, the Winter Solstice will occur. Astronomically, the Winter Solstice is the moment when the earth is in that point of its orbit where the northern hemisphere is most tilted away from the sun - We usually refer to the Winter Solstice as the shortest day of the year, but it really isn't. The winter solstice is the shortest day in the sense that the length of time between sunrise and sunset on that day is at the minimum for the year. It is the day with the least daylight hours for the year.

Does anyone know which day is actually the shortest in time? Due to the omnipotent powers of our Congress; by law - the second Sunday in March has only 23 hours – due to Daylight Savings Time. But this human meddling with the calendar does not actually change the number of hours in the day, or the historic and religious significance of the winter solstice. Interestingly, human meddling has previously also had an effect on the day the Solstice is celebrated. While solstice now occurs around the 21<sup>th</sup> of December, on our Gregorian calendar, up until just over 200 years ago it occurred the 13<sup>th</sup> of the month on some calendars, and around December 25<sup>th</sup> on the old Julian Calendar.

Historically humankind has found that this time of year to be special - and paid special attention to the time in religious and civil observances. Most revolve around the themes of Light, Darkness, Hope, Death and the Perseverance of Life.

At this time of year Judaism celebrates the 8 day festival of Hanukkah, or the Festival of Lights, Dating back to about the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE.

Druids brought holly boughs into their homes to shelter elves and faeries who joined mortals during Yuletide. The plant captured evil spirits that tried to enter

homes. Because holly is very hardy and an evergreen, it was believed that their ability to survive harsh conditions would somehow help the household to make it through the winter. I hope you will place your sprig of holly in an inviting place within your home, and will get to share the season with some elves and faeries, and it will provide you with some protection from the evil spirits that are lurking in the dark.

The Northern Europeans celebrated the Solstice as Yule Time; The three days before Yule was considered a magical time, and warmed with burning Yule logs and other ceremonies.

Through out the British Islands, Normandy and Brittany, and in fact much of Europe, are many Neolithic stone structures that seem to have been built for the observance of the winter solstice, and have passages or markers that are aligned with the rising sun on or near the winters solstice

In Ancient Egypt the God/Man Osiris died and was entombed on at the solstice.

In Iran Shabe-Yalda (Shab-e Yaldae) is celebrated by followers of many religions. It originated in Zoroastrianism, and the name refers to the birthday or rebirth of the sun.

In the 1<sup>st</sup> through about the 4<sup>th</sup> centuries c.e., Romans soldiers brought back to Rome a religion from the Eastern provinces a religion that revolved around a Savior-God who was reported to have died and was resurrected in order to become a messenger god, an intermediary between men and the God of Light, and who would lead the forces of righteousness against the dark forces of the god evil. Sunday was kept holy in his honor, and December 25<sup>th</sup> was observed as his birthday when he was born to a virgin on the *dies natalis solis invicti* (birthday of the invincible sun). This was the Cult of Mithras which appears to have originated in Persia and related to the Zoroastrians.

Beginning just a little later; in the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries BCE, The Christian religion, from which we trace our own roots, began to take hold, spreading from the East, to Rome and then throughout the west, again focusing on an intermediary

between God and Man, and the perseverance of life. And a Savior-God whose birth was originally celebrated, if at all, in January, as it still is by the Orthodox Catholics. Western Christians first celebrated Christmas on December 25 in 336, after Emperor Constantine had declared Christianity the empire's favored religion at the time of the Solstice (based on the old Julian calendar) but still kept traditionally as December 25<sup>th</sup>. The pagan origins of the Christmas date, as well as pagan origins for many Christmas customs such as gift-giving and merrymaking from Roman Saturnalia; greenery, lights, and charity from the Roman New Year; Yule logs and various foods from Teutonic feasts were kept alive. This ironically helped to preserve the memories of many of the old solstice traditions. However you choose to view these ancient traditions, what meanings you choose to derive from them, and which ones you choose to celebrate, they all seem to stem from a universal need to mark the changing from days of dwindling light to the days of increasing light.

Today is Santa Lucia day It is one of the few Saint's Days celebrated by Lutherans, and is an important celebration in Sweden. The festival of Santa Lucia occurs on the 13th of December, which under the old calendar used in Sweden before 1753 was Christmas Day and the longest night of the year. Throughout Sweden you will still hear the Song "Santa Lucia" and see people with candles bringing light to the darkness, and bringing joy to all on the traditional darkest day of the year. – As long as I am on the subject of Scandinavian holiday traditions... I should mention the Norwegian holiday tradition – Lutefisk! I think that says all that needs to be said about the Norwegians!

Even now, in our modern, high-tech world, our western culture keeps some bits and forms of these traditions alive today. We still celebrate, and maybe even feel a sort of primal need to mark and this time of year, when the earth begins its turn from shorter to longer days. We still find light to be a central part of these celebrations.

Light and references to light are found throughout these celebrations. The longer days, A bright star in the East, Candles, Christmas tree lights; homes and businesses are decorated with colored lights, and of course, the Jewish Festival of Lights - the lighting of the candles the Menorah each day of Hanukah. - The holiday burning of Yule logs is still remembered (along with wassailing),

These are all special greetings of love, hope and friendship to be shared with each other. The parties, special foods, drinks and feasts, even the gifts that we share with each other all serve to remind us that, although it is the darkest part of the year, and it tends to be the coldest and bleakest (at least in the northern parts of the world); there is hope that light and life will prevail. The darkness is passing, and we can look forward with anticipation to longer, warmer days. Spring, along with the rebirth of the plants and the birth of young animals is coming.

All these rituals serve to unite us in faith and community, to remind us that we need not fear the dark, but, as a community we need to celebrate the end of the darkness that has overtaken the world, A new year, an new beginning is near, and with the lengthening days, is the coming of more light - and a promise of rebirth of the world, nature and importantly - our spirits.

I am going to close by reading the Unitarian Universalist statement of our living tradition, which can be found in your hymnal, about 3 pages before page 1.

“The living tradition we share draws from many sources:

- Direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces that create and uphold life;
- Words and deeds of prophetic women and men which challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion and the transforming power of love;
- Wisdom from the world’s religions which inspire us in our ethical & spiritual life;

- Jewish and Christian teachings which call us to respond to God’s love by loving our neighbors as ourselves;
- Humanist teachings which counsel us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science, and warn us against idolatries of mind and spirit;
- Spiritual teachings of Earth-centered traditions which celebrate the sacred circle of life and instruct us to live in harmony with the rhythms of nature.”

**Blessings and peace to all.**