

The Solstice- When magic reinvents itself.



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Perhaps a calendar is not the best way to keep track of a year. The Celts had a far more efficient system that was based on real life - agricultural, seasonal, and the movement of the heavenly bodies- stars and planets, sun and moon. -We are at Solstice- the longest night of the year. We have just come out of a time called “the Darkest Depths”. We will be beginning winter, the season called the “Stay-home time”.¹ Though it is common when we think of Solstice to think of the Celtic people, this phenomena of the longest night and returning day light is known throughout the world. China, Japan, Middle East, are and were also places that noted the Solstice. Ancient Egypt too had great temples that were built with the sole purpose to focus the rays of the Midwinter/Solstice/ Spring/ Equinox sun deep into the heart of those temples. I happened to be in Mexico at the temple of Kulkulkan in

ChechaNintzen during the Spring Equinox and the serpent shape of the God Kulkulkan slithering down the steps, as he returned from heaven to earth, was clearly visible and clearly powerful as the god come to earth from the heavens. The use of architecture and construction of temples and stone edifices to mark the changing seasons speaks to our deep connection to the earth. The time of shifts such as the Equinox and the Solstice were known as times when the veils between the gods and humans was thin and easily penetrated by both. The Solstice was often known as the time when the Sun Gods, the god of new life and new energy could enter the earth's sphere. Fire and light, representing the sun, are two sources round which the midwinter festival revolves and really have revolved since the beginning of human consciousness.ⁱⁱ After all life depended on noting the changes and life depended on the ability to keep fire and light active and alive during the time of deepest gloom and time of rest. Solstice day is a time of rest and for slowing down for a day to notice the change, to feel the shift and to prepare by ritual and festival.

The traditions of the yule log is one such festival that acknowledges fire and light. The cutting of the yule log is a tradition that many still partake in. The yule log custom perhaps came from the Norse people. It said to be associated with the wheels of chariot that the Norse God- Odin also named Yulnir rode through the skies as he was searching for the souls of recently dead heroes who had sacrificed

themselves for the good of the people. This does suggest that during some of the Yule festivals live sacrifices may have been made, whether of humans or animals we do not know. We also know that a root word could be wheel, such as the wheel of nature. The symbolism of the Yule log is a reminder to keep fire burning to preserve life. The Yule log must not be allowed to burn out completely but a fragment of it must be preserved to kindle the next year's fire, thus bridging the gap year to year.

If you were going to adopt one ritual for honoring the Solstice, choosing, decorating, tending, burning and preserving a yule log might be one. Gather a log, decorate it with ribbons and greens and seasonal blossoms. Part of your ritual might be to recite the following words.

'Welcome log, welcome bring your blessings to this house and to all who dwell within'

And as you light the log you could say-

'I kindle this Midwinter fire. In the name of the ancestors and all the holy ones who guard the world; may it flames warm us all and may its light remind us of the ever-returning sun.'

It is interesting to note that in many parts of Scandinavia, St. Nicholas or his helpers would carry the ashes of the Yule log with them to bring as blessings to others. Perhaps this is where the custom of giving coal came from, as coal is burnt out ash, which will not reignite

without other fuel and fire being applied to it. This is a reminder to me that to survive the dark and gloomy stay-home times we need to be connected to others. Their light helps to give us energy and warmth and the fire of love and compassion.

There are other stories about the festival of lights too, let me tell you the one which is associated with St. Lucia. In Sweden, the midwinter festival begins with choosing a young girl to be crowned as Queen Lucy/Lucia. She is dressed in a white dress and a crown of lighted candles is set on her head. As Lucia sets forth into the dark with her glowing crown of lights she is followed by a man on a horse, a troupe of young women and a group of young men, called “star-boys” who are said to represent the demons and trolls and little people who have been released by the newly risen sun. She visits houses where there is a lighted candle in the window, to offer blessings and prosperity for the new- year. All festival goers sing carols and traditional songs and finally gather for a breakfast in a room illuminated by many candles. ⁱⁱⁱ

The practice of placing lit candles in our own windows is but another way to demonstrate our willingness to welcome the blessings of new life and of the midwinter spirits. These could be the Green Man, the Christ Child, or other gods and goddesses associated with light.

Much of our Christmas/holiday season can be traced back to these ancient times and festivals.

The birth of the child Jesus in the midst of midwinter is a story that is told and celebrated by many. What better time to have the nativity story happen than during the mid-winter, as this is the time when a new era was being ushered in. To celebrate the birth of Jesus, [called the Christ and thought by many to be the human presence of God on earth,] during the interval of the dying of the old year and the birth of a new year was perfect timing. It is true that Saturnalia, the raucous pagan festival happened during this time in Rome, and that the greenery, the gift giving, the festivals, the merriment occurred at this time, and that the church wanted to temper and stop the pagan festivals however the deeper meaning lies in aligning the shifts of the natural world with the festival of the birth of Jesus as new possibility and new life.

The Solstice is a natural occurrence that has huge significance for many people and cultures. Most every festival that we associate with the holidays grew out of some ancient practices engaged in during the Solstice. The magic of this season is that through all the ages, this occurrence reinvents itself and is made manifest when gathering with family, friends, neighbors and when seeing the growing light of days lengthening again. And what better way to mark the changes of the natural world than with festivals and feasts. If the natural world can

reinvent itself, there must be magic. For what is magic but the acknowledgement of some things special, the awareness of the ordinary being extraordinary, of distinctive times and events.

As you enter this last week before the Christmas day may you know that you are light bearers for each other, that you carry the light of love and caring inside and that you are the ones who the world needs to see as messengers of hope and light.

ⁱ P 19 The Winter Solstice The Sacred Traditions of Christmas by John Matthews, with contributions from Caitlin Matthews. Quest Books Godsfield Press. 1998

ⁱⁱ P 14

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