

## Ψυλλε Σερμον, 12-21-08—Μανψ Ρεασονσ φορ τηε Σεασον

I believe we live in a perfect universe: we get exactly what we need, when we need it, from whence we need it—whether we ask for it or not! That’s a big statement, but I only intend to deal with a small part of the universe today. As a modern pagan, I look at each season of the year as the bearer of lessons I need to learn. Take this holiday season, if there were ever a need for a party season where generosity and joy are celebrated, AND a time needed to recover from such festivities—December in the Midwest is THE time.

I am clearly not alone in feeling this way. In 1948, Earl W. Court published a book called, *Four Thousand Years of Christmas* that claims the Mesopotamians were the first to celebrate a Winter Solstice holiday. He wrote that these people held a 12-day festival of renewal, designed to help the god Marduk tame the monsters of chaos for one more year.

Many ancient cultures built monuments and temples in order to observe the sacred solstice times. Stonehenge, many people know, is a marker for the Winter and Summer Solstices; but, not as many people know about Newgrange, an amazing megalithic site in Ireland. The structure is large and circular. It is about 5000 years old—much older than Stonehenge, older even than the Egyptian pyramids. It was built simply to receive a single shaft of sunlight at dawn of the Winter Solstice. We don’t know how the builders used Newgrange, but clearly the Winter Solstice was very important to them.

Maeshowe, built in the Orkney Islands just north of Scotland, receives the Winter Solstice’s setting sun. It has been called, "one of the greatest architectural achievements of the prehistoric peoples of Scotland." The shortest day of the year is clearly a major event.

Hundreds of sites throughout Europe were built to mark the solstices and the equinoxes. Sites have also been found in the Americas, Asia, Indonesia and the Middle East. There is a site in sub-Saharan Africa (Zimbabwe). The most famous site in North America is the Sun Dagger of Chaco Canyon in New Mexico built by the ancestors of the Pueblo people. The Chumash people of coastal California celebrated the Winter Solstice for thousands of years before Europeans arrived there. The celebrations lasted for days.

A new book by J.L. Heilbron, *The Sun in the Church* tells that many medieval Catholic churches were built with solar observatories that help determined the date of Easter.

We as UUs tend to think of Christmas as the replacement of the European Winter Solstice rituals; that it was Christmas that spread across the globe with its attendant Christianity. We are wrong—people all over the world have been celebrating the Solstice since someone was smart enough to notice that the sun pretty much went away part of the year, but came back again! The Solstices are the universal holidays—since ancient times, we have been observing the shortest and longest days of the year.

In Iran, they celebrate Yalda and help the sun battle the darkness. The Winter Solstice is celebrated in Pakistan and Tibet. In China it's called Dong Zhi, "the arrival of winter." The Hopi Indians also celebrate. Then there is Hanukkah—tied to both lunar and solar calendars. This year the first night of Hanukkah lands on the Winter Solstice. As a commemoration of the return of light and a time of spiritual rebirth—Hanukkah is very much a Solstice celebration.

In a small town near Heidelberg, Wilhelmsfeld, the Winter Solstice is celebrated by rolling huge fiery wheels down the hillside. Fire and rotation are common themes in solstice activities, perhaps to mark the turn of the Wheel of the year towards the sun.

Andrew Zwarun writes on the "Candlegrove" site that the "Carol of the Bells" is based on the Ukrainian carol called "Shchedryk," meaning "Generous One." It refers to the god of generosity, the Dazh Boh - the Giver God, who is the sun and whose feast is on the Winter Solstice. Even after the coming of Christianity in 988, Ukrainian pagan customs still permeate their spiritual outlook.

For many cultures, Winter Solstice has been a time of divination and magical fortune telling. In Russia there's candle divination: one sits in a darkened room with two lighted candles and two mirrors facing each other. The viewer seeks out the seventh reflection in which to see her future.

The Germans would build an altar to Bertha, goddess of domesticity. Fires of fir branches would create smoke through which Bertha would descend and guide those wise ones to read the future for those at the feast.

In Spain, the "urn of fate" contains slips of paper upon which are written all the names of those present. The papers are drawn out two at a time to see who should be devoted friends for the coming year. (There's a bit of matchmaking involved, as well 😊.)

In Scandinavia, family members place all their shoes together to help them live in harmony throughout the coming year.

Many cultures consider it bad luck for a fire or a candle to go out on Christmas or Solstice day.

What I have been most "blown away" by while researching this sermon, was the length and breadth of the list of celebrations associated with this time of year in all nations. We hear the echoes of these merry events today.

Four thousand years ago, the Egyptians held a 12-day festival celebrating the rebirth of the sun. Each day reflected a month of their solar calendar. They decorated with greenery....

The Persians adopted a Babylonian renewal festival where the order of society was temporarily subverted: masters and slaves exchanged places, a mock king was crowned, parties poured into the streets. As the old year died, the rules were relaxed. Sounds like a New Year's Eve party to me!

There was fear as well as fun involved at this time of failing sunlight. Even after the Greeks were Christianized they told the story of the Kallikantzaroi—the ugly monsters of chaos that are mostly trapped underground. During the 12 days of Christmas, these monsters roam freely upon the earth. Most of their activities were nasty practical jokes rather than wreaking real havoc; but to scare them away, Greek people would keep their “Christmas” log burning. Most amusing was the Greek tendency to burn old shoes, believing that the awful smell would repel the monsters. Perhaps George W. Bush should have known this before his last trip to Iraq where he was pelted with shoes!

From Iceland comes the legend of the sinister and huge Yule Cat, who, it seems, is prone to eat lazy people. Those who did not help with the work on the autumn wool by Yule time were doubly cursed—they missed out on a Yule gift of a new article of clothing, and they were threatened with being sacrificed to the dreaded Yule Cat!

In ancient Rome, the Egyptian and Persian traditions merged in Saturnalia, celebrating the seedtime god, Saturn. It is said that, “the people gave themselves up to wild joy.” There were feasts, gifts and greenery decorations. The year was turned upside down: quarrels and grudges suspended; wars interrupted; the markets, schools and courts closed. Masters served slaves, rich and poor were equal, children made the family decisions. There was a Lord of Misrule, masquerades, cross-dressing and parties galore. Lamps were lit to chase away the spirits of darkness.

The ancient religion of Mithras became hopelessly entwined with the Jesus story. Beginning around 3000 years BCE, the religion taught that Mithras was a sun god born of a virgin in a cave on the Winter Solstice. Three Wise Men of Persia came to visit the baby savior-god Mithras to bring him gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. The parallels go on....

I went to Wikipedia to see what celebrations they had listed and it was overwhelming! But, really, it's an ancient idea—much older than our written histories: the harvest is in, it's too early to plant again, we are stuck inside with each other due to the weather and probably getting cranky. What shall we do with the time between the seasons of heavy work in the fields? Party!

Partying is simply a break, however, in the real business of winter. The party simply divides the cold weather into two seasons: the dying of the sun, and the return of the light. For modern pagans, the Winter Solstice is a joyful time between two times of introspection and meditation.

Most of us no longer work the fields, instead, we spend most of the winter in a sort of silence, a quiet darkness where we go inside of ourselves and do our soul work. It's a time to plan for the future and to come to peace with ourselves; a time of gestation, a time of silent waiting, a time of patience—a time to be, not do.

I use meditations on the four compass points to do my spiritual work in winter: the North is earth—it's cold, challenging; it represents endings, ice, snow and things waiting to germinate. The East is air—it's awakening, new life, peace and triumph of the spirit. The South is fire—the heat of life ripening in earth, the stable root of our lives. There is also the West, water—the restless seas and wandering spirits; it's movement, emotion and the seeking of new directions. All these lead me to think about where I have been, what I have been doing, and—finally—what I intend to do next.

The season of Winter Solstice/Yule/Christmas has always been a time a peace and charity towards others; for instance, in Norway, work was minimal and no wheels were turned in deference to the great wheel in the sky—the sun. Part of this peaceful time—Julafred—no bird, no beast nor fish was trapped, shot or netted.

A blessing for this time of year from John Matthews goes, “For the return of the sun — blessings and praise! For the gifts we give and receive — blessings and praise! For animals everywhere — blessings and praise!

You will have heard this sort of sentiment many times, but I'm saying it anyway! Somewhere in the so-called evolution of Christmas traditions, we lost much of the deep connections to a weather/seasonal/hemispheric event that our ancestors understood. Many of us seek to regain that connection.

Zwarum writes, “I share this season with all those who still feel that innocent joy of these ancient beliefs. They are irrational, but that is their strength. They satisfy the subconscious, not logic. They bind us to a hoary past which always brings us comfort and hope for life from the Giver God.” I say that we need the Solstice season; it makes us human beings.

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1. Most information blatantly lifted from the “Candlegrove” section of the “Ancient Origins” website, but the description of the directions and the blessing come from John Matthews’ *Winter Solstice: The Sacred Traditions of Christmas*.
2. The outline on Mithras’ birth comes from “The Pagan Origins of Christianity” site.