

FROM SOLSTICE TO SACRED BIRTHDAY
by Rev. Kit Ketcham, Dec. 19, 2004

Reflection: When the Sun dies and is reborn

Welcome tonight as we trace our human roots back through the centuries, beyond the scientific discoveries of Enlightenment and modern time logic and reason, beyond the legends and stories which surround the beginnings of our religious tradition, and back to the time in space of our oldest brothers and sisters, those whose dependence upon the sun, earth, moon, and stars was expressed in ritual and ceremony that still appear faintly in our memories.

I invite you to a time of celebrating the dark and all its gifts and welcoming the light, as our earth moves into winter and on into spring and summer. We Unitarian Universalists, in our 7th principle, acknowledge our deep connection to the earth and its creatures, and that is one of the reasons we celebrate this time of year. Without the dark, we would have no time to rest; without the light, we would not grow.

No one is really sure how long ago humans recognized the winter solstice and began to herald it as a turning point, the day that marks the beginning of the return of the sun. But since ancient times, cultures have built their structures and customs to align with the seasons. Stonehenge, Newgrange, Maeshowe, all in the British Isles, are stone structures which receive the light of the sun in special ways at solstice.

Indigenous peoples had winter solstice rites, as did cultures in the East, such as Iran, Pakistan, Tibet, and China. Hanukkah is tied to both the lunar and solar calendars, beginning 3 days before the new moon closest

to the Winter Solstice. And Ramadan, marked by the appearance in the sky of the new moons of November and December, is also determined by the earth's rhythms.

As we mark the coming Solstice tonight, we join hands with cultures across the earth in a millennia-old recognition of our interdependence as human beings on a planet ruled by the mysterious forces of nature.

The symbols we use in this season affirm that connection. The ivy honors the Winter King and Queen, whose sacred tree is the holly. Though these species are not native to our region, we have imported them for their spiritual significance.

The Druids gave us mistletoe for decorative and magical purposes; mistletoe grows atop the sacred oak, the point nearest the sun. Various traditions revere trees--evergreens, especially--for their ability to stay green in the winter.

We decorate the trees with all kinds of lights and figures to ensure the light's return, as did many of our most ancient ancestors, and to celebrate the bounty of the year that is passing.

Many fire-customs are important at this time of year. The Yule log fire in the darkest night embodies the everliving fire of the soul, the ever-springing hope of the worlds. At Winter Solstice, we honor the Sun King who has reached the end of his reign and has bid us farewell. The sun of the old year has sunk into darkness and gone to rest.

REFLECTION: HOW CHRISTMAS CAME TO BE

Though we are not quite sure when the ancients began to mark the winter solstice with ritual and celebration, we do know that out of those

beginnings grew the holiday we now call Christmas.

It was in the year 354 of the common era when the birthday of Jesus was first celebrated on December 25. The early Christian church was competing with many pagan mid-winter festivals which were more attractive to its converts.

And so, ever seeking to make its doctrine more inviting to non-Christians, the church decided to proclaim Jesus' birthday as December 25, which just happened to coincide with the birth of the ancient Phrygian sun-god Attis, the birth of the Persian sun-god Mithras, and Saturnalia, a Roman festival dedicated to Saturn, the god of peace and plenty.

For these festivals, public gathering places were decorated with garlands, gifts were exchanged, candles lit, and the whole population celebrated the occasion with great enthusiasm. Christmas, celebrating yet another miraculous birth and life, fit right in.

It is highly unlikely that Jesus was actually born in the winter, if the Gospels' birth stories are in any way accurate historically. Probably he was born in the spring, when shepherds would more likely be in their fields.

But spring was already taken, the stories of Jesus' death and miraculous resurrection as portrayed at Easter being more important in Christian doctrine than his birth story. Gradually, both miracle stories began to gain in strength in Christian theology.

By the end of the 8th century, the celebration of Christmas had spread all the way to Scandinavia, and pagan rituals and festivities flavored most of the season. By the Middle Ages, Christianity had pretty

well supplanted pagan religion, but on Christmas, believers attended church, then celebrated raucously in a drunken, carnival-like atmosphere much like the old Saturnalia and today's Mardi Gras.

In the early 17th century, religious reform changed everything. When the Puritans and Oliver Cromwell gained power in England, Christmas was canceled---at least until Charles the II was restored to the throne and, along with him, Christmas.

The Pilgrims who came to America in 1620 were even more strict. Christmas was outlawed in Boston and merry-makers were fined five shillings. After the American Revolution, British customs were even less popular, and Christmas wasn't declared a holiday until June of 1870.

Gradually, Americans began to embrace Christmas, re-inventing it into a family-centered day of peace and nostalgia. American author Washington Irving and English author Charles Dickens, who was a Unitarian, by the way, were largely responsible for offering a vision of Christmas spirit and custom that readers found engaging and adopted as their own. Both authors portrayed a peaceful, warm holiday, bringing people together and celebrating good will towards all humankind. Their vision became the Christmas we know today.

A Holy Season in Unitarian Universalism

As we've moved tonight from the earliest recorded religious observations of this winter season, rituals marking the longest nights and the shortest days, the subsequent development of ceremonies honoring the birthday of a child who might redeem humanity, the customs and songs and sentiments that have become so dear and yet so commercialized, you

may have had the same question that always comes to me when I contemplate the meaning of some religious doctrine or practice: what is the bottom line here? Where might my faith touch hands and heart with this moment in time that is so important to other religious folk?

Is there an underlying theme to all the Christmas hype? Is there a link between the solstice and the sacred birthday, a common thread that stitches together the legends of Kris Kringle and St. Nicholas and the baby Jesus? For that matter, how about the other cultural holidays that we celebrate at this time of year, Hanukkah and Kwanzaa? What is the point of making a big deal out of this season?

Over Thanksgiving, I attended church with my sister who is a member of the Moses Lake Christian and Missionary Alliance church. She had assured me that we would sing the old hymns that we loved when we were kids together, and I'm always looking for a chance to belt out those old songs. I knew I'd do a lot of translating from Christian into Unitarian Universalist language, and I did. I decided that the message that morning, in my religious tongue, was "Love is the meaning of life".

And every year, I wrestle with doing the same thing to Christmas, Hanukkah, Kwanzaa, solstice. What is their common thread? Is it light? The light of the world as exemplified by Jesus? The light of the menorah which miraculously lasted for eight days long ago? The light of enlightenment when African Americans re-affirm their worth and dignity and purpose? The light of the returning sun, after the longest night of the year?

Is there something deeper and more meaningful than light? And I remembered a morning long, long ago in my life, when I sat on a barren

hilltop with other young people my age. We had been at a weekend retreat in eastern Oregon, and we had gathered on this hilltop in the dark night to await the sunrise on Sunday morning.

We had a small campfire and flashlights, we were bundled up against the chill, we were laughing and clowning around as kids do. But gradually the fire died, darkness took hold, the occasional flashlight scanning the faces dimmed, we huddled together in the wind, facing the east, as the sky lightened, the stars went out, and a faint golden streak began to broaden on the horizon.

Almost breathless with anticipation, for few of us had ever stayed up all night to await the dawn, we watched the sun climb through the clouds on the skyline. I have a dim memory of the old hymn we were singing “what bountiful care, no tongue can recite, it breathes in the air, it shines in the light; it streams from the hills, it descends to the plain, and sweetly distills in the dew and the rain”.

As the sun rose higher and the song ended, we responded with joy---our joy at seeing the sunrise, our joy at being together on that hilltop, our sheer joy for the gifts of life so beautifully offered in that shining moment.

My theology has changed a lot since then, but never have I known more clearly than that day that light and love are intertwined forever in my mind and heart, and that the product of light and love in my heart and mind is Joy.

And that is, for me, the bottom line, the common thread, the link between solstice, Christmas, Hanukkah, Kwanzaa, and all the ritual and

ceremony of this time of year, the hoped-for outcome of all the effort.

We endure a great deal of hardship, worry and anxiety, anger and fear, sorrow for the injustice and cruelty in the world around us; we suffer these cares and concerns all year round. There is little respite. We long for joy; and sometimes it seems that the world conspires to keep it from us.

One more story: this one is about my friend Bill, a UU minister recently serving a congregation in Texas.

Bill was from Provincetown, MA and for several years before going to seminary, he had served AIDS patients as a social worker. This involved being with many people in their last illnesses; you can imagine what that does to a person's heart.

At some point his work really got to him and he was overcome with gloom and despair and those feelings which are too heavy to name. He went out to take a walk along the beach there in Provincetown, asking himself where he was going to get the strength to continue his work.

It was then that he realized he wasn't alone. There was a woman walking on the beach, and she was shouting something. Bill was a little upwind of her, but as she moved closer, he could hear that she was shouting "Joy."

Bill felt it was a call from somewhere to his soul: "Joy, that's it. I'll just try to feel joy." The realization swept over him that even in the midst of all the woes of his life, joy was something he could have. So he started shouting it too.

The woman was shouting "Joy" and Bill was shouting "Joy" as he came closer, their cries echoing each other as they came to within talking

distance, and he was just about to tell her how her shout of joy had changed his whole outlook on life when a large Golden Retriever came out from behind a dune, and ran up to the woman, who said to the dog, "Joy, where have you been, I've been looking all over for you."

The psalmist wrote, in Psalms 30:5, "Weeping May Endure for a Night, but Joy Cometh in the Morning."

Joy comes when we call it. Let us call to ourselves the joy that is the common theme of Christmas, of solstice, of Hanukkah and Kwanzaa, the joy that is the foundation of our life together in this community.

Let's pause for a time of silent reflection and prayer.

BENEDICTION:

Our worship service, our time of shaping worth together, is ended, but our service to the world begins again as we leave this place. Let us go in peace, remembering that we can call upon Joy and it will come, that no matter what the cares and anxieties of the world offer us, Joy is still available to us. May we share our Joy at this happy season, with ourselves, with each other, and with the larger community beyond these walls. Amen, Shalom, Salaam, and Blessed Be.

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