

Winter Solstice is the night of longest dark, the point of deepest night and winter before the returning of new life. It's the last moment of gestation, the time in the womb that's about to end in birth, the nothingness that becomes the universe. The Hopi call this time *Soyal*, the time of turning the sun. This is the moment when *Ianra* begins her return from the underworld, and the moment again of her rescue of *Tamnu* in her second descent. The goddess returns from death to life, from winter to spring. *Hecate* releases *Persephone* to her mother *Demeter*, *Tamnu* and *Persephone* are reborn. It is no coincidence that *Christlany's* god-dess *Maya* birthed *Jesus* at the time of *Yule*. *Winter Solstice* is the moment of the goddess' birth herself, the point of creation to come at the next moment after. This is the first passage, into awareness, from nothingness to the chaos of all hope and potential. It's the total stillness of winter, the furthest descent before winter cold gives way. Rituals for *Winter Solstice* reflect the passage, the turning back, the birthing and awakening of death into life.

The circle area is decorated in winter white, with evergreens, holly and mistletoe, and the ritual uses white and red candles. A Christmas tree in the room is not out of keeping, as long as its light does not distract.

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and bells used in invoking the directions are an added touch. The altar is made with a white cloth and decorated with gold, snowflakes, a goddess image draped in white, pine and holly boughs and objects for the four wintery directions.² A red candle for each woman present is placed on the altar, but not yet lit.

From the Hopi *Soyal* ceremony comes the rite of the Hawk Maidens.³ The women begin the ritual by purification with cedar smoke or pine incense, and cast the circle and invoke the directions in their wintery attributes, lighting white candles at the quarters. There is no other light in the room. At the center of the circle is a large nest, made with pine boughs or straw. In it are seeds of all kinds, and objects to symbolize life, people and animals—objects brought to it by the women of the coven who build it as part of the ritual. Feathers represent birds; small figures, toys or pictures are animals; insects and humans; seashells are marine life; the seeds are for plants and all nourishment.

The high priestess of the evening says:

We are gathered here tonight to give birth, not only the birds of our bodies, but the birds of the universe and our minds. Being, the longest dark is the ending of the death from which all life is born. Tonight we turn back the sun, and our efforts birth the goddess, *Persephone* and *Tamnu*, all of life and our selves.

Each woman of the coven takes her turn at sitting on the Hawk Maiden's nest, which tonight is the cauldron of transformations, and they brood the return of life. As each takes her place there, she takes of her own life a creation, of her hopes for the year, or her projects under way or beginning. When each has experienced this brooding before birth, this gestating of her life, she goes to the circle and lies down, curling herself into a fetal position, waiting for hatching and the birth of her hopes.

The women curled as fetuses meditate on darkness and non-being, dreaming in the state between life and death, listening to her sisters dream from the safety of the womb. The room is almost dark, and as the women finish on the nest and lie down, the room grows quiet with their meditation, nothing heard now but their breathing. One begins a

²Ed Fitch and Janine Brown, *Magical Rites from the Crystal Well* (St. Paul: Llewellyn Publications, 1984), p. 45.
³Adapted from Frank Waters, *Book of the Hopi*, New York: Bantam Books, 1953, p. 194.

humming sound, a wordless chant, and the others take it up.⁴ They are led in the process of birth by a woman of the circle, a priestess who messages each of them lovingly to life, or they experience birth simultaneously and themselves. As one woman is awakened, she helps to birth the nest, or one curls in the circle alone for the others to birth her, and then another takes her place. The chanting continues throughout, as the energy rises, the time within the womb, the time of sleep, waking and non-being comes to an end. The women let go, choose life, are propelled into the world, into Being and creation. They uncurl slowly, open their eyes and stretch, and are led and welcomed to the earth by their sisters. Each woman as she rises lights a red candle and places it on the altar. Born, she savors newness, savors the feeling loved and cherished, savors the knowledge that all she hopes for is possible and beginning. She is the newborn goddess about to create the universe of her life, and she helps her sisters to be born as well.

As each woman lights her candle she remains standing in the circle. When all are standing and the altar glows with the women's light, they begin to chant and hum again or sing in an increasing tempo of emerging and Being.

*Isla, Astoria,
 Dana, Hecate,
 Demeter, Kali—
 Ianra.*

The cone of power forms, and the women channel it to nourish their creations and projects, to nourish the newborn goddess, *Persephone*, *Tamnu* and the earth. They direct it to creativity, to beginnings, to Being, by turning the sun, to spring. The women ground the energy by placing their hands on the floor, and open the circle. They keep the seeds from the nest for spring planting in their gardens to come.

I believe this is from
 "The Women's Spirituality
 Book" by Diane Stein