

Children of the Goddess

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We are all children of the Goddess, the Great Mother. Some of us have always been on good terms with our Mother; some have been estranged in the past and have found their way back, while others have not spoken to Her in years. No matter what, She is still our Mother and she loves all of us.

Even though She loves all her children, there are certain ones who are exceptionally precious to Her, who have a special connection with the Earth, a link with all other living things. They are not only Her children, they are our children.

Anyone who has ever taken a walk with a two-year-old knows that everything is wonderful, everything is interesting, from puddles of water to blades of grass, from dandelions to dead worms, from clouds to leaves to little tiny rocks that they want to bring home. They know instinctively and intuitively what we sometimes struggle to realize: that everything is connected, that all is part of a greater whole, that the Earth is awesome.

This sense of connection and unity does not last long in our society. While some societies realize that they are inseparable from the Earth, ours considers itself separate, alienated, above. This detached attitude shows in our children; the wonder and delight often disappear by the age of seven or eight, and video games and clothes become more "cool" than rainbows and ants.

To build a society in which all realize that to harm another is to harm oneself, this sense of kinship and connection must be encouraged and nurtured. There are in our ceremonies to honor and acknowledge the Earth, we must include our children, especially our sons.

The path to the Goddess is not always clear or easy for women; for men the way can be even more difficult.

My husband and I had discussed religious and spiritual teaching for our children, but we had not really come to any definite agreement or plan. We had both been raised Catholic, but we were uncomfortable with several aspects of that church. We thought we had time to figure it out.

Then, when my son was about three, he came home and informed me that Jesus loves only nice people, and they get to go to heaven. God, I was told, was an old man who had made the world and had a beard. Our four-year-old neighbor was going to Summer Bible School and had shared what he had learned. Obviously, we didn't have as much time as we had thought.

After our son came home with this religious information, I decided to share some of my rituals and observances with him. I talked about how wonderful and interwoven the universe is and started using the term "the Earth" in conversation with him.

I knew that simply sharing was not enough. Children need to actively participate, to make the rituals their own. The eight festivals (Beltane, Samhain, Imbolc, Lammas, the Solstices and the Equinoxes) are rich with tradition and meaning, and they have survived as long as they have partly because children enjoy them so much. We chose to celebrate Yule and Imbolc in ways that would allow our children to participate and which would be both meaningful and fun.

December 20-23 — *Midwinter Solstice or Yule*

Yule is a festival of light at the darkest time of the year and has persisted in various forms throughout the centuries. Rather than breaking entirely with tradition, we chose to decorate a Solstice tree in addition to the Christmas tree. While a Christmas tree is chopped down, placed indoors, and decorated with ornaments and surrounded by presents, a Solstice tree is left outside to live and grow, decorated with food and nesting materials for wild creatures.

During the several days before Solstice, you can



gather yarn, ribbons, and wool for nest building, make popcorn and cranberry strings (Cheerios and dried apples are easier for little fingers), and roll pinecones in peanut butter and birdseed.

On Solstice day, go for a walk in the woods or your backyard and decorate a tree or bush (it doesn't have to be a pine) with these food and items for the woodland animals. Instead of presents under the tree, use apples, corn cobs and nuts. If the woods are far from your home, decorate a wreath and hang it on the outside of a window for the birds. Singing "O Solstice Tree," or "Here We Go A-Wassailing" or "The Holly and the Ivy" adds to the occasion. In a season dominated by "What can I get?", it is refreshing to give without thoughts of receiving.

On Solstice evening, you can light a Yule log or candles to symbolize the start of longer days of sunshine. Some families also choose to decorate their Christmas tree on this night.

February 2 — Imbolc (Candlemas)

Though still dark and cold, the first signs of returning life appear in the birth of spring lambs (or ground-hogs coming up). Traditionally, candlelit processions were made through the villages and an offering of milk was given to Mother Earth. The Catholic Church encouraged the procession to enter the church, where the candles and the

milk were blessed by the priest.

In Ireland, this feast is sacred to Brigit. My grandmother, Catherine Brigid Regan Kelly, always had St. Brigit's straw cross in her kitchen. She would "walk in the year" carrying the cross with her, going out one door, around the house, and in a different door.

A few days before Imbolc, the family can make candles. Even very young children can roll beeswax, and older children enjoy dipping candles or using some of the candle-making kits available in craft stores. On the evening of Imbolc, extinguish all the lights in the house, then with a suitable ceremony, light a special hearth candle or a fire in the fireplace. The children can light their candles from this flame.

If the weather allows it, you and the children can go outside and have a candlelit procession around the house. Very small children can carry flashlights or place the candles inside lanterns. Pour some milk on the ground as an offering; cow's milk will do fine, although if there is a nursing mother in the house, human milk is a special gift. If the weather is not very pleasant, the procession can be done inside, and the offering can be made to a potted plant. A candlelit dinner and a candlelit bath and bedtime story will make this a magical night for a child.

These activities are starting places. Your family can add to them, change them; research your heritage and develop your own traditions and rituals. The dates given are not absolute, as most of the festivals are agricultural. Our ancestors held the festivals in accordance with the growing seasons. They celebrated when the lambs were born or when the fields were harvested, so if you need to move a festival to accommodate weekends and work or school schedules, feel free to do so. You can choose to celebrate some festivals within the family and invite friends to others.

Any holiday can be secular or sacred, a collection of fun yet meaningless traditions, or a cer-

emony of purpose and reverence. It is up to you to add the words which will make your children (and you) aware of the deeper rhythms of life.

You can describe the special nature of the particular festival, then adapt the following: "We thank you, Mother, for your gift of (flowers, fire, grain, nuts, death, sunlight in the dark of winter, milk, new life in springtime). May we use the gift wisely and with reverence. We receive the gift from you, and now we offer this gift to (people, the wild creatures, the Earth)."

Both festivals described involve receiving gifts from the Goddess, and then in turn offering those gifts to someone else. Everything that we are, everything that we use, ultimately comes from her. Nothing, including our bodies and our children, is for us to keep or to have. They are for us to borrow, for us to share, for us to receive and for us to give. May we receive gratefully, use wisely, and share generously.

Resources

Karas, Sheryl Ann, *The Solstice Evergreen*, 1991, ISBN 0-944031-26-9

Breathnach, Sarah Ban, *Mrs. Sharp's Traditions*, 1990, ISBN 0-671-69569-X



— Janeen Grohsmeyer lives with her husband and two children, ages 6 and 3. She is currently employed as a 'domestic engineer,' a job with irregular hours and no pay, but many fringe benefits. This article is the first of a four-part series.