

Yule side celebration - News 12/15/00
Dec 18 - Jan 6

182 - RITUALS & CELEBRATIONS

Even though the stores have their Christmas decorations and sales up and going since the middle of October and we may be booked for twice as many Christmas and New Year parties as we can really cope with, the true center of this season is the winter solstice (as usual, check your calendar for the exact date). It's the longest night of the year, and since this season is ruled by Saturn, it's the time when, deep down, we really want to stay home and take a nice long nap.

With catholic abandon, I extend the holiday so I can celebrate with everybody and still keep enough time for myself. Some of the social holidays are the ancient Roman festival of Saturnalia (a week of carnival beginning December 18), Kwanzaa (a week-long African American celebration), Hanukkah (eight days), Yule (the Gothic 12-day winter celebration), and both Christmas itself (December 25) and the Twelve Days of Christmas (ending on January 6). I put it all together and call the collective holiday Yuletide.

Saturnalia, which antedated the Roman Empire, was named after Saturn, who is both Father Time, the Grim Reaper, and the god of agriculture and ruler of the Golden Age. His wife is Ops, whose name and attributes survive in our word *opulent*; her special holiday was December 19. During the Saturnalia, society was turned upside-down: laws were suspended and the courts were closed, school was out, wars were even put on hold. Nobody worked during the reign of the Lord of Misrule. It was carnival, party time, time for pranks and practical jokes, time to whoop it up.

Kwanzaa is a modern African American alternative to Christmas. During this cultural (not religious) holiday, people light a candle each day and celebrate aspects of traditional African life. The seven candles represent the seven principles of life, in Swahili called the *Nguzo Saba*: unity, self-determination, responsibility, cooperative economics, purpose, creativity, and faith. Another feast with multiple lights is Hanukkah, which falls

I believe this is from "Rituals of Celebration Honoring the Seasons of Light Through the Wheel of the Year", by Meredith Jane.

RITUALS & CELEBRATIONS - 183

on 25 Kislev in the Hebrew calendar; it's the feast of lights that commemorates the Maccabean rededication of the temple in Jerusalem, at which time a one-day supply of lamp oil lasted eight days. Both of these holidays fall at the winter solstice and both are dedicated to light, enlightenment, and remembrance.

Christmas (in Middle English *Cristes Maesse*) is another example of how the Christian bishops adopted pagan holidays and symbols. Since the people were accustomed to celebrating in December, the fathers of the church took advantage of the custom but changed its object. Christmas was first celebrated (on January 6) some 350 years after the birth it commemorates; a century later, the date of the birth of Jesus (who was actually born in Nazareth) was moved to December 25, which is also the birthday of Mithra. The solstice is, in fact, the birthday of a dozen or more solar gods: Aeon, Attis, Baldur, Chango, Dionysus, Frey, Helios, Horus, Jesus, Mithra, Osiris, Quetzalcoatl, Tammuz. Their mother is the Celestial Queen, and the Romans called the occasion the Birthday of the Unconquerable Sun. The day before, by the way, is dedicated to the Mothers. Madranicht (Mothers Night) is the Celtic and Germanic celebration of home, hearth, and fertility.

Yule comes from the Old English *gēol* and from similar Norse and Saxon words that mean "wheel," as in the zodiac or wheel of life and the year whose eight spokes are our eight festivals. The turning of the wheel is the informing concept in this winter holiday: time itself, as everyone (except the linear rationalist) knows, is a wheel that includes our reincarnational lives as well as all the cycles of nature on earth and in the skies.

Light is equally important. As we have seen, light and dark dance together during the year, approaching and retreating and revolving together in their times. Before we got central heating and electric lights, the winter solstice (which is also the first day of Capricorn) was possibly the most fearsome night of the year.

Yule

Imagine sitting by the hearthfire or the rushlights listening to the wind and watching your food stores getting smaller and smaller. Would the light really return? Would the warmth really come back? Would the family, clan, or tribe survive the hard times? Would they live until the next growing season and its harvest? These doubts may be responsible for the solstice celebrations: "Eat, drink, and carry on, for we may not make it through the winter."

Believing that the Sun Goddess, the Mother of Plants and Animals, always provided and that the son/sun would always be reborn was genuine cause for celebration. It must also have been a genuine trial of faith. Long before St. John of the Cross, winter must have been a dark night of the soul as well as the sky.

Our Yuletide ritual requires no soul's dark night, but it may give you a sweet nap.

Decorate your home and your altar with any or all of the familiar seasonal symbols. Start with candles, a multitude in red, green, white, and especially silver and gold. Scented candles are wonderful, or you can burn a Yule incense or pine, bayberry, or holiday spice potpourri. Pick a scent you really love. Even if you're not Jewish or African American, find a place in your home for a many-branched candelabra and light a candle a day to join our sisters and brothers in celebrating their lights. The evergreens that smell so good remind us that life never dies, and the Christmas tree reminds us that all trees are sacred to the Goddess. The lights in the tree represent the sun, moon, and stars, the lights of the dead, and perhaps the Goddess Herself dancing in the Northern Lights. The holly is named after Frau Holle (or Hel), a northern underground goddess who is the grandmother/comforter of all babies; the ivy is a symbol of Dionysus and eternal life; and mistletoe was holy to the Druids.

Santa Claus is a shaman. He wears the three sacred colors of the Triple Goddess and he's fat because he's well-fed. (A

Native American shaman once told me that you should never trust a skinny shaman; if his people don't provide for him, he's not doing his job.) Santa flies from the frozen north, where the Saami, or Lapp, shamans still wield their full, traditional power, and he is drawn through the air behind his sacred, magical reindeer whose antlers symbolize the surging force of life. His gifts are the gifts of the spirit made material. In this context, the Christmas tree is the world pole, for from Mongolia to the American Southwest, shamans customarily ascend tent poles or trees when they make their astral journeys. Santa knows everything, especially if we've been good or bad, and like karma itself, he gives us our just desserts. His attendants, the toy-making elves, are the Old Ones. Be sure, therefore, to give Santa a place on your altar, too.

Although the purpose of any ritual is to alter our consciousness, some rituals involve more than sitting before an altar and invoking energies. Sometimes ritual is drama. Drama historians believe that drama was born in ritual, that is, in sympathetic magic that acted out hunts and other important occasions. Greek drama was born in celebrations to Dionysus and on the threshing floor, which became the circular arena on which the Greek chorus danced, and modern drama was born on the porches of the medieval cathedrals as mystery and miracle plays. Our Yuletide ritual is thus a little play, and you get to be all the characters.

Because this ritual is about rest and revival, you need a blanket, preferably an old, handmade quilt or comforter full of warm and snuggly associations. You can also use a baby blanket or anything else that will cover at least part of your body.

You also need a small gift to yourself. This can be a crystal, a flower, a book, any small item you really want. It's your gift from the Goddess Ops, so wrap it as beautifully as you'd wrap a gift to anyone else you love. Lay it on the altar.

Light your silver candle and sit on your blanket. Cast your circle by inviting the elemental powers to celebrate the long winter's night with you. Ask them to take the same places the guardian angels take around Hansel and Gretel in Humperdinck's opera, watching over you at your head, feet, right and left hands, above you and below you.

Draw your blanket up over your shoulders, as if to shelter yourself from bad weather and the cold, and invoke Frau Holle into your circle. I always picture her kind of like Cinderella's Fairy Godmother from the Disney movie. Address her as Grandmother and ask her to comfort you and cradle you on her generous lap.

Frau Holle, Grandmother of All,
it's winter, and I am cold.
Frau Holle, Grandmother of All,
it's dark, and I am weary.
Frau Holle, Grandmother of All,
take me in your arms —
hold me, rock me, cradle me,
and watch me while I sleep.

If your blanket is big enough, lie down and roll up in it. At least curl up in front of your altar and pull the blanket around your shoulders. As you tuck yourself in, imagine Frau Holle coming to tuck you in and sing you a lullaby — the aria from *Hansel & Gretel*, "All Through the Night," Brahms' Lullaby, "Mockingbird," or any other lullaby you know. As Frau Holle, sing it to yourself.

When she has finished singing to you, Frau Holle sits in her old rocking chair and takes out her eternal knitting, which becomes the blanket of snow that covers the land.

Now, warm and snuggly in your own blanket, you get to be an animal. You're a bear in your cave, some smaller animal in

your burrow. You've eaten enough to sustain you through the winter, you've grown a heavy coat of glossy fur to keep you warm, and you know it's time for your rest. Peek out of your burrow at the shining moon (the silver candle on your altar), then curl up again and go to sleep. You may actually fall asleep. If you do, make sure ahead of time that your candle is safe, on a holder that absolutely won't burn and away from anything flammable on your altar.

When you wake up, make animal noises. Yawn and stretch. Winter's over! The sun has been reborn! Untangle yourself from your blanket and crawl out of your cave under the earth. Light your gold candle and greet the newborn sun.

Hail, golden Saule, beautiful Hathor,
mighty Mithra, gentle Jesus.
Hail, climbing power of the rising sun,
living day, illumination, warming joy.
Night is done, winter's over,
I rejoice! Welcome, rising sun!

Frau Holle returns, but with the passing of winter she's been transformed! She's become your Christmas tree angel, and now she's on the top of the tree, singing and dancing. The angel has a gift for you. As the angel, descend from the Goddess's tree of life and rebirth and give yourself the gift that you just happen to find on the altar. As yourself again, exclaim over the beauty of the packaging, unwrap the gift, and thank the Goddess Ops for giving you exactly what you wanted. If you see Santa Shaman hovering nearby, thank him, too.

Spend a few minutes sitting on your blanket, holding your gift, and thinking about your long winter's nap and your joyous revival. Think about what this sleep and rebirth have meant to you, and give thanks once more that the wheel of the year has

turned again, as it eternally and inevitably does. Sing another song. (This is the familiar Christmas carol, slightly rewritten.)

Joy to the world,
The light is born.
Let earth begin to sing.
Let every heart
Rejoice in the light.
And heaven and nature sing,
And heaven and nature sing,
And heaven, and earth, and nature sing!

For the rest of Yuletide, share your joy with your family and friends.

