

Winter Solstice

What **is** the Winter Solstice and why does it matter to us? Simply put, the winter solstice is that point at which the earth's tilt and rotation is the farthest away from the sun, making the daylight and warmth in short supply. For the northern hemisphere, where we are, it occurs in December but it occurs in June in the southern hemisphere. This year it occurs at 11:19pm on December 21st. Why does it matter? Well, celebrations of Winter Solstice predate any monotheistic celebrations by quite a bit. Some of our cherished Christmas activities actually originated in Winter Solstice celebrations.

Even before humans knew how the solar system worked, they knew about survival. Darkness meant cold and fewer food sources so they tracked the sun. Winter solstice was the turning point, after which, they learned, the precious sun would be reborn and return to its glory. Interestingly, animals might be slaughtered so they didn't need to be fed and meat was temporarily plentiful for the celebrations. Fermented drinks were ready to be consumed.

Evidence of winter solstice celebrations exist in not only Western European culture, like Stonehenge in England, but also Hindu, Persian, and East Asian. There is a primal survival instinct that associates light with life. Celebrations tended to be centered not only around the sun but family, food, fire and a sacred relationship with a greater power.

The Roman Empire had Sol Invictus (the Invincible Sun), who was originally a Syrian god but declared chief god under Emperor Aurelian. His celebration was December 25th. The desire of the early Christian church to convert pagans may have been achieved by simply aligning celebrations and assimilating them into Christianity.

Yule appears to arise from a name for the long-bearded Norse god Odin and traditions around a yule log and yule singing can be attributed to those European pagan roots. I found this online information: "Scholars have connected the month event and Yule time period to the Wild Hunt (a ghostly procession in the winter sky), the god Odin (who is attested in Germanic areas as leading the Wild Hunt), and increased supernatural activity, such as the aforementioned Wild Hunt and the increased activities of draugar—undead beings who walk the earth. Mōdraniht, an event focused on collective female beings attested by Bede as having occurred among the pagan Anglo-Saxons on what is now Christmas Eve, has been seen as further evidence of a fertility event during the Yule period.

The events of Yule are generally held to have centred on Midwinter (although specific dating is a matter of debate), and feasting, drinking, and sacrifice were involved. Scholar Rudolf Simek comments that the pagan Yule feast "had a pronounced religious character" and comments that "it is uncertain whether the Germanic Yule feast still had a function in the cult of the dead and in the veneration of the ancestors, a function which the mid-winter sacrifice certainly held for the West European Stone and Bronze Ages."

I put Winter Solstice with our Advent Sunday of Peace to symbolize making peace with the darkness and making peace with the ongoing cycles of change, of birth and death and rebirth in our lives. When we can release the struggle of believing life should be different than it is, we discover the peace that is always available within. The peace that surpasses human understanding.

Take a breath. One Power. One Presence. One Mind. One Love. One of the fascinating outcomes of interfaith exploration for me is a greater understanding of the weaving together of our humanity. Are we really so different? Does having different names for things really make them different? Are the celebrations of winter really just all about life; about light overcoming darkness; about death and rebirth? Is the present always about honoring the past and anticipating new good while living fully in this moment?

In the Revealing Word, Charles Fillmore says that Life is "that expression of Being which manifests as animation, activity, vigor. Life and substance are ideas in Divine Mind. Life is the acting principle; substance is the thing acted upon. In the phenomenal world, life is the energy that propels all forms to action. Life does not emanate from the mind; it is not a psychic or purely mental quality, nor does it spring from the physical. Life is divine, spiritual, and its source is God, Spirit."

Often we tend to think that Life is the sum of the days one exists on the earthly plane. Life is one of the 12 spiritual powers Fillmore described. No matter how often we refer to life as eternal, we focus on that portion of life experienced on earth. And when the person leaves the earthly plane, we grieve and talk about the end of life. But if life does not emanate from the mind or even from the physical, is it limited to that portion of experience we can touch or comprehend? In Unity, we profess there is no such limit. In our humanity, we mostly **act** as if we believe life ends with the end of breath and the end of heart beats. To align with our Unity teachings, we affirm the ongoing nature of life, the continuing presence of love and the ability of life to transcend the bounds of humanity into a new expression of Being.

During the holidays, we **long** to believe in the ongoing nature of life and we grieve the missing physical presence of those we love. Our focus on the senses brings our attention to what is missing—the personality, the touch, the cooking, the singing, the love we have relied upon. Our focus on the sacred reminds us of the possibility that even if the personality, the touch, the cooking and singing is gone, the love remains.

This holiday season comes upon us with the absence of Wilma fresh in our heart. In the past we have talked about what is sacred and meaningful in our holiday activities? What connects us? Shared experiences connect us. It is the bond of friendship over the years. It is the sense of community that arises any time a group of people share an experience, whether it is a weather disaster, a delayed flight, a wedding or family crisis. So what do we remember about Wilma? Do we remember if her hair was always perfectly in place or that she was perfectly in place so many times when we needed her? Do we remember the awards and degrees she earned or the degree she made you feel valued and loved? Many of us probably have our own memories of experiences shared with Wilma. And memories of shared experiences with others that we have loved who are not physically present this holiday season.

As we live the lessons learned from those we love, we honor their memory. As we speak their names and talk about the gifts they have shared with us, they are alive in this holiday season.

We have talked about rituals, keeping them fresh and meaningful. Have you ever thought about why we light candles in memory of ones we've lost? I found this online: "Keeping a light burning in remembrance signifies that the memory still lives on and burns bright. It is a ritual that promotes reflection and signifies remembrance. It can be traced back to ancient pagan rites and the beginning of Christianity, as we know it. Light is considered pure, it dispels darkness, it nourishes life and illuminates everything. In addition, wax has its own symbolic meaning. The wax being spotless, is supposed to represent Christ's spotless body, with the wick within it representing his soul and the glowing flame representing the Divine Nature united with the human in one Divine Person."

The Gospel of John begins: *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.*

Candles represent our belief in a life that is eternal life and there is no darkness that can overcome it. Just as fire meant survival and life in ancient days, light continues to represent life overcoming darkness.

Today, I'd like to incorporate a ritual with light into our meditation. The lighting of candles as part of winter celebrations is ancient. It connects us with our ancestors and the lineage of all humanity. You should have all received candles as you came into the sanctuary. If you need a candle, please raise your hand and the ushers will bring you one.

I invite you to take your candle and bring to mind Wilma and all those we have loved who are missing from our celebrations this year. Whether it is a new loss or one that lingers in our memory from long ago, bring to mind those gifts you have received from each treasured one and how you honor these memories in how you live your life today.

We will light our candles together. Rick and Sandy will light the candle of each person in the aisle seat. Candles that are lit should be held upright. To light your candle, tilt your wick sideways into the flame of the lit candle. Then hold your candle upright. As you light your candle, feel free to say aloud or in your heart, the names of those you remember. When all the candles are lit, we will have a time of silent reflection and then, together, we will speak the words of "We Remember Them", which will be up on the screen. Then we will extinguish our candles together.