



a winter solstice celebration

A book of traditions to guide
your annual celebration
of the Winter Solstice

PRELUDE

"Solstice Prayer" chant by Thorn Coyle

To be sung by all.

We wait in the dark for the light to appear,
Mother, give birth to our brother the Sun.
We wait in the dark for the light to appear,
Mother, give birth to our brother the Sun!

We wait. We watch.
Out of the cold comes the promise of newness.
We wait. We watch.
Out of the cold comes the promise of day!

INTRODUCTION

*Person dressed in costume of the Holly King
comes in and tells the following story.*

I am the Holly King, King of Winter, the dark time of the year, Lord of the Underworld. I am the dark twin of my brother, the Oak King, the King of the Summerlands, the Lord of Light. I am the wolf and he is the stag. I am the dark to his light. It is his birthday- the birth of the conquering sun- that we celebrate on winter solstice.

I have come to teach you about the Wheel of the Year. The Wheel of the Year has eight special days, spread evenly apart.

The winter solstice is the longest night of the year. Pagans today call this time by its ancient Anglo-Saxon name, Yule. Yule is the night when I am the strongest. But it is also the time when I slowly begin to grow weak again, as the Sun slowly returns from land of darkness. This is night that the Child of Promise is born from the dark womb of the earth.. The Child of Promise is the new sun, which is small and weak at this time of the year, but will grow stronger and stronger until he defeats me in the springtime. This is a time for celebrating new beginnings.

WINTER SOLSTICE CHANT
by Phillip Palmer (UU Hymn 1063)

To be sung by all.

Child – ren of the Earth,
we have come to sing to each oth – er,
Sist – er to Broth – er,
songs of our Moth – er Earth.
Children of the Earth,
Autumn soon will breathe her last breath and
quick will hear death bear
witness to Winter’s Birth.
Children of the Earth,
can you feel the air getting cold as
darkness takes hold and
sleep covers Mother Earth?
Children of the Earth,
we have come to sit in the darkness,
breathe in the silence,
think of our Mother Earth.

STORY: “THE REBIRTH OF THE SUN”
by Starhawk

Short skit read by narrator and reader.

Circle round, and I’ll tell you a story about when the sun was born again. It was the middle of winter, and the sun had grown very old. All year long the sun had worked very hard, rising and setting day after day. All year long the sun had fed everybody on earth, shining and shining, giving energy to the trees and the flowers and the grasses so they could grow and feed the animals and birds and insects and people.

All year the sun’s gravity held tight to the spinning ball of the earth and the twirling ball of the moon and the eight other whirling planets as they traveled around and around and around, until the poor sun was dizzy watching it all.

Now the poor tired sun could barely make it up in the morning, and after a very short time, needed to sleep again. So the days grew shorter, and the nights grew longer, until the day was so short it was hardly worth getting up for. Mother Night felt sorry for the sun.

READER: “Come to my arms and rest, child. After all, I am your mother. You were born out of my darkness, billions of years ago, and you will return to me when all things end. Let me cradle you now, as I shelter every galaxy and star in the universe.”

So Mother Night wrapped her great arms around the sun, and the night was very long indeed.

“Why does the dark go on so long?” asked children all over the earth.

“Won’t the sun ever come back again?”

“The sun is very tired,” the old ones said. “But maybe, if you children say thank you for all the things the sun does for us, the light may return in the morning.”

STORY CONTINUED

The children sang songs to the sun. They thought about all the things the sun gave them.

[Narrator asks the kids what they think the children might have thanked the sun for, then resumes the story.]

"Thank you for growing the lettuces and the corn and the rice and the wheat," they said. "Thank you for growing the trees of the forests and the seaweed in the oceans and the krill that feeds the whales. Thank you for stirring the air and making winds that bring the rain."

Every time a child said thank you, the sun began to feel a little warmer, a little brighter. Wrapped safely in the arms of Night, the sun grew younger and younger. At last the children had to go to bed. "We will stay up and wait for the sun to rise again" the old ones said.

"Can't we stay up, too?" the children asked.

"You can try, but you will get too sleepy," the old ones said. "But you can each light a candle, because all fire is a spark of the sun's fire. Put your candle in a very safe place, and let it keep vigil for you as you sleep and dream of sunrise."

So the children lit their candles and put them in very safe places, and each flame was a little spark of the sun's fire.

[Narrator lights a candle.]

And the sun peeped out from between the arms of Night, and saw all the little fires, and began to feel warmer and brighter and younger still. Early in the morning, the old ones woke the children. Together they climbed a high hill and faced to the east, the direction of sunrise. They sang songs to the sun and ran around trying to keep warm. They waited and waited to see what dawn would bring.

STORY CONTINUED

The sky began to turn from black to indigo to blue. Slowly the sky grew light. A golden glow crept over the horizon. Night opened her great arms, and in a burst of brightness, the sun appeared, new and strong and shining.

For in the long night the sun had rested well and grown young from the songs and the thanks of the children, young as a brand-new baby, born out of Night once more.

Everybody cheered, and the children jumped up and down.

"The sun has returned! The sun is reborn!" the people cried. And they danced and sang to celebrate the birth of a new day, and then went home to breakfast.



READING

“The Holly King and the New Light”

NARRATOR: This is the time of the year when everything changes again. At this special time, nature-lovers might go on a quest through the woodlands to catch the Holly King, God of the Waning Year, in his regal white robe. At Yule, the winter solstice, the reign of the Holly King ends when his brother, the Oak King (also known as the Sun King or God of the Waxing Year, is born. The turning of the year happens is celebrated annually on December 21st or 22nd. With it, rebirth, hope, and light return to our daily lives.

The Holly King has been leading us to this point since the Summer Solstice, when he began stealing a little more light from each day. Now the days have shriveled to a bare flicker. The sun sets in the middle of the afternoon and frozen nights are endless. Yes, this is an opportunity for quiet, inner reflection but it feels more as though we have been left huddling in the dark with the outlines of skeleton trees, no flowers, and only the heartiest of birds darting thankfully to the feeders. Has the sun abandoned us to the night?

HOLLY KING: Welcome to the Winter Solstice, where the dark triumphs - but only for a moment. This is a turning point; the reign of the Holly King will end, the days will grow longer again, as the Oak King, who brings the light, is quietly born from the womb of the dark night. At his birth, he is only a small spark, but we have known in our bones since always that light, no matter how tiny, means life.

READING CONTINUED

NARRATOR: In lighting the fires, in stringing the lights, we do more than stave off the darkness, even more than honor the sun. We also stand with fierce courage to say to the darkness, You may come this far but no further! We have given the darkness its due, we have watched it leach the light from our lives for as long as we had to; now the long night is over, we can tentatively bring our own lights back from hiding, and let the new days begin.

HOLLY KING: This Turning of the Year, the returning of the light, this most hopeful of all days, has been celebrated across cultures and throughout millennia so, however you choose to participate, you will be part of an ancient tapestry. Whether you float old ideas and sorrows out to sea on paper mache boats with candles, make a Yule wreath to honor the sacred circle of life, death and rebirth, find a Yule log and burn it in your fireplace, or join the Fairies in ringing bells on Solstice morning to welcome back the sun, remember that this is a festival of inner rebirth. No matter how dark it seems, how completely dead the world appears, nature - including the holly and the ivy and the oak - teaches us that there is always rebirth.

BRIEF HOMILY ON DARKNESS

Read aloud by one person.

The winter solstice happens in nature around us. But it also happens inside of us, in our souls. It can happen inside of us in summer or winter, spring or fall.

In the dark place of our soul, we carry secret wishes, pains, frustrations, loneliness, fears, regrets, worries.

Darkness is not something to be afraid of. Sometimes we go to the dark place of our soul, where we can find safety and comfort. In the dark place in our soul we can find rest and rejuvenation.

In the dark place of our soul we can find balance. And when we have rested, and been comforted, and restored, we can return from the dark place in our soul to the world of light and new possibilities.

READING:

'REFLECTIONS ON THE RESURGENCE OF JOY'
Litany by Dori Jeanine Somers (UU Reading 653)

Read alone by one or many.

How short the daylight hours have now become.
How grey the skies, how barren seem the trees.
A damp and chilling wind has gripped my mind
and made me gloomy, too.
But there is that in me which reaches up toward the light
and laughter, bells, and carolers,
And knows that my religious myth and dream
of reborn joy and goodness must be true,
Because it speaks the truths of older myths;
That light returns to balance darkness,
life surges in the evergreen – and us,
As babes are hope, and saviors of the world,
as miracles abound in common things.
Rejoice! And join in the gladness of the season.

ACTIVITY:
WISHES FOR THE YEAR

Each person must write a new year's wish on a slip of paper.
Then everyone goes outside, bring their wish with them.
Cast a circle by joining hands around the unlit fire.

BRIEF SILENT MEDITATION ON DARKNESS

Someone leads the meditation by saying the following.

Now we will have a brief silent meditation.
Think about the darkness. Think about the silence.
Think about how everything begins in the darkness.
Think about how in the darkness there is always a spark of light.

Wait a few minutes then light the candles.

As group sings, one person readies and lights the campfire. Everyone
stands in a circle singing.

One by one, going round the circle, each person drops their wish into the
campfire and welcome the birth of the Sun King.

HOLLY KING AND MISTLETOE

The Holly King uses a golden sickle to cut mistletoe from the gnarled
branches of an oak tree. Holly and mistletoe are both traditionally hung
during mid-winter to represent the transition of power from the Holly King
(who rules the waning year) to the Oak King (who reigns over the waxing
year).

For the ancient Celts and Druids, trees (especially the oak) were sacred,
powerful beings. The felling of whole trees was said to bring bad luck, but
the taking of boughs for decoration, and the coppicing of trees to provide
winter fodder, was allowed. Conservation was sacred.

The Holly King, unsurprisingly, is associated with holly, a plant that was
sacred to the first inhabitants of the British Isles. Of course, the three most
prominent green plants in British native woodland during the winter were
holly, ivy and mistletoe. These plants all earned respect from the early
countryside dwellers and a place in their traditions. In ancient English
village life, there was a midwinter custom of holding singing contests
betwixt men and women, where the men sang carols praising holly (for its
'manly' qualities) and disparaging ivy, while women sang songs praising the
ivy (for its 'feminine' qualities) and disparaging holly. The resolution
between the two was under the mistletoe, which gave rise to the tradition
of kissing under this plant during the midwinter festival of Yule.

THE CALL

*Going around the circle again,
everyone takes turns reading a line of the "call".
Everyone responds to the call with the line
"The light is reborn."*

When the earth is barren.
The light is reborn.
When the animals sleep.
The light is reborn.
When the leaves have all fallen.
The light is reborn.
When the rivers are frozen.
The light is reborn.
When the ground is hard.
The light is reborn.
When the shadows grow long.
The light is reborn.
When warmth has fled.
The light is reborn.
In the darkest night.
The light is reborn.

READING: A POEM

by Susan Cooper

One person reads aloud.

So the shortest day came, and the year died,
and everywhere down the centuries
of the snow-white world
came people singing, dancing
to drive the dark away.
They lighted candles in the winter trees,
They hung their homes with evergreens;
They burned beseeching fires all night long
to keep the year alive.
And when the new year's sunshine blazed awake
they shouted, revelling,
through all the frosty ages you can hear them
echoing, behind us—listen!
All the long echoes sing the same delight,
this shortest day,
as promise wakens in the sleeping land:
they carol, feast, give thanks,
and dearly love their friends, and hope for peace.
And so do we, here, now,
this year, and every year.
Welcome Yule!