

As many of you know I grew up in the San Francisco Bay area. My childhood memories of winter are of glistening lights in the rain. There were no icicles, no snowdrifts, no frosted windows. Days were shorter for sure but mostly they were sunny. And in fact strangely enough in the area where I grew up winter was the green season for summer was a time of no rain.

I tell you this not because it is super interesting but to give you a sense of my history and so that you understand me when I say that for much of my life I had little understanding of why the winter solstice or the celebration of Yule was important. As I was growing up it seemed like Yule traditions were really a throwback to my grandparent's life. Sure we had a tree with lights, and presents, sure we had stockings, sure we gathered with friends and family. Yes there was special food and for the adults a fair amount of drink, and yes there were toasts and well wishes and promises made for the upcoming year. But honestly as a little kid I thought Yule was a Dickens thing. Not something for the modern times.

And then, then I moved to Central New York. The winter here is an event! We tend to under react to the snow that we get but it is newsworthy. The huge snowstorm that buffalo got a few weeks ago made the news in Siberia! My friends and family still back in California do wonder why I stay in Central New York. I often tell them that I spend less time digging out of snow than they do in traffic.

Here in Central New York we know what the dark days of winter are. We know how long those nights can be. We know what it feels like when it seems like the sun is permanently hiding from us. Most of us I bet can easily tell if the mud we walk on is frozen or simply dried. We all know the roads can be treacherous, and sidewalks even more so. We know the importance of mid winter frivolity assuring us that life goes on. It's not so great to be over busy but a little bit of busyness can give you something to look forward to and a way to distract oneself from the inevitable long nights.

Many many of our traditions that keep us busy at this time of year are borrowed from our northern European pagan ancestors

"Norsemen believed the sun was a great wheel of fire that would roll away from the earth and back, and they'd encourage and celebrate the return of the sun with great bonfires and large logs to burn on home fires (Yule logs). They would **decorate with bows of evergreen and put ornaments like the sun** (often many-pointed star shaped) out in the trees all around, to attract the sun back to the earth. Many cultures, both modern and historical, celebrated with fire and lights, to both light the longest night and to welcome back the sun. Germanic tribes **worshipped Odin**, went wassailing (caroling!), put out fruit and candles, even ON trees!"

([http://thestir.cafemom.com/baby/113242/How\\_to\\_Celebrate\\_Yule\\_With](http://thestir.cafemom.com/baby/113242/How_to_Celebrate_Yule_With))

And even jolly old St. Nick has pagan ancestor

“We have to go back a bit find the pagan legend and myth associated with Santa [we look again to] Odin. The 13th Century Poetic Edda is a compilation of stories and poems from Scandinavian history, some as early 985 CE. In this work and from Snorri Sturluson's Prose Edda we learn about Odin riding an eight-legged horse named Sleipnir, that can leap great distances. At Yule, Odin leads a great hunting party through the sky in celebration. This story gives rise to comparisons of Santa and his 8 reindeer flying through the sky.

In some traditions of Odin's Yule time ride, children could place their boots near the chimney filled with treats for Sleipnir and Odin would reward them for their kindness with food, candy or gifts. The tradition still continues Belgium, Germany and the Netherlands. In other Germanic countries the practice has been replaced with hanging stockings.” <http://www.paganspath.com/magik/yule-history2.htm>

I do get a giggle at my fellow Christians who rant about Jesus being the reason for the season, as they hang their stockings, and decorate their porches with lights and greens. As they bring a tree inside and hang shiny ornaments and more lights on it. As they imbibe a little nog and sing some songs to their neighbors. If an 11th century Norseman were able to see our celebrations I think he or she would recognize a great many things. Interestingly our Puritan ancestors banned the celebration or recognition of Christmas when they were busy establishing their church in America. They did not believe the celebration to have firm biblical roots. And given the number of pagan Yule details that are included in Christmas they may be more right than we give them credit for.

But why all these midwinter festivities

There is emptiness to winter. And I do not mean that it is a wasteland, or simply something to be endured. But it is a time when there is less - of everything except snow, cold and dark. This is the part that I cannot quite communicate to my California friends and family. When I say to them that I love the 4 seasons they think I mean that I love having fall colors - which I do. But I also love this time of emptiness. When the light is softer, sounds are quieter. There is a bit of a hush over nature - and a sense that anticipation is right around the corner as if we are anticipating anticipation. And in centuries past when we lived in an agrarian society it must have been particularly empty. With no electricity the dark had to seem particularly difficult and straining.

One of my favorite times in winter is when it has snowed at night and if I happen wake up before dawn, which is much easier to do in December than June by the way, before the plows start in, before the commuters, there is a muffledness to nature. Stillness like

no other. It brings new meaning to "Silent Night" And there is magic in that moment because the snow has covered over old footprints, dirty frozen puddles, tire tracks, soot and dirt. My house sounds different after a nighttime snow - it is nature's sound proofing. If we pay attention to the emptiness we may find that we are making space for something new. We may find we are making space for something that will not bloom until the spring.

Some folk, who are much more learned than I and probably know better than I, say that the early pagans who celebrated Yule created their rituals in part as a way of calling the sun back for it had fallen below the horizon and there was a fear that it would never come back. Perhaps that is true but I find the tone in that a bit patronizing. Yule was and is especially a time of story telling and some of these stories come from eons ago. And even eons ago those stories came from eons ago. The people who first celebrated Yule and helped to shape its rituals had a sense of history and time. But what they may have been much more aware of than we are - is how vulnerable we humans really are. Perhaps they knew that the sun will rise every morning, that the spring will follow every winter, but that any one of us or them may not be witness to it. Stonehenge may not have been built to beckon the sun back but to reassure human then that humans had as much presence as nature. The sense of impermanence may not have been about the sun but rather about us.

I do not describe my faith as pagan and I am unlikely to participate in a true Yule vigil since I am not one to stay up all night. But as a Unitarian Universalist there are truths that I can learn from these ancient traditions, these rituals these beliefs. At a Yule vigil there are elements that we all can relate to I think - food - drink - stories - gifts. But it is a vigil not just an all night party. There is the calling of the quarters as we did at the beginning of this service. Usually there is some kind of a fire, outside if possible, where the Yule log is burned. This fire must be tended all night - it keeps the dark and the cold at bay and it beckons the sun in the morning and so folks take turns keeping the fire. Perhaps as we celebrate our chosen traditions we can remember to keep a fire lit in our hearts and souls. Perhaps we can be the light for those around us reminding them that the darkness is not all that there is. And maybe we can remember that it is a group effort this being a light to the world. No one of us can do it by ourselves. A pagan colleague of mine was talking about his Yule rituals and what he said was that it was the longest night and the vigil is kept by the community because it is the community that pulls one through the longest night. As a UU I could agree with that. We each come here and gather and in our own way reminds ourselves and each other that there is something larger than the individual, something more wondrous than the one, and in that we are able to see and feel awe and wonder.

There are those times when life is tough and it is hard to see where the light is, hard to know what to do or who to be. Hard to know what the future will bring. And that is precisely when we should gather with our community. When we should raise our glass,

make a toast, tell a story, remind ourselves that there is hope to be found in the love of friends that surround us. We may be far away from family at this time, we may be far away from friends but we can gather here in this place with one another and remember the reason for the season

Love  
Light  
Friends  
Family  
Emptiness  
Welcoming  
Waiting  
Preparing  
Receiving  
Expectation

In a world without end may it be so.