

Seasonal Spirituality
Learning the Language of the Winter Solstice
By Beth McDonald

The celebration of the Winter Solstice is one of the oldest spiritual observances known to man. And the most complex. Ancient people were hunters and farmers and as such, the seasons and weather played a very important part in their lives. Winter was a very difficult time for inhabitants of the northern latitudes. As the growing season had ended, the tribe had to live off of stored food and whatever animals they could catch. Marking the progression of the sun, so that they could prepare for winter was both the foundation of their religion and a survival tool.

Because of this, many ancient people had a great reverence for, and even worshipped the sun, the moon and nature. Their methods varied and their different cultural elements found in the traditions we uphold today. Regardless of your faith or of what religion you practice, the challenge before us now is how to celebrate the winter holidays in ways that retain the traditions that are still meaningful and relevant while creating new traditions to fill in the gaps. The solutions to challenge are very personal and unique to each individual and family. Trusting yourself, and being tolerant of others is the key.

As far as the histories of our traditions are concerned, if you muck around in it for a minute or more, you will find all sorts of interesting things. One is that the Norsemen of Northern Europe saw the sun as a wheel that changed the seasons. It was from their word for this wheel, *houl*, that the word Yule is thought to have come. At mid-winter the Norsemen lit bonfires to light the longer nights, told stories and drank sweet ale.

Another comes from the Romans. They also held a midwinter festival to celebrate the rebirth of the year. It was called Saturnalia ran for seven days starting the 17th of December. Their festival also involved decorating houses with greenery, lighting candles, holding processions and giving presents.

Before Christianity came to the British Isles, the Celts also celebrated the shortest day of the year. Celtic priests would cut the mistletoe that grew on the oak tree and give it as a blessing. Oaks were seen as sacred and the winter fruit of the mistletoe was a symbol of life in the dark winter months. It was also the Celts who had a the tradition of the Yule log, which was lit to conquer the darkness, banish evil spirits and bring luck for the coming year.

This year the Winter Solstice falls on Thursday, December 21st, just after a New Moon. As always, the New Moon is in the same sign as sun, which will be Capricorn. The New Moon is a time of beginnings and fresh starts. It is a good time to turn a page or enter into something new. In the Northern Hemisphere, the Winter Solstice marks the longest night and the shortest day of the year. It is a turning point, a moment in time, a graphic reminder of just how much we need each other to get through the darkness of those

longest nights and coldest days. In most cultures, the Winter Solstice was observed in ways that celebrate and emphasize our connections, commonalities and interdependence.

Capricorn, the sign of Saturn (and Saturnalia) is the ruler of material abundance, as well as the sense organization, discipline, focus and structure it takes to achieve success on the material level. Capricorn is also the sign of leadership. The Winter Solstice always occurs as the sun moves from Sagittarius into Capricorn, and as such, it is a time when all of us are being called to step up to the plate. With the New Moon here as well, this holiday season is, now more than ever, a time to start anew, especially on material levels. But bigger than that, it is a time to redefine leadership and how we express that in our most valued relationships.

That can be a very interesting proposition, especially given that sometimes good leadership looks and is different from person to person and from week to week. Here are some ideas:

Who am I This Week?

A Very Generic and Experiential Zodiac-based Guide to Holiday Survival

Aries: Normally, you're Speed Racer. This week, you're not. It's a big bit of a downshift, I know. But do it. Fire up some Jack Johnson or Ben Harper and pull the Mach Five over into the right hand lane.

Taurus: Normally the epitome of grace and graciousness, you may find your talents pushed to their limits by the munchkins and flying monkeys surrounding you this week. Your goal is to be channeling Glenda the Good Witch.

Gemini: Talk about pressure. Jupiter and three other planets are greatly exacerbating your tendencies towards avoiding reality. *Seriously*. Focus, identify your priorities, beg the intercession of Mary Poppins, and start chanting "Supercalifragilisticexpialidocious!"

Cancer: Your pesky issues with authority may well get you into trouble if you're not careful, Grasshopper. Now would be a good time for you to take a week off from work, study Buddhism and watch reruns of *Kung Fu*.

Leo: You're working out some big changes right now and, playful Lion that you are, can't find the motivation. Don't let your personal third act crisis kill your momentum. You need to be watching *Scrooge*," or *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*. Exclusively.

Virgo: Okay, just admit it. You are haunted by ghosts from the past. Don't freak, baby, they're here to help you. Honest. And you need to let them. You should be channeling the Ghost Whisperer.

Libra: This week can be an extraordinarily pleasant time for you if you can stop saving the downtrodden and oppressed for a minute. Your role model is Pee Wee Herman (pre-porn bust, of course). The world is your Playhouse.

Scorpio: More is definitely revealed for you this week, especially in regards to the opposite sex. Your visual is Sherlock Holmes, solving mysteries, investigating curious matters. Your theme song is Robert Palmer's *Looking for Clues*.

Sagittarius: Four planets on your sun have made you a big giant spaz. This week will go better for you if stop talking and stop thinking so much. Put on a version of *Shut up and Dance* (any version will suffice) and cut the rug.

Capricorn: This is you're your day, your hour, your moment. You are the shepherd of your flock, the Chief of your tribe, and the keeper of the Winter Solstice for you and yours. This week, your role model is Moses.

Aquarius: You are having a PHAT creative streak, so much so that you don't want to do anything else. Don't alienate anyone, but run with it, for you are truly inspired and can change the world. You're channeling Bono.

Pisces: Stop, Children, what's that sound? It's God calling, you've had Him on hold for far too long and you should really consider having that conversation. Your mantra is the Buffalo Springfield's *For What it's Worth*, in it's entirety.