

Season's Greetings!!

Since ancient times, people have waited through the cold dark days of winter for the return of warmth and light. Throughout history, and across many cultures, festivals of light have been practiced during this time of year. "Sol Invictus" was one such celebration held on December 25th during Roman times. "Sol Invictus" literally means "the unconquered sun".

As we pass through the longest nights of the year, we are assured that darkness will not prevail--that light and warmth will return. We gather with friends and family and surround ourselves with joy and celebration. Evergreens and lights remind us that even in the cold stillness of winter, life is triumphant.

As the old year passes and a new year is born, we reflect on that which has passed and hope for a better tomorrow. May the light of reason be a beacon to a brighter future for us all. **HAPPY NEW YEAR** from the Arkansas Society of Freethinkers!!

Festivities around the Winter Solstice

The Winter Solstice has been celebrated in cultures the world over for thousands of years. This start of the solar year is a celebration of Light and the rebirth of the Sun. In old Europe, it was known as Yule, from the Norse, Jul, meaning wheel.

Today, many people in Western-based cultures refer to this holiday as "Christmas." Yet a look into its origins of Christmas reveals its Pagan roots. Emperor Aurelian established December 25 as the birthday of the "Invincible Sun" in the third century as part of the Roman Winter Solstice celebrations. Shortly thereafter, in 273, the Christian church selected this day to represent the birthday of Jesus, and by 336, this Roman solar feast day was Christianized. January 6, celebrated as Epiphany in Christendom and linked with the visit of the Magi, was originally an Egyptian date for the Winter Solstice.

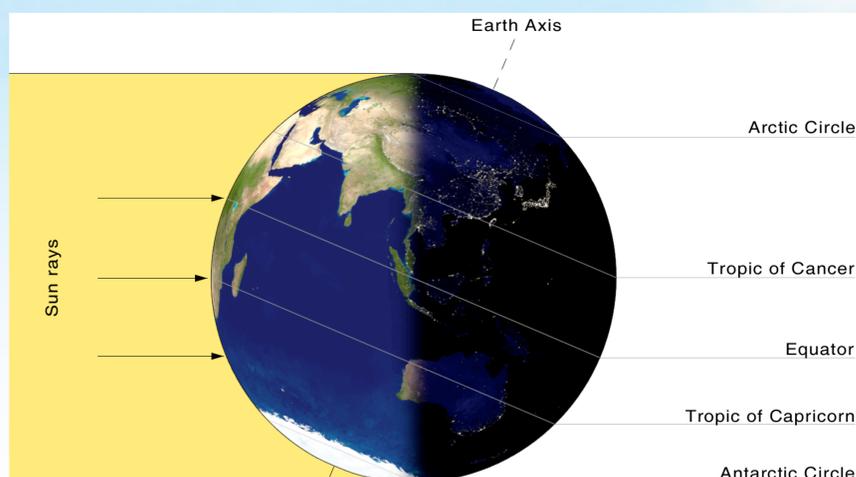
Most of the customs, lore, symbols, and rituals associated with "Christmas" actually are linked to Winter Solstice celebrations of ancient Pagan cultures. While Christian mythology is interwoven with contemporary observances of this holiday time, its Pagan nature is still strong and apparent. Today we can readily celebrate the holiday and the secular New Year by recognizing the Pagan spiritual focus in existing holiday customs and by creating new traditions that draw on ancient ways. Here are some ways to do this:

Celebrate Yule with a series of rituals, feasts, and other activities. In most ancient cultures, the celebration lasted more than a day. The ancient Roman Saturnalia festival sometimes went on for a week. Have Winter Solstice Eve and Day be the central focus for your household, and conceptualize other holiday festivities, including New Year's office parties and Christmas visits with Christian relatives, as part of your Solstice celebration.

By adopting this perspective, parents can help their children develop an understanding of the multicultural and interfaith aspects of this holiday time and view "Christmas" as just another form of Solstice. Have gift exchanges and feasts over the course of several days and nights as was done of old. Party hearty on New Year's Eve not just to welcome in the new calendar year, but also to welcome the new solar year.

Adorn the home with sacred herbs and colors. Decorate your home in Druidic holiday colors red, green, and white. Place holly, ivy, evergreen boughs, and pine cones around your home, especially in areas where socializing takes place. Hang a sprig of mistletoe above a major threshold and leave it there until next Yule as a charm for good luck throughout the year. Have family/household members join together to make or purchase an evergreen wreath. Include holiday herbs in it and then place it on your front door to symbolize the continuity of life and the wheel of the year. If you choose to have a living or a harvested evergreen tree as part of your holiday decorations, call it a Solstice tree and decorate it with Pagan symbols.

Convey love to family, friends, and associates. At the heart of Saturnalia was the custom of family and friends feasting together and exchanging presents. Continue this custom by visiting, entertaining, giving gifts, and sending greetings by mail and/or phone. Consider those who are and/or have been important in your life and share appreciation.



The Winter Solstice

In astronomy, the winter solstice is the moment when the earth is at a point in its orbit where one hemisphere is most inclined away from the sun. As the date of the winter solstice approaches, the days get progressively shorter, leading some ancient people to believe that the sun, an object of worship, was dying. In the northern hemisphere, the winter solstice falls on December 21, or December 22. The sun was believed to be dead for three days, since its trajectory was not perceived to have moved until December 25, the day associated with the rebirth of the sun. This three day period of death, then resurrection, is associated with many of the saviour gods, including Horus, Attis, Osiris, Mithra, and Jesus, who were all said to be born on December 25. The word Solstice comes from two Latin segments, sol (sun), and *sistere* (to standstill), or sun standstill.

Reclaim Santa Claus as a Pagan God form. Today's Santa is a folk figure with multicultural roots. He embodies characteristics of Saturn (Roman agricultural god), Cronos (Greek god, also known as Father Time), the Holly King (Celtic god of the dying year), Father Ice/Grandfather Frost (Russian winter god), Thor (Norse sky god who rides the sky in a chariot drawn by goats), Odin/Wotan (Scandinavian/Teutonic All-Father who rides the sky on an eight-legged horse), Frey (Norse fertility god), and the Tomte (a Norse Land Spirit known for giving gifts to children at this time of year). Santa's reindeer can be viewed as forms of Herne, the Celtic Horned God. Decorate your home with Santa images that reflect His Pagan heritage.

You may also want to include one with a Sun child, such as Isis with Horus. Pagan Goddess forms traditionally linked with this time of year include Tonantzin (Native Mexican corn mother), Holda (Teutonic earth goddess of good fortune), Bona Dea (Roman women's goddess of abundance and prophecy), Ops (Roman goddess of plenty), Au Set/Isis (Egyptian/multicultural All Goddess whose worship continued in Christian times under the name Mary), Lucina/St. Lucy (Roman/Swedish goddess/saint of light), and Befana (Italian Witch who gives gifts to children at this season).

Honor the new solar year with light. Do a Solstice Eve ritual in which you meditate in darkness and then welcome the birth of the sun by lighting candles and singing chants and Pagan carols. If you have a indoor fireplace or an outdoor fire circle, burn an oak log as a Yule log and save a bit to start next year's fire. Decorate the inside and/or outside of your home with electric colored lights. Because of the popularity of five pointed stars as holiday symbols, this is a good time to display a pentagram of blue or white lights.

Contribute to the manifestation of more wellness on Planet Earth. Donate food and clothing to poor in your area. Volunteer time at a social service agency. Put up bird feeders and keep them filled throughout the winter to supplement the diets of wild birds. Donate funds and items to non-profit groups, and environmental organizations. Meditate for world peace. Work magic for a healthier planet. Make a pledge to do some form of good works in the new solar year.

HumanLight presents an alternative reason to celebrate: a Humanist's vision of a good future. It is a future in which all people can identify with one another, care for each other, behave with the highest moral standards, and work together toward a happy, just and peaceful world. It is a vision that we not only wish to celebrate, but which we also wish to communicate to our children, families and friends. We want the people important to us to understand the ideals that we hold most dear to our hearts and, in so doing, to have a fuller understanding of who we are as people.

