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Culture

Happy Re-Birthday: Celebrating the Light's Return at Winter Solstice

by Barbara Schiffman, CHt and Cat Williford, MCC

Winter Solstice marks the shift of the seasons from harvesting crops to rejuvenating the Earth.

In 2009, this longest night of the year falls on December 21. While the notion of winter usually evokes images of warm coats, mittens and boots, in ancient times Winter Solstice was honored as the turning point when the sun begins warming the Earth a little bit longer every day.

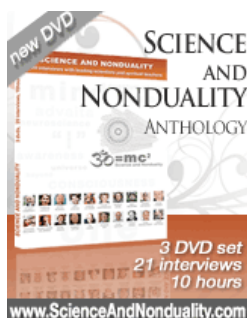
Like the Earth, our moods are affected by the abundance of darkness at this time of year. Medical studies have shown that many people—especially women—get depressed as daylight diminishes steadily between October and December. So the gradual return of light helps us begin feeling more optimistic and hopeful as we prepare for a new year.

Winter Solstice Legends and Lore

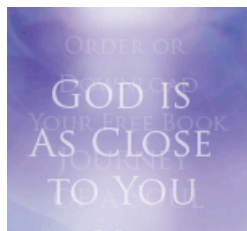
In both ancient and modern religions, the sun's rebirth has long been celebrated by lighting candles and dancing under the stars at Christmas, Chanukah and Kwanzaa. In Goddess or Celtic traditions, Solstice marks the first of the year's Sabbats, which mark the phases of the changing seasons. It follows Samhain or All Hallow's Eve (Halloween) on October 31, which denotes the start of the lengthening nights to foster introspection and rest. As winter moves into spring, the Earth regains its strength—and so do we.

Winter Solstice marks the birth of new life and the rebirth of the Goddess. Many cultures and traditions honor Sun Goddesses at Yuletide such as Sunna (Scandinavia), Lucia (Sweden), Befana (Italy), Rhiannon (Wales), Grainne (Ireland) and Sun Woman (Australia). Others honor Fire Goddesses like Pele (Polynesia), Oya (Africa) and Fuji (Japan). After the decline of matriarchy, most religions transformed their Sun Goddesses into Sun Gods, retaining only Moon Goddesses to reign over the night sky.

Sun Goddesses are key figures in many cultures' Winter Solstice legends. The Japanese believe Sun Goddess Amaterasu retreated into a cave to escape her Storm God brother Susu-wo-no, plunging the world into darkness. The people begged



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Amaterasu to return when their crops stopped growing. Months passed but she would not emerge from her cave until sacred clown Alarming Woman finally charmed Amaterasu to come close to the cave's mouth. Then she yanked Amaterasu out as if through a birth canal.

The metaphor of going underground during this time of year is echoed in the Greek myth of Persephone. She goes into the Underworld for six months of the year until her mother, Demeter, brings her out. In the Hopi Indian observance of Soyal, fires are lit and creation stories told to help the kachinas (spirit helpers) emerge from dark kivas (sacred caves) so they can live with the people for six months as daylight increases.

Other traditions consider the Goddess to be the Sun's mother and so many sacred birth legends echo the Christmas story. In Celtic lore, Rhiannon gives birth to sacred son Pryderi. In Egyptian tradition, Isis rebirths Horus. In Roman myths, Leto gives birth to sun god Apollo.

Symbols from ancient ceremonies used in today's Solstice celebrations include evergreen trees, mistletoe and holly which represent how seeds and the color green remain alive even in dark months. Flames on candles and Yule logs echo the sun's returning light and warmth, as does the color red.

Winter Solstice and Renewal

Winter Solstice can be celebrated as a re-birthday for modern Gods and Goddesses. As we release the old year and prepare for the new, it is an ideal time to complete projects and resolve unfinished business in relationships so that we can move on with a clean slate.

What do you need to feel safe and secure as you rebirth yourself into the new year? You can celebrate alone or in a circle of likeminded and supportive friends to release the past and celebrate all the ways you've evolved in 2009.

Celebrating Solstice

This is an ideal time to clean house, literally and figuratively. This freshens your environmental energy so you can move from winter to spring with a clean slate.

Sort through cupboards and closets to remove items that weigh you down emotionally or no longer serve you. Swap clothing that doesn't fits your lifestyle or body anymore with friends who are also cleaning house. Donate items to a needy family or charity. File all the papers on your desk, toss out old magazines and put your financial books in order (which will make tax preparation easier in April). By literally putting your house in order, you will feel lighter and more energized.

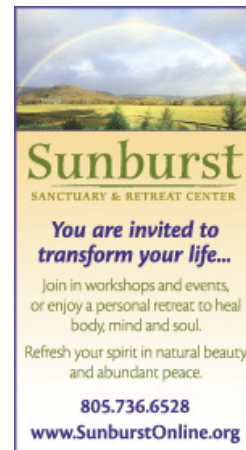
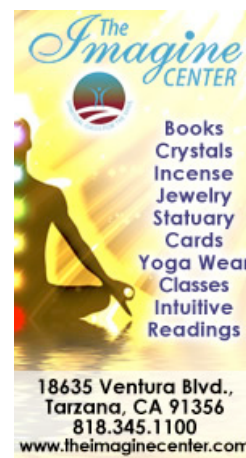
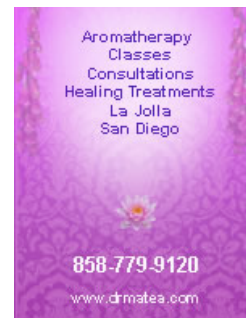
Write a list of projects and communications that still feel unfinished for you. Decide which no longer interest you and which ones you want to continue working on in the new year.

Now reflect on the year that's ending by writing out a list of your accomplishments in 2009. For this list you can use special paper or ink with the colors of the season: red for the fire of rebirth and renewal, green for growth and love.

Next write a paragraph describing your overall experience of 2009.

When you're done, take a few minutes to sit in quiet gratitude. If you like, you can imagine you're moving through a cosmic birth canal to emerge afresh into 2010. Envision yourself as you wish to be in the new year or see and feel yourself as an infant ready to start over. Take your first big breath as you open your eyes and see the world anew.

No matter how you choose to celebrate Winter Solstice, gift yourself with the knowledge that you are not the same as you were yesterday. Dozens of cells in your body are new,



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as are your thoughts and feelings. All that you are is constantly evolving.

Let Winter Solstice remind you to make 2010 a year of renewal and rejuvenation as you celebrate the return of the light in everything you do.

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