



Solstice traditions date back thousands of years

Earth's slightly tilted axis as it travels around the sun is the basis for our seasons. As we approach the period between Dec. 20 and 23, the shortest day of the year occurs, usually on Dec. 21. It is known as winter solstice, the point when the Northern Hemisphere is farthest from the sun.

Six months later, our planet tilts the other way and faces the sun, culminating with the longest day of the year, the summer solstice. The astronomical phenomenon of the solstices happens every year, as predictable as the sunrise.

Many of the traditions now associated with winter are believed to have originated centuries ago with indigenous peoples and nature-based societies. Before there were clocks, watches and satellite timekeepers, native people paid intense attention to the movements of the planets, the phases of the moon and the length of the days. They knew that summer solstice marked the longest day, and that the days would get shorter as the time for harvest arrived.

They also knew that the shortest days of the year were coming, and put aside stores of food to nourish them during long winter nights.

Winter is the season of dormancy, darkness and cold, until the solstice on Dec. 21 marks the "Return of the Sun." The significance of nature's continuing cycles and longer days to come is celebrated with feasts, festivals and holidays throughout the world.

In Scandinavia, solstice is referred to as Yule or Juul, derived from the Norse word jól. Fires are lit to symbolize the heat, light and life-giving properties of the returning sun. Traditionally, a Yule or Juul log was burned on the hearth, and a piece of it was kept as kindling for the following year's log. In other parts of Europe, ashes of the Yule log were strewn on the fields as fertilizer for the coming year's crop.

Evergreen trees have always carried a special meaning. They remain green and vibrant after other trees have lost their leaves, standing as beacons of hope for the continuation of life. In Northern Europe, the two traditions merged, resulting in the symbol of an evergreen tree lit by small ornaments of light. At first, the lights were candles attached to tree boughs, a significant fire hazard. Now we celebrate the season with safe and energy-efficient lights outside and inside our homes.

Significant astronomical events may carry spiritual meaning for some. Ancient sites like Stonehenge in England were built to celebrate the winter solstice. For others, like me, the solstice is a day for being outside, for feeling appreciation for nature and for life itself.

The ending of the year carries the weight of the days that came before. It is an opportunity to reflect on the high points and lows of the year about to end, and forming optimistic plans for the year about to begin.

We can make wise use of the last few weeks of the darkness of winter, and prepare to celebrate the return of longer days filled with light.

Happy Winter Solstice!



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