

When We Welcome the Light: Yule and Renewal

By Rev. Jane Smith, Channing Memorial Church, UU, Ellicott City, MD December 19, 2021

The sweet smell of cookies emanates from the oven as the families gather in celebration and joy around heaps of food, a Yule log, and a freshly cut evergreen tree – for we are coming upon the winter solstice, the shortest day and longest night of the year, a transition to the rebirth of the sun. Yule – an ancient pagan celebration – still opening families and friends and faith communities to joy as we honor the cycles of life, the beauty in the darkness, and a time for renewal. For those of us who are pagan this is a time for magic, a connection to the Goddess.

Tradition is the true heart and soul of this holiday season, honoring the stories of times past, singing or lighting candles as a connection with our ancestors, and offering us a reason to gather – an invitation to love, joy, and generosity. Food that nourishes not only our physical bodies but feeds our souls through metaphor. As we welcome the sun after a period of darkness, sunny-side-up eggs symbolize a connection to the solar. Cookies – a common holiday tradition – take on a new meaning during Solstice. Sweet baked goods and cookies “ensures ‘sweetness’ in the year to come.”¹ Those cookies and eggs create community and foster joy. Or delight through the pagan practice of wassailing – traveling from house to house, singing and drinking and creating good cheer for singers and listeners alike. Perhaps those celebrating burn a Yule log, charring in the flames of a fireplace to protect the household and discern futures, or adorn an evergreen tree with items filled with magic. Some of the joyful, sacred traditions of Yule – honoring the cycle of the sun.²

For the ancient pagan peoples knew that the winter solstice was the longest night of the year, and as the days lengthened again the sun returned, the dormant earth sprung back to life. I quote, “as the wheel continues to spin, the sun returns to us once more.”³ And this becomes a sacred time for those among us who practice magic – the special wonders of winter! The water

¹ *The Wheel of the Year: Living the Magical Life*, Pauline Campanelli pg. 2

² <https://www.learnreligions.com/all-about-yule-2562972>

³ *ibid*

that comprises the snow that delicately coats the earth is understood as a connection to the Goddess, used for healing and cleansing. A sacred connection to the divine – a time for purification. For these dark, still, cold winter months serve as an honored time for reflection – focusing within ourselves, not beyond – a time to set intentions that manifest just as the crocuses peak through the crusty earth.⁴ As this wheel turns, we are offered a way, through daylight and nighttime, to acknowledge this universal cycle of birth, life, death and rebirth. For just as the sun creates a cycle of light and darkness, warmth and illumination followed by a shadow that creates stillness and dormancy, so, too, do we cycle through life – repeatedly experiencing with wisdom and introspection that arises from dormancy, and the growth and joy that we garner from the light. Through our own experiences of darkness and light, let us remember that whatever we are experiencing will ultimately come to an end as we welcome the next stage of this inevitable, unending sequence. May we greet each renewal with sweetness – as a cookie, anticipating the joy that lies ahead.

As we lie dormant, just as the plants do as the short days give way to darkness, we, too, are encased in that veil of black. Often when we think of darkness we relate to the negative – that of hardship, or an experience of fear and a scary, threatening unknown. And yet what Yule highlights is the beauty in the dark – the sacred opportunities this darkness offers which light simply cannot. Even when dormant, even when cold and subdued and buried, we find those opportunities in this endless cycle that lead to introspection, growth, and strength – a time to pause and truly engage with our inner selves – connecting with our inner beings. Darkness, nighttime, winter, a veil over our souls – this maintains its own kind of beauty. For there is mystery in the darkness; that which is present, but which we cannot see. In the darkness we are opened to eternity, to endless time. Even our beings – our inner beings – hold this contrast between metaphorical darkness and light, as reflected on by Reverend Gary Kowalski,

“At the center of our being
there is light and there is darkness,

⁴ <https://www.learnreligions.com/welcome-back-the-sun-for-yule-2562985>

the known and the unknown,
the named and the nameless,
the finite and the infinite.”⁵

What grows from the unknown, the nameless, the infinite? Is this not a wealth of opportunity for reflection and introspection, examining the self, understanding our souls with more certainty, connecting to that hidden space which is only obtainable as we are offered the sacred stillness of the dark? Stephanie Noble reflects on the idea that darkness is nothing to fear, but to celebrate, as it offers a chance for our light to ultimately shine! It serves as a cave where our souls rest and renew; the gestation of our inner beings.⁶

For just as a seed is nourished while buried in the darkness of earth, ultimately blossoming, and becoming its full, true self as spring arrives, so, too, are we renewed in this time of darkness to flower and flourish in the warmth of the sun. All that we gained in the darkness comes to fruition and we set and live our intentions and welcome in a new kind of beauty. For in this time – we are invited to set our intentions. Mine is to live fully present in each moment. I wonder, what is yours? After our dormant period – we are reborn! I quote,

“As the wheel turns, light returns.
The light of the sun has returned to us,
bringing life and warmth with it.
The shadows will vanish, and life will continue.
We are blessed by the light of the sun.”⁷

Not good arising from bad but growth arising from introspection. As we heard earlier in our meditation, “change is part of the rhythm of the universe.”⁸ And so there is change with the

⁵ *Soul Matters Worship Packet December 2021* excerpt from Gary Kowalski

⁶ *Soul Matters Worship Packet December 2021* excerpt from

⁷ <https://www.learnreligions.com/all-about-yule-2562972>

⁸ “Winter Solstice Meditation” By Lyn Cox

seasons, and change in the “center of our beings.”⁹ Each phase we experience has elements of goodness, of growth in it. And these cyclical changes – this makes us who we are – change leads to growth, to wisdom – that maturation unobtainable if life remains stationary. Change is a reminder that both hardship and joy – we will cycle through this. That even in the darkness we can learn and grow and mature. Through cycles we learn lessons and obtain a stronger sense of appreciation, a true understanding of self. Birth, life, death, rebirth – each solstice, as the light returns, offers a sacred time of renewal. Of using that darkness for growth and welcoming the light that allows that dormant seed to flourish – renewed and strengthened – setting intention for the year ahead. So as the days begin to lengthen, and we welcome the rebirth of the sun, let our light shine forth! Let us flourish and bask in joy and warmth. Let us welcome the sun and our own rebirth with appreciation, gratitude, and delight. May our inner lights shine.

May it be so, and Amen.

⁹ *Soul Matters Worship Packet December 2021* excerpt from Gary Kowalski