

The Winter Solstice, or, Happy New Year

By Dennis Knight

The Winter Solstice occurs annually on December 21 or 22. In the Northern Hemisphere it is the time at which the Sun is at its southernmost point in sky, creating the shortest day and longest night of the year. By my personal logic, it should mark the beginning of the New Year, although our Gregorian calendar fixes that about 10 days later on January 1. My theory gets no support from the astronomical community which fixes the solar year as beginning at the Vernal Equinox, or about March 21.

The date of January 1 to start the new calendar year was fixed by the Catholic Church to occur seven days after the anniversary of the birth of Christ and to mark the date of His circumcision as a holy day of obligation. The actual date of the Nativity was not settled until the year 433 when it was finally fixed on the Julian calendar as December 25, corresponding to the date that was then thought to be the winter solstice.

In 1582, Pope Gregory XII adopted the Gregorian calendar which we use today. By that time, the solstice was known to occur several days earlier, on about December 21, but the Pope maintained December 25 as Christmas, and thereby separated that important Christian holiday from the solar event. If you are interested, you may find much more on this subject in the Catholic Encyclopedia (1913) on the Internet at www.newadvent.org.

That separation of Christmas from the solar event was important to Christians because of the bacchanalian ways in which the early Greeks and Romans observed the winter solstice. The ancient calendar consisted of twelve 30-day months, or 360 days, and a five-day bonus period called Saturnalia to finish out the solar year. Because those days were 'outside of time', the ancients found in them license to behave without restriction, enjoying excesses of food, wine and sexual exploits.

The solstice in today's cultures and religions represents birth, rebirth, or a new beginning and the reversal of the months' long trend to shorter days, and so I continue to defy convention and hold to my initial declaration that it marks the year's new beginning. It is a moment for cultures around the hemisphere to celebrate the joy and optimism that the New Year brings.

The Zuni and Hopi tribes of North America celebrate Soyal on December 21 to ceremonially bring the sun back from its long winter slumber, and to mark the beginning of another cycle of the Wheel of the Year. It is a time for purification, and prayer sticks are made prior to the ceremony to bless all the community, including their homes, animals and plants.

Of all the mid-winter celebrations, Christmas, even though it is not tied to the solstice, is the most globally recognized, and it involves feasting, singing, gifts, good deeds, prayer, religious ceremony and commercial exploitation. It, too, is really about joy and optimism.

The Yule is a winter festival that was first celebrated by the Germanic people as a pagan religious festival but it was later absorbed into and equated with the Christmas. Yule is also used in English speaking countries to refer to Christmas, and has led to customs enjoyed around the world such as the Yule log and Yule singing.

Mummer's Day originated in Cornwall to celebrate the solstice dancing in disguise with blackened faces or wearing masks. It is celebrated with a Mummers Parade in Philadelphia which is thought to be the oldest folk festival in the United States.

Perhaps because their long winter nights are even more pronounced, cultures in arctic regions acknowledge the transitional event of the solstice with deeply symbolic events. On Saint Lucy's Day in Scandinavia, a young girl is chosen to portray Lucia wearing a crown or wreath with candles, a white robe and red sash to chase away winter and bring back the sun. The Saami, who are the indigenous people of Finland, Sweden and Norway celebrate the Beiwe festival to honor the sun-goddess who flies through the sky in a structure of reindeer bones.

The winter solstice is celebrated in every continent in some way by nearly every culture, and it is always an occasion of hope and a great spiritual lift to those of us who find ourselves deep in winter's doldrums. Happy New Year!