



Auckland Unitarian Church

Love beyond belief

What Yule traditions can teach us

23 May 2024. © Barbara Thomborson

Casting the circle (words for invoking the directions)

Blessed be to all here. Let's cast the sacred circle to invoke the spirit powers of the directions. When we have finished invoking spirits of the south, please do not walk behind the lit candles. You'll break the sacredness of our circle.

Please join me in saying at the end of the invocation 'Hail and welcome, spirits of the direction'. Please rise, let your arms and hands hang down the sides, and turn your palms towards the altar (like this). We start by facing east (I point):

We turn to the Spirits of the East, place of air,
Of morning and springtime:
Be with us as the sun rises,

Inspire us with the fresh breath of courage
As we go forth into new adventures.

HAIL AND WELCOME, SPIRITS OF THE EAST

We turn to the Spirits of the North, place of fire,
Of noontime and summer:
Be with us in your shortest days,

Light our spirit at this dark time
For the work that awaits us.

HAIL AND WELCOME, SPIRITS OF THE EAST

We turn to the Spirits of the West, place of water,
Of evening and autumn:
Be with us as the sun sets,

Help us to enjoy a rich harvest
Of our personal ripening and maturing.

HAIL AND WELCOME, SPIRITS OF THE EAST

We turn to the Spirits of the South, place of earth,
Of nighttime and winter:
Be with us in this darkness,

Ground us in the wisdom of the changing seasons
As we celebrate the spiraling journey of our lives.
HAIL AND WELCOME, SPIRITS OF THE EAST

What Yule traditions can teach us

Our Christmas traditions came from ancient Nordic and Celtic pagans. You already knew that, right? To this native of the northern hemisphere, New Zealanders use those traditions at the wrong time of the year. The British are blessed with numerous ways to celebrate the winter solstice because the Vikings and Romans, then French, brought their traditions to England and Scotland. These pagans' earth-based deities and celebrations came from their agricultural lives and dependence on nature. They had to live in tune with nature, and nature inspired all of their holidays.

The word Yule comes from the Old Norse for 'wheel'. Both the Norse and Celts ascribed to a wheel of the year. At winter solstice, the wheel finished its turning. The old god had to die at Yule so the new son could be born which restarted the wheel.

Almost all cultures, ancient and current, held gatherings for winter solstice to help dispel depression from the long nights of darkness, especially in northern Europe. It was a time of feasting and drinking. Wassail was both a wish for good health and alcoholic drink of barley beer, warm cider, or warm, spiced wine. Pagans did circle dances while singing seasonal carols. The circle dances symbolized the turning of the wheel of the year. They also caroled while going from house to house for some food and drink. The Romans brought their tradition of gift giving as part of their Saturnalia celebrations. At Yule, medieval British also gathered to play games of divination, like casting sacred stones or reading tarot cards. This divination was for understanding the past year, anticipating the new year, and personal understanding of the self.

The most obvious reason for creating celebrations was to deal with fear at this fallow time and during long, dark days. Ancient and medieval pagans made and gave bright

decorations of silver and gold. Bringing greenery indoors was important. Ivy vines symbolized friendship and fidelity; holly was protection from bad luck. Wreaths of greenery and berries symbolized the Yule wheel. The Yule tree, both inside and outside, was a pine or a yew. The pine's meaning was for healing and cleaning of air, while the yew symbolized rebirth and the spirit realm. Those pagans also decorated with holly berries for red and mistletoe for white. Mistletoe represented male fertility.

PAUSE Fire is the most ancient way of banishing the dark. Over centuries, pagans used candles, bonfires (bone fires), and burning the yule log for light over Yuletide. They preferred the oak, as they believed the giant tree was a gateway between the dying year and the new year. If the Yule log burnt less than 12 days, it was a bad omen.

What lessons can we take from this ancient wisdom?

It's a time for sensual pleasures: Cosying up under soft blankets, warm comfort foods, including spices like cinnamon, especially in tea and wine.

Of course, it's a time for fire: light a scented candle. Enjoy the warm glow of a woodfire. Throw some pine boughs on it for a lovely fragrance.

It's a time for gifts, even if you only gift yourself.

Yule is a time to slow down, even stop for a while, like Nature does. Some trees drop all their leaves; all plants stop growing – it's their down time, days for absolute rest.

Take a lesson from Papatuanuku, mother Earth.

It's a time for introspection. Turn inwards and contemplate your life; try for more self-understanding. Get a tarot reading.

Lastly, it's a time for magic. On a cloudless night, go out and appreciate the stars. Sit outside and marvel at those amazing fires at unimaginable distances from us. Or just go out and savour the darkness, maybe meditate on it. There is calm in lack of visual stimulation; Take solace in the darkness.

I'll close with poet Wendell Berry's ode titled *To Know The Dark*:

To go in the dark with a light is to know the light.

To know the dark, go dark. Go without sight,
and find that the dark, too, blooms and sings,
and is travelled by dark feet and dark wings.

Open Circle (words for farewelling directions)

We turn to the Spirits of the South,
place of earth and winter.

We thank you for blessing us with your presence.
May your power to bless us with peace
Abide with us in our busy lives.

HAIL AND FAREWELL, SPIRITS OF THE SOUTH

We turn to the Spirits of the West, place of water,
Of evening and autumn:

We thank you for blessing us with your presence.
May your power to cleanse and heal
Abide with us as we mature through our days.
HAIL AND FAREWELL, SPIRITS OF THE WEST

We turn to the Spirits of the North, place of fire,
Of noontime and summer:

We thank you for blessing us with your presence.
May your power to help us to adapt to life
Abide with us and bring light to our lives.
HAIL AND FAREWELL, SPIRITS OF THE NORTH

We turn to the Spirits of the East, place of air,
Of morning and springtime.

We thank you for blessing us with your presence.
May your power to expand our vision and imagination
Abide with us as we work to make the world better.
HAIL AND FAREWELL, SPIRITS OF THE EAST

Merry meet and merry part, and merry meet again.