

Tis The Season

I have always been fascinated with the variety of customs and activities that go on during the holiday season. Every family seems to have their own traditions handed down from generation to generation, but most interesting, is the fact that so many different cultures and spiritual paths, all have a celebration taking place around this time of year. There is the Christian Christmas, The Jewish Hanukkah, and the Winter Solstice, which is celebrated by a large number of cultures and faiths, to name only a few.

Many of our North American customs, I have learned, have deep roots in Northern European pagan holiday practices that were absorbed into the celebration surrounding Christmas after these people converted to Christianity. Yule or the Yuletide, was a pagan midwinter religious festival, observed by the Germanic and some other neighboring peoples. It went on for about two months time, and took place from about mid-November to early January of the modern calendar year. It was believed to be the last feast celebration before deep winter began. I believe our version of this is Thanksgiving, the frantic holiday shopping season, endless boxing day sales, with a credit card hangover lasting the remainder of the winter.

Before the days of grocery stores and imported produce, most of the cattle were slaughtered in early winter so they would not have to be kept until spring. The result of this was an abundant supply of fresh meat. With all the crops harvested, and the majority of beer and wine made over the year now fermented and ready to consume, It was a good time for folks to get together and have a party. The grim reality of those earlier times was that deep winter was often a time of famine, and many people did not survive until spring. With the prospect of facing a harsh winter that you or your loved ones may not survived, one feasted, laughed, and sang together while you still could.

To many other cultures and religions, the Winter Solstice, is seen as a time of birth or rebirth. This event happens the moment that the sun appears at noon, at its lowest altitude above the horizon. It is the shortest day and longest night of the year, and heralds the return of lengthening days and the arrival of spring. In Greek mythology the gods and goddesses meet on the summer and winter Solstices, and Hades, who's domain is the underworld, is permitted to enter Mount Olympus only during the Winter Solstice. This theme is thought to fuel the zany Saturnalia's master and slave role reversals that often took place during the Roman celebrations.

Ironically in Colonial America, especially the New England states, the celebration of Christmas was illegal. They believed that it was a pagan practice, therefore disrespecting of the Lord. All decorations and tasty holiday foods were considered illegal. The holiday excesses and revelry that carried over from pagan times had always been deeply frowned upon by the Christian community, since they believed that Christ's birthday was a serious matter. This may be why some people, even when they are Christian in belief, do not celebrate Christmas Day. The second irony surrounding Christmas, is the trend these last few years in North America, (a society that had been built of people mostly of Christian origin) to remove the religious aspect of Christmas from school pageants, and public events and displays.

Some time in the early nineteen hundreds, holiday celebrations became not only legal but widely accepted practice. School children began reading books filled with

stories of Santa Claus or St. Nicolas, and learned to expect gifts to magically appear on Christmas morning in stockings and under gayly decorated trees. Women's magazines went into publication with recipes and decoration ideas, many of them for holiday entertaining. With the appearance of Radio and TV retailers were now able to reach a broad audience with gift ideas sure to bring joy to all. A commercial holiday was born!

I can still recall the glorious anticipation I felt while gazing at page after page of wonderful toys in the Sears wish book, as a child. It is hard to decide what gave me the most pleasure, The wishing or the getting. With eight children, our Sears Wish Book was nearly worn out before the first week of December. I sensed even as a young child that Santa Claus was really my parents; yet still wanted to believe that there was some generous gift giver out there who would grant me my hearts desire, if I tried to be a good girl all year. The closer it got to Christmas, the harder I tried to be obedient and helpful for my mom.

Most years there were two really exciting gifts under the tree for all of us, other years not so much. Every year my stocking was stuffed with a Christmas orange, candy and nuts. Some years even a small toy! Looking back, I can't imagine how my parents managed this with so many of us, and only one income. Even when I didn't get what I had wished for, it was still a magical day with a shimmering tree, company arriving, delicious food, and the love and laughter we all shared. As a child I never questioned or cared if Christmas was a Christian or pagan holiday, nor do I care now. It had an interesting history, but I love a good party like I love a good story, so it is all good with me.

People during the weeks leading up to Christmas always ask one another what they want for Christmas. I always tell everyone that I don't want anything, and for the most part it is true. I don't want my loved ones to spend money on me that they could use for their own families; and it wouldn't please me to know that obtaining a gift for me was a source of stress for someone I care about. I love attractively wrapped gifts as much as the next person, but I know that those things only provide fleeting happiness. So this year, since we are getting so well acquainted, I thought I would let you know what is on my wish list that I send out to Santa each year.

I wish for peace on earth, and respect for this planet and all that share it. I know.....it's a really tall order. Santa has told me that this is something that even he may not be able to deliver. But I keep wishing. I am not so idealistic to think that it is possible to have a world where no tears will fall; sorrow and pain are part of the human experience as much as pleasure and joy are. Yet we cause unnecessary suffering through wars, tyranny, greed, and ignorance. Perhaps if I tried to make better choices myself, tried to be a little more understanding of others, it would help make my wish possible. Perhaps...but change can only happen when people want it to.

May you all enjoy a holiday celebrated in warm shelter, and in the company of loved ones. May you find joy in simple things and hope for the coming year. Light a candle and rejoice in the certainty of the turning of the wheel, and spring's renewal.

Merry Christmas All.

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