

AS THE PRESSURE TO BUY, BUY,
BUY CONTINUES TO BUILD,
WELLBEING TAKES TIME TO ASK
WHAT HOLIDAYS AND ANNUAL
CELEBRATIONS ARE REALLY ABOUT.

HOLIDAYS & HOLY DAYS

BY KELLY SURTEES



“We must not allow the clock and the calendar to blind us to the fact that each moment of life is a miracle and mystery.” — H. G. Wells

Everyone loves an excuse to celebrate. The calendar year is dotted with opportunities to stop work and gather with friends and family to eat, drink and be merry. In the Christianised west, two popular festivals include Christmas in December and Easter in March/April. North Americans also celebrate Thanksgiving and Halloween through October and November, while in Europe feast days linked to saints are popular throughout the year.

“Holiday” is derived from the words “holy day”. The word itself evokes a sense of spiritual or physical significance. In fact, the origins of many Christmas traditions can be found in the pagan observance of Yule. Celebrated around the midwinter solstice (about June 20 in the southern hemisphere and December 20 in the northern hemisphere), Yule traditions such as all-night log burning arose out of worshipping sun gods such as Mithras and Horus.

It’s thought that ancient festivals emerged out of humanity’s desire to measure time, which, having much less sophisticated calendars, they did by marking seasonal changes. Consider that until 1753 Great Britain celebrated New Year’s Day on March 25 — shortly after the northern hemisphere spring equinox, traditionally a time of new beginnings. As origins of many modern festivals lie in physical and seasonal changes, rituals linked to celebrations such as Easter and Christmas are as practical as they are symbolic.

Common Easter symbols such as rabbits, eggs and flowers were actual indicators of the emerging spring. Compare this to modern rituals associated with celebrations like Easter, Christmas and Halloween that include pressured gift-buying and excessive chocolate consumption. Rather than celebrate the essence of a particular time, it seems society is caught up outdoing the Joneses throughout the holidays.

A typical earth-based or pagan calendar comprises eight festivals, four linked to the turning points of the sun (solstices and equinoxes) and four that represent the mid-points between these. These celebrations also form the basis of the Wiccan calendar and are known as sabbats. They are linked to the sun and masculine energy. Esbats are

moon celebrations that honour feminine energy. They are held to honour all phases of the moon, though most commonly around the full moon.

At key times throughout the year, when the balance between light and dark and day and night changes, seasons begin to change. Taking time to acknowledge the emerging green shoots of spring; to bask and slow down in the long, hot days of summer; to harvest the efforts and produce of the year as the leaves change colour through autumn; and to rest and recuperate through the long, cold nights of winter are ways of honouring both nature’s cycles and the passing of time.

THE SUN AND MOON IN MODERN FESTIVALS

Solstice and equinox points have historically been regarded as important for timing. *Solstice* is derived from two words: *sol*, meaning “sun”, and *stice*, meaning “still”. The solstices, then, are the standing-still points of the Sun, at either the highest arc (summer — longest day/shortest night) or the lowest arc (winter — longest night/shortest day). At the summer solstice, the sun reaches its highest point in the sky, offering maximum heat and light. At the winter solstice, the sun hangs at its lowest point, sharing minimal heat and light.

Equinoxes are halfway between each solstice and occur when day and night are equal. From the spring equinox to the summer solstice, days rapidly lengthen and temperatures rise. Once the summer solstice occurs, days begin to shorten and temperatures drop until there is a 12-hour day and 12-hour night at the autumn equinox. After the autumn equinox, days continue to shorten and temperatures keep dropping as nature heads towards the longest night of the year at the winter solstice. From the winter solstice, days begin to lengthen and temperatures rise as the spring equinox approaches.

The historical influence of natural cycles, such as the solstices and equinoxes, in determining festival or celebration dates can be seen in the methods used to calculate dates for significant cultural celebrations. Chinese New Year begins on the second new moon after the winter solstice. Easter is the first Sunday after the first full moon after the northern hemisphere spring equinox (March). Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish “head of the year” or New Year festival, starts at sunset on the day of the new moon closest to the September equinox (northern hemisphere autumn).

The connection between modern religious

festivals, especially those of the Christian faith, with older pagan celebrations could be in part due to the efforts of Pope Gregory I (540–604). He built churches on the sites of pagan temples, perhaps hopeful that people would still gather at these sacred sites, which could then create an opportunity to convert them to Christian prayer.

THE WHEEL OF THE YEAR

The two solstices (about December 20 and June 20), the two equinoxes (about March 20 and September 20) and the approximate middle points between these form the basis of the Wheel of the Year, used in alternative faiths such as paganism and Wicca. The Wheel of the Year celebrates nature’s changing cycles and seasons. It is a way of marking time that’s neither manmade nor abstract, like our modern Gregorian calendar. The Wheel of the Year is designed to honour sacred days and nights of power.

Traditional feasts and festivals, many of which stem from turning points on the Wheel of the Year, are expressions of the

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nature of time and seasonal change at any given point.

Because of the reality that most people live (and have lived) in the northern hemisphere, over time the globally accepted calendar has grown to incorporate traditional festivals with calendar dates as they occur in the northern hemisphere. Those living in the southern hemisphere should switch dates by six months to ensure they celebrate the festivals in line with the physical and seasonal energy to which they relate.

For example, Yule, Midwinter and Christmas are tied to the winter solstice, around December 20 in the northern hemisphere, but energy-wise is most appropriately celebrated in June for those living below the equator. Not all celebrations on the Wheel of the Year have modern correlations: the most obvious are the two that, through time, were reflected in the →

Christian festivals of Yule (Christmas) and Eostre (Easter).

- Samhain October 31/November 1
- Yule December 20 (solstice)
- Imbolc February 2
- Eostre March 20 (equinox)
- Beltane April 30/May 1
- Midsummer June 20 (solstice)
- Lammass/Lughnasadh August 1
- Mabon September 20 (equinox)

(These dates refer to the northern hemisphere [NH])

SAMHAIN (pronounced *salwhen*) is an old Celtic word meaning summer's end. It's considered the Witches' New Year. Fire and bonfires were burned to cleanse away the energy of the old year, marking the end or death of summer and the start or birth of winter. A modern incarnation is the dressing-up of homes in candles, jack-o-lanterns and fairy lights for Halloween, prevalent throughout North America. This was a festival for honouring the dead. The Catholic Church celebrates All Saints (November 1) and All Souls day (November 2) at this time, too. In the astrological calendar, this is the time of Scorpio, which is a sign about death and rebirth, magic, mystery and secrets.

Pagans traditionally celebrated the birth of their mythical Lord on November 1 (May 1 for the southern hemisphere [SH]) at Samhain. At this time of year, the veil between this world and the next is said to thin, making it important to honour and remember those who had died in the previous year. Out of this ending emerges the birth or new beginning for the next solar, calendar cycle. The festival of Samhain forms the start of the traditional Wheel of The Year, like a New Year celebration.

YULE (derived from the Nordic *iul*, meaning "wheel") was a 12-day pagan feast held during midwinter. The word "yule" is now commonly linked to Christmas. Occurring

Autumn
equinox
mabon
ritual.



Autumn's beauty is said to be a blessing from the Celtic god Mabon as he prepares to die on Samhain, only to be reborn again at midwinter.

around December 20 (NH) or June 20 (SH), Yule honours the winter solstice point, where the sun reaches its lowest arc in the sky, ready to begin again his climb back to his peak and longer days with increased warmth.

The period between Samhain and Yule represents darkness, where days shorten and temperatures drop. The Yule celebration is thus the celebration of the return of the sun (and therefore light) as, from the winter solstice on, days lengthen. This literal return of the light is symbolically depicted as the birth of the sun. According to pagan tradition, this is a time of divine birth; it is no great leap from here to the Christian celebration of the birth of Jesus.

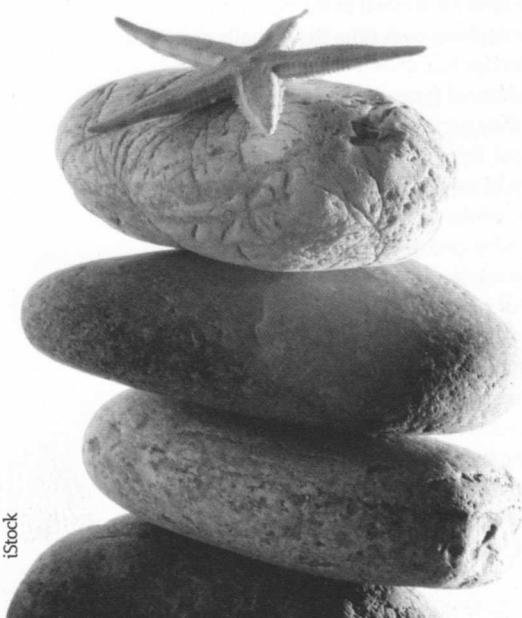
Modern-day Christmas has evolved from traditional celebrations linked to the solstice by way of the Catholic Church's adoption of

this time of year as an important feast date. Rather than celebrating the *sun*, as ancient cultures such as the Egyptians and Romans did, the Catholic Church denoted this date as the celebration of the birth of the *son* of God.

Ancient Druid ritual honours the symbolic battle between the Holly King (death and darkness) and the Oak King (light and life) "by cutting the sacred mistletoe from the oak tree and letting it fall to the ground". This shows the triumph of the Oak King, representing light and life, over the Holly King.

In other religions, festivals of light are also celebrated through this period of actual and symbolic darkness. The Jews celebrate Hanukkah and a number of eastern and Indian faiths celebrate the Festival of Diwali.

The burning of the yule log, said to be a reminder that heat and light would come →



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again, has morphed into the hanging of electric fairy lights around houses and on Christmas trees in a modern attempt to honour humanity's renewed journey back to the light that pagans celebrated through midwinter. Evergreen trees were decorated in the home to ensure prosperity and new growth. Candles are burned inside houses to light up space in the absence of the sun and as a tangible reminder that the long nights will soon end.

IMBOLC also known as Candlemas, is linked to the goddess Brigid (the term "bride" is derived from her name) and Venus. In America, this is often known as Groundhog Day and marks the first seasonal turning towards spring. The appearance of early green shoots is nature's revelation of its earnest preparation for the next season of growth. The earth shows its first flush of colour and fertility and this time is linked to the maiden aspect of the goddess triplicity. Today's festival of love, Valentine's Day, is celebrated shortly after Imbolc. Imbolc is the halfway point between the midwinter Yule festival and the upcoming equinox/Easter celebration.

OSTARA or Eostre (a Teutonic Goddess of Rebirth) was celebrated near the spring equinox. Regardless of what the calendar indicates, this is the first true day of spring, when day and night are equal and the sun stands halfway between its lowest point (midwinter) and highest arc (midsummer). The period from the spring equinox through to midsummer (about June 21 NH or Dec 21 SH) is a time when light rapidly grows, days lengthen, crops ripen and plants sprout and burst forth. All around, you can see signs of life, growth and fertility.

Symbols of the goddesses revered at this time of year include eggs, rabbits, flowers and vines. The direct links from these symbols to the chocolate Easter eggs and bunny rabbits you see around March/April each year are modern translations of older traditions. The reappearance of rabbits after winter hibernation was a sign that spring and all it promised was coming. It is a time to celebrate transformation, as nature emerges green and fresh again from under a blanket of snow and ice.


The word "Easter" is thought to be derived from *Eostre* or *Ostara*, an Anglo Saxon goddess of spring who was worshipped throughout April until the 8th century.

BELTANE relates to Bel's fire (Bel is a Celtic sky god). With the Wheel of the Year beginning at Samhain, this festival, six months later, represents the halfway point on the Wheel of the Year. Summer living and crop and animal arrangements were put in place from here until Samhain. May poles were erected amid celebrations honouring the union of the Stag Lord (Horned God) and May Queen (the Great Mother). Themes of this festival include fertility, sexual union and erotic passion. Couples made a ceremonial commitment, like an engagement, to stay together for a year and a day before deciding to either handfast (marry) or separate. Author of several books on tarot, Christine Jette, describes it as a "time for splendour in the grass".

MIDSUMMER festivals celebrate the highest point of the sun's journey, with outdoor feasting and all-night dancing. Litha, a Celtic goddess, was revered at this time. The Holly and Oak kings again battle, but this time the Holly King (death and darkness) is the victor, as the world begins turning towards the upcoming darker days. Midsummer itself was a classic time for magic, mischievousness and madness. The sun reaches its highest peak and then starts to sink lower in the sky until we reach the halfway point again at the autumn equinox.

LUGHNASADH (*loo-na-saw*), the first harvest festival, is also known as Lammas, (festival of the bread). Traditionally, bread is baked now and other crops from the harvest are prepared (canned, dried or bottled) to provide food through the winter. A good harvest meant survival through winter's cold days ahead. Many celebrations and thanksgivings were offered to harvest gods and goddesses (such as Demeter and Ceres) now. The chance to stock the larder had come again and the bounty of the harvest meant survival through the long, dark winter when no new food was easily available.

MABON the second harvest festival, held



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at the end of the harvest at the autumn equinox, is considered the Witches' Thanksgiving. Many North American traditions for thanksgiving originate from this agricultural festival. Autumn's beauty is said to be a blessing from the Celtic god Mabon as he prepares to die on Samhain, only to be reborn again at midwinter. It's a time of change and anticipation, most noticeably in the vibrant colour change in the leaves on the trees.

Perhaps society's steadfast adherence to modern celebrations, with all their glitz and glamour, is a way to hold onto these rituals and traditions of the past, when by necessity we humans had greater awareness of the subtle and obvious changes in the world around us. Previously, the passage of time was noted by the changing length of daylight or heat/intensity of the sun, the need for crops to be planted or harvested and the practical necessity of staying inside when it was too cold or hot to go out. Life actually changed as the seasons did.

Now, life goes on in the same way, day in, day out, month in, month out, from one year to the next, almost regardless of what the climate, sun or weather is doing. By engaging with modern interpretations of older festivals, today's society is able to maintain some awareness of the passage of time. Given the choice, how would you prefer to mark time: through enjoying naturally inspired seasonal celebration or lost in consumer consumption gone wild? ☺

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