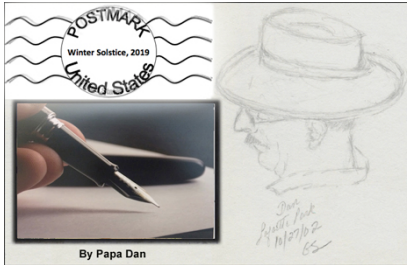


The Winter Solstice: Revisiting a Time for Reflection and Review

By Dan Sapone



“The dance between darkness and light will always remain— the stars and the moon will always need the darkness to be seen, the darkness will just not be worth having without the moon and the stars.”

— C. JoyBell

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Some say that the seasons drive the way we feel about the events swirling around us. Here in America in the twenty-first century, most of us might say that, this time of year, most of our feelings are dominated by celebrations of Christmas and The New Year. We are filled with thoughts of exchanging gifts, decorating a tree, and making New Year’s resolutions. We think of these cultural forces as having always been with us — but there are stories that can take us back to their origins. If we speculate on where all of this comes from, we might consider that it all comes from one common astronomical fact — *The Winter Solstice*: the shortest day of the year.

This year, 2019, here in our part of the world, the official astronomical moment of the Winter Solstice takes place at 8:19 pm PST on Saturday, December 21. Since ancient times, this time of year has signaled a time for review and thoughtful reflection. Historians tell us that we can trace this back a long way. The Romans, for example, like other ancient peoples, had festivals acknowledging that the birth and death of Winter signified important trends in their world, often credited to — or blamed on — “the gods.” That habit has endured through a variety of cultures.

We are also told — although quietly — that early Christians selected the last week of December to celebrate the birth of Jesus of Nazareth to coincide with the pre-Christian celebration of the Winter Solstice. If true, it was a sensible thing to do since it was already a time celebrated with the giving of gifts and official pronouncements about the state of society. So, what’s the story?

It turns out that, for the first three centuries of the existence of Christianity, there is no record that the birth of Jesus was celebrated officially at all. In those early centuries, the two most significant “holidays” were *Epiphany* on January 6 — reputed to be the arrival of The Magi (“The Three Wise Men”) after the birth of Jesus — and *Easter*, which celebrated the resurrection of Jesus. The first official mention of December 25 as a holiday honoring Jesus’ birthday appears in an early Roman calendar from 336 A.D. BUT, you may ask: was Jesus actually born on December 25?

The answer is ‘probably not.’ The Bible doesn’t mention a date for his birthday; but the Nativity story contains some clues. Among the examples of such ‘hints,’ the presence of shepherds and their sheep in the story suggests a Springtime birth; but a lot of time went by before anyone settled on a date for the occasion. Historians tell us that the Western Roman Emperor Constantine made Christianity ‘legal’ in his empire with the Edict of Milan in 313. In 336, he is said to have formally established the birth of Jesus at December 25 (while the Eastern Empire celebrated the birth on January 6). So, the date is not planted on solid ground. Even in more recent American history, the celebration of Christmas as we know it has not been without controversy. The Puritans of colonial New England, for example, banned the observance of Christmas traditions —giving gifts, lighting candles, and decorating trees — primarily because of



its pagan roots. Later, Christmas fell out of favor following the American Revolution as a rejection of a peculiarly British custom. It didn't become an American Federal holiday until 1870. So, whether or not we accept the story that Emperor Constantine "*stole*" the Winter Solstice and turned it into Christmas, this part of the calendar has for a long time been recognized as a time of reflection and review by societies and individuals associated with many beliefs and traditions.

Winter Solstice Rituals from Around the World

Setting aside for a moment the powerful Christmas traditions that dominate the modern western world in the last week of December, thousands of people around the globe will herald the Winter Solstice, the shortest day of the year, with centuries-old rituals. It is, of course, the first day of Winter, — the turning point of the year in many cultures — the moment that our hemisphere is pointed at its farthest distance from the sun. Some of the vocabulary that comes down to us from the ancients provides examples. Pagans called it the "Yule," acknowledging the birth of the new solar year, celebrated to this day in North America by the Circle Sanctuary, one of several prominent pagan groups in Northern America. Here are a few other notable examples of Winter Solstice observances that are practiced here in our own twenty-first century:

1. Catching the Sunrise at Stonehenge

England's famous Stonehenge lures thousands of visitors during both the summer and winter solstices. Dozens of pagan and druid groups head to Stonehenge to pay tribute to the Sun on this occasion. Revelers gather at the prehistoric site of ancient stones in Wiltshire to sing, dance, play instruments, kiss the stones, and do yoga as they wait for the sun to rise. The iconic Stonehenge is known for its precise alignment with the sun's movement and has been known as a sacred place of worship and celebration of solstices for thousands of years.

2. Absorbing the First Rays of the "New" Sun at the Newgrange Monument in Ireland

Dozens of people, lucky enough to be selected through an annual lottery, get the chance to stand inside the ancient Newgrange monument in Ireland and absorb the first rays of the day during the Winter Solstice. Newgrange is a burial mound in Ireland's Boyne Valley that is over 5,000 years old. The Stone Age monument contains a 62-foot passage that leads into a chamber that is aligned with the sun as it rises during the Winter Solstice. Between Dec. 19 and Dec. 23, around dawn, sunlight pierces through the top of the chamber and slowly illuminates the room for about 17 minutes. More than 32,500 people applied for a spot inside the chamber this year. Only 60 of them were picked from the lottery to partake in this Winter Solstice ritual.

3. Soaking in "Fruit Baths" in Japan

In Japan, people traditionally soak in hot baths filled with yuzu citrus fruits to welcome the Winter Solstice and protect their bodies from the common cold. During a typical solstice celebration, children from a local preschool share a dip in a traditional yuzu tub as dozens of the yellow yuzu fruits float around them on the surface.

4. Getting Scared by the Krampus in Austria

Hordes of revelers descend on Hollabrunn, Austria, each year during the Winter Solstice to watch a swarm of people dressed like Krampus — the half-demon, half-goat counterpart to Santa Claus. They terrorize and tease the crowd in giant horned masks, sharpened teeth, fur body suits, and whips. The traditional 'Krampus Run' in Austria is believed to ward off bad spirits



near the Winter Solstice, but it is also a source of entertainment — “It is weird, but it’s fun,” according to local scholars. “It’s sort of like Halloween, you get to dress up in these really disgusting costumes. You get to do stuff you don’t normally get to do.”

So, what do these ceremonial observances have in common?

1. Taking advantage of the opportunity to “start over” as the Sun does every year.
2. Reflecting on the things that have happened over the past year as the Sun dies — and “closes the curtain” on a portion of our lives.
3. Taking part in the rebirth of the Sun and, with it, starting our own lives over again by learning lessons from what has gone before and finding ways to make the coming year better than the last one.

So, Can All of this celebratory stuff actually make a difference?

While I have *tried* (and occasionally failed) over the past year to avoid writing about our corrosive politics and the bad news that follows from it, maybe this Winter Solstice can provide an opportunity to recall *good things* that have happened that we might be able to build on.

Let’s take a look at some examples.

1. In 2019, the most diverse class of lawmakers in history was sworn into the 116th Congress: the most women ever (105 in the House, 25 in the Senate); a record number of Hispanic and Latino members (45 in the House, 5 in the Senate); 56 African American members (53 in the House, 3 in the Senate); 30 members who are Asian American; a record number of Native American, Pacific Islander Americans; the most diverse religious representation ever (Christian Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, Mormon, Buddhist, Muslim, Hindu, Greek Orthodox, Pentecostals, Unitarians, and Adventist); and 96% have a college education.
2. Sixteen-year-old Greta Thunberg was honored as *Time Magazine’s Person of the Year* for starting a world-wide movement of young people to motivate world leaders — notably by speaking at the General Assembly of the United Nations — to urgently address the threat of climate change. Millions are paying attention at the highest levels. (Only one person we know of was publicly displeased with this news.)
3. The European Union banned single-use plastic bags, plates, forks, and straws in Europe. This act could avoid nearly \$25 billion worth of environmental harm by 2030. The U.S. is ... uh ... well ... (not) following their lead, slowly, reluctantly, from well behind ... but ... well ... it’s early (isn’t it?) California and New York were the first U.S. states to follow this example.
4. A Federal Judge stopped the Trump Admin from ending no-cost birth control that was subsidized in the Affordable Care Act. (The decision will be appealed.)
5. UCLA gymnast Katelyn Ohashi scored a perfect "10" on her floor routine, making it look fun and effortless, with a jaw-dropping final landing!
6. Chicago became the largest city in US history to elect a black, female, openly gay mayor.
7. The Scripps National Spelling Bee crowned eight co-champions when the kids ran through five consecutive final rounds of perfect spelling, causing the contest to run out of words. (I guess someone is learning something out there.)



8. Michelle Obama's memoir *Becoming* in becoming the most popular memoir in history, selling more than 10 million copies in one year (and still counting) and staying on the *NYT* top ten non-fiction books for a record number of weeks (53 as of this writing).
9. A 48-year-old Cookie Monster from Sesame Street made his baseball debut — singing "Take Me Out To The Ballgame" at Wrigley Field during the 7th inning of a Chicago Cubs game. Thousands of old folks and young kids took photos.
10. Solar and wind power have started to gain popularity. Today, one third of power around the world is being generated by renewable sources and coal is now more expensive than wind or solar. Finland just committed to phasing out coal within ten years. So it begins ...

What Does All This Stuff Have to Do with the Winter Solstice?

Maybe good things begin with good ideas. The Winter Solstice reminds us that the world is ready to remake itself once again. Those who try to influence the outcome, especially in concert with others, may be surprised at how much influence is possible. Maybe an opportunity like the Winter Solstice can cause folks like us (you know, Michele, Greta, Cookie Monster, and the rest of us) to *pause*, and *reflect*, and then maybe *decide* to make a difference and *act* in the coming year as the Sun rises out of the darkness of Winter. It is easy to moan about how cold and dark it is on the shortest days of the year; but it doesn't take much more effort to consider how to help make it brighter when the Sun rises. And we don't have to do BIG things. The list of ten good things we just noticed above did not start big. They started small, with individuals deciding to do something small and then joining others to do it together. We can decide to do some small things in our own families, our neighborhood, our town, you know, right here and right now. And, we can seek out others, let them know what changes we'd like to be part of, and join them to make them happen.

So, after the "reflection and review" that the Winter Solstice evokes, can the coming sunlight bring with it a call for action? But what kind of action and by whom? When we were kids, we are taught that our voices are very effective tools. And in a country like ours, we select representatives to increase the reach and volume of our voices. So, it would make sense to let those representatives know what kind of action we intend.

Some sample pathways:

<https://www.feinstein.senate.gov/public/>

<https://www.harris.senate.gov/contact/>

<https://swalwell.house.gov/>

<https://govapps.gov.ca.gov/gov39mail/>

Finally, I'd like to cite two writers I have mentioned before who have offered useful advice for this time. One is poet Annie Finch, the author of a poem called "[Winter Solstice Chant](#)." In an interview, she reminds us of the two-step process of moving from darkness to light: "If you don't experience the darkness fully, then you are not going to appreciate the light." The other — a well-known and eloquent gentleman — advised us once to "become the change we seek." It might be worth a try as the Sun, at its darkest point, prepares to rise.

