

Spiritual Essence: The Holly and the Mistletoe

The Winter Solstice is my favorite time of year. I know this seems odd, the days are getting darker and darker, the sun is weak and cold. He is far to the south in the warm lands, the green lands. He is walking through the verdant and fertile fields of the southern hemisphere. Everything is reversed in its polarity from just a few months ago. On the Summer Solstice, the Horned God, the King Stag, was reaching the peak of his power. His marriage to the Goddess, consummated at Beltaine, was building through the summer to the Solstice and to Lammas. At Lammas, he was cut down with the harvest, and he has been journeying to the lands of death through the fall.

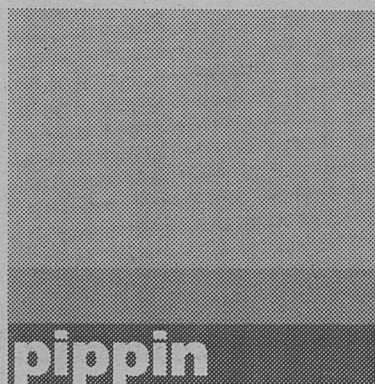
But now, Blessed Be, he is reborn of the Goddess just as we are convinced that the light has failed forever! And now he is the golden

The sun god is reborn of the Goddess just as we are convinced that the light has failed forever!

child, Gwydion, the bright, shining one. He is the laughing, smiling infant grasping at the light.

The Winter Solstice is the shortest day of the year and the longest night. In Vermont we will have less than eight hours of daylight, and the darkness comes with seemingly interminable cold. Yet in the darkness is also the return of the light and the growth of the new King, beginning the cycle anew.

The Solstices and Equinoxes are sun festivals, masculine in their orientation. The other four Sabbats – Imbolc, Beltaine, Lammas and Samhain – are more related to the moon and thus feminine. Yet these cyclical festivals are not polarized by gender, for in each there is the aspect of the other, and the festivals cannot happen in a set-



ting that excludes masculine or feminine energy. They must blend in order to stand fully in their power.

We can see this blending in many ways. Although the pagan festival of Yule has long been co-opted by the Christian celebration of the birth of Jesus, we can easily note the parallels between the birth of Jesus and the rebirth of the sun god. We can look to Mary as an incarnation of the triple goddess represented in Maiden, Mother and Crone. We honor her transformation at the Solstice from Maiden to Mother, seeing in that story the inevitable continuation. She will transform from Mother to Crone as her child is sacrificed for the survival of her people later in the liturgical drama.

Many of today's "Christmas Traditions" are built on earlier pagan rituals. While I regret our reliance on Vermont Yankee to power all those Christmas lights, I love driving through the snowy streets to see my neighbors' elaborate displays. I am reminded of the Solstice bonfires that were kept burning on every hilltop each mid-winter night for thousands of years. The fires were representations of the sun and burned in order to welcome back the pale light and celebrate the birth of the new god.

The bonfire lights are also lit in miniature in our Christmas trees. The evergreens are reminders of the hope of summer in the darkness of winter. In many pagan traditions the Yule tree is stripped of its branches after the Solstice and used at Beltaine as the Maypole. By the time the cycle of the year has returned to the Winter Solstice, the trunk is dry and cracked, ready to be burned in the ritual fire as the Yule log, laced in flaming brandy to remind us of the sun.

Morning Glory Zell, a pagan priestess, describes the earth religions as like a tree, an important metaphor as we bring evergreens into our homes and let the scent of pine and spruce cheer us. Zell writes, "A

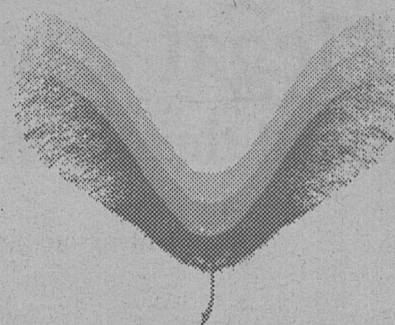
Pagan religion ... emerges alive from the Earth, grows, changes (both cyclically in seasons, and continually in upward and outward growth), bears flowers, fruit, shares its life with other living beings. ... And when, after many thousands of years... it should come to the end of its time, it does not pass from the world entirely, for its own progeny have, in the interval, begun to spring up all around, again from the Earth, and again, similar, yet each unique. A world of Pagan religions is like a forest."

Holly, mistletoe and ivy are also evergreens, reminding us that the darkness will fail and the sun will return. The bright red berries of the Holly remind us of the summer sun, while the pale white fruits of the mistletoe are reflections of the winter sun at its nadir. So many of the Christmas traditions come from the earth and from our Pagan past, and yet they have been overtaken by the materialist wonders born of television advertising, blue light specials and, lately, of internet shopping – are these new gods perhaps? Are they at war with the old gods of nature? They are certainly unconnected to our roots, except in perhaps the most tangential of ways.

We would do well to remember the natural roots of our holiday season and dig deep into the earth to reclaim them. The Winter Solstice should be about rejoicing at the birth of the new God and the turn in the cycle of the year. I often hear people say that Christmas is for the children. Can we offer gifts to our children as we offer gifts to the newborn god of the sun? Can we look at the three Kings of the east and recognize in the Magi, the pagan priests and astrologers celebrating the birth of the new sun?

Is the Christ child another incarnation of Gwydion? Is he the bright, shining one? Shall our gifts be offered to the returning sun and the coming spring? Let us light the winter fires, decorate our homes with holly, mistletoe and ivy. Let us exchange warm fires and clementines and honor the mother who has given birth to the sun. ▼

Pippin is a radical faerie touring the back roads of Vermont looking for best Solstice light display in the state. If you can help him find it, email pippin@sover.net. He is also known as Christopher Kaufman, Executive Director of R.U.1.2? Community Center.



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How To Contact Us:

90 main street
p.o. box 1263
burlington, vermont
05402-1263
p. 802-860-6236
f. 802-860-6315
info@samarafoundation.org
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