

Sermon by Reverend Nur'llah (Cathy) Layland, Solstice December 2024, for Emerging Light Sufi Center, Lehigh Valley Universal Worship

Years ago... well, no, actually a few decades ago... I traveled to NYC to attend the Paul Winter Winter Solstice concerts, a few years in a row. Each year he hosted musicians and dancers from around the world. It was an awesome experience. Traditional cultures of old, from afar, places like Russian, Germany, Africa, heralded the return of the sun. And each year, at the height of the evening, there rose from the subterranean levels a platform bearing a musician. In his hands, the handle of a mallet so large that it, too was suspended in a harness. With all of his might, with his whole body, over and over again, he struck the center of a gigundo gong as it rose up and up and up into the very peak of the gothic ceiling arches of The Cathedral of St. John the Divine.

Throughout the vast shell of the stone nave, bells and gongs and singing bowls rang out, reminiscent of a time when people believed that dark spirits were to be chased away so that the sun could come out of hiding. The gong's golden glow evoked the visage of the sun, the reverberations of the sounding spread throughout the Cathedral, waves of vibration passing right through bodies and hearts and minds, the communal experience raised souls along with the symbol of the returning glow. What a way to mark the Solstice!

Remembering those years, I became curious about how Solstice is marked in other cultures. And there it was, an article on NPR about just that.

For centuries, Iranians around the world have gathered on winter solstice to celebrate [Yalda](#), meaning birth or rebirth. The holiday dates back to the Zoroastrian tradition, and is believed to be a dedication to the sun god Mithra. Also celebrated in many Central Asian countries such as Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, and Uzbekistan, Yalda is a time when loved ones gather to eat, drink, and read poetry through the night and welcome the sun. Nuts and fruits such as pomegranates and watermelons are symbolic, as their red hues represent dawn and life. The holiday represents the victory of light over darkness.

In Chinese, they call this Dongzhi literally means "winter's arrival," and is one of the solar terms in the traditional Chinese calendar. [The occasion](#) signifies a turning point in the year when yin energy transitions to the positive energy of yang as the days grow longer. Traditionally celebrated as an end-of-harvest festival during the Han Dynasty, today it is an important time to spend with family and eat a hearty meal of tangyuan (glutinous rice balls) or dumplings, depending on what part of China one lives in.

Peru's winter solstice is celebrated in June and honors the Incan sun god Inti (Quechua for "sun"), the most revered god in the Inca religion. Banned during the first years of the Spanish conquest, [the festival](#) has since been resurrected and now takes place in the city of Cusco, once the center of the Incan Empire. Festivities include feasts and mock sacrifices that honor historic rituals.

In ancient times there was worry - what if the sun did not regain its strength? In Germany, the name is die Sonne, Mother Sun, and the theme of rebirth. Celebrated over many days rituals center on fire, light, warmth, and life. I found it interesting to learn that the oldest archeological evidence of a Solstice tradition was found in Germany, a circular henge called Goseck Circle, from 4,900 BCE. Two gates align with the sunset and sunrise of the winter solstice.

For the Native American Hopi tribe in the Southwest, [the Soyal ceremony](#) is one of the most important ceremonies of the year. December is the month when protective spirits called katsinas bring the sun back from its long slumber. Lasting up to 16 days, ceremonies include gift-giving, dancing, and storytelling, and are mostly performed in sacred underground chambers called kivas. The festival marks a time for prayer and purification.

In Japan, the winter solstice comes with several rituals and customs to welcome the return of the sun. [One custom](#) that dates back hundreds of years involves taking a hot bath with yuzu, a citrus fruit known for its healing properties. Other traditions include eating a winter squash called kabocha, and foods that contain the "n" sound (like udon), as they are believed to bring good luck.

Some celebrate today by the burning of the Yule log, with its roots in Norse tradition thru the Celtic. Druids burned a large oak log over 12 days that the sun 'stood still.' It was decorated with gifts of nature which demonstrated that life goes on - holly, pine cones, evergreens. Gathered round the warmth and light of the Yule fire, people were reminded that the warmth and the light of the sun was returning, a new beginning.

So, we see some common themes. Rebirth, resurrection, healing, purification, prayers, the receiving of gifts, and feasts.

How will you mark this time of transition? Is there room in this busy season for times of quiet, of turning inward, of listening with your inner ear?

What practices do you experience for purification, for transformation, for healing, for the grace of rebirth? I like the idea of a hot bath although I may use Epson Salts rather than citrus fruit.

What gifts do you give?

I'm in the midst of a 40 day concentration of this Chivalric Rule, "The essence of spirituality and mysticism is readiness to serve the person next to you." And in Social Gothikas, Murshid says, "We say that whatever be our religion, nation, race, or class, our most sacred duty is to work for one another, in one another's interest, and to consider this as the **service** of God.

What gifts do you celebrate in your life?

Let's welcome the gift of another turn 'round the sun,' of a warm place to lay our heads, of opportunities to serve, of gatherings of friends and family for feasts and traditions, dancing, storytelling,,, of community.