



Winter Solstice & Yuletide Issue

Image Credit: almanac.com

Mother, I Thank Thee



*by Mrs. Shenandoah Spross-Charette ~
Nemeton of the Mother Grove's Voice of Healing and Hospitality*

*From the birds to the bees,
The stones to the trees,
And the waters that wind through the Land,
The insects and beasts who roam all the World,
All the spirits who call you Home.*




*Mother, I thank thee for thee
Mother, I thank thee for thee
The ability to be, the ability to see,
I also thank thee for me.*

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A Druid's Winter Greeting

by Rev. Jeremiah Lennox, Archdruid of the Nemeton

Hail and winter's tidings, dear ones, may these days of extended darkness find you tending your hearts and hearths with gentle care and warm compassion. Here we are, once more approaching the Winter Solstice, the Yuletide season, a period when each day the light of the Sun shines less and less...the winds blow more fiercely, and the power of the night seems more full of our fears and anxieties with every diminishing sunrise and each all too swift sunset. Yet, within the many traditions that enliven our sanctuary, our Nemeton, we are reminded that within this season of darkness holds a kernel of joy, a cause for celebration as we march ever closer to the shortest day and longest night of the year...



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Whichever faith tradition you walk, it is likely that either within its ancient roots or modern context that it holds space to honor the Winter Solstice, that moment when the Sun shines from its lowest point in the heavens and we are plunged into the longest night only to be reborn. It is in this season that the Druids celebrate Alban Arthan ("The Light of Arthur", a modern Welsh name for the ancient holiday gifted by Iolo Morganwg in the 19th Century), that Germanic and Anglo-Saxon Pagans prepare for the Modraniht (The Mothers' Night) and Yule, when practitioners of *religio Romana* make way to celebrate Saturnalia, Hellenes prepare for the Rural Dionysia, when Christians and non-Christians (all traditions evolve, no?) make ready for Christmas Eve and Day. Indeed, these are only a small smattering of the richness of holidays and traditions that bring light and merriment into this dark season and there are so very many ways for any one of us of the modern era to join in that ancient procession of celebratory light and of gifting.

With so many ways of engaging in this season, I wilt away from writing yet another "top ten" list of ways to celebrate. One can find so, so, so very many examples with a simple internet search on your favorite engine (though if you do, I recommend using Ecosia). One thing, however, I would encourage you in as the Sun wanes, that you join with me in a simple hearth practice: Take a few moments each day in tending your hearth (the central flame/light/heat source) of your home. Depending on the set up of your household, there's any number of ways this might look. In our household, we maintain a small altar within the kitchen holding the central flame that is tended daily and gifted small offerings from our meals or pantry. Sit with the light in gratitude, reflect on the many boons of your home and the blessings of your kin. Take a moment to sit in gratitude for all the many relationships that build and sustain your life, be it your partner, your pet(s), the solidity of your home, the friends who lend comfort and inspiration, your coreligionists who share your ways, the strangers with whom you share a moment of passing cheer.

Whichever traditions you follow, if any, all are rooted in a deeper awareness of gratitude and in the interconnectedness of the whole of our world, from the depths of the dark soil to the heights of the life-giving Sun. This year especially, we are made all the more aware of the intimacy with which we share the breath of life (or breath of death if we do not don our masks!) and how our actions determine not only the wellness of ourselves, but of the whole of our communities. Before we stress about buying enough gifts or having a large enough tree, let us first center ourselves in that awareness of the self-within-the-whole and root within that web of thankfulness for light, life, and compassionate warmth.

Have yourselves a very merry Solstice, dear ones.



Winter Solstice and Yule Songs

Silent Night by Ellen Reed

Sung in the traditional carol tune

Silent night, Solstice Night, All is calm, all is bright

Nature slumbers in forest and glen

Till in Springtime She awakens again

Sleeping spirits grow strong!

Sleeping spirits grow strong!

Silent night, Solstice night, Silver moon shining bright

Snowfall blankets the slumbering Earth

Yule fires welcome the Sun's rebirth

Hark, the Light is reborn!

Hark, the Light is reborn!

Silent night, Solstice night, Quiet rest till the Light,

Turning ever the rolling Wheel

Brings the Winter to comfort and heal

Rest your spirit in peace!

Rest your spirit in peace!

Hark the Neo-Pagans Sing by Sunblade

Sung to the tune of "Hark the Herald Angels Sing"

Hark the neo-Pagans sing, Glory to the Holly King!

Peace on Earth and mercy mild, God and Goddess reconciled,

Hear us now as we proclaim:

We have risen from the flames!

Our ancient Craft now we reclaim,

In the God and Goddess' names

Hark the neo-Pagans sing, Glory to the Holly King!

Herne by highest love adored, Herne the ever-reborn Lord,

At all times behold Him come, Offspring of the Holy One,

Veiled in flesh, the Godhead see,

Hail Incarnate Deity!

Our ancient Craft now we reclaim,

in the God and Goddess' names

Hark the neo-Pagans sing, Glory to the Holly King!



Image Credit: clipartmax.com



Deep Breathing Meditation – Part 1

by Brandi Collesides

Like mindfulness meditation, Deep Breathing is an important part of a meditation practice. When we are stressed, we tend to tense up. We breathe from our chests in quick, shallow breaths. This can lead to a whole host of problems, including dizziness, light-headedness and a shortness of breath. Over time, shallow breathing will create a buildup of carbon dioxide in our system, which will cause the body to produce stress hormones like cortisol. These hormones can suppress the immune system, cause disturbed sleep and even loss of appetite.



Image Credit: Olga Yastremska

One of the only proven ways to lower cortisol in the body is through meditation. Deep breathing meditation is a way to practice relaxation through breath work and help bring you back to a state of calm centeredness necessary for a healthy existence. There are three steps to deep breathing: Belly Breathing, Expand & Relax, and Elongate the Breath. This article will cover the first two steps, and the third we'll dive into in our next newsletter (so you have plenty of time to practice between now and then!)

Belly Breathing

In order to breathe with the full capacity of your lungs, you will need to draw your breath into your lower belly.

1. Sit in a comfortable meditation position with your hips at the same height or higher than your knees.
2. Place your hands in your lap, and just breathe naturally. Notice where your breath first begins to expand your ribs. This is the center of your breath.
3. Place your hands over this location and feel your breath push your hand outwards as you inhale, and your hands fall back into your chest as you exhale.
4. Once you have located where the center of your breath currently is, place your hands a couple of inches lower. Breathe into your hand. Try and push your hand away from you with your breath.
5. Once you can feel your breath coming from where your palms are, move them again down a few inches. Breathe into your hands for three full breath cycles, then move again.
6. Keep going until your palms are cupping your lower belly below your navel and above your pelvic bone. This is your energy center of the body.

If you have having difficulty getting your breath to this location, don't worry. Just work with your breath at its lowest point and stay there. It may take some time to get your breath down to your lower belly. Keep working at it. You will get it with practice.

Expand & Relax

As you're breathing deeply, remember that your lungs encompass 360 degrees of your torso. Let your lungs expand to the sides and back as well as the front. Now imagine you are filling a water balloon with every breath. The first part of the balloon to fill is the bottom. When you first inhale, let your belly expand before your chest. Once your belly has moved outward, then allow your chest to expand. After you have taken a full inhale, exhale by releasing the tension in your muscles and let them go back to their relaxed state.

1. Close your eyes. Place your left hand on your sternum, and your right over your lower belly.
2. Inhale into your right hand, then your left, then relax. Right, Left, Relax.
3. Do this 10 times to get the feel of it. Continue with both hands over your lower belly. Chest, then belly, then relax.

Congratulations! You are now using your entire lung to take full, deep, and relaxed breaths! Keep practicing. I'll build from here next time and show you some really cool places you can take this meditation.



What is a libation?

Hellenic Libation 101

By Amy Lupinski

Last newsletter, I told you HOW to do a libation, but I did not tell you WHAT a libation is. A simple definition is this: *an act of pouring a liquid as a sacrifice (as to a deity)* (Merriam-Webster). In essence, a libation is a sacrifice to the deity to say “please” or “thank you” during prayer. It is a gift you are giving. You do not need to sacrifice the entire container to pour libations unless pouring libations to the Chthonic (unworld/earthly) gods. If offering libations to them, pour the entire libation.

Here’s a quick and easy example!

If you’ve met me before, you know I **LOVE** coffee, especially Starbucks espresso over ice (yum!). When I treat myself to this tasty drink, before taking a sip, I pour a small libation to whomever I wish to honor that day before continuing on my way. This is a sacrifice that I willingly give to the gods that I love. I’m sharing a part of my favorite drink with them to show them that I honor them.



The Most Wonderful Critter of Them All!

Getting to Know Your Neighbor

by Brandi Collesides



I want to introduce you to what is quickly becoming my favorite backyard critter. The Virginia Opossum! “Opossum” is Algonquin for “White Face”. This little guy is the only marsupial in North America and can often be seen wherever people live. The first time I knew we had some around us was from their tracks in the snow, where you could see their opposable thumbs on its fore and hind legs. If you ever get the chance, watch a possum walk. When their back feet are off the ground, they fold together like our hands do. They definitely evolved to be climbers rather than grounders.

I know many people feel a kind of yuck factor about them. I think this is mainly due to them getting into our garbage. But take a minute to consider this backyard native in a slightly different light... I mean, the possum should really not be held responsible for the massive amount of trash we create. This little squirt is doing its best to clean up after

us! We started a compost bin this summer, and since I’m already feeding the neighborhood bird and squirrel population, I decided to place our food scraps on a plate as an offering to anyone interested in them before they ended up in the bin. Turns out, I have two yearling Opossums living in my neighborhood! Some food likings of Opossums: chips of any kind, bagels, bread and pastries. Meats and eggs. Fruits if they are out long enough. No to onions and citrus fruits. And no green vegetables (what was I thinking?! I saw possums being fed grapes on a video, so I bought them grapes and put them out. They didn’t touch the grapes until they started to rot, so don’t believe everything you see on YouTube...

So, here’s a cool evolutionary side effect for you. The possum has a natural protein that protects them from snake venom, even snakes that don’t live on the same continent as they do. This protein also protects them from most toxins they come into contact with as they eat our leftovers. You could say they were born for this job!

Every night, a possum will do laps around its neighborhood, foraging for food. While walking about, they may pick up some ticks. These scrumptious snacks get eaten during its next cleaning, making this cutie probably the MOST beneficial pest controller out there. Believe it or not, Opossums have been documented to consume up to 4,000 ticks in one week! I told you these guys were cool. *(continued)*



The Most Wonderful Critter of Them All!

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by Brandi Collesides

You know, another reason I think some people have an aversion to this animal is the crazy number of teeth that they have. I mean, their mouth is really scary looking. Possums have **50** teeth, more than any other mammal in North America! Oh, and it doesn't help that some of the monsters in Beetlejuice are a dead ringer for these guys! Seriously Tim Burton, why are you picking on little ole White Face, huh?

Even with all those teeth, this critter is not aggressive. They don't attack. Possums will hiss and growl while showing off those pearly whites, but when their adrenaline goes up too high, they actually freeze, fall to their side and can't move. Their tongue sticks out, they drool, and their bowels can loosen. Most predators don't eat dead animals, so this catatonic state of "playing possum" probably evolved to keep them safe.

The Opossum is a solitary animal. So typically, if you have one around your neighborhood, that's the **ONLY** one you have around your neighborhood. Really one of the only times you will see more than one is if it is a mother and her offspring. Marsupials give birth to live babies.

Really tiny, tiny things that then crawl up their mom's belly and into their pouch where they stay and nurse and grow until they are too big for their mom's pouch. At this point, mom starts carrying them (a whole bunch of them!) on her back. So, this is **DEFINITELY** a bucket list for me, to see a possum in the wild with a slew of babies grabbing on to her back and riding with her! It's gonna happen (it's a bucket list, it's gonna happen!) Yeah, and that might be one of the only times you see more than one possum in one spot. Okay, here's one more quick story for you: Lita and I woke up in the middle of the night one time to one of the bird feeders swinging on its hook. There's no wind. Nothing else is moving. ... so, it was pitch black out and all we can see in the darkness is the suet balls and they are swinging back and forth, back and forth. No other movement. No other light. And no sound. It was so creepy! I took out a flashlight, and it was a possum eating the bird food. It was just silent. So wild!



Happy Possum

TotallyLooksLike.com

Barbara from Beetlejuice

And as a parting gift, even though I didn't talk about this animal, I thought I'd share with you my favorite tongue twister of all time. Enjoy!

*A skunk sat on a stump.
The stump thunk the skunk stunk,
And the skunk thunk the stump stunk!*



Hearth & Home



Dear Willow,

I'm struggling to keep in contact with family and friends. With the possible upcoming quarantine, how do I maintain connections with the people I care about?

~Socially Distanced



Dear Socially Distanced,

Phone calls, video chats and text messages are all good ways of reaching out. From a check-in, to a conversation of philosophy, to in-game chats -all are good ways to stay in contact and keep your mind occupied, while sneaking a little fun in where you can. There is also handwriting a letter, imagine getting a personal response with a dried leaf in it instead of bills for once. It can be difficult to reach out sometimes, for any number of reasons. Just try to remember that a single text can bring a smile, a simple "hi" can start a conversation, and a challenge to a word duel can cause any amount of laughter.

Dear Willow,

I live with my parents and my younger sibling, before covid-19, I could get out of the house and clear my head. But now it feels like I'm stuck with them always around, and no time to myself. How do I keep from going crazy?

~QuaranCrazy



Dear QuaranCrazy,

Creativity is the key here. Walks can be very good for you, and can give you time away from family, just remember to take precautions while outside the house. If a reason is needed dogs are a favorite, whether it's yours or a neighbor's, just make sure you have permission. When nature is not an option, try and make the best use of the space you have already- if you have access to a private area go there, play games, listen to music, re-decorate, meditate, or even start a new hobby- whatever helps you feel calm.

Then there are books, whether you are reading from a hardcover, paperback, e-reader, or listening to an audio rendition; a book can take you to an entirely different world, or the same one but with new characters. Books can introduce you to ancient cultures and new ideas. I will never not recommend a good book.

Dear Willow,

I just moved to the area and am also new to the Nemeton community. I am an introvert and have a hard time meeting people. However, I would like to get to know more about the Nemeton and its members. What is the best way to go about this while social distancing is still a thing? Thank you.

~ New Community Member



Dear New Community Member,

Getting to know a new community is always an experience, pandemic aside. The Nemeton of the Ways has a website, www.nemetonoftheways.org, and a Facebook page. Both of which have event listings and uplifting messages from the community and clergy. With photos of past rituals, altars, and current happenings, as well as many varied videos posted by the community, so you can see what we're up to. Messenger on the Facebook page works to contact us directly, or utilizing the contact us page on the website, which should result in a response within a day or two. Also, feel free to check in on any current event posts on Facebook, as it has become our primary form of communication and interaction during quarantine. Just remember every little step helps, as you never know what it may lead into, or the friends you could make!

Dear Willow will answer any questions we can, please email us at now.mg.newsletter@gmail.com



Seasonal Recipes

Wintertime Braised Beef Stew

Michaela Rosenthal at [Taste of Home](#)

"This easy beef stew is incredibly rich. Since it's even better a day or two later, you may want to make a double" batch."
~ Michaela Rosenthal, Woodland Hills, California.

Nutrition Facts

1 cup: 310 calories, 9g fat (3g saturated fat), 64mg cholesterol, 373mg sodium, 26g carbohydrate (8g sugars, 5g fiber), 25g protein. Diabetic Exchanges: 3 lean meat, 1 starch, 1 vegetable, 1 fat.
8 servings (2 quarts)

Ingredients

- 2 pounds boneless beef sirloin steak or chuck roast, cut into 1-inch pieces
- 2 tablespoons all-purpose flour
- 2 teaspoons Montreal steak seasoning
- 2 tablespoons olive oil, divided
- 1 large onion, chopped
- 2 celery ribs, chopped
- 2 medium parsnips, peeled & cut into 1 ½ -inch pieces
- 2 medium carrots, peeled and cut into 1 ½ -inch pieces
- 2 garlic cloves, minced
- 1 can (14-1/2 ounces) diced tomatoes, undrained
- 1 cup dry red wine or reduced-sodium beef broth
- 2 tablespoons red currant jelly
- 2 bay leaves
- 2 fresh oregano sprigs
- 1 can (15 ounces) cannellini beans, rinsed and drained
- Minced fresh parsley, optional



Directions

Preheat oven to 350°. Toss beef with flour and steak seasoning.

In an ovenproof Dutch oven, heat 1 tablespoon oil over medium heat. Brown beef in batches; remove with a slotted spoon.

In same pan, heat remaining oil over medium heat. Add onion, celery, parsnips and carrots; cook and stir until onion is tender. Add garlic; cook 1 minute longer. Stir in tomatoes, wine, jelly, bay leaves, oregano and beef; bring to a boil.

Bake, covered, 1-1/2 hours. Stir in beans; bake, covered, 30-40 minutes longer or until beef and vegetables are tender. Remove bay leaves and oregano sprigs. If desired, sprinkle with parsley.

Freeze option: Freeze cooled stew in freezer containers. To use, partially thaw in refrigerator overnight. Heat through in a saucepan, stirring occasionally and adding a little broth or water if necessary.



Seasonal Recipes

Wassail (non-alcoholic)

By [Recipes for a Pagan Soul](#)



- 8 cups apple juice or cider
- 2 cups cranberry juice
- 3/4 cup sugar
- 1 tsp allspice
- 2 cinnamon sticks
- 1 orange
- whole cloves

Turn the crockpot on high and pour in the apple and cranberry juices. Stir in the sugar and allspice, then add cinnamon sticks. Stud the orange with the cloves... about 25 or 30 cloves should do the trick.. and toss it in. Cover the pot and cook on high for 1 hour. Change the setting to low and allow to simmer for 3 more hours, then serve

Icicle Cookies

By [Recipes for a Pagan Soul](#)

- 2 1/2 cups all-purpose flour
- 1/4 teaspoon salt
- 1 cup sugar
- 3/4 cup softened butter
- 2 ounces white chocolate, melted
- 1 egg
- 1 teaspoon vanilla
- Coarse white decorating sugar, colored sugars and decorations

Combine flour and salt in a bowl. Then beat the sugar and butter together in another bowl, until it's fluffy. Beat in the white chocolate, egg, and vanilla, then finally the flour mix little by little. When it's blended well, shape it into a disc and refrigerate it for 30 minutes, wrapped in plastic wrap.

Preheat the oven to 350° F. Grease your cookie sheets. Take a heaping tablespoonful of dough, make it into a ten-inch rope, and fold in half. Then twist it around so it looks like an icicle, leaving a big loop at the top if you want there to be room to loop a ribbon through to hang for decorations. (Otherwise it can be a smaller loop-- it will still look like an icicle.) Taper the end. Make more ropes and repeat, and before placing on the sheets, roll in the sugars. Place 1 inch apart. Bake 8 to 10 minutes (but don't let get brown!), cool on the sheets 1 minute, and then cool on racks. Hang if desired!



Yields: 2 1/2 dozen



Arts & Crafts

Yule Herbal Sachet

(adapted from Patti Wiginton at [Learn Religions](#) and Lora Craig-Gaddis at [Pooka Pages for Pagan Kids](#))

This is a great activity that can be done as a family, including the wee ones.

"Herbal sachets are a great way to use up bits of scrap fabric, and they have the added bonus of making your home smell amazing! A sachet is simply a cloth pouch or bag stuffed with aromatic blends of herbs, flowers, or other goodies. Believe it or not, there's a rich history behind the use of herbal sachets. You can place herbal sachets in your dresser drawers to give your clothing a soft seasonal scent, or tuck them under your pillow, so you can breathe in the aromas of Yule as you fall asleep." *Patti Wiginton*

Supplies:

- Fabric (enough to make the number of sachets you desire, you'll use a 4-inch square per sachet) of seasonally appropriate colors such as red, green, white, silver or gold or use burlap for a more natural look. Feel free to use fabric with patterns too.
- Winter/Yule herbs (and oils** if desired) such as mistletoe, holly, pine, balsam, cinnamon and cloves.
- Jar with tight lid
- Twine or ribbon
- Charms, mini bells and/or rubber stamps with desired symbols (optional)

Preparation:

It is suggested to make the herbal blend a few days before putting together the sachets. This will more likely produce an aroma you are happy with. Combine the herbs and stir to mix. You can add a little oil of your choosing to make it more fragrant. Start off with a very small amount of oil, you can always add more later. Cover with lid and store for a few days.

Next, cut all the 4-inch squares that you will need and the appropriate ribbon/twine. This will help make the crafting process go smoothly.

Crafting:

If using a stamp to decorate the fabric, do so before beginning. Lay out your 4-inch squares and place a tablespoon of the blended herbs in the center of each square. Next, bring the ends of the fabric together and tie it closed with your string around the top making a little pouch. Adding charms or mini bells to the string can add an extra touch if you are so inclined. If desired, tuck a sprig of holly, mistletoe or little birch pinecones into the ribbon. Then hang/place them anywhere you wish.



Please remember to use safety practices if incorporating oil (especially essential oils) into this project as some can be irritating to the skin or harmful to children and pets. Here is one resource of many to review: [Essential Oil Basics: Part 5 – Essential Oil Use for Children and Pets](#)



Arts & Crafts

Yule/Winter Smoke Cleansing Bundles

(adapted from Patti Wiginton at [Learn Religions](http://www.learnreligions.com))



One of the most notable aspects of the season is that of the scents and smells. There is something about our olfactory system triggering certain memories and recollections, and the Yule/Winter Solstice season is no exception.

Smoke cleansing is a great way to cleanse your home and other sacred spaces. Some commonly used seasonal plants for this purpose include pine, fir, juniper, balsam, cedar and rosemary. Feel free to use whatever helps you connect to this time of year.

Supplies:

- Scissors or garden clippers
- Cotton string
- Chosen plants

Trim your clippings down to a manageable length, between six and ten inches, but if you'd like to make shorter smudge sticks, go right ahead. Cut a length of string about five feet long. Put several branches together and wind the string tightly around the stems of the bundle, leaving two inches of loose string where you began. Tie a knot when you get to the end and leave a loop so you can hang them for drying. Depending on how fresh your branches are – and how much sap is in them – it can take a few weeks to dry them out.

These can be used to cleanse spaces, objects, people and in rituals and ceremonies. Don't forget to thank each plant ally for their gifts.

Happy Crafting!



Visit to Mother Winter

A Children's Story for Winter Solstice

By Starhawk

Circle round, and I'll tell you a story for a long winter's night...

Once there were two sisters – we'll call them Johanna and Zelda, although they lived so long ago that no one remembers their true names. Zelda, the elder sister, was very beautiful to look at, but she wasn't kind. In fact, because she was so beautiful, she went through life expecting everyone to do favors for her and let her have her own way, and often enough they did. To read the full story visit the [Yoga Healer's website](http://www.yogahelers.com).



Tarot Spreads

"Tarot is the storybook of our life, the mirror to our soul, and the key to our inner wisdom." ~ biddytarot.com



1. Rebirth: What is being awakened in you after a long slumber? What is going to be gaining momentum as the days grow longer?
2. Midnight: What is it in ourselves that we fear to shed light on?
3. Gift: What is your gift? Do you hide your gifts and talents for fear of judgement if you shine them out into the World? This is a reminder to embrace your gifts and a share them with the World.

(source: Ethony.com)



Image Credit: [The Curious Cardslinger](http://TheCuriousCardslinger.com)



- What's hiding in the darkness/my subconscious that I need to explore?
- What will give me strength as I face my shadow self?
- What must I work to release during this season of rest?
- What a of my life most requires hibernation?
- How will this hibernation benefit me?
- What lessons can I learn from this season?

(source: Rose B Mystics – Almanacsupplyco.com)



Holiday & Lunar Observances



At this time all in-person gatherings are suspended due to the need for social distancing. Live online rituals and libations will be posted to our [Facebook Events Page](#) when they are scheduled, so please check that page regularly for updates.

Date	Observance
Saturday, December 12th	Libation to Dionysus
Monday, December 14th	New Moon in Sagittarius
Tuesday, December 29th	Full Moon in Cancer
Saturday, January 9th	Libation to Hera
Wednesday, January 13th	New Moon in Capricorn
Thursday, January 28th	Full Moon in Leo
Monday, February 1st	Imbolc (Brigid's Day)



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