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The Solstice: A Rediscovery

Throughout human history the ability to understand and recognize natural cycles has meant the difference between life and death. Humankind has been dependent on nature for all its needs, both physically and spiritually. Myth and ritual has long been the way we try to explain why things are the way they are in the natural world. With the advent of technology, these ancient beliefs and knowledge are being lost. They are often dismissed as naïve and out-dated. In its wake we are struggling in this postmodern society for some sense of meaning and direction. According to the philosopher J.F. Lyotard, postmodern society looks at time differently than in the past. Starting out in the classical era, when myth was prevalent, time was seen as more cyclical and more immediate. The modern era started to view time as linear and the purpose of life was seen at the end. Postmodern society is seen when people are no longer looking to the future but rather living in the future. They are cut off from the past and the present only serves to reach the future. There is no present moment. He felt that this led to three disorders in society that are fairly evident today.

1. A loss of community bonds by not knowing or spending time with neighbors, co-workers, and family.
2. A loss of personal identity can come with no longer having a sense of producing anything. You become a paper pusher with nothing tangible to show for it. He also felt that leisure activities, such as TV, contributed to this.
3. A loss of real objects and of reality. Knowledge, values, and technology change so quickly that nothing seems real or permanent. Nature, other cultures, and knowledge become something to consume. Their destruction garners little notice since they are intangible (Schultz).

With this in mind, I offer to you that the beliefs, myths, and rites of the past could still be valuable. It is generally believed today that myth, deities, and rituals are not referring to specific historical events. They are seen more as symbolic of our minds and can be helpful in looking "to the inward potentials of our species" (Campbell 255). Perhaps they can provide a way to combat the ills of the post-modern society.

In this paper I wish to explore the rituals and beliefs surrounding the solstice as an example of how widespread and vital rituals have been throughout history. Myth has been with us since our earliest beginnings, it's part of what differentiates us from animals (Campbell 23). Animals are already neurologically wired with instinctual responses. Humans are born with a more open system that requires the society to imprint its mores and behaviors. Myth and ritual is another way to pass along vital information and beliefs through the generations. It can give a sense of belonging to a greater whole and provide stability in a culture (Campbell 45-47). Joseph Campbell explains ritual best in this passage.

A ritual is an organization of mythological symbols; and by participating in the drama of the rite one is brought directly in touch with these, not as verbal reports of historic events, either past, present, or to be, but as revelations, here and now, of what is always and forever... The value of an effective rite is that it leaves everyone to his own thoughts which dogma and definition only confuse. (97)

I've chosen to also make this the topic of my website. Why a website? Part of revisiting these myths is to find a new way to pass this information on. The art of storytelling around the campfire is, unfortunately, a dying art. The Internet has the capability of transmitting information instantly across the globe. This information can be in the form of the written word, art, and/or music. The Internet can act as an archive and educator. It's not limited to selling products or chat rooms.

First I need to define for you, the reader, what is a solstice and how people have predicted them in the past. I will then discuss some of the larger myths and beliefs that

make up the solstice ritual. Lastly I will provide historical examples from a sampling of cultures.

What is a solstice?

The earth spins on an axis that is tilted at $23 \frac{1}{2}^{\circ}$. As the Earth orbits the sun the axis always stays pointed in the same direction. This causes the hemispheres to be tilted towards the sun for half the year and away for the rest of the year. This is the reason for the seasons.

The solstices happen when the Earth's axis is tilted closest to and away from the sun. There are two solstices each year. One occurs in the summer on June 21st and the other is in the winter on December 21st. The winter solstice is the shortest day of the year. Around December 25th, you can see that the days are gradually getting longer until the longest day of the year on the summer solstice. Then the cosmic cycle starts all over again.

Equinoxes were also very important in many cultures. The equinoxes occur halfway between the solstices. The equinox in late March is referred to as the vernal and the one in late September as the autumnal. On these days the North and South hemispheres of the earth receive equal amounts of sunlight and the days and night are equal in length. These two days are the only times that the sun rises due east and sets due west (Hartmann 12-15).

How do you tell when it's the solstice?

Today it's easy to tell because you can go to a calendar and look up the date. But how did people hundreds, even thousands of years ago, tell when it was the solstice?

1. The easiest way was to watch where on the horizon the sun rose and set. In the Northern Hemisphere, the sun rises and sets further south closer to the winter solstice;

it rises and sets further north closer to the summer solstice. Right around the solstices, the sun appears to be standing still. It rises and sets at almost the exact same spots. This method was used throughout Europe, Asia, and the Americas. Stonehenge is an example with both solar and lunar alignments.

2. Build a structure where only on the solstice the sunlight could enter and illuminate a room or specific spot on a wall. Newgrange and the Temple at Karnak used this method.
3. Measure the shadow of an upright pillar, also called a gnomon, at noon. The shadow would be the shortest in summer and the longest in winter. The Babylonians, Ionian Greeks, Chinese, and Peruvians used this.
4. Another way was to use a specially built temple that had a hole in the roof. Only on the longest day of the year would the sun shine in and illuminate a specific spot on the floor. This was often used by Central and South American cultures (Heinberg 30-31).

Basic themes and the solstice today.

The overall theme to the solstice rituals and myths is one of world renewal. There are cycles in life and the cosmos that one has to observe. Life and death play a major role in these cycles. Death is seen as necessary to make room for the new life (Heinberg 95). A prevalent myth revolves around a wise and good deity who dies too soon; they are bitterly mourned and through the actions of a mother/sister/wife are resurrected. Some examples include Balder in Norse myth, Osiris in Egypt, King Arthur in England, and even Jesus Christ.

The summer solstice sees nature at its peak but is marred by the knowledge that the days will soon be shortening and winter will arrive. Among the celebrations are rites similar to funerals that mark the passing of the sun. The summer solstice was also connected with fertility, the feminine aspects of the universe, and the earth itself. The people encouraged the fertility of nature by example. Sometimes this was done by symbolic sacred marriages or temporary marriages. Another, which was done until

recent times, was for couples to make love in the fields. It was not an example of promiscuous behavior, as we would define it today but sacred (Heinberg 121).

In Europe this was the time of year to gather protective and healing herbs for the coming year. Rue, vervain, woodbine, and St. John's wort were all associated with this event. Mistletoe was also considered sacred and was gathered at both solstices. In midsummer it is without berries and was seen as an amulet of protection. In winter, the addition of the red berries marks it as an amulet of fertility (Campanelli 82-84).

The summer solstice is still marked by bonfires or a rekindling of a sacred fire. For the Gikuyu people of Africa, fire is seen as sacred and is used for religious purposes such as the purification of crops and cattle. The fire is seen as symbolizing the welfare and prosperity of the entire community. Every year a new sacred fire is lit and distributed to everyone. The old fires have been extinguished and are then relit by the sacred fire. The sacred flame is not allowed to die out until the next season and ceremony. (Mbiti 56). A very similar ritual is enacted throughout Europe.

As we will see, the winter solstice was often the signal of the end of the year. According to the author Gaster, there are four parts to almost all New Year ceremonies. The first consists of mortification, when the world was seen at its lowest ebb. The society reinforced this by effectively shutting down; often this time of year didn't officially exist on the calendar. Purgation followed when the community sought to rid itself of evil by some sort of purification rite. People or animals were often made scapegoats for the community's woes and were killed or banished. This was also the time when the dying / resurrected god myth became reality when the king was deposed or killed for the good of the community. The society went through an invigoration when it conducted rites to bring the positive forces back. Sometimes this was a mock combat between the old and the new or a sacred marriage. The last was the one we still embrace today, jubilation. This was the time for festivities to rejoice that society was renewed and back to normal (qt. In Heinberg 99-100).

Many old traditions of the winter solstice can still be seen today. The "decking of the halls" with evergreens, fruits, and berries. Eating oranges, fruitcake and drinking hot cider or wassail all evoke the warm summer months. The lights on the tree, candles, and a fire in the fireplace help keep the dark nights at bay. This time of year is also seen as a time for festivities, goodwill, and gift giving. We (hopefully) reconnect with family and friends, remember the past, and look towards the future. We create resolutions that we hope to keep for the next year (Campanelli chpt. 8).

Historical solstice myths and rites

When, exactly, humans started observing a pattern to nature is unknown to us. We do know that as far back as the Paleolithic period (20,000 - 60,000 years ago) that people were observing the heavens. Archaeologist Alexander Marshack examined tally marks on bone and ivory pieces from that era and found that they correspond to the lunar cycle (Heinberg 23). What they did with this knowledge has been lost in history.

The British Isles are strewn with megalithic ruins, many of which are still a mystery to us. They may have served many purposes: burial sites, a gathering place for ritual and celebration, and as astronomical sites. At Newgrange, in Ireland, a womb shaped passage was built around 3350 BCE. This 62 ft. corridor slopes upward into a 20 ft. high vaulted chamber. A week before and after the winter solstice is the only time when sunlight reaches the back wall of the chamber. It illuminates the wall that is covered in intricate carvings and symbols (Heinberg 26-27).

Stonehenge may be one of the most recognized sites in Britain today. Stonehenge was built in five or six phases, first starting around 2800 BCE. It was not, contrary to popular belief, built by the Druids but by several groups of earlier peoples who lived on the Salisbury Plain. The Stonehenge we view today was largely built around 2000 BCE. It is an impressive site particularly when you consider that these stones range from 5 - 45 tons each and many were brought here from Wales, some 250 miles away (Fowles 40-44). Stonehenge may have been used for both lunar and solar alignments. It is oriented

towards the summer solstice sunrise along one axis and the winter solstice sunset along another.

In Egypt, the sun god Re was the supreme deity. The many temples and pyramids were often aligned to solstice and equinox sunrise points. One of the most impressive sites is the Great Temple at Karnak, built around 1417 BCE. On the summer solstice sunset, the light would creep along the axis of the temple and illuminate a sanctuary inside the temple for a few precious minutes (Heinberg 37-39).

China, one of the oldest continuous civilizations, has also one of the longest records of astronomical observations. These were started at least 1500 BCE and were mainly concerned with foretelling events and interpreting omens (Heinberg 75-76). The Chinese had their major ceremonies on the solstices. These were carried out by the Emperor and were seen as a renewal of the cosmos. The winter solstice was a time to renew the yang forces; usually considered male and celestial. The Emperor was purified and led to the Round Mound in Beijing's Temple of Heaven. This was symbolically seen as the center of the universe. The Emperor would pay respect to the Heavens, read an account of the year, and offer a human sacrifice along with jade and incense. In the summer the Emperor was trying to renew the yin forces, considered female and terrestrial. A similar ceremony took place on the Altar of Earth, which was square in shape (Heinberg 78-79).

There isn't a lot of evidence that the observance of the solstice was indigenous to Hebrews. It has been suggested that in monotheistic religions there is less emphasis on natural events and more on historical ones. For them it's a given that nature will proceed as it always has, without a need for supplication (Wyllen 1). There is a passage, however, which tells that after Adam's expulsion from the Garden of Eden he discovered the winter solstice. After noticing the shorter days he fasted and prayed for eight days. The ritual appeared to succeed, being it was midwinter. This passage is from the 1500-year-old Jewish commentary in "Abodah Zarah" in the Babylonian Talmud (Heinberg 45).

The Christian church has adapted some of their celebrations to coincide with the solstices, mostly as a way to co-opt other religions. St. John's wort, a plant usually associated with the sun and the summer solstice, was named for St. John's Day. This is the name given to the summer solstice by the Christian church (Campanelli 84). The observance of Christmas didn't actually start until the fourth century. Before that time, Christ's birth was downplayed because the death day was seen as more important (and divine). At this time the pagan Romans were following the Mithraism religion. For a time, it looked as if this religion might take hold instead of Christianity. It celebrated the *Natalis Solis Invicti*, "Birthday of the Invincible Sun God" Mithras on December 25th. The church fathers decided to compete by placing Christmas on the 25th of December also (Panati 216-15).

On the other side of the ocean, many great civilizations were making strides in math and astronomy. Aztecs, Mayans, and Incas all celebrated the solstices and equinoxes. Most ceremonies involved showing deference to the sun and lighting a sacred fire with the sunrays using mirrors. Human sacrifice was also common, offering up the hearts of victims was seen as a way of keeping the sun alive (Heinberg 62-72). Often their temples and even cities were aligned with the solstices and equinoxes. In one such Mayan city, Chichen Itza, is a funerary pyramid named Castillo. This pyramid, built about 900 CE, also serves to commemorate the passage of time. The staircases on each side of the pyramid have a total of 365 steps, the number of days in a solar year. On the equinoxes the pyramids edge casts a shadow of a serpent along the northern staircase (Miller 181-83).

Near the Little Miami River in Southern Ohio is the site of two ancient serpents. These serpents were constructed from rocks by the Fort Ancient people around 1200 CE. The serpents are 2 feet high and vary in length from 88 - 166 feet. One points toward the summer solstice and another to the winter solstice sunrise. Serpents, with their shedding of skin, are often seen as symbols of renewal (Krupp).

On the American plains, the Oglala Sioux mark the summer solstice with the Sun Dance. This was one of the major rites for the Sioux. Its significance can be seen in this quote from Black Elk, a Sioux Holy Man, "As you know the moon comes and goes, but *anpetu wi*, the sun, lives on forever; it is the source of all light, and because of this it is like *Wakan-Tanka* (Great Spirit)."

A lodge was constructed for this purpose with a sacred tree at the center, which connects heaven and earth. Twenty-eight forked sticks were arranged around the sacred tree with poles extending from the outer sticks to the top of the sacred tree. This lodge was made in the universe's likeness. At this ritual, several chosen men and women suffer for the good of the people. The suffering was actual physical pain as the dancers offered up strips of their own flesh and endured hanging from the sacred tree by skewers that pierced their chest (Black Elk 71). This sacrifice ensured the welfare of the community.

Today in our society we are recognized as individuals with the facility to critically analyze. We know that the sun, barring a supernova, will still rise each day without our help. It is neither needed, nor acceptable anymore, to offer up human sacrifices. Yet how often do we actually notice the sun, the stars, or the turning of the leaves? Can observing some sort of ritual today still create positive results? My suggestion is not tied to any particular faith, myth, or rite. A successful ritual creates an awareness of oneself, humanity, and the universe. By being aware do we consciously decide how we live and how we relate to one another and the universe. How you achieve this awareness is entirely up to you.

Stepping out of the normal routine and acknowledging what is going on around you can be revitalizing. Some sort of ritual, anything from watching the sunrise on a solstice to gardening to an act of kindness, can be an opportunity to be in the moment. It can put our relationships with other people and the earth in perspective and maybe improve them. It won't solve all the problems but perhaps it can put us in the right frame of mind to make a start.

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