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MuseLetter #307 / December 2017 by Richard Heinberg

Dear Readers,

Thanks for you support this year, it's been quite a year.

Did you know that 2017 was the 25th Anniversary of the Museletter? If it's provided you any value over that time then please consider making a [\\$25 donation](#) to keep it going. Any support you can give is really appreciated.

*This month's MuseLetter consists of two excerpts adapted from my 1993 book [Celebrate the Solstice: Honoring Earth's Seasonal Rhythms Through Festival and Ceremony](#), shared with permission from the publisher, Quest Books. May this Solstice season be a joyous one for you and yours.
Richard*

The Power of Festivals

It is an early winter morning in the year we would call 976, in the northeast corner of what is now San Fernando Valley in southern California. A Chumash shaman prepares for the most important moment of the season. He has spent the past three days fasting, singing, and praying. During the night he has partaken of the sacred and dangerous datura herb and his head reels with terrifying visions. Once again, as he has done every year at this time since receiving initiation from an older shaman, he deliberately crosses from the mundane world into the magical realm of the gods and spirits. He knows that this night, this morning, he must position himself at the boundary between the ordinary and the supernatural worlds in order to play his part in maintaining the balance and health of the Earth, of the sky, and of his people.

As the eastern horizon shows the first faint hint of coming daylight, he enters a shallow cave. Inside, he contemplates sacred petroglyphs whose meanings only he and his teacher understand. Dawn arrives, and the shaman watches in religious awe as a finger of sunlight approaches and bisects a series of concentric circles on the cave's back wall. It is only on one morning of the year—the morning of the year's shortest day—that this piercing of the circles occurs. It is a sign that the Sun has reached its extreme limit; it is a boundary of the cosmic order, revealing the shape of the world and of human affairs. Now, if his prayers have been effective, the days will grow longer and the light will return.

Later in the day he will lead his people in ceremony and celebration. The new year has begun, the Sun has been reborn and the world has been fertilized.

It is a summer night in seventeenth-century Cornwall. Hilltop bonfires light the horizon in every direction. A young newlywed couple is dancing with family and friends around a fire built from straw and brush. There is much laughter and singing. Each couple, hand in hand, takes a turn leaping across the flames for good luck, as Cornish couples have done on similar Midsummer evenings for untold generations past.

The young man and woman are from families with ancient ties to the land. In their entire lives they will never once leave this rugged precinct of tiny fields bordered by piled-rock fences, and dotted with prehistoric stone monuments—the subjects of innumerable and sometimes lurid legends.

This has been the longest day of the year. From this night onward until late December, nature will gradually lose her vitality, only to awaken again next spring with the return of the light.

According to the traditional English calendar, summer commenced on May 1; today, June 21, is Midsummer. Vegetation is nearly at its peak of growth; the wilting heat of late summer is yet to come. It is a time when local holy wells have special powers of healing, and when the ancient stone circles are visited by fairies and spirits.

The Church of England has repeatedly instructed the local priest to discourage Midsummer rites because of their “pagan” origin, but instead he turns a blind eye to them. Though he disapproves of all the talk of ghosts and nature spirits, he sees no real harm in the festivities. After all, he can see for himself how the people are refreshed and revived by the break in their routines. Like the newlywed couple dancing on the hilltop, he knows in his very bones that it is a time to celebrate.

The time is the present. We are at the edge of the Cleveland National Forest in Riverside County, California, on ground once sacred to the Luiseno Indians. Four friends, two men and two women, have agreed to meet before dawn to climb into the hills to watch a December sunrise together.

By profession they are an architect, a massage therapist, a gardener, and a writer. All share a keen interest in ecological issues and a passion for life. During the years they’ve known each other, they’ve shared joys and sorrows, accomplishments and tragedies. Their friendship has served as an anchor of kindness and genuineness in the bizarre, stress-filled maelstrom that is life in the early twenty-first century.

They stand in somewhat awkward silence, watching the eastern horizon. Their breath condenses in the chilly air. Birds in the canyon below begin to sing as the first ray of dawn pierces the horizon. The four join hands in a silent prayer for the Earth. As the Sun comes fully above the hills to the southeast and the air begins to warm, they lift their arms, turn clockwise, and begin a spontaneous circle

dance. They move slowly at first, but the light in one another's eyes seems to propel them a little faster, then faster still, wheeling and kicking and jumping. By now all are laughing heartily and they break into a long, fond group hug. Smiling and still holding hands, they start back down the hillside. It is the winter Solstice.

For thousands of years our ancestors marked the seasons of the year with festivals. These festivals—of which the greatest and most universally observed were the twice-yearly Solstices—served many functions. They bound together young and old, women and men, rich and poor. They gave people an emotional outlet and a break from ordinary cultural strictures and boundaries. All work was put aside; prisoners were freed; masters and servants traded places.

The festivals also provided ways for the community to govern itself. Not only did the people enjoy themselves on these occasions, but in gathering together they had opportunity to discuss their collective affairs. Politics and revelry were combined, for example, in the staging and acting out of plays satirizing unpopular nobles, merchants, and church officials.

But perhaps most importantly, the old seasonal festivals deepened people's sense of connection with land and sky. The Sun, Moon, stars, trees, crops, and animals were all included in the celebration. Each person felt a heightened connection with the Source of all life. In short, the festival was the community's way of renewing itself and its bonds with nature.

For the most part, we today no longer celebrate these ancient festivals. Or, if we do, we observe them in unrecognizable forms—as (for example) in Christmas and New Year gatherings. But these are often highly commercialized affairs. Gone is the sense of participation in the cyclic interaction of Earth and heavens.

Now, we seem to be interested only in our human business. We rarely look up at the night sky, and we tend to observe a sunrise or sunset with only casual interest. Meanwhile, human society creaks and groans under the weight of violence, injustice, overpopulation, poverty, and greed. And our ties with nature are strained nearly to the breaking point from water and air pollution, global warming, species extinctions, and deforestation.

Could there be a connection between our ignorance of the seasonal festivals and our loss of relatedness with one another and with the Earth?

These days, people everywhere are voicing their concerns about the environment and are looking for ways to make a difference. More and more, we sense that it is time to return our attention to the Earth and to heal the rift we have created.

Perhaps it is time also to return to the festivals.

The recovery of the ancient seasonal festivals is more than a symbolic gesture. It can be a meaningful way of reminding ourselves of the natural order of things. It can also provide opportunities to increase our awareness of nature and to affirm our commitment to its welfare.

Seasonal festivals shouldn't be thought of merely as cultural relics. They were—and potentially are—joyous, fun, mischievous, profound, life-affirming events that connect us deeply with the land, the sky, and the wellspring of being within us.

Festivals are times of singing, dancing, and laughter. They are times when the child inside each of us is allowed to come out and play. They are times when old and young find a cross-generational bond. They are times when we return to the simple truths at the heart of life.

Is the celebration of the Solstices pagan or un-Christian? Certainly, the great seasonal festivals were key elements of the religions of pre-Christian Europe. But the Solstices themselves transcend religious ideology: they are simply astronomical facts. And they were celebrated by ancient peoples nearly everywhere in the world, not just by the inhabitants of pagan Europe.

Moreover, the early Christians were quick to appropriate the ancient festivals into their own calendar of holy days. Christmas—the most popular Christian holiday—was deliberately timed to coincide with the winter Solstice. This is partly because the winter Solstice and Christmas are both times to celebrate the birth of light and to affirm our hope for the renewal of the world.

Many familiar Yuletide customs have more to do with the winter Solstice than with Christian doctrine. The mixture of the two celebrations served at first to popularize the Christian festival and later to preserve some of the ancient Solstice traditions that were in danger of being forgotten.

But perhaps separating the two festivals once again—the Solstice on one hand, and Christmas on the other—will make it easier for Christians to refocus the unique meaning of their midwinter holiday and for us all to rediscover a celebration in which everyone can participate.

We can all benefit from attention paid to our home planet and to her relationship with the cosmos beyond. Whether we are Christians, Jews, Muslim, Hindus, Buddhists, follower of Native American or African religions, agnostics, or atheists, we can express our gratitude for the gifts of light and life. The Solstice isn't about worshipping particular gods or goddesses. It is about life itself.

Go On an Energy Fast

On a recent winter Solstice my partner and I decided to stay home and to use no electric lights or appliances for twenty-four hours so that we could participate more directly in the Earth's rhythm of light and dark. On the afternoon of December twentieth we hid all our clocks, unplugged the phone, ate dinner by candlelight and retired early, awakening naturally just before sunrise on the morning of the Solstice. That day we felt more fully alive than usual, more relaxed, more attentive, and—I can find no more accurate word—happier.

Of course, untold millions of people lived without electricity day in and day out until the twentieth century, and hundreds of millions in

the Third World still do, and their experience is certainly not one of uniform happiness. But for most modern urban Americans, the experience of a day without artificial light and electrical appliances is unusual, unsettling, and (it seems to me) highly therapeutic.

When energy is available literally at our fingertips, awaiting only the flick of a switch, it is easy to take it for granted. In most cases, our only participation in the process by which that energy is produced and distributed is the act of writing a check to the utility company. When we use energy so unthinkingly we end to become addicts. We feel helpless without our "drug," and so we unconsciously assume that any threat to its supply would be a challenge to our very existence. If told that the production of our drug involves the ecological equivalents of slavery, stealing, or murder we try to ignore the news so as not to have to face the intolerable double bind.

The only way to free ourselves from this bondage to unconscious consumption is to take deliberate action—if not to go "cold turkey," then at least to make our use of energy a conscious choice rather than a reflex. Tackling an addiction may be hard work, but there are always rewards. The act of facing one's energy dependency tends to yield a new sense of self-reliance as well as feeling of connectedness with what lies outside the artificially structured reality that is daily reinforced by the various carrots and sticks of industrial civilization. An energy fast offers an opportunity to witness and participate in the ordinary miracles of day and night, of Sun and Moon, to a far greater depth than is usually the case. Each time I go on an energy fast, I find myself awed by the "ordinary" miracle of being alive on planet Earth, and am reminded that the things we tend to take for granted—air, water, light—are the most precious and beautiful gifts imaginable.