

## **The Reason for the Season**

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Many UUs and Humanists “keep Christmas” by employing secular and/or pagan traditions in their households. A few give a nod to the Christian nativity story. Generally we’ve learned to live with our ambivalence toward the season and are able to maintain the requisite holiday cheer. Occasionally we might be annoyed by the Christian zealot who exhorts us to “remember the reason for the season” or the ardent atheist who rails against ubiquitous religious messaging in the public square. More troubling perhaps to some is the rampant materialism that has come to characterize the de facto national secular holiday.

Our decade long tradition at FUS of celebrating the winter solstice provides members and friends an alternative way to participate in the holiday season. Here we have been actively reconstructing holiday celebrations to better reflect our values and imbue our lives with meaning--just as people have done for centuries. We draw on a wide variety of ancient festivals--Saturnalia, Yule, and pagan rites that honor the natural world, the ancestors and, of course, the sun-- to give form to our festivities.

But why choose to celebrate the winter solstice in particular? As people of the scientific age, we do not fear the diminishing sun; we know it is going to return whether we commemorate the day or not. Obviously, then, we do it for ourselves. Solstice celebrations connect us with the natural world and beckon us to accept our responsibility for its care. We are reminded of how dependent we are upon the rhythms of nature and heartened by the joys to be found in this dark winter season.

Another reason to embrace the winter solstice is to link ourselves to the past by celebrating what has been called the “people’s holiday.” Historically, Midwinter celebrations provided a festive respite from the hard labor of survival and allowed for the suspension of social mores. The season was characterized by excess, merriment and freedom for ordinary folks. Masters waited on their servants, revelers masqueraded and cross-dressed, mock peasant kings reigned for a brief time of peace, the rich indulged the poor, and people feasted and made merry to keep the dark and cold at bay. Midwinter revels can give us permission still today to imagine and practice different ways of being together in the world.

And, finally, at the winter solstice we are prompted to stand still and be reflective. In the quiet poignant moments of extended darkness, we turn inward to examine our most cherished values and take time to strengthen the bonds of kinship, friendship and community. As we wait for the earth to turn toward brighter days, we rekindle our own lights of compassion, truth and justice. The winter solstice presents us then, as Humanists, with an opportunity to celebrate our connections to and engagement with *this world* and share our hopes for its future. Good Yule to one and all!