

Light bonfire to honor winter solstice

Holidays are cultural creations. They are a way to celebrate important events or values, and they come into existence, transform and disappear as a culture's needs dictate.

Thanksgiving, Christmas, Kwanzaa, Chanukah and even New Year's Day are all cultural creations that help mark the passing of time. But there are two special days that transcend cultural limitations. They are older and more constant than all human cultures — the winter and summer solstice.

Solstice are the days when the sun appears at its highest or lowest in the sky. They are cosmic rather than cultural, but many early cultures celebrated them as important to all life. On every continent except Antarctica there are prehistoric monuments that exist to mark these days, and yet today we hardly notice the passing of the Solstice.

For eons the light and warmth of the sun set the rhythm of life on this planet. As the sun rose ever higher in the sky, the earth warmed plants sprung up, trees regenerated and the long, cold nights grew shorter. By the time the sun reached its zenith (the summer solstice) the earth was carpeted in a new coat of green that would turn ever more lush and bear fruits thanks to the sun's abundant light and heat.

Each day after the summer solstice the sun rises a little lower and the days get a little shorter. We hardly notice it at first. The sun is still so high and the earth, now warmed by months of increasing sunlight, gets even warmer. But the days are dwindling. By the time of the equinox (the day when the length of night and day are the same), plants and trees are ripe with seed and fruit.

As the days continue to shorten, plants begin to die off, trees shed their leaves, animals store up food and fat for the coming winter and the sky is filled with migrating birds.

Finally, the sun reaches its lowest point, winter solstice. It is the shortest day and longest night of the year.

OPINION



Larry Haftl

In earlier times bonfires would be lit, in part to ward off the cold of the long night, in part as a way to call out to the sun and ask it to return. Through the long night people would gather around the fires and talk of the sun and of the heat and light it gave to them. They would wonder if perhaps one day the sun would vanish forever and take all life with it. Through the bitter cold of predawn they waited and watched until the first faint flicker of sunlight touched the horizon.

Imagine their sense of joy and relief when the sun appeared to not go any lower.

With our science and technology we know exactly why the sun appears to travel through the heavens. We know that the sun is not going to go away, at least in our lifetime. We have the power to overcome the dark of long winter nights with the flick of a light switch, and we can ward off winter's chill by simply turning up the thermostat.

Science and technology have given us the power to overcome nature. Unfortunately, they have also driven a wedge between us and the natural world that surrounds us.

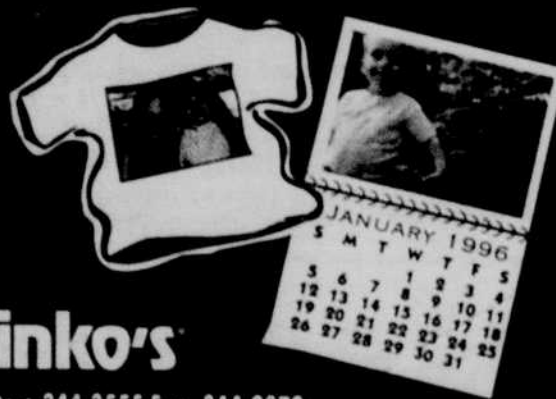
While the solstice goes by us unnoticed, it still continues to set the rhythm for the natural world that surrounds us. Solstice is still a fixed point on the circle of life. It says to the natural world, "This is as good [or as bad] as it gets, but the wheel is still turning."

We have the power to ignore the solstice, and there are no compelling commercial reasons why we should observe its passing. But perhaps if we took a moment to light a candle (or a bonfire) on the nights of Dec. 21 and 22, it would help us remember that we are still very much a part of the natural world.

By Larry Haftl

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