

National Unitarian Fellowship

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Viewpoint



Religious Festivals

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Religious Festivals, June-August 2017

For this second *Viewpoint*, in the series on religious festivals, covering the summer months of June, July and August, what better way to open than with the Midsummer Solstice, written by our NUF Minister, Tony McNeile. Tony has, for a long time been a great supporter and moving force in the Unitarian Earth Spirit Network and has incorporated Pagan festivals into his ministry and his daily life.

Rev Sue Woolley, Secretary and Minister of the Midland Unitarian Association and also Minister at Banbury and Northampton, writes on the Pagan festival of Lammas, celebrated on the 1st August in recognition of the beginning of harvest. This piece has been videoed for NUF Monthly Reflection and will be available for viewing on the front page of the NUF website: www.nufonline.org uk from 1st August.

In order to give a broader overview of some of the main world religions, I briefly cover festivals from Christianity, Sikhism, Islam, Buddhist, Hinduism and Judaism.

Editor

The Midsummer Solstice 5.24 am 21st June 2017 – Pagan Festival

The world we live in is filled with illusions. The sun rises in the east and sets in the west but in fact it doesn't. The sun stays where it is and it is the spinning earth that orbits around it. And because the spinning earth is also tilted, the sun also appears to travel northwards and southwards, during the course of the year. The turning points on this illusory north to south and south to north journey have always been regarded with awe and reverence. They are the solstices. Solstice means standing still because at these moments the sun does seem to stand still before it sets off in the opposite direction. It is said that in early ceremonies the sun had to be encouraged to move on from the time of 'standing still'. Usually it was encouraged by the lighting of bonfires, ceremonies and incantations.

In our world of illusions, we call the summer solstice, 'The longest day'. But of course, the day is no longer than any other days in the year but it does give the most hours of daylight. In the Arctic there will be no darkness at all.

Many people still get up and go outside to greet the sunrise on the day of the summer solstice. It is a magical feeling to travel in the darkness to some high point or significant place and witness the arrival of the dawn and then the sun appearing brilliantly across the rim of the horizon.

Those should travel to Stonehenge will feel a connection when the sun first strikes the eastern portal. It is not just a connection with the rising sun but a connection with the stones themselves and the mystery that surrounds them. The watchers will be aware of the generations before them, stretching back in time through the dark ages and thousands of years before then to a culture where the sun was so necessary for survival. Because life depended on its presence, the sun would have been worshipped and honoured.

It is difficult for our generations even to imagine those far-off times. We live in an age of light pollution. There is only one dark place in the United Kingdom where the view of the stars is not corrupted by our artificial light. For those who gathered together for the solstice before our light-times, it must have been a mystical experience to witness the real darkness being swept away.

It was believed that the solstice sun gave power to those who witnessed its rise and it gave power to whatever was displayed before it, whether they were amulets, charms or objects used for healing. There might be charms to help attract a partner or charms to help conception. The solstice was a time for making merry. In nature, everything was growing and should be growing well. While the crops and gardens were growing, there was time to celebrate life itself. Young couples

could reaffirm the commitment they made to each other the year before at Beltane when they swore to be together for a year and a day. Celebrations included rolling flaming wagon wheels down a slope. The wheels were first packed with straw and then set alight before being set off downhill. Flaming tar barrels would also be carried on the heads of revellers. This tar barrel tradition is well known as a New year festival in the town of Allendale. The barrels are lit, carried in procession on the heads of chosen young men and finishes as the barrels are flung into a bonfire to set it alight.

It is not unusual that what is considered a summer festival should be transposed to a winter one. Rituals around the use of fire are common to all eight of the festivals that make up the pagan year. Fire is sacred, and also cleansing. Many of the fire rituals involve jumping over or stepping through the remnants of a bonfire to symbolise the confirming of a vow, or a relationship. It might also mean the end of one time of life and the beginning of another, giving a fresh start and bidding farewell to a bad time. Fire and the smoke from fires was used to purify cattle as they were turned out for pasture at the beginning of spring (Beltane). The smoke would also ward off evil spirits. In October (Samhain), the main cooking fire in the house would be cleaned out, reset and then rekindled with fire from the communal bonfire. This would reinforce the sense of community in the village.

In our modern world too, we have lost the sense of unpredictability about life. A change in the weather could bring misfortune to a community or a family. The potato blight in Ireland in the nineteenth century drove more than half the population to emigrate to the new world. Today it would simply mean that the price of potatoes would go up and supplies would come in from elsewhere in the world.

We have an allotment where we grow fruit and vegetables. We often talk about what would happen if we really had to rely on it for our food, especially when one chill summer night can so easily kill off peas

and cucumbers, or after rain the slugs rampage and chew off the growing tips of the lettuce. It makes us realise how hard country life must have been. Like them we grow organically so do not call in chemicals to protect our plants. We are more aware of the weather because it is so influential on our own little plot of land.

The modern world has little time for the superstitions of the country dwellers. Those who lived life in the countryside were more spiritual. Everyday life was filled with omens that spoke of the future. We still look at the holly tree and see if the berries are foretelling a harsh or a mild winter. The more berries the colder the winter will be.

The moon with its waxing and waning has its own influence on the growing plants but it is the sun which gives life and power to all things that grow. Its energy fills our spirits too. At the end of its northward journey, when it stands still above the Tropic of Cancer before journeying south once more, let us give thanks for its continuing presence, giving light and power to everything and filling our own spirits with joy when we see it rise so majestically out of the dawn with its gift of life.

Tony McNeile

Christian Trinity Sunday 11th June

This is the only Christian festival that celebrates a Church doctrine rather than an event in history. Rev Theophilus Lindsey, was one Anglican amongst many liberal Anglicans, who rejected this doctrine, finding nothing to support the Trinitarian view in the Bible. In 1774, he began leading Unitarian services in Essex Street, London. Many Unitarians to this day are Unitarian Christians, see:

<http://www.unitarianchristian.org.uk/> Trinity Sunday celebrates the belief in three aspects of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit and is celebrated one week after Pentecost, (*Viewpoint April 2017*). This religious festival was instituted in 828CE by Pope Gregory 1X.

Editor

Sikhs remember the martyrdom of Guru Arjan Dev on the 16th June

Guru Arjan, 1563-1606, was the fifth of ten Sikh Gurus and the first Sikh to be martyred. He laid the foundation of the Golden Temple in Amritsar and proclaimed: "My faith is for the people of all castes and all creeds from whichever direction they come and to whichever direction they bow." He declared that all Sikhs should donate a tenth of their earnings to charity.

Guru Arjan's greatest contribution, though, was to compile all of the past Gurus' writings into the Sikh's holy scripture, the Guru Granth Sahib. Included were composition from both Hindu and Muslim saints, which were consistent with the teaching of Sikhism. When ordered to remove all Islamic and Hindu references by the Muslim Emperor Jahangir, he refused and for this was martyred. He was made to sit on a burning hot sheet while boiling hot sand was poured over his burnt body. After enduring five days of torture, he was taken to the river for a bath in front of thousands; he entered the river never to be seen again. The way in which he died changed the course of Sikhism forever. *Taken from: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/sikhism/people/arjandev.shtml>*

The day has been honoured since 1606 with prayers and messages of peace, mediated by Sikhs. 'Kirta', recitation of hymns from the Guru Granth Sahib and 'Katha', Sikhism based lectures take place. Last year in the hot weather, Sikhs served 'Chabeel' to the public, a sweet, cool and non-alcoholic drink. This was an act intended to spread positive energy and a message that one should be eternally optimistic.

Editor

Muslim Festival of Lailat al-Qadar – Night of Power 21st June

This festival is celebrated within the last ten days of **Ramadan**, (*Viewpoint April 2017*) and marks the night in which the first verses of

the Qur'an were first revealed to the Prophet Muhammad, by the Angel Gabriel. This the most important event in history for Muslims, and is spent in study and prayer, with many spending the whole night in prayer or reciting the Qur'an. It is time to ask for forgiveness for past sins, and if faith is sincere, all past sins will be forgiven.

Editor

Buddhist Asalha/Dharma Day 15th July

Dharma Day is celebrated by Buddhists around the world as one of the most important festival of the year. It commemorates the day when Buddha first delivered his core religious teachings following his enlightenment. It was out of compassion and a desire for others to share the happiness and enlightenment, which he had gained. This festival marks the establishment of Buddhism. Dharma is the eternal law of the cosmos, inherent in the nature of things. For more information go to: <https://www.thoughtco.com/what-is-dharma-1770048>

In this first sermon, delivered in a forest at Beneras, it was described as "setting into motion the wheel of dharma". the Buddha discussed the **Four Noble Truths**: Suffering exists; the cause of suffering is caused by craving; there is an end of suffering; the way to the end of suffering and path to nirvana (enlightenment) is the **Noble Eightfold Path**, also called the Middle Way.

1. Right view or understanding. Vision of the nature of reality and the path of transformation.
2. Right thought and attitude. Liberating emotional intelligence in your life and acting from love and compassion. An informed heart and feeling mind that are free to practice letting go.
3. Right Speech. Clear, truthful, uplifting and non-harmful communication.
4. Right action. An ethical foundation for life based on the principle of non-exploitation of oneself and others.

5. Right livelihood. This is a livelihood based on correct action the ethical principal of non-exploitation. The basis of an Ideal society.

6. Right effort. Consciously directing our life energy to the transformative path of creative and healing action that fosters wholeness.

7. Right mindfulness. Developing awareness. Levels of Awareness and mindfulness - of things, oneself, feelings, thought, people and Reality.

8. Right concentration. Meditation, or one-pointedness of mind. Samadhi literally means to be fixed, absorbed in or established at one point, thus the first level of meaning is concentration when the mind is fixed on a single object. The second level of meaning goes further and represents the establishment, not just of the mind, but also of the whole being in various levels or modes of consciousness and awareness. This is Samadhi in the sense of enlightenment or Buddhahood.

Buddhists mark this day to reflect on the qualities of Buddha, his teachings of peace and enlightenment. This is a day of deep reflection, devotion and gratitude for the dharma. <http://www.buddhanet.net/e-learning/8foldpath.htm> *Editor*

Pagan Festival of Lammass 1st August

I count myself so very blessed to live in the country. Life in our little Northamptonshire village is still very much linked to the cycle of the seasons, and at this time of year I have to remember to allow a little extra time for journeys, as the chances of getting stuck behind a tractor are fairly high.

Because this is the beginning of the Harvest season. The Celts celebrated it at the festival of Lughnasadh, or Lammass, on 31st July. The wheat and barley in the surrounding fields has begun to ripen and turn gold, and the farmers are praying for a few weeks of good weather, to complete the process, and to get the crops in safely.

I think it is a shame that Western society has grown so far away from the rhythm of the seasons, and the agricultural cycle. Even when I was a child, which I know my children think was sometime in the Dark Ages, but really isn't so long ago, harvest still meant something, at least to a child brought up in the countryside.

But now, ask anyone where their food comes from, and they are likely to reply "from the supermarket". You can buy pretty much anything all the year round – strawberries in December, parsnips in June. We've got a recipe book at home called 'The Cookery Year', which is full of wonderful recipes to cook for each month of the year, using "seasonal ingredients". And in the beginning of it, there is a four-page table entitled 'The Fruit and Vegetable Year', which explains what you can get from which country at particular times of year. It makes fascinating reading.

But this universal bounty (in the West) has its down side. We have lost contact with the changing order of the seasons – and I think it is a loss. The Western demand for all kinds of everything all the year round has had far-reaching effects all over the world. Farmers in developing countries now grow "cash crops" such as coffee and bananas, instead of food to feed themselves and their families.

Most people in the West already have absolutely everything they need. And yet, we seem to have this hunger for more and more, the newest, the brightest, the glitziest gadgets we can lay our hands on. Last year's gadgets are discarded as "so yesterday" so we have to work yet harder and longer to "keep up with the Jones's".

But need it be this way? As Brighton Unitarian John Naish so wisely writes: "We have to learn to live 'post-more' ... Enoughness is a path to contentment." We don't seem to appreciate all the marvels that we have, including abundant food. So maybe this year, we can remember to give thanks for all the farmers and agricultural labourers the world over, whose hard work enables us to eat what we want, when we want.

I'm a beginner at this, but am finding that when I do remember to be mindful, and to think about the spiritual aspects of everyday life, I'm enjoying it more, appreciating things more. Hopefully in time, if I practice it faithfully, it will transform my life, and how I connect with other people and with the world.

May we all remember to count our blessings, and realise how very rich we are, not only during this season of Harvest, but all the year round.

Sue Woolley recorded the above for the August Monthly Reflection on the NUF website: www.nufonline.org.uk

Jewish Tisha B'Av 1st August

This is the saddest day of the Jewish calendar. A full day fast is held at the conclusion of three weeks of mourning, while reflecting on the destruction of the first and second Temples in Jerusalem. Other tragedies in Jewish history are also recalled, many of which have coincidentally happened on this day. The Book of Lamentations is read at this time. <http://www.reonline.org.uk/supporting/festivals-calendar/>

Hindu Janmashtami/Krishna Jayanti 15th August

The birth of Krishna, one of the most popular Gods in the Hindu pantheon, is celebrated over two days. He is considered to be a warrior, hero, teacher and philosopher by Hindus.

Hindus are likely to forego sleep and sing bhajans, traditional Hindu songs. Milk and curds, said to be favoured by Krishna are prepared. Some Hindus fast on the first day eating only after the midnight celebrations.

Dances and songs celebrate the life of Krishna and plays are enacted of Krishna's early life. Temple images of Krishna are bathed and placed in cradles, a conch shell is played and bells are rung. Holy mantras are chanted.

Editor

Comments -

We welcome your comments on this issue. With your permission your comments might also be included in the NUF Newsletter.

Please send your comments to the editor:

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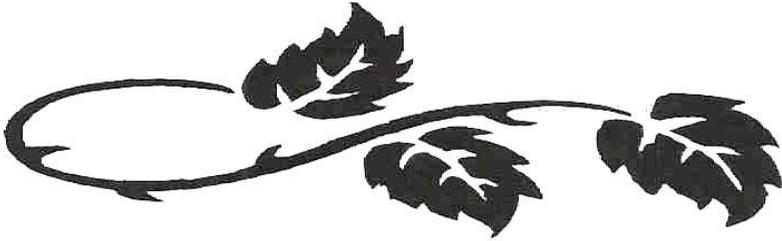
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