

# Children's Religious Education

## World Religions Program

In our Children's Religious Education classes we have been exploring World Religions, with music, art, crafts and discussion. As we navigate the distinctly different elements of worship and celebration we work to identify the common threads of treating each other with dignity, fairness and respect.

All children age 3 and up are welcome to join us on Sunday's during regular service. Supervised play is available in our nursery each week for children under three.

12/20 – Exploring Pagan/Earth Religions  
with a Winter Solstice Celebration

12/27 – Exploring Christmas and Hanukkah

## **Winter Solstice Celebrations for Families and Households**

*From an article by Selena Fox*

**Focus of Celebration:** consider first your purpose(s) for the celebration, such as:

- Strengthen family bonding with each other
- Expand upon existing patterns of family celebrations
- Attune family to Nature's cycles
- Attune family to its membership in the community of all life on planet Earth
- Connect with ancestors
- Celebrate ethnic/cultural heritage(s)
- Educate about ancient and contemporary folkways
- Extend the celebration of Christmas, be an alternative, or expand upon it
- Deepen understanding about spiritual renewal and love
- Have fun

**Components of Celebration:** select one or more that fits your focus, timing, length, and setting

### Yule Wreath

- purchase a wreath or make a wreath from evergreens collected by family members.
- have family members gather around the wreath and consider it as a symbol of cycles of Nature; mention Yule and Jul, names for Winter Solstice time (and Christmas) mean wheel.
- have family members each share something they appreciate about Winter
- put the wreath in a visible location, such as on the front door, on an inside wall, or in the center of the dining table.
- On or after New Year's Day, wreath can be returned to Nature, or kept until Summer Solstice and then burned in a bonfire.

### Solstice Feast

- Prepare favorite family foods and beverages.
- Before beginning the dining experience, do a family prayer of thanksgiving.
- End the feast with a cake or pie with a sun image on it.
- Birthday candles can be put on this solar dessert. Each family member can light a candle and make a wish for the holiday season or the upcoming calendar year. Once all candles are lit, the family as a whole can blow them out to send wishes on their way. Then call out "Happy Solstice" or "Good Yule" in unison.

### Candlelight Circle

- Can be done as part of a feast or separately.
- Family gathers in a circle around a card table or dining table. There is an unlit new red taper candle in a candleholder for each family member, plus a larger new red taper or pillar candle in a candleholder to represent the family as a whole and the Solstice Sun. Candles are arranged evenly around the central larger candle.
- Parent(s) begin the circle by sharing some background about Winter Solstice, such as how it has been celebrated across time and cultures, and how its celebration is reflected in contemporary secular and religious Christmas customs. Then parent(s) describe the focus for this candlelight circle, such as to attune the family members to each other, to the ways of ancestors, and/or to Nature.
- Lights are extinguished. Family stands or sits in darkness for a few moments and contemplates the reduction of daylight at this time of year, the importance of the Sun to life on the planet, and the symbology of light as indicators of renewal.
- Then, parent(s) light the central candle with a blessing of renewal for the family and the planet and guide a short meditation on light and renewal.

- Next, parent(s) invite each member to light her/his personal candle and give a thanksgiving for something in past or present or a blessing for the year to come.
- When all the candles are lit, the family joins hands and chants or sings. The song, "We wish you a Merry Christmas" can be adapted to "We wish you a Merry Solstice" and sung to end the circle.
- Candles can be left burning if in a safe, attended location, throughout the rest of the Solstice celebration, if there are other component parts.
- Candles can be extinguished by everyone doing it simultaneously after one of the family members states that the light of renewal remains in our hearts.

### Yule Log

- An oak log, plus a fireplace or bonfire area is needed for this form of celebration. The oak log should be very dry so that it will blaze well. It can be decorated with burnable red ribbons of natural fiber and dried holly leaves. In the fireplace or bonfire area, dried kindling should be set to facilitate the burning of the log.
- Begin by having parent(s) or some other family member describe the tradition of the Yule log. The tale of the Oak King and Holly King from Celtic mythology can be shared as a story, or can be summarized with a statement that the Oak represents the waxing solar year, Winter Solstice to Summer Solstice, and the Holly represents the waning solar year, Summer Solstice to Winter Solstice.
- Lights are extinguished as much as possible. The family is quiet together in the darkness. Family members quietly contemplate the change in the solar year. Each in her/his own way contemplates the past calendar year, the challenges as well as the good times.
- Then the Yule Log fire is lit. As it begins to burn, each family member throws in one or more dried holly sprigs and says farewell to the old calendar year. Farewells can take the form of thanksgiving and appreciation and/or a banishment of old habits or personal pains.
- Once the Yule Log itself starts blazing, then the facilitator invites family members to contemplate the year ahead and the power of possibilities. Each member then throws in an oak twig or acorn into the fire to represent the year ahead, and calls out a resolution and/or a hope.
- When this process is done, the family sings a song together. The traditional carol, "Deck the Halls," is good because it mentions the Solstice, the change in the solar year, and the Yule log.
- Let the Yule Log burn down to a few chunks of charred wood and ashes. Following an ancient tradition, save remnants of the fire and use them to start the Yule Log fire the following year.

### Yule Tree

- Decorate an evergreen tree as a Yule tree. The tree can be a living tree growing in the yard of the home or in a container indoors to be planted outside in Spring. Or, the tree can be a harvested one purchased or cut yourself from a tree farm.
- The Yule Tree can be decorated prior to or on Solstice for the entire holiday season. If decorated prior to Solstice, on Solstice day, family members can each add an ornament. Members may want to speak a blessing on the Solstice celebration as they add their ornaments. Ornaments can be of any type, but those that represent the Sun, such as sun figures or shiny red or golden balls, are very appropriate because of their symbolism. A star, sunburst, or light at the top of the tree is another traditional Solstice symbol.
- Electric lights on the tree can also play into the Solstice celebration. They can be first turned on during the Solstice celebration. Or, if the family custom is to have a lit holiday tree for much of December, the lights can be turned off during a celebration as the family focuses on the year passing and the longest nights of the year and then turned on to represent renewal and the new Solar year.
- After the holiday season is over, the Yule tree can be burned in a bonfire, chopped up and used as mulch, or placed in the wilds as additional habitat for wild creatures. A branch can be saved and stored away until next year and then burned with the Yule Log to represent the continuity of Nature's cycles.

### Winter Nature Communion

- Grains and seeds, and the feeding of creatures have been associated with Yuletide holidays for hundred of years in Europe. To continue this tradition, gather some sunflower seeds in a large basket or bowl. Go outside next to the home or to a place frequented by wild birds and other wild creatures.
- The family gathers around a bird feeder, a tree stump, a rock ledge, or other spot where the seeds are to be placed. Someone in the family serves as facilitator and guides the family in a Nature attunement meditation. First, the family silently focuses on the experience of being outdoors in the Winter at this Solstice time. Next, the family silently focuses on being part of the fabric of life of Nature. Then the family silently focuses on expressing appreciation for the beauty of Nature and the relationships with other lifeforms. Each family member then takes a handful of seeds and focuses on the seeds as symbols of life and as messengers of goodwill toward other parts of Nature.
- Now, each family member in turn places the seeds in the feeder or on the stump, ledge, or other spot, and speaks an appreciation of Nature. After all the offerings have been made, the family joins hands and says together several times, "We are part of the Family of Nature!" The ceremony ends as the family in unison calls out "Happy Solstice!" or "Good Yule!"

## **Adult Religious Education**

### **New Groups Forming in 2010**

#### **Men's Group – Informational Meeting January 10th**

A men's group can be a great support when you are going through a tough time in your life and need support. A men's group can also be a place where you celebrate the victories in your life with great people and explore what is possible in your life.

Interested in belonging to a group of like-minded men that will both challenge and provide for independent and collective gain? The newly forming PCUUC Men's Group may be the place for you!

An informational meeting will take place on January 10<sup>th</sup> following regular service to set up a regular meeting time, place, frequency, guidelines, purpose and vision for the group.

*If interested in joining please contact to [RE@pairiecircleuuc.org](mailto:RE@pairiecircleuuc.org)*

*If there is any interest in a Father/Son group as well, please let me know.*

#### **Mother/Daughter Group – Informational Meeting January 24th**

Program Based on the book: The Mother/Daughter Project: How Mothers and Daughters Can Band Together, Beat the Odds and Thrive Through Adolescence.

*If interested in joining please RSVP to [RE@pairiecircleuuc.org](mailto:RE@pairiecircleuuc.org)*

#### **New Book Group – Starting March 14th:**

Karen Armstrong's *The Case for God*

Moving from the Paleolithic age to the present, Karen Armstrong details the great lengths to which humankind has gone in order to experience a sacred reality that it called by many names, such as God, Brahman, Nirvana, Allah, or Dao. Focusing especially on Christianity but including Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Chinese spiritualities, Armstrong examines the diminished impulse toward religion in our own time, when a significant number of people either want nothing to do with God or question the efficacy of faith. Why has God become unbelievable? Why is it that atheists and theists alike now think and speak about God in a way that veers so profoundly from the thinking of our ancestors?

Answering these questions with the same depth of knowledge and profound insight that have marked all her acclaimed books, Armstrong makes clear how the changing face of the world has necessarily changed the importance of religion at both the societal and the individual level. And she makes a powerful, convincing argument for drawing on the insights of the past in order to build a faith that speaks to the needs of our dangerously polarized age. Yet she cautions us that religion was never supposed to provide answers that lie within the competence of human reason; that, she says, is the role of logos. The task of religion is "to help us live creatively, peacefully, and even joyously with realities for which there are no easy explanations."

*If interested in joining the book discussion group and/or ordering a book please contact Laura*

at 874-871-7049 or [RE@prariecircleuuc.org](mailto:RE@prariecircleuuc.org)

**As always, if you have any questions, concerns or suggestions regarding our Religious Education programming, please feel free to contact me directly or any member of the RE Committee.**

*Laura C. Tomskey, Director Religious Education*