

# A Year of Living Shamanically

## Part 9: Winter Solstice

On or around December the 21st is the winter solstice (I am talking of the northern hemisphere here). Just before settling to write this I went for a walk to my Axis Mundi, the place in this world which I use as my starting point for my shamanic journeys. It is, for me, a place where the veil is thin that separates this world from shamanic reality, and where I can easily step into the shamanic realms. It is a place I have visited many hundreds of times before and know well. This time was magical though. As I entered the area, I was struck by an overwhelming and palpable sense of silence. It was a biting cold, clear and crisp winter day. Normally the place is alive with birdsong and the wind (and animals) rustling in the trees and undergrowth. Today, the only sound was the noise of the frost crunching under my feet. The silence was thick and heavy in the air. I felt it push against me and slow my pace as I walked into it. I stood there for as long as I could stand the cold, enjoying and absorbing the peaceful stillness, and reflecting on the energy of this time of the year. It was the last Saturday before Christmas. At the same time as I was stood there, only a mile away, in the center of town, thousands of people were rushing and jostling each other in a frenzy of shopping. The contrast could not have been clearer more stark.



The winter solstice, a.k.a. Yule, is the longest night (and shortest day) of the year. The three harvest of Lammas, autumn equinox and Samhain are over. This is meant to be a time of quiet and inactivity; of conserving energy; of turning inward. Instead, we have turned it into the most frenzied and stressful time of the year! Maybe you are reading this and thinking 'I love Christmas'. In which case, genuinely, well done and good on you. However it only takes a few minutes online to find research showing that: many people feel pressured at this time into spending beyond their means; half the population of the UK won't have enough money to pay their bills in January due to Christmas expenditure (and feel stressed about it); most people feel obliged to go to parties that they really do not want to go to, or spend time with other people/relatives they actually do not like; more people have arguments than at any other time of the year; many people eat and drink in ways that are way out of tune with their bodies real wishes and needs; it is the busiest time of year for crisis workers such as the Samaritans; suicide rates and divorce rates soars. And so on.

This is the polar opposite of what this time of year is meant to be about, and *is* about in the natural world. One has only to go for a walk into the country over the next few days, and get away from people, and just stop and look and listen, to see and hear *and feel* that nature has slowed down. Shamanism is all about connection; connection with nature and the cycles of life. We are part of nature, and yet we cut ourselves off from it. To reconnect, to feel that interconnectedness at this time of year, is to spend some time simply slowing down and being quiet and still. And it is not just this winter season as a whole that is about stillness. The actual solstice itself is a particularly potent time. It is one of those times loved by shamans; a time of 'betwixt and between'. It is a time when things change over, and in that changeover there is a momentary pause. The rhythm between the summer and winter solstices is the hemisphere's slow in-breath and out-breath. Since the summer solstice in June, the light has been fading. Nature has been breathing out. There is now a moment between breaths, a pause, and then the long slow in-breath starts, recharging the land with energy and light. In fact the word 'solstice' comes from two Latin words: 'sol' (the sun), and 'sistere' (to stand still). So

winter solstice means, 'winter sun stands still'. This is a time to slow down if possible, and turn away from outer activities and spend some time just 'being' rather than 'doing'. Rather than outer activities, it is a chance to spend time turning inwards and contact our spiritual self, and spiritual help.

On a psychological level, when we are in the depths of a psychological 'winter', of course it can be hard to find one's spiritual self, or even to have any sense of connection with spiritual help. Here, holding on may be all we can do. I have been thinking on this recently, both through working with some people who are going through very dark times in their lives, as well as thinking back and reflecting on my own dark times in the past. What the medicine wheel, and the cycle of the year reminds us is that the darkest time is in fact a tipping point, even though it may not be apparent yet. At the winter solstice, although the darkness is now going to start to recede, and spring is on its way, it still looks dark! The changes are as yet imperceptible, and we still have January and February to get through. The medicine wheel shows us though that when we do reach our darkest and lowest points, it is also the start of the inevitable and inexorable process of recovery. As in the yin and yang symbol, within the yang is the seed of the yin (and vice versa). The wheel will turn and spring will come.



### **Santa Claus is a shaman.**

Although there is some truth that the modern-day image of Santa Claus was in part created by the marketing department of Coca-Cola, in truth his origins are much older. Northern shamans used a mushroom, fly agaric, for shamanic journeys. This is the red mushroom with white spots that often appears in pictures of fairy tales. Once it was an important part of shamanic work (with the coming of Christianity, people were told it is poisonous, and it commonly became associated with evil witches). One of its side effects is that the skin and face take ruddy glow, hence Santa's glowing red cheeks and nose. Using it provokes an euphoric laugh, hence Santa's "Ho, ho, ho". Because its dosage is unpredictable, it was 'processed' by feeding it to reindeer, and the shaman would drink the reindeer's urine (the rest of the tribe would then drink the shaman's urine!), and it induces sensations of flying, hence the flying reindeer. The ancient shamans even dressed much like Santa, wearing red and white fur-trimmed coats and long black boots. They lived in yurts, and the central smoke hole was used as an exit for the shaman to fly out of when journeying, borne up to the upper world by the smoke and the reindeer, and returning with gifts (messages and healing) for the tribe for the new year. Rattles and (jingle) bells were used to help the shaman journey. So this is a great time to do upper world journeys and ask for help with upper world issues such as: healing wounds of the spirit; finding ones spiritual purpose; finding your upper world guides; asking for help to develop spiritual qualities such as wisdom, love and compassion; and gaining a more spiritual perspective on issues.



This is the last of the 'Year of Living Shamanically' articles. I hope you have enjoyed reading them, and maybe even found them helpful. Thank you to those who gave me such positive feedback. I have enjoyed the process of writing them; it has helped me personally to spend the year reflecting more on the seasons and the medicine wheel, and to live a bit more more shamanically in this 'civilised' world.

Waes Hael<sup>(1)</sup> to you and yours.

<sup>(1)</sup>'Be Well', The traditional Old English greeting for this time of the year.

If you missed the previous articles in this series, they are available to download from [www.therapeutic-shamanism.co.uk](http://www.therapeutic-shamanism.co.uk).  
Paul Francis teaches [shamanism](#) and [therapeutic-shamanism](#) in the UK, where he also works as a homeopath, polarity therapist and psychotherapist. He is the creator of the Power Animal Essences ([www.animal-essences.co.uk](http://www.animal-essences.co.uk)) and the Harmonic Resonances ([www.harmonic-resonances.co.uk](http://www.harmonic-resonances.co.uk))