

Festivals as a Path of Initiation

by Hazel Archer Ginsberg

To celebrate a festival really means to unite oneself in spirit with the cosmic spirit. ~Rudolf Steiner



The Greek meaning of the word festival is “Shining Day”.

A festival has the quality of lifting us out of the ordinary and into the mysteries and magic of the rhythm of the seasons. Throughout history, festivals have emerged from people’s connection with their spiritual life and their search for the meaning of human existence.

The festivals not only commemorate great historical events, cosmic truths and traditions; they are in themselves spiritual events that manifest in seasonal rhythms, and carry a significance that grows and deepens with the development of human evolution. The celebration of the festivals let us practice what Rudolf Steiner calls ‘the Reverse-Ritual’ - The idea of ‘Openness to Above’. Instead of invoking Spirit down, as in days of old, we rise to the spirit, in our thinking. We study and celebrate these ‘Shining Days’ to sustain and renew ourselves and the world.

Spring Festivals: Holy Week – Easter

In the New Mysteries we follow the path of the Christian initiation through the Holy Week before Easter: The Feast of the Resurrection.

Before the ‘Mystery of Golgotha’, the task of evolution was that the cosmos would become human; after this ‘Turning Point of Time’, the human becomes cosmos -The New Sun -The imperishable resurrection-body uniting with the Cosmic- Sophia. The tomb becomes the Round table, and the Parsifal question leads us on a quest to find The Christ within.

Ascension - 40 Days after Easter

At this time nature celebrates the ascension of the soul of the earth. It is not by chance that the 40 days between Easter and the Feast of Ascension coincide with this season. Every year, when the earth breathes out in the springtime, the mystery of the Ascension of Christ, Who is the Spirit of the Earth, is renewed.

The Christ-Revelation 'coming in the clouds' is here - showing us the bridge that brings a harmonizing spring-dialogue between the worlds. The fulfillment of the secret promise of the Ascension is the Second Coming; and the Second Coming is the fulfillment of the Ascension.

Pentecost – Whitsun - 50 Days after Easter

Festival of the higher self and the universal human being

Festival of the Holy Spirit

Festival of Flowers

Festival of United Soul Endeavor and Spirit Community

Festival of the purified astral body

– the lifting out of one's egotism into universal caring

– out of opinion into truth

– out of opinion into wisdom

Festival of the human unbound from materialism

Whitsun is a festival of the future, for we must grow ripe to withstand the surging of the Spirit. It is the festival of our true higher self, which as yet only hovers above us like a dove.

The original Whitsun presents us with a remarkable and dramatic picture of spirit-filled individuals speaking the language of the heart, that all can understand; anointed and enkindled with the impulse to speak out of individual freedom regarding the truth and healing power of the Spirit. This intense rush of spirit

waiting to be planted in the hearts of all of us highlights one of the greatest challenges of being human: placing our individual gifts, our individual “I”, in right relationship within the social realm. This challenge is strongly felt during this time of the consciousness soul age. Our groups striving to know Spiritual Science must work together as a community, to have the possibility to create this type of culture, and the opportunity is here for each of us to meet, human to human, where a sacrament is possible in every encounter. Our individual strength comes from our personal development and is enhanced by weaving our gifts together with others, knitting our social world in conscious community.

Summer Festival - St. John's Tide – 24 June

In the new mysteries we strive at St. John's Tide toward an enhanced awareness of our will forces – an effort to ‘make straight the path’. Through ‘the great window of heaven’ provided during the summer outbreath, we experience an interaction between humanity and the Sun forces, assisting us to develop an awareness of our “I” forces.

Like the call of conscience from John the Baptist, the need arises to let the light of the higher “I” shine into our being, knowing that the union of creator and created is affected by the disharmony from the imperfect deeds of humanity.

We respond to the summertime call for a yearly ‘metanoia’ by reviewing our deeds of the past year, (like we do at the time of the Winter Solstice) while the ‘eye of heaven’ gazes down upon us. We seek to know the will forces; that through our deeds, become part of the earth's being.

Autumn Festivals – Michaelmas – 29 September

Since ancient times, the full name for September 29th is: The feast Day of St. Michael and All the Heavenly Hosts. The old legends always preface the story of the battle against the dragon with an enumeration of the nine angelic realms. Michael stands before us as the Prince and herald of all the hierarchies, that we

may look to the angelic choirs, that we may look to our future selves, that we may think, what it is to be truly human, here and now, and step by step, to courageously build our own strong and steady rung on the ladder of evolution. It is our job to strive to complete the never ending story, with the new Michaelic mysteries put forth by Rudolf Steiner, a true emissary of our Time Spirit, teaching us to count the human being as the 10th hierarchy.

All Souls Festival – 1 November

During this time of year the veils between the worlds are thin, and the spiritual world beckons. Having put the iron will of Michael to work in our thinking, we now have the courage to look beyond the mask of the material world into the spirit realm, the place of our beginning, the place of our ending when we shuffle off this mortal coil, only to begin again and yet again...for every ending is a new beginning...This festival often includes a Journey of the Soul between Death and Rebirth, and a 'Circle of Remembrance' to help us stay connected to our beloved dead.

Martinmas – November 11

As we journey into the darkest time of the year, we kindle warmth and light within our hearts, which becomes a beacon of light to the world. Martin's cloak can remind us to share with those in need. We celebrate with a Lantern Walk to activate this 'Festival of Inner Light.'

Winter Festivals: ADVENT – Spiral of Light

The term "Advent" – is Latin for 'that which is coming'. So this is a time of preparation, of waiting, in the dark, for the return of the light at Winter Solstice and the birth of the Sun/Son at Christmas. During this four week festival, we deepen our relationship to the world around us by recognizing and celebrating the strength and beauty of all four kingdoms of the natural world.

During the first week, we pay tribute to the mineral world.

During the second week, we focus on the plant kingdom.

In the third week, we celebrate the kingdom of the animals.
The fourth week speaks to the human being and angelic realm.
As we pass through these realms, it moves us toward a deeper understanding of our place in the universe, of all that supports us, and all that we aspire to, as well as all that needs our care and protection.

The Feast of St. Nicholas - 6 December

At the start of Advent we remember Old St. Nick, a bishop wearing his red mantle and mitre hat, sporting a long white beard and carrying his golden shepherd's crook. He helps the poor and calms the seas, and on his feast day gives children sweets or gifts. There is a lesson looming for those that are selfish, for the legend says that if you are bad, Black Peter will put you in his bag and take you away to the Black Forest until you learn to be better...On the night of December 5th, the children set out their boots and leave a carrot for his horse; then go to bed and dream of doing good deeds like St. Nicholas.

Feast of St. Lucia – 13 December

Celebrating the life of this Saint of light during the time of the longest nights, this feast day begins before dawn, with the oldest girl in the family rising to make hot cross buns to bring to her parents. She wears a white dress, with a red sash and a wreath of candles on her head. Other girls in the family are dressed in white as attendants and the boys are dressed as "star boys" with pointy star hats. This day kicks off the Christmas season.

The Holy Nights - 24 December – 6 January

This sacred 'Time out of Time' provides an opportunity in the course of the year to contemplate, not only the journey of Jesus to Christ, but also the evolution of the Human Being as a Star unfolding in an Earthly biography.

Each of the 12 days and 13 nights – From the Eve of the Sacred Birth, to the Eve of Epiphany, can be seen as a microcosmic experience of the macrocosm, allowing us to approach the sublime gesture of the divine spiritual beings whose outer vestments are the constellations of the zodiac – while simultaneously contemplating the events in our own lives, in order to uncover the golden threads connecting us to each other, as well as, to the goals of Earth evolution, and to the divine spiritual nature that comes to birth again and again at this darkest time of the year.



Christmas and Epiphany - 25 December and 6 January

These two festivals stand at opposite ends of the year. They are the markers of two paths and two births. Christmas celebrates the birth of the Son of Man – Jesus, and Epiphany celebrates the birth of the Son of God - The Christ or Logos. The 12 days of Christmas or Holy Nights fall between these two festivals, exemplifying two paths, one of a god towards manhood & the other, of a man toward godhood.

The Paradise Play, the Shepherds' Play and the Three Kings' Play – are known as the Oberufer Christmas Plays; ancient tales first collected by Rudolf Steiner's teacher Karl Julius Schroer. The first - The Paradise Play, tells the story in the book of Genesis of the creation of the world, and of Adam and Eve's expulsion from the Garden of Eden after they succumbed to Satan's stratagem to eat the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge too soon. It is from this primordial tree that we get the modern tradition of the Christmas tree. In the olden days they called it the Paradise Tree. And Christmas Eve, used to be referred to as the Feast of Adam and Eve. The fall from paradise represents that point in human evolution, which precipitated the necessity for the incarnation of Christ.

The Shepherds' Play, tells the story of the proclamation of the Birth of Jesus to the shepherds in the field. This is the nativity story told in the Gospel According to Luke.

The third of the Oberufer Plays is the Kings Play, which tells of the visit of the Magi, or three wise men, to the birthplace of the Jesus child, and of the murderous atrocities of Herod in his attempt to destroy the new born King. This is the nativity story told in the Gospel According to St Matthew, usually performed on the 5th or 6th of January, 12th night, Three Kings day, or **The Feast of Epiphany**, which in Greek means 'Manifestation'.

The Three Kings from the East: Caspar, Melchior and Balthazar, were wise men initiated into the mysteries of the stars by Zarathustra. They followed the starry script written in the heavens that was foretold by the ancient prophets, to Bethlehem, where they paid homage to the Christ-child and presented him with gold, frankincense and myrrh.

Epiphany is older than Christmas, at one time the Nativity and Epiphany were celebrated together and were referred to as the first and second nativity; the second being Christ's manifestation to the world, linked as it is with the cosmic event of Christ's baptism.

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