

## *Celebrating Yule*

Yule is the great season for parties so I'm including descriptions of several ceremonies I've created or attended. Of course, the best thing is to seize upon some idea that appeals to you and create your own holiday traditions, which you can elaborate year after year.

### *Waiting for the Sun*

For many years I've been celebrating Advent with friends, using suggestions from *The Advent Sunwheel* by Helen Farias. We gather around the Advent wreath about the time dark falls on Sunday. We spend a few minutes creating a circle, then light the candles.

As with Hanukkah candles, only one candle is lit the first Sunday. Two are lit the second Sunday, three the third and four on the fourth Sunday. The central candle is lit for the first time on Winter Solstice. Red is a traditional color for the candles. Catholic custom calls for three purple candles and one pink one, which is lit on the third Sunday, as a promise of the coming joy. Helen suggested using candles in the colors of the four directions and that's what I usually do: a yellow candle for east, red for south, blue for west and green for north.

When we light the candles, we often invoke the quality of the direction, by saying something like "I light the candle of the east and ask that the returning sun bring us insight." The candles can also symbolize the seasons of the coming year, for instance, "I light the candle of the Spring and ask that the returning sun bring us renewal."

After lighting the candles, we take turns reading aloud from one of the wonderful stories Helen includes in her book. I love Helen's stories but actually any stories would do. For instance, you could read classic fairy tales, like "The Snow Queen." Winter is an important time for storytelling and this coming together to share stories around the flickering fires of the candles recreates the community of the tribe gathering around the campfire.

After the story, we sing carols, then feast. One of my favorite parts of Christmas is the baking. I try to make three different kinds of cookies every week during Advent in hopes of having thirteen different kinds of cookies to share with guests at my Winter Solstice party.

### *Sitting in the Darkness*

I've created one of my most satisfying winter solstice rituals around the feast day of Diva Angerona, a Roman goddess, so obscure that I for a long time I couldn't find a source to verify her existence. All I knew was that her holiday was the Winter Solstice and she was supposedly the goddess of silence, always pictured holding her finger to her lips.

My ritual involves spending the day of the solstice in silence. I don't talk to anyone, turn on the radio or the TV or answer the phone. I turn over or hide all the clocks. To increase my sense of time out of time, I also don't turn on the electric lights at night but light candles. I've been doing this for many years and I love my oasis of peace and serenity in the midst of the chaotic holiday season.

## *Lucia Party*

Once upon a time, Helen Farias lived at Bright House with her husband, James Carrell, and they threw fabulous Christmas parties for their friends. These were known as Lucia Parties because they were held on the Saturday before St Lucy's Day (Dec 13) and because...well, you will have to read on to know the other reason why.

Now let it be known that Bright House, despite its grand name, had begun its life as a chicken coop on the property outside Clear Lake owned by Helen's parents. It had been converted into a dwelling but it was a humble one, with ceilings so low that James who was over 6 feet tall had to duck his head to walk between the rooms. It was drafty and always smelled of mildew and cat urine because of the ten to twelve cats that lived on the premises. Still, for the Lucia Party, Bright House became a vision, with candles burning everywhere and garlands looped over the tops of windows and snaking their way along the surfaces of bookshelves and tables.

A Huge Christmas tree filled one corner. The Tree was as much a part of the place as the cats for it had been grown on the property, been selected earlier in the year, chopped down after a ritual honoring its life and dragged back to Bright House to be decorated with traditional ornaments and real candles. Beside the tree stood a punch bowl containing an eggnog punch, whipped up fresh in the kitchen, which by the start of the party was buried in dirty pans, the debris from days of cooking the platters of food spread out on the round dining room table.

The guest bedroom converted for the night of the party was the Sweet Room, a wonderland of white and glitter, with candles burning amongst boughs of evergreens and plates of cookies, the name of each on a card written in gold calligraphy: Kourbiedes, Zimsterne, Springerle.

The Party actually began about a month ahead of time with the receipt of an invitation identifying the chosen date and encouraging guests to wear dashing attire. This meant most of the women and some of the men spent the intervening time planning and either purchasing or creating a spectacular outfit. On the night of the party, the room was awash in green velvet, sweeping skirts, shiny silver taffeta, ties that sparkled with gold and even thigh-high leather boots.

On the day of the party, guests began arriving in the afternoon, bearing platters of cookies for the Sweet Room, for Helen was not only a brilliant scholar and hostess, but also an incredible organizer, sending out recipes for the types of cookies she required for the Sweet Room, one to each of the guests.

Helen knew the recipe for a successful party—simply fill a small room with attractively-dressed and interesting people, who can't help but talk to each other as there's not enough room to move around. Then at intervals, sprinkle in an activity or an apparition: a wondrous epiphany, the arrival of a numinous visitor, the presentation of a flaming plum pudding.

I can't remember the exact order of events, but I believe the first Event of the Evening was wassailing the Bird's Tree, a tall evergreen which grew on the north side of Bright House. Every year it was hung with Christmas lights and oranges cut in half and filled with suet and birdseed

for the birds. We all trooped out of the house, through the wet and frosty grass, carrying songbooks in one hand and clutching glasses in the other hand, to sing to the tree and pour out a libation on its roots.

Further along in the evening came the Lighting of the Candles on the Christmas Tree. Helen had inherited tiny clip-on candle holders from her mother and still used them, under certain conditions. We gathered around the Inside Tree, each person lit their candle, while making a wish. We each watched our candles carefully, our attention focused on that little wavering flame, guarding the Tree from conflagration, while we sang another song, probably *O Tannenbaum*. Then the candles were extinguished so we could place our attention back where it belonged, on the guests and the conversation and the food.

Sometimes the Holly King or St Nick arrived and gave out presents. One year he handed each of us a silver nut (a walnut split open with a ribbon pasted inside, then sealed back up and painted silver) which He told us to hang on our trees to make our wishes for the New Year come true.

The Big Arrival was St. Lucy who appeared sometime after the meal. We would see candles flickering outside the windows and hear the faint sound of female voices in song, then a rap on the door, and St Lucy would burst in, a crown of candles flaming on her head and walk through the company, offering each guest one of the pastries on the tray she carried. Her female companions would sing Santa Lucia and so would we all as we took our treats and thanked St Lucy for bringing Light back to the world.

The Plum Pudding was another Welcome Visitor, brought in from the kitchen, doused with warmed brandy sauce and set aflame to a rousing cheer, then deposited on its pedestal near the door.

By this time, the party was winding down and people were leaving, going out into the chill night for their long drives back to Seattle or Bellingham or wherever they came from. I never made it to the end since Seattle was two hours away but I was told that the evening usually ended with the reading of stories. Helen and James would gather a group in front of the wood stove and pull out one of their favorite books--Saki, for instance--and read stories. It sounded like a deliciously sleepy ending to a great party, drifting off by the fire, listening to stories at the only time of the year when stories can be told, according to many indigenous cultures.

After Helen's death in September of 1994, there were no more parties at Bright House, but the tradition has spread and I know of at least three parties modeled after Helen's—mine in Seattle, Anna's in Boise and Joanna's on Lummi Island. Create your own Lucia Party and you can be part of the tradition too.

## *Winter Solstice Party*

I usually hold my Winter Solstice party on the Sunday closest to the Solstice. When the guests arrive the house is bright with Christmas lights and candles, but at some point during the evening I turn off the lights and blow out the candles and ask the guests to spend a few moments in the darkness and silence reflecting on these qualities of the winter. Then I tell the story of St Lucy and play the traditional Lucy song.

As the song is playing, from out of the darkness, faint at first and growing stronger, comes the wavering light of a candle, carried by St Lucy (a role which is coveted by the younger members of the party). She is dressed in white with a crown of candles on her head and her face as she advances through the darkness, ever so intent on the candle she carries before her, is radiant.

There is usually a gasp from the assembled guests, so numinous is this figure. St Lucy lights the central candle in the Advent wreath, then I invite the guests to bring their own candles to the flame to light them and make a wish for the New Year. St Lucy disappears into the darkness to reappear again as Shaw or Leah or Amy, and the house is soon full of lights and noise as we talk and listen to carols and feast on the thirteen kinds of Christmas cookies I prepare for this occasion.

## *Twelfth Night Party*

On the final night of the Christmas festivities (the traditional date is January 6) the emphasis should be on eating spicy foods, acting silly, reversing roles, social satire and, in general, being as rowdy as possible. Ginger is the spice most associated with Twelfth Night when the Lord of Misrule is at his peak. Ginger beer, ginger brandy and ginger wine, were favorite drinks at Yule, because they "heat" the body and "comfort the stomach."

To serve as Master of Ceremonies, one must have a Lord of Misrule or Twelfth Night King. Ordinarily the King is the person who finds the bean in his slice of Twelfth Night Cake. Sometimes a pea is also included in the cake and designates the Queen. I don't think it matters if the King is a woman and the Queen a man, since role reversals are encouraged on Twelfth Night. But there are two other ways to choose the King and Queen. If a woman finds the bean, she designate the man who will be the King. Or you can have one legume (or other special token—I use a spiced gumdrop) and the person who gets the token chooses a consort.

The King or Queen or Lord of Misrule assigns titles to the rest of the company as they wish, thus creating a mock court. Since this is an opportunity to make fun of existing institutions, you may want to assign political titles or dysfunctional family roles instead. In France, every move the royal couple makes is commented on and imitated with mock ceremony, for instance, "The Queen drinks!" "The King sneezes!" In my house, the King or Queen gets to order the others around, with an emphasis on making them do silly and uncharacteristic things. The highlight of my Twelfth Night parties (and now of my winter solstice party) is the dashing game of snapdragon.