



SOLSTICE

# Our Winter Search for Meaning

WHAT WE DID WHEN AMAZON PRIME BECAME OUR GOD

**SEVERAL YEARS AGO**, my family and I changed up our holiday ritual. For years the busy-ness of the season had been ratcheting up to increasingly unworkable heights. The holidays had come to mean unmitigated stress and overload in the form of last-minute shopping for gifts no one needed, convoluted travel plans, and weeks of gluttony. The clincher came one day as I was driving my three kids to school, and my older daughter said, apropos of nothing, “Christmas doesn’t really mean anything.”

She was right. For one thing, my husband, raised Jewish, and I, brought up Presbyterian, were raising our three kids without religion. They had never attended midnight Mass, acted in a Christmas pageant, or recited the Hanukah prayer while lighting the menorah. Of course the holiday season carried no religious significance for them. But my husband and I had failed to supply any alternative to fill that spiritual vacuum. And so the hole had been filled for us—with Barbies, Shopkins, and Minecraft figurines. Each December, Amazon Prime became our God.

The year my daughter pronounced Christmas meaningless, we’d moved halfway across the country, and our usual holiday ritual, like everything else in our lives, was suddenly up for reevaluation. It seemed as good a time as any to reexamine our practices, and we decided to simplify. We skipped the extended family circus, steered clear of the crowded aisles at Target, and set off for a friend’s borrowed house in the woods of Vermont, a white clapboard bungalow set on a frozen lake—a million miles away from our usual holiday frenzy.

Once there, our pace changed. We slept in, turned off our electronics, and took leisurely trips into town and to a local farm to learn about the area. One day, while playing outside in the snow, the kids found a fallen branch bursting with fragrant needles. We placed its thick stem in a pot by the window and called it our Christmas tree. The kids made simple ornaments with white paper and crayons, tying them to the branch with yarn.

The next day I gave each child a \$10 bill and we drove to the general store in town to choose small gifts for one another. On Christmas morning, the five of us sat by sat by

## 3 Simple Solstice Rituals.

### Let There Be Light

Because the winter solstice is a celebration of light, light a fire—or several. Meditate in darkness and then light candles to symbolize the return of the sun. Create suncatchers by stringing dried orange slices in long garlands and hanging them in your windows. Or make ice lanterns by placing a candle in a plastic tub of any size, filling the tub with water, and freezing it. Add color by placing small fir branches, pinecones, and holly berries in the water before freezing.

### Goodbye to All That

*Yule* comes from the Norse *Jul*, meaning “wheel,” and yule logs, a Scandinavian tradition, are said to bring good fortune in the new year. Top your log with a mix of seasonal items such as small sprigs of holly, cinnamon sticks, and thyme; wrap it in a red bow; and use a felt-tip pen to write something you want to let go of on the log itself (stressful holidays, perhaps). Then light it up and let it go.

### Ring in the New Year

Arrange a collection of bells on a solstice altar and create your own bell-ringing ceremony. Gather family and friends to ring the bells several times in unison, each time symbolizing connection—to family, community, nature, the universe. Then ask each person to state a wish for the coming year. With each wish, ring the bells in unison, formally acknowledging each individual hope for the new year.

For those of us who've left religion and crave new holiday rituals, winter solstice celebrations—**centered on nature, celestial bodies, and turning inward for warmth**—are a powerful alternative.



*Bring You the  
North Star*  
Kristiana Pärn >>

our potted branch and opened our gifts—ornaments, chocolates, and small toys. In the past, such items would have been mere stocking stuffers, but this time they were the main event. Because they were so few and so small, we appreciated them more. We spent hours opening each one and telling stories about why we'd chosen them. With so little before us, our focus shifted to a sense of gratitude for the simple things—and one another.

It occurred to me later that we were practicing a version of what people have been doing in winter since ancient times—in particular on the winter solstice, the shortest day of the year. The word *solstice* comes from the Latin *sol*, meaning “sun,” and *sistere*, meaning “to stand still.” Ancient people noted the sun’s seeming stillness in the sky each year as Earth’s axis tilts the northern hemisphere to its greatest distance from the sun. And they created rituals to try to rekindle the sun’s light. Those practices come down to us in a blend of pagan and Christian traditions, but at their core

they’re about creating meaning—and light—in the darkness. For those of us who’ve left religion and crave new holiday rituals, winter solstice celebrations—centered on nature, celestial bodies, and turning inward for warmth—are a powerful alternative.

Looking back on that winter, I see now that it wasn’t just the plastic toys and holiday rush we were running away from. Having moved just months before, we were also adjusting to the loss of the familiar—home, school, work, and friends. Life as we’d known it had been blown wide open, and we were trying to figure out what to create in that new space. I never could have guessed that the answer would come from a broken branch brought in from the cold, ornaments cut from plain white paper, and gifts I could hold in the palm of my hand. Yet, there beside that frozen lake, we stood still and drew closer. I saw, finally, that it was up to us to create our own meaning. We didn’t have to wait for the light to return. It had been with us all along.

—KATHERINE OZMENT