

# Session 9: Paganism and Winter Solstice

## Teacher Notes

In this session, participants explore some Pagan traditions that honor our connection to nature and the universe. The religion of Wicca, or Paganism, believes that everyone is interconnected and by honoring this interconnection we can make our world a more just and peaceful place to live. Participants experience the Pagan rituals of casting a circle, calling the directions. They will hear briefly about the traditions and history of Paganism, and hear a story about the Winter Mother and solstice. In the Creativity Circle activity, participants learn the exhilarating “Turning the Wheel Dance”.

## Theme

Paganism

## Participant Goals

Experiencing Pagan rituals and dances

Learning about the history of Paganism

Exploring Earth-based traditions

## Session at a Glance

- 1. Arrival** (5 minutes) - Greetings; name tags, purifying ritual.
- 2. Opening** (5 minutes) - Call directions, cast circle, light chalice and session introduction.
- 3. Learning together: Learning about Paganism and the Winter Solstice.** (30 minutes) Participants A) hear briefly about the traditions and history of Paganism, B) and hear a story about the Winter Mother and solstice.
- 4. Sharing our Experience: What is the spiritual meaning of winter solstice?** (15 minutes) Class members look inward to reflect on past memories and dreams for the future.
- 5. Creativity Circle: Turning the Wheel Dance** (15 minutes) Participants learn how to create a human Wheel of the Seasons.
- 6. Closing Circle** (5 minutes) The class gathers together to share closing words and looks ahead to the next session.

**Mystery of the Day: What is the spiritual meaning of winter solstice?**

## Supplies Needed:

*Singing the Living Tradition*, 362 Music “Rise Up O Flame”

*Singing the Living Tradition*, 446 “To the Four Directions”

Feather  
Candle  
Bowl of water  
Branch or egg  
Wheel calendar example  
Globe for earth  
Yellow ball or lit light bulb for sun  
“Circle Round – Raising Children in Goddess Traditions” by Starhawk, Diane  
Bake, and Anne Hill  
Black Cauldron  
Card stock stars and snowflakes  
Pencils  
Drums or rhythm instruments

## **The Session**

### **1. Arrival** (5 minutes)

Welcome participants as they arrive. If there are newcomers, welcome them and ask them to sign the class covenant. As people enter the room, ask permission to purify them by sprinkling a little water on them. Also sprinkle the room to create a sacred space.

### **2. Opening** (5 minutes)

As an opening activity, cast a circle as in the Pagan tradition. Have participants stand in a circle. Light the chalice in the center of the circle. One person (the leader) takes the hand of the person to their left, and then that person takes the hand of the person to their left and so on until the circle is linked. Sing the song “Rise up O Flame” and move slowly in a circle.

Rise up, O flame, by thy light glowing,  
Bring to us beauty, vision, and joy.

*Singing the Living Tradition 362*

Then call to the four directions. Leader leads and participants face the direction called by the leader.

Spirit of the East, spirit of air,  
Of morning and springtime:  
Be with us as the sun rises,  
In times of beginning,  
Times of planting.  
Inspire us with the fresh breath of courage  
As we go forth into new adventures.

Spirit of the South, spirit of fire,

Of noontime and summer:  
Be with us through the heat of the day  
And help us to be ever growing.  
Warm us with strength  
And energy for the work that awaits us.

Spirit of the West, spirit of water,  
Of evening and autumn:  
Be with us as the sun sets  
And help us to enjoy a rich harvest.  
Flow through us with a cooling,  
Healing quietness and bring us peace.

Spirit of the North, spirit of earth,  
Of nighttime and winter:  
Be with us in the darkness,  
In the time of gestation.

Singing the Living Tradition 446

Once the directions have been called, place a small object to symbolize the four directions. Use a feather for east, a lit candle for south, a bowl of water for west, and an egg or branch for north.

Have the class sit in a circle and introduce today's session as follows:

*Just now we began our time together in the tradition of Paganism. Paganism is a religion embraced by many Unitarian Universalists that honors our connections to the earth and greater Universe.*

*The ritual that we just performed, the casting a circle when we joined hands and sang and the calling of directions is a way to start a Pagan ritual. The purpose of a ritual is to set it a part from everyday life and to create a sacred space.*

*Today, our mystery question is "What is the spiritual meaning of Winter Solstice." We are going to explore some of the ideas of paganism, through ritual, stories, and dancing. We will also think about what kind of spiritual practice the Winter Solstice brings.*

### **3. Learning together: Paganism and the Winter Solstice. (30 minutes)**

Participants will A) hear briefly about the traditions and history of Paganism, B) and hear a story about the Winter Mother and solstice. (IMPORTANT: At some point in the discussion of the wheel calendar, make sure that the participants understand where the earth is in relationship to the sun during the solstices and equinoxes. For some ideas on showing this look at the website [www.videojug.com/film/why-does-the-earth-have-seasons](http://www.videojug.com/film/why-does-the-earth-have-seasons) or if you have internet

access in your classroom, you may show the video which is just a few minutes long. If you are concerned about maintaining a ritualistic mood in the class, perhaps leave time at the end of the session to explain the science of the seasons.)

A) Sitting in a circle, introduce this activity with the following words:

*Does anyone remember a couple of sessions back when we talked about the sacred circle of life? Recall that we read the reading by Black Elk that explained the Native American idea of the sacred hoop? What examples could you give about the sacred hoop or circle? (bird's nest, moon cycles, yearly calendar cycle, birth-growth-decay-rebirth cycle, a star's lifecycle nebula – star – red giant – supernova – black hole, seed of a tree.....)*

*Paganism also honors the sacred circle of life. In fact Pagans call their yearly calendar, the wheel of the year. This calendar is in the shape of a circle and is sectioned off into eight equal "pie" shape pieces. The solstices and equinoxes section the circle into the four seasons. Then the Cross-Quarters are the holidays in between the solstices and equinoxes. (Show the example of the Wheel calendar. This would also be a good time to make sure the class understands why there are seasons on earth.)*

*Samhain (SAH-win), Oct 31. The Goddess year begins.*

*Yule/Winter Solstice; December 20, 21, or 22. The year is reborn.*

*Brigit, February 2. The year is beginning to grow up.*

*Eostar (A-yo-star)/ Spring Equinox; March 20, 21, or 22. Day and night are balanced.*

*Beltane, May 1. The earth is fully awake and everything is blossoming.*

*Summer Solstice; June 20, 21, or 22. The sun reaches its peak and begins to decline.*

*Lughnasad (LOO-na-sa)/ Lammas, August 1. The days are growing shorter.*

*Mabon (MAH-bon)/Fall Equinox; September 20, 21, or 22. Day and night are equal again.*

*All the Cross-Quarter holidays have traditional door rituals associated with them. What holiday can you think of that happens in October?  
(We are familiar with Samhain in October when kids going trick or treating.)*

*Then at Beltane in May, there is the old tradition of secretly leaving a May basket full of flowers. And notice at the opposite sides of the circle, there is a balance. In October, one goes to the door to receive, and in May one goes to a door to give. Gifting out and gifting in is in balance. The idea of living in balance is very important in Paganism.*

*Paganism is sometimes called the old religion, Wicca, or the Religion of the Goddess. Paganism came from the old religions in Europe and was considered the religion of the countryside, especially after Christianity came to the cities. The country folk often stayed with the old religion because it suited their way of life that was more connected to the seasons. Wicca or Paganism doesn't have anything to do with the devil. There was a time when Christians felt threatened by Pagans or witches and they persecuted them for their beliefs. Today as Unitarian Universalists, we gain inspiration from the Paganism view of a Universe that is a living being. Everything in the world is living and is part of the living body of the Universe. And each living part of the Universe is important and sacred. Pagans view animals and plants as part of the living spirit of the Universe, but also some things that may not ordinarily be considered alive like mountains, rocks, streams, stars, and clouds.*

*Today we will mostly discuss the Yule season when the sun is weak and the nights are long. This is a dark time, but a time of rebirth. One can think of seeds underground, or a fetus in a dark womb. Yule and Winter Solstice is the time to look inside oneself and to consider new ideas and dreams. Once Solstice passes, a new sun is born and the days begin to get longer. And this is when we can give birth to new ideas.*

*Paganism has many rich stories and traditions linking to nature's natural rhythms. In our modern society, we have lost much of this connection.*

*Now we are going to hear one story that talks about Mother Winter and it is called, "A Visit to Mother Winter" retold by Starhawk.*

*(This story came from chapter 6 in the book, "Circle Round – Raising children in Goddess Traditions" by Starhawk, Diane Baker and Anne Hill.)*

Read the story to the class. Chapter 6, Yule/Winter Solstice, pages 101 – 107.

**4. Sharing our Experience: What is the spiritual meaning of Winter Solstice?** ( 15 minutes) Have cauldron and star and snowflake cards and pencils handy. Initiate a discussion about the story with the following words:

*What did Johanna gain from meeting Mother Winter?*

*What did she feel when she picked the apples or baked the bread?*

[We learn from Johanna in this story that meeting Mother Winter and doing the work of picking apples and baking bread, it is a time of reflection. Johanna thinks

back on memories of the past year that she had forgotten and she thinks of dreams for the future.]

*We have a cauldron here that contains stars and snowflakes.*

*What do you think the snowflakes represent? [Memories of past]*

*What do you think the stars represent? [Dreams for future]*

*Each of you can reach in and take a snowflake and a star. Then write a memory on the snowflake and a dream on a star. Don't put your name on them and then put them back into the pot. We will read out the dreams and memories together by drawing into the pot.*

After participants put their sheets in the cauldron, then gather everyone's attention.

*We will pass the cauldron around and each person can pick a star or snowflake out to read. We will pass the cauldron around twice until all of the cards are read.*

*In Paganism, one can look at nature and observe, listen, and draw inspiration from its cycles. Winter solstice can be a time to look inward and it is a time of thinking of new dreams and possibilities. Taking time in the dark days of Yule to reflect and dream can help us live fully and intentionally.*

## **5. Creativity Circle: Turning the Wheel Dance (15 minutes)**

This dance is a wonderful celebration of the wheel of seasons that we talked about earlier in the session. This dance is explained in "Circle Round" on page 222 – 223. Please refer to the book if you have questions after reading the instructions below. There are helpful diagrams that are worth looking at!

Introduce the dance as follows.

*Now I invite three other people to join me. We are going to make a human wheel of seasons. The four of us will be the center spokes of the wheel and we will each stretch out our right arm and grasp the hand of the person directly across. Now we need a second set of four people who will then take the left hand of each of the center spokes. (If there is a third set of four people, they take the left hand of the second set, and so on. The number of people on each spoke should be about the same.)*

Once everyone is linked up like a wheel, start rotating by walking around in a circle. The center spoke folks shouldn't go too fast!! Once the human wheel has made one complete rotation, the center spokes let go of both their partners'

hands, and walk out of the edge of the wheel to become the last person in their line. The second set of four dancers must draw close to form the new center spokes.

If the group is enjoying the human wheel, you can add singing or drumming and invite others to join!! Try singing "Rise up O Flame" since the group sang it before.

**6. Closing Circle** (5 minutes) The class gathers together to revisit the mystery of the day question and to share closing words.

Does anyone have any questions or comments about the Mystery of the Day question: "What is the spiritual meaning of Winter Solstice?"

*Let us close our circle with the following words:*

Spirit of the East, be with us always.  
Spirit of the South, be with us always.  
Spirit of the West, be with us always.  
Spirit of the North, Be with us always.  
Blessed be.

Anonymous

## Teacher Resource

**Tree of Life Meditation** – wonderful guided meditation drawing one’s attention to the interconnection between our body and the earth. Starts on page 403 of “Circle Round – Raising Children in the Goddess Tradition” by Starhawk, Diane Baker, and Anne Hill.

**Some notes on Yule** from a discussion with Denise Jess and Kelly Crocker  
Yule is a time of deep introspection – the ancients were inside more – “in time” – time to create internal space, to spend time with family and pass on the important traditions. You couldn’t be outside and this was okay because this was the time to spend indoors, both literally and metaphorically. We fight the “in time” – we turn on extra lights to extend the hours of the days. Our cellular connection to the ancients calls us to go inward at this time. Yule is “going in” to think about what is it that I want to give birth to in my life – time between Halloween and Yule is literally a gestational period of giving birth.

### **Video – Why Does the Earth have seasons**

At some point in the discussion of the wheel calendar, make sure that the participants understand where the earth is in relationship to the sun during the solstices and equinoxes. For some ideas on showing this look at the website [www.videojug.com/film/why-does-the-earth-have-seasons](http://www.videojug.com/film/why-does-the-earth-have-seasons) or if you have internet access in your classroom, you may show the video which is just a few minutes long.