

Winter Solstice

It was the a gurgle from the river that pulled my gaze away from the dying embers of the solstice fire. The wind swirling, backing from one direction then another, had occupied my quiet mind. My attention shifted easily toward the sound.

On this chilly eve, our celebration started near dusk. We gathered in the snowy garden, windy on the frozen ground and prepared the fire.

I had 8 sticks to lay on the unlit pyre. Each one to be placed toward a cardinal direction East, South, West, and North. The last 4 to be laid diagonal to the first 4.

When my turn came I prayed. I turned east and intoned "The east, illumination and birth" I looked south and said "The south, with beauty and grace" to the west, as my voice cracked, "To the west, darkness and introspection", then with reverence, northward I gazed and said, "North, wisdom and strength" Then I looked skyward and asked Father sky to bless us, tracing a circle in the air. I looked down, with my arms outstretched and asked Mother earth to bless us.

Once each of us had placed our 8 sticks, Loren, Carolyn, Bette, Billie, Larry and I joined hands with crossed and weaved arms to form a 6 pointed star with the unlit fire in the center.

Then it was lit.

The fire moved quickly through the dry pine needles, kept stashed for this occasion in the green house. The wind sending hot flames in each direction as it came from one direction then another.

We each had 2 more pieces of wood to add. I watched quietly as Loren then Larry moved around the circle and added these last 2 sticks. I wasn't sure what to do or say when my turn came, so I opened my heart and let the universe lead me. I walked halfway around and stopped. Looking down, I kneeled and reaching over the flames I tenderly placed the 2 sticks. The fire jumped to my right completely engulfing my gloved hand and arm to the shoulder. I immediately pulled back, the heat caressing my bared arm.

I stood and walked back to the circle. I could smell burned hair and could sense the skin on my arm, just between where my glove ended and my jacket sleeve started with an outstretched arm, tingle from the burn.

Wanting me to know I was precious and loved, the universe let the fire kiss me as lightly as a fire might, me a mere human and susceptible to a quick destruction.

The sun had slipped behind the knoll but under the clouds and we were favored with a blaze of sunlight on the wintering treetops opposite the hollow on the hill to the east.

Darkness crept closer, unnoticed, as our solstice fire brilliantly warmed us. We moved clockwise about it 3 times. Then we danced and sang. We added the last of the wood, some pine fronds with needles still green, blazing up and permeating us with their incense.

The sun gone, the wind now fitful, gusty, our celebration wound down, the fire lowered, mostly coals, I settled very near.

Someone noticed a crescent moon emerge in the hazy cloud cover with Jupiter, star-like, nearby.

The glow of the coals was hypnotic, the cold was at bay. The wind whips through our diminished circle stoking the coals, it's just me and Carolyn now.

This fire is not to be extinguished, and we watch it slowly dying. I am kneeling on a piece of hay in the snow, the cold is not present in my mind but I can feel it's effects.

I will leave Carolyn to a lone vigil a companion to a dying fire. I bend down and blow hard into the coals, firing up a hot spot, energy splayed on my face. I pray quickly, once the decision to leave is made I see no reason to dawdle, rising I walk away. I can see the lighted kitchen windows, through the streaky glass I see the blurry figures of people moving, I hear muffled conversations punctuated by laughter.

Larry has had the foresight to prepare a blueberry pie!

Leaving the spirit of the solstice and fire and the longest night behind, trading it for the warmth and communion of the kitchen I wander in from the dark.

*Stephen Priesthoff
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