



Racing from store to store. Dozens of trips to the grocery store. Balancing precariously on ladders installing festive decorations. Donning costumes and fancy dresses. Running breathlessly from one activity to another.

Phew!

If this blistering whirlwind of wearying activity during what is supposed to be a season of joy and rest is all too familiar for you, you're not alone. Most of us approach the holidays with a mix of anticipation and dread. After all the shopping, the gifts, the meals, the parties, and the decorations, we end up feeling exhausted and spent.

Have we strayed too far from what's really important during this time of year?

I would venture that we have. Regardless of whether faith informs your festivities—Kwanza, Christmas, Hanukkah—or what cultural community with which you identify, if you celebrate the holidays in any way at all, you're taking part in long-held traditions that are full of meaning and nature. Even if you're not aware, your customs are likely rooted in centuries old, nature-inspired elements that still lurk beneath the surface.

Is there a way to seek meaning in our roots—the natural foundation of these traditions—that would help to restore peace to our holiday celebrations? Let us see if we can't try.

Sink into the Season of Hibernation

Seasonal changes mark transitions from one cycle to another. From spring to summer to fall to winter, the earth goes from sprouting to blooming, fading to resting. Each of these seasons plays an important role, building from one to the other as time passes.

In nature, winter is a time of rest and rejuvenation. Trees have shed their leaves and thickened their sap. Bears and other mammals hibernate for

some quiet respite. Flowering bulbs stay protected under a blanket of snow until next spring.

And just like non-human creatures of the earth, many of us also physically slow down. Our bodies remember their evolutionary history whether we like it or not, as instinctively we're drawn to the fire and linger in our beds.

But in today's society, we act as if it's summer all year round! Our bodies—and our souls and hearts—desire periods of low-key activity on both large and small scales: daily, weekly, and annually. Yet we often deny ourselves this natural reprieve when we need it the most.

Being aware of the earth's seasonal transitions is a great way to become tuned to our planet's natural cycles, and by doing so, to partake in the symbolism and rhythms they embody. What would happen if, during the busy holiday season, we gave in to our inclination to slow down, to rest?

Taking our cues from winter, we could choose to forgo the extra travel and stay at home with your families instead. Or maybe, rather than attending the tenth party, we could choose to take a quiet walk in a snow-covered park to reflect on the year previous and consider things to come.

Whatever your slow-down technique, modeling your holiday season after bears and trees may be just the break you need to really enjoy the season for its true beauty. So dare to scale back and be intentional about indulging in your own mini hibernation. Doing so may also benefit the planet, especially if you spend less, minimize travel, and reduce waste.

Celebrate the Light of Coming Spring

Traditionally, the holidays are celebrated near to the time when winter is at its darkest. Thousands of years ago, humans marked this period of time first through Roman celebrations of Saturnalia,

and then as the winter solstice festival. As winter deepened, days became shorter and the nights longer, but the solstice marked the turning point when the light began to push back the darkness. Commemorated with torches and candles, people of ancient times were encouraged by the reminder that soon, the darkness would ease.

Most faith-based holiday celebrations, including Christmas and Hanukkah, began as solstice festivals, representing the shift in the relationship between light and darkness. Though our traditional calendar, which is based on lunar cycles, doesn't perfectly align the solstice with Hanukkah and Christmas, the concept of bringing light into the darkness is yet another frame around which to build a healthier, more natural understanding of the holidays.

Today, the symbols of solstice festivities haven't changed much, whether it's a Hanukkah menorah, a brightly lit Christmas tree, or Kwanza kinara. Light symbolizes many positive sentiments that can be kindled during the holidays to bring you and your family more joy.

You could, for example, choose to focus on light as warmth by offering kindness and generosity to those less fortunate. If candles signify a guiding presence, you could reflect on all the loving people who have steered you through life and offer the same caring direction to someone in need of a course correction. And if for you, light means hope in hard times, shine some light in the lives of the abused and hurting by caring for animals at a local humane society, donating to a wildlife preservation society, or supporting your local women's shelter.

You could also take some practical changes to make your holiday light symbols more honoring of the earth. Choosing efficient artificial lights for trees, garland, and outdoor fixtures (LEDs and



ENERGY STAR qualified options are the most efficient and durable) will reduce your energy consumption. Using timers to turn lights on and off is also an excellent way to reduce your production of greenhouse gas emissions.

And if you'll be lighting candles, select those made with plant-based rather than petroleum/paraffin waxes. Soy, beeswax, and palm candles created with lead-free wicks are healthier for you and the planet.

Whatever your choice, don't let the enveloping darkness of the season get you down. Instead, remind yourself that the light is on its way and herald its coming by shining lightness into the lives of others.

Prioritize Relationships

Mistletoe and ivy, quintessential symbols of the holiday season, are not just silly little traditions; they actually have symbolic meaning all their own. Branches of holly were exchanged by Romans during Saturnalia, their winter festival, as tokens of friendship. And because holly plants are either male or female, they have also traditionally symbolized fertility. Today, holly represents many happy holiday sentiments, including peace, joy, and contentment.

Not surprisingly, mistletoe also has roots in relational concepts. Not only was it given as an herbal remedy to barren animals to make them fertile, they were hung in homes by the Druids to ensure harmony and a prosperous year. It has also been traditionally used to signify love and harmony.

So as you hang these cheerful holiday emblems around your home or through your workplace, consider their origins and how they may help you turn an exhausting, sometimes meaningless season into one full of relational importance. Consider your priorities for the holidays and try to come up with some ways you can honor your family and friends while bringing harmony into your relationship with the earth as well.

You could, for instance, give gifts of living plants—mistletoe, holly, ivy, or any kind of plant for that matter—as a token of friendship and love to those you care for. Linger under the mistletoe with your significant other, taking the time to thoughtfully appreciate one another. Or better yet, rather

than wasting enormous amounts of money on gifts for the adults in your life, why not agree to spend the time enjoying each other's company instead?

Certainly one obvious way to expend emotional energy this holiday season is to put some effort into healing broken relationships and stimulating a more peaceful interpersonal space for yourself. Apologizing for wrongs done, encouraging a colleague about a job well done, complimenting a friend on their new look, or creating personal, handmade gifts for everyone on your list are all excellent options for cultivating better relationships.

And in the spirit of relationship-building, why not give some thought as to how you can better honor your relationship with the non-human world as well? Each of us have different green vices—forgetting to recycle, using toxic cleaners around the home, driving an inefficient vehicle, or an addiction to bottled water. But with mistletoe and holly in the forefront of our minds, we can identify these earthly shortcomings and establish plans to minimize the impact of daily habits. Let the relationship-building symbols of the season inspire you to live a life more nature-filled and earth-honoring.

Be Mindful of Trees

Speaking of plant life, trees play a central role in virtually all holiday celebrations. Whether you hang pine boughs on the mantle, set up a Christmas tree, enjoy a Yule log while celebrating the 12 days of Christmas, or light a menorah or kinara, you've likely been using trees as a way to mark the holidays all of your life. This year, why not take some time and meditate on the meaning and importance of trees?

To begin, trees have been the symbolize for life for centuries. It is said that the tradition of using trees in holiday-time celebrations started with Babylonians and was passed along to Romans, then Germans, and from there to modern culture.

Used by ancient cultures to celebrate agriculture, harvest, and rebirth, the symbol of the tree as life may have begun with a fable told in Babylonian lore about an evergreen tree that sprang to life out of a dead tree stump. Though the species used in

various historical celebrations has shifted from fir to palm to oak, the idea has remained the same: life persists, even in the most hostile conditions.

Today, of all species the evergreen tree is particularly full of life, symbolizing that life indeed does go on, even during the winter seasons of our lives. And we know trees to be life-sustaining in many ways. They provide shelter for wildlife, strengthen the earth with their roots, filter water, capture carbon dioxide to mitigate climate change, and much, much more. We humans literally depend on trees for our very lives.

This year, consider the trees when preparing for your celebrations. For instance, instead of chopping down a tree you could purchase a living Christmas tree and then replant it in your yard in the spring. Further prevent the cutting of trees by choosing gifts that are minimally packaged and by forgoing disposable wrapping paper by bundling up your gifts in reusable gift bags. And don't forget holiday cards and letters! Send them electronically, use tree-free papers, or forgo this tradition altogether.

Tree-inspired gift ideas include promising a loved one the gift of a live tree in the spring, or making a donation in someone's name to support a tree planting project. And of course, be sure to recycle all cardboard and paper generated in the process of merry-making. Above all, take some time to think about how your holiday traditions affect our forests and be creative about how to protect them this season.

However you incorporate nature into your holiday celebrations, if you're mindful of their symbolic importance in our lives, you're sure to be inspired. Weave these thoughtful, intentional ideas into your holiday rituals—whether you're celebrating the birth of Christ, African culture, Winter Solstice, or the Festival of Light—and may the natural roots we share be a source of inspiration and meaning this year. 🌿