

# Seasons Greetings

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As the year comes to an end, the many religions of the world have some sort of festival going on. They all revolve around the winter solstice, the shortest day of the year. The difference between the shortest day and the longest day in June varies depending on where you are in the world. At the equator, the difference is very little, while in Alaska, the longest day means the sun doesn't go down and the shortest day means it doesn't come up. Quite dramatic.

Back in the times of the early civilizations, people gathered mostly in the southern climates and it wasn't until some smart person started mapping the skies that it became apparent that some days were longer than others. The main reason for celebrating the winter solstice was it marked the end of declining light and the renewal of the yearly cycle for crops. The sun was highly worshipped by early humans and having it present longer each day was worth celebrating.

Christmas was set in this period for a similar reason. For the period of December 21st to 24th, the earth is turning around in its orbit and these four days tend to be about the same in length. By the 25th, the day shows the first significant sign of lengthening. So, early Christian fathers set Jesus' birth to December 25th as he is considered the light of the world (in Christian traditions). Turns out most winter solstice celebrations in earlier cultures didn't begin until a few days past the solstice as well, people waiting to see if the days did get longer.

Yes Christians, December 25th as Jesus' birthday is made up. No one knows when he was actually born. It could have been May 12th for all we know, but there's no symbolism attached to May 12th. December 25th matched pagan celebrations, making conversions to Christianity a little easier, but mostly it is an excellent symbol of the return of light to the world. And it is this symbolism that makes the season.

As this year's season comes upon us again, I started thinking about how personal traditions change as the years go by. It is likely the same in all religions as well. As children, the family gets together and you spend the time with aunts and uncles and cousins, all connected through your grandparents. As you become parents, your parents become the grandparents and all your aunts and uncles and cousins no longer gather with you as they are developing their own families. You still gather with your siblings and their children and your children see it as a time to meet with their aunts and uncles and cousins. Then, you become the grandparents. You are now the top of the pyramid. Your siblings have become grandparents themselves. You might go for a visit if they are within striking distance, but mostly, you will have shed your siblings to concentrate on your own growing family. The final stage is being a great grandparent, and you spend Christmas alternating between your children's families.

Through all that, the traditions you learned as a child evolve. When you get married, your wife or husband will have different traditions that need to be mixed with yours. One of the big changes is how you handle two sets of grandparents for your children. Then you become grandparents as your children get married and bring their little new traditions from their spouses into your life.

There was a time when people did not leave their home towns much, spending their whole life living in one place. Over the last forty years or so, people have become much more mobile, complicating the Christmas traditions of their youth. I have personally had many addresses over the years, living in sixteen different towns and cities. For years, my Christmases centered on my mother's home in Niagara Falls, no matter where I lived. Once I got married, however, Christmas centered on my wife's family in Edmonton, Niagara Falls being about two thousand miles to the east.

There are still some small traditions from Niagara Falls that I still carry on. One is a little elf that was always on our tree when I was young. Made of pipe cleaner and a little plaster face and beard, it was made during the Depression by my grandmother when you made ornaments because they were too expensive to buy. The little guy still hangs on our tree every year. My wife and daughter think he's a little creepy, but it is the small little thread back to my youth that reminds me of the excitement of the season.

And after all the bustle of shopping and presents, feeling the excitement and what Christmas is supposed to mean is what it's all about for me.

Merry Christmas, Happy Hanukkah, Happy Bohdi Day, and since the Islamic faith runs their holy days off a lunar calendar, apparently they don't have one in December this year that I know of. To each their own.



**My Little Elf, with me every Christmas. Yes, he is a little creepy.**