

Why Do We Celebrate Spring, and When Is the New Year?

By Barbara Biziou

According to our modern calendar, on March 20, 2012, at precisely 1:14 a.m. EDT (March 20), the sun will cross directly over the Earth's equator. This moment is known as the vernal equinox (from the Latin *vernare*, to bloom) in the Northern Hemisphere. In the Southern Hemisphere, this is the moment of the autumnal equinox.

Translated literally, equinox means "equal night." Because the sun is positioned above the equator, day and night are about equal in length all over the world during the equinoxes. In many cultures this is a time for rituals of balance and new beginnings, and even marks the beginning of the year itself.

When Is the New Year?

In the zodiac, the astrological year begins as we enter the sign of Aries. Many New Year's celebrations still occur at this time. Noruz, which means new day, is still celebrated in Iran, Turkey, Pakistan and Afghanistan. Rooted in Zoroastrianism, it is a time of purification and setting one's intention for a new start. In the Baha'i calendar, the new year occurs on the vernal equinox. In Bali, March 23, 2012 is the celebration of Nyepi, a 3-day festival for the new year that involves purification (all the statues are taken out of the temples and brought to the water to be cleansed). Like Chinese New Year, there are parades and loud noises the night before to scare off evil spirits. On the actual day of Nyepi, the island goes into silence, fasting, and prayer. No one leaves their home, all businesses are closed, and noise or entertaining is forbidden.

The ancient Babylonians also celebrated the new year to coincide with the beginning of spring. However, with the creation of the Julian Calendar, the Romans changed the new year from March to Jan. 1. Many people refused to change and continued to celebrate the new year through the beginning of April. They were considered "April Fools".

Why We Celebrate the Seasons

We can look to our ancestors, who planned their rituals to coincide with the changes in the season. They believed there was a direct relationship between the elements, the stars, and Spirit, who directed all things. Because they needed a way to predict and honor the seasons, they routinely celebrated moon cycles, the solstices (when the sun is at its greatest distance from the celestial equator and appears to stand still), and the equinoxes (when the sun crosses the plane of the earth's equator, making night and day of equal length all over the earth). Many people still live by these markers.

Those of us in the modern world barely notice the seasons except to mark the beginning of a sport season or fashion collection. Thanks to technology, snowplows immediately clear the streets of snow, and air conditioners take the heat out of summer. Furthermore, most of us don't grow our own food, buying summer fruit in the middle of winter, winter squash in May, and milk that comes from cartons rather than cows or goats. We rarely think about the significance of the seasons—whether plants are lying dormant or growing, whether animals are resting or bearing their young. We've lost our intimate connection with the earth.

Spring is a time of rebirth and revival, full of new possibilities. In Greek mythology, it was the time when Persephone (daughter of Earth Mother Demeter) returned from the underworld, and everything bloomed again. In Japan and the U.S., millions of people flock to parks for "Hanami," the cherry blossom festival. Originally, the purpose was to ponder the transient nature of life, as the cherry blossom season is so short. This concept lies in with Buddhist thinking about the ephemeral nature of life. However, today these parties are less about pondering deep thoughts and more about having fun with friends and family, while enjoying the new blooms.

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Almost every culture, past and present, has some sort of ritual to celebrate the promise and fertility of spring. In ancient Rome, the lengthening of the day that followed the vernal equinox was marked by sacrifice to celebrate the death and rebirth of the fertility god Attis. Various goddesses of fertility the Greeks' Aphrodite, the Native American Spider Woman, Mexico's Tonantzin, the African goddess Oshun, the Norse Freya, and the Roman goddess Flora were all honored in the spring.

Not surprisingly, the egg—the universal symbol of rebirth—finds its way into many different types of spring rituals. In ancient Persia, Greece, Egypt,

and Rome, red eggs representing life and rebirth were given as gifts. In our modern day celebrations of Easter, children all over the world decorate eggs. At Passover Seders, guest dip eggs in salt water as a reminder of the sacrifices made in the ancient temples. In the Greek Orthodox Church, everyone is given a red egg on Easter, representing the rebirth of Christ.

The March Hare was also a major fertility symbol in medieval Europe. One fact that most of us do not know is that female hares ("does") can conceive a second litter of offspring while still pregnant with the first. As you can imagine, the females were not that happy when the males wanted to mate, so they ran them off. This led to angry hares and the term "mad as a March hare" which became immortalized in Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*.

Beauty Tip: It was once thought that if you bathed your face in the early morning dew of spring, you would have beauty all year long. Guess someone will be bottling it soon! ✕



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