

Yuletide and Sisterhood by Corinne L. Casazza

A circle of women sits silently in the dark. The center of the circle boasts a Yule log of birch. Three candles – black, white and red adorn it, yet to be lit. Boughs of holly, evergreen and even some mistletoe are festooned around the Yule log. The spicy aroma of the greenery reaches the women's noses as they sit in anticipation. The Priestess seated in the east, the direction of beginnings, starts to speak – calling in the Goddess.

I attended my first pagan circle in New Hampshire where I'd heard my dear friend Patti Murphy talk about "doing circle at Gail's." I knew the circle was closed and I needed permission to attend. Patti told me she went to circle and dreamt of a fiery red-headed woman who gave her the phrase, "Novelty Teachings." She told Gail her dream the next day and got the reply, "My God, that was Brigid!" Brigid is the Celtic Goddess of fire, the hearth, poetry, childbirth and unity. She is the Goddess celebrated at Imbolc; the very one Gail had been calling in that night. "Novelty Teachings" became the title of Patti's first book.

After hearing this story, I asked if I could attend and the circle was opened to me. I loved the pageantry, spectacle and ritual of circle. Calling in the Goddess, praising her, and setting intentions. But the best things of all were the women. This was Sisterhood. Something I'd never known before.

In my corporate life all I'd experienced was the back-stabbing cattiness of women. Here was a group of women working together, helping each other, telling each other they looked beautiful and truly basking in each other's accomplishments. It was amazing; so much so that I dedicated my first novel to this group of women. When I left the east coast, they were the most difficult thing to leave behind.

Yule or Solstice is December 21st. It is a new beginning; the birth of the sun. A time when light returns to the earth and the days become longer. The Pagans used evergreen and holly in their celebrations to represent the promise of life going on; nothing dies completely. The candles on the altar represent the

triple Goddess: white being the maiden, red the mother and black for the crone. The Yule log was burned in the fire as an offering to the Goddess and the ashes were given out for protection. Families would place them in their own hearths.

Gail Nickerson was our High Priestess presiding over all our rituals. “Yule is a new beginning,” she explains. “The promise of a new season and life ever-lasting. It’s also a time to set intentions for the coming year, to decide what you want to bring into your life.”

There’s no set ritual; it’s up to the celebrant to choose. In Gail’s circle each woman lit an individual candle from the Yule log and stated aloud her wishes for the coming year. We raised the energy around these intentions and sent them out on Goddess’s ear to the Universe.

Other rituals could include making small gifts for each other from materials found in nature like jellies, incense or ornaments. Bayberry is typically burned as this herb is associated with bringing riches and prosperity into one’s home. “Mistletoe was considered a fertility herb. If someone wanted to conceive, you’d give them a gift of mistletoe. Placing mistletoe under a kissing ball is a fertility rite,” says Nickerson.

Raised protestant, Nickerson started questioning her faith in her late twenties. “I was so intrigued by readings – cards and leaves. Then I read *Out on a Limb* which introduced reincarnation. The more I learned about it, the more it resonated.”

Nickerson learned meditation and it was life-changing for her. “I did more research and brought people that I cared about together to do ritual. I had a lot of fear to overcome, but it was worth it.” There were originally five women in her circle. “The more we worked together, the more powerful the work became until none of us wanted to do without it.”

They practiced the eight Sabbaths for the turning of the wheel (the change of seasons). “I invited people and the circle grew. It changed my world. Eventually, people broke off and started their own circles and it was really exciting to see it grow and spread,” says Nickerson.

The circle is also used for specific reasons: for healing, for abundance, to celebrate the lives of the women. There are circles for pregnancy, birth, naming circles, and marriage and divorce circles as well. These personalized rituals are Gail’s favorites.

One particularly moving circle was held for a woman prior to brain surgery. “At the end of that circle, I just knew that something had shifted and everything was going to be all right. And it was,” says Nickerson.

Indeed, I, the author, was here in Sedona when our sister went into surgery, and I was shocked to receive an e-mail from her only days afterwards. I assumed someone had sent it for her, but she was up and around and e-mailing!

Gail feels her finest hour was when she “taught a class for women on how to create their own circle. It was very moving to see the understanding on the faces of other women. To know they have an inkling of who they are and what they are capable of. I loved sharing my gift with them.”

There’s also the passing of the torch to the next generation. Nickerson shares circle with her daughter, Morgan, who’s ten. “My daughter loves circle. She comes every time I have one and never wants to miss it. I wish I’d had it when I was her age. There is nothing like being in the midst of a group of powerful women.”

Nickerson advises other woman to create their own circle if it resonates with them. “Don’t be afraid you’ll do it wrong,” she says. “There’s a pattern you can follow. It’s simply setting an intention, celebrating or healing. It’s very powerful to steer the presence of the Goddess among you. I can’t imagine not having that in my life.”

According to Nickerson, circle is “just connecting with the Divine through symbol and ritual to have a conversation with the Universe. Cast your fears aside and give it a try!”