

*Outside, the cries of the birds
are rumours we hear clearly
but can't yet understand. Fresh ice
glints on the branches.
In this dark
space of the year, the earth
turns again toward the sun, or
we would like to hope so.*

Margaret Atwood
excerpt from "Solstice Poem"

The Winter Holidays for Battered Women

by Rev. Dr. Marie M. Fortune

Whatever one's religious or ethnic tradition, the winter holidays of Ramadan, Solstice, Hanukkah, Christmas, Kwanzaa or Lunar New Year can be times of despair, sadness, and grief. Memories of childhood in dysfunctional families may be bountiful. For non-Christians, the overwhelming presence of Christmas decorations and music can be very alienating. For battered women, the holidays may be times of increased stress and tension in relation to the batterer. For battered women who are in a shelter in December, the burden of good and bad memories, fear for the future, and desire to provide some sense of normalcy for their children make it important to be able to celebrate the holidays in ways consistent with their religious beliefs and cultural practices.

Winter holidays in North America are religious and/or cultural. But as a society, the evolution of a variety of holidays in December derives from our common experience of the shortest days and longest nights of the year. This is why the winter holidays of western origin all center around the celebrations of light—maintaining, celebrating, and affirming light in the midst of darkness.

Battered women and their children in residence in a shelter can certainly benefit from some light in the midst of their darkness. Shelters can facilitate this experience for the women and children by offering to provide the things which would be significant to individual women depending on their traditions and customs. Shelter staff can also benefit from voluntary participation in traditions which are reminders of light and hope in the midst of the often grim reality of domestic violence. After all, shelters are, for many women, a beacon of light in the middle of a long, dark night. I would urge shelter programs to lift up each of the winter holidays in the shelter and to make available the materials with which to celebrate them. Additional information about each holiday can be found on the web. Many traditions follow lunar or other calendars, so it is important to check dates each year.

Ramadan is the ninth month of the Muslim calendar. It is during this month that Muslims observe the Fast of Ramadan. Lasting for the entire month, Muslims fast during the daylight hours and in the evening eat small meals and visit with friends and family. It is a time of worship and contemplation and a time to strengthen family and community ties. Ramadan begins November 27 and will end when the new moon is sighted which will be December 25, 26, or 27. This day is known as Eid ul-Fitr or the Feast of Fast Breaking. It is important to insure that appropriate foods are available for Muslim women who are observing the fast and to celebrate the end of the fast period.

Yule or Winter Solstice (Dec. 21) is a holiday originating in northern Europe: on the longest night of the year, the Goddess gives birth to the Sun God and hope for new light is reborn. The days lengthen and nights grow shorter— light returns to the world. The old tradition of feasting and rejoicing celebrates this natural occurrence. On Solstice night, turn out all the lights in the house; experience and contemplate the darkness for a few moments. Then light a candle to welcome light back into the world and share good food with friends.

For Jews, Hanukkah (December 21–28) is a celebration of the victory of the Maccabees over their oppressors who wouldn't let them study Torah and freely practice their religion. As they prepared to rededicate the temple, they realized that there was not enough oil for the lamp. Miraculously, the lamp burned for eight days and nights until more oil could be found. So the light burned in the darkness in remembrance of what a small group of dedicated people could do to set things right. Hanukkah begins the evening of December 21 and lasts for eight days. To celebrate, the women would need a Menorah with candles to light each night, a driedle for the kids to play with, and a chance to give small gifts to the children each night. Although it is considered a minor religious holiday, it is a wonderful time for children and an important story to recall.

For Christians, Christmas (December 25) is the celebration of the birth of Jesus whom Christians regard as a Messiah sent from God to bring good news of joy and hope to the people. His birth as a child in a stable to Mary, an unwed mother, is regarded as a sign of Emmanuel, God-with-us. A Christmas tree with lights and other decorations and a chance for the women to give gifts to their children and sing Christmas carols would be appropriate. Many Latinos celebrate Las Posadas, a re-enactment of Mary and Joseph seeking shelter, during the nine days before Christmas, and El Dia de los Reyes (also known as Three Kings) on January 6. Many African Americans celebrate Kwanzaa (December 26–January 1). This holiday celebration means “first fruits of the harvest” in Swahili. It was begun in 1966 as a way to instill cultural and spiritual unity within the African-American community. It is a time to celebrate friends and family and to reflect on the Seven Principles: unity, self-determination, collective work and responsibility, cooperative economics, purpose, creativity, and faith. The most important custom of Kwanzaa is the lighting of a candle each day related to the principles and taking time to reflect on the meaning of the principles together. Provide a black candle, three red candles, and three green candles.

The most important holiday for many East and Southeast Asians is Lunar New Year. The date varies by nationality, but Chinese, Koreans and Vietnamese will start celebrating what is often a week-long event on January 24, 2001. The New Year is preceded by acts of forgiveness, family reunification, and house cleansing. Families mark the holiday with special vegetarian meals, thanks to ancestors, gifts, and "lucky money" for children (and unmarried adults). It is appropriate to ask women for a shopping list of groceries, red good luck signs, incense and lucky money envelopes (all available at Asian grocery stores), and to make space available for an ancestral alter.

For all of us, the dominant cultural commercialization of Christmas, turning it into an orgy of consumerism which begins in October, is depressing and easy to want to escape. This phenomenon also completely overwhelms the customs of non-Christian groups. But for anyone who wants to retain the joy of the holidays, especially for children, and affirm this as a time of light and love in the world, in spite of pain, suffering and oppression, we can refuse to allow the commercial world to define our experiences. We can celebrate all of the traditions which affirm the values of simplicity, hope, love, joy and friendship and which affirm battered women, their children and all who support them.

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