

Autumn

Summer is softly slipping away and autumn is almost here. Soon, we will be experiencing the autumn equinox, when day and night stand together in a perfect balance. After this, the nights will become longer and the days shorter. Even though the sun can be quite strong and we can still experience lovely days full of sunlight, the mornings can be chilly and cold and we are anticipating the darker times that are coming (in this part of the earth's hemisphere) .

It is in this time that we would like to celebrate all the gifts we received from the summer that has passed, the fruits it has bared and show gratitude for how nature has provided our food for this past year and for the coming winter. At the same time, we will need to look for inner light, to carry us through the cold winter months, now that the sun is leaving us and we can no longer gather its strength and warmth.

So, it is not only gratitude that we would like to show in this time of year, we also want to gather our courage to face the "unknown" of the winter months.

Michaelmas

A story that helps us gather this courage is the story of Saint George and the dragon. This is a western European story that tells about a knight, who battles against the unknown (the dragon). One of the images of Saint George is where he rides his horse, with his sword in hand, roaming through the world, fighting all that is evil and bad. He finds the dragon in a cave or in the dungeon of a fortress, where he keeps a princess captive. Saint George tames the dragon and frees the princess. Together, they go off and live happily ever after.

There is another story where the dragon is tamed by an angel named Michael instead of a knight. In Western Europe the 29th of September has been known as Michaelmas. Michael stands for the battle against darkness and the unknown and has always been linked to this time of year.



Autumn is well on its way. The trees are starting to become bare, only to reveal the stars and the winter sky above them. When we go out, we become more and more aware that nature has shed off her cloak, and animals are getting ready for winter or are slowing down. In this time, the stars and the silver moon are more present, and they remind us that we are also connected to that world of the heaven above us. It's also during this time that we seek comfort with each other.

Finding comfort with each other means to experience light and warmth inside us, whilst also being able to give some of this light and warmth to other people and seeing the light that shines in the people around us.

Light that guides us in the darkness has been an elemental longing of humankind, from the beginning of time and throughout many cultures. In Northern Europe, people would come together around the fire during the autumn, well into the winter months and celebrate festivals that have to do with overcoming darkness and giving and receiving light.

Festivals of Light

During Halloween, we are surrounded by spirits and visit the cemeteries to commemorate the loved ones with candlelight and hollowed-out fruits the harvest brings.

With Día de los Muertos, we reflect on those who are no longer physically with us. With loving thoughts, lighting candles, recalling memories and looking at pictures, we can experience that our loved ones are near and in a way, live on in us.

We are invited to look inside and seek our inner light, during Martinmas and share it with others. We celebrate the light with the celebration of Diwali.

Halloween

Halloween is originally a Celtic celebration. In the Celtic calendar, November 1 is the first day of the new year. On October 31, their New Year's Eve, they would reflect on the fact that the harvest had been brought in and the seeds were ready for the new year.

To show their gratitude for the harvest, which was partly due to the favor of the dead, people would go to the cemeteries. They made offerings in the form of the gifts of the harvest and decorated the tombs with candles.

The name Halloween comes from All Hallows Eve or All Saints Eve, the evening before All Saints' Day on November 1. All Saints' Day is a Catholic holiday commemorating all Saints and martyrs.

People felt that during the nebulous time around the beginning of November, the spirit world was tangibly close to our earthly existence. It was believed that on All Saints' Eve the dead spirits would return among the living. To scare away evil spirits, people wore masks to scare them away.



The old Celtic traditions came with a large group of Irish emigrants to the United States and have evolved into a new form.

Halloween is now a celebration where children dress up, go door-to-door and trick or treat. Houses are decorated with pumpkins and lights. This trick or treat tradition originated with poor Christians who used to go to houses on All Souls Day to beg. They begged for bread and promised to pray for the dead souls.

By going out into the darkness on Halloween and courageously looking for the somewhat shadowy side of life, one dares to look one's own fears in the eye. Dressing up can be fun and exciting. It is better to keep the element of fear outside our door! We can light a candle around these days and reflect on those who have passed away.

Día de los Muertos

Día de los Muertos and Halloween have very different histories and contemporary evolutions.

In many Latin American countries, Día de Los Muertos celebrates death in a way that signifies the perpetual cycle of life, viewing death as the beginning of a new life in another realm. In fact, many spiritual traditions believe that during this time of year, in the Fall, or in the month of October, the veil between the spirit realm and the human realm is at its thinnest. Latin cultures thus celebrate Día de los Muertos as a day to commemorate this communion.



One of the ways this is done is through the creation of an altar or ofrenda. The symbolism of the ofrenda is deeply important as it creates



a central space for the living and the dead to come together. Traditionally, on the altar one might place photos, food or drink items the deceased loved ones enjoyed in life, maybe even religious or spiritual symbols. A particular food items are prepared, and you might also see sugar skulls on the ofrenda which can symbolize the sweetness of life, and the overall celebratory spirit of the tradition.

Another tradition, which is common in Ecuador, is a certain kind of bread, “Guaguas de pan”, bread babies.

Typically, families would gather together and decorate the bread and bring it to the graveyard to offer it to the loved ones who are deceased.

Martinmas

The festival of Martinmas is traditionally celebrated on November 11, between the fiery out breath of Michaelmas and the deep in breath of the winter holidays. It honors, the story of St. Martin, patron saint of beggars and outcasts, who was known for his gentleness and his ability to bring warmth and light to those in need.

From France comes the story of St. Martin, who as a young man passed under an archway of the city of Amiens and discovered a poor beggar huddled there. The man was barely clothed, and shivering with cold. On seeing him, the young Martin took his cape from his own shoulders, tore the garment in half, and covered the poor man to warm him. The following night Martin had a dream in which he saw an angel wearing this same piece of his cape. The experience confirmed in him his devotion to all mankind regardless of their station in life. Martin went on to become patron saint of beggars and outcasts, and was known for his gentleness, his unassuming nature and his ability to bring warmth and light to those in need.



As we journey into the darkest time of the year, it is increasingly important for each of us to kindle warmth and light in our hearts. Martin’s cloak can remind us to share with those in need. The gently glowing lanterns of Martinmas will give light and warmth as we draw nearer to the Solstice, showing how our inner light must shine ever brighter against the cold. As nature sleeps, we must be wakeful. In many parts of the Netherlands, children gather for Martinmas walks. As the sun sets, they carry handmade lanterns, symbolizing their own individual light. This is a quiet, meditative celebration. Following the lighting of the lanterns, the children walk from door to door, singing lantern songs.



Diwali

Diwali is a five-day Hindu festival of lights, held in the period from October to November. It is particularly associated with Lakshmi, the goddess of prosperity, and marks the beginning of the year in India. It comes at harvest time and it unites three different streams of Hindu religions. Families and friends gather in homes brightly lit with oil lamps and candles. Women dress in their finest, most colorful saris and decorate their doorway floors with bright powders in intricate Rangoli designs. Sweets and cakes are freely offered and gifts are exchanged amid joyous family reunions that culminate in firework displays.



Winter

Saint Nicholas/Sinterklaas



In many different European countries, the festival of Saint Nicholas is celebrated on the 5th of December. He is the good Bishop who brings gifts for all children, great and small. The Netherlands has a special connection to Saint Nicholas, lovingly called *Sinterklaas*. The reason for this is that he is the patron saint of Amsterdam, of all seafaring people and of trade. It is therefore no wonder that he is etched into the Dutch folk soul. Saint Nicholas is not a bringer of light as such, but through the gifts he brings, he sees the light in all of us. He truly loves all people of good will and therefore belongs in the row of celebrations during the winter months.

As winter solstice approaches in the northern hemisphere, there is a growing mood of sleepiness in the world. The children can experience a settling down. The fallen leaves, the animals in hibernation, and the shorter days, which bring us inside much earlier, all contribute to this experience.

Advent

is the 4 weeks leading up to Christmas and mid-winter solstice. Advent means *coming* in Latin. It's a time of anticipation and expectation, as we move through darkness towards the yearly rebirth of the light, when the days grow longer.



Chanoeka



Chanoeka, which is of Jewish origin, is also a light festival that may be celebrated during this time. Chanoeka is traditionally celebrated for eight days. For eight consecutive days, a candle of the "Chanoekia" is lit.

Christmas

After the winter solstice on the 21st of December, the sun slowly returns, and it is for this reason that Christmas (the celebration of light) has been placed right at the sun's deepest point.

The word Christmas of course refers to the celebration of the birth of Jesus Christ. Even if one is not



religiously inclined, one can also see this celebration as the celebration of the gift of life that we all have. The story of the birth of this child can also be perceived as the birth of every child, bringing gifts of trust, beauty and purity to us. This story gives children everything they need: a wholesome family, the angels and the stars in heaven, the earthly shepherds, and the animals, flowers and fruits which all surround the baby and give

him the gift of themselves. It speaks to us as human beings, as each baby that is born should receive such gifts.

In pre-Christian times, Northern cultures have celebrated mid-winter by lighting candles in a pine tree. This has become our Christmas tree.



Spring

As winter slowly recedes, it takes along its' coldness, darkness, and crisp shapes of bare branches and snowflakes and spring announces itself [or, allowing spring to announce itself]. Nature begins to rise and flow again. The light increases as warmth approaches and new life awakens everywhere. Buds swell, the air is filled with gentle fragrances and flocks of birds return, heard twittering in manifold.

Nature teaches us in many ways that within every death comes the germ of new life. In autumn, even before the trees lose their leaves, they form their buds for new ones. Seeds form in fruits to continue the cycle of life after the fruit breaks off.

It is a mighty transformation that happens in nature and it is the great mystery of life, how it continues, even after an apparent death.



In the European (Christian) tradition, this transformation is illustrated in the theme of Easter-- how Christ overcame death. Young children do not need to know about the facts of Easter, but we can bring the essence of the festival through activities and experiences. Therefore, we do not tell the children about the story of the passion of the Christ-figure. Instead, we celebrate the miracle of the unfolding of nature after a long, dark and cold winter.

These are some of the symbols that we will be seeing and exploring at school:

Easter rabbit



One Easter tradition is the arrival of the Easter rabbit, or hare. In German mythology, the hare is a symbol of fertility, since it reproduces so rapidly. The hare is a unique and independent animal that roams without a fixed home-- he lives from plants alone and never seeks conflict with other animals.

The Egg

The egg symbolizes fertility and the renewal of life in many traditions. In Persian, Greek, Egyptian and Indian cultures, the egg has an important meaning. In ancient Egypt, for example, the yellow yolk symbolized the sun and the round shell, the arch of the heaven above us. The shiny and smooth surface of an egg begs to be decorated. When visiting Eastern European countries, you'll find the most elaborate and beautifully decorated eggs, as it's a regionally popular craft.





Sowing Seeds

The sowing of seeds embodies the transformation of death into new life most suitably and strikingly. This is an activity we will be doing in both classes, and in Kindergarten the children will create an Easter garden.

Decorating Branches

We will continue to welcome spring by decorating branches with ribbons, fruit and coloured eggs.

Weaving Baskets

Traditionally, basket weaving is done from February onward, when reeds are cut and willows are pruned. The basket weavers and broom makers used to make brooms and baskets to clean the house and collect eggs. In the Kindergarten class, we will be making a basket to use when we collect eggs (and other Spring surprises).

Spring Cleaning

When Mother Nature pulls on her new dress, we can use this opportunity to get rid of the cobwebs and dust that has been collecting indoors over the winter months. There is nothing so wonderful as laundry that has been hung outside to dry in the fresh spring air! Sweeping and shaking out the carpets can be a strenuous task, but it comes with great satisfaction. We can also learn to enjoy this labour as a personal cleansing ritual.

Summer

Whitsun

Whitsun is celebrated when nature has opened up to us in its full glory, with an abundance of flowers. It is a time where we would almost want to sing, just like the birds, who have all arrived by now and are busy, either still building a nest, or feeding their chicks.

One of the traditions in Western and Northern Europe has been to dance around the May pole. This would be a long tree trunk, that is erected in a central place and is decorated with flowers and ribbons.

The men and women each hold a ribbon in their hand and dance around the pole, singing songs and playing music.

It is unclear where this tradition comes from. Some sources tell us that it may come from pre-Christian times and is a ritual to honor the sun and the “tree of life” (like the tree Ygdrasil, from Norse mythology), but other sources tell us that it originated in the medieval Christian Europe, motherhood, in particular mother Mary. We also know that in some places, it would be the tradition to ask a woman for her hand in marriage, during the month of May, because it would bring good fortune to the marriage.



In this time of year, we can sense an inspiration for new things that may lead us to wonderful things for the future. Summer is coming near, to which we look forward to, and we make plans for exploring new things (new countries) during the summer months.

Inspiration can also spark fire within a community. Whitsun is therefore also to celebrate the blessings of being a community.

We are all different individuals, and we all come from different backgrounds. Yet, people are brought together, either by fate or choice to become a community of people. This is also true for our school. This offers us great challenges but also great blessings. We may have different perspectives on certain things in our lives, we speak different languages, and we might even have different ideas of how to achieve things. Yet, we can also be inspired and learn from each other.

Thanks to the community, you can become more than you are on your own. When we realize this, and can be inspired by the forces that have brought us together, and the community can become more than a number of separate individuals put together.

Dancing around the maypole reinforces this feeling of connection. As we all hold our own ribbon, we all walk our different paths. Yet, the central focal point is the tree in the middle. Through that, all of us are connected to one another.

Looking back, we can recall our observations of the role of light in the passing seasons. We were grateful for the gifts of the sun during our harvest festival and Michaelmas celebration. As Autumn days grew short and outer light decreased, we felt the need to kindle our own light within, by creating lanterns to shelter one of the sun's last sparks. The lanterns led us through darkness, towards the time of our midwinter celebration. In this quiet and beautiful space, we experienced the turning point, when our inner light could begin to shine, bringing warmth and light into the world. Soon after mid-winter, the days begin to lengthen noticeably, and in spite of the cold, we could look ahead to spring as the sun's path crept further above the horizon and the sap began to rise in the trees.

Midsummer/St. John's festival

At midsummer, we feel the growing strength of sunlight that is drawing us outward. During the summer solstice, we will experience the longest day of the year, when the sun is at its height. That is truly a time to dance with the flowers and to sing with the sun.

In the Northern hemisphere, especially in the most Northern part of Europe, such as in Scandinavia, midsummer is celebrated as one of the most important festivals of the year. In these countries, depending on how much to the North you travel, the sun will not set at all, during midsummer's night. People decorate themselves with flower wreaths, stay up all night and sing and dance together and share delicious food. It is as if they have to drink their fill of sunlight before the sun starts traveling southwards.

This promise of the sun's return will be needed to bear the dark long winter nights.



Another tradition during midsummer would be to build a bonfire. In some countries, such as the Basque region (Northern Spain, Southern France), this is a tradition. When the fire dies down, people would jump over the fire, as a cleansing ritual. Fire has the ability to destroy, but it also stands for initiation and renewal. When jumping through the fire together, you can renew your friendships with your loved ones and start anew.

