'ENJOY THE SOLSTICE.' BRIGHTER DAYS ARE AHEAD

Today at 11:28 a.m., our annual descent into darkness will be over. The following days will be brighter, longer and warmer. Though this astronomical turnabout is the psychological bedrock of our seasonal celebrations, American mass culture treats it either indifferently or as something pagans do.

Last week, and for the first time in my life, I waved goodbye to a holiday gathering and instinctively found myself saying, "Enjoy the solstice." Previously, my go-to phrase would have been "Happy holidays." And in the earlier days of yore, it would have been "Merry Christmas."

Why did my new salutation arise? I haven't figured this out yet. Perhaps I'm getting older and feeling more appreciation for solar warmth, as do many New Englanders in sunshine-state retirement havens.

Perhaps I was responding to this year's obsessive political focus on the plurality of religious traditions in America. During my small-town, Midwestern, Sputnik-era, Protestant childhood, the knee-jerk seasonal salutation was always "Merry Christmas." This made perfect sense in my parents' church-going Christian culture. Our family gave little thought to the notion that the word "Christmas" is actually a portmanteau that combines and conflates a holiday celebrating the divinity of Jesus (Christ) and the practice of worshiping with a didactic liturgy (Mass).

Within the last generation, "Merry Christmas" has been slowly usurped by "Happy holidays" in public settings; a salutation general enough to accommodate Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, pagans, agnostics, atheists and countless others. Alas, the greater inclusiveness of "Happy holidays" is offset by its blandness and by its umbilical tether to commercial retail marketing. The alternative salutation "Season's greetings" reads well in writing, but doesn't translate well into speech, isn't specific to a season and can't be used when saying goodbye.

Having taken the time to put my thoughts to paper, I now suspect that the main reason I said, "Enjoy the solstice," had to do with my life's work of teaching.

This fall I piloted a new sophomore-level course called "Earth System Science." During its design, I experimented with ways to bring the abstractions of planetary thinking down to the observable scale of landforms, neighborhoods, towns and valleys, which collectively give us our sense of place. Rethinking the solstice as the nadir of our heat budget was part of that effort.

Let's start with the simple but counterintuitive fact that the sun doesn't actually rise and set. Instead, every place on Earth rotates first toward the sun and then away from it, giving us day and night and the marker points of midday and midnight. Simultaneously, every place also orbits the central figure of the sun, giving us the seasons and the marker points of summer solstice and winter solstice.

Earth as a whole doesn't have a solstice because the same amount of sunlight is always streaming our way from the same place. What changes is the distribution of that sunlight on a tilted, spinning globe with the local land surface sloping different directions. What the Northern Hemisphere gains, the Southern loses. And no two places in either hemisphere respond the same way. Changes in day length are related to latitude. One side of a valley experiences a different regime of sunlight than its opposite side. Though every place on Earth shares the same solstice timing, each one experiences that moment at a different local time, and does so in a different way. What this means is that your solstice is uniquely your own, being part of your sense of place.
Regardless of why, this year I've decided to exchange the phrase "Happy holidays" for the phrase "Happy solstice" in public places. It feels more earthly and better suits my natural philosophy.

At home, however, I'll continue to celebrate Christmas as a lifelong habit, for its compelling story of human rebirth. While decorating the tree, singing, feasting, visiting family and opening our gifts, I'll be keeping in mind that the bedrock of this celebration is earthly in origin.

During the solstice, it's not the sun being reborn, but our relationship to it.

Enjoy the solstice.