

My parents welcomed me, eighth child of eleven, middle son of three, into the world four days before the winter solstice in 1958.

Six years later, my Christmas present from Santa was a sting ray bike with five speeds, hand brakes, banana seat and sissy bar. Know what I'm talking about, fellas? Well, it turned out to be a mistake. My mother's first explanation was, essentially, a mix-up at the north pole, that five speeds was four too many for a six-year-old and hand brakes a hand full! I pleaded with her that I would easily learn how to ride and care for that bike. The next day, a Saturday, on a ride to Sears with my mom, she told me that she had no doubt about me and that bike, which we exchanged for a plain one. She also told me the truth about one Christmas myth, and that a box mix-up at that store several days before was more likely than my parents being able to afford something so fancy on my dad's prison guard salary.

My life journey in the 51 years since then has been a good one. Free thought, philosophy, education and life experience have provided certain wisdom to me. I love learning and discovering new things. I know there are sensible explanations, perhaps not yet discovered or understood, for, well, everything.

For example, we all know that the north and south poles mark the top and bottom of the earth. But you might forget, in your daily carryings-on, that the earth is not oriented perfectly vertical with respect to the plane of its orbit around the sun. It is tilted 23-and-a-half degrees on its polar axis, which gives us our seasons, the equinoxes and the solstices.

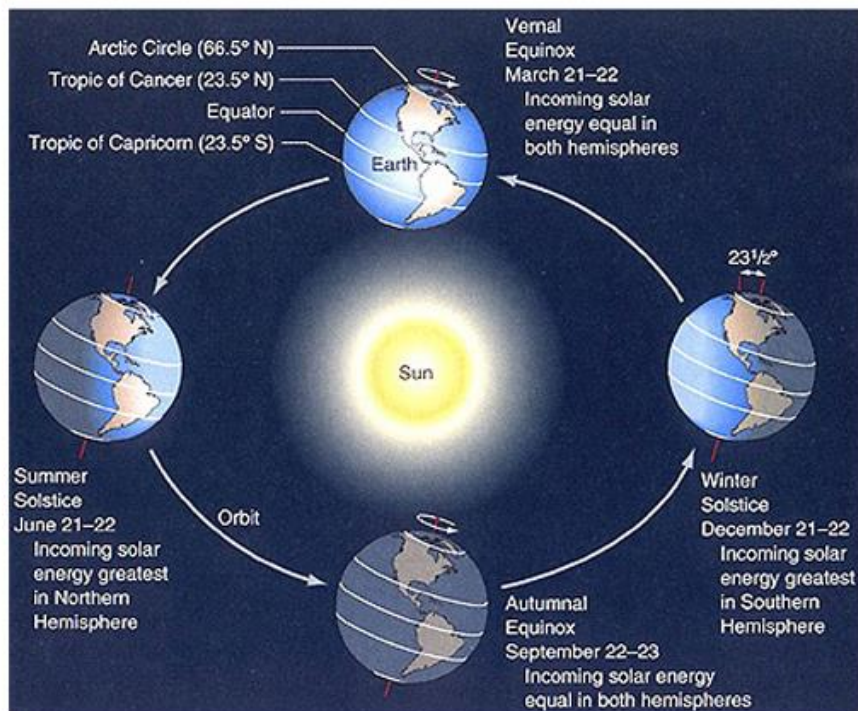


Figure 1 - Earth solstices, equinoxes and seasons ([NASA](#))

At the Chankillo archaeological site of Peru, residents, 2300 years ago built 13 towers spread across 980

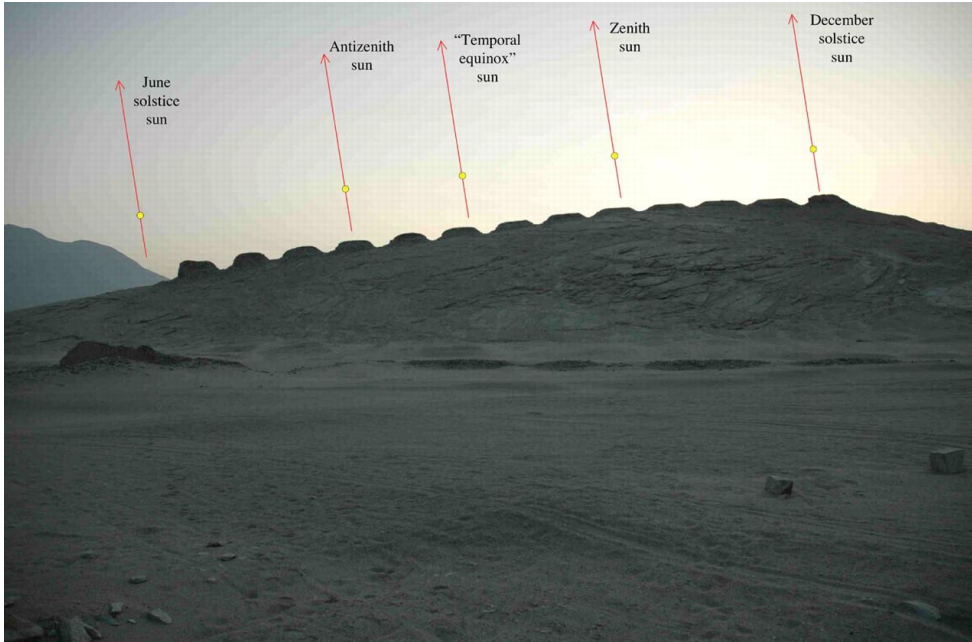


Figure 2 - The Thirteen Towers of Chankillo (www.sciencemag.org)

feet to mark the Sun's location in the sky from summer solstice to winter solstice and back.

Everyone is familiar with the Stonehenge in England, built 4000-5000 years ago,

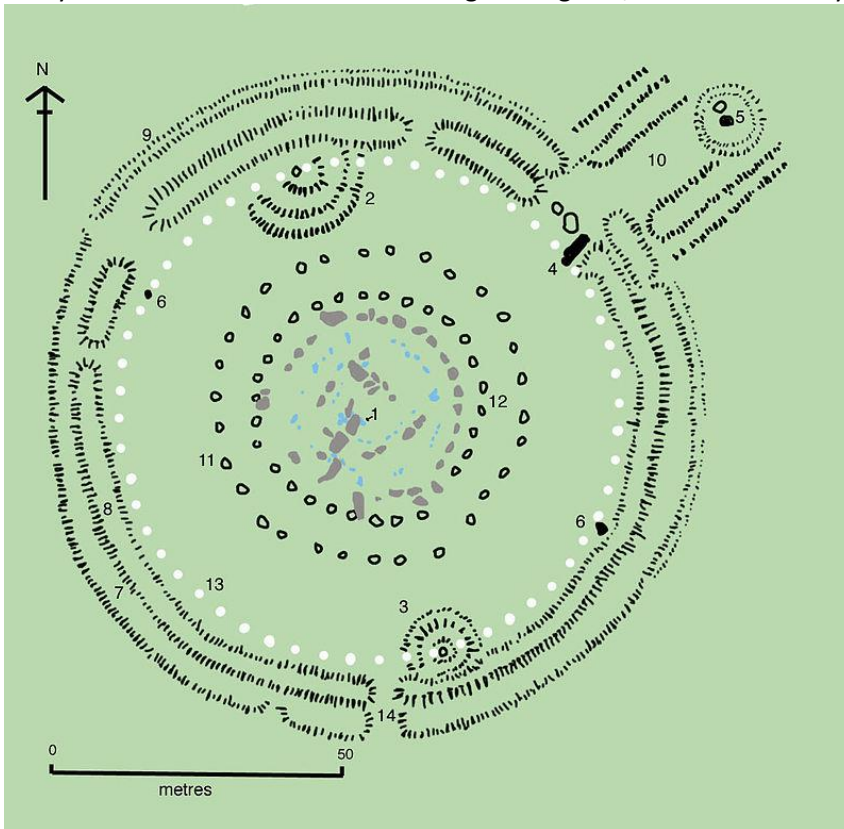


Figure 3 "Stonehenge plan". Licensed under CC BY-SA 3.0 via Commons - https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Stonehenge_plan.jpg#/media/File:Stonehenge_plan.jpg

and from the center of which, celebrants could enjoy views, through spaces between carefully placed giant stones, of the summer solstice sunrise to the northeast and sunset to the northwest, and on the winter solstice, the sunrise to the southeast and sunset to the southwest.

The Goseck circle is a Neolithic structure in Saxony-Anhalt, Germany, built in the 49th century BCE, *only two-tenths of a degree north of Stonehenge*.



Figure 4 - Goseck Circle (<http://www.ancient-wisdom.com/germanygoseck.htm>)

It consisted of a set of concentric ditches 75 meters across and two Palisade rings containing gates in defined places, which allow a view from the center of the circle of the winter solstice sunrise and sunset.

What was the point of all this?

The definition of solstice, from Middle English, Old French and Latin (*sol*, meaning "sun", and *stice* from *sistere*, meaning make stand or stop), of course, reveals that as humans have evolved, we've learned a natural explanation and accepted that the high point of the sun's arc, creeping day-to-day ever lower, across the southern sky, stops, in the bleak midwinter, and, from that point, begins ascending day-to-day, ever higher, until the summer solstice.

At some point, prior to 70 centuries ago, our ancestors certainly feared that the sun might, any winter, continue dipping lower each day, disappear and never come back, thus depriving mankind and all creation of the sun's life-giving warmth and light.

Intelligent humans named the solstice.

Of course the solstice is a celebration of the beginning of the return, the rebirth, of the sun. So, let us celebrate, my brothers and sisters. Let us spread good cheer and enjoy each other's company and gifts. Let us be thankful for our bounty and the coming spring and then summer, when that warm sun will bring us crops and trees that consume our carbon dioxide and provide us oxygen and food, in return.