Birthdays

Pre-reading

Questions:
• What do you think of when you read the title?
• What might you learn in this reading?

Definitions:
• Ancient – something very old, or from long ago
• Festive – joyous, or party-like

Reading

Celebrating birthdays is a very old custom. Ancient people did not know the exact day of their birth. They measured time only by using the moon and the seasons. As humans began to learn more about the earth’s natural sequence of time, calendars were developed. Calendars made it easy for people to keep track of and celebrate important events each year. Birthdays were such events.

Many birthday traditions and symbols have been passed down through the years. Some say birthday cakes began with the Greeks who took cakes to the temple of the moon goddess. These cakes were round to represent the full moon. Others believe the tradition of the birthday cake started in Germany. Geburtstagorten is a sweet, layered German cake that was used for birthdays.

Another symbol closely related to the birthday cake is the custom of putting birthday candles on the cake. The Greeks who took cakes to the moon goddess put candles on the cake to make it look like it was glowing.

The Germans, who were known as good candle makers, made small candles for their cakes. Some say that the candles were put on the cakes for religious reasons, that the light was symbolic. Others believed that the smoke from the candles would take their wishes up to heaven.

Friends and family enjoy celebrating with the birthday person. The earliest birthday parties were held because people thought that evil spirits would visit them on their birthdays. They liked to have friends and family nearby so that the evil spirits would not bother them.

The birthday party has evolved into a time of food, fun, and gift giving. Friends and families gather for a festive time and bring gifts to the person of honor. If someone cannot visit a friend on his or her birthday, a card is often sent. The tradition of sending birthday cards is a long one. It began in England over one hundred years ago.

Don’t forget to sing! Before the candles are blown out, and before the cake is cut, the century-old favorite needs to be sung. “Happy Birthday to You” is one of the most well-known songs in the world. The six note melody is tradition at most birthdays.

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Level 6.0
Understanding

1. Compare and contrast the first known birthday parties with the present day ones.

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2. What does the word **celebrate** mean?

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3. About how many years has “Happy Birthday to You” been sung?

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4. Pagan beliefs are a part of many holidays. Do you think this is true for birthdays as well? If so, how?

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5. We could not have birthdays without what?

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6. What does the word **tradition** mean?

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7. Which two groups of people can we credit for birthday cakes and candles?

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8. What is a **custom**?

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Writing

**Option A:** Summarize the reading in your own words.

**Option B:** Write about how you celebrate your birthday.

**Option C:** Write about a memorable birthday celebration.