

# Solstice: The Play of Light and Darkness

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A Sermon preached at the First Unitarian Church, Albuquerque, New Mexico

By Christine Robinson            December 20, 2015

It has been a bad few weeks for political liberals and humanitarians, as most of us are, in one degree or another. Terrorist incidents, gun violence, corruption in government, politicians pandering to frightened people who seem determined to be ignorant, and a few of whom are inclined to be violent. An entire school system in Virginia was closed on Friday because of the threatening climate created by parents who objected, probably rightly, to a clumsy assignment given out by a teacher who should have done her research, and which could have been settled easily without threats. And we had our own puzzling episode with diversity and schools here in Albuquerque this week. I guess we should all congratulate ourselves that nobody got violent and nobody will have to have a make-up day in the heat of the summer. Two other school systems had to decide whether or not to shut down to protect their students against threats. Random gunshots killed a football player and injured a shopper in a mall last week. This is....awful.

Climate Change, even though we seem to be moving through our denial and starting to get to work, brings the specter of looming disaster. And then there is the general climate of meanness which pervades politics and especially campaigns. I've talked to more people who are feeling more pessimistic about our society and our corporate future in the past few weeks, than in a long time, and have felt pretty down myself. It all seems pretty dark. Probably not as dark as the times felt during the Mexican or Civil wars, but bad enough. The hopes and fears of all the years seem very close this holiday season.

And besides. It's dark when I get up in the morning and dark when I get home at night. Where IS the light?

It must have all gotten swallowed by the Dark Side, in preparation for the release of Star Wars episode 7, the first for a new generation of this epic galactic battle between the dark side and the Force. The Dark side, with its stark white-armored henchmen and black helmeted leaders has arisen again in a galaxy far away. Two generations of good guys have fought before and still...evil abides. How many times to do we have to do this? So, good and earnest and gifted young people have to leave safety and home and all they know to save their worlds and fight for good, for color, for humor, for love.

The “how many times?” Resonates with me. Over and over again....really....over and over we seem to be tempted to violate our constitution, trash human rights, break our own laws, violate the tenets of our own faith to love our neighbors and honor the stranger...because we are scared....and not even of the things very likely to hurt us, either. Over and over again we fight ignorance, long for leaders who can lead, for a little humanity in the public square and for justice, equality, and civility to prevail. A little progress gets made, it seems, there are a few weeks or months or years in which hope comes naturally, and then, we are at it again, slogging away with evil in the darkness. Once upon a time I was young enough to be sanguine about the way the pendulum swings back and forth. Now I’m starting to wonder if my optimistic nature will see another swing.

This is the darkest time of the year, but it is also a time of year which abounds with stories that could bring us hope, if we were willing...and the festive release of the Star Wars movie is only the most modern of the holidays. In that movie, out of ever darkening, worysome times, fresh youth and wise heads, all at least somewhat reluctantly come together with their sometime enemies and a galaxy of diverse faces to confront the dark side. It’s a smash hit all over the world. Who has seen it? Did it recharge your hope?

The makers of Star Wars from the beginning leaned heavily into humanity’s stories of the battle between light and darkness, and in a nuanced way that reminds us that we all have some of each within us, and that we can change in our lives. The Star Wars universe is best represented by the Taoist Yin Yang....up there on the mural...the swirling forces of light and dark which change, which contain each other, which work in our lives in different ways. Here’s the story in a nutshell: It gets darker and darker and darker...and the forces of good call us to sacrifice, call us to community, call us to work. Just let it in.

Here’s another of those stories...a really old one.

The oft-told solstice story goes something like this: that the ancient peoples noticed that the sun was getting lower and lower in the sky, and that the hours of light were less and less, and they were sore afraid because life NEEDS light in a very direct and obvious way....so they carefully marked the low point on the horizon and celebrated when they noticed that the Sun was moving northward and higher in the sky again. That’s about the 25<sup>th</sup> of December, as a matter of fact, and no small part of the reason that the early church chose that date on which to celebrate the birth of the Christ child, which by all internal, biblical evidence, happened in the Spring.

It’s actually unlikely that the ancients felt any anxiety at all about the sun’s return to warmth. They’d been around a while. And it is even possible that, while the surely were glad of warmth

before central air, they also knew that the frozen meat would keep longer than ever it would in the merry month of May, that sleep is necessary, the dreams enrich us, that rest from the Frenzy of summer is a good thing.

That doesn't mean they didn't celebrate...of course they did. Holly and Ivy and fires to gather the community and songs and good food...ancients marked the passage of the season because they valued balance and the play of light and dark...which is the story of the Solistice, ....it gets darker and darker and darker...and then the light returns.

Tomorrow is the solstice, tonight the longest night of the year. By this time next week, even an ordinary person in the city who is observant, will notice a few more minutes of light in the day. I invite you to make a practice of noticing this week, when the sun rises and sets, when darkness falls. You'll see.

And I suggest that not only to get you outside, although that in itself is a good antidote to despair, but so you're remember, when you hear the next round of bad news, misbehaving public servants, or even notice the dark side in yourself, that this is how the world works....it gets darker and darker and darker...and then the light returns.

Last week, Angela told us three stories that answer the question, "Why Hanukkah," here's a fourth.

Hanukkah was a relatively minor holiday in Judaism, until after the Holocaust. However the story was told, it featured an ancient threat to the Jewish people and their way of life, a threat that was overcome, for a while, by guerilla grit or by miracle... and there's the bit about candles in the darkness which certainly resonates in human hearts at this time of year, especially in northern Europe where so many Jewish communities lived in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. So, a fancier than usual meal, a little spending money and a special game for the children, and the story re-told in the synagogue...a minor holiday.

Until World War II, when the European Jewish community was decimated by the Holocaust, by action and inaction of the leaders of almost every nation in the west, including ours.

American Jews, both venerable and new refugees of war, took notice. A genocide attempt on the people of your blood is a wound that does not heal for generations. Suddenly an obscure holiday that took notice of darkness...physical and heart-felt...in human life took on new appeal, and Hanukkah took off. It's commonly said that Hanukkah gained importance in the second half of the last century so that Jewish children could have an equivalent of Christmas, but that's not the whole story...it might not even be the half of it. The whole story is that the Jewish community was shaken to its core by the Holocaust, and because of that, they resurrected an old story of resistance and the forces of help and hope.

It gets darker and darker and darker, but we light one candle, and with that candle we light others, one at a time, until our light shines proud and true. We light candles of hope because we survived. We say, "Never Again," we try to let time do its healing work. It gets darker and darker and darker, and we do what we can, small though it may be.

Can the people of first Unitarian Church solve the problems of poverty and homelessness in our nation? No. But we can offer hospitality a few times a year to a few families caught in homelessness, to give them a breathing space to solve some of their problems and make some new plans. That's what the Family Promise program is all about, and you'll be hearing a lot about this because we'll be welcoming our first guests for a week's stay in only about 6 weeks and there's lots to do and some money to raise to get it together. It's a "light one candle" solution, and we do it not only because every family helped is, after all, a family helped, but because one candle lights another, one at a time, until humanity and goodness prevail, at least here and at least for a time, over the powers of evil.

Do you believe that? Remember it, even in hard times. Do you feel the calling? Just let it in.

The Christian story of the child born in the manger fits the same pattern. In that grim and dark time, when things were uncertain, when a tyrant was in power, when the poor were being crushed and everyone feared civil unrest, the people of Bethlehem offered what hospitality they could muster to two strangers and a child was born whose words would change the world. That's the story, and it is repeated every night of the year, in every labor. It gets darker and darker and darker, and then....a child is born. Hope calls to us....just let it in.

In paganism, as in Christianity, a symbolic child is born at the darkest time of the year; the sun child who will bring the Spring with her adolescence and die in the autumn with the harvest. Thus, Yule is a celebration of the circle immortality and rebirth in nature. In the midst of cold, dark, and seeming death, we celebrate birth, light, and warmth. The evergreens like pines, Holly wreaths, mistletoe, and ivy, which we use to decorate our homes, the lights we light and the red and green that are the colors of the season, all make reference to these themes.

It's a paradox: Light in the time of darkness, greens in the time of snow, fire in the cold. Paradox is a part of life. We feel loneliness in times of celebration, know we must rest for times of growth, understand that growth often comes in the midst of pain. And that, too, is the message of the evergreens in winter and the candles lit in the early dark.

Here's another paradox.... Down as you might feel about the state of the world, depressing as it all might seem, Frightening, this climate of terrorism is, and prevail, we must, and the weight of it all does seem crushingly heavy. Where is the light? It's inside of you, a tiny candle sheltered from the cold and the wind by the life forces in your body, a baby of an idea or a

strength or longing of your heart, a fire of purpose and conviction now banked, but ready to flare up when the time is right. I can see it from here, in each of your faces.

Here's the light. Just Let it in.