

First Unitarian Church

December 17, 2017

This Thursday, December 21<sup>st</sup>, we will experience the longest night and the shortest day of the year: the winter solstice. For many Americans, the solstice is kind of a footnote to Christmas. Others aren't even particularly aware of it.

When I got married on December 21<sup>st</sup>, 1996, I had no idea I was getting married on the solstice, or what the symbolism of that might be. (Nor did I have any idea I'd later become a minister, and that I'd rue the decision to place my anniversary right in the middle of one of the busiest weeks of the church year).

I only knew there was an ice storm that day that whittled the wedding guests down to about 25 people, including the wedding party. There were more people at our daughter's first birthday. Oh well.

These days I've come to appreciate the solstice, and the pagan traditions around it that still infuse our other celebrations at this time of year: the Christmas tree, and sprigs of mistletoe and holly. Yule logs, and songs about these things that are still sung among the Christmas carols—caroling itself also having roots in ancient celebrations of the solstice.

And I've noticed that, at least the way it's usually celebrated, the Christmas season without solstice is spiritually incomplete.

Have you ever stepped into a department store in December when you were in a bad mood? Or terribly anxious about something? Or grieving?

Did the extra loud Jackson Five rendition of "Santa Claus is Comin' to Town" make you want to yank the snow globes off the shelf and chuck them through the nearest gingerbread village like some kind of overgrown, abominable snowman?

If you're going through something tough, the Christmas season can feel like a campaign of enforced jolliness.

Living through Christmas—secular and religious alike—when you are not feeling 100% cheerful, can feel like being depressed in what the Episcopal priest Barbara Brown Taylor calls a "full solar church."<sup>i</sup> Surrounded by people who project all light and certainty.

Taylor has what she calls a Lunar spirituality. As she puts it, the "divine light" given to her waxes and wanes with the season. And she says,

The way most people talk about darkness, you would think that it came from a whole different deity— but, no. To be human is to live by sunlight and moonlight; with anxiety and delight; admitting limits and transcending them;

falling down and rising up. To want a life with only half of these things in it is to want half a life.

Taylor decided to embrace her lunar spirituality by living for a while without artificial light in her home. She decided to develop a theology of sacred darkness, connecting it with things like uncertainty, anxiety, and grief, by experiencing more of the actual dark.

When she did that, she really started to notice the way we humans light up and chase away darkness, and the way we teach children to avoid it, too. We call them in from playing at dusk, if they are lucky enough to play freely outside, into the house where all is lit, and even when it is time to close our eyes and be in inner darkness, we place nightlights everywhere, just in case.

We have disrupted our circadian rhythms –our bodies’ 24 hour rhythms—with all this light. In the 1990’s, there was a study in which subjects spent fourteen hours per day in darkness for a month—not unlike what our ancestors would have experienced before artificial light.<sup>ii</sup> It took a while for them to adjust, but by the end, they had settled into a new, distinctive sleeping pattern: four hours asleep, then one or two hours awake, followed by another four hours of sleep.

Later, the historian Roger Ekirch of Virginia Tech published a book about sleep patterns. In twenty years of research, he had found over five hundred references to a similar, two-part sleeping pattern. He found them in historical documents from before the invention of artificial light, such as court records, literature, and journals. And he also found references to contemporary people, such as a modern day tribe in Nigeria, that also sleeps in two parts.

Historically, the time between the “two sleeps” was not spent tossing and turning. It was used for meditation, prayer, writing, quiet conversation, or—according to the advice of a medieval French medical text—conceiving a child “better” and with “more enjoyment” than is possible right at the end of a long day’s labor. Ah, the French!

It wasn’t just artificial light, but also societal changes that disrupted the old sleep pattern. With increased emphasis on productive days, for example, the amount of time people could dedicate to rest was diminished.

Just as we humans have chased away darkness without wondering what it might have cost us to do so, we also tend to devalue and try to suppress or chase away feelings associated with darkness, like fear, uncertainty, and sadness.

Our avoidance of the dark is surely tied to something primal—our ancestors needed to be able to see those saber tooth tigers. But the way it translates over into other parts of our lives—like feelings and spirituality— is a reflection of the Christianity that has shaped our culture, and its dualistic worldview. There is good and evil. God and the world. Right and wrong. The flesh and the spirit. Christianity offers other

pathways beyond duality, and you can especially see this in non-canonical scriptures, but that's not what became mainstream.

Meanwhile, in Christianity's course of growth, it overtook other traditions that had other kinds of wisdom that we would do well to remember. Pagan traditions. Pagan is an umbrella term. It covers indigenous earth based traditions, including those of Western Europe before the time of Christianity.

In the Druid tradition of that region, the winter solstice ceremony is known as Alban Arthan.<sup>iii</sup> Arthan comes from Arthur, and Alban means white or light. So it means, poetically speaking, the light of Arthur. Alban Arthan celebrates the ritual story of a sun god Arthur, who dies and is reborn as the Son of Light at the winter solstice, becoming the savior of the British Isles. If the birth of a son who is a savior sounds like another story you know at this time of year, well, you're right.

The Christian nativity story is one variation on one of humankind's oldest, most common stories.

The Druids traditionally held—and modern day Druids still hold— their solstice ceremonies outdoors, preferably with a view to the locations of the rising and the setting of the winter solstice sun. Participants tie black strips of cloth, to symbolize mourning, to their clothes. The ceremony begins with wishing peace to the four corners of the earth—the four directions—and then purification and consecration of the circle—the ceremony space—with water and fire.

The ceremony continues with participants acting out a ritual questioning, in which the youngest one, Mabon, questions the Ancient one. Mabon is also the name given to the young new sun that will be reborn after the longest night of solstice.

“Teach us, wise Ancient, to what period of time we have come,” says the young one. And the Ancient replies, “We show to you, young One, the birth of the youngest one, who bears your name, who is born in silence and weakness as the smallest of lights.”

The people acknowledge that the time has come to mourn what is coming to an end, and what is dying. The dark night of solstice is connected with—it makes a space for—the dark nights that are part of our spiritual lives, times when we may feel lost, unable to see or imagine what is ahead, and afraid things will never get better.

“The oak is bare, the earth is cold, the sky is black—from where could hope arise?” one elegist says.

“The cold and dark have grown strong. We mourn the passing of the bright days,” says another.

Soon, all light is turned off or extinguished. The ceremony is plunged into darkness.

The people meditate, held in the dark and silence. They practice letting go of that which has ended. They prepare themselves for the return of the light.

By embracing the dark, entering fully into it, they embrace not just half a life, but the whole of it. The sacred balance, which includes the sacred dark.

Finally, participants remove the symbols of mourning from their clothes, and a lantern is lit at the place of the solstice sunrise. Other lights are kindled from that first one, symbolizing the one source of all Life, Light, and Love, from which we are born.

Mistletoe, representing darkness and growth, is brought from the North, and joined with oak, the tree of eternity and of the present moment. Together, they are passed to each participant, as a symbol of healing.

The ceremony, taking place at the end of the darkest day of the year and the beginning of the return of the light, marks both a completion and a new beginning. In this way, it is about deeply entering into a particular moment, a turning moment. Solstice means standstill. Like the pause in our breath after each exhalation, the earth at solstice seems to stand still for a moment.

Before Christianity swept over Europe, people throughout the western countries there celebrated the solstice with food, evergreen boughs, holly, and especially fire and light.

Festivities could go on for nearly two weeks—a tradition that carried over into the “twelve days of Christmas.” The Romans called it Saturnalia, and right around the time Christianity was taking root there, the Romans were already celebrating what they called the “birthday of the unconquered sun” on December 25<sup>th</sup>. In the north, the Norse people had “Yule” for their celebration, and some linguists believe *Yule* may be the root of the word “jolly.”

The Christian scriptures do not say when Jesus was born. Some scholars, noting clues such as shepherds watching over their flocks at night, believe the stories are meant to take place in the spring.

But in the fourth century, the Roman Catholic Church strategically made the official birthdate December 25<sup>th</sup>—the same as the birthday of the unconquered sun. People were already used to celebrating the birth of a hero that day, after all.

The challenge was reminding them that they were supposed to celebrate a different one now. They kept up with their old traditions—the holly, the ivy, the evergreen trees, caroling, feasts and fire—which sometimes worried church officials.

Indigenous traditions in other parts of the world, including New Mexico, also involve solstice stories and ceremonies. When a particular kind of ritual is so ubiquitous, so *everywhere*, you know we’re onto something important.

The public intellectual and pagan theologian Starhawk writes that when we reject the dualism that separates the world into light and dark, good and bad, it is healing. iv “Instead of *enlightenment*,” she says, “we begin to speak of deepening... we

remember that in the old myths, the entrance to the realm of the spirit was through the fairy mound, the cave, the crack, the fissure in the earth, the gate, the doorway... We call it the underworld, and we go within it for our visions.”<sup>v</sup> The dark is a place of changing consciousness.

The dark she says, is “all that we are afraid of, all that we don’t want to see—fear, anger, sex, grief, death, the unknown.”<sup>vi</sup> Starhawk includes sex in this list because it is a sacred source of power and joy... and the obsession of those who want power-over. Sexuality is a life-affirming gift... and it is the locus of conflicted feelings, shame, repression, and violence.

Out of the darkest point of winter, spring is being born. As another pagan author, Diane Stein, puts it, “The experience of nothingness, of death, is changed to the experience of new Be-ing, where everything is wonderful and possible.”<sup>vii</sup>

Birth and rebirth are common metaphors for the turning of the solstice. Actually, birth is most wonderful in hindsight. It’s really intense while it’s happening—for the person giving birth and, I imagine, for the person being born. There is a point in natural labor called “transition” characterized by time distortion, feeling out of control, fogginess, disorientation, and self-doubt.

Well, those feelings sound a lot like what we might experience during a very hard time in our lives, too, don’t they? Feeling out of control, fogginess, disorientation, self-doubt, and like it has been going on forever and will never end. Time distortion.

But it’s impossible to skip over the hard part, what scares us and even transforms us. In solstice ceremonies we know the light is coming, but we can’t get there without experiencing the dark first.

There is important work to be done in not being *just* cheerful, or *just* hopeful.

The wisdom of the solstice is that the dark, too, is important, and that it does *not* last forever.

Then, when we have experienced the dark, when we have recognized what we need to let go, we can give thanks for the important purpose it served, and then... let it go. In ritual at least, in intention, in prayer, and in our hearts.

Now, this letting go might not take effect immediately.

Brenda Cole is a member and volunteer leader in our congregation who is also ordained in the Druid tradition. As part of my research for today’s sermon, she agreed to share some of her knowledge about the druid tradition and solstice. And one thing she said especially stayed with me. She said that the hard part about letting go of something is trusting that there will be anything there to fill that space.

This can be true whether it is a relationship, a job or role we’ve had, a routine or habit, a feeling that has powered us through a phase in life, intense grief for a loss that is now well behind us, or of something else.

When it is time to let go of these things, we know because they become uncomfortable, are no longer life giving or affirming, or no longer suit us or serve our wellbeing. But sometimes we hold onto something uncomfortable because we are afraid of what comes next, and especially of having nothing at all to replace it.

It takes trust. It takes faith in the cycle of life. And it might take multiple attempts. We can let go of something in ritual, only to find ourselves holding onto it again a little while later. Letting go can be a process.

But the ritual helps. It moves us along, spiritually, onto the next thing. It helps us make room for the new.

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There are many pagan solstice ceremonies happening in Albuquerque. There is even a pagan group within our congregation, called CUUPS—the Covenant of UU Pagans. But if you aren't part of a larger group, the Order of Bards, Ovates, and Druids in England suggests some simple ways to honor the solstice on your own:

- One the longest night, turn out all the lights and spend some time experiencing the darkness. Then light a candle, and go through your home lighting other candles from that first one, in each room.
- Decorate an altar with mistletoe.
- Notice where the sun enters and leaves your home at this time of year.
- Travel by “tube” meaning the subway in England—I guess you won't be doing that unless you have big travel plans this week. It's the experiencing of going underground and re-emerging that they are inviting you to notice.
- Or try a dance or movement meditation, beginning lying down in meditative silence, and then “awakening,” rising or stirring, moving, and then even dancing to some enlivening music.

This solstice, wherever you are in your life journey, may you experience the clarity you need in order to make room for what is waiting to be born in your life.

If you are experiencing grief of any kind, may you take comfort in the embrace of winter dark, and receive what you need from it, as you wait for the sun to appear once more.

Whoever you are, wherever you are, may you receive the invitation to deepening in whatever way you are called to in this wintery week.

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<sup>i</sup> Taylor, Barbara Brown. Learning to Walk in the Dark. HarperOne: New York, 2014.

<sup>ii</sup> Hegarty, Stephanie. “The Myth of the Eight Hour Sleep.” BBC News Service. 22 Feb. 2012. Accessed online December 14, 2017. <<http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-16964783>>

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iii "Alban Arthan: the Winter Solstice Ceremony of the Order of Bards, Ovates, and Druids." A handbook published by that same order: Sussex England, 2001. More info available at [www.druidry.org](http://www.druidry.org)

iv Starhawk. Dreaming the Dark: Magic, Sex, & Politics. Beacon Press: Boston, 1982.

v p.26

vi p.xiv

vii Stein, Diane. Casting the Circle. The Crossing Press: Freedom, 1990. (97)