

The Longest Night

Solstice: Germinating Darkness

Readings: "Winter's Cloak" by Joyce Rupp

"You, Darkness that I Come from..." by Rainier Maria Rilke

"I have faith in nights." "Let me seek solace in the empty places of winter's passage, those vast dark nights."

Tomorrow is the winter solstice, the longest night of the year. It is a sacred day for those who follow earth centered traditions and mark the wheel of the year. And even if celebrating the solstice is not part of our spiritual practice, we can't help but notice the wheel of the year as we wake in darkness and live much of our lives in darkness in these weeks.

The solstice can be many things. Today, I invite you to consider it as a time to be like the seeds that the children and I planted earlier. What does it look like to plumb the depths, to take this season as one for germination, renewal, transformation – the hard work of growth that happens under the surface where no one – sometimes not even us – notices?

Describing her understanding of grace, the Reverend Heidi Neumark, a Lutheran pastor who served for years in the South Bronx writes, "I have learned that grace cleaves to the depths, attends the losses and there slowly works her defiant transfiguration."¹ This may be the work of grace, but it is also the work of each of us – and it is appropriate soul work for solstice. In this time of darkness, we might follow the seeds and do deep, germinating internal work. I invite you, I invite all of us to cleave to the depths, attend the losses and slowly work a defiant transfiguration.

This time of darkness is an opportune moment turn downward, to turn inward, to attend to the depths and the wounds and our internal unfinished business. I invite you to set aside some time for it over the next few weeks, or next few months in this winter season. I invite us to pause and step aside from the full calendars and long to-do lists that plague so many of us. Is there grief or loss or disappointment that you didn't make time for this year, or last year or the year before?

And if you didn't make time for it before, please offer yourself forgiveness for that. Not attending to grief, loss and disappointment is a hallmark of our culture. We used to know it took several months or a year to mourn a significant loss. In Victorian society, a widow was expected to mourn for at least a year, during which time she wore all black, which gradually lightened to gray "half-mourning" as she prepared to reenter society. She stepped back from all social obligations.² In the Jewish tradition, mourners sit

¹ From Neumark, Heidi. *Breathing Space: A Spiritual Journey in the South Bronx*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2003. page xiv

² From: "Mourning and Funeral Usages." *Harper's Bazaar*. April 17, 1886. retrieved from <http://www.victoriana.com/library/harpers/funeral.html>

Shiva, stay home with family to grieve the loss of a close family member for seven days and then say a prayer of mourning – the Mourner's Kaddish — daily for eleven months and then again on the anniversary of the death. We don't have rituals like that. Now, if someone is fortunate enough to receive a bereavement leave from work, it's about three days. That is not enough to do the hard, slow work of attending to grief and loss.

Francis Weller is a psychotherapist that specializes in grief and sorrow. He offers a powerful criticism of our culture's tendency to not engage grief, to not dive deeply into the soul work that we need to do to be whole and holy. He says, "The bias against going down arises from our cultural conditioning. Christian mythology teaches that resurrection and ascension are the proper directions for a spiritual life. The very earth is seen as a fallen place, and our bodies are perceived as fallen objects that can be redeemed only by the soul finally getting out of this tawdry place and moving on to its final reward. You rise above, getting better, higher, and lighter."³

This focus on ascension not only present in the Christian tradition. It is common in Unitarian Universalism as well. There is an old description of Unitarian theology, written by James Freeman Clarke in 1885. It summarized the theology of the day and was echoed in Unitarian congregations throughout the land. He proclaimed "the fatherhood of God, the brotherhood of man, the leadership of Jesus, salvation by character, and the continuity of human development in all worlds, or, the progress of mankind onward and upward forever."⁴ The progress of mankind onward and upward forever. That's a strong ascension narrative. That's a lot to live up to, even in an idealistic statement of faith. And this is not some old forgotten document. I've met lifelong UUs in the Baby Boomer generation who memorized this in their Sunday School classes as children.

In this time might we remember that progress is not an ever onward upward trajectory. Progress and healing and wholeness requires deep dives into germinating darkness as well. Might we do that deep, internal work that happens in the dark, that can only happen when we slow down and attend to the losses and work defiant transfigurations.

And maybe this isn't your story. Perhaps you're one of those lucky people with no losses that need attending or who has been willing and able to attend to the losses as they happen. Maybe you are not dragging yourself across the finish line at the end of the year, but are skipping joyfully. And in that case, since we are a community who are all in this together, letting others grieve, holding space so they might work their transfiguration is good for us all.

Keller, the psychotherapist, leads grief rituals as part of his practice. He describes how making time for grief helps us all, "During the grief ritual you go off by yourself to weep, and when you return, the group welcomes you back and thanks you for helping to empty the communal cup of sorrow. How many of us

³ McKee, Tim. "The Geography of Sorrow: Francis Weller on Navigating Our Losses." *The Sun*. October 2015. Issue 478. Retrieved from http://thesunmagazine.org/issues/478/the_geography_of_sorrow

⁴ Cohen, Sonja L. "Clarke Changed Congregational Life." *UU World*. Summer 2010. Retrieved from <http://www.uuworld.org/articles/clarke-transformed-congregation>

have ever been thanked for our grief before? We think of grief as a burden we lay on someone else. But what if it's actually a gift?"

This is a powerful idea. What if grieving is personal, internal work that heals us all? A gift to the world? What if grief work, the deep, germinating work that we are called to in the time of solstice, the time of darkness, empties the communal cup of sorrow that burdens us all? Individual healing heals us all and our world. What if attending to the losses now allows us all to greet the returning sun with more hope and more wholeness?

If this solstice is your season for grief, attend to loss and disappointment. Have faith in nights. Seek solace in the empty places of winter's passage.

What do you want to plant in this time? What do you hope will grow and bear fruit? What can you make time to attend to in the midst of the busyness of this season?

When the sun returns, may we be ready to greet the returning light with transfiguration, new growth, new green sprouts reaching toward the sun.

And in the meantime, may we find solace, comfort, and encouragement to do the hard work that needs to be done in this community and our other communities. May we find the joy that so many feel in this season. May we see in the firelight a promise that the sun will return.

Advent: A Time to Wait

Readings: "Advent Poem" by Enuma Okoro
"Wait" by Galway Kinnell

Today is the final Sunday of Advent, a season in the liturgical year observed by our Christian friends, neighbors and fellow congregants. Advent is a time of dual preparation – waiting with anticipation for the birth of Jesus that is celebrated on December 25th and waiting for the Second Coming and the reign of love and justice that Christians yearn for. Many of us share this yearning for the Beloved Community, the time of more love, more hope, more peace, and more joy.

In the Christian tradition, advent is a season distinct from Christmas. An interesting aside—I didn't learn this until seminary—Christmas is the beginning of the twelve days of Christmastide. The twelve days stretch from Christmas to Epiphany, the holiday on January 6 celebrating the arrival of the wise men to the manger.

Back to a-Advent. Advent, the month or so proceeding Christmas has its own colors, music, readings and rituals. If you have visited a Christian church that marks Advent in recent weeks, you will not have heard the Christmas carols that are so prevalent in stores and on the radio right now –you will hear less popular advent hymns, like the one we will use to close this service. Advent is a time of anticipation and patience and yearning, a time of waiting for the birth and rebirth of love, that guest, that rose, that star. Many of us, Christians and others, have faith that the greater love that some call God is on its way; and

we know as we look around at this broken and heart-breaking world, that there is not yet enough love moving within us, between us, and among us.

There is wisdom in the Christian tradition having a ritualized season of waiting, patience, slowness and anticipation. Waiting is hard; patience is hard. We need the practice. The Christians practice this holy waiting, this holy slowness, this holy patience year after year. They pause and make time for the deep internal work that we talked about earlier.

Of course, Christian communities are not alone in ritualizing waiting, slowness, and patience. A curious example of this ritualized waiting has appeared in recent years in Norway. Television programs are making Norwegians expert in patience, waiting, and slowness. The Norwegian public broadcaster has developed Slow TV. Slow TV Programs include 12 hours of 'speed knitting,' which follows the process from the shearing of sheep to the completion of a sweater; 18 hours of mostly uneventful salmon fishing; and the live broadcast of a 134 hour ferry journey along the Norwegian coastline. There was also "National Firewood Night" – four hours of chopping wood and talking about how to best stack it followed by eight hours of a fire burning. This Slow TV is extremely popular. Over half of the country tuned in for the ferry journey. People speculate that Slow TV is so popular because it propels people into their own minds. It is almost a collective meditation, shared with the whole country.⁵ A time of stillness and waiting. There are plans to bring Slow TV to American airwaves.

Practicing waiting, patience and slowness is especially important because too often waiting surprises us. We aren't ready for it. We are promised no waiting everywhere we turn. Author of modern holy texts Dr Seuss promises no waiting in his classic *Oh the Places You'll Go*. He writes,

You can get so confused
That you'll start in to race
Down long wiggled road at a break-necking pace
And grind on for miles across weirdish wild space,
Headed, I fear, toward a most useless place,
The waiting place...
... for people just waiting.
Waiting for a train to go
Or a bus to come or a plane to go
Or the mail to come, or the rain to go
Or the phone to ring, or the snow to snow
Or waiting around for a Yes or No
Or waiting for their hair to grow.
Everyone is just waiting.
Waiting for the fish to bite
Or waiting for wind to fly a kite
Or waiting around for Friday night
Or waiting, perhaps, for their Uncle Jake

⁵ Heller, Nathan. "Slow TV is Here." *The New Yorker*. September 30, 2014. Retrieved from <http://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/slow-tv>

Or a pot to boil, or a Better Break
Or a string of pearls, or a pair of pants
Or a wig with curls or Another Chance.
Everyone is just waiting.
No!
That's not for you!
Somehow you'll escape
All that waiting and staying.
You'll find the bright places
Where boom bands are playing.⁶

But we know that's not true. We won't escape the seasons of waiting. We know that life's not all bright places. It's not all boom bands, however much we wish it were. Sometimes, there is nothing to do but wait, have patience, let something unfold in the fullness of time. We must wait for the seeds—metaphorical or literal—to germinate and grow.

And we know that waiting isn't the right response in every situation. Is it enough to wait, anticipate, and yearn for the reign of love and justice? No. Wishing and hoping and yearning and dreaming do not make it so. Christians wait during advent with assurance that Christmas will come. December 25th will come. Things are not always so certain. Not everything comes inevitably in the fullness of time. The prophetic tradition, the holy impatience of our prophets ancient and modern, teaches us that, again and again. They call us to action, again and again.

There is a story from the Jewish tradition about Rebbe Menachem Mendel of Kotzk, a leader of the Hasidic community in Poland in the 19th century. A student of his asked a question.

"God, who is perfect, took six days to create a world that is not. How is that possible?"

The Rebbe answered him: "Could you have done better?"

"Yes, I think so," stammered the student.

"You could have done better?" The master cried out. "Then what are you waiting for? You don't have a minute to waste. Go ahead, start working!"⁷

There are times when we do not have a moment to waste. When we must go ahead and start working.

In this season of advent, this season of solstice, we join with others and the natural world. We wait, we prepare, we gestate, we yearn. And we discern. What would happen if we stilled ourselves amidst the busyness of the season? What is that still, small voice inside each of us calling out for us to do, calling out for us to be? What is waiting to be born in this world? What is worth waiting for? And what can't wait?

⁶ Dr. Seuss. *Oh the Places You'll Go!* New York: Random House: 1990.

⁷ Story from Elie Weisel, quoted in Gilbert, Richard S. *The Prophetic Imperative*. Boston: Skinner House Books, 2000. page 105.

In this season of advent, this season of solstice, may we commit and recommit ourselves to that hard and untimely labor required to bring anything worthwhile into existence. May we postpone what is unnecessary and commit to what is needed. May we possess the holy patience found in Advent and in the soil where seeds germinate. May we possess the holy impatience of the prophets that name what is unjust and envision what is new and necessary. And, through it all may we have faith that through us—through our action and our patience—and through forces bigger than any of us, love, the guest, the rose, the star, is on the way.

May it be so. May we make it so. Amen.