

## Solstice -- Time of Darkness and Light

Sunday, December 15, 2013

Rev. Roger Jones  
Unitarian Universalist Society of Sacramento

Music: Hymns: #226 “People, Look East,” #118 “This Little Light of mine,” #1008 “When Our Heart Is in a Holy Place.” *Solo:* “The Dark” by Mary Grigolia, sung *a capella* by Rev. Lucy Bunch.

Litany of Darkness and Light (see at end)

### Sermon

I sat looking out the kitchen window well before 7 in the morning, just last week. I felt the chilly air seeping in, and a mug of warm tea in my cold hands. I was ready to watch the morning light emerge, was waiting for the sunlight to change the look of everything. But I felt sadness. The tea had caffeine—how long would it take to change my mood, if it could? This mood was not of deep grief, and not a heavy burden of depression on my shoulders, yet it was a decidedly not-fun feeling of sadness. I said my morning prayer anyway.

I gave thanks for the gift of life and the new day, for a night’s rest in a warm, safe place. I lifted up the names of parishioners who need good wishes or prayers, brought their faces to mind, plus those of colleagues, friends, and relatives. I stated my intentions for living the day with gratitude, generosity, curiosity and kindness. The light was now making the street visible, and showing the colors of the cars parked on it.

Then it occurred to me: that pre-dawn darkness was just the right place for my sadness. The shadows could receive it. The shadows could let the sadness move, in its own gentle way. Had it been 7 AM in June or July, the sun would have claimed the whole scene by now. It would be urging me into the many tasks of the day: *Get going, look alive!* But the morning darkness of December seems to say, “Take it easy and slowly--I am taking it easy and slowly, after all. Let it be. Feel what you feel in this moment. You will notice how it changes.”

Soon it was bright and clear, and my day was on its way. And it went fast. The night came in the middle of the day—5 o’clock. *Wait! I’m not finished with my day yet!*

For years I have resisted and resented the early evening. I’ve dreaded the shrinking hours of daylight, starting in early November, when we set our clocks back an hour.

But as this December Solstice approaches, I try to appreciate what can happen in the dark. I would like to mention a few of the gifts of the time of darkness, but first I want to say: it’s not a gift for everyone, no matter what a preacher or a poet might say.

Like many people, a friend of mine has a clinical, biological reaction in the winter darkness, called Seasonal Affective Disorder. It does not help that she lives at a latitude even farther north than we do, and it’s cold there, for a long time. You know what they would call the chilly weather we’ve had this past week? *Springtime* (without the mud).

She sits under a special kind of lamp every day, to give her body and spirit some extra rays of light. In retirement she has the time to travel, so she spends a few weeks in the winter visiting friends in warm, sunny places. When she can save up enough money and find a cheap deal, she takes a trip to a warm country. Not speaking Vietnamese, she made her way around villages in Vietnam by pointing and smiling. In the sunshine of Egypt a few years ago, she heard people speak with hope right after the overthrow of longtime ruler Hosni Mubarak. She enjoyed the January summer of Argentina, taking in the spray of *Iguazu* falls, the marvel of a glacier, and some penguins in their stiff cuteness. Rather than cursing the dark and cold, she follows the sun. Of course, this is not an option for most people, and she gives thanks for the privilege to do so.

It’s important to note that seasons of darkness and cold can be very hard on the spirit, hard on the emotional health of many people around us. It may not only bring up grief or painful memories of past experiences, it may bring depression that weighs on our minds and even on our physical bodies. This can happen to people young or old, in any occupation or stage of life. When other ways of dealing with the shadow side of this dark time don’t seem to help us, it may be worth seeing if anti-depressant medicines, psychotherapy, or a 12-Step recovery group can make a difference for us. Whether as individuals or as families, we can look for professional resources and community support as we pursue emotional healing, personal growth, and the ability to accept the gift of life with joy.

Personal growth can happen in the dark times and places. Seeds will sprout in the cool dark of the earth, and begin their journey toward the light. As a tree stretches toward the sun, it also grows downward, inward, into the dark earth. We can be like the trees. As Henry David Thoreau said, “In winter we lead a more inward life.”

Another friend of mine lives not so far north, so the weather’s not as cold and the nights not as long. Yet the winter darkness does mean a change of her pattern of living, toward a more inward life. She spends more time under the covers, reading a book propped on the pillow next to her. In the living room she brings out candles and a string of holiday lights. They remind her of our inner light, of an eternal spark. Believing that winter is the best time for exercise, she puts on layers and goes out for a brisk walk. The leaves crunch underfoot, the air chills the skin of the face, the nose runs.

In winter, she says, we need exercise to stimulate our endorphins. Of course, we can be tempted to medicate our mood by drinking more alcohol and eating more, especially sweets and other carbohydrates. But the boost we might feel by consuming alcohol and sweets can have a down side. It can make us feel worse—edgy--after the boost wears off. This December I am taking some of her advice. Of course, I may never stop my holiday consumption of cookies, cake, fudge and anything else any of you might wish to make for me. But I’m eating more almonds and pecans and not forgetting my veggies. And I am having less alcohol, and drinking less often. I’m not crazy about green tea, but I’ve been drinking so much of it lately that soon I may turn the color of the Grinch Who Stole Christmas.

One Unitarian Universalist family I know has created their own Solstice tradition. With candles and cloths they make an altar of their table. They bake a light brown, round ginger cake—dense and only an inch thick. They serve it on a large round plate with a rim glazed with dark blue like the sky, and specked with stars. They pass the cake around, each one cutting a piece for the next person, who indicates by nods and silent gestures how large of a piece to cut.

As the cake is served, what is revealed underneath it in the center of the plate is a round red sun. The sun returns! For Solstice dinner, they eat only foods with round shapes, evoking the sun.

They read prayers to the divine light and sing chants to the source of returning warmth. The parents hide little suns around the house and the kids go searching for them. By finding a likeness of sun, they are bringing the sun back, helping it return. This family does not rely on the dominant culture to tell them what they need to do or to buy for making spirits bright—they create their own traditions. Any of us can be creative. We can join with nature and with other people to create our own light, and share the light, now in the dark of winter.

For many people, winter is a time for making soup and other warm foods, and eating more of the fresh foods that our season brings out. In California we have so many winter crops. Those in cold climates now can benefit from quick transport of fresh foods, but in the old days they kept food in the root cellar, and dried meat and beans from the summer crop.

Back home in Indiana, my mother’s fridge held many frozen foods for our winter meals, and this was fine. But around the corner from our house, my uncle and aunt had shelves of clear glass jars with green beans, tomatoes, corn and other produce they had canned in the summer. My uncle Roger had been a cook on a ship in the Navy during the Second World War. As a boy I helped him in the kitchen, including his major undertaking of putting up all that food, with Mason jars boiling in big pots of water and other steps for cleanliness and safety. That was a summer activity, but the memory of it warms me in the winter.

Now I can see that we were storing sunshine in shiny glass jars.

The poet Theodore Roethke wrote, “In a dark time the eye begins to see.”

The darkness can help us to see the truth... that we are not in control of everything. We can be so busy in our lives, have so many expectations. So many technologies at our fingertips and conveniences in our daily experience can lull us into thinking that there is an online menu tab for peace of mind or an iPad application for wisdom, courage, and grace.

The world does not revolve around any of us, including me; nor does earth rotate at my command. Its creation is a miracle and a blessing. The operation of the heavens is a wonder. And it all goes on without my permission or involvement. It will go on without me. The darkness comes and

goes—my cursing it or my blessing it affects only the condition of my own spirit. The season’s advice to me: you need not be in control, and in fact you are not in control. Let the darkness hold the future. Let go!

We can be intentional about living in the darker season. This is why candles appeal to us: the darker it gets around them, the more they show their beauty. Looking at a candle flame, or a string of lights on the tree or around the window, we can think about the meaning of light, and the bringers of light—like our nearby star, the human mind and heart, the source of love and light eternal, the creative spark, the divine fire of courage and compassion.

Solstice rituals use fire and food and song—to bless the darkness with beauty, while praising the cycles of the seasons of the earth. People hang lights at Christmas to praise the source of life, celebrate the story of the star of Bethlehem, and remember that sun and warmth will return.

On Christmas Eve at UUSS, our sanctuary fills with members and their friends, and with guests we see only once a year. In the weeks leading up to it, folks ask me the time: *seven o’clock, same as always*. They ask me if we will light candles and sing “Silent Night,” at the end. *Of course!* We will make a circle around the walls of the sanctuary, and exchange the light with one another, and then enjoy the darkness, filled with song and silence, and with faces illuminated by the flames.

Folks never ask: will we sing the carols and hear a homily, will we have some instrumental music, prayer and silence and an offering? All those things are like the setup to the “Silent Night” candle light finale! Yet without those elements, the finale would be weak.

Without the darkness, our candles would be weak. Likewise, without the embrace of the darkness, we might not have the reminder to plan ahead, create meaning in the season, and reach out for fellowship and support. The darkness holds an invitation to let go of all that we cannot control, and accept with serenity all that we can’t change.

At my kitchen window, in my early morning watch for the light, the dark of winter seems to say: “Take it easy, and go slowly--*I* am taking it easy, and going slowly, after all. Let it be. Feel what you feel in this moment. You will notice how it changes.”

The dark of winter is a time to consider the sources of light we can count on, and give thanks for them. It’s the season for tasting the warmth of nourishing food, made by human hands from the gifts of the earth for our sustenance and our joy. It’s a season for creativity, planning ahead, self-care and care for others. It’s a time for digging deep and for reaching out toward others with compassion, openness, and kindness.

It’s a time for patience and letting go of control, for releasing the past and opening to the mystery of the future. May we all be so blessed.

In the days to come, may you welcome the gifts of light and warmth you can bring into the darkness. May the days and nights ahead bless us with light, learning, warmth, patience and peace.

Blessed be.

## Litany of Darkness and Light

### Part A (Before silent meditation/prayer)

*Voice 1: We wait in the darkness expectantly, longingly, anxiously, thoughtfully.*

*Voice 2: In the darkness of the womb, we have all been nurtured and protected.*

**All Voices: May we feel comfort in the darkness.**

*It is only in the darkness that we can see the splendor of the universe-- blankets of stars, the solitary glowing of distant planets.*

*In the darkness of the night sky we feel beyond time – in the presence of the past, and with the promise of the future.*

**May we feel hope in the darkness.**

*In the solitude of the darkness we may remember those who need our love and support in special ways–*

*the sick, the unemployed, the bereaved, the persecuted, the homeless, those who are demoralized or discouraged, those whose fear has turned to cynicism, those whose vulnerability has become bitterness.*

*Sometimes in the darkness we remember those who are near to our hearts – colleagues, partners, parents, children, neighbors, friends, congregation members. We pray for their safety and happiness. We offer our support.*

**May we know healing in the darkness.**

### Part B (After musical interlude following sermon)

*In the quiet darkness of the night, we may hear that still, small voice within.*

*In the blessed darkness we may be transformed, changed by what we face in the dark.*

**May we feel the challenge of the darkness.**

*In the darkness of sleep, we are soothed and restored, healed and renewed.*

*In the darkness of sleep dreams rise up, calling us to possibilities, calling us to know our connection to the world.*

**May we feel joy in the darkness.**

*Sometimes in the solitude of darkness our fears and concerns, our hopes and our visions rise to the surface. We come face to face with ourselves. We find the road that lies ahead of us.*

*Sometimes in the darkness we wonder about the important things, the deep things, and inexpressible things. We watch for glimmers of hope and glimpses of grace.*

**May we feel renewed in the darkness.  
May we be guided by the light of our hearts. Reflecting the divine love that shines at the heart of life, let us reach out to this troubled world with compassion.**

*-New Century Hymnal, adapted*