



High Country Unitarian Universalist Fellowship

Summit County, Colorado

Celebrating life in community
in the beautiful mountains of Colorado!

December 10, 2017
Monthly Touchstones Theme
Hope
Service Leader: Maria Cheng

Sunday Services, 4:00 pm weekly
Fellowship Hall
Lord of the Mountains
Lutheran Church
56 Highway 6, Dillon, CO 80435
(Services are not held in the
months of October and May)

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Starry, Starry Night

Rev. Kirk Loadman-Copeland

Standing Still

Each year it happens slowly, almost imperceptibly, this long day's journey into night. First the change is just a minute a day, eventually accelerating to two minutes a day. When it's done, we will have lost slightly more than four hours of daylight as we travel from the summer solstice to the winter solstice, the two times in the year when it appears that the sun is standing still. For six days the sun seems to rise and set almost in the same spot. The word solstice comes from the Latin root, *sol stetit*, which literally means "sun stood still."

I know that I do not pay attention to these changes as much as I should. I am not really aware of the loss of daylight until early fall, nor its increase until early spring. But year-in and year-out, at those two times, I am surprised. This lack of awareness is a luxury or a loss, depending on your perspective, one that is abetted by artificial illumination. Keep in mind that we humans figured out fire 250,000 years ago, while lighting using electricity goes back about 140 years.

Our ancestors were not nearly as inattentive regarding their annual journey around the sun, especially at the time of the winter solstice. Carolyn Edwards writes, "The ancients watched this quiet drama with drawn breath. Would the sun begin to move again? Would the light grow anew on the great wheel of life?"

Would life itself continue?" Praise the solstice for its invitation to us to pause in this season of the year.

Paying Attention

Once I begin to attend to the shortening of the day, it affects me. At this time of year, with the autumnal equinox and the end of daylight savings time come and gone, our days take on a different shape as the solstice approaches and winter descends. This is the place where the reality of winter and darkness intertwine, as do the metaphors for both. The hours of daylight are diminished in length. The nighttime temperature's plunge is intensified by the wind as the warmth we create is whisked away. And the chill can, at times, go very deep. This is the season that some would sleep away, dimly recalling, out of a collective unconscious, ancient memories of dark caves. Winter unfolds in its own way, with its own demands, and we should take heed.



Welcome the Darkness

Jacqui James, a Unitarian Universalist, authored an important meditation in 1991 entitled *Dark and Light*. She wrote, "We shape language and we are shaped by it. In our culture, white is esteemed. It

Our Mission: It is the purpose of the High Country Unitarian Universalist Fellowship [HCUUF] to be a community filled with love, beauty, and compassion. We are committed to freedom of opinion, expression, and spirituality. We seek to be of service to each other, our families, our larger community, and our natural environment.

is heavenly, sun-like, clean, pure, immaculate, innocent, and beautiful. At the same time, black is evil, wicked, gloomy, depressing, angry, sullen." She suggests that we should, "... acknowledge that darkness has a redemptive character; that in darkness there is power and beauty. The dark nurtured and protected us before our birth." James invites us to, "Welcome darkness. Don't be afraid of it or deny it. Darkness brings relief from the blinding sun, from scorching heat, from exhausting labor. Night signals permission to rest, to be with our loved ones, to conceive new life, to search our hearts, to remember our dreams. The dark of winter is a time of hibernation. Seeds grow in the dark, fertile earth." She concludes, "The words black and dark don't need to be destroyed or ignored, only balanced and reclaimed in their wholeness. ...Imagine a world that had only light—or dark. We need both. Dark and light. Light and dark."

Via Negativa

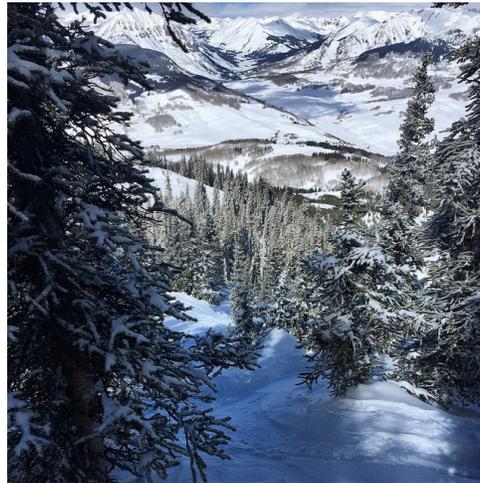
The deep winter's cold and darkness are a kind of emptiness, the *via negativa*, the negative life. To call this season of darkness the "via negativa" may, on the surface, appear to say that it is somehow "less than" or "deficit." This opinion may follow from the ways in which blackness is symbolized in the West, as Jacqui James suggests.

In spiritual traditions, the "via negativa" is as valued as the "via positiva." Beverly Lanzatta writes that the "via negativa ...is often depicted ...as a higher form of contemplation. The seeker enters a pathless wilderness, moving away from what can be grasped by categories and names into an unknowing where the divine is obscure and silent." She concludes that, "Its most important effect, however, may be its manifestation ...where one is able to hold seemingly contradictory and paradoxical truth claims. It is a state of consciousness that recognizes how emptiness, letting go, and deconstruction foster new understandings of reality." In a similar manner, meditation in Buddhism is characterized by emptying.

Reflections on this Season

In her poem *Winter Evening*, May Sarton wrote, "The fragile earth, the trees, all seem to shiver... / While people peer out just before they pull / The comfortable shades and shut themselves away / From all that's ominous and beautiful, / From what they guess the night might have to say." In this solstice time, we should contemplate the darkness to go beyond the obvious, to go further and deeper into the meaning of our own lives and life itself.

Martin Marty writes, "Winter is a season of the heart as much as it is a season in the weather."



He cautions that those possessed of a "summery spirituality" are prone to disregard this season of the heart. The painter Andrew Wyeth, in speaking of winter, said, "Something waits beneath it—the whole story doesn't show." This is also true of darkness. In the depth of winter or the midst of darkness, we need a faith that there is more than meets the eye or touches the heart; more love, more hope, and more life. We also need patience, because the changes that we seek may happen slowly. We must learn not to hurry winter or the darkness, but to wait on them both.

Behold Winter's Stars

While some constellations can be seen year round, many are associated with the seasons. In summer we can see seven constellations including Sagittarius, the centaur, with his bow aimed at Scorpius. By winter, these have been replaced by seven other constellations including Orion, the hunter, and Canis



Major, one of Orion's hunting dogs. In Greek mythology, it is said that Orion boasted that no creature could kill him. The Goddess Hera sent a scorpion to sting him. Orion killed it with his club, but not before it poisoned him. Orion and Scorpius are now on opposite sides of the sky and cannot be seen at the same time.

I share this to invite us to focus on the nighttime sky as the winter solstice approaches. Because of the position of the earth in winter, the night sky is at its brightest, clearest, and most beautiful. More stars are actually visible in winter because, rather than looking toward the center of the Milky Way as we do in summer, our gaze is now directed toward the edge of the galaxy, which is particularly dark.

The nighttime sky in this season is truly the "solstice yin" with countless points of "yang stars" shining through the blackness. As we look up, we bear witness to a starry, starry night.

van Gogh's Starry Night

Of the nighttime sky Vincent van Gogh wrote, "It often seems to me that the night is even more richly colored than the day, colored with the most intense violets, blues, and greens. If you look carefully, you'll see that some stars are lemony; others have a pink, green, forget-me-not blue glow. And without laboring the point, it's clear [that] to paint a starry sky it's not nearly enough to [just] put white spots on blue-black." van Gogh also said, "When I have a terrible need of—shall I say the word—religion, then I go out and paint the stars."

Following a mental breakdown in the winter of 1888, van Gogh checked himself into the Saint-Paul-de-Mausole asylum near Saint-Rémy-de-Provence in May 1889. The view from his east facing

bedroom on the second floor became the basis of his most iconic work, *Starry, Starry Night*. Of his inspiration, van Gogh wrote in one of his many letters to his brother Theo, "This morning I saw the country from my window a long time before sunrise, with nothing but the morning star, which looked very big."



While the painting was done just before the summer solstice in 1889, it is an homage to both the nighttime sky and van Gogh's inner world. While he considered it a failure, it is his most recognizable and famous work.

Earlier van Gogh had wrote, "I must also have a starry night;there are some wonderful nights here." I have no idea what he saw in those starry nights, but his painting goes far beyond the visible world, to something he visualized through his imagination, a starry night that was primal and powerful, a starry night that was informed by his deep and profound religious longing.

During van Gogh's younger years (1876-1880) he pursued the ministry, following in the footsteps of his father who was a minister in the Dutch Reformed church. That tradition, like Unitarian Universalism, focused on humankind's godlike nature, universal salvation, and free will. Rejecting miracles and supernatural events, it sought the divine in nature and community through painting, poetry and other forms of art. Van Gogh abandoned his missionary career and pursued painting when he was not reappointed by the church because he was not an effective preacher. But van Gogh used his paintings to become a preacher of great eloquence.

Solstice Blessings

Speaking of Christmas Eve, Unitarian Universalist minister Mark Belletini writes, "Blest is the dark night, which cradles the moon, and all the stars and the dreams that pave the way to tomorrow. Blest is the deep time before new life arrives, when the mind prepares for the coming day, and the heart remembers how to welcome, and the body waits with dark anticipation. Blest is the indigo blue cloth of the evening which wraps the gift of this hour every year, and festoons it with ribbons of a story 1900 years old; and blest are the carols that match in beauty van Gogh's whirling of stars."

We might also say: Blest is the winter solstice that wraps us in darkness that we might pause and ponder who we are, where we are, and why. Blest is the dark that is the source of imagination and creativity. Blest is the night, the time of sleep and dreaming. Blest is the snow that covers the earth like a blanket whose water-melt will quench our summer thirst. Blest is the winter cold that paves the way to spring and the return of life.



As one person wrote in the spirit of van Gogh, "So you look up,.... And suddenly you see the sky like you've seldom seen it before. It's not just the same old sky tonight. Instead, the blackness is a deep, rich, velvet blue that is more bottomless than any ocean. The stars are not spots of light but brilliant, magical diamonds that dance and twirl like tiny ballerinas. In just this special moment, the sky is somehow alive, and it seems to speak to you silently about the meaning of infinity."

More than New Year' Eve, the Winter Solstice is a time to consider where we

want to go in the coming year. With that knowledge, we know that the darkness will give way go light as we journey forward.

Vincent and the Solstice

Let me close with a paraphrase of some lyrics of the song, *Vincent*, by Don McLean

Starry starry night

Gaze upon this winter view

Paint with snow born anew

And dark that knows the hope within our soul

Stars upon the sky

Sketch the night over mountain dark

Catch the mystery in the spark

Of promise in the dawn's humble birth

...

Starry starry night

Flaming stars that will lead us there

Feel the promise that love will share

See the hope shine in our hearts so bright

On this solstice night

Readings from the Common Bowl

The winter solstice is "a chance to still ourselves inside, to behold the glory of the cosmos, and to take a breath with the Sacred." T. Thorn Coyle

"With faithful progress, the Great Sun has traveled, from north to south again, and on [the winter solstice will] ... stand still, with the whole Earth, in quiet thankfulness...." Eric Williams

"I like... the myth elements of Christmas. The way in which its origins reach back far beyond Jesus, to the rituals of people unknown to us. The celebration of the winter solstice. The coming of light in the darkest time." Robert B. Parker

"The Winter Solstice is the time of ending and beginning, a powerful time—a time to contemplate your immortality. A time to forgive, to be forgiven, and to make a fresh start. A time to awaken." Frederick Lenz

"[On] the winter solstice ...the planet tilts just so to its star, lists and holds circling in a fixed tension between veering and longing, and spins helpless, ex-

alted, in and out of that fleet blazing touch." Annie Dillard

"The [Winter] Solstice is a time of quietude, of firelight, and dreaming, when seeds germinate in the cold earth.... Rivers are stilled and the land lays waiting beneath a coverlet of snow. We watch the cold sunlight and the bright stars... All around us the season seems to reach a standstill — a point of repose."

John Matthews

"The winter solstice celebrates the return of hope to our land as our planet experiences the first slow turn toward greater daylight. Soon we will welcome the return of the sun and the coming of springtime. As we do so, let us remember and embrace the positive, enriching aspects of winter's darkness."

Joyce Rupp and Macrina Wiederkehr

"...Let us be aware of black blessings: Blessed be the black night that nurtures dreams.

Blessed be the black hole out of which creation sprang.

Blessed be the black cave of imagination that births creativity.

Blessed be dark wombs that cradle us.

... Blessed be even our own darkness, our raw, undeveloped cave of shadows.

...May we discover the blessings that lie deep within our holy dark so that we may freely affirm that

Black is beautiful indeed!"

William John Fitzgerald

"Cold and dark, this time of year, the earth lies dormant, awaiting the return of the sun, and with it, life. Far beneath the frozen surface, a heartbeat waits, until the moment is right, to spring."

Anonymous

...[The winter solstice] is the night when you can trust that any direction you go, you will be walking toward the dawn."

Jan Richardson

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