

Sermon for Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Central Michigan

December 20, 2020

Rev. Andrew Frantz

Befriend the Darkness

I am inspired by the words of Rev. Rebecca Parker in today's reading¹. She says,

*In the universe there moves a Wild One
whose gestures alter earth's axis
toward love.*

That's a poetic and spiritual way of thinking about what's happening astronomically and celestially right now. It's the winter solstice because of the tilt of the earth's axis, and tomorrow, the shortest day of the year for those of us in the north, more of our daily spin is in the shadow side of the planet. It's an astronomical and scientific phenomenon, but the minister and the poet frames it as "altering earth's axis toward love." And she says,

*In the immense darkness
everything spins with joy.
The cosmos enfolds us.
We are caught in a web of stars,
cradled in a swaying embrace,*

If you step back far enough in your mind's eye, you see that we are spinning on a blue-green ball in immense darkness, cradled in a web of stars, and that darkness is especially noticeable at this time—the winter solstice. Rebecca Parker ends her poem by saying,

*Let this be the time
we wake to life,
like spring wakes, in the moment
of winter solstice.*

I want to talk this morning about the opposite impulses that are present at the winter solstice, the darkest time of the year: the impulse to drive out the darkness with light, and the impulse to embrace fully the darkness—the gifts within the darkness and the wisdom of the darkness.

As a practical matter, of course, darkness is dangerous. As humans who have survived generations we know—and our ancestors knew—that if there's total darkness and there's no light, no warmth, we're in big trouble. If the fire goes out, literally, we risk freezing to death. So there's a reason for humans to have that impulse to drive out the darkness with fire, with light. We see that in our city streets, where so many of us put bright lights on our houses in the dark season of the year. We see that in what we do here every week: in the Unitarian Universalist tradition we light a chalice to represent light; hope; good things. In fact, our chalice lighting this morning said,

Let that little candle flame be your friend this morning.

¹ Rebecca Parker, "Winter Solstice." <https://www.uua.org/worship/words/poetry/winter-solstice>

*Allow it to quiet your mind,
as you attentively watch its flickering glow.*

*Allow it to calm your mind in a way that brings a stillness
that can light up the interior of your being
that can help you find the wellspring of your feelings.²*

Befriend the flame: I say that's a good idea. I love that mediation, inviting us to look at the candle flame and find serenity there. And I say it's also a good idea to befriend the darkness. That, of course, was the message of the story the Kendra read this morning,³ where the child was afraid of the darkness, and the child was eventually able to befriend the darkness and find the wisdom, the possibility, the gifts of the darkness.

We are holding opposites today. I'm inviting you to hold both things.

Both of these opposites, embracing light and embracing darkness, I find present in the celebration of Yule. The tradition of Yule is the Pagan holiday at this time of year, the winter solstice, predating Christianity and Christmas by many centuries. Long before the story of the birth of Jesus, long before the historical figure of Jesus, humans were surviving through long winters. And they noticed when is the longest night (the shortest day), and when does the sun begin to return. We know that from Stonehenge and other artifacts of ancient civilizations. So we've been doing this for a long time—and some of the Christmas traditions have been grafted onto ancient Yule traditions.

One of the ancient Yule traditions is to burn a Yule log. It's a tradition of embracing light: it's the darkest time; let's bring the light back in. Let's do that in a ritual way. I celebrate that, just as Pagans do.

And, I have Pagan friends in Ohio who describe another ritual. This is what they do. They gather in someone's home and they turn off all the lights for Yule. They shut off the electricity. If there is a pilot light for the water heater, they even blow out the pilot light. They are embracing the full darkness, and they sit in meditation in that darkness open to the possibilities, the wisdom, the embrace of the darkness itself—before they relight the pilot light, turn back on the lights, and ritually bring back in the light.

There is wisdom in embracing the light, but I think we don't want to make an enemy of the darkness. What is good about darkness? Darkness represents a chance to sleep; and bears and other animals that hibernate in the winter show us the wisdom of this in the natural world. Darkness represents healing, I would say, which may be akin to sleep. We all need sleep, rest, and healing. Darkness represents safety. We can hide in the dark, we can feel safe embraced by the dark. Darkness gives us a chance for introspection, for slowing down. Darkness and the dark season is a time for planning—planning what we will do next year when the light returns. In darkness there is wisdom.

All through the month of December the worship theme has been, and remains to be, "stillness." Last week I talked about the importance of a spiritual practice of stillness—that it's good for you although difficult, because we must confront our own shadow in the stillness.

This is good for individuals, this practice of stillness, and the dark time of year lends itself to that. I also say that this is a good practice for us as a society. Can we embrace as a society a moment of embracing the

² Samuel Trumbore, "Chalice Flame Contemplation."

<https://www.uua.org/worship/words/meditation/chalice-flame-contemplation>

³ Orion and the Dark by Emma Yarlett. Candlewick Press, 2015.

darkness, of slowing down, with time to sleep, time to heal, time to rest? Using our vacation time, if we have that, to heal. To slow down.

There is good practical advice here: if we use the dark time to slow down as a society, to not visit each other so much as we might wish to, we will spread the infectious virus less. There is soul-searching work to do as a society also: what have we learned from the pandemic in the past nine months? What have we learned from the election? Where are we now on the eve of a very different presidency (one month from now)? I say we have lot to gain from embracing the darkness as individuals and as a society.

I'll end today with these words by Shelley Jackson Denham, which appears as a hymn in our hymnal called Dark of Winter:

*Dark of winter, soft and still, your quiet calm surrounds me.
Let my thoughts go where they will; ease my mind profoundly.
And then my soul will sing a song, a blessed song of love eternal.
Gentle darkness, soft and still, bring your quiet to me.*

*Darkness, soothe my weary eyes, that I may see more clearly.
When my heart with sorrow cries, comfort and caress me.
And then my soul may hear a voice, a still, small voice of love eternal.
Darkness, when my fears arise, let your peace flow through me.⁴*

There is calmness in the darkness. There is peace. On this winter solstice, may we embrace the opposites. We know that we need light and warmth; we nurture and welcome the light in the darkness. And we know that darkness has gifts. Darkness represents safety, healing, rest, introspection. In this solstice season may we be open to the wisdom of the darkness.

Blessed be. May it be so.

⁴ Shelley Jackson Denham, "Dark of Winter." #55 in Singing the Living Tradition, The Unitarian Universalist Association, Beacon Press, Boston. 1993.