

## Winter Solstice 2020

The word “solstice” is made up of 2 Latin words meaning “sun” and “stopping,” for ancient people believed that the sun literally stopped in its tracks during the winter and summer solstices, causing the shortest and longest days to occur. The early Celtic peoples of the British Isles called the winter solstice “Yule,” which

has come to be synonymous with Christmas, but it was not always so. “Yule” comes from an Old English root that means young or youth; the pre-Christian Celts, like the ancient Greeks and Romans, thought of the winter solstice as the sun’s birthday, the day when the sun begins to come back after its winter journey away from the earth. As with many of the celebrations now considered Christian, Christmas was simply laid on top of the winter holiday of

the sun's rebirth that people had been celebrating for thousands of years. (The return of the Sun Child on the winter solstice is why some UU churches hold a Child Dedication in their service at that time of year.

It is difficult now to cast ourselves back, to put our modern selves in the place of the folks of the Northern Hemisphere during pre-urban, pre-Christian times. These agricultural peoples were dependent

on the sun for the growth of crops and for their survival through the deprivation and bitter cold of the winter. Just living through a northern European winter in those days was quite an accomplishment. During the long winter months, people were cut off from their normal outdoor occupations, were faced with un-certain supplies of food and fuel and were unable to easily communicate with friends and neighbors. Almost as deadly as the

possibility of starvation was the certainty of long stretches of both fear and boredom.

The earliest peoples were afraid because they may have thought it was possible that the sun might not return, that spring might not arrive. It would be only natural to fear that you yourself or members of your family might not survive to see the spring, even if it did come. There was no reliable means of weather forecasting, so the fierce winter

storms must have seemed even more deadly, arising as they did with so little warning.

What is truly wonderful is the reaction these people had to their straitened circumstances during the winter solstice. With all they had to worry about, you might think the Celts would have come up with a winter ritual of sadness and grief, or at least full of intercessory prayer to ease their troubled hearts. Instead, these humanistic pagans developed

Yule, a holiday time full of parties,  
feasting, drinking, and play-acting.

They splurged their food and fuel  
supplies on gatherings of friends  
and family, spiced with song and  
laughter, lit with bonfires, Yule  
logs, and candles. They dragged  
evergreens into their homes,  
somehow assured by their eternal  
greenness that spring would indeed  
come and death was not the end of  
everything.

The highlight of Yule was something like Mardi Gras – the “Feast of Fools,” a tableau or informal play where everything of importance was mocked and turned upside-down. No subject was too painful to make fun of; no person or personality too exalted to escape the needle of the people’s satire. From among the villagers, they chose a Fool King, whose every command had to be obeyed, no matter how ridiculous or how wicked. They



sang silly, meaningless songs,  
whose lyrics of “fa la la la” come  
down to us today in certain carols.  
They got drunk on homemade mead,  
a beer made from honey, and  
overindulged in pies made from  
everything in their cupboards:  
preserved meat and dried fruits and  
honey and nuts and spices – the  
precursors to our own minced-meat  
pies. They were afraid of the dark  
and the cold – so they ate, drank,  
and made merry. They were afraid

of death, so they had a party to  
make fun of death. How touching!  
How brave! ...how very human.

Unlike our early human ancestors,  
for the most part we moderns no  
longer fear the dark time of the year  
(especially not here in Florida,  
Mark Twain once famously said  
about the south, we have only 2  
seasons, one being summer and the  
other not.) But we are still afraid of  
the dark – we fear the dark parts of  
ourselves and the dark unknown of

the future. We have made darkness a villain, as UU Jacqui James has pointed out, even our language proclaims it. But we forget the importance of balance; we forget our own mixed-up natures; we forget and begin to demonize all that we do not like and do not understand and fear. We need to be reminded that all life needs sunlight and dark, growth and rest, summer and winter; that all beings are made of good and bad, strong and weak.

I may have told this story to you before, but it's worth retelling to make a point. Many years ago, I was given a science assignment: I had to determine under what conditions plants grew best. My dad and I went to a nursery and purchased 3 nearly-identical plants, and got advice on how often to water them and what to feed them for optimum growth.

When we got home, I put one in a dark closet, one in a closet with the light turned on all the time, and one

on the living room windowsill, where it received the benefit of both sunlight and darkness. All 3 plants were otherwise cared for in exactly the same manner – all 3 were watered regularly and all 3 got calcium feedings made from water and crushed eggshells.

After the first week, I noticed some slight differences among the 3 plants. For one thing, the plant in the dark closet was not quite as green and healthy-looking as the

other 2. Secondly, the plant in the lighted closet was definitely the tallest and had grown the most.

After the second week, however, the differences became much more marked. The plant in the dark closet was really sad-looking – some of the leaves were brown and curling and the entire plant had lost even more color. The plant that got light all the time was no longer the biggest or the greenest – that honor went to the plant on the windowsill. By the third

week, I had 2 plants that were nearly dead: the one in the dark and its opposite, the one in perpetual light.

The only plant that continued to thrive was the one in the living room window, receiving both sunlight and darkness in the natural way of things.

Everything living on the earth needs both light and dark for growth and health and wholeness. This is known in every culture around the globe, and there are dozens and dozens of

origin stories about the beginnings of creation, when earth-beings complained either of perpetual day or perpetual night, and received the gift of both. In her insightful book, *Dreaming the Dark*, Starhawk reminds us of the healing power of darkness, and encourages us to look deeper into our fear of the dark: She writes, “Where there is fear, there is power.... We need to dream the dark as process, and dream the dark as change, to create the dark in a new



image. Because the dark created us....The dark [is] all that we are afraid of, all that we don't want to see – fear, anger, grief, death, the unknown.” The turning dark: change. The velvet dark: skin soft in the night, the stroke of flesh on flesh, touch, joy, mortality....Birth-giving dark: seeds are planted underground, the womb is dark, and life forms it-self anew in hidden places.

The question of the dark has become a journey... How do we find the dark within and transform it, own it as our own power? How do we dream it into a new image, dream into actions that will change the world into a place where no more horror stories happen, where there are no more victims? Where the dark is kind and charged with a friendly power: the power of the unseen, the power that comes from within, the power [that] is the spark

of every nerve and life of every  
breath...

To answer Starhawk's heart-felt  
question, I look to the same playful  
spirit that animated the pagan Celts  
celebrating Yule, a childlike spirit  
that befriends that which we fear. In  
the wonderful bedtime book, *There's  
a Nightmare in My Closet*,  
children's author and illustrator  
Mercer Mayer tells of a young child  
who is afraid of the dark and is  
convinced that a Nightmare lurks in

his dark closet. The story does not assert that there is nothing there – instead, the Nightmare comes out of the closet and turns out to be more frightened of the child than the child is of the Nightmare. The child comforts the ugly Nightmare when it cries and tucks it tenderly into bed – not neglecting to carefully shut the closet door. The book ends with the child musing, “I suppose there's another nightmare in my closet, but my bed's not big enough for 3.”

After hurricane Katrina I travelled to New Orleans a few times and grew close to the ministers of UU congregations in that area. I kept in touch with them and the Rev. Emily Morel once wrote this in an email to me: We in New Orleans have had to face our worst nightmares – What if the levees broke? What if we lost everything? What if our church was filled with dirty floodwater? What if the city was crippled and broken and

wounded? And we found out,  
somewhat to our own surprise, that  
we could survive, that we could  
even, at times, thrive, that we could  
hope and plan for a better future,  
that we could even retain our grit  
and sense of humor. Our worst fears  
came true, and we came out on the  
other side – not unscathed, certainly,  
but at least still whole, still able to  
cope, still able to love each other  
and this exasperating city of ours.  
Yes, there is still of lot of darkness

to be faced – the lack of grocery stores, the dearth of healthcare professionals, the scarcity of high quality, reliable childcare, the many schools that have not reopened, the shrinkage of affordable housing, the malfeasance and unreliability of too many of our elected officials – but still we carry on, facing what must be faced, fighting we needs to be fought, and still managing to celebrate every small recovery,

every tiny victory, every  
insignificant holiday

We can learn from the dark – the  
real dark, that we have a need for  
rest and respite and creativity and  
new birth, and the metaphorical  
dark, our shadow sides, our fears.

Let us make friends with the healing  
dark, and connect with those  
feelings and emotions of which we  
are most afraid. We need the  
balance. May we strive for the



balance, and reach for the healing  
darkness when we need it.

May it be so.