

The Gathering Darkness
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December 20, 2015

The sun rose this morning at 7:09 AM.

It will set tonight at 4:51 PM.

Not quite ten hours of daylight in these days just around the Winter Solstice tomorrow. Serious cold is rare enough to get a lot of attention here, especially if it sticks around for more than a few days as I hear it did last winter; snow is even more rare. Even here, though, winter advances inexorably on a river of shadow, dimming our sunlit lives, pooling in the corners of our houses and gardens and moods. Some of us rise and travel to work in the dark and come home in the dark; night begins to seem like the norm.

Winter is the season of gathering darkness. And in response to that darkness, and the cooling as our hemisphere slowly turns its face away from the sun, life sinks below the surface of the earth. Trees sigh and say goodbye to the last of their leaves. Plants wither and hide their last traces of vitality inside gnarled, dirt-colored bulbs and roots. Animals disappear, save for a few hardy or desperate scavengers, or birds migrating from Earth's coldest places. And above all, it is dark—even if it's not terribly cold, it's dark.

Into this season of gathering darkness, the many faiths of humankind scatter festivals of light.

Jews celebrate the rekindling of a sacred lamp, reconsecrating with God's miraculous help a temple that had been desecrated by conquerors.

Hindus celebrate several stories of the godly triumph of light over darkness in the festival of Diwali.

For many Buddhists, this time of year includes Bodhi Day, the day when Prince Siddhartha finally found enlightenment and became the Buddha.

Christians celebrate the birth of Jesus, the Light of the World born into a world lost in darkness.

All over the world, on calendars lunar and solar, in religions simple or complex, as far back as the memory of stories goes, this season when the light seems faintest, the sun far away and indifferent, has been the time for religious festivals marking the return of the light. In the gathering darkness, the *people* gather. With fasting, feasts, and dances, with songs and prayers and glowing flames we join our many ancestors to celebrate the birth or the rebirth of light against the all-enveloping backdrop of darkness. As all the natural

world breathes out into the sleep of dark and cold and death, humankind breathes in and sings a song of light and hope.

In all this season's celebration of light it's easy to think that darkness and cold, Winter itself, is the enemy, a danger and an evil to be pushed or driven away. Our American Christmas customs have their roots in European traditions far older than Christianity. Evergreens, candles, decorated trees, gift-giving and feasting are all carryovers from the pre-Christian celebrations of Yule at the Winter Solstice. The popular interpretation of this Celtic Pagan festival, at least since Sir James Frazer's *Golden Bough* was published in 1890, is that the solstice celebration grew out of fear that the light would never return. It was intended to stave off the encroaching darkness and call back the sun from its wayward wandering.

Maybe so. But I wonder. These Bronze Age people had to be very well aware of the annual cycles of light and darkness. They built monumental structures that still act as very sophisticated solar calendars, tracing the movement of sun from Summer Solstice to Equinox to Winter Solstice and back to Equinox generation after generation. Their lives depended on understanding the cycles of the seasons for agriculture and for hunting. Is it really possible they didn't know the sun would come back without their intervention?

I think that's a culturally arrogant interpretation. I'm far more inclined to think that the celebrations of Winter Solstice, light and warmth and life in the midst of Nature's darkest, coldest, deadliest season, are a recognition of the natural and necessary rhythm of waxing and waning, of fertility and fallowness, of life and death. Solstice calls me not only to celebrate the light and look with assurance for its return, but also to take time to understand and acknowledge the power and value of the darkness. Solstice reminds me that winter is a season unto itself, not just the way toward Spring.

In all the warmth and glow of our many Festivals of Light, I don't want to miss the beauty and the necessity of winter. As a wonderful reading in our hymnal says, winter is "a table set in ice and starlight," a time of austere yet compelling loveliness. Listen to our Transcendentalist Unitarian sage, Henry David Thoreau, on winter:

"Why do you flee so soon, sir, to the theaters, lecture-rooms, and museums of the city? If you will stay here awhile I will promise you strange sights. You shall walk on water; all these brooks and rivers and ponds shall be your highway. You shall see the whole earth covered a foot or more deep with purest white crystals, in which you slump or over which you glide, and all the trees and stubble glittering in icy armor."

Take the time to look at trees in winter. Stripped of their foliage, they reveal the magnificent intricate architecture of branch and twig, the amazing muscular lift of the trunk that carries life from the earth to the crown. Older trees reveal in their bark the

long story of their annual rebirths, the record of what poet Richard Wilbur calls their art – “to grow, stretch, crack and yet not come apart.”

There are times, looking at the midnight stars on an icy December night, when I swear I can *feel* the movement of our little living rock of a planet through the vastness of space, *feel* the slow spin that carries our hemisphere through the night and into the dawn.

In winter’s subtle shadings of black, white, and gray, in its long nights and bright stars, in its silences, I find my vision, my hearing, my sensitivity to life heightened. The least bit of color or light leaps out at me, the faintest sound calls my attention. And I find myself deeply aware of all that’s lying dormant, waiting, gathering strength and energy and nourishment beneath the soil, inside the tree trunk, below the surface and under the banks of the pond. Life is there, life that needs this fallow time, depends on it every year. Winter is not just a beautiful, it is *necessary*. Fallow time is vital in our own lives as well, quiet seasons when we rest, restore our strength, and gather ourselves for the next burst of growth and development.

Why is Christmas a winter festival? What led the early church leaders to set the liturgical calendar so that the celebration of Jesus’ birth coincided with the celebrations of Yule and Saturnalia at Winter Solstice? It didn’t have to. Most historians who use the Bible as at least literary if not literal evidence, think it’s likely that the actual birth of the historic Jesus occurred sometime in the early Fall, not near the Winter Solstice. So why move Christmas to fall amidst all the ancient festivals of light?

Some say those trying to establish the new religion were trying to link Jesus with popular and joyful festivals already existing; some claim the early church fathers wanted to replace the rather riotous pre-Christian Solstice celebrations with the more pious observation of the birth of Christ. I don’t claim to know. But there’s something about the interplay of dark and light, something about the necessity of winter that hints at something else for me. Somehow it seems to me that *we* need winter to fully experience the deepest meanings of Christmas.

In the clear darkness of the winter sky perhaps we can discern the light of a guiding Star of Wonder. In the chill of a long winter twilight perhaps we can experience the desperation of a mother seeking shelter to give birth. In the silence of a winter dawn perhaps we can just make out the voices of angels singing Peace on Earth. In the hidden, waiting, expectant life just beneath the winter surface perhaps we can sense new life, new hope, new strength waiting within us.

It seems to me that the story of Christmas, of hope born in the darkness of a poor stable, connects deeply with the ancient Yuletide assurance that indeed, the light *will return*. How we need to be reminded of this, sometimes! In any given year there is darkness enough to dim even the lightest spirit. You don’t have to be unusually moody or

sensitive to feel weighed down sometimes; just a season of ordinary disappointments, personal shortcomings, and the discouraging news of the wayward world can take the wind out of our sails.

Sometimes, though, the darkness seems deeper. There's enough accumulated violence, savagery, deception and poor judgment on the world's stage today to make us doubt there can ever be a time of peace or justice on earth. In our own lives, too, some awful event or great struggle might have decimated our reserves of hope or sapped our zest for living.

Sometimes, we can truly feel we have come to our own longest night, when the light of hope seems no more than a legend.

That's when we really need the ancient wisdom, the wisdom Christmas calls to mind. Hope is alive in the gathering darkness. The light has not gone; we're just tilted away from it for a time. Even on the longest night, when our little part of Earth is leaning as far as possible into the darkness of space, the light is right there, waiting for us to lean back in.

In this Solstice season of gathering darkness, may we all be assured that light returns as surely as the turn of the earth around the Sun. In the austere beauties of winter may we find new clarity of purpose and hope. In the warmth of winter's celebrations may we find closer, deeper, stronger relationships. And may our fallow times be seasons of acceptance, growth, and renewal.

Happy Solstice – Merry Christmas!