

“Joy in the Darkness”
Homily by Rev. Joan Javier-Duval
Unitarian Church of Montpelier
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Recently, my family took a trip to the Fairbanks Museum and Planetarium in St. Johnsbury for a tour of the night sky. As we found our seats in the planetarium, the lights grew dim and then were shut off. We fixed our eyes upon the dome above us and watched as it was soon populated by tiny dots of light representative of stars and planets and asteroids in our solar system and well beyond.

We gazed in awe at the streak of light composing the Milky Way and the rising and falling of Venus and Jupiter.

The darkness of night can be wondrous and inviting. It is with darkness that we are more able to notice what has already been illuminated, like the millions of celestial bodies of light telling us of our connection to the cosmos.

The night sky also contains darkness that is mysterious. Patches of lightless space that tell of the far reaches of the universe - empty and open.

The dark of the winter season is now upon us. The Winter Solstice is just around the corner marking the official start of winter as well as the the slow lengthening of days as we rotate back into greater proximity to the Sun.

While we celebrate the return of the light, the lengthening of days can feel like they happen ever so slowly at this northern latitude. Winter can be a difficult time for many. The cold temperatures, icy roads and sidewalks, the lack of sunshine. If you struggle with mobility issues or with seasonal depression, winter can be a challenging time to feel a sense of well-being.

Despite the returning of the light, darkness is still very much a reality during this season especially here in Vermont with our bounty of cloud-covered winter days. For ancient cultures built around an agricultural calendar, the lack of sun meant a kind of death. No plants to be grown for nourishment. Animals that could not be fed. This could be a scary time of not quite

knowing whether one could survive the season. Winter solstice rituals of gathering together, of feasting and merry-making spoke to this longing for the return of the light.

As for these ancient ancestors, this winter darkness can feel like a kind of death. A lack of vitality. The dark can be frightening, and we may not want to linger here for too long.

Yet, darkness is an inherent part of the cycles and rhythms of the natural world. These cycles, rhythms, and seasons can offer us grounding and a way to reconnect especially in a time when the stressors of collapsing systems (climate systems and democratic systems) are so great. The ancient cycles - as old as our solar system - can remind us of our place in something greater than us - our connection to forces beyond our control.

With the long nights of winter still to come (though the longest night will soon pass), I wonder if you can approach this time of darkness as a time to pause and rest in the cycle of the seasons. You might view this pause as a time of preparation. It is in darkness that the earth rests and that seeds store up their reserves until it is time to grow again. This preparation time is a time all of its own. A time of waiting, resting, and noticing.

The Unitarian Universalist minister, Gary Kowalski, writes:

“Night has its own kind of beauty, different than the beauty of day.
Night is a time of sleep and dreams and
inward visions,
A time of pause within activity.
Darkness is an invitation to imagining and storytelling,
And to using ears instead of eyes to listen to the world in its stillness.
Darkness is the den of life in germination,
And darkness is the portal of death that opens
to eternity:
The mystery of all time past and endless time
to come.”¹

¹ Gary Kowalski, “Solstice,” <https://www.uua.org/worship/words/meditation/solstice>.

If we can resist the urge to fill up all of the darkness with light, darkness can offer a gentle invitation into deeper awareness than can bring joy. The joy of stillness. The joy of imagination. The joy of possibility lying in wait.

Darkness and light both have their place. It is the presence of both darkness and light that supports our spiritual well-being.

There is a legend from the cultures of the British Isles that depicts the interplay of darkness and light across the seasons. In this legend, the Holly King and Oak King are twin brothers, two sides of a whole. These twin brothers take turns ruling over the world. The Oak King wears a crown of antlers and dresses in all green. He is associated with summer and its light and warmth. The Holly King wears a crown of holly and thick robes and represents the winter and its darkness and cold. According to legend, these two kings battle throughout the year to determine who will dominate.

Unitarian Universalist minister, Erica Baron, re-imagines this ancient legend for our times. In her retelling, people watched this continual battle and began to take sides. They cheered for the Oak King and celebrated the return of light and warmth. Soon they found ways to introduce their own light and warmth into the world all year round.

Generations passed and the people began to notice a dramatic shift. Darkness was disappearing as was the cold. Summer was lasting longer. Ice that had been frozen for as long as anyone alive could remember began to melt. The whole world around them was changing in unpredictable ways.

Erica Baron writes: “The people began to see that their support of warmth and light over cold and darkness had altered the balance of the whole world. They began, slowly, one at a time, to realize that the Holly King was dying. And for the first time, this thought filled them with fear. What would happen if the balance continued to be destroyed? Could they even survive in a world without the Holly King?”

And in the world of the gods, the Oak King realized it, too. And though they had been competitors all these many centuries, he also realized that he loved his brother deeply, and could not live without him. The longest night came, and the Oak King and the Holly King met again, but this time, the Oak King had no heart for the fight. He lay down his sword and spear. He came, open-handed to his brother, who was struggling just to stay on his feet. The Oak King

wrapped the Holly King in a tight embrace. And he promised to set aside their enmity and to help his brother heal. On the night when he usually claimed ascendance, he realized that the world was already too warm and too light. And so, he laid the great Oak crown on the head of his brother, took his hand, and each supporting the other, they went out into the world to see what could be done to restore balance.”²

On the cusp of this Yuletide, may you embrace the gifts of both the darkness and the light. May you feel rest in the gentleness of the night. May you seek to restore balance in the earth’s rhythms. And, may you find within the darkness a spark of joy and blow on its embers to keep it strong.

² Erica Baron, “Yule Story,” December 3, 2016, <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/naturessacredjourney/2016/12/yule-story/>.