

The Light That Shines in the Darkness

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I remember the Christmas of my childhood: a time of anticipation, looking forward to the gifts on Christmas morning; the story of baby Jesus born in Bethlehem; baby Jesus as a gift. I remember music: Christmas carols sung on cold clear nights; Christmas lights like stars shining out against a pure dark sky. Music coming out of the silence, and always leading back to silence. Stillness.

It was an experience that repeated year after year on the clock of the seasons, the hour hand approaching midnight once again. The seasons circled again as I grew and unfolded, my capacities growing wider. The circle of time became a spiral moving out, ever forward, ever wider.

I opened out from the seeds of the Christian tradition I was raised in. I gained perspective. Half-in, half-out of that tradition I could reflect, reconnect. This was the beginning of my shift towards Unitarian Universalism. It gave me questions. Where does Christmas come from? Whence the rituals? Whence the hope for a new heaven and a new Earth? It gave me options. Hearing the story of the Earth as a living being. A spiritual being.

I tentatively explored the Pagan outlook not as an oddity from the past but as a living, Earth-centered tradition. I saw there is a “there” there, through my reading of Margot Adler, through the teaching and example of Starhawk. I affirmed the connection between ancient spiritualities and my own love of the woods and mountains; the urge to address Mother Earth as “thou”.

Christmas as we know it, in this part of the world, has roots in Yule. It’s the ultimate both/and. Those who celebrate Christmas are also celebrating Yule. Whether we know it or not, the ancient ways inform the present.

Christmas is a festival built on earlier festivals. Like a cathedral built on the site of an ancient temple, it is held up by ancient foundations. Like a saint’s shrine at a well once consecrated to the Goddess, Christmas does not pre-empt the spirit of the place, but pays her due reverence. The memories extend deeper than we realize. The stories we tell now

derive their power from stories half-remembered; our collective unconscious. Like water from an underground spring they continue to nourish and bring new life.

At its best, Christmas is an expression of Yule. It brings together archetypes of light and darkness in fertile contact. The cyclic time of the ancients merges with an arc of history drawn towards a vision of a world transformed.

Our service this morning happens the day before Winter Solstice, December 21, the longest night of the year. This will be a special solstice because Jupiter and Saturn will come in very close conjunction, to appear as a double planet. Sadly we won't be celebrating together that evening: the Yule ceremony you enjoy every year won't be happening, because of Covid.

I wonder how you're feeling about the winter ahead. Winter has a beauty all its own; will you embrace it, or will you hunker down? It's not so easy to embrace winter during the pandemic which demands that we continue to stay home as much as possible, as we have done since last March.

Myself, I'm not excited about snow removal. I'm not looking forward to the icy ground. And even though I spent yesterday morning skiing in the woods, and look forward to such mornings, there's a part of me muttering "it ain't summer anymore" and counting the weeks until spring.

We are still, underneath, the original people who needed Yule to give them that ray of hope.

Imagine Christmas, imagine Yule, and we see night. Winter is the night-time of the year. There are things to fear, and it's a rational fear. We look ahead to the prospect of want: all the lean months ahead. We are cold; we desire to be warm. This is a time to be together, not a time for isolation. Not a time to be alone and lost in the woods.

The dark ends later and starts earlier. Sometimes it seems we're living in the dark. The darkness has become a repository for unseen dangers, unnamed fears. All that we disowned about ourselves and banished to the outer darkness seems to be moving close, shrinking our little circle of light. In a very real sense our world is dying.

But there is a force within us that will not succumb. An equal and opposite response being kindled inside: a yearning that will carry us through. A yearning for light, for warmth, for green things and abundance.

Hence the sympathetic magic of Yule, as in Susan Cooper's poem we read earlier: "They burned beseeching fires all night long to keep the year alive". It is a celebration that evokes, and answers, the yearning for spring.

In the words of another poet, David C. Meyer:

*So we take up boughs and hang their green from rafters
and roof-trees and lintels; we drag pines and junipers,
berries clustered in their hands, into our homes
of cold timber and stone; we roll logs
thick as cattle into our hearths, mumbling
all the time of Mithras or Odin; hunched
in tents of skin in desert or on steppe
we line candles in a row and kindle fire
night by night to bring us back to light,
little by little, reminding us of warmth,
of the time when earth was green and beasts
were fat, and sunlight lasted through the day,
the whole day.*

*We stoke the Yule log, light
our candles in a row, we huddle close
beneath the pungent boughs, and tell each other
tales to keep us wakeful through the night,
tending the fire, striking another light.*

On the other side of the celebration is darkness: not the darkness we fear but the darkness we can embrace. There is a time for rest, a time for dreaming, a time to let go and let be. This darkness is the generative place from which light is born. It is the silence between sounds: the rest between the notes, in the never-ending song that traces the cycle of the seasons across the arc of the years.

Something has changed through this seasonal ritual. We have befriended the darkness we had feared. Hope has been seeded within us, by the yearning we evoked. We step outside to enjoy the cold night air, witnessing the pinpoint stars against the night sky's blackness. On the horizon, the light is coming. From a poem by your former minister, Tess Baumberger, "December Dawn":

*... spirit breathes its reassuring hymn
that even coldest evenings of the year
conceal a subtle, everlasting fire.*

I'd like to suggest that this ancient experience of Yule, the transformation of midwinter to a time of hope, provides foundations for what we have come to know as Christmas. The stories of Christ being born retell the story of light returning, with the promise of Earth being born once again.

Christmas is a tradition centered on the birth of Jesus, a tradition with many layers of history and interpretation. For many centuries the people of Israel were subjugated by a series of empires – Assyrian, Babylonian, Persian, Hellenistic and Roman. The Hebrew prophets interpreted this situation in terms of Israel's struggle to return to right relationship with their God. The people's yearning was for an end to oppression and a lasting peace. The prophets foretold the coming of an anointed one, a Messiah, who would drive out the oppressors and usher in a new age. From Isaiah chapter 9: (9:2, 4, 6)

The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness – on them light has shined.

The yoke of their burden, and the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor, you have broken ...

For a child has been born for us, a son given to us ... and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

For the Gospel writers and the faith communities they represented, Jesus was that Messiah. He came to answer the yearnings of an oppressed people and fulfill God's promise to them, as foretold by the prophets.

Mary understood this as she carried the baby Jesus in her womb. In Luke's gospel, chapter 1, she utters these words: (1:46-55)

My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.

Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name.

His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation.

He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.

He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly;

he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.

*He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy,
according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
to Abraham and to his descendants forever.*

Luke provides the most complete and familiar story of the Nativity, the birth of Jesus. In this story, images of light and darkness play a prominent role.

Mary and Joseph search long for a place where they can spend the night, a safe place in which Mary can give birth to her child. (The image of this birth is forever a night-time scene).

Angels come to the shepherds watching their flocks by night; their brilliance shines against the night sky as they bring the good news and tell the shepherds, “be not afraid”.

Darkness is transformed: it has become the place of new birth, the genesis of a new world, The future begins with a tiny flicker of life: a defenseless child who will, in his own peaceful way, overturn an existing order.

The Nativity does not signify the end of that transformation, but the beginning. There would be many years of struggle ahead. There still are. What is new is the hope that was born on that night and continues to be born. A word was spoken that will never be unsaid, a flame kindled that will not be extinguished. In the opening words of John’s gospel: “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it”. (John 1:5)

The seasons turn and turn again. We approach the midnight of the year and within it, the yearning for the morning sun to rise. Our stories and our rituals quicken that yearning and rekindle the hope that will carry us through.

Blessed Yule.

Merry Christmas.