

In Darkness and in Light

By Rev. Jane Smith, Channing Memorial Church, UU, Ellicott City, MD December 18, 2022

Sometimes I lament the darkness of fall and winter, the late afternoon slowly shifting, earlier and earlier, to a deep, dark sky. And yet, when evening arrives and I look to the moon, and beyond the moon to those suspended stars that glitter – not in the light of day – but only in the blanket of darkness, I am reminded that this time is a sacred time.

Unitarian Universalist minister Rev. Rebecca Ann Parker wrote, in her own interpretation of the winter solstice,

Let there be a season
when holiness is heard, and
the splendor of living is revealed.
Stunned to stillness by beauty
we remember who we are and why we are here.
There are inexplicable mysteries.¹

A time when holiness is heard, and we are stunned to stillness by beauty – I imagine the tranquil, calm, peaceful beauty particular to this season of cold darkness, of falling snow, of frozen lakes and ponds, of clouds of breath ascending through the air. This is a time of mystery – of calm, restorative darkness. In this sacred shadow, “We are caught in a web of stars,”² Rev. Parker writes. The web illuminated in the early winter as I – as we – are ushered into a time of much needed pause and stillness. On this solstice day we celebrate, we are tilted as far away from the sun as ever – immersed in cold and the longest night of the year. And it is this day that marks the ushering in of the light, and the days begin to slowly grow longer. There is a moment of pause, a stillness as the earth shifts, before the sunlight reawakens. And so, we have the

¹ <https://www.uua.org/worship/words/poetry/winter-solstice>

² Ibid

beauty of restorative darkness bridged into a time of active, joyful light by a moment of pause, of connection with all that is as the earth takes a short breath. The mystery of the darkness invokes a time to simply, deeply, intensely be – with ourselves, our beloveds, our sacred. The new illumination of the sun ushers in a time when our restored selves reenter an enlivened, exciting, joyful period. One illuminates the other, as the dark sky illuminates the glittering stars.

To me, this is a sacred time. The darkness, the intentional pause, the cold air that evokes a seasonal rest in nature as plants and animals alike enter a period of hibernation – this time offers me extended moments to connect with all I hold within, and all I hold beyond. I have a yearly new understanding of myself and my core – my holy within – and an intentional time to connect to that sacred which is transcendent. Let us pause in reverence and pause in prayer – whatever prayer may mean to us.

It is a sacred time for those of the Jewish faith as well – a time to honor the Festival of Lights – a time of acknowledging and celebrating the holiday of Hanukkah. Those of the Jewish faith honor a story, a sacred story, about a flickering light that sustained their faith. In the ancient times, Syrian king Antiochus abolished Judaism and desecrated the sacred temple. A Jewish resistance movement – known as the Maccabees – revolted and rededicated the temple – the small group overcame all odds. In the temple, the Maccabees relit their *ner tamid* a sacred light, with only enough oil to last one day. Miraculously, it lasted for eight – enough time to procure more oil to keep the flame kindled.³

Hanukkah commemorates the miracle of the oil – the light that shone brilliantly against the veil of oppression, the spark that illuminated a persecuted faith and an abused people, the flame that cast light upon the sacred. Unexpected light – a sacred offering of inner peace, an offering of hope, an offering of a faith sustained. Can we bring the miracle of light into our own lives, sustaining our own faith no matter what adversities we are facing? Can we find in the sacred spark of life our own hope, our own inner peace, our own strength and determination, no

³ <https://www.reformjudaism.org/jewish-holidays/hanukkah/history-hanukkah-story>

matter what hardships we are facing? Just as was held in that temple a flame so, too, do we carry a flame within us – a spark of light in our souls or our hearts or our inner selves – may we each kindle this flame with love and care.

Life begins in darkness and life ends in darkness. We are each held within the darkness of the womb, and ultimately rest in the darkness that is finitude, that is the universe, that is the soil deep beneath the ground. The womb ushers in all life – ushers in all that is! Whether that of our mothers or that of our universe. Darkness lulls us to sleep after days of angst, anxiety, stress, offering a daily, a yearly, cycle of activity and rest. Unitarian Universalist minister Rev. Kristen Harper writes of the darkness, “...if we can rest in its grace, cease fighting to control it, we just might see in it the face of God.” If we rest in its grace, we just might see the face of God.⁴

This quote reminds me of the words of Rabbi Peter Rigler, “I have seen in my own life and through my pastoral work that darkness can actually be an invitation to experience God.” I think of my own understanding of God – both the deep connection that arises when I am immersed in intentional calm and pause and introspection, and that connection also found in that darkness that is synonymous with pain – finding the sacred when facing grief or loss. The rabbi continues, “We are taught in our tradition to be like one who ‘would rather light a candle than curse the darkness,’ seeing even in darkness — physical, spiritual, and emotional flickers — an opportunity to illuminate.” He tells us, “If there is darkness around us, then we ignite a spark and pray for glimmers and rays of hope.”⁵

What can we learn from our Jewish sibling? Not to curse the darkness and the hardships that may arise, but to use it as a time to illuminate the good, to highlight hope, to awaken within us the spirituality and the emotions that sustain us. We can kindle an intentional light within our hearts, our souls, to usher in a period of goodness and love. We are invited not to destroy, but

⁴ “Creation in the Darkness” in *The Darkness Divine* by Kristen L. Harper pg. 21

⁵ “Out of the Darkness Comes Light” By Rabbi Peter Rigler <https://www.jewishexponent.com/2020/01/31/out-of-the-darkness-comes-light/>

to create. Not to reject but to embrace. Ushering in our own intentional change via an inner flicker of light to better the world around us.

I am reminded of the marginalized in our midst, the least of these buried in the shadows, covered by the veils of poverty, illness, racism, addiction. A different kind of darkness. We are called to bring forth the light just as the Hanukkah candle illuminated a persecuted people, just as solstice ushers in a time of energy and joy, just as Christmas celebrates a man who dedicated his life to healing and to revolutionary love.

And so, I ask, what light do you bring to the world? What flame do you kindle within, what do you connect with as you pause in the reflective, introspective moments offered through calm, peaceful darkness? Justice and healing flow throughout our sacred, interdependent web of life. Just as a simple pebble tossed in a pond creates a ripple that stretches to the outskirts of an unassuming pool of water, so, too, do our actions ripple out to affect those well beyond us.

When we bring forth our genuine light, we heal others in unimaginable ways. After moments of introspection, I bring two genuine statements to the world around me: I see you – even the hidden. I love you – all of who you are. That is my light. Panentheists and religious humanists who see nature as God, anyone who meditates in the trees, may be called to heal the environment – to protect their sacred. If our light is kindled through art, through intentional paint strokes on canvas, through a soprano's voice carrying an ancient melody, we bring joy and delight and calm to those who lead a revolution, offering justice from afar, just as we bring peace and rejuvenation to those in our midst. If it is compassion you kindle within, that is what sustains and connects and strengthens us all.

Bringing forth our light heals the world – bringing forth our light kindles justice. Have you ever encountered a person guided by this light, by this flame, by this flicker? I assume that is a person you will never forget. For me it was an anthropology professor committed to teaching all her students about the plights of the undocumented workers in our midst; it was the minister who packed her car full of seminarians and brought us to Standing Rock to pray with the water protectors. Again, may we hear the words of the rabbi, “If there is darkness around

us, then we ignite a spark and pray for glimmers and rays of hope.”⁶ May we be glimmers and rays of hope.

“Let there be a season,” writes Rev. Rebecca Parker, “when holiness is heard, and the splendor of living is revealed.” May this be the season of solstice, the season of the Festival of Lights. Out of the rest of darkness may we be bearers of love and energy. Out of the veils of oppression in our midst, may we be the ones to kindle the flame of love and life. “Let this be the time,” the reverend writes, that we “wake to life.”⁷

May it be so, and Amen.

⁶ “Out of the Darkness Comes Light” By Rabbi Peter Rigler <https://www.jewishexponent.com/2020/01/31/out-of-the-darkness-comes-light/>

⁷ <https://www.uua.org/worship/words/poetry/winter-solstice>