

When Dark and Light Meet

By Reverend Jane Smith, Channing Memorial Church, UU, Ellicott City, MD, December 20, 2020

I spent every summer growing up at Ocean City in New Jersey. Waves crashing, the smell of salt in the air, hot sun blazing above us. We sat on the hot sand and ate our sandwiches, protecting them from the scavenger seagulls flying closely overhead. Our bodies warmed as the sun reflected on us, and we cooled ourselves down by jumping into that vast body of salty water. The water was often cold yet the air often hot as we dipped below the waves. I felt whole, alive, filled with energy, joyful as those long summer days passed me by.

This was the ocean to me. Light, bright, filled with activity! As a child, I stayed away from that same beach at night. It felt scary to me; ominous. The setting of the sun seemed to take away from the magic of that summer scene. And yet as I grew, I began to explore that scene at night – and what I found was beautiful. The same waves and vast water, now visually blending together with that dark night sky – no longer a reprieve from heat but a reprieve from a busy mind. I found stillness. The air cooled as I huddled in a blanket, gentle moon replacing hot sun, stars twinkling in the night sky. On occasion, I would notice a shooting star for a fleeting second above me. Darkness. Reprieve. A silent place to simply be. To connect with that nature that occurs in darkness, that stillness we may miss in the light.

The two complemented each other. The stillness of dark allows for pause; for rest for those seagulls, for the stars and moon to shine, a time for reflection. The bright day offers heat, sustenance, joy, and a place to play! Dark and light always complement each other. They are different, but friends. They both provide us with their own unique treasures and gifts, not solely for the senses – not just nature and our surroundings – but also for the soul. We need pause and give both our senses and our inner beings the chance to observe and enmesh with the beauty of each. We also appreciate the beauty of each when

we notice the juxtaposition between the two! That space for calmness and reprieve in that silent darkness, that chance for energetic renewal in the light!

Tomorrow marks the winter solstice – the longest night of the year. The short, cold day quickly giving way to a velvety dark sky. Winter solstice, also known as Yule, is an ancient pagan celebration. Ancient pagan societies were primarily hunters who spent their time in the outdoors – livelihood greatly affected by the change of the seasons. The sun was their salvation! They offered great reverence for the sun, and some even worshipped it. To some, the sun was seen as the “wheel that changed the seasons.”¹ Today is a day to celebrate the sun! To acknowledge the solar cycle has come to an end, with a new year on the horizon. A year for “light, life, and hope.”² Pagan families celebrating with mistletoe cut from sacred trees – seen as a symbol of life. Celebrants lighting the yule log, the flames of the log conquering darkness, banishing spirits, bringing luck for the new year.³

It is this change between the seasons that cannot be ignored – this is a necessary cycle foundational for many forms of life to persist. This yearly event – this switch from short days to long – has been both celebrated and revered in many ancient cultures – this yearly event is still celebrated today! This day to so many people marks this sacred rebirth of the sun. This sacred transition – this crucial transition. This is a return of the sun – yes – a celebration! On this day, in some pagan traditions, the moon gives birth to the sun. And just as many celebrate on New Year’s Eve – this is a time used for self-renewal, for regeneration, for a time of deep, personal reflection upon our past year and to see what we would like to change in the year ahead. It is a time for setting goals and intentions – it is a time for personal awakening.

¹ [BBC - Religions - Paganism: Winter Solstice](#)

² Winter Solstice | Naturalistic Paganism

³ [BBC - Religions - Paganism: Winter Solstice](#)

And it is these tangible, beautiful pieces of nature that are so very important! We see the cycles of dark and light, of moon and sun, of winter and summer. Winter and summer need each other – night and day need each other – for they complement each other for the survival of the planet. Death, hibernation, and dormant seeds, giving way to growth and life. A time for sleep and a time to be awake. And yet it is not only external – not just outside of us – but these complementary aspects of darkness and light exist in our very souls! Pagan blogger John Halstead writes that it is in those dark places of our souls where we carry “secret wishes, pains, frustrations, loneliness, fears, regrets, worries.” And yet he urges us not to be afraid! When we explore these dark places of our souls – when we delve deep with a sense of intention – we can find that sacred “safety and comfort” – we can find “rest and rejuvenation” we can find “balance.” He concludes, “when we have rested, and been comforted, and restored, we can return from the dark place in our soul to the world of light and new possibilities.”⁴

I want to lift up as well this feminine imagery – this birthing imagery – so powerful in the pagan tradition. The moon giving birth to the sun. In our poems – dark as gestation. Dark as a “moist womb.”

⁵ In this tradition – we were created in the dark, we were birthed of the dark – without the dark, we would not exist.

I want to invite us all in this moment to simply pause – to simply be. It is morning – it is light – and yet there is also this darkness of winter. And – there is beauty all around us! I drank my morning coffee before service on my porch as I do every morning and took that time to notice the snow covering the trees – lining the steps – crunchy as feet tread new paths in the white, wintry mix. Winter is a beautiful time, a still time, a reflective time. Winter is dark. We are offered this time for reflection, of

⁴ [Winter Solstice | Naturalistic Paganism](#)

⁵ In Celebration of the Winter Solstice, Stephanie Noble

introspection, of a time to focus on our intentions for the year ahead. An inner connection to find calm, peace, renewal – stillness of body and mind. And what about those precious moments found in the light? I invite us to practice this stillness – this noticing – even in this exciting newness of spring or vibrant energy produced by the warmth of the sun! The budding flowers both growing from rich earth, also budding in our soul as we celebrate newness and birth and life, just as the sun was birthed from the moon! The abundance of sustenance as seeds transform to plants transforming into a fruitful harvest. May we find abundance within ourselves to offer the world as well! Our souls are at times light and energetic, and our souls at other times are dark and introspective. In the light, may we be willing to live into those intentions we created for ourselves in those sacred moments of dark introspection. We need both – we need the light and the dark. They complement each other; they cycle through from one to the next. No life could possibly be sustained on this planet without both dark and light, stillness and activities, retrospection and action, rest and movement. No physical life – and no fulfilled spiritual life, either!

I want to circle back around to the fear of the dark – those nights I spent on the ocean as a child avoiding that same dark space that offered so much sustenance and joy during the day. Why do we so often run away from darkness? Darkness is often a metaphor for bad or scary things, feelings, or events. But darkness can mean so much more! How can these gifts feed our souls? How can we see this as a necessary part of spiritual growth? Winter Solstice is widely celebrated because of this rebirth of the sun – the days of planting and plentiful hunting returning again. A celebration of the sun – of light. And yet we also take this time to lift up that crucial juxtaposition to this light – the darkness. The darkness that is so often feared. In order to grow spiritually, we need both.

I loved our readings this morning, both of them highlighting so much of the beauty found in the darkness. Darkness may feel scary – but do not be afraid, for in that darkness is “rich, fertile earth.”

That earth – that mix of dirt and nutrients hidden below the ground out of site of the rays of the sun. That darkness – that darkness “cradles the seed”- that darkness leads to growth – that darkness nourishes tiny, delicate things until they become life. Darkness is that magic of which we were all born – that “deep, moist womb” we each inhabited before birth. We are all born of the darkness – plants, animals – even planets circling in the universe! Because of darkness, we exist. Nobel writes, “there is magic in the darkness. Do not be afraid. We are born of this magic. It fills our dreams.”⁶

Author John O’Donohue, an author who explores Celtic pagan wisdom, writes of these changes as a piece of a cycle – dark and light in a perpetual cycle with shades of grey in between. O’Donohue writes of these changes as complementary but not so much of a juxtaposition as a place in a cycle – in a necessary circle– a circle of time that is never broken. The circle of the seasons –winter giving way to spring, growing into summer until finally fall completes the cycle. Or the cycle of a day - dawn emerging from darkness, sun gathering strength until noontime, only to subside again into the darkness of night. Life is a cycle – the earth is a cycle – light to dark is a cycle. And just as earth is a cycle, so are our hearts and our souls changing in corresponding ways. Each stage in this cycle is entirely necessary – each has its own place in the human soul and in the natural world. Its own place in what O’Donohue calls “the seasons in the heart.”⁷

The season of darkness, of winter – when color fades away from the landscape and the air makes objects cold to the touch. During the dark of winter of our heart we may experience pain, we may experience difficulty, or withdrawal. Our heart, our soul, may feel turbulent. To O’Donohue, in Celtic pagan wisdom this is a time to shelter in that sacred darkness, that introspective darkness. Winter inevitably gives way to spring, when quivering flowers begin to bloom. Spring emerges with a “rush of

⁶ In Celebration of the Winter Solstice, Stephanie Noble

⁷ *Anam Cara: A Book of Celtic Wisdom* John O’Donohue 164-167

life” bringing with it “promise, hope and possibility.” O’Donohue encourages us to engage with this piece of the cycle seeking out new and exciting things! To connect with hope, beauty, and strength. This area of hope between darkness and light. And as those days get longer and the air continues to heat, spring leads to summer – to that ultimate light place! A time of balance, a time to be grounded, centered. Ultimately, the year cycles into autumn – the harvest – the end of the seed’s journey. A time for feasting. A time when the heart – and the earth – yields its fruitfulness. That in your soul which may at one point may have felt unknown is now bearing precious fruit. The seasons of the heart.⁸

These are one set of Celtic pagan beliefs highlighting in a cyclical way these differences between light and dark, morning and night, summer and winter. The cycles of the natural world, and the cycles of our soul. Those elements that beautifully and seamlessly complement each other as we navigate this delicate planet.

And this all circles back around again to solstice! Tomorrow’s short, chilly day followed by the longest night of the year. Both that darkness and that light feeding our souls – perhaps even that grey in-between, the mist and fog as the sun gently peaks over the horizon. These complementary yet different experiences are inherent to life as the earth rotates on its axis, as it always does and always will. Just like my experience on the beach. That spiritual wholeness that comes from the energy, excitement, playful pieces of the day, covered in that sticky, wet sand, complemented by the deep introspection and intentional stillness underneath the velvety blackness peppered with stars. This is nature, yes, but the sustenance these cycles and these too different states of the world also profoundly impact our souls. So I invite us to pause. I invite us to notice. To notice and appreciate the light, and to notice and appreciate

⁸ *Anam Cara: A Book of Celtic Wisdom* John O’Donohue 164-167

the darkness. For each is sacred. Each is whole. Each is necessary. Each is beautiful. May we find around us at any time that which we can use to feed our very souls.

May it be so, and Amen