

First Unitarian Church

December 17, 2023

*Come to my arms and rest, child, Night said. I am your mother... Let me cradle you now, as I shelter every galaxy and star in the universe. So, Night wrapped her great arms around the sun, and the night was very long indeed.<sup>i</sup>*

Those are my favorite lines of the morning. Better than anything else I'm about to say, honestly. Who wouldn't want to be wrapped in such great nurturing arms? To rest. To rest.

That's what this week offers us. Solstice is on Thursday. And it's not just a footnote to Christmas! Solstice is a whole mood. Solstice is a whole week, in my mind. On Thursday the day will be the shortest of the year, and the night the longest. But today you can already feel the solstice's power, those great arms, growing stronger and more nurturing as we approach that day of deepest darkness. It's already so dark. It's getting a little darker, a little darker. And then after that day, we'll feel the new year begin to draw us toward her growing light.

The opposite happens in the summer. We reach a day with the most light and the least dark: the summer solstice on June 21.

Does anyone know how much more daylight the summer solstice has than the winter solstice, here in Albuquerque? It's 4 hours and 44 minutes. Day is almost five hours longer at summer solstice. How about in Copenhagen Denmark? Anyone know? It's ten hours difference. They *really* have long nights in the winter. That's where the concept of *hygge* (pronounced "hooga") comes from. *Hygge* trended a few years ago. A bunch of books about it came out, mainly for people who don't live in Denmark. *Hygge* doesn't have an exact English translation. It is a certain kind of coziness. It's warmth and connection with loved ones. It's enjoyment of simple comforts like a cup of tea, a candle, a soft sweater or blanket, warm food, and warm spices like cinnamon and cardamom. *Hygge* is a whole mood, too. *Hygge* is related to an old Norse word that means "protected from the outside world."

*Hygge's* attention to simple pleasures reminds me of the Buddhist concept of savoring, which is the practice of being fully present, enjoying the gift of each moment: the softness of where you are sitting, the way the choir's harmonies flow over you. If you feel even a little bit more at ease now than you did when you first came in this morning, you can savor that. It's noticing what's good, comforting, nourishing, pleasurable. Kind of like a gratitude practice, but more embodied. We feel many of the things we savor.

Solstice is a good time for that. For *hygge*. For savoring. Especially if you're going through something hard right now.

Even those of us who welcome Christmas can use the gentle balance the solstice provides. But if you're going through something tough, or if you don't celebrate Christmas, the Christmas season can feel like a campaign of culturally enforced jolliness. Holy Toledo is there a lot of Christmas. I know someone who experienced a terrible trauma one Christmas, who still struggles with tough feelings all through December. They wear noise canceling headphones that blast rap music whenever they're in public spaces at Christmas time. The enforced jolliness is just too much. There are many people for whom December brings up painful feelings.

Solstice says, “It’s okay to not be okay.” However we are feeling, up or down, the quiet, nurturing dark resettles us, wraps around us, balances the energy of bright lights and festivities.

In the Druid tradition of that Western Europe, the winter solstice ceremony is known as Alban Arthan.<sup>ii</sup> Arthan comes from Arthur, and Alban means white or light. So, it means the light of Arthur. Alban Arthan celebrates the ritual story of a sun god, Arthur, who dies and is reborn as the Son of Light at the winter solstice, becoming the savior of the British Isles. If the birth of a son who is a savior sounds like another story you we hear at this time of year, that is correct.

The Christian nativity story is a variation on one of humankind’s oldest story themes.

The Druid tradition draws connections between the dark night of solstice and the dark nights that are part of our spiritual lives, times when we may feel lost, unable to see or imagine what is ahead, and afraid things will never get better.

The Druids traditionally hold their solstice ceremonies outdoors, with a view of the rising and the setting of the winter solstice sun. Participants tie black strips of cloth, to symbolize mourning, to their clothes. The ceremony begins with wishing peace to the four corners of the earth, and then purification and consecration of the circle—the ceremony space—with water and fire.

In a ritual enactment, the youngest one, Mabon, questions the Ancient one. Mabon is also the name given to the young new sun that will be reborn after the longest night of solstice.

“Teach us, wise Ancient, to what period of time we have come,” says Mabon. And the Ancient replies, “We show to you, young One, the birth of the youngest one, who bears your name, who is born in silence and weakness as the smallest of lights.”

“The oak is bare, the earth is cold, the sky is black—from where could hope arise?” another person says.

“The cold and dark have grown strong. We mourn the passing of the bright days,” says another.

Soon, all light is turned off or extinguished. The ceremony is plunged into darkness.

The people meditate, held in the dark and silence. They practice letting go of that which has ended. They prepare themselves for the return of the light.

Finally, participants remove the black strips tied to their clothes, and a lantern is lit in the direction of the solstice sunrise. Other lights are kindled from that first one, symbolizing the one source of all Life, Light, and Love, from which we are born.

Mistletoe, representing darkness and growth, is brought from the North, and joined with oak, the tree of eternity and of the present moment. Together, they are passed to each participant. Darkness, growth, eternity, and the present.

The ceremony, taking place at the end of the darkest day of the year and the beginning of the return of the light, marks both a completion and a new beginning. It’s a turning point. Solstice means standstill. Like the pause in our breath after each exhalation, the earth at solstice seems to stand still for a moment.

The Druid tradition dates to before Christianity swept over Europe, a time when people throughout western Europe celebrated the solstice with food, evergreen boughs, holly, and especially fire and light.

Festivities could go on for nearly two weeks—a tradition that carried over into the “twelve days of Christmas.” The Romans called it Saturnalia, and right around the time Christianity was taking root there, the Romans were already celebrating what they called the “birthday of the unconquered sun” on December 25<sup>th</sup>. In the north, the Norse people had “Yule” for their celebration, and some linguists believe *Yule* may be the root of the word “jolly.”

Indigenous traditions in other parts of the world, including New Mexico, also involve solstice stories and ceremonies.

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We often speak of dark and darkness as though they are negative things. But light and dark can both be either positive or negative. Jacqui James writes:

Light can be blinding, bleaching, enervating. Conversely, we must acknowledge that darkness has a redemptive character, that in darkness there is power and beauty. The dark nurtured and protected us before our birth. Welcome darkness. Don't be afraid of it or deny it. Darkness brings relief from the blinding sun, from scorching heat, from exhausting labor. Night signals permission to rest... The dark of winter is a time of hibernation. Seeds grow in the dark, fertile earth.<sup>iii</sup>

Starhawk (one of the writers of the story Mia told) writes that when we reject the dualism that separates the world into light and dark, good and bad, it is healing.<sup>iv</sup> “Instead of *enlightenment*,” she says, “we begin to speak of deepening... we remember that in the old myths, the entrance to the realm of the spirit was through the fairy mound, the cave, the crack, the fissure in the earth, the gate, the doorway... We call it the underworld, and we go within it for our visions.”<sup>v</sup> The dark is a place of changing consciousness.

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So, it would be hard to grow up in the US without knowing how to celebrate Christmas. But most of us were probably not taught how to celebrate the solstice. If you'd like to do something to honor it this week, you might want some ideas. Do any of you already have solstice rituals? What do you do?

My list of ideas:

- Build an altar. Find a little spot. It doesn't have to be an Instagram kind of spot. My altar is the counter behind my kitchen sink. That's where I have room, and since the sink is in an island, it's also in the middle of a room where I spend a lot of time relaxing. You can build an altar on a table, mantle, or counter, or you can build a mini altar, in a mason jar. Building altars is a fun thing to do with kids, too, if you happen to know any.
- What goes into a solstice altar? Depends on the space. I like evergreen boughs, pinecones, or branches, as symbols of winter. Ivy is associated with good luck. You might

include cinnamon sticks, a candle or a few to symbolize the sun, fairy lights, and a bell to ring in good energy.

- Bundle up and visit the mountain or bosque, or just go outside, to watch the earliest sunset. What are the critters up to at that hour?
- On the longest night, turn out all the lights and spend some time experiencing the darkness. Then light a candle, and light other candles from that first one, bringing light back into your space.
- Give back to nature, perhaps by setting out some birdseed.
- You can also celebrate solstice with CUUPS—the Covenant of UU Pagans. They are gathering on Friday and invite everyone to join. You hear more details about that in a few minutes.
- Or make time to just be. Get cozy. Savor. Contemplate what you’re letting go of, and what is being born.

This solstice, wherever you are in your life journey, may you experience the clarity you need to make room for what is waiting to be born in your life.

If you are experiencing grief of any kind, may you take comfort in the embrace of winter dark, and receive what you need from it, as you wait for the sun to appear once more.

Whoever you are, wherever you are, may you receive the invitation to deepening in whatever way you are called to in this wintry week.

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<sup>i</sup> From Starhawk, Diane Baker, and Anne Hill:

<https://www.uua.org/re/tapestry/children/loveguide/session11/168878.shtml>

<sup>ii</sup> “Alban Arthan: the Winter Solstice Ceremony of the Order of Bards, Ovates, and Druids.” A handbook published by that same order: Sussex England, 2001. More info available at [www.druidry.org](http://www.druidry.org)

<sup>iii</sup> <https://www.uua.org/worship/words/reading/5934.shtml>

<sup>iv</sup> Starhawk. Dreaming the Dark: Magic, Sex, & Politics. Beacon Press: Boston, 1982.

<sup>v</sup> p.26