

Unitarian Universalist Community Church, Augusta, ME, December 28, 2021

Yuletide: The Holiest Time of the Year

INGATHERING MUSIC

Stefanie

PRELUDE

Stefanie

BREATHS

In preparation for entering our time together, let us be conscious of three breaths.

As you inhale the first breath, be aware of what you are *leaving behind*.

As you exhale, let go of that which would keep you from being here completely.

As you inhale the second breath, feel the *presence* of being here.

As you exhale, notice those who are here with you.

As you inhale the third breath, *step over the threshold* into the space where our spirits meet.

As you exhale, feel the sense of holy community.

=====

CALLING THE DIRECTIONS

Honoring the Directions in the Yuletide

Spirit of the East, of Air and Energy

We *observed* the crisp air that accompanied the decreasing light toward Solstice.
May we now observe the gradual return of light in the wheel of the seasons.

Spirit of the South, of fire

May we *feel* deeply the warmth of the burning log and the light of candles.
May we embrace regeneration and renewal in the energy of the returning sun.

Spirit of the West, of water

May our *need* for explanations be tempered with patience from gently flowing water.

May our need for assurance of survival be realized as we see our likenesses in reflecting pools of water that emerge from the ice.

Spirit of the North. Of earth

May our *actions* be grounded in the earth, the universe, community and energies beyond ourselves.

May our actions bear witness to the moral connections and values.

Spirit of the Center, of the Soul, of the past, the present and the future.

May ours be the richness of the darkness before the return of the light.

With anticipation of discoveries and dreams that enrich our lives,

May we emerge from the darkness with awareness of new stirrings in this Yuletide.

Lighting the Chalice

You are welcome to light a candle or chalice.
Come, light the flame of wholeness.
From darkness both scary and restoring.
To the light of community, hope and fulfilment.
Light for this holy time of mortality and morality,
May this chalice lead our way through Yuletide.

=====
Helen

OPENING WORDS

Our services this time of the year frequently focus on the Winter Solstice. But here we are today after both Solstice and Christmas have occurred, but before we are ready for a new year – the transition period of Yuletide.

T

“Yule” comes from the pre-Christian festivities of Germanic tribes and is believed to have been handed down to us from the ancient Norse in particular. Mid-Winter celebration has been an important part of indigenous European traditions and culture since at least 2400 BC by one name or another. We do know that this time of the year has been commonly recognized as Yule since before 1000 AD at the latest. The dates of the twelve days may vary slightly from tradition to tradition, (Christian: December 25 Christmas to January 6 Epiphany or Yuletide: December 20 Solstice to December 31 Twelfth Night).

Twelve Days of Holiness

Twelve days at the end of an ancient lunar calendar year at a time with cruel weather and a threat to survival.

Twelve days that focus on making us whole, connected with each other and with the universe, human and beyond, ourselves and others.

Twelve days that are worthy of worship and veneration, reflection and consecration.

Twelve days that encompass celebrations from many cultures, such as Saturnalia in ancient Rome, the ancient Germanic tribes and Norse pagans, to the overlay of Christian mythology.

Twelve days of the year that invite people of the northern hemisphere into the cycles of the seasons made holy by our very living, surviving and thriving.

Winter Solstice itself is the beginning of Yuletide. Solstice is the event that is observed—changing light. Yuletide is the time to embrace the feelings, needs and actions that stem from that observation, taking us to Twelfth Night, and on our way into a new year.

To set the context for Yuletide, there was the OBSERVATION that the light of day was

gradually disappearing, starting with what we now call Fall equinox in September. This had become very noticeable around Samhain (Halloween) and did not seem to end. And then at the point in the cycle that we now call Winter Solstice, the decline in light stopped. --- and reversed! Light gradually started to reappear for increasingly longer periods. Was this a unique occurrence? Would it happen again?

Low and behold, the loss and then the gradual return of light happened again! And again! And again with predictability as the ancients observed the cycle of the seasons of the earth and sun.

=====
Such observations evoked FEELINGS.

The first observation, loss of light, would have brought anxiety, confusion and maybe panic. If the light disappeared, so would the heat., so would the nurturing of plants for food. Would the world survive?

The observation of return of light, however slowly, would have brought a sense of relief, at least for the time being. But there could have been doubt. Could the return be trusted? Was the world dependable?

As the observations each year became consistent, the feelings may have changed from panic to a time of rest and gestation followed by celebration.

Some of these feelings may be present even today. How did you feel a couple of weeks ago, before Solstice, when the morning light seemed to arrive later? And have you noticed the gradually increasing light in the last week?

With the consistency in this dark to light event, understanding of this as a period of rest, of gestation, of preparation has emerged as a critical part of our physical and spiritual living.

MARTY: VIDEO.

This is reflected in Hymn #55 Dark of Winter. The words are included on the video. Please sing with this presentation.

HYMN 55 Dark of Winter

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZlzYlcu1asQ> words are included.

*Dark of winter, soft and still, your quiet calm surrounds me.
Let my thoughts go where they will, ease my mind profoundly.
And then my soul will sing a song, a blessed song of love eternal.
Gentle darkness, soft and still, bring your quiet to me.*

*Darkness, soothe my weary eyes, that I may see more clearly.
When my heart with sorrow cries, comfort and caress me.
And when my soul may hear a voice, a still, small voice of love eternal.
Darkness, when my fears arise, let your peace flow through me.*

=====

Observations also create NEEDS. An immediate and constant human need is for explanation and understanding of what has or is happening. The explanation comes from what we know, and what we know comes from the universe around us —knowledge, culture and society. How we quickly we look for answers – sometimes too quickly -- and argue about details. And when the event cannot be explained by what we know or what our culture tells us, we create answers. Sometimes we look for answers beyond ourselves, creating theories that may or may not have credence. We may blame others, or something beyond ourselves.

Think to yourself of an event that has occurred in the last couple of years and the attempts to explain how it happened and why.

PAUSE BRIEFLY (count to 10 slowly)

Think how *we* might have reacted to the observation of the loss of light if we were to experience it for the first time. What explanations would we give?

PAUSE BRIEFLY (Count to 10)

A second need arises from an event or observation: the need to cope with the impact of the event. Coping includes finding a sense of meaning. Again, this comes from where we are in time and culture.

When we cannot cope ourselves, when we do not have the answers, the knowledge or resources, we look for something beyond ourselves, even to non-human sources, including deities or other ways to describe mystery!

=====

It is from these needs for answers and for ability to cope that humans take ACTION to make corrections toward survival. What can we do?

The needs prompt actions in the form of rituals, traditions and myths -- again, grounded in culture. Myths give the meaning behind the story rather than present a literal record of an event.

We would like to consider actions related to three of many themes that run through the Yuletide story: Darkness and Light, Community, and The Passing of the Year. The

stories and traditions have been told, retold and evolved over the centuries to accommodate the cultural changes. I would like to start with the story “Rebirth of the Sun” told by Starhawk, *Circle Round* , adapted. “Mother Darkness” is used for “Night” in this version.

It was the middle of the winter, and the sun had grown very old. All year long the sun had worked very hard, rising and setting day after day. All year long the sun had fed everyone on earth, shining and shining, giving energy to the trees and the flowers and the grasses so they could grow and feed the animals and birds and insects and people. All year the sun’s gravity held tight to the spinning ball of the earth and the twirling ball of the moon and the other whirling planets and their moons as they traveled around and around and around.

Now the poor tired sun could barely make it up in the morning and after a very short time, needed to sleep again. So the days grew shorter and the nights grew longer, until the day was so short it was hardly worth getting up for.

Night, or Mother Darkness, felt sorry for the sun. “Come to my arms and rest,” she said. “I am your mother. You were born out of my darkness, billions of years ago, and you will return to me when all things end. Let me cradle you now, as I shelter every galaxy and star in the universe.

So Mother Darkness wrapped her great arms around the sun, and the night was very long indeed.

When the night went on so long, people began worry. They started to sing songs to the sun. They lit candles and floated them on water. Each flame was a little spark of the sun’s fire.

The sun saw the flames of the candles and heard the singing and praising and began to feel a little warmer. All through the night, the sun, safely wrapped in the arms of Mother Darkness, grew younger and younger.

Early in the morning, all of the people climbed a high hill and faced the direction of sunrise. They waited to see if the sun would return. The sky began to turn from black to indigo to blue. Slowly the sky grew light. A golden glow crept over the horizon. Mother Darkness opened her great arms and in a burst of brightness, the sun appeared, new and strong and shining.

Winter Solstice is the celebration of the birth of the Sun, the divine child of the Goddess. In our own lives, this longest night can be a time of divination, of journeying deep into our inner dreamtime, to bring forth a dream that can help us in the years to come.

COMMUNITY

Being community is an action taken to meet the needs of knowing and of coping. The variety of communities, the complexities and configurations of communities are beyond description this morning. So please define it for yourself. Regardless, community is a critical part of the celebrations, especially in this time of the year, and increasingly noted with the last two years of the pandemic. Here are a few notes about community.

On this day we remind ourselves of the virtue of Community. Build your personal community today, strengthen the bonds of kinship. Relish your friendships. Cooperate with kin and friends, do your fair share, and remember your responsibilities to others. Be a good guest as well as a good host, no matter where you happen to be.

Many believe all living beings come from and are a part of the divine energy, and the divine is within everyone. This divine connection spark v, or giving back to community. Volunteering is generally considered an unselfish activity and is intended to promote good or improve human quality of life. In return, this activity can produce a feeling of self-worth and respect. Volunteering is also renowned for skill development, socialization, and fun.

We also remind ourselves of the virtue of hospitality. Hospitality is simply one of the strongest core values at the heart of virtually every ancient human civilization. In a community such as our own, it is the virtue that upholds our social fabric. In ancient times it was essential that when a traveler went into the world he could find some sort of shelter and welcome for the night. In modern times it is just as essential that a traveler find friendship and safety.

The *Havamal* says:

*Fire is needed by the newcomer
Whose knees are frozen numb;
Meat and clean linen a man needs
Who has fared across the fells,
Water, too, that he may wash before eating,
Hand cloth's and a hearty welcome,
Courteous words, then courteous silence
That he may tell his tale.*

THE PASSING OF THE YEAR

The action of celebrating is affirmation that the light is, in reality, returning. Along with the feasting and visiting, caroling and games, there are superstitions of what to do to ensure a successful new year. It is also a time to review the virtues that are to be brought into the new year.

Following is a listing of 9 Noble Virtues from Norse Paganism. We added three others from the same reference to create 12 Attributes for the New Year.

Courage

Courage is of utmost importance. We may face such turmoil as a literal battle for one's life as well as the many smaller day to day occurrences in which courage is called for in our lives. The virtue of strength is also expressed when one is gentle, loving and calm in the face of fear, pain or times of tragedy.

Discipline

Discipline includes using one's personal will to uphold honor and other virtues. Upholding the virtues is a *choice*, done of our own accord without threat or bribe. Discipline is the ability to show courage, loyalty, and sense of self-reliance, in the face of personal challenges.

Honor

Honor reminds us that our deeds, words, and reputation will outlive our bodies. Stand by our oaths and promises. The person we are in life will be remembered for a long time.

Industriousness

Industriousness reminds us to hard work at everything we do — we owe it to ourselves, to our families, to our community and to our gods. We need to balance work and rest, and we are at our best when we feel a sense of accomplishment in both.

Perseverance

Perseverance reminds us to continue pushing onward, despite potential obstacles. To persevere is to learn and grow from our mistakes and choices. If we want to live up to our fullest potential, we have to persevere. We have to push on even when things are hard and frustrating, or even if it seems like things are completely impossible.

Self-Reliance

Self-Reliance is the virtue taking care of oneself, while still maintaining relationships. Find a balance between doing for others and doing for the self. To thrive as part of a community, we must also be able to thrive as individuals. We rely on ourselves to administer our own morality.

Truth

The concept of Truth stands as a reminder that we must speak of what we know as Truth, rather than what we think others wish to hear. Seek the truth even though it may be a hard truth. Speak true words or stand in silence and defend the truth from those who do not honor it.

Fidelity

By the dictionary fidelity simply means being faithful to someone or something. The concept of fidelity is one of loyalty. If we let down a friend or member of our kindred or the gods, we are turning ours back on our entire community and all that it stands for. Be true to family, friends and to those to whom you pledge or loyalty.

Hospitality

Hospitality is about treating others with respect and being part of the community. It was often a matter of survival. Hospitality means not just food and shelter, but also companionship and safety. Traditionally, once a guest had eaten at your table, it meant they were also granted your protection while under your roof.

Love

Love and compassion allows us to have true love, not only for others, but also for ourselves. It allows us to forgive ourselves when we make mistakes. It's also the ability to have deep feelings and concern for others. Compassion allows us to share another's pain, gives us the desire to relieve it, and the willingness to act on that desire.

Justice

In justice, let equity and fairness be our hallmark. Inherent worth and dignity of each is a guide to justice. Give each person a chance to show his or her best.

Wisdom

Wisdom is learning from our experiences. Grow in the understanding of the world, and of the human heart. Comprehend as much of the universe as we can in the years available to us. Wisdom comes from life experience. Wisdom is the ability to see what is for the best and when or when not to act.

MARTY: VIDEO with words

“The Ceaseless Flow of Endless Time”, John Andrew Storey (*SLT* #350)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qf7tAKlQSjI> words included, great sound, pictures PREFERENCE

The ceaseless flow of endless time
no one can check or stay;
we'll view the past with no regret,
nor future with dismay.

The present slips into the past,
and dream like melts away;
the breaking of tomorrow's dawn
begins a new today.

The past and future ever meet
in the eternal now;
to make each day a thing complete
Shall be our New Year vow.

CLOSING WORDS

Our closing words for Yuletide are taken from Sun Praise for Solstice (source unknown), followed by response for Twelfth Night.

Solstice: Sun Praise

What night is this, so long and dark,
On which we feel such a yearning--
As earth is sleeping, her seedlings keeping,
While toward the sun she's turning?
This, this is Solstice night
When dark surrenders to the light.
Hope! Hope for all who live.
This night the sun is born anew.

Twelfth Night: Response

What time is this, twelve days hence
On which we feel such yearning--
As earth is awakening, gently warming,
While now our lives are calling.
This, this is the Twelfth Night
When we're rejuvenated by the light,
Hope! Hope for all who live.
This night a year is born anew.

Blessed Yuletide!

OFFERING

POSTLUDE

BREAKOUT/SOCIAL TIME