

The Light Returns: A Solstice Celebration  
Sunday, December 19, 2021  
Tri-County Unitarian Universalists  
Summerfield, FL  
Rev. Cynthia A. Snavelly

In the book Circle Round: Raising Children in Goddess Traditions by Starhawk, Diane Baker and Anne Hill, they say, “Yule is the ancient name for the Winter Solstice, the longest night and shortest day of the year. In northern climates, this is the darkest and coldest time of year. The sun seems to be weak, even dying, and we fear winter will last forever.

“But just as soon as the Solstice passes, the days begin to grow longer again. The Solstice is a turning point in the wheel of the year, when the sun symbolically dies and is reborn from the womb of the Goddess,

“In our tradition, darkness is not something bad or something to fear. Of course, we wouldn’t want the world to be dark all of the time—that’s why we’re so happy when the sun begins to return after the long nights of winter. Light and dark must always be in balance. But we know that without the dark nothing could live or grow. Without night we would have no day, no chance to rest and sleep. We would have no dreams...Babies develop in the darkness of their mother’s wombs. Seeds must be put into the dark earth in order to send out roots and push up new shoots.

“Now, at Solstice, the balance has tipped as far toward the dark as it can go. We are ready for the light to come back, and we do all we can to help it....

“On Solstice night, many Pagan grownups stay up all night to keep the Mother Goddess company as she labors to give birth to the sun, the new year, from her night-sky womb. We sing and chant and feast in our night-long ritual, hoping that the sun will be reborn. Children and grown-ups who can’t stay awake ask for special dreams as they sleep in the womb of the Goddess.

“In the very early morning, we like to climb up on a hill to watch for the dawn, to drum and dance and welcome the reborn child who brings back the light and the promise of summer. The sun rises, and we are reborn with the year. Within each one of us, whatever our age, the miracle child we were at birth emerges anew.”

In Dr. E.C. Krupp’s book, Beyond the Blue Horizon they tell many stories of the sun from around the world, for the sun is something that all of us, no matter where we live on this earth, have in common. They note that solstice means “sun stand still.” Obviously, the sun doesn’t really stand still. It rises and sets every day as it always does, but for a few days before and after the solstice the rising point of the sun, unlike at other times of the year, scarcely changes from day to day.

Krupp tells a creation story from the Luiseno Indians in southern California in which the first people stretch a net out on the ground and bounce the newly created sun into the sky. The net is the Milky Way. The Toba Pilaga Indians on the Paraguay Argentine border say the sun in summer when food is plentiful is a heavy woman who walks slowly across the sky but in winter when food is not so plentiful, she is a thin, swift woman who runs across the sky. In a Norse creation myth, the directions are four dwarves who hold up the heavens; Austri, east meaning glowing bright, burning, a nod to the

sunrise and dawn; Vestri, west meaning evening. Sudri seems to have meant the brilliant, and, if so, it probably refers to the sun's high point of the day when it crosses due south. Nodri means away below and suggests the sun's passage at night through the underworld. The road of the dead that leads to this realm goes north. The Egyptians saw the dung ball full of eggs that the scarab rolled in front of it as a sun symbol. Dr. Krupp says the Egyptian name for the scarab is Khephri, which means "coming into being" or self-created." By the time the new beetles emerge from the earth the debris-collecting parent is long gone, and the new scarabs seem to have created themselves as the Egyptians believed Re, the sun, did each morning. The Egyptians took this rebirth of the sun and this seeming self-creation of the scarab as a sign of their own being. Stone scarabs, symbols of the sun's rebirth, were tucked into the folds of their mummies. And they put a sun story on the walls of their tombs. The Egyptians, like many other peoples, believed that we ourselves, like the sun, would return to life from death. A Slavic folktale of Maroukla, a mistreated stepdaughter of a miserly widow, has the widow and her daughter send Maroukla out into the mountains in winter to fetch them violets and strawberries and apples and such. Maroukla finds a fire around which 12 people are seated, some very old, some very young. When she tells them of her plight the person who is holding sway gives up their high seat to another and thus briefly Maroukla collects the item she needs. When the widow and her daughter decide to make their own way into the mountains to see if they can find what Maroukla has, they are punished by the 12, who are the months of the year. Dr. Krupp writes, "The year and its seasons are an essential component in the natural order of things. Our ancestors judged it necessary to act in harmony with the natural orders. It was the foundation for all behavior, and they saw the laws, taboos, and rules of conduct of society as extensions of the natural order. For this reason, they sometimes called upon the seasonal components of that natural order to endorse and uphold the social and ethical order of their communities. Dr. Krupp says most of us know a European sun story without even knowing it is about the sun. They say, "Even the nursery tale of Little Red Riding Hood... conceals a story about the sun...The crimson cowl Red wears should make us suspicious. She's a young thing (the morning sun) on a journey (the sun's daily path) to old age- her grandmother's house (the sunset)-where she is devoured by darkness (the wolf). Red Riding Hood emerges (sunrise) from the wolf's gullet, however, and is reborn to carry her basket of goodies another day."

How much we have attributed to the sun- not just warmth and light, but directions, ethics and a hope for our own rebirth after death. The pagans among us take seriously the old stories. That is not the same as believing them literally. It is, however, seeing value in staying up all night on winter solstice to aid the night sky in her labor as she brings forth the newborn sun for another cycle of the year.

As you listened or hummed along to our first hymn who did you connect to "O Thou from whose unfathomed law the year in beauty flows...Day unto day doth utter speech, and night to night proclaim, in ever changing words of light, the wonder of thy name"? If you are a theist probably God. If you are a pagan, maybe the sun.

I came into Unitarian Universalism in the late eighties/early nineties just as the pagans were making their presence known among us. Some Unitarian Universalists then were about as accepting of the pagans as Unitarian Christians were of the humanists at the beginning of the twentieth century, that it is to say not very. In the late 1890s some radical Unitarians wanted to organize on an "ethical basis'- not to require any statement of theistic belief of those individuals, ministers, and congregations accepted as Unitarian. The principle of association was to be ethical, lying in a shared commitment of all congregations to personal moral growth and social improvement." Jabez Thomas Sunderland spoke for

those who were against such an undertaking. He said, “The issue is not whether we shall make much or little of ethics. All are agreed to put as strong emphasis on ethics as possible, as Unitarianism has always done. The question is whether we do not stand for ethics with a *plus- ethics and also something else*, namely, belief in God and Worship—these as being both of them important in themselves, and also being something without which ethics itself loses its high sanction and impulse,” The Unitarians and the Universalists by David Robinson. By the time the pagans declared that they wanted and needed symbol, story, and ritual and a deeper connection with nature in their religion, the humanists held sway among us and protested that symbols, stories, and rituals were not rational and so should be rejected by us. Fortunately, I believe, for all of us, the humanists were eventually accepted by the theists and the pagans by the humanists. If we take the time to listen to one another, we can each learn from how others practice their faith.

I would not call myself a pagan, but I appreciate symbols, story and ritual and wanting a deep connection with nature. I remember a Christian college professor of mine who declared that he was not a pantheist, he did not believe in many gods and goddesses, but he was a panentheist, he believed there was something of the Holy present in all things. A statement like that, I think, would put him in sympathy with many a pagan.

Do you remember how Shaughna B of The Solstice Lady website began the story I shared for our Whistlestop? “For the Druids and the Celtic peoples, the forest was the cathedral of the holy.” I can relate to that. I always have, and the more I learn about trees and their connections, the more I see a forest as a holy place. I also see the ocean as a holy place and a mountain.

It was not the pagans among us who taught me my first pagan prayer, but the Girl Scouts. They taught me to sing, “Peace, I ask of thee, oh River, peace, peace, peace, When I learn to live serenely cares will cease. From the hills I gather courage vision of the day to be. Strength to lead and faith to follow, all are given unto me. Peace, I ask of thee, oh River, peace, peace, peace.” Many years ago, I took the quiz on Belief.net. My results suggested I was fairly equally aligned with Unitarian Universalism, liberal Christianity, and neopaganism. However, you name yourself religiously I invite you this week to sleep well in the womb of the night sky and welcome each new dawn birth of the beautiful sun because of which life is possible on this blue green planet.

I end with a prayer/poem by the Rev. Dr. Rebecca Ann Parker, an ordained United Methodist theologian who served as president of the Unitarian Universalist Starr King School for the Ministry in Berkeley, California, from 1999 to 2014.

“Perhaps  
for a moment  
the typewriters will stop clicking,  
the wheels stop rolling  
the computers desist from computing,  
and a hush will fall over the city.  
For an instant, in the stillness,  
the chiming of the celestial spheres will be heard  
as earth hangs poised  
in the crystalline darkness, and then  
gracefully

tilts.

“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.  
We are not alone.  
In the universe there moves a Wild One  
whose gestures alter earth’s axis  
toward love.  
In the immense darkness  
everything spins with joy.  
The cosmos enfolds us.  
We are caught in a web of stars,  
cradled in a swaying embrace,  
rocked by the holy night,  
babes of the universe.  
Let this be the time  
we wake to life,  
like spring wakes, in the moment  
of winter solstice.” Blessed Be.