

**THEY BROUGHT BACK THE LIGHT:
REFLECTIONS FOR A WINTER SOLSTICE**
A Sermon Offered by Rev. Tim Kutzmark
December 23, 2012
Unitarian Universalist Church of Reading

But it is the dark emptiness contained
in every next moment that seems to me
the most singularly glorious gift,
that void which one is free to fill
with processions of people bearing burning
cedar logs or companies of black-robed choristers;
that space large enough to hold all
invented blasphemies and pieties,
ten thousand definitions of god and more,
never fully filled, never.

– *Pattiann Rogers*

“Where do all the lights come from?” asked the little girl, her eyes wide with winter wonder. Her mother looked quickly behind her where her daughter sat securely clasped in her car seat. It was Thursday night, three nights ago, the night before the shortest day of the year, the night before the Winter Solstice. That Thursday night, driving through their neighborhood was like driving in an illuminated fairyland. White lights festooned bushes and trees. Red and green and blue lights blinked on doorways and railings. Grazing deer and inflatable penguins and glowing plastic snowmen shined in yards; while inside houses, gaily decorated trees glowed with multi-colored magic. We see it all around us, don’t we. How could that little girl not wonder: “Where do all the lights come from?”

Charlotte’s mother smiled, and answered: “They come from long ago.” “How long ago?” asked Charlotte, curious. “A long, long time ago,” her Mom said. That seemed to satisfy little Charlotte, who turns her attention again to the sparkling displays passing before her eyes.

What a great answer that Mom offered: *They come from long ago*. Our winter lights of this season are but the newest incarnation of an ageless human impulse to light up our darkening days with the promise of light.

Joan Goodwin writes:

Yes, there have been [winter lights] for as long as there have been people who needed [them].

[The winter lights] started with stone-age people, with primitive people, with the ancients . . . with days getting shorter and the nights getting

colder, with people hoping for light and warmth and another spring and another year of life, with people coming closer together around the fire, comforting one another, helping one another to last out the winter.

[The winter lights] started with people using all the magic they knew to help the sun stay bright in the sky. There seemed to be magic in the flame which people could kindle and control. That fire held some of the magic brightness and warmth of the sun itself. (*Celebrating Christmas: An Anthology*, Carl Seaburg, editor, p. 176-77, adapted)

Kenneth Patton, a leading Universalist minister who, in the 1950's, led innovative worship at Boston's Charles Street Meeting House, writes:

In very early times and in primitive societies, people worshipped the sun. Our forebears depended on the sun for warmth and light, and for the food that grew in the warm sunlight. When, in the fall, the sun began to wane, the people were afraid, for the sun, their God, seemed to be weak and ill.

As a strength offering to their god, the terrified people brought dry cedar to use as wicks, and gathered mistletoe, which was believed to be a plant sacred to the sun [and was actually believed to be a source of fire].”

The people brought food to feed the great fires, which they burned upon the hills. They made crude wheels of dry cedar or pine or willow and rubbed them with resin or animal fat to make them burn quickly. These they set afire and rolled them up the hills to symbolize the Sun God's ascent. (Ibid, p. 254-55, adapted)

Author Christy Thorrat notes: “In Britain, huge bonfires were lighted [to imitate the light and warmth of the retreating sun, and to lure it back by magical means]. These bonfires were kept burning for several days and nights [to call back the sun.] The people would gather around these fires and dance, sing, and feast.” (Ibid, 251) “When it became apparent that the magic was succeeding, that the days were lengthening and the sun was returning, the feelings of relief and rejoicing were expressed in the greatest celebration of the year. All normal business came to an end, and wars were suspended by common consent.” (Ibid, p. 3) The return of the sun at Solstice literally brought peace on earth, good will to all—at least for a moment.

Farther north, the early Nordic people celebrated Yule. They blessed and burned a huge wooden Yule log that would burn through the entire long night, a roaring “display of light and heat . . . to bring the sun back.” (Ibid, p. 3) They sang: “See the blazing Yule before us, Fa la la la la, la la la la. Strike the hard and join the chorus, Fa la la la la, la la la la.

Similar sun celebrations existed in Northern Africa and the Middle East.

In Ancient Egypt, on the night of the Solstice, the High Priest would enter a sacred cave, going down into the womb of Mother Earth. [Here, deep inside, the Goddess Isis labored to give birth to her son, Horus, who Egyptians believed would be the savior of the world.] Hours later, when the High Priest returned and stepped from the cave, he bore a torch in one hand and a newborn infant in the other. He held the child high in the air, crying: “Behold, Horus, the infant sent to us by the Gods to bestow light upon the world.” (Ibid, p. 251)

Many ancient traditions taught that no Light Bearer could be born without the powers of the sacred feminine, without the wisdom and womb of the Divine Mother. The Scandinavian and Germanic tribes of Europe called the night of Winter Solstice ‘Mother’s Night.’

Persia—present day Iran—had their story own of the birth of the unconquerable sun, known as the God Mithra. Kenneth Patton writes: “Legends about Mithra say that he was born one night, as a baby, cold and crying in a cave. Shepherds, watching in fields near by, discovered him and cared for him. As he grew into an adult, Mithra performed many miracles for the people of the land. But after a while he returned to the sky, traveling daily across the heavens in a flaming chariot. To remember Mithra’s blazing return to the sky, just after midnight [on Solstice Night], three Persian priests, or Magi, led the faithful to a shrine at the mouth of a cave. There a bull was slain and burned as sacrifice. Each worshipper held a torch, and they sang praises to Mithra, the strong, the mighty, the god of light and power and truth. With torches held high, they sang, “Rejoice, a child of heaven has been born.” (Ibid, 262, adapted)

Ancient Romans celebrated the God Saturn at Solstice time, in a great festival called Saturnalia. [“Saturn was the god of agriculture, liberation, and time. His coming Kingdom and reign was depicted as a Golden Age of abundance and peace.” (Wikipedia)] As part of the celebration, friends exchanged gifts, including wax tapers,” (Ibid, p. 251) candles flickering in the night.

“Where do all the lights come from?” asked the little girl, her eyes wide with winter wonder? Her mother smiled. “They come from long ago.”

This year I placed candles in most of the windows of my house. These lights came from General Electric via Lowe’s. They automatically turn on at 5:15 pm when it is already deep dark outside. They flicker gently through the power of two AA batteries. When I arrive home at night after church meetings or pastoral care appointments, my heart stirs to see them in their utter simplicity. In the face of all the tears and all the fears of all the years, in the face of all the many and complex realities in the world, in the face of all the heartbreak and horror so alive this year, this season—especially this season—those candles stand still, strong, and shine. They shine their little bit of light into the world.

Cannot we do the same? Cannot we stand in that long line of humanity, reaching back to the caves of the Stone Age, when it seemed that the light was fading and the night would completely and forever overwhelm? Cannot we stand in that long line of humanity,

reaching back to those great bonfires and burning wheels of ancient Britain? Cannot we stand in that long line of humanity, reaching back to those blazing Yule logs, Divine Mothers, Persian Priests with torches aloft, and Romans exchanging gifts of candles?

Imagine it—that long line of light passed down through the ages, from hand to hand, from heart to heart, to us!

Cannot we stand—us—today, in the time and place and condition we find ourselves? Like a candle, cannot we stand still, strong, and shine?

This year, more than ever, we need to ask ourselves: “Where do all the lights come from?” In the midst of uncertainty about our economy, in the midst of the choices our elected officials will make (or not make) in the these next few days, in the midst of decisions that could limit availability of social services, in the midst of grieving the shattered dreams of Newtown CT, in the midst of our culture that continues to glorify violence, in the midst of our much needed national conversation about gun control, in the midst of the lasting devastation from super storm Sandy, in the midst of growing uneasiness about the large scale impact of global warming, in the midst of more bloodshed in Syria and Afghanistan and so many other places around the globe, in the midst of our own life struggles, and health struggles, and personal and family challenges and losses—in the midst of all this and more....we ask: “Where do all the lights come from?”

The answer is the same as it has been for season after season of Winter Solstices, echoing down through the ages, for thousands and thousands of years. Where do all the lights come from? They come from us, the people who—rather than curse the darkness—choose to light a candle. They come from us, the people who, though worn and weary, build bonfires in our hearts to keep our love from growing cold. They come from us, the people who hold torches aloft to illuminate the strength and possibility so abundant this time of year.

Where do all the lights come from? They come from us, the people of faith who believe there are great powers at work in the world, powers that, when united, are stronger than any fear, stronger than any hate, stronger than any evil or misguided act. They come from us, the people who hold Unitarian Universalism’s profound belief: that within each person is inherent goodness, and that goodness within us and among us and beyond us, will carry us, it can be nurtured, and from it can arise once more a people—us—who, even in the midst of great challenge or tragedy, will choose to stand on the side of hope, stand on the side of love, stand on the side of life!

As African American poet and philosopher Howard Thurmond proclaims:

In the darkness we light a candle of hope.
In the pain we light a candle of forgiveness
In loneliness we light a candle of warmth
In gratitude we light a candle of thanks

In wonder we light a candle of praise
Our separate lights become one
That we may be nourished by its glow.

That the world may be nourished by our glow.

May it be so. Blessed Be. Amen

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