

Just a Tiny Spark: A Homily in Honor of the Winter Solstice
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by Richard Stromer

And so it comes again, the shortest day and the longest night... the Winter Solstice, inspiration for countless festivals celebrating the rebirth of the light at this darkest time of the year. Often the images that people are drawn to when they think of light at this season are big, bright, cheery fires, like the ones blazing away in hearths and fireplaces on holiday greeting cards. Or the giant bonfires around which the ancients danced away this longest night on Winter Solstices in centuries past.

For me, paradoxically, one of the most powerful symbols of this season is a fire much humbler and less exciting than that of a blazing hearth, the glow of one small candle in a window facing the cold and the dark of night. It's not that I can't appreciate the charm of a roaring fire on a cold night. But also I believe that the hardest challenge we face in dark times is simply to keep the little spark of that lonely candle from going out.

Moreover, when we think about the symbolism of the Winter Solstice, I believe we must begin not with the light, but rather with the inevitable, necessary, and fruitful darkness within which and out of which our sparks must be kindled. It is for this reason that in countless myths, legends, and stories, the miracle of the rekindling of the spark of light always begins, not at daybreak with the coming of the morning, but rather at midnight. It was then that ancient pagans began their solstice observances, often celebrating the birth of a magical child born of the union of a Sky Father and an Earth Mother. And in the Christian story, it was at the darkest hour of the night rather than in the glow of morning that shepherds heard the singing of angels. And the Three Wise Men were guided to their divine child, not by the bright light of the sun, but rather by the flickering light of a star.

Both Christianity and some of the older traditions that the early Christians drew upon tended to focus on an ongoing battle between the darkness and the light. That said, many other ancient and indigenous traditions -- as well as we UUs -- embrace the understanding that both darkness and light are necessary and valuable, that both offer us important gifts. For it is in the darkness of the womb, the womb of night and winter, that the light of spring and new life are reborn at this season. Whether literal or symbolic, the womb of a mother or the unconscious aspects of our own minds, it is out of darkness that new life arises.

Sometimes darkness rises quite naturally in our lives, whether through the rolling calendar of the year or the shifting seasons of our own lives. Then again, sometimes the dark rises unexpectedly, in awesome, cataclysmic shifts of fortune, tragedies spawned of death, disease, war, the breakup of relationships, and a whole host of other natural and manmade disasters.

As many of you know, for me, the year since our last Winter Solstice service was one deeply touched by this sudden, catastrophic kind of darkness, the kind that falls upon us completely unprepared. Since the death of Bill, my partner of many years, in August from the ravages of cancer, I have found myself living with a kind of darkness that I'd never imagined possible. In the very heart of that darkness it's sometimes hard to remember even the possibility of hope and joy, of purpose and meaning. Yet even here, in this darkest darkness I've yet to experience, when all else fails, I know I can always find a tiny spark of light in the awareness that everything must and will change; that, as my mother used to say, "this, too, shall pass"; and as the writer of Ecclesiastes wisely teaches, "To everything there is a season."

Just as darkness may descend suddenly and shockingly as in the unexpected death of a loved one or slowly and quietly like the gradual process of our own aging, so too the light may be re-kindled suddenly from without or gradually as the unfolding of an inner process. Just like lightening suddenly setting fire to an old dead tree, sometimes it feels like the sparks of hope, compassion, and joy return to us as gifts of grace coming from we know not where. And sometime these sparks are kindled within our minds and hearts through careful and patient fire-making, the spiritual equivalent of rubbing two sticks together.

I've generally found it best to practice both approaches to keeping our inner light aglow. On the one hand, I try to remain open to those sparks of light that come to me through some agency of grace: gifts of insight, awareness, and unconditional love from some unseen divine source. And I also recognize that our own ability to kindle light in the midst of both outer and inner darkness is an essential psychological and spiritual skill. In this way, through practices such as mindfulness, gratitude, compassion, and service to others, we can transform ourselves into light-kindlers and light-bearers.

In addition to sparks of light that come through an agency of grace and those we may kindle through our own spiritual effort, my experience this year has taught me a host of new and deeper lessons about yet a third source of light in dark times. When grace has seemed in short supply and my own efforts to keep the spark alive have proven woefully inadequate, I've regularly been blessed by gifts of light brought to me by my family, my friends, and by this community. "At times our own light goes out," said Albert Schweitzer, "and is rekindled by a spark from another person." As a result, he advises, "each of us has cause to think with deep gratitude of those who have lighted the flame within us." I know firsthand of what the good doctor speaks and am truly grateful for all of the light-bringers in my life this year.

I will close my reflections this afternoon with the words of UU minister A. Powell Davies:

"Here is something goes right back to the beginning, farther than thought can reach, back into the primitive from which we come. Here is something that journeys through the centuries, borne by the faith and courage of those who came before. Here is something that beckons to us also from the future, that belongs to the very nature of the human spirit, because it belongs to the nature of life itself."

That "something" says Rev Davies, "kindles a light, and no matter how little a light it is, the darkness cannot put it out. It says, Be not afraid, the good and the true are stronger than anything that stands against them, and sooner or later, will prevail. It you doubt it, look backward and trace the path by which we have come; and look around you: in spite of everything, we are still on our way. The darkness is vast truly, but across it there is a path of light ."

Rev Davies concludes that "Lighting a light at the darkest time of the year is a pledge somehow. A promise. A sacred vow. Such a small, symbolic gesture. So elegantly simple. So significant. Each tentative flicker of each flame is a reminder of the fragility and pulsating persistence of the life force. Each spark, a signal flare of faith."

May it be so. Blessed be. Amen.