

A Reflection on Winter Solstice: Returning to the Light*

By Nanci Armstrong-Temple

This is a piece adapted from a Reflection (sort of like a sermon, but given by someone who is not a minister) given by the author on 12.16.12. For those of you who do not meditate because you believe it to be too religious, please read this piece by noted atheist and writer [Sam Harris](#). And feel free to read more about [Live Oak](#) or [Unitarian Universalism](#).

Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our Light, not our Darkness, that most frightens us.

--Marianne Williamson

Every man must decide whether he will walk in the light of creative altruism or in the darkness of destructive selfishness.

--Martin Luther King, Jr.

Unless we form the habit of going to the Bible in bright moments as well as in trouble, we cannot fully respond to its consolations because we lack equilibrium between light and darkness.

--Helen Keller

I set aside the other reflection I was writing. In the wake of the events of the last week I have been in a state of alternating gratitude and panic, compassion and despair, sadness and fury.

Last week I heard about the shooting at the mall in Oregon because one of my friends posted on Facebook that her daughter had just left work at that mall when the shooting happened; her daughter's boyfriend was on his way to work and missed it by moments as well. I read a few posts and sent some blessings and descended back into the mound of studying that I have been under for the final two weeks of school.

On Friday morning I spent several hours revising a few little details on my final paper of my first semester back at U.C. Berkeley. I had spent a considerable amount of time writing and thinking and talking and revising and talking and writing some more, so I wasn't worried about the paper itself, just revising to make sure my ideas were as clearly stated as possible. I am grateful for the chance that I have been given to go back to school...the light of education is a boon to the darkness of ignorance.

After I emailed the paper I went onto Facebook to post that I had finished my paper and my semester, and saw the posts from friends and family and colleagues about Connecticut. The shock and awe of the news made my own news seem less important.

Like one of my other friends at Live Oak Unitarian Universalist Fellowship I wanted to shut off my computer, and my radio, and anything else that could let in the knowledge of so devastating an act of hate and rage and sadness as the one which happened in Connecticut on Friday.

And so I did, for a while. I changed out of my pajamas and picked up my daughters Annabelle and Tallulah from school. I spent the entire afternoon just watching them play and talking with other friends, parents of their classmates, processing our reactions and emotions and fears. And I went back to writing this reflection.

But I couldn't write about the light.

All I could think about was the darkness. Though Maryanne Williamson says that we fear our own light, I fear other's darkness. And though I was raised Unitarian Universalist, to believe in the inherent worth and

dignity of others, I find it difficult in these kinds of circumstances to come up with some sort of rational argument for why I shouldn't have a gun of my own in times of necessary vigilante justice.

And in these times, I remember Helen Keller's words. Although I read the bible, it's not my main source of spirit and solace. What I do in the time between tragedies is pray, and work, and meditate. I do these things not just because I want to be good and whole; I do want to be good and whole. But I do these things because the violence in me wants to respond to the violence in you with more violence. When I am afraid or desperate or hungry or homeless or grieving there is a part of me that wants to strike you and everyone else down so that you could feel what I feel in that moment. The adage misery loves company is not just a pithy saying. We each need to be held in our despair and rage and comforted from a place of knowledge of the darkness by those who have been there and are there in the darkness no longer. And when someone so hurts people I love, or innocents whether I know and love them or not, I want to strike them down. And because I do the spirit work in between times, I remember words like these from Thich Nhat Hahn:

(Reading from Peace is Every Step, pp. 123-124)

*I am the mayfly metamorphosing on the surface of the river,
and I am the bird which, when spring comes, arrives in time
to eat the mayfly.*

*I am the frog swimming happily in the clear pond,
and I am also the grass snake who, approaching in silence,
feeds itself on the frog.*

*I am the child in Uganda, all skin and bones,
my legs as thin as bamboo sticks,
and I am the arms merchant, selling deadly weapons to Uganda.*

*I am the twelve-year-old girl, refugee on a small boat,
who throws herself into the ocean after being raped by a sea pirate,
and I am the sea pirate, my heart not yet capable of seeing and loving.*

...

*My joy is like spring, so warm it makes flowers bloom in all walks of life.
My pain is like a river of tears, so full it fills the four oceans.*

...

*Please call me by my true names, so I can wake up,
and so the door of my heart can be left open,
the door of compassion.*

I remember these words and they do not stamp out my anger. Instead, they pull it in. I remember that the dark power of anger and destruction is the same darkness and power that is in the womb. I harness my anger not to quiet it, or to deaden it, nor even to make it stronger. Instead I use anger as the white hot forge of clarity and I work ever the harder for justice, ever the harder to stay awake, ever the harder to reform schools who do not love children enough, to teach parents who have been hurt and therefore hurt their children what they could do instead, to grow food and teach others to do so, and teach them also to share and love their neighbor, to sing and to dance. I use the fire of anger to look at my own life and burn off the things that are bad habits and the things that are destructive to me, to my family, or to my fellow humans.

And so I still have no explanation for what happened, what happens. But I do know how to find the light in me that counters it.