

“The Light is Reborn”
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When snow is coming, many of us engage in gambling, bargaining and panic that would seem entirely out of our regular personality. Will it be a snow day?? Should I do my work?? Is it safe to go out? My husband and I spent hours yesterday agonizing over the weather report. Sam and Abbey were supposed to fly out of Logan last night to go to see their mom in Canada for Christmas and we needed to sort out whether we each would be holding worship today. The kids’ flight was scheduled for 9PM and the blizzard watch just south of Boston was supposed to begin shortly before that. We had the experience in the past of incoming weather delaying their flights for hours and hours and we were not happy about that happening on a Saturday night before church. We were anxious about getting ourselves prepared for church. Is it going to snow too much or not enough? Will it be just enough to make it horrible to get there, but not enough to cancel? If we don’t change the tickets now, will there be any seats left on Monday? The questions went on and on. We waited until 2 o’clock, and then decided to change their tickets, since the airline was letting people change for free. We got the last 2 seats on a plane to Buffalo on Monday and congratulated ourselves on a job well done. Because I am who I am, before bed last night, I checked to see if their original flight had taken off. Of course it had and only 30 minutes late. In retrospect, we could have made it, but there were so many factors in the choice, the driving, safety, getting home to sleep before church, their mom having to drive home so late at night... We made the best choice we could in a complicated situation.

In Western thought there has been a tendency to ignore how complicated people and situations can be. We often put things into binaries or dichotomies. If we have this, we can’t have that. If someone is this, they are not that. We polarize ideas, concepts and people: white and black, light and dark, good and bad. In the process of doing this we also reveal our societal prejudices. We make value judgments about people and cultures based on where they fit or do not fit into categories of this versus that. Postmodern philosophies and theologies have done a lot of work to break down these categories and to help us to understand the potential of fully integrated identities.

The history of feminism is a great example of how understanding the limits of polarized thinking can change lives and understanding. In feminist history there have been developments in thought and language. These changes have been called waves of feminism: the first being in the late 19th century, the second in the 1960s and 70s, and the third beginning in the early 1990s. Third wave feminists of color and from the third world suggested that predominantly white first and second wave feminist language and rhetoric was not part of their experience and has marginalized them from the movement. They felt the feminist movement was organized around the experience of white women. Some also felt too much emphasis was still being placed on binaries. Genders were still polarized, and ascribed value, just different value that had been done in the past.

Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza is an acclaimed feminist scholar who has been the Krister Stendhal Professor of Scripture and Interpretation at Harvard Divinity School since 1988. In her book, *Wisdom Ways*, Schüssler Fiorenza provides an introduction to feminist biblical interpretation that includes how waves of feminism and liberation theologies have interacted and sometimes worked against each other. She explains how Third World feminists have brought to

the forefront the importance of understanding netted oppressions and identities. Schüssler Fiorenza illustrates how complex feminist analysis must be to capture the experience of women. Oppression on parts of a person's identity like race, class and/or gender, cannot simply be added up in order to have an understanding of their relationship to oppressive systems. Rather Schüssler Fiorenza states, "such an "adding up" feminist approach disregards the historical inter-structuring of race, class, gender, age, and nation as forms of stratification which develop together out of the same set of domination and which therefore need to be changed simultaneously. Structures of wo/men's oppression are not just multiple but multiplicative: racism is multiplied by sexism multiplied by ageism, multiplied by classism multiplied by colonial exploitation."¹ In other words, our identities and the way we are in the world are complex and our identities cannot be unwound into simple categories or parts and oppression is linked to ignoring this completely.

Part of this development in the feminist movement came with the rise of Womanist thought. Womanism has grown out of the work of African American ethicists, theologians and scholars since the 1980s. Womanism works to break apart the stereotypes of black women in American culture and history through self-definition, self-naming and exploring theology through the lens of black womens' experience. In her essay "Womanist Theology: An Expression of Multi-dimensionality for Multi-dimensional Beings"

Chandra Taylor Smith writes: "the traditional oppositions between whiteness/blackness, oppressor/oppressed, and community/personality in black theology...explode in their binary contrasts to open up to the multi-dimensions of racial/ethnic/social/economic/gender/sexual and religious identities representative of African American women's *real-lived* experiences."²

Real life is complicated and messy. When we try to fit life into a box or make it tidy, things go very badly wrong. This is expressed from the experience of oppressed people being written out of stories or history, to ignoring the full possibility of experience in our lives. Understanding identity is important to our human story as is letting go of attachment to false dichotomies. This work is hard. In some ways, we have to retrain our brains to hold more chaos, more options, and layers of meaning. When we remain attached to categories and hold tightly to constructs we can be left frustrated and unconnected. We can also miss the vast variety of experience we can know from our fellow human beings.

At this time of the year, there are binaries in many of our stories of light and dark with values ascribed to them. The dark is bad and we fight it with light, the cold is bad and warm is good. We ascribe judgment and value to the transitions of the seasons. Light and dark are powerful symbols throughout human history... they parallel concepts like: knowing and unknowing, good and evil, success and failure. I offer an alternative metaphor from our neo-pagan neighbors.

At the time of the solstice, modern pagans focus on rebirth in the cycle of the earth. At the solstice, as we experience its movement on Earth, the sun stands still, and many call the solstice the birth of the sun. For those who honor the triple goddess of maiden, mother, and crone, or a four part god or goddess system, the solstice is the beginning, when the cycle from birth to death begins again. There is something very important in this imagery for Unitarian Universalism. There is a Western tendency to put things into categories. They are this and not that, light and dark, good and bad. But as we actually go about the business of living our lives, what is that linear and clear cut? We make the best choices we can based on complicated and

¹ ESF, *Wisdom Ways*, Orbis Books, 2001, p. 118.

² Chandra Taylor Smith, "Womanist Theology" in *The Ties that Bind*, Continuum, 2001, p160. (emphasis mine)

intertwined factors, including but not limited to our identity, experience, intuition and expectation.

On a clear winter night when there is snow on the ground it seems the stars are so bright, and the earth hushed. There is magic in the winter night. When the moon reflects off the snow, and it is bright, even at the darkest time of year, I feel the presence of the holy. We are at a point in the cycle of seasons where many people and traditions around the world mark this transition, from the dying of vegetation to the beginning of the rebirth of life sustaining growth. It is hard to imagine with all the frozen ground and the whole winter before us, but this is the moment, the transition from the darkest time of the year to increasing light, a time of rebirth.

Darkness and light are not good or bad. They are. They are part of the cycle of the earth and of our lives. In our ritual earlier this evening we honored both the power of the dark and the light, and how we live our lives holding both. Nancy Shaffer's poem, "A Theology Adequate for Night" we heard earlier, speaks to the power that exists in the night.

The potential to be close to that force we can sense when we walk in the snow on a clear night, or wake in the night worried or anxious. She writes,

this may work in the night: something that breathes with us, as others sleep; something that breathes also those sleeping, so no one is alone. Something that is the beginning of love, and also each part of how love is completed. Something so large, wherever we are, we are not separate; which teaches again the way to start over.³

May it be so for each of us that through our connections to one another, nature, and ourselves, we are able to live more rich and fully human lives. May we be open to holding complexity and resist the urge to put ourselves, or experience, or others into columns and boxes. May we as human beings and Unitarian Universalists, through this openness, work to end oppression. As we begin again the rebirth of a new year, may it be filled with love and blessing.

Amen and blessed be.

³ "A Theology Adequate for Night", Nancy Shaffer,