

Solstice  
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One of my loved ones is thinking about her retirement. She is one of those kinds of folks who volunteers for *everything*, and she knows that she doesn't want to do what some of her friends have done and get even busier after she retires. Can anyone in this room relate to this a little? So, this is her plan: the day after she retires, she is going to do nothing but hang out and work in her garden. She is going quit everything. And she is going to stay away from everything for quite some time to see what she misses. Does she miss committee and board work? Spiritual practice groups? Planning events? Certain organizations? Certain people? Once she has experienced missing things, then she is going to make her choices about how she spends her time, and if it turns out that hanging out and gardening (because she is *sure* about the gardening) is what makes her feel happy and productive, then so be it. I am totally impressed by this plan. When she first told me my heart jumped. On the inside I thought, "but what will you *do*? What will happen to all the groups you serve?" But of course they will be fine. I know I am far away from retirement, but the idea of stepping back from everything, that sounds so radical, so much against my own grain, against *her* grain. I can't wait to see what she thinks of it. Now, *please* don't hear this as me encouraging everyone to drop all your work for this congregation! But, my hope for all of us is that we are doing *some* work, whether it is volunteer or paid, that we feel good about, that fills us back up in some way. I know it is not always possible, but it is so special when that happens, isn't it?

I have heard it said that the new normal for life in the United States is to be overworked and overtired almost all that time, and that this is true for kids in school, and for adults. Whether or not this is true for you, I invite you to imagine with me. Imagine that tomorrow morning you were to wake up, sit down, and have no responsibilities, nothing that you *had* to do. What do you think *you* would miss? Imagine a bucket, and pile in there everything you would miss, any sized bucket you want. While you are at it, think about the relationships, the feelings, the people you would miss, and place them in the bucket as well. Let's sit for a moment with our bucket. I am sure you can guess what is coming next... What would you be grateful you *didn't* have to do? What wouldn't you miss? Put those things in a different imaginary bucket. What about situations, or feelings, or other things that aren't things, but that you might like to let go of, they can go in the bucket as well. Let's sit for a moment with our two buckets. Consider the bucket of things you wouldn't miss. What would happen if you stopped doing them? Maybe some of them would impact your ability to live and pay bills, my husband calls them gottus - got-tos, but what about the others? What would change? Could you take some things out of that bucket and let them go? Okay, now go back to the bucket of stuff you *would* miss, and consider it. Are there any themes in what you would miss? How does what's in that bucket make you feel? Are there any tools in *that* bucket that can help us with the other?

Back when I was in school once of my jobs was cleaning houses. There was a part of me that was fed by creating order out of chaos and I was able to turn that into a job. I also was fed by a job that gave me time alone and with flexible hours. Eventually though the balance changed, and it started to wear me down. It was really tiring work and I was starting to feel

weird about cleaning other people's stuff, so I stopped taking on jobs and did other work instead. After that, when I was cleaning my own house, I wanted it to feel special, and not like work. I had this plastic tiara at home, I don't remember where it came from, but it was really pretty, and I used to keep it right on top of my vacuum cleaner to wear when I was cleaning. I used it until it disappeared in our move to Northampton. The tiara helped me remember that the work I was doing was for me, because it was important to my sense of order to have the house cleaner than not, and that cleaning could be fun again.

I have spoken many times about the power of spiritual practices and quiet to build our resilience. Resilience is important to our spiritual lives and to our hearts so that we are able to face whatever comes our way and to respond to ourselves and others with compassion. Resilience comes from the bucket of things that feed our spirit. Something else that can build our resilience is saying no, and letting things go. When we feed the aspects of our lives that help us get to the feelings, things, people, and communities that build us up, protect us, challenge us, teach us, love us, we help build our resilience, we help ourselves feel and do better, which in turn helps us to help others feel and do better. We feed and honor the interdependent web. How can what we *have* to do be supported by what we love to do? And what can we just let go? The earth can help us figure it out.

Winter Solstice is an opportunity to celebrate and honor our place in the web of life, for our turning around the sun, our unique place in the universe, and the opportunity to connect through song and story with others in a cold (well, usually cold) and dark time of year. For the pagans among us, Winter Solstice and Yule are a celebration of thousands of years of tradition—of people who were so committed they hauled enormous rocks from far away rivers up hills to make seasonal ritual spaces. There is a rhythm to life, to our bodies, to the universe. These nights are long, inviting us to a time of greater introspection. The changes in seasons bring resiliency to our ecosystem as the plant life that dies becomes the food for the next season's growth. Different animals are up and about and serve different needs in the ecosystem. Living in a place like we do, with the uniqueness of four seasons, mountains, forests, and fields, this helps us stay connected to our environment. If we are attentive to the seasons, to the cycles of birth, death, and rebirth in our natural world, we are all the more likely to live in gratitude and connection, and to be attentive to the impact we have on our environment. We can better see our place in the circle. Perhaps something in our bucket of resilience and strength could be wonder at this connection, this process, how we got here.

Solstice is the moment, this year December 21 at 11:49 p.m. when the earth seems to stand still. In the words of Barbara Wells ten Hove, "The spinning dance of the earth continues, but for one brief instant, when the axis of the Earth's rotation crosses the line through the center of our orbit around the sun, the tipping stops, and for a moment, we seem to stand suspended in space, pulsing with potential movement and ongoing life. Then, like a child's top that almost fell over, we are saved by the spin and lifted up again towards the light."<sup>1</sup> Solstice is the top of a hill, that moment on a bike when you start peddling or fall over. It is the moment before a choice. The moment before we decide what we will do next, what we will pick up, and what will become the fertilizer for future growth. Can we listen to the changes around us and take this moment to be attentive? Can we sit with our imaginary buckets, and make some choices that will feed our spirits and know that the choices we make are not forever? If we ever forget that everything is

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1 <http://www.uua.org/worship/words/meditation/174628.shtml>

always changing around us, we have the opportunity in each turning of the season to be reminded again of the cycle of life—to make our choices again.

My friends, today I invite us to participate in a ritual that can be very fun and cathartic. We are going to do more than quietly imagine letting go of things. In the spirit of our pagan ancestors, today we are going to burn them. We are going to be in quiet for a few moments while we consider again what things we can take out of our got-to buckets and let go of for this season. As you are ready, I invite you to come up and take one of these papers. Hold the thing in your mind that you want to let go of, hold the paper near the flame and then as it burns pull your hand away like this [show]. Then I invite you to hold in your mind something from your bucket of resilience that helps you in your life. Hold that image in your mind as you take a stone and charge up that stone to keep with you and remember your own well when things are challenging.

[Activity]

May we remember our own power and let go of the things that keep us from connecting to ourselves, each other, and the interdependent web of all existence, of which we are a part.

So may it be.