

Solstice
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UUMSB
December 18, 2016

Readings:
“Keeping Quiet” by Pablo Neruda

Now we will count to twelve
and we will all keep still.

For once on the face of the earth,
let's not speak in any language;
let's stop for one second,
and not move our arms so much.

It would be an exotic moment
without rush, without engines;
we would all be together
in a sudden strangeness.

Fisherman in the cold sea
would not harm whales
and the man gathering salt
would look at his hurt hands.

Those who prepare green wars,
wars with gas, wars with fire,
victories with no survivors,
would put on clean clothes
and walk about with their brothers
in the shade, doing nothing.

What I want should not be confused
with total inactivity.
Life is what it is about;
I want no truck with death.

If we were not so single-minded
about keeping our lives moving,
and for once could do nothing,
perhaps a huge silence
might interrupt this sadness

of never understanding ourselves
and of threatening ourselves with death.
Perhaps the earth can teach us
as when everything seems dead
and later proves to be alive.

Now I'll count up to twelve
and you keep quiet and I will go.

—from *Extravagaria* (translated by Alastair Reid, pp. 27-29, 1974)

The Moment of Magic
By Victoria Safford,

Now is the moment of magic,
when the whole, round earth turns again toward the sun,
and here's a blessing:
the days will be longer and brighter now,
even before the winter settles in to chill us.
Now is the moment of magic,
when people beaten down and broken,
with nothing left but misery and candles and their own clear voices,
kindle tiny lights and whisper secret music,
and here's a blessing:
the dark universe is suddenly illuminated by the lights of the menorah,
suddenly ablaze with the lights of the kinara,
and the whole world is glad and loud with winter singing.
Now is the moment of magic,
when an eastern star beckons... toward an unknown goal,
and here's a blessing:
they find nothing in the end but an ordinary baby,
born at midnight, born in poverty, and the baby's cry, like bells ringing,
makes people wonder as they wander through their lives,
what human love might really look like,
sound like,
feel like.
Now is the moment of magic,
and here's a blessing:
we already possess all the gifts we need;
we've already received our presents:
ears to hear music,
eyes to behold lights,
hands to build true peace on earth

and to hold each other tight in love.

Sermon:

When I was a kid, my mom was a Director of Religious Education, so she worked on Sunday mornings, in the children's program. Usually I was there too, but I also went to the worship service sometimes with my Dad or Grandmother. Christmas Eve was one of the few services when we were all together. Friday night at the Carol sing, we were singing a song that I remember singing next to my mom on Christmas Eve, and I got verklempt. The holiday season is full of ritual and songs and stories, and that is a wonderful human experience. And, it means there are so many anchors for our memories to hold on to wonderful and bittersweet moments in our past. Christmas, Hannukah, Solstice, lights, beauty, the moon on snow, ornaments from loved ones, giving gifts, pulling out old records, and on and on, this is a month of memories and symbols, songs, and rituals. Yesterday I sat writing this sermon intermittently staring at my Christmas tree, the beautiful pagan symbol of rebirth and light, and the power of mother earth, twinkling in my living room, and I couldn't help but think of the Christmases of the past, of childhood, of my own kids and wondering about how they will remember Christmases 20 years from now, all because of a tree in a pot with twinkle lights on it. Symbols and ritual can have a lot of power. Western celebrations of solstice are full of ancient rites, that have become part of other winter holiday traditions from Yule Logs, Christmas trees and greens, to creatures coming to our houses to leave presents or declare children naughty.

Often near Solstice, I preach about slowing down in a season of busyness, of letting the quiet of the darkest time of the year be a model for a possibility for our attention and intention, which is still important. However, in talking with people in the last month or so, we are of course still busy, and thinking about holiday things, but I know that many folks, in addition to holiday busyness, excitement, or melancholy, are holding more existential worries. Folks are worried for people caught in conflicts around the world, they are worried about the safety of themselves and those they love if laws change that currently protect them, they are worried about managing what is possible to control, and what is not, about how to navigate reinvigorated racism and patriarchy in our communities. Folks are worried because the unknown is hard, especially when we are afraid. What tools can Solstice offer us this year?

Winter Solstice is a celebration of the rebirth of the sun, of the transition to longer days, so that even though we have a winter yet to move through, we will have more light reflecting off the snow, to help us on our path. For the pagans among us, Winter Solstice and Yule are a celebration of thousands of years of tradition—an opportunity to celebrate and honor our place in the web of life. We celebrate 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 and dark time of year. The nights are long, inviting us to a time of greater introspection.

We have an opportunity to move from memory and ritual, into seeing our place in the greater story. Solstice is the moment, on December 21, when the earth seems to stand still. It is the top of a hill, that moment on a bike when you start peddling or fall over. The moment before we decide what we will do next, where we will put our energy. While of course I imagine that we will all be very engaged in our inner and outer worlds in the next year, we can also consider the advice of Neruda:

If we were not so single-minded
about keeping our lives moving,

and for once could do nothing,
perhaps a huge silence
might interrupt this sadness
of never understanding ourselves
and of threatening ourselves with death.
Perhaps the earth can teach us
as when everything seems dead
and later proves to be alive.

In the face of injustice, or struggle, it is vital to raise our voice, but it is also vital to leave space for silence, and opportunity to reflect on our experience, to understand ourselves and others.

Do you remember the movie, *Finding Nemo*? What is it that Dory always says when she is afraid? “Just keep swimming,” right? That is an admirable response to fear, courage being admitting we are afraid and moving forward anyway. And, if we apply it all the time, it is a mode that can lead us away from reflection. A moment of danger may not be the time to reflect, but what about more existential fear, or fear of the unknown? Is it better to just keep swimming, or to find a way to reflect and see the fear differently? Sometimes we feel we need to just keep swimming or we will be overwhelmed and unable to keep going. It is the work of each of us to discern when we are able to stop and seek understanding, and when we are in a wave and need to keep paddling or we will be dragged under. Both ways require courage.

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Solstice gives us a physical reminder of the power of the relationship between light and darkness. Illumination, like a bright moon or setting sun on snow, are so lovely this time of year. The lights we kindle in our homes spread out into the darkness around, not to illuminate all the sky and push away the night, but rather to brighten our corner.

Now is the moment of magic,
when people beaten down and broken,
with nothing left but misery and candles and their own clear voices,
kindle tiny lights and whisper secret music,

and here's a blessing:
the dark universe is suddenly illuminated by the lights of the menorah,
suddenly ablaze with the lights of the kinara,
and the whole world is glad and loud with winter singing.

In the darkness of winter, a symbol that we see over and over again, is many small lights, or candles, or stars, together lighting a space. Ritual helps us transform fear, through physical reminders of our connections one to another, and through time. Winter reminds us that though we may be strong as individuals, we need each other's light to get through challenging times. Even if we are the only creature in a room, we are never truly alone, and we are connected to all that is, was, and will be.

May we find moments for reflection and silence in this Solstice week, and when we are struggling, or need support, may we see each other's light in the darkness.

So may it be.
Amen.