

Solstice
Rev. Carol Allman-Morton
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UUMSB

Our seeds for spring planting came yesterday. We obviously don't need them yet, but last year they were out of some of the types we wanted later in the season, so we ordered early this year. A large portion of what will become our food for next summer is sitting in a small cardboard box in my kitchen. I am going to store the box in a cool cupboard in the basement, near the potatoes we are enjoying from this fall, some of which may also become seed for next year. The fact that the seeds arrived in time for solstice feels symbolic. Like the seeds in the ground waiting for rebirth in spring, or in my cupboard waiting to be planted, we are in a time of preparation, of waiting, of transition, of anticipation.

Winter Solstice and Yule celebrate and honor our place in the web of life, our journey around the sun, and unique place in the universe. Solstice is an opportunity to connect through song and story in a cold and dark time of year. Much of our Solstice and Yule traditions are drawn from the ancient practices of the Celtic peoples of Europe. These were Iron and Bronze age people who migrated across northern Europe, and then to what became the islands of Britain and Ireland. Because Ireland was not invaded by Rome, nor was Scotland (remember Hadrian's wall?), as mainland Europe and England were, that language and culture is largely preserved there.

In Ireland, there are a number of neolithic sites that are aligned to the winter solstice. There is the passage tomb at Newgrange, north of Dublin, where the 5,000-year-old inner chamber is illuminated on solstice by a perfectly angled passage through which the sun shines that morning. In Co. Kilkenny is the Knockroe Passage tomb, which contains extensive megalithic art, and two chambers, showing light at both sunrise and sunset on the Winter Solstice. Additionally, Drombeg Circle in Co. Cork, which we saw in our music for meditation today, is a circle of standing stones including a low flat-topped rock, which aligns to the horizon where the sun sets on the solstice.¹ For the ancient people who spent years crafting these spaces, we can only imagine the importance of the cycles of seasons, and of light to their experience and beliefs. For the modern pagans among us, Winter Solstice and Yule continue thousands of years of tradition—tradition that inspired ancient people to haul enormous rocks from far away rivers up hills to make seasonal ritual spaces, who sang and danced to welcome the winter, and the return of light, to honor traditions that have been co-opted by Christianity and the secular world in everything from yule logs to evergreens, mistletoe, holly, and ivy.

On Winter Solstice the seeds underground, the trees, the creatures big and small, experience the shortest day of the year--an invitation to get comfortable with the dark, with quiet, with ourselves and each other. Seeds are resting underground, waiting for spring, and so do we wait--for safely gathering, and family, and vaccines. On Solstice, through ritual and attention we connect more deeply with the cycles that will continue whether we are present to them or not, we more deeply experience our place in the interdependent web.

Solstice is the moment, tomorrow, when the earth seems to stand still. It is the moment before we decide what we will do next, where we will put our energy. For many of us, our traditions and celebrations are upended this year, and we are adjusting to celebrating in new ways. For myself, Solstice is an opportunity to reach back into history, seeking wisdom and

¹ <https://loraobrien.ie/an-irish-winter-solstice/>

strength, and to reach out to people I love while I am not with them, through intention and connection to the power of the web of life. Wind and weather permitting, we are planning a Solstice fire in our yard tomorrow night, kindling light out of the scraps and broken branches from our yard, and welcoming winter with light and cleansing fire, a crackle of hope in the snow and quiet.

In the midst of all that is, we are invited to remember that each day *is* different. Each day the sun rises and sets at a different time, the moon follows a different path. We mark the times when these things happen every month and year to count our days, but no day is the same. Your favorite spot in the woods will have different footprints in the snow tomorrow. Our earth and galaxy spin and move. When we feel stuck or afraid, we can know that change continues to happen, even as we move through the wheel of the year, through the seasons that return.

In our reading today, Margaret Atwood wrote:

This is the solstice, the still point
of the sun, its cusp and midnight,
the year's threshold
and unlocking, where the past
lets go of and becomes the future;
the place of caught breath...

As we come to the longest night of the year, may we be attentive to our breath, to quiet, and to being in a place between what was and what will be. This year is different, and for many of us, tinged with grief and challenge. If your house is quiet on Solstice, perhaps this is an opportunity to go deep into stillness and to feel our connection with changing seasons, and with the power of light kindled in the darkness. If your home is chaotic, or challenged with the experience of school, work, and living all happening in the same place, perhaps this Solstice, you will have a moment together to settle into quiet, to take a breath together, and be present to the power of stillness. Breathe together and pause with the earth. As the air gets colder and winter settles in, remember that seeds are ready and waiting to bring forth food and beauty, and each day light grows on the path toward summer, bringing us forward, into what comes next.

Blessed be.