

Solstice
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I live out in the hilltowns, in what some would call the country. On one hand, I can see my neighbors, on the other, one could walk for miles from my back door through fields and Fish and Wildlife land, down toward Huntington and Russell without seeing a soul. We have coyote runs in the woods across the street, and a bobcat family that lives somewhere off the field next door, but that is also be true in some suburbs these days. We live on a dead end street, off of the main road that goes through our town, so we hear traffic noises as they go up and down the hill nearby. When the traffic is gone though, it can be very still, and I love the quiet. Yesterday, Tadd and I were walking the dog, right before the storm began, and there was a moment when the air had that snowy quiet, like a blanket over everything. I know there is a scientific explanation for why, but I like to focus on the wonder of it. Then a few minutes later, little bits of ice came tinkling out of the sky, bouncing off us and the ground. It was loud, and really cool. I couldn't remember ever being outside for the beginning of an ice storm, and I liked it. I also liked that it quickly turned to light rain so I could finish my outside chores without falling all over the yard.

In a few days we will come to the solstice—a moment of stillness on the shortest day of the year. On Solstice we can know that though we have winter before us, each day will have a little more sunshine in it than the last. We are entering the coldest time of our year, when many of the creatures around us have either packed a bag and headed south, or hunkered down with their saved stores of food to wait out the cold. The seeds underground rest, waiting for spring, trees store their sugar, ready to grow new leaves. Much of life around us is waiting and resting.

Winter Solstice and Yule celebrate and honor our place in the web of life, our journey around the sun, and unique place in this 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, 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 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

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

co-opted by Christianity and the secular world in everything from yule logs to evergreens, mistletoe, holly, and ivy.

In our walk through the Unitarian Universalist Principles this season, today we come to our third principle, “Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations.” Acceptance is an interesting word here. Sometimes I feel like it is too bland, or minimalist and want it to be something like celebrate one another. But, I have been reflecting with a colleague lately on the power of acceptance, and the challenges that many are facing in particular right now as we navigate this pandemic, threats to democracy, accelerating climate change, violence against people of color, and on and on. A state of overwhelm, of decision fatigue, of everything fatigue, is common among many people. So, what could an acceptance of one another look like? Acceptance of our identities, loves, interests, and theologies, but also acceptance of our failures, of our mistakes, our struggles. Growth often comes through trying and failing, and so perhaps, pairing that growth in a principle with acceptance, is important. Acceptance of one another doesn’t mean be nice to one another, though of course compassion and kindness are so important, it is an invitation to recognize our shared humanity, and that we will have to be vulnerable, and risk failure to find growth, particularly spiritual growth. AND we do these things not just as people, but in community, we grow in our congregations. In the words of Rev. Harmony from our reading:

If we stay inside ourselves and do not venture out
then the Fullness of the universe
shall be unknown to us
And our locked hearts shall never feel the rush of worship.²

As we come to the longest night of the year, may we be attentive to being in a place between what was and what will be. This year is different, and for most 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 feel our connection with changing seasons, and with the power of light kindled in the darkness. If your home is full or loud, 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 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.

So may it be. Amen.

² If We Do Not Venture Out Meditation By Marni Harmony, Minister Emerita of First Unitarian Church of Orlando