

Two weeks ago, I preached a bit on Advent as a time of preparation for the coming of Jesus and how some of its practices were based in Pagan faiths that preceded Christianity. How Advent was a time of preparation to make us ready for the mystery of Christmas.

And Christians have in no way cornered the market on Mystery. 2 days ago, was the Winter Solstice. A time when Pagans and earth-based religions recognize the longest night and shortest day. You heard our Time For All Ages today. A story that spoke of the mystery Will the sun return will life start over again? Will we break the back of winter or will it break us?

There is emptiness to winter. And I do not mean that it is a wasteland, or simply something to be endured. But it is a time when there is less - of everything except snow, cold and dark. Folks who don't live here I suspect think that what I mean when I say I like having 4 seasons is that I love having fall colors - which I do. But I also love this time of emptiness. When the light is softer, sounds are quieter. There is a bit of a hush over nature - and a sense that anticipation is right around the corner as if we are anticipating anticipation. And in centuries past when we lived in an agrarian society it must have been particularly empty. With no electricity the dark had to seem particularly difficult and straining.

This fall I had the opportunity to talk to someone who had never seen snow never lived in snow. I got to sing the praises of snow just a little bit. I am not sure I knew until that moment how much I actually like snow.

One of my favorite times in winter is when it has snowed at night and if I happen wake up before dawn, which is much easier to do in December than June by the way, before the plows start in, before the commuters, there is a muffledness to nature. Stillness like no other. It brings new meaning to "Silent Night" And there is magic in that moment because the snow has covered over old footprints, dirty frozen puddles, tire tracks, soot and dirt. My house sounds different after a nighttime snow - it is like

nature's sound proofing. If we pay attention to the emptiness we may find that we are making space for something new. We may find we are making space for something that will not bloom until the spring.

Some folk, who are much more learned than I and probably know better than I, say that the early pagans who celebrated Yule created their rituals in part as a way of calling the sun back for it had fallen below the horizon and there was a fear that it would never come back. Perhaps that is true but I find the tone in that a bit patronizing. Yule was and is especially a time of storytelling and some of these stories come from eons ago. And even eons ago those stories came from eons ago. The people who first celebrated Yule and helped to shape its rituals had a sense of history and time. But what they may have been much more aware of than we are - is how vulnerable we humans really are. Perhaps they knew that the sun will rise every morning, that the spring will follow every winter, there is a permanence to nature. But will any one of us be there to experience it – that is another question. Stonehenge may not have been built to beckon the sun back so much as to reassure human then that humans had as much presence as nature. The sense of impermanence may not have been about the sun but rather about us.

Here in Central New York we know what the dark days of winter are. We know how long those nights can be. We know what it feels like when it seems like the sun is permanently hiding from us. Most of us I bet can easily tell if the mud we walk on is frozen or simply dried. We all know the roads can be treacherous, and sidewalks even more so. As winter sets in and the snow is on the sidewalks I develop a different gait – one that is designed to keep me steady on slippery sidewalks. We know the importance of mid-winter frivolity assuring us that life goes on. It's not so great to be over busy but a little bit of busyness can give you something to look forward to and a way to distract oneself from the inevitable long nights.

Many, many of our traditions that keep us busy at this time of year are borrowed from our northern European pagan ancestors

"Norsemen believed the sun was a great wheel of fire that would roll away from the earth and back, and they'd encourage and celebrate the return of the sun with great bonfires and large logs to burn on home fires (Yule logs). They would **decorate with bows of evergreen and put ornaments like the sun** (often many-pointed star shaped) out in the trees all around, to attract the sun back to the earth. Many cultures, both modern and historical, celebrated with fire and lights, to both light the longest night and to welcome back the sun. Germanic tribes **worshipped Odin**, went wassailing (caroling!), put out fruit and candles, even ON trees!" ([http://thestir.cafemom.com/baby/113242/How\\_to\\_Celebrate\\_Yule\\_With](http://thestir.cafemom.com/baby/113242/How_to_Celebrate_Yule_With))

And even jolly old St. Nick has pagan ancestor

"We have to go back a bit find the pagan legend and myth associated with Santa [we look again to] Odin. The 13th Century Poetic Edda is a complication of stories and poems from Scandinavian history, some as early 985 CE. In this work and from Snorri Sturluson's Prose Edda we learn about Odin riding an eight-legged horse named Sleipnir, that can leap great distances. At Yule, Odin leads a great hunting party through the sky in celebration. This story gives rise to comparisons of Santa and his 8 reindeer flying through the sky.

In some traditions of Odin's Yule time ride, children could place their boots near the chimney filled with treats for Sleipnir and Odin would reward them for their kindness with food, candy or gifts. The tradition still continues Belgium, Germany and the Netherlands. In other Germanic countries the practice has been replaced with hanging stockings."

<http://www.paganspath.com/magik/yule-history2.htm>

I do get a giggle at my fellow Christians who rant about Jesus being the reason for the season, as they hang their stockings, and decorate their porches with lights and greens. As they bring a tree inside and hang shiny ornaments and more lights on it. As they imbibe a little nog and sing

some songs to their neighbors. If an 11th century Norseman were able to see our celebrations I think he or she would recognize a great many things. Interestingly our Puritan ancestors banned the celebration or recognition of Christmas when they were busy establishing their church in America. They did not believe the celebration to have firm biblical roots. And given the number of pagan Yule details that are included in Christmas they may be more right than we give them credit for.

I do not describe my faith as pagan and I am unlikely to participate in a true Yule vigil since I am not one to stay up all night. But as a Unitarian Universalist there are truths that I can learn from these ancient traditions, these rituals these beliefs. At a Yule vigil there are elements that we all can relate to I think - food - drink - stories - gifts. But it is a vigil not just an all-night party. There is the calling of the quarters as we did at the beginning of this service. Usually there is some kind of a fire, outside if possible, where the Yule log is burned. This fire must be tended all night - it keeps the dark and the cold at bay and it beckons the sun in the morning and so folks take turns keeping the fire. Perhaps as we celebrate our chosen traditions we can remember to keep a fire lit in our hearts and souls. Perhaps we can be the light for those around us reminding them that the darkness is not all that there is. And maybe we can remember that it is a group effort this being a light to the world. No one of us can do it by ourselves. A pagan colleague of mine was talking about his Yule rituals and what he said was that it was the longest night and the vigil is kept by the community because it is the community that pulls one through the longest night. As a UU I could agree with that. We each come here and gather and in our own way reminds ourselves and each other that there is something larger than the individual, something more wondrous than the one, and in that we are able to see and feel awe and wonder.

Somehow to me there is the mystery. That when you gather a community together the gathered power and impact somehow exceeds the simple sum of the gathered. The sum of the parts is greater than the whole. As much as it takes time and effort to gather together to be in community to stay connected it is worth it.

There are those times when life is tough and it is hard to see where the light is, hard to know what to do or who to be. Hard to know what the future will bring. And that is precisely when we should gather with our community. When we should raise our glass, make a toast, tell a story, remind ourselves that there is hope to be found in the love of friends that surround us. We may be far away from family at this time, we may be far away from friends but we can gather here in this place with one another and remember the reason for the season

Love

Light

Friends

Family

Emptiness

Welcoming

Waiting

Preparing

Receiving

Expectation

Mystery

In a world without end may it be so.