

Bringing the Light
Unitarian Universalist Church in Cherry Hill
Sunday, December 17, 2023
Rev. Margret A. O’Neill and Melanie Jones, DLFE

Solstice
Melanie Jones, DLFE

Today, we celebrate the coming solstice. A day when the sun is set low in the sky and the night is long. I find that nights in winter seem incredibly dark; it’s a different kind of dark than at any other time of year. It’s hard to explain, but I wonder if you have also had this thought. The darkness of winter reminds me of the metaphorical kind of darkness. All of us here have walked through some kind of darkness in our lives; some may have been darker times than others.

We wait for the light at the end of the tunnel, we look for the signal that the darkness is gone and our future is illuminated. For many of us waiting for the light to come is the hardest part. However, we are an active participant in the waiting process. The waiting is the time for us to look deep inside ourselves, to look into the dark, and to identify what doesn’t belong. It can be hard work, but we can find courage and healing to call the light of our dreams and intentions forward. And when we begin to understand ourselves from these inner places, a change starts. A deepening happens in us. And the deeper it is, the greater the amount of light that will fill that space inside of us.

I was driving the other day, and while driving, I was listening to my Playlist for 2023. For the past few years, I have made a playlist of meaningful songs for that year, even if it was just for a moment. A song came on that I hadn’t heard in a little while. Interestingly, it’s a song by Ariana Grande. The chorus is one repeating line, and she repeats it four times; it becomes a mantra of sorts: “The light is coming to give back everything the darkness stole.” The light is coming, and we have the chance to leave that which no longer serves us behind in the dark, creating space for the light.

There is a table in the back with paper and writing supplies. If you feel moved, you can write or draw your hopes and intentions for the new light and new year. Later in the service, we will do the ritual of jumping the yule log, and you can bring your intentions along as you jump to symbolize moving into the new light.

Calling Back the Light with Our Intentions
Rev. Margret A. O’Neill

You can blame it on the tilt. The reason we have seasons, the reason we have a longest day in June and a longest night in December, is all because the Earth is tilted on its axis, so as it rotates around the sun, the northern part is tilted toward the sun in the summer and away in the winter, shifting us back and forth in a predictable pattern every year.

Let’s get a feeling in our bodies for the tilt. You can stay in your seat, just turn your head to see the window up above on your left where the light from the sun comes in on Sunday mornings. Imagine the sun is shining on you through that window, so that window is the sun. Now pretend that you are the earth, and your head is the north pole, and your feet are the south pole, and bend just a little bit sideways – tilt – on your seat, and notice what part of you is closer to the sun, so it

gets more light and warmth, and what part is farther away, getting less. Now tilt over the opposite way, away from the window, and notice what part of you points toward the sun now, and what part points away. Now you have seasons, just like our planet! Well, sort of.

Yes, we know to blame it on the tilt. If the earth were straight up and down in its relationship to the sun, there would not be seasons - we would not have the leafy green in summer, the snow in winter, the glory of autumn leaves or the thrill of spring blossoms. We know about the tilt, so we understand why there are seasons, why in our northern hemisphere – our head - the days are longer and warmer in the summer, colder and shorter in the winter – and the opposite in the southern hemisphere – our legs. We know to blame it on the tilt.

But in very long-ago ancient times, before there were telescopes and rockets and other scientific ways to learn about the universe, people just made their best guess about why there were times when things would bloom and grow, and other times when everything would freeze over and the food would get covered in ice and snow, making it harder to live. So they made up stories to explain the seasons. Some of the stories were about what the sun does – in the summer, the sun seems happy with us, getting up early and staying late, like a friend who wants to be with us as long as they can. But then comes the fall, when the sun starts getting up later and later, going to bed earlier and earlier each day, so that every day there is less time of daylight.

This keeps happening until we reach nearly the end of December, when some days it seems like the sun is hardly with us any time at all. And finally we reach the day in December that we call the Winter Solstice, the shortest day and longest night of all. Is the sun angry with us? Have we done something wrong? Will the days just keep getting shorter and shorter until we are simply left in the dark forever? Sure, last year it got darker and then the sun eventually did come back, but what if the sun is really angry this time and doesn't come back at all?

Sometimes if we think a friend might be angry with us, we try to figure out what will make them happier so they will come back and spend time with us, right? And in the long-ago times, that is what people did - they tried to figure out what might make the sun happy, and they thought up celebrations of light in the dark times to make the sun happy so it would come back.

The celebrations of light around the world have many names: Christmas and St. Nicholas Day, Hanukkah and Eid-al-Adha, Kwanzaa and Diwali, St Lucia Day and Hogmany and Saturnalia; Yalda and Karachun and Soyal and Dong Zhi, a wide variety of winter festivals around the world. Activities might include cleaning the house or taking a special bath, eating certain ceremonial foods, giving gifts, and making fires of different kinds to communicate with the fire of the sun. Fireworks are set off around the world to light up the dark skies of a winter night. One small town in Germany rolls huge fiery wheels down the hillside, and on St. Lucia day in Sweden teenage women wear a wreath of lit candles on their heads – they use battery candles now, to keep from setting their hair on fire.

Yule is the ancient pagan celebration in Scandinavia, Germany and other parts of northern Europe, where people cleanse their homes, clear their minds, and create a clear focus on the future to invite the return of the sun, the return of life-giving warmth and light. In a little while we are going to enact the ritual of jumping the Yule log to symbolize entering the new year with the return of the light.

This Yule ritual is a time to let go of any burdens we have been carrying, to free up space for new light to enter, creating new beginnings as we set our intentions for the new year. As we prepare for this ritual of intentions to invite the sun back into our lives, I invite you to consider, what do you choose to let go of and leave behind as you step over the Yule Log, thinking about your intentions, rekindling the light within you to welcome Yule.

Sources:

Winter Solstice retrieved from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Winter_solstice

The Shortest Day by Susan Cooper retrieved from <http://www.minogue.com/articles/winter-solstice-poetry/>