Ray of Darkness
First Unitarian Church of Philadelphia
Rev. Abbey Tennis
December 18th, 2016 11:00 AM

Description: “In the universe there moves a Wild One whose gestures alter earth’s axis toward love” says poet, scholar, and theologian Rev. Dr. Rebecca Parker. This morning, we gather to honor the Winter Solstice and find meaning in this time of deep darkness and turning of the seasons.

Sermon:

There is a term in the art world called “Chiaroscuro” - does anyone know it?

Chiaroscuro has a few definitions, but the basic gist is that chiaroscuro is the interplay of light and dark. Its origins are in the Italian “Chiaro” meaning clear, or light, and “Oscura” meaning obscure, or dark.

One of the early pioneers of Chiaroscuro in fine art was Leonardo da Vinci – using the play of light and dark in his paintings to create depth – to make his paintings seem 3-dimensional rather than flat. Most famous Ansel Adams photographs show a chiaroscuro kind of composition as well.

Light and dark, clear and obscure, Chiaro and Oscura.

I’ve been thinking a great deal about the interplay of light and dark as we approach the Winter Solstice on Wednesday. At this moment of the year, when the sun rises as 7:19 in the morning and sets at 4:39 in the evening – when in Philadelphia we have only 9 hours and 19 minutes of light to the 14 hours and 41 minutes of darkness. Wednesday night will be longest night of the year – Wednesday will be the shortest day of the year.

With electricity, internet, 24-hour stores, flex time, and online classes at schools, many of us in Western culture have the option to live without regard to the natural cycles of light and dark.

But others of us find ourselves dramatically affected by the amount of dark and sunlight. Early risers spend hours awake before the dawn breaks outside. Those of us in school or working 9 to 5 jobs find ourselves stuck inside for nearly all of the daylight hours. Those of us working outdoors find ourselves with fewer hours to get our work done. Those of us who don’t drive in the dark find ourselves stuck at home much more. Those of us who suffer from Seasonal Affective Disorder can sink into depression.
Lots of darkness can be hard. Darkness can be scary. How many of you can remember a time when you were afraid of the dark?

I was certainly afraid of the dark as a child. I used to sleep with the light on when I was young because otherwise my imagination would run away with me – in the dark, there could be monsters under the bed, burglars in the closet, animals at the windows.

Though, even as a child, I knew that we aren’t usually afraid of the dark itself; we’re afraid of the unknown, the mysterious, the possibility of danger that could be hidden by the dark. We fear the “Oscura” – that which has been obscured by the dark – more than the dark itself.

Now that I am an adult, I have a hard time sleeping if there is any light at all in my bedroom. Sleeping in darkness feels restful, comforting. Darkness is an empty and quiet space after a long day filled with the frenetic jumble of conversations, things to do, hurting loved ones, and problems to solve. The darkness of night is an opportunity to turn inward, to withdraw from the swirling world around me, and to “find a stillness” within me.

But the quiet of night brings new challenges with it. Though darkness no longer brings the fear of monsters or hiding burglars [at least, not usually], these days the dark silence of night can be so huge and cacophonous that it allows my anxieties to run around wild inside. With the empty stillness of the dark, conversations that went sour, to-do list items left undone, loved ones still hurting, and unsolvable problems seem to yell louder than the stillness and silence within me. The quiet and dark of the night, when daytime distractions are lifted, can cast light on our loneliness, worries, insecurities, and despair – far from obscuring that which we fear, darkness sometimes creates space for our fears to take center stage.

In his now-famous poem “Dark Night of the Soul,” 15th Century Spanish Mystic St. John of the Cross uses the metaphor of the “dark night” as the pathway to union with the holy. Many of us think of the “dark night of the soul” as a spiritual crisis, but it originally meant a spiritual journey. The poet describes going forth on a dark night, yearning for love, and grateful for the darkness and quiet that conceals his journey from his fellow humans. “Without light or guide, save that which burned in my heart,” he writes, “this light guided me more surely than the light of noonday to the place where he was awaiting me.” Effusive with gratitude, the poet writes: “Oh, night that guided me, oh night more lovely than the dawn, oh night that joined Beloved with lover, Lover transformed in the Beloved!”

The poem concludes with a description of what is essentially a “holy snuggle” – St. John of the Cross describing a scene where he and the Holy are resting on each other, sleeping, caressing, and leaving all cares behind for a time.

---

1 Dark Night of the Soul, with commentary, St. John of the Cross, available at http://www.catholictreasury.info/books/dark_night/index.php
It reads like a love poem between two men, not the deep depressive despair that most people describe as a “dark night of the soul.”

In his commentary on the poem, St. John of the Cross talks about contemplation as a “Ray of Darkness” – the process of engaging in contemplative practice – meditation and prayer – as the method for entering the kind of dark night of the soul of which he wrote in his poem. Contemplation opens a dark space within for the soul to journey towards that “holy snuggle” – to the union with that which matters most – to complete inner peace.

Though St. John of the Cross personifies that inner peace, the idea of contemplative practice as route to inner peace – of sitting in the “Ray of Darkness” - is shared across many religious traditions. Meditation in Zen Buddhism, Spirit Quests in some indigenous traditions, Prayer in mystic Christianity, Judaism, and Islam.

In “A Celebration of Winter Solstice” from The Circle of Life, Joyce Rupp and Macrina Wiederkehr write:

“There is a tendency to want to hurry from autumn to spring, to avoid the long dark days that winter brings. Many people do not like constant days bereft of light and months filled with colder temperatures. They struggle with the bleakness of land and the emptiness of trees. Their eyes and hearts seek color. Their spirits tire of tasting the endless gray skies. There is great rejoicing in the thought that light and warmth will soon be filling more and more of each new day.

But winter darkness has a positive side to it. As we gather to celebrate the first turn from winter to spring, we are invited to recognize and honor the beauty in the often unwanted season of winter…

Let us invite our hearts to be glad for the courage winter proclaims. Let us be grateful for the wisdom winter brings in teaching us about the need for withdrawal as an essential part of renewal. Let us also encourage our spirits as Earth prepares to come forth from this time of withdrawal into a season filled with light.”

If we are attuned to this season, winter’s wisdom will teach us of the need for withdrawal as an essential part of renewal. If, in this season of darkness, we intentionally choose to move into the “Ray of Darkness,” the withdrawal and emptiness of meditation, prayer, or other contemplative practice can lead us to a powerful place; to union with the holy, to inner peace, to spiritual renewal.

Do you find yourself in need of renewal as this year drags to a close? And if so, do you seek renewal in “doing more” or do you give yourself time for withdrawal, or contemplation? I so often hear people who are convinced that addition “self-care” items to their to-do lists will

---

2 The Circle Of Life: The Heart's Journey Through The Seasons, February 1, 2005, Joyce Rupp and Macrina Wiederkehr
bring them renewal – they make plans to go to Yoga class more often, visit more art exhibits, or begin a home improvement or crafting project in order to help them recharge. And sometimes it works. But sometimes it just adds more stress, right? All of the sudden, in addition to our exhaustion, we are scolding ourselves for skipping yoga or leaving the project unfinished. If we attune ourselves to Winter, however, her voice will often tell us to just be still and watch for beauty. “Find a stillness, hold a stillness, let the stillness carry me.”3 I must say that, for me, being attuned to the seasons often means simply snatching a moment here and here. When my keyboard stops clicking for a moment… wheels stop rolling for a moment … computer desists from computing for a moment, and I pause, stunned to stillness by beauty.

The beauty of the simplicity of this time of year hits me when I’m getting ready to head to an evening meeting and suddenly the houses around mine glow pink with the last light of the setting sun. When I see from my living room windows a neighborhood cat dropping down onto the pavement, eyes closed in ecstasy as she rolls around in the day’s first ray of sunshine. In this season, food and drinks take on the flavors of cinnamon and cloves. I wrap myself in soft knitted sweaters and warm scarves. There is comfort and richness in the midst of the stark weather – each ray of warm sun an opportunity for ecstasy, each hour of dark an opportunity for stillness and reflection.

My favorite moment of each winter evening is when I have brushed my teeth, washed my face, turned off the lights, and shut myself in my dark bedroom. I sit down at my little altar and light the fragrant beeswax candles in my small chalice and two terracotta candle-holders shaped like open palms – one formed in the Indian “Varada mudra” to symbolize hope [Left - open hand facing up] and one formed in the “Jnana mudra” symbolizing wisdom [Right - thumb touches forefinger with palm up]. When the rest of the lights in the house are off and it is fully dark, the connection with those ancient symbols and tiny tongues of flame feels intimate and magic.

In the darkness, I listen to the silence, and try to let go of the thoughts cluttering my mind. I open my palms to mirror the candleholders, seeking to make myself open to both wisdom and hope.

The ray of darkness that envelops me seems to bring my awareness to a deeper reality than the one that often keeps me occupied during the daytime.

I ring my singing bowl and listen for the chiming of the celestial spheres … the ringing of deeper reality that continues in my ears long after the bowl stops resonating.

---

3 Hymn: Find a Stillness, #352 in Unitarian Universalist Hymnal, Singing the Living Tradition, Carl Seaburg and Larry Phillips, based on a Transylvanian hymn tune.
Joyce Rupp and Macrina Wiederkehr write that winter teaches us that withdrawal is an essential part of renewal… a lesson so easily forgotten by us in a 24-hour news cycle, with our waking hours often so full of “doing” and sometimes so absent of “being.”

When we feel exhausted and in need of renewal, like so many of us do at this time of year, we can heed the advice of nature around us and allow ourselves to withdraw for a while in order to replenish ourselves and strengthen ourselves for the next stage of life’s journey. Immersing ourselves fully into the darkness of this time opens us to the spiritual path to peace.

Mythologist Joseph Campbell once wrote “One thing that comes out in myths … is that at the bottom of the abyss comes the voice of salvation. The black moment is the moment when the real message of transformation is going to come. At the darkest moment comes the light.”

Like Leonardo da Vinci, and Ansel Adams, and all other artists who find that Chiaroscuro brings depth and added dimension to their work, if we allow ourselves to wade into both the darkness and the light, we too will find our lives take on greater depth and dimension.

My friends, as our beautiful planet prepares to gracefully tilts back towards lengthening days, may you revel in the starkness and darkness of this season. May your days be scented with cinnamon and cloves, may the glow of the warm morning sun and the pink dying day light your face, may your world be wrapped in softness and warmth. In the darkness, may you journey into the holy snuggle – the union with that which matters most – the complete peace that renews the soul. May wisdom guide you and hope sustain you.

“Let this be the time
we wake to life,
like spring wakes, in the moment
of winter solstice.”

Amen, and Blessed Be

---

4 Poem: Winter Solstice, by Rev. Dr. Rebecca Parker