

DEEPER DARKNESS

**A sermon given in celebration of the Winter Solstice by
The Rev. Dr. Kelly Murphy Mason at UU Wellesley Hills on
Sunday, December 16th, 2018**

From Thursday through this past Friday, the meteor shower known as Geminid came fast and furious and sent bright meteors whizzing past earth at the rate of roughly 100 per hour at peak activity. Perhaps you were paying attention to it. Webcasts of the celestial event broadcast through the nighttime hours, and many turned to their screens to watch. The best viewing time was around 2:00 am, according to experts. This year, there was little moon competing with the meteors for attention, so stargazers had that advantage. It was light pollution that made even this brightest of meteor showers harder to spy. The viewing recommendation given stargazers was to find some dark-sky area that was far from light sources and give their eyes about half an hour to adjust. “In a dark time, the eye begins to see,” poet Theodore Roethke wrote. The problem these days is that there is less and less dark time for all of us. So there is less heaven that any eye can see.

“There’s no getting away from the light. There are fluorescent lights and halogen lights, stadium lights, streetlights, stoplights, headlights and billboard lights,” spiritual writer Clark Strand complains. “There are night lights to stand sentinel in hallways, and... lit screens... even in the middle of the night... The lights are always on.” In his book

Waking Up to the Dark: Ancient Wisdom for a Sleepless Age, Strand laments that we have driven away darkness without really questioning what what else we might be losing along with it, including — very possibly — our own peace of mind.

Strand tells a story that sounds fantastical today, but is pulled from the historical record. Late in 1924, just before Christmastime, the people of Woodstock, New York, gathered on their village green to protest the evils of modern lighting, more specifically, those electric lights that they found appalling in their intensity. The protest did not garner Woodstock the kind of celebrity some later social unrest would, nor did the town succeed in halting the adoption of new technology. Strand lives there today and can attest to its incandescence. According to him, “the reluctance to embrace brighter nights was a brief and halfhearted affair” soon consigned to local lore.

Now, of course, we recognize that those villagers on the green nearly a hundred years ago knew something important about human routines. One Woodstock historian recorded: “Old people swore that reading or living by so fierce a light was impossible.” With our characteristic American ingenuity, though, we have made the impossible seem almost inevitable. “It wasn’t obvious that repurposing every aspect of the planet for our own benefit wasn’t really to our benefit at all,” Strand writes. Increasingly, though, it has become obvious. Insomnia has become commonplace and more of us rely on sleeping medication than ever before. There are any number of medical and mental ailments related to sleeplessness, some quite serious. But our appetite for over-illumination has not abated yet.

Over time, the environmental costs of artificial lighting have mounted and grown considerable. That scene the Rev. Greta Crosby describes in her meditation on winter, where “trees rest, growing no leaves, gathering no light” and “let in sky” alone, uninterrupted, is hardly glimpsed any more. These days, if a group of people gathered on a green somewhere in December, I can almost guarantee you that they are not there to protest the presence of electric lights. The odds are good they have come to plug in some more and drape them from the highest branches. I love the glimmering, shimmering lights of the holidays as much as the next person. Yet I have come to regret what mega-wattage now symbolizes year-round: no rest for weary life. Not for flora or fauna or us.

This coming Friday is the Winter Solstice, and Strand and other advocates of natural darkness are calling on us to celebrate it with a fuller appreciation we generally do in contemporary culture. As environmentalist Bill McKibben contends, “It rarely occurs to us how much intelligence about the world a light erases... For millennia, the starry skies were revered as a the source of much wisdom. The sciences got their start tracking tracking the constellations,” he notes, tracking those same constellations that advancing technologies make it tough to see with the naked eye. We have become gluttons for light, blinded to the ways we and our world suffer from an oversupply of it.

When the Solstice arrives, Strand frets, “few of us will turn off the lights long enough to notice”. Somehow, even the longest night can get overlooked by us. By Strand’s reckoning, night is our “natural corrective to that most persistent of all illusions: that human progress is the reason for the world.” As nighttime hours have disappeared

from view, that illusion has increasingly gone unchecked. “Darkness was the only power that has ever put the human agenda on hold,” Strand declares. We have more hours “for work, for entertainment, for discovery, for consumption” — for everything except rest.

“We need a rest from ourselves that only a night like the Winter Solstice can give us,” Strand insists. Like that boy in Switch on the Night during Our Time for All Ages, Strand befriended the dark in his youth. He lost any fear he had of the dark early on in life. “Not only am I not afraid of it,” Strand proclaims, “I love it more than anything.” He says that he feels so at home in it because he is convinced it contains the foundations of our earthly existence. After all, a vast preponderance of the universe dwells in darkness; it is undoubtedly the place from which our own galaxy burst into being. Strand ventures, “Even our universe—the mother of a hundred billion galaxies—must surely have had a mother... of her own.” Being carbon-based life forms, we cannot deny the obvious human parallels. “Our lives begin in the womb and end in the tomb,” Strand states. “It’s dark on either side.” We will never escape it, but we may drive ourselves crazy trying.

Today, most of us are overstimulated and overextended. We bounce between being agitated or anesthetized. We stay up late and we get up early; we do not let darkness slow us down or we certainly won’t stay still for it. “In the modern world, petroleum may drive our engines but our consciousness is driven by light,” Strand notes. “And what it drives us to is excess, in every imaginable form.” There’s no such thing as close of business anymore, and Strand observes that the busyness of “unrelenting commerce and consumption, information

and media” activate us and keep us up at all hours, even during the relatively few we have allotted ourselves for sleep.

The natural pattern of human sleep is inefficient, research has found. In the absence of artificial light, people will fall into a deep sleep after sunset, wake for a couple of hours in the middle of the night, then fall into another deep sleep before daylight. When people placed less of premium on productivity, those wee hours could feel luxurious and embracing. One of the hormones released during sleep, prolactin, is known for fostering “a feeling of security, quietness, and peace,” Strand writes. “And it is intimately, and biologically, tied to the dark.” Between the interludes of sleep, people could relish their hours of “quiet rest” in a “richer, deeper darkness” that they experienced as a contemplative time, a time of feeling “blessed, loved, realized, or held,” he explains. People tended to better rested when they allowed for these extended rhythms and often were more “spiritually content” as a result. When they slept, they dreamed. And when they woke at off hours, they simply rested.

Surveying sacred scriptures from a range of wisdom traditions, Stand speculates that nearly all religious practices seek to duplicate “a state of well-being that is probably the closest we’ve ever come as a species to the experience of oneness with the divine, [that] nightly meditation retreat for all Homo sapiens on Earth.” What we yearn for is a sense of our being restored, of our returning to peace eternal. This is achieved only when we begin to unlearn our distrust of the dark, which has grown debilitating, surrender a measure of our angst, and start to cultivate our innate capacities for stillness and silence. We

have to stop watching our digital clocks and start watching the skies instead. The Winter Solstice give us an important prompt for this.

Each year, it gives us the opportunity to commit ourselves anew to “letting night live”, as Ray Bradbury wrote in his story. As frightening as the dark might first appear to us, as alert as it might keep us to signs of danger, it is an organic and necessary occurrence, and at least as life-giving as it is lethal. Nocturnal creatures make their way under its cover. If we watch carefully, we might spy those things the poet describes “In a Dark Time”, the “night flowing with birds, a ragged moon” overhead, even stray stars shooting by us, as our eyes learn to read things in shadow. Here — there — everywhere we recognize our fellow companions on this world tilted away from the sun. It turns just slowly enough to take us all with it. We can easily sustain this pace. We must let it sustain us.

“Winter is a table set with ice and starlight,” the Rev. Crosby says, but we have to accept the invitation it has issued us to feast there, amidst “its beauty, challenge, and pregnant negativities.” By stressing positivism and progress — all these things we most immediately associate with light — we have unwittingly diminished what the dark holds in abundance, its unique possibilities.

If we regard Solstice as a festival in its own right, we opt to participate in gladly deepening darkness. Citing the global threats of light pollution and climate change, Strand cautions that we continuously defy nature and its cycles at considerable risk to ourselves - to our individual sanity and serenity, certainly, but also to our collective survival. We need to strengthen our practices of sufficiency, of

already having enough and doing enough, and curb our most insatiable habits of manic and almost incessant activity. “The only thing I can hope for is that, if we won’t come to our senses and search for the darkness, on nights like these, the darkness will come looking for us,” he declares. The Solstice provides us with a wonderfully wintry Sabbath time. It can take us outside ourselves when we most need that, which these days is more and more.

Nighttime reminds us of our accurate human scale here on earth. Every night, “suddenly we can see the infinite all around us,” environmentalist McKibben observes. “It is impossible not to stand under the stars and not feel small.” We cannot allow ourselves to lose sight of them. Let’s all agree that when we’re peering down at our screens, we’re not quite stargazers. We’ve lost a certain perspective, even if the image resolution is amazingly clear.

Please - don’t skip over Solstice this year. Don’t tumble into Christmas and don’t jump ahead to New Year’s, either. Resist the temptation to accelerate time. Let peace become both a daily and nightly practice of yours. Mark December 21st, 2018, this Friday. Sleep, rest, wake. Settle into the longest night and savor its deeper darkness. Consider what early sundown might invite you and yours to embrace: logging off, powering down, unplugging altogether. Switch off every last alarm. Take a media sabbath - maybe liberate yourself from television or radio broadcasts, any Facebook or Twitter feeds. Consider a 24-hour fast from any artificial light. Silence the phone and have neighbors over. Celebrations can always take place in candlelight, whether they are solitary or shared. They can be at once silent, still and alive - never doubt that. Dwell peacefully in your nighttime. “Deep peace of the

flowing air to you. Deep peace of the quiet earth to you,” a Gaelic blessing says. “Deep peace of the shining stars.” Look up and out. Notice that ground below you and the heavens above and beyond. Give yourself time to wake to wonders all around, near and far. Let your eyes adjust. See what there is to see. Just see...

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