

“Of Mystery and Darkness”
December 11, 2022

There is something mystical or even magical about this time of the year. But let me be clear – this is NOT my most favorite time of the year! It’s cold, it’s dark, and the days seem to be getting greyer and greyer. Yet there is an excitement, an anticipation of things to come. We know undoubtedly that sooner or later the days will begin to get longer, the nights shorter...there is that proverbial light at the end of the tunnel.

What I do love about this time is the image of these colliding holidays about to merge into a season of mystery, darkness, and a season of light. We are in the throws of the Christian Advent season – a time of waiting, a time of mystery, a time of anticipation. Hanukkah will begin next Sunday – a festival of lights, mystery, and brightness. Quickly followed by the Winter Solstice on the darkest night of the year. The **winter solstice**, also called **hibernal solstice**, the two moments during the year when the path of the [Sun](#) in the sky is farthest south in the Northern Hemisphere and farthest north in the Southern Hemisphere. At the winter solstice the Sun travels the shortest path through the sky, and that day therefore has the least daylight and the longest night. In winter everything lies dormant in the silent earth, it is a sacred time of rest and reflection before the awakening and the slow build toward brighter days.

Almost immediately following the solstice is the Christian holiday of Christmas – the birth of the Messiah, or perhaps the re-birth of love? As Naomi points out in her reflection, I too have always been enthralled by the metaphor of the star, the bright light that allowed the kings to find their way. The light that led the way.

And immediately after Christmas, is the newer celebration of Kwanzaa with its symbolic Kinara, the candle holder that represents the 7 principles of African Heritage.

All of these holidays converge at this time of the year representing mystery, darkness and then light. I believe that it is no mistake that these celebrations occur around the same time. It was not folks being careless and not checking their calendars. Each of these represent the human condition, our struggle to embrace the darkness when it comes, yet our challenge of returning to the

light. Our sometimes-darker selves wanting to stay in that darkness and yet moved forward by the light peeking out on the horizon.

I am also reminded here of our human need to know, to understand all, to solve every problem, every mystery. To lean on science to explain who we are, where we came from – and even where we go next. But with each experiment, with each better understanding of the unknown, there is always mystery. There is always that piece that just doesn't fit in. Perhaps that's the way it is supposed to be? Perhaps that's the way it was meant to be?

Rev Victoria Stafford, from the White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church writes: "Maybe there are limits. Maybe we don't need to touch everything, tamper with everything just because we can; maybe we don't need to change everything, know everything, own and master every living and inanimate thing, split every single atom. Maybe sometimes it's best to let the mystery be...We're here to garner not only knowledge, but wisdom and reverence, our rightful place, which sometimes you can only see in the dark." Sometimes you can only see in the dark...floating on your back in that infinite ocean of mystery and stars, everything we cannot know."

The darkness in our corner of the planet at this time of the year calls us inward, to deep questions, old stories. We wonder as we wander in December dark, listening for the lost voices of loved ones, and ancestors. We revisit all kind of ancient mysteries, and we keep lovely, strange traditions, whose origins we cannot trace, regarding light and stars, angel wings and wonder. The stars hang lower in the evening sky; they seem closer to us now, and it doesn't matter, really, if they are lumps of molten rock a billion miles away, or magical moments of miracles and grace, signs for kings to travel by. The nights blanket us early, and even in this noisiest of seasons, mystery abides. At this time of year, I try to keep open, try not to feel oppressed by the cold and closed in by the night, try to look at stars in the evening and the morning, and welcome mystery as an old companion, one I loved when I was small.
(Stafford)

Stafford continues: "What do we ever know for sure? I love the story told by Loren Eiseley, who was himself a distinguished scientist, about a colleague who was a famous physicist, a designer of the first nuclear weapons, who lived to see them used against a human population. Walking in the woods this man found a little tortoise, and picked it up, delightedly, to bring it home and show

it to his children. He walked a ways, and then he stopped and put it down. "It just struck me," he said, "that perhaps, for one man, I have tampered enough with the universe." Maybe sometimes it's better to let the mystery be. "I have tampered enough," he said – and maybe that was the most brilliant realization of his entire career, his bravest, most human contribution."

I believe I've told this story before, but it seems appropriate to revisit it today. When I was growing up, Christmas Eve was the most sacred day in our household. My mom would be busy all day preparing the traditional Polish Christmas Eve meal – Wigilia – the meatless feast of the seven fishes, midnight mass, which actually was not at midnight but like 9pm, then back home for some more food and merriment, just settling in with each other. At some point in the middle of the night, my older brother would wake all of us up, and we'd sit at the top of the stairs counting every second of every minute until we were allowed to come downstairs at 6am. The miraculous thing about this tradition is that there were no clocks in any of our bedroom, no wristwatches – we would estimate what time it was and just start counting. Each of us would take turns counting for a few minutes at a time. To this day, I can feel the darkness of sitting at the top of those steps, the mystery of the unknown surrounding us, the anticipation of the coming light. As an adult, I recognize that's quite a lesson I learned at an early age. Settle into the darkness, count your minutes knowing that dawn will break and bring forth its own mysteries.

Mark Nepo, a poet and teacher, writes this meditation on all the many, many things, terrible and beautiful things we hold at once and are called to respond to somehow, in the brief days we are given, while all the while our planet earth gently spins through space, and all the while we're held in mystery. There are things that neither science nor religion ever can explain; truths which shine more brightly in the dark.

Nepo writes: "*An old president died just hours after a young*

*man from Idaho was shot in his sleep in Iraq,
and now in the Sundarbans east of the Himalayas, a tiger licks the eyes of its
newborn yet to see, and further east in Vietnam, a young woman who has
worked very hard*

*to learn how to read is reciting a sutra from Buddha,
in awe how presence moves through words across the centuries, .
At the same time, an unwed mother in Chicago thinks about stealing a blanket
as winter stiffens, and moments after this,*

*a manta ray in Ecuador wakes because of the sun's heat on its back
and its sweep over coral startles the moray back into its nook,
and as the old president's body cools,*

*a sergeant finds the boy from Idaho.
And just now, in Chile,
a tired couple re-see each other in the afternoon*

*while clouds come in from the Pacific.
And just now, you stir,
the dog stretches,
and far away,*

*two stars collide, a new world forms,
and somewhere between the city and the sea,
a child is born with an untempered capacity to love.
In time, he or she will want to love us all. Remember their face, though you have
never seen it. Speak their name, though you have never heard it.
Mistake everyone for them.*

Love everything in that way."

There are things we know and things we don't and things we can't and things
we can still learn.

How much love is possible?
How many stars in the December sky?

My prayer for all of us today is that:
As the darkness deepens now, may we not be afraid,
nor be too quick to light our candles and our lights.
May we sit at the top of our stairs, engulfed in darkness and mystery.
And may we make room for that mystery and wonder,

room for grief and fear and gratitude and courage,
room for beauty,
room for holy curiosity, and room as well
for the quiet and resilient hope
that waits deep in our soul.

As darkness deepens all around,
may we be reminded that the greatest mystery
is that we're here at all,
here and now,
and undeniably together.
Our greatest work,
and all we know for sure,
is love. (Stafford, adapted)

May we make it so.