

Long Night / Cold Day
December 18, 2011
The Rev Dr. Matthew Johnson-Doyle

That lovely anthem you just heard was a setting of a hymn by Samuel Longfellow – his older brother is the Henry Wadsworth so well know;
Samuel was a Unitarian minister in the 19th century
and a prolific hymn writer.
Nine hymns in your grey hymnal are settings of his words;
he was inspired by the transcendentalist theology,
and wrote hymns to the God of nature,
hymns like Now On Land and Sea Descending,
Lo, the Earth Awakes Again,
The Sweet June Days (which would not have been a good choice for today),
O Life That Maketh All Things New,
and With Joy We Claim the Growing Light.

And Winter Carol is in such a vein:
yes, tis' winter now, and though it isn't supposed to snow here until tomorrow,
the sun has made its retreat,
is just a few days away from that longest night,
and frost and chill shall be among us soon enough.

And yet, though the sun withdraws its heat,
God, says Longfellow, does not withdraw God's love.
Indeed, the beauty of winter,
the crimson dawn, the glittering wreaths,
is a sign, a reminder,
in the transcendentalist Unitarian theology,
which still animates our faith,
that what is holy, what is worthy, what is good,
is with us not just sometimes,
but all the time.

And thus, Longfellow is saying, in this and in other hymns of his,
just because it is winter does not mean that God's love is not with you,
and just because your life is having a hard patch,
doesn't mean that God's love is not with you.
Beauty and truth and love are present – not just in the sweet June days – but in every moment,
in every season of the earth and in every season of our lives.

This is Longfellow's message to us at Solstice time,
that in times of danger and trouble, "home closer draws her circle now" and the love of what is more than us
is with us still.

This morning, I want to ask you to go with me on a journey.
Don't worry, you don't have to leave your seats.
But you might get comfortable,
and prepare yourself.

4 in the afternoon, later this week.
Our traveler – it could be me, could be you, we'll call her Amy.
Amy, beloved, derived from the French word Ami, friend.
She's our friend.

4 in the afternoon, later this week, and Amy notices the sun low over the western houses, trees, and power lines.
Quick, she pulls out her phone and checks her weather app –

today the sunset is at 4:26 – just a few minutes from now,
and Amy decides on a whim, let’s celebrate Solstice today.
She’s not a Pagan, doesn’t observe this holiday – Yule, the Pagan’s call it –
along with the seven others, don’t know much about it,
but why not?

Just going with her gut, she decides that to celebrate Solstice,
she’s going to need some holly and evergreen -
her Christmas tree is up, so that’ll do for the evergreen,
and she does, in fact, have a holly bush, so she clips a small branch and brings it in.

Candles. Got have candles, right?
So she lays them out on the table, lights them.
Sits down, a glass of something, watches the flame dance.
Looks out the window, and the dark cometh.
Going. Going. Gone.

And, well, she doesn’t get to just sit there all evening.
There’s dinner to arrange,
maybe the kids need supervision,
and life never seems to just stop and pause, does it?
Do this, do that.
Check the internets to see what’s going on in the news, with her friends,
this that and the other.
An hour or more after the sun went down,
Amy sits down to eat.
Maybe it’s just her, or maybe she is one of many.
It’s solstice, and she thinks,
we should say grace.

So they do – they hold hands – go ahead, you can too –
and Amy speaks the words:
We give thanks this night,
the longest night of the year,
when cold and chill ‘round us gather,
we give thanks for the warmth of our home,
we give thanks for food to feed our bodies,
we give thanks for the light of candles and the light of electric power,
that we can see our beautiful faces,
and we give thanks for the night,
for starlight and moonbeam,
and for the beauty of the night,
an invitation to imagining,
the den of life in germination.
Blessed Be.

They let go, and dinner is eaten, with at least a little bit of reverence.
But life doesn’t stop, does it?

Dishes to be done, perhaps, kids to put to bed soon enough, maybe.
Finally, things are in good enough shape
that Amy can sit down.
Look out at the night.
She doesn’t turn on the TV.
Turns off Spotify or Pandora or the radio, and it is quiet.
Walks around the house, turning off lights.
Leaves the Christmas tree lights on, and the candles burning,
but otherwise, sits in the dark.

Sits in the dark,
and feels a compulsion.
She puts on her coat and hat,
and steps onto the porch.
There are streetlights (though not as many as there used to be)
and car lights and this, that, and the other,
but she can still see some stars out there.
Twinkling.

There is just the smallest sliver of the moon in the sky,
and Amy looks up at it.
She breathes in and out.

It's chilly, but not too bad,
and Amy begins to speak –
just in a whisper –
to the moon? to the stars? to herself? to God? to the Goddess?

What's the difference, really?
She speaks.
It seems like the right thing to do.

Spend the darkness with no one but the moon.
She listens to my complaints
like the good companion she is
and comforts me surely with her light.

Amy doesn't just complain.
She has some praises and a lot of questions.
But there are complaints, too.
An achy muscle. An annoying problem that just won't go away.
Not enough time to do what she wants to do.
A feeling, too much, like she's it in by herself:
certainly the political so-called leaders aren't helping,
and she worries about her country, her town, her world.
What will come to pass for the children, this minute, being born into the world?
Will they ever know peace and prosperity?
Will they ever forgive us for what we have done to the earth?

A question: is this all there is?
Is this how it is supposed to be?
Am I missing something?
Or, maybe, I have all I really need and so why can't I just appreciate what I have?

Questions, a few praises, and some complaints.
The moon listens.
Like a good friend.

But finally, Amy understands:
the moon wants me to refold myself
into my own life –
refold myself into my own life.
Return, re-occupy this life, this body, this time.

And it is getting colder.
Amy goes inside.

To sleep and perchance to dream?
Maybe, but maybe, she thinks,
this night calls for something else.
Maybe on this longest night,
she'll stay up for a while.
See what happens.

She reads for a while.
Fiddles and fusses.
Peaks in on those she loves.
Pets the cat, who wonders, as cat's do,
why someone else is still awake –
this is usually his time alone.

But soon enough, as you might imagine,
Amy dozes off on the couch,
paperback still in hand.
She sleeps for a while.
Dreams.

You ever have one of those dreams where all you remember are images?
Feelings?
You know the dream was vivid, but it doesn't quite stick with you?
Most dreams are like this, I guess, at least most of mine are.

A few hours after she dozed off, Amy wakes with a start.
It is still, of course, dark out there.
Images from the dream come to her.
Six suns in the sky, the ground parched,
cracked and flaky.
Hungry children. Hot.

A group of people, gathered around in circle.
Their clothes were of many colors, and they spoke different tongues.
An arrow, flying through the sky, falling back to the earth.

A lone warrior, gesturing to the others.
Shooting into a pool of water.

Then, the terrible darkness.
The night went on and on.
The crops will no more grow in constant darkness than they did in too much light.

Amy woke with these images, these vague dream-like memories,
and looked out her window.
It was still dark.
Who knew what time it was,
or how much longer it might before the sun was to rise.

Darkness, she thought, can be good.
The den of life in germination.
A time of quiet and imagination.
A pause in things.

A chance to slow down from the rush,
to gaze in wonder at the stars, shining back at us through millions of miles

and years of time,
darkness can be a balance to the light,
a sacred time.

But solstice, though it embraces the dark,
isn't about the dark.
It's about the morning.
It is the celebration –
once again, as it has always been – but you never know –
once again, the light comes back.
The night does not grow longer and longer and longer forever,
does not swallow up the light for eternity,
and plunge us into forever dark.
Even if the sun is slow in the cold time,
remembering with sorrow the deaths of his brothers,
he never fails to greet his feathered friend,
nor to light the day for the farmers who are growing their crops
for the people to eat.

There, gathering her wits in the night,
sitting up on the couch, putting her book,
unbookmarked and her place long lost but findable again,
on the table, Amy understands Solstice in a new way:
the dark is good, but this is about the morning.
It is about the sun, which rises still,
and about life, which rises still.
We have our questions and our complaints for the moon,
but the sun rises and life is before us.
The sun – it has already circled the earth
and looked upon distant lands and far-away peoples.
It has beheld proud cities with gleaming towers
and also the hovels of the poor,
witness to both good and evil and now,
unsullied from its tireless journey,
it comes to us,
messenger of the morning.

Amy looks at the clock on the mantle,
a gift of her grandfathers,
rarely consulted, but the battery is new and it works.
Rubs her eyes – she is not used to a non-digital display,
and it takes a moment.
She had slept longer than she thought,
and it is now just after 7.
She recalls, yesterday when she checked on her phone,
that the sun would rise at 7:22.

She washes off her face,
puts her coat back on – it is frosty this morning –
and steps out her front door.
Looks to the east,
where the crimson dawn has already announced what is to come.
And pop, out of the earth, birthed from the horizon,
comes the sun.
Harbinger of a new day.

Speaking of the new day,

there's a lot to do.
Breakfast, get ready, do, do, go.
That's the way it is.

Yet, Amy makes for herself a resolution –
it is close the new year, after all,
a pledge –
to rejoice in the day as given.
The day might be long or short,
it might be full and frantic or calm and sleepy.
Whatever it brings,
to rejoice in the day.
Even in the cold,
the warm love of God, as Longfellow put it,
does not depart.
Even in the longest night, the earth is already turning back to the sun,
it shall not hide forever,
and the crops shall grow, and life shall go on, and love shall go on,
and so,
she says to herself,
rejoice in the day.

And this is not just a meteorological lesson.
It is about life.
The dark is good, a time for imagining, the den of life.
The moon makes a fine friend,
a fine conversation partner, for a while,
but not forever.

Our ancient ancestors took the returning sun as a sign of hope,
as a reminder that we live in the cycle of time,
and what comes, goes, and what goes, comes again.
So too might we take it as such a sign –
yea, to embrace the dark, its mystery and magic,
and to rejoice in the day.

To mark the Yule.

Later that day,
when she has a little time, Amy does some research on the solstice.

She finds a ritual, written by the Pagan priestess Starhawk.
There is a chant; she speaks it aloud to herself:

To die and be reborn,
the wheel is turning,
what must you lose to the night? (repeat)

fear.

Fear is lost to the night. (2x)

To die and be reborn,
the wheel is turning,
what must you lose to the night?

Fear.

Fear is lost to the night (2x).

And so it is.

Speak your fears to the moon,
and lose them to the night.

Let the sun rise in you, and begin again.

For light returns. Hope returns. The wheel turns.

In that same ritual, Amy sees she was right:

evergreen and holly, candles.

The ancient symbols of Yule,
of green even in winter.

“At the center of our being
there is light and there is darkness,
the known and the unknown,
the named and the nameless,
the finite and the infinite.”

There is the reflection of the night, and there is the joy of the day.

There is quiet, and sympathy,
and there is the jolly, the laughter,
the Yule log aflame,
the sweets and the gifts of love and fun,
there is cause to rejoice.

Let us sing a song of rejoicing, a song of Yule.