

Seeking Stillness

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Unitarian Universalist Congregation of the South Jersey Shore

Silence

Darkness

Stillness

Solitude

Quiet

It is the time of the year when all of nature in the northern hemisphere is tuned to the turning of the season, aware of the darkness of the long night, and looking again toward the lengthening days that will bring the return of warmth and springtime.

But there is much to celebrate in the darkness.

Marge Piercy reminds us that vital connections are made in the dark, deep underground, out of sight of most living creatures, but every bit as vital as what is visible in the daylight.¹

In our time for all ages this morning, we heard an adaptation of Erica Baron's "A Story of Light And Darkness"² in which a community of people loved the light and feared the darkness, but who eventually came to appreciate that the darkness allowed for much necessary time to rest and recharge, to heal, to prepare for more light.

It is the same story told through the ages about the need for balance between day and night, summer and winter, activity and rest. Persiphone in Greek mythology was the queen of the underworld after being kidnapped by Hades, who ruled that realm. Persophone's mother Demeter, was so bereft at her daughter's abduction that she caused the sun to shine continually, causing a great drought. She relented when a deal was worked

¹ Piercy, Marge, "The Seven of Pentacles," from **Circles on the Water**, Middlemarsh, Inc. 1982

² <https://www.uuworld.org/articles/story-light-darkness>

out that allowed Persiphone to spend half the year above ground with her mother and half the year in the underworld with her kidnapper/husband.

Forever, humans have struggled with the balance of light and dark. Dark has been something to be feared – it is when predators with more acute vision would attack, it is when humans feel powerless without our ability to see. It has been said that 90% of the information our brain receives comes to us visually. Deprived of our ability to see, we flail about, frightened, and vulnerable.

Children are often afraid of the dark, imagining all manner of frightening things that live beneath their beds or in their closets. Sometimes the monsters live down the hall, or in the next room.

I read a book this week called “Unafraid of the Dark.” It is a memoir written by Rosemary Bray, who at the time was an editor at the New York Times Book Review. She told the story of her childhood growing up poor in Chicago, with a father who beat her mother and who gambled too often. She told of lying awake in bed at night, listening to her parents fight, holding her breath in the awful silences that came between the sounds of blows thrown and furniture being broken.

She wrote about lying bundled up in bed in their frigid apartment because the furnace had stopped working, or the gas had been turned off, and she wrote about feeling trapped in the cold and dark, unable to escape, unable to protect her mother from her father’s rages.

Nighttime – darkness – was a time of terror for the Bray children, and the scars of that experience followed Rosemary into adulthood. She wrote about owning her first home with her husband, and when the furnace malfunctioned, she needed to escape to where it was warm – to a friend’s place or to her husband’s parents’ home. She would not – *could not* – spend the night shivering in the cold and dark, no matter how safe she felt with her husband next to her.

To the inner part of her brain, the one set as a child, cold + dark = danger and vulnerability. As an adult, she had the power and the means to escape

that place, and she did, even if she could not explain to her confused husband why she must. For him, a malfunctioning furnace was one of the adventures of first-time homeownership. For Rosemary, it was a flashback.

I have considered in other sermons the curious way that humans define and describe things. Often, we describe something by first explaining what it is not. We describe dark as the absence of light, and light as the absence of dark. We describe hunger as the absence of food, and cold as the absence of warmth. We describe heat as being without coolness, and aridity as an absence of moisture.

We inaccurately describe peace as the absence of conflict, happiness as the absence of sorrow, and health as the absence of illness.

Humans very much like dualistic concepts. Binaries are easy to understand. Good/bad, right/wrong, north/south, black/white.

We understand, though, that such concrete and absolute thinking is misguided at best, and harmful at worst. Much as we'd like the world to be so simple, it – and we – are not.

Humans and the human experience are complex. No human being is entirely good or entirely bad. Very few places in nature are entirely lit or entirely dark all the time. Even in the darkest night, there are stars. Even on the brightest day, there is shade. Even the surface of the moon is lit in shades of white and gray, as the dark side is illuminated by the ambient light of the stars of the galaxy.

It is also human nature – the law of all nature, honestly – to seek the path of least resistance. Water flows downhill, animals seek the safest and most efficient ways to survive. Afraid of the dark, we humans long for more light. Like the people in our story, the dark makes us uneasy. We feel out of control.

And yet we need it. We need that balance between control and surrender, between work and rest, growth and dormancy.

Without the dark, we would not be able to see the fantastic dance of Saturn and Jupiter as they meet and seem to meld in the night sky. Without the dark, we would be unable to see fireflies in the summer, tomatoes would not ripen in those steamy August nights, and our lives would be less rich for it all.

We are deep in the season of holidays and holy days. Hanukkah has passed, the solstice and Saturnalia are upon us, Christmas is Friday, Kwanzaa starts on the 26th and lasts until January 1.

Human Light is on the 23rd, celebrating the wisdom of humanism in this season, and the Hindu holiday of Pancha Ganapati this week honors Ganesha.

The new year begins in less than two weeks – and I think we can all agree that saying goodbye to the year 2020 will come with no small measure of relief.

Again, we define our hope for a better year based upon our desire to be rid of the troubles of 2020. We define what is by saying what it isn't.

When we consider stillness, how often do we tend to define it as an absence of noise? Or do we define quiet as an absence of sound?

What would it be to define stillness as stillness itself, and that noise is the disruption? The aberration?

Can we define stillness as the norm, and understand busy-ness as the unnatural state?

Douglas Adams once remarked through a character in his book "The Restaurant at the End of the Universe," that humans avoided silence to keep themselves from the heavy work of thinking.

"It is worth repeating at this point the theories that Ford had come up with, on his first encounter with human beings, to account for their peculiar habit of continually stating and restating the very very obvious, as in "It's a nice day," or "You're very tall," or "So this is it,

we're going to die."

His first theory was that if human beings didn't keep exercising their lips, their mouths probably shriveled up.

After a few months of observation he had come up with a second theory, which was this--"If human beings don't keep exercising their lips, their brains start working."³

And while this is amusing, I think it also contains more than a small grain of truth. We fill our days with activity and noise, but it is when things quiet down that the deep learning can happen. It is in the dark, underground, where our connections are made.

I want to challenge you this week, in the madness that too often surrounds this time of holidays and holy days, to listen to the quiet. Do not fill every moment with activity. Allow your body to rest, and your mind to relax and learn what it will from the stillness.

I know we've all been stuck indoors for 10 months. I get it. How much more sitting in the quiet can we stand?

But I want you to take a look at how we have managed to fill those days indoors, how much noise and activity and *input* we manage to create, and I want you to think about what we might be protecting ourselves from. What great truth might emerge from within if we are still enough to permit that to happen?

Might we learn that we are afraid?

Might we have to face our own shortcomings?

Without the noise to protect us, might we be forced to do some self-reflection and take an honest look at who we are and what we value?

It can be a dangerous thing to sit in the dark and silence and to let truth emerge.

³ Adams, Douglas [The Restaurant at the End of the Universe](#), Pan Books (now McMillan) UK, 1980

It can also be the most profound experience we allow ourselves.

If you can this week, take some time, more than you think is necessary, actually. Take twice or three times the amount of time you think is necessary and sit in the quiet. Sit in the dark of the evening and gaze into the endless night sky.

Try to stop making lists, checking your phone, or even reading a book.

Just. Stop.

Embrace the stillness.

Embrace the quiet time in the dark that allows us to be still and heal deeply.

I leave you with this prayer by my friend and colleague Jennifer Grayson.

“Embrace the Night”

Universal mystery,
Guide us away from the desire to
Shine light in all the corners.
Teach us to embrace the night,
For without the darkness,
We never see the stars.⁴

May we all permit ourselves some stillness this week and through the season.

May it be so.

Amen.

⁴ Grayson, Jennifer, “Embrace the Night” <https://www.uua.org/worship/words/chalice-lighting/embrace-night>