

Winter Solstice

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Today marks the winter solstice. Well, the Solstice isn't a day, but a moment. It will happen today at 6:03 pm when the Northern Hemisphere is tilted the farthest from the sun. This means today we'll have the least sunlight, the most dark of the whole year. The shortest day and longest night. And after today, winter begins.

Solstice is a moment. One dark moment when we are as far as we can get from the light. One dark, cold moment. We've all had those. Dark, cold moments. When someone we love dies. Periods of unemployment when it's difficult to feel like part of the world. Experiences of grave injustice. The end of a love relationship. Real financial poverty. Unrelenting depression. Dark, cold moments.

I've lived through some of those things. I'm not talking about bad days; I'm talking about grief and fury and meaninglessness and the kind of fear that haunts you when the lights go out, the fear that refuses to let you sleep. There are those times, those dark nights of the soul, when shadows loom large.

Winter Solstice is the planetary embodiment of that. A turning away from the sun. A deep, dark, cold moment. At this time of year there is more night. Here in Westchester, we'll have about 9 hours of daylight today. In some places further north, there is only night; the sun won't rise at all. Ancient peoples marked this day with fire. It was part of an attempt to bring the light back, to ensure that it wasn't going to be dark forever. When light is less, we need to know it's temporary or, at the very least, that we can do something about it, that we can light a fire.

Have any of you been to Newgrange in Ireland? I've been there twice. Newgrange is 5000 years old making it 500 years older than the Egyptian pyramids and 1000 years older than Stonehenge. It looks like a grassy mound with almost 100 white stones surrounding it and a huge, stone decorated with Celtic spirals marking the entrance. The ancients buried their dead inside. Aside from the mind-blowing how-did-they-build-that piece, there's something else truly fantastic about Newgrange. For a few days, around the winter solstice, when dawn arrives, the light of the sun fills the core of the building. It comes streaming in a small window only during those few days. From December 19th to the 23rd, a narrow beam of light penetrates the roof-box and reaches the floor, gradually extending to the rear of the chamber. As the sun rises higher, the beam widens so that the whole room is illuminated. This event lasts for 17 minutes, beginning around 9am for those 4 days of the year, the 4 darkest days in the Northern Hemisphere. The ancient people brought light into the darkest of places on the days when light was least and needed most.

It's a powerful thing to be in a place that old, a temple that old. For five thousand years, people have been praying on that grassy mound. For millennia, people have brought their greatest fears, their deepest worries, their wildest dreams and laid them at the base of that temple. One after another for five thousand years, into the dark. They brought the bodies of their loved ones, their mothers and fathers, sisters and brothers, husbands and wives, sons and daughters and with the bodies of their dead they brought their sadness and their hopes for something better, a world that would one day be brighter than it felt that day. And then, they would return, during the darkest of days, and watch as the light took over, reminding them that the dark will not win, that the light is strong.

The first time I went to Newgrange, I was studying the war in Northern Ireland. It was 1989 and war was in full bloom and I was living in the middle of it. The world felt dark, out of control. I've told these stories before, stories of houses being tossed and old women being harassed in their homes, soldiers walking the streets with machine guns and children afraid to play in their backyards because that's where the landmines were secretly planted. I went to Newgrange the first time aware of what the dark really felt like. I laid down on the hill, exposed to the sun and waited for the light, for the wisdom of the ages, for the spirits of the ancients to wrap me in warmth and hope. While I lay there, still, my mentor and teacher laid down in arm's distance of me. She reached out and took my hand. We stayed for some time, in the middle of a summer afternoon, on that ancient sunlit hill, letting the darkness burn off of us.

Today, we burn off the winter darkness by brightening our houses and neighborhoods with Christmas lights and Hanukah and Kwanza candles. I saw about 15 minutes of that TV show called Christmas Light Fight.

Families are putting thousands, even hundreds of thousands of lights on their houses. It's the same impulse of the ancient peoples who designed their temple to capture the light on the darkest days. There's a house we pass on a major road near our home that has colored lights outlining every window and door and the entire frame and the roof and if that's not enough, they've marked every branch of an enormous pine tree out front with lights as well. It brings me such joy to see each evening, even late afternoon, in December.

This is the way we birth the light. In some pagan traditions, the winter solstice is when Mother Earth gives birth to the new sun. The new year begins with the young sun, who grows stronger over time. Saxon pagans call this Mother's Night and they stay up through this, the darkest, longest night, to see the sun rise again, to be there for the birth of the new year. Mother Earth will deliver the light unto the world, precisely when we need it most. After the solstice, Earth will begin the return, turning slowly back, moving us closer to a growing sun.

There are times we, too, need to birth a new sun, need to bring light into the world. A good number of my friends and colleagues believe we are seeing the beginning of an uprising, that we are watching – or maybe participating in – the birth of a new sun. One colleague told me that as a religious leader, she decided it was necessary to participate in the Black Lives Matter protests in Chicago. She went to the location of the protest with her sign. She chanted and sang and called on the good people of Chicago to demand greater police and governmental system accountability in and for communities of color. They began to walk and she walked with them. And together, tens of thousands of people walked and walked and walked right onto the highway. She didn't know she'd be shutting down a highway, but what a powerful statement. We can't continue the way we're going. We have to stop and think. Stop the rush of our lives and pay attention. People are dying. And people are starving and suffering because our largest corporations aren't paying a fair wage and the power is located in the hands of so few while too many are struggling and we are continuing in our cars on the highway. In our cars, burning fossil fuels, increasing carbon in the atmosphere, decreasing our ability to breathe. We can't breathe.

But we keep driving, moving forward, thinking we have somewhere to go, racing from one place to the next, going too fast to notice all the people who need us to see them. So in the dark of the night, they stopped the traffic. It's time to stop. Time to pay attention to the dark. Time to birth a new light.

When we become aware of the dark, we can bring in the light. The ancient peoples knew the dark. They knew they needed the light and they summoned Mother Earth to bring it. And now we know we need the light, so we need to summon it as well. The thing is, I'm not sure the light we need is going to come from outside of us. I'm afraid, my friends, this time, we are the light.

Pagans have a tradition of waiting through the night. The children want to stay awake to see the sun rise, but the parents coax them to bed and in the morning, dawn has come. It's time to celebrate. This morning in Newgrange in County Meath, 100 people will gather in the temple and watch as the sun rises and fills the room with light.

But I think the light for which we wait won't be coming with the dawn. I think we will have to become the light. I don't know of a room in which we can wait, a temple that will fill while we stand guard. If we want a room to get brighter, we will have to *be* the light.

There's something deliciously safe about the darkness. You can't see anything or anyone. You can curse the dark for all that can't be done. But that only works when we don't know we can set ourselves on fire, that we can ignite our own minds such that others will also set themselves ablaze.

The ability to transform pain into ecstatic beauty, to create joy out of suffering, that's light into darkness. Great painters and composers and authors and sculptors and liturgists and poets and architects do this; they transform pain into beauty, bringing light into dark places, setting rooms and minds on fire with their art.

How do we become the light during these dark days? I think we are all artists of a great world, all creators of justice, all able to transform pain into ecstatic beauty. Every mother does this, every father, every friend and companion. Great love brings light into the world. When we demonstrate that love, when we live out of compassion and hope, we, too, can set rooms on fire.

Can you join a protest, a rally, a die-in? Can you write an article or start to blog? Can you bring light to social media or speak a clear and gentle truth with friends? Can you stand alongside a frightened or hurting family? Accompany someone through a time of grief? Or maybe we become the light when we start to live differently. When we think about living simply or reducing our carbon footprint or spending less energy worrying about the trivial matters that too often fill our brains and more energy in authentic relationship with the world. For the second time, I'm going to hold up Rose and Ewa as a beautiful and simple example of being present.

Every holiday, Christmas included, they ask me if I know of anyone who might be alone because they would like to invite them over. It's a sweet way of being open to those who are unseen, a simple way of adding a little light to a day that might otherwise be dark.

For a moment, I'm going to ask you to consider ways you can bring great love and transform pain into beauty. And then we're going to start a fire. But first, a moment of silence for you to identify a place in the world or in your world that has been plunged into darkness, a relationship in need of healing or a way you can become part of the great movement for justice we're witnessing. Take some time to think...

The world is in need of our light. The world needs for us to set ourselves ablaze, to bring fire to this dark night. So I'm going to ask you all to come forward and light a candle. And with that candle, see if you can commit yourself to becoming the light we so desperately need. And if you aren't ready to become the fire, at the very least, you might be willing to light a single candle to help even in a small way for us to fight off the darkness.

We are the light of the world. We are the people being called during this time of darkness. There are tombs, chambers, both physical and metaphorical and we are called to be present in them, to witness the sun filling them with warmth, to become the sun bringing light to the dark places. This is Mother's Night, the night of birthing the new sun. The new year starts in the morning and Earth will begin her return to the light. Into the dark and cold night, fires will be lit and ours is one of them. The fire of faith and of hope and of truth. We light our fire today knowing how it is needed and knowing that we are the light of the world, that we are being called to brighten up the dark places and to let our light shine.