

Symbols of the Dark/Symbols of the Light

A Sermon in Two Parts by the Rev. Molly Housh Gordon

Given at the Unitarian Universalist Church of Columbia

Sunday, December 1, 2013

Symbols of the Dark

My first year at divinity school, I attended an interfaith winter worship service put together by students from the many faith traditions represented at our school.

The service focused on the winter holidays in many traditions that celebrate the returning light. In it, person after person came up and gave a reading from their tradition invoking many different images and symbols of light.

Chanukkah candles and Advent candles were kindled; a Yule log was ignited; Diwali - lamps were lit.

Then toward the end, a woman who studied and practiced indigenous African traditions came up and read the most beautiful blessing in praise of Darkness.

That reading struck me in many ways, first by its beauty and truth. Second in the much needed balance it brought to our light-soaked service.

It also reminded me that many of our symbolic dichotomies of dark and light are problematic, because they are steeped in centuries of imperialist and racist undertones.

Narratives of dark as evil and light as good, dark as ignorant and light as wise, dark as impure and light as pure, dark as something to fear and light as something to trust - all these narratives have been employed across centuries as justification for domination and dehumanization. These symbolic narratives have done real harm.

And even beyond the harmful ways that human images of darkness and light have been used, there is a universal truth about the need for dark as well as light.

That blessing in praise of darkness reminded me that the many winter light traditions are not at their heart an unqualified celebration of light.

Rather, each contains seeds of a prayer for restoration of the rightful balance between darkness and light, as equal halves of a beautiful whole that exists in nature beyond the control of human language.

So, this month, as we explore the theme of Darkness and Light during a time of year marked by both, I hope we can recognize and praise their holy balance in our lives.

And as a people who seek love and flourishing over domination and dehumanization, I hope together we can find and claim some life-giving symbols of darkness and light.

We begin by celebrating the darkness.

We praise the sweet, rich darkness in which we can imagine beyond what could ever be seen...

And we name the darkness a symbol of dreaming, as creativity unleashed and unformed, unfettered by the definition of light.

Creativity left to ramble and grow, unbound by what we think we know in the light of day.

Praise the dark.

We praise the calm, still darkness, which gives us rest, nourishes our souls, creates for us a time and space apart from striving...

And we name the darkness a symbol of growth. The dark is the safety of the womb and the richness of black soil.

It is the growth of our bones and bodies, knit together in the dark, it is the growth of our very souls, coaxed by the quiet into their flowering.

Praise the dark.

We praise the teeming, moving darkness, the dark matter that makes up the bulk of our universe, the bustling worlds within and beyond that we will never see or understand...

And we name the darkness a symbol of mystery. It is the cloud of our unknowing, the Truth beyond our human grasp, the core of All, beyond our understanding.

We bow in humility before the mystery of the darkness...

And we name the darkness a symbol of our surrender. The dark night of the soul, and even death itself are the unlit pathways to our Source. They bring us to our knees before the mysterious love that gave us birth. They are the only way through.

The darkness is power, and in it we let go.

So let us bless the darkness, it's every incarnation.

Bless the dark of shadows at mid-day – shadows giving form and depth to all we see.
Bless the shadows.

Bless the dusk, every color and every hue of gray. The meeting place of darkness and light – the place out of time, the place touching eternity. Bless the dusk.

Bless the dark of midnight. The dark kissed by moon and star, the dark that holds our dreams. Bless midnight.

Bless the moon and the stars, who take their beauty as a gift from the dark that surrounds them. Bless the moon and stars.

Bless the time before dawn, dark trembling at the edge of light, grays sweeping through. The dark moving and breathing with possibility and growth. Bless the dark before dawn.

And bless the dark of winter, the long nights to rest, and contemplate, to grow, and to just be. Bless the dark of winter.

Symbols of the Light

As we bless the dark, so we bless the light, and recognize both to be intertwined, embracing, dancing through our days and nights, through seasons of dark and light.

We bless the wonder of soft light at dawn and a world arising once more as light meets dark with a kiss of peace. Bless the light at dawn.

We bless the morning sun as it peeks up over the horizon, bringing a world of greys and soft color to life. Bless the morning sun.

We bless the light of noon, warming our faces, soaking to our bones, quickening our step as it measures the passing of time. Bless the light at noon.

We bless the light as the sun moves down the sky, lengthening shadows, angled light washing the world with a feeling of magic. Bless the evening light.

As we seek to balance our praise of darkness and light, we recognize every color and shade between. A whole world of light/dark playing together, sharing space.

Creatures of both, we seek to live at the horizon.

We are light teetering before the dark.
We are dark standing at the edge of light.

We are filled with the mystery of the teeming darkness and bathed in the warmth of soft light.

We are nourished in the quiet night and sent forth in the riotous day.

In this time of long nights, quiet expectation, and rest, we seek symbols of light that enliven rather than dominate, that bring the sheer power of the light and the dark into our human lives – their natural drama playing across our days and nights as we live under their rule.

And so we praise the quickening, electric power of the light, as its interplay with the dark gives form to raw energy – dark matter and vibrating particles, agents of light - together creating all that is.

And we name light a symbol of energy and life force, its remnants firing between the synapses of our brains, pulsing in our veins.

Our very existence echoes the sun's light, as her energy moves through the metabolic processes of life and animates our being. It is nourishment and warmth and power.

Praise the light.

We praise the leaping, flickering light of the flame, as it burns low and roars forth – the flame bursting into light from its core of dark heat.

And we name light a symbol of the fire within - that divine spark driving each of us – the fire of commitment, the flame of desire and passion for life itself and for one another.

It is the flame of the human spirit, fed by empty space and other flame. Light building upon light.

We are lit by its glow; we are lit from within.

We praise the light that illuminates our way through this world. It is the sun rising in the east and setting in the west. It is the north star guiding us home.

And we name the symbol of light as our guide in a mysterious world – it illuminates our path, shows us the way of beauty, the way of the good.

It is our faith that none is ever truly lost – that all are found and held in light. It is our faith that we will find our way – that our journey is guided by some creative source, bathed in beauty, and true.

Praise the light.

And when there is no path to be found, when the darkness of surrender seems endless & unbalanced, we name the light at last our symbol of wild hope.

It is the single candle glowing against the vastness of the dark.

It is the improbability of our human lives in the rich, dark wideness of space and the dark matter that make up most of our universe.

It is the lamp of the Maccabees, burning for days after the oil has run dry.

It is the tireless human search for understanding, even in the depths of holy mystery.

It is the kindled spark of another soul, lighting the way that we may see.

The light is power, and in it we are free.

Sacred balance of light and dark,

We praise you.

Our dreaming in the dark, our energy in the light.

Our dark womb of growth, our flickering flame of desire.

Our mystery and our guide.

Our surrender and our hope.

In you may our lives be whole.

With you may we dance in grace.

Of you may we sing unceasing.