

Season of Darkness

11/28/21 - 1/15/22



Photo Credit: Larry Eldridge

Rekindle Joy!

What does it mean to practice the spiritual task of Rekindling Joy in the season of Darkness?

Dear Ones Rekindling Joy,

As we approach the solstice, we prepare for the darkness of winter. This season has two important aspects that define our spiritual work – to lay down the fears and negative experiences that weigh on our hearts and to prepare ourselves to rekindle joy. One way we do that is the symbolic ritual of the solstice service. We write down the sorrows of the year on magic paper. We drop them into the cauldron. The leader lights the paper in the cauldron and WHOOSH! they go up in smoke. In doing this, we embrace the dark time and release ourselves to rekindle joy.



Photo Credit Dave Burnet

I've recently learned of the Danish custom of Hygge – leaning into the dark times – and found an example in a recent Louise Penny murder mystery novel. Coming from a warm climate, a woman visits the tiny village in Quebec at New Year's. She can't fathom why anyone would choose to live in such a cold dark climate. Then she observes the children's delight in sledding down the hills and skating on the pond. She joins the potluck at a villager's home. She sinks into the comfy sofa by the huge stone fireplace in the bistro. The people of the village have embraced the dark time by finding joy in community. They celebrate the new year together with a party, a bonfire, and fireworks. The visitor gradually warms to the village customs and ultimately finds pure joy in a mug of hot chocolate.

The Greek myth of Demeter and Persephone explains why we must have the dark time. Clarissa Pinkola Estes describes it in her book, The Creative Fire. What I'm sharing here is woefully oversimplified. Demeter is the life-giving goddess of agriculture, grain, and the harvest. Zeus is the father of her daughter Persephone and has permitted Hades, the lord of the underworld, to kidnap the young Persephone. Persephone is unhappy in the underworld and wants to go home. Zeus tells Hades the only way she can stay in the underworld is if she eats while there. Hades tricks her by squeezing a pomegranate into her mouth as she's leaving. As a result, Zeus rules that she must spend half the year in the underworld and half the year with her mother. From that time forward, the earth is dark when Persephone is in the underworld. Plants die, trees shed their leaves, animals enter their dens to hibernate. Death is necessary for the land to be fertile the next year. The dark time is when the earth rests. It's also necessary for us to rest, to rejuvenate our spirits and rekindle our joy.

In ancient times, there was great uncertainty during the dark times. Primal fear that the light will not return or that the community has not stored enough food to make it through the winter. While we may not share those worries, we have experienced the primal fear of not knowing what COVID-19 will bring. It has brought far too much death, uncertain hospital stays, and just not knowing what will come next. As we enter this year's season of darkness, let's embrace this darkness and grief and take time to rekindle joy. Consider the joys you find in this season. For some, it's the joy of sharing cookies, building gingerbread houses, making potato latkes for Hanukkah, enjoying pernil, pasteles, arroz con gandules & arroz con dulce, preparing the Christmas Eve Feast of the Seven Fishes, beginning New Year's Day with black-eyed peas and cornbread. For many it's the joy of decorating our living spaces with evergreen trees and colored lights and sinking into the restfulness of candlelight.

This season, we invite you to embrace the darkness, let go of the busy-ness that demands we exhibit joy at this time of year, settle into the gifts of the season and find new ways to (re)kindle joy.

In faith that the sun will return even when it's dark,
Anne J. Perry
First Unitarian Church of Rochester, Soul Matters Packet Writing Team

Land Acknowledgement: We acknowledge with respect the Seneca Nation, Keepers of the Western Door and part of the Haudenosaunee People, on whose ancestral land the Unitarian Universalist Churches in Rochester and Canandaigua now stand.

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Etymologies (etymonline.com)

Rekindle: 1590s 'set on fire again'; also 'take fire or be animated anew'.

Joy: Middle English: from Old French joie, based on Latin gaudium, from gaudere 'rejoice'.

SPIRITUAL EXERCISES

Select one of the exercises below to practice and come prepared to discuss the experience and your thoughts and feelings about it with your group.

Exercise A. The Vaccine Miracle: Appreciating Visible and Invisible Miracles



*Photo by Junfu Han,
Detroit Free Press*

At 5am on December 13, 2020, the first FedEx truck reversed into a loading facility at Pfizer Global Supply in Portage, Michigan. A December miracle providing hope for all of us during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Miracles are at the core of some of the major celebrations of this season. Hanukkah celebrates the miracle of the persistence of the oil while Christmas revolves around the miraculous birth of a child.

In this year, we have seen the development, testing, manufacture, and distribution of vaccines to protect us from COVID-19. Many miracles happen together: the visible miracles of the delivery people, pharmacists and nurses getting the vaccines into our arms. Plus, all the invisible miracles making that possible: the scientists and engineers who developed, tested, and manufactured the product. One person among them is Katalin Kariko, a Hungarian immigrant to the United States who worked for decades to develop the foundational process of mRNA. It's that process that made the Pfizer and Moderna vaccines available in record time. It is serendipity that this work was completed just in time to create the life-saving vaccines. Kariko persisted despite little institutional support until she found another person who could help her investigate and make the process work.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Katalin_Karik%C3%B3

What miracles are present in your life now? What people miraculously gave you a hand when you needed it? What miracles can you hold in your hand that were made possible by all the people you will never know? How does reflection on these miracles and the struggles before them shape your appreciation of rekindling joy?

Exercise B: "Indian Schools": Share the Story of Darkness / Rekindling Joy Across Ages

How did Christian colonists impact indigenous communities? Residential Canadian schools for First Nations children have been in the news in recent months, revealing their genocide to the general population. The Thomas Indian School, Tunessasa Indian Boarding School, and Carlisle Boarding School were more local schools that Haudenosaunee children were forced into. Indigenous voices have shared some of their process of rekindling the joy of living their culture fully with future generations in the truth-telling of these stories – making them accessible for all ages. This season, spend some time with someone of a different age group other than your own

– a child, a grandchild, a youth or adult of another age – and listen to these accounts. Share your reflections, especially on the role of religion. Decide [to learn more](#) or [act](#) in support of continued healing and empowerment.

- [When We Were Alone](#) (Note: even the youngest RE kids understand this story. 5:15)
- [When I Was Eight](#) (10:55)
- [Fatty Legs](#) (13:19 – first chapter of a book; for teens and above)

Exercise C: Grieving and Honoring

We've probably all had the experience of opening a closet or drawer and facing challenging questions: troubling memories attached to some things that have been stowed away for later, reminders of times or people gone, or negative thoughts about why things are the way they are. If you've moved yourself or helped someone else to move, or if you have decided to start the (Swedish) process of making early decisions on the ultimate disposition of your things, you know that there are many hard choices to be made as things that have been hidden come into the open. Grief and loss, excitement and anticipation, hope and fear are likely all present. You might be going through a similar mental uncluttering and assessing process, whether you are making new resolutions or considering what to write on the paper you throw into the cauldron for Winter Solstice. This process can involve coming to terms with long held issues to make way for the new.

Activity: Open a closet, drawer, box, or file folder you haven't opened in a while. Select several items which strike you as having a good deal of meaning, memory or "charge." On each of the next five days, write a few words about what these items mean to you. On the sixth day, decide if it is time to honor them by letting them go, to honor them by sending them to a new home, or whether they should be honored by bringing them out into the open.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

These questions aren't "homework" that need to be covered entirely. Instead, simply pick the one question that speaks to you most and let it lead you where you need to go. The questions often lead not to answers, but more questions.

1. We live in a part of the world where winter is both dark and cold. What joyful activities bring you out into the cold dark world?
2. How do you settle into and embrace the darkness, perhaps in new and different ways?
3. What do you need to 'clear out', 'leave behind' or 'resolve' in order to rekindle joy?
4. How do the gifts and miracles in your life inspire you to pass these on and give to others?
5. In setting intentions for the lengthening days, how do you acknowledge and honor what has gone before?
6. How might a time of darkness, interior work, and gratitude set the stage for future growth in yourself, in our church community, and in the world?
7. Have you found a joy in this season? How might you be able to pass it on to a loved one or to our community? What spiritual gifts might you give to others – attention, caring,

creating together, spiritual or physical nourishment, shared silence or shared singing?
Can you think of other spiritual gifts that you would like to receive?

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

READINGS FOR CHALICE LIGHTING & EXTINGUISHING

Chalice Lighting

Author unknown:

When you're in a dark place, you sometimes tend to think you've been buried.
Perhaps you've been planted.
Bloom.

Deep Calls Unto Deep, Joy Calls Unto Joy by Gordon B. McKeeman

Deep calls unto deep, joy calls unto joy, light calls unto light.
Let the kindling of this flame rekindle in us the inner light of love, of peace, of hope.
And "as one flame lights another, nor grows the less,"
we pledge ourselves to be bearers of the light, wherever we are.

Closing Words

Instructions for Living a Life by Mary Oliver

"Instructions for living a life.
Pay attention.
Be astonished.
Tell about it."

Every Endeavor Begins with the First Step by Charles F. Flagg

Leader: Every endeavor begins with a first step, and encounters darkness and difficulty along the way.

Response: We know the darkness of ignorance, of fear, and of tyranny.

Leader: Yet we know the dawning of the light, the beginnings of hope, and the renewal of life.

Response: Blessed be the eternal power which inspires us. Blessed be the source of light and of life. Amen.

FROM UNITARIAN UNIVERSALISM

Trauma Response to COVID by Rev. Sunshine Wolfe:

"It's important to understand that our faith communities have gone through a traumatic experience, and that is having an impact on our physical and mental functioning."

<https://www.uua.org/leadership/library/multi-platform-trauma>

Hymns From Singing the Living Tradition:

No. 245 Joy to the World (Christmas)

Joy to the world! The Lord is come

Let earth receive her King!

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-Xo64Q2ucQ8>

No. 55 Dark of Winter

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZlzYlcu1asQ>

No. 221 Light One Candle (Hanukkah)

Don't let the light go out!

Peter, Paul & Mary:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h1cRXgDFiSs>

No. 225 O Come, O Come, Emanuel (Christian Advent) (link to traditional choir)

“O come, O come Emmanuel and ransom captive Israel that mourns in lonely exile here until the son of God appear. Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to you O Israel”

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7xtpJ4Q_Q-4

HOLIDAYS / HIGH HOLY DAYS / SACRED STORIES

Ramayana

From the British Library:

“The Ramayana – “Rama’s journey” - is one of India’s oldest stories. It was first told in the Sanskrit epic poem of Valmiki some two and a half thousand years ago. Since then, it has been retold over and over in different forms in many languages of India and beyond.

The Ramayana is India’s best-loved story, full of poignant moments and fascinating characters. The hero Rama is exiled from the kingdom of Ayodhya due to the scheming of his stepmother, Kaikeyi. He is joined in the forest by his beloved wife Sita and his ever-faithful brother Lakshmana. Rama’s doting father, King Dasharatha, dies of a broken heart. Sita is carried off by the wicked demon-king, Ravana. The monkeys and the bears lead the frantic search for her. She is discovered by the devoted monkey Hanuman in Ravana’s stronghold of Lanka. After an epic battle in which Ravana is killed, Sita is rescued. Rama and Sita return in triumph to Ayodhya, ushering in a golden age.”

<https://www.bl.uk/onlinegallery/whatson/exhibitions/ramayana/guide.html>

Ramayana is often linked to Diwali, celebrated in our Harvest Season. However, it is a festival of lights – more closely linked for us in the Season of Darkness. For the Rekindling Joy in the Season of Darkness theme, we learn that Rama arrived at the end of a crisis by defeating Rava. Rama is lost and can’t find the way home. The people produce little lanterns to guide him. Sometimes the end of a traumatic crisis time is when you feel most lost. This often happens to soldiers returning from the battlefield (PTSD). We may achieve vaccines for nearly everyone during this season, but how do we light lanterns to show us the way home? What comes next?

Kwanzaa

“The Principles and Meaning of Kwanzaa: The holiday is a call to celebrate the richness of what it means to have African roots”. King, S. *Oprah Daily* (2020)

<https://www.oprahdaily.com/life/a34894866/kwanzaa-principles-candles-meaning/>

Observed from December 26-January 1, Kwanzaa is a celebration of African roots, not tied to a specific religion. It is anchored by the Seven Principles symbolized by seven candles. The first day, the black candle is for Umoja/Unity. Second is a red candle for Kuji/Self-Determination. Day Three is a green candle for Ujima/Collective Work & Responsibility. Day four is a red candle for



Ujamaa/Cooperative Economies. Day five is a green candle for Nia/Purpose. Day six is a red candle for Kuumba/Creativity. Finally, day seven is a green candle for Imani/Faith – belief in African people & the righteousness of the struggle. (See [demo here](#))

Documentary about Kwanzaa (this is one hour 11 minutes and there is an option to watch for free or to watch the trailer: <https://mkasante.com/films/the-black-candle/>)

Christmas



Celebrated December 25th. There's the familiar version of the Christmas story: Joseph and pregnant Mary travel to Bethlehem... no room in the inn... baby born in the stable and placed in a manger... angels and shepherds adore him... three Wise Men bring gifts, etc. This version blends material from the biblical accounts of Matthew and Luke, creating a

simplified version that leaves out much and collapses time. For example, Jesus is probably a toddler when the three Magi come seeking the child "King of the Jews."

Want to learn more? Read this Oxford University Press blog post: *Two Christmas stories: An analysis of New Testament narratives*. Author: Daniel J. Harrington, S.J. (professor of New Testament at Boston College School of Theology and Ministry).

<https://blog.oup.com/2012/12/biblical-historical-christmas-harrington/>

Hanukkah

In 2021, Hanukkah begins at sundown on Sunday, November 28th and lasts until sundown on Monday, December 6th. This Jewish festival, full of light and joy, commemorates the purification and rededication of the Temple in 165 B.C.E. According to the legend when the Maccabees entered the Temple to reclaim it from the Greeks, they immediately relit the *ner tamid* (the "eternal light" which hangs over the ark in every synagogue to this day). They found a single jar of oil that was enough for only one day. The messenger sent to get additional oil took eight days to complete his mission. Miraculously, the single jar of oil continued to burn until his return.



"Today, the holiday reminds Jews to rededicate themselves to keeping alive the flame of Jewish religion, culture, and peoplehood so that it may be passed on to the next generation."

<https://reformjudaism.org/jewish-holidays/hanukkah/history-hanukkah-story>

Shōgatsu (Shinto)

Shōgatsu. New Year is the most important holiday in Japan. Most businesses close January 1-3, so families can gather to spend these days together. All duties should be completed by the end of the year, including the cleaning & purification of one's clothes and home. Bonenkai parties ("year forgetting parties") are held to leave the old year's worries and troubles behind. Families also visit shrines or temples and ring massive bells at midnight to welcome the new year. For more information:

<https://asiasociety.org/education/japanese-new-year>

Indigenous or First Nations People

Haudenosaunee

“. . . the Midwinter ceremony begins five days after the new year moon in January and is a time to renew responsibilities for the coming year. Doug George-Kanentiio of the Mohawk Nation at Akwasasne wrote in the Utica Phoenix that Midwinter is ‘the annual ritual of thanksgiving, renewal, and repentance’ . . .” Read More:

https://www.grunge.com/446614/the-untold-truth-of-the-iroquois-midwinter-festival/?utm_campaign=clip

Lakota

Here’s a very short Lakota Winter Solstice Prayer:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NLqbdMm3t_U

Acknowledging the Winter Solstice is a Decolonial Act for Indigenous People:

“In its period of darkness, the winter solstice is an opportunity to go inward with deep intention, to care for our spiritual selves, our bodies and minds, our loved ones and families, and to prepare for the longer days ahead.”

<https://ndncollective.org/acknowledging-the-winter-solstice-is-a-decolonial-act-for-indigenous-people/>

Cree

From the **Cree** First Nations people in Canada, a very short “Ask an Elder” on a Cree understanding of the winter solstice:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dX5F9zRYfQ0>

National Museum of the American Indian blog post on Solstice:

<https://www.smithsonianmag.com/blogs/national-museum-american-indian/2017/12/20/american-indian-winter-solstice/>

PODCASTS, SONGS, ARTICLES, FILMS, & BOOKS

Valerie Kaur New Year’s Eve speech (~ 6 minutes)

What if this is not the darkness of the tomb, but the darkness of the womb?

<https://www.today.com/video/what-if-this-is-not-the-darkness-of-the-tomb-but-the-darkness-of-the-womb-watch-valerie-kaur-s-speech-917892675740>

Christmas Music to Light the Darkness: Reflecting on 2020. NPR Here and Now.

The music segment begins at 12:48 and ends at 23:53 (about 11 minutes and including performances) (click on the red ‘play’ button above ‘42:27’; then go to the bottom left and click on the blue speaker icon; you will get a music control slider to move to 12:48)

<https://www.wbur.org/hereandnow/2020/12/25/dec-25-2020-hn-two>

Myth of Demeter and Persephone

There are many versions of this myth. This link is a paragraph.

https://canvas.uw.edu/courses/862997/pages/demeter-and-persephone?module_item_id=4891922

This link is much more comprehensive.

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Demeter>

Danish custom of Hygge

hyg·ge pronounced 'h(y)ōōgə, 'hōōgə/

“a quality of coziness and comfortable conviviality that engenders a feeling of contentment or well-being (regarded as a defining characteristic of Danish culture).”

From the New Yorker:

“Winter is the most hygge time of year. It is candles, nubby woolens, shearling slippers, woven textiles, pastries, blond wood, sheepskin rugs, lattes with milk-foam hearts, and a warm fireplace.”

<https://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/the-year-of-hygge-the-danish-obsession-with-getting-cozy>

Swedish custom of *dostadning* “death cleaning”:

<https://time.com/4985533/death-cleaning-declutter/>

Three Little Birds by Bob Marley

“Don’t worry about a thing, cause every little thing gonna be alright.”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zaGUr6wzyT8>

Joy to the World, song written by Hoyt Axton, popularized by Three Dog Night

Joy to the fishes in the deep blue sea

Joy to you and me

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0as6UN02E0A>

POETRY EXCERPTS



Photo by Ira Srole

A Blessing for Traveling in the Dark

By Jan Richardson

<https://www.uua.org/worship/words/poetry/blessing-traveling-dark>

Go slow
if you can.
Slower.
More slowly still.
Friendly dark
or fearsome,
this is no place
to break your neck
by rushing,
by running,
by crashing into
what you cannot see.

...

That in the darkness
there be a blessing.
That in the shadows
there be a welcome.
That in the night
you be encompassed
by the Love that knows
your name.

The Solstice Teaches Us

By David Breeden

<https://www.uua.org/worship/words/poetry/solstice-teaches-us>

The Solstices teach us
that darkness comes,
that darkness goes.

The Solstices teach us
that light comes,
that light goes.

...

to remember time.

The seasons. And love
as we circle the sun.

We Are Waiting (a reading for Advent)

By Leslie Takahashi

<https://www.uua.org/worship/words/responsive-reading/we-are-waiting>

This is the time of living in darkness, in the
hues of unknowing.

Of being quiet, of reflecting on a year almost
past.

Waiting for a new beginning, for a closing or
an end.

This is the time for digesting the lessons of
days gone past, anticipating the future for
which

We are waiting.

HUMOR

The First Unitarian Bi-Friers (Friars?) Sing Hallelujah Chorus from Messiah!

Directed by Mary Lyubomirsky (about 5 minutes)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yxVSN5SFAFY>

Festivus for the Rest of Us (4:37):

On Seinfeld, George Costanza's dad Frank invents a holiday, Festivus, in response to all the commercial and religious aspects of Christmas. It is celebrated on December 23rd. **Just follow these five steps.**

- Get a Festivus pole. Search your home for an aluminum pole. ...
- Prepare a Festivus dinner. Meatloaf is key to stay true to the "Seinfeld" episode. ...
- Air your grievances. ...
- Join in the Feats of Strength. ...
- Call all slightly non-routine events 'Festivus miracles'

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HX55AzGku5Y>

Mr. Bean Nativity Scene – Find your LOL moment (3:39):

<https://youtu.be/FsCoK-n10fw>

From Unitarian Universalist Hysterical Society