

The Season of Darkness

November 27 – January 14

How do we Reweave Connections by Delving Deeply Underground?

Dear underground seekers,

As we enter this season of darkness, many of us feel like we've been in darkness for nearly three years. We've resisted it. We've embraced it. We've railed against it. Our children have struggled with it. Some have found life-saving school in the forest. Others are still trying to find a way out. This season, we are invited to consider what is going on below the surface, in our individual lives, in our communities, and literally underground.

This season we'll focus on a few themes:

- Language referencing darkness as negative pushes Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) cultures underground. In "A Theology of Darkness" (UU World Fall 2021), Rev. Kristen L. Harper says ". . . we first need a new theology of darkness – a new way to relate to the darkness, blackness, and brownness that surrounds us, and to the people whose skin is often reflected in our disempowering language. . . . The dark is rarely celebrated for what it brings to our lives. Relearning to appreciate the darkness takes intention and practice."
- Darkness / underground as restful, restorative and regenerative, both for ourselves and for the biosphere. We say Rest in Peace as we lay our deceased loved ones to rest . . .
- Darkness / underground systems that are easy to ignore until something goes wrong. There are natural systems such as the mushrooms, mycelium and tree roots that occupy the ground we live on. Deeper still, there are the tectonic plates moved by geologic forces that literally change our landscape. There are also human-made systems that hide things like where our water comes from and where our sewage goes to.

"Hello darkness, my old friend, I've come to talk to you again," so sing Simon and Garfunkel in the classic Sound of Silence. Darkness is restful & restorative. We sleep more during the darker part of the year and often under warm covers. Many animals hibernate through the winter, not just bears. The dark underground is where regeneration takes place, as seeds and bulbs have a dormant period in our northern winter under a blanket of snow.

There's a rotting stump in my backyard. From time to time, it sprouts a fungus shelf on its side or mushrooms pop up around it. That's when I realize that there is an underground network of mushrooms, fungus, mycelium. Those of us who are 'city' people may think of the ground around us as 'sterile' without life other than some earthworms, gophers or ground squirrels.



The reality is that there is a whole universe down there if only we pay attention. Going deeper toward the earth's core, we encounter the tectonic plates that move at a glacial pace, mostly. Recently, I learned about the Paricutin Volcano in Mexico. For a few weeks in 1943, the area experienced increasingly frequent earthquakes. Then one day, a fissure formed in a cornfield and within 24 hours there was a 165-foot-tall cone. The volcano was active for 9 years.

Take some time this season to rest, to regenerate and to consider what's going on below the surface.

In love and faith,

Anne J. Perry

Gratitude: *This packet was prepared by Anne J. Perry and Suzanne Morgan with the assistance of the 3-church worship team, Rev. AJ Van Tine, Tom Perry and the whole-hearted support of the packet writers team.*

Acknowledgement:

We gather on the ancestral land of the Seneca people, Keepers of the Western Door of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy. We pay respect to their elders, past and present. We are grateful for their contributions to the concepts of democracy and the Constitution of the United States of America. We apologize for the harm our colonial ancestors caused in taking their land, murdering their people, and attempting to destroy their culture.

Spiritual Exercises

Exercise A. Media Literacy – Recognizing Racist Speech and Imagery

"I have been concerned about the consistent equating of darkness and blackness with negative qualities such as sin and despair." So says Rev. Dr. Kristen L. Harper in "A Theology of Darkness" in UU World.

In "The Risks That Must Be Taken: Using Privilege to Defy Power", Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg tells the story of Pharaoh's daughter, Batya, saving the life of the infant Moses after Pharaoh proclaimed that all Hebrew babies must be killed. Batya took many risky actions, she "... spied the basket among the reeds and sent her servant to fetch it. When she opened it, she saw that it was a child, a boy crying. She took pity on it and said, 'This must be a Hebrew child.'" (Exodus 2.5-6) Batya saw something and did something at great risk to herself. At the same time, other Egyptian mothers took their babies into Jewish homes to elicit the cries of hidden babies. In any time and place, we find a few people who defy the powerful. These few do the right thing at huge risk to themselves. Rabbi Ruttenberg goes on to say, "Each of us is still obligated to do what we can, within our sphere of power and influence, to try to protect and preserve life – even in ways that are subversive, and even at great personal risk."

How can we put the theologies of Rev. Harper and Rabbi Ruttenberg into action? A critical first step is to recognize and name the micro-aggressions and oppressions of white supremacy culture occurring in daily life and in the media that you consume. Harm that is not recognized and called out remains buried in the majority culture.

Spend a few days this season intentionally looking for racist language, actions, and imagery in the media you consume. It may be underground or hidden in plain sight. Keep a log of the instances you find. You might want to start with some of your favorite movies and TV shows from your youth. The more overt racism of decades past can be easier to recognize and name. Many of these shows are still in syndication on broadcast television and on streaming sites. Political ads can be a rich source, where the speech may be benign, but the imagery and sounds tell another story, appealing to fears that trigger our unconscious biases. And children's books are worth a look.

Also, or as an alternative, make a list of words and phrases that equate darkness with the negative and a second list that equate darkness with the positive. Can you find ways to rephrase these to remove the negative connotations?

Resources:

- A Theology of Darkness. <https://www.uuworld.org/articles/theology-darkness>
- The Risks That Must Be Taken. <https://lifeisasacredtext.substack.com/p/the-risks-that-must-be-taken> (this site has a 7-day free trial but you have to be sure to cancel it).
- Sarah Kendzior's essay. <https://thecorrespondent.com/5696/were-heading-into-dark-times-this-is-how-to-be-your-own-light-in-the-age-of-trump/1611114266432-e23ea1a6>

Exercise B. Underground Tectonic Plates – Literal or Figurative – Shake Up Our Lives.

One day, about 80 years ago, a farmer in Mexico was clearing his cornfield when he came across a small hill he had not seen before. He did not realize at that moment that he was witnessing the birth of a volcano that would forever change his life and his community. The volcano, named Paricutin, grew within a 24-hour period from being a smoking mound of dirt to a 165-foot pile of ash and stone, belching flames and lava. Over the next several years, it rose to a height of 1,391 feet and covered an area of more than 90 square miles with volcanic ash, stone, and lava. Two towns were buried, and three more were severely impacted.

Tectonic plates are mysterious things, even in this age of advanced seismology. We usually can't predict what they will do, or when. Pressure builds up along fault lines, only to be released suddenly as an earthquake or uplift. They can cause unimaginable devastation, yet scientists theorize that they were key to sustaining nascent life on earth by spewing carbon into the air at a period when the sun was still too cool to keep the oceans from freezing.

Like the formation of Paricutin, many of us have experienced seismic shifts that rapidly altered the landscape of our lives. It might be a sudden loss, an unexpected boon, or a buildup of pressure that finds release in a way that shakes up our world. The "tectonic plates" on which our reality rests – health, jobs, relationships, etc. – can shift in an instant, leaving us lurching for steady ground.

For the next several days, sit down with your journal or paper and pen and each day document a “seismic” moment – literal or figurative – that you have experienced, when something that had been building up, unseen, suddenly caused a shakeup in your life. After several days, review your writing and reflect further on your experiences. What was the sudden shift that changed your reality? Were you able to ride out the tremors easily, or did you find yourself off balance for a while? How was the landscape of your life different after this moment? Share this experience with your soul matters group. If you’re not in a soul matters group, share with a friend and ask them about seismic moments they have experienced that altered the terrain of their lives.

Resources:

The story of the Paricutin Volcano: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Par%C3%ADcutin>

Seismic shift definition: https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/seismic_shift

Exercise C. Rest in Peace

Talk about death tends to be taboo in our society, pushed underground, so to speak. We bury the dead underground . . . but in different ways. In 1964 muckraking journalist Jessica Mitford published The American Way of Death, spotlighting the high-pressure sales practices of the funeral industry that hyped things like embalming and expensive caskets, taking advantage of the grief-stricken relatives. Current reviews of the book attest to its continuing relevance. Some were convinced that they needed to preserve the body for eternity to be ready for “the Rapture”. Throughout much of human history and even prehistory, people were buried without embalming in a simple wooden box or merely in a shroud. Jewish practice is to bury the person as soon as possible without embalming. Cremation became popular as people sought a method that didn’t require precious ‘real estate’ for burial and could avoid expensive funerary practices. Ashes might be scattered or buried in an urn, for example. As we are paying more attention to fossil fuel usage, cremation starts to look more problematic as high amounts of fuel are needed to achieve the high temperatures. What’s next? Many are talking about Natural Burial - burial in a shroud with the expectation that the body will decompose. We’re seeing that become available at many cemeteries.

Sort through the pros and cons of how you would want your body to be handled after death. You could do this by yourself or with treasured friends or loved ones. Share the experience with your soul matters group.

Resources:

- Funeral Consumers Alliance of Rochester, NY: <https://www.fcagr.com/index.html>
- Jewish funeral practices: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bereavement_in_Judaism
- Cremation impact on environment (requires email address to read past paragraph 1): <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/science/article/is-cremation-environmentally-friendly-heres-the-science>
- New York does not make it easy or cheap to just bury granddad in the back 40. You have to have a licensed funeral director involved and a permit for your family cemetery. How

to plan a green burial: <https://www.us-funerals.com/guide-to-arranging-a-green-burial-in-new-york/#.Y2wUqeTMLVg>

- The Rapture: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rapture>

Intergenerational Exercise. Bulbs & Bears Need Rest

At this time of year, amaryllis bulbs are often widely available. Get together with a child or grandchild and plant a bulb inside in a pot or plant a bean in a cup. Talk about the fact that bulbs and seeds need a dormant period – a period of rest in the darkness – to be ready to grow. Ask if the child remembers seeing bright flowers last spring. Explain that those bulbs are dormant and resting underground until spring when they will respond to warmth and light to produce a flower. For a longer-term project, you could choose other bulbs, such as daffodils, crocuses, or tulips, that also require a cold dormancy period (in a refrigerator!) before their instinct to grow is “switched on” by warmer temperatures or increased light. Bulbs placed in the refrigerator in December, for instance, should be ready to bloom in March or April.

Besides bulbs, many animals have a dormant period that we call hibernation. Ask if the child knows of an animal that hibernates (see resource below for other than bears).

Resources:

Amaryllis - Cornell University Extension: <https://ccefm.com/readarticle.asp?ID=1358&progID=8>

Planting a Bean: <https://www.scienceworld.ca/resource/bean-garden/>

Forcing other bulbs: <https://buffalo-niagaragardening.com/2014/12/16/do-you-need-to-refrigerate-daffodil-tulip-bulbs-before-forcing-them-indoors/>

Hibernating Animals: <https://kidactivities.net/animals-that-hibernate/>

The Chipmunk Song: https://youtu.be/HD6Gm_6gclY

Questions

1. When you find yourself disagreeing with someone, are you comfortable bringing the issue to the surface or do you push it down deep? How does that impact you? How does it affect your relationship?
2. We're proud of what our Western New York 'ancestors' did in supporting the underground railroad that transported escaped slaves to safety, often in Canada. Some may think that most New Yorkers opposed slavery prior to nationwide abolition in 1865. Please take a look at the following link. Were you surprised by the History of Slavery in New York State? What did you learn? [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_slavery_in_New_York_\(state\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_slavery_in_New_York_(state))
3. There is scientific evidence that we sleep more in winter: <https://www.aprilaire.com/blog/more-sleep-winter/>. How easy or hard is it to respond to your inclination to rest and recharge in winter? In what other ways do you embrace darkness at this time of year?

4. Sometimes going underground is a means of self-preservation and escape. For example, Mary & Joseph fled to Egypt to protect the baby Jesus. The Maccabees practiced their religion underground when Jewish practices were forbidden. The prophet Mohammad hid in a cave from the Quraish tribe who were trying to assassinate him. The Dalai Lama, a leader of Tibetan Buddhism, escaped to India where he currently lives in exile. How can one balance the self-preservation of going underground against the isolation? How can a whole people preserve their culture when pushed underground?
5. What's the difference between being buried and being burrowed?
6. What roots hold you close (as the hymn says)? How do you tend to your roots, whether spiritual, ancestral, local or otherwise?

7. The crystals in the Naica Cave in Mexico are as much as 30 feet long. They could only reach that size because there's no wind underground. What connections or growth are possible undisturbed, underground or below the surface that don't thrive above ground, exposed to wind and other elements?

<https://cen.acs.org/physical-chemistry/geochemistry/Naicas-crystal-cave-captivates-chemists/97/i6>

Photo Credit: Javier Trueba/MSF/Science Source



CHALICE LIGHTING

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.
Jennifer Gracen, author, contributor to UUA.org

Darkness, soothe my wear eyes,
 that I may see more clearly.
 When my heart with sorrow cries,
 Comfort and caress me.
 And then my soul may hear a voice,
 A still, small voice of love eternal.
 Darkness, when my fears arise,
 Let your peace flow through me.
from Hymn #55 Dark of Winter

CHALICE EXTINGUISHING

Blessed is the dark,
 in which our dreams
 stir and are
 revealed.
 Blessed is the dark
 of earth, where seeds come to life.



Blessed are the depths of the ocean where
 no light shimmers: the womb of all earthly
 life.

Blessed is the light into which we awake,

the light that sparkles on the waters:
that calls the tree forth from the seed,
and calls the shadow forth from the tree.

Blessed are we as we move through
darkness and through light.

*Rev. Amy Zucker Morgenstern is parish minister
of the Unitarian Universalist Church of Palo Alto,
California.*

In this holiday season
May we find peace inside ourselves;
May we be peace for those around us,
And may we renew our commitment
To bring peace with justice
To our community and the world.
May we be peace.

*Rev. Dr. David Breeden is senior minister of First
Unitarian Society in Minneapolis, Minnesota.*

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

The Darkness Divine

*By Rev. Dr. Kristen L. Harper,
Poet and senior minister of the Unitarian Church of Barnstable, Massachusetts.*

God resides in depths of darkness
as in the light of sunbeams.

The moon shines brighter surrounded by night
and life is secure in the black waters of the womb.

As the night sky littered with stars demonstrates again and again,
there is beauty in darkness and beauty in light –

one no more brilliant than the other,
one no more necessary than the other,
one always complementing the other.

Without the heated darkness of the Universe,
splitting neutrons, electrons, and protons from atoms,
life and light would never be.

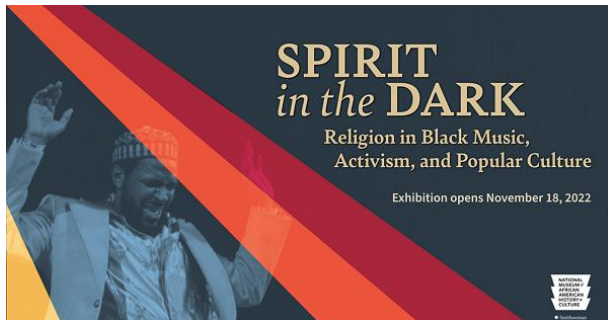
The task for us today
is to recognize God in both –

To see the divine in the rich brown earth,
the textured black walnut,
as well as the white snow and the pale pink jellyfish.

To see the sacred in the panther and the swan.

To embrace the dignity of the Black Madonna,
as it is embodied in the Virgin Mary.

The task for us today
is to look into the multifaceted colors of the onyx
and see the miraculous spectrum of color
produced in the prism of a diamond.



Spirit in the Dark: Religion in Black Music, Activism, and Popular Culture. This exhibit at the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture showcases 37 framed photographs from the recently acquired Johnson Publishing Company archive, which is jointly owned by the Museum and the Getty Research Institute, and approximately 25 objects from the Museum's collection. The

exhibition includes photographs of several prominent African Americans, such as Aretha Franklin, Duke Ellington, Marvin Gaye, Angela Davis, Malcolm X, Maya Angelou, Reverend Ike, and Jesse Jackson, examining religion's impact on their lives and the larger Black community.

Spirit in the Dark will be on view in the Earl W. and Amanda Stafford Center for African American Media Arts (CAAMA) gallery until November 2023. Visitors also will be able to listen to the sounds of the exhibition with a curated playlist of music by artists included in *Spirit in the Dark*, as well as experience the exhibition virtually with a special companion digital exhibition on the Smithsonian [Searchable Museum website](#).

Hymns

#55 – Dark of Winter

Dark of winter soft and still,
Your quiet calm surrounds me.

<https://www.google.com/search?client=firefox-b-1-d&q=dark+of+winter+hymn#fpstate=ive&vld=cid:8f40428a,vid:YmRfsZNpipA>

#123 – Spirit of Life

. . . Roots hold me close; wings set me free;
Spirit of Life, come to me, come to me.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L5xv7Mne5rA>

#275 – Joyful is the Dark

Joyful is the dark, Spirit of the deep,
winging wildly o'er the world's creation,
silken sheen of midnight, plumage black and bright,
swooping with the beauty of a raven.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2vchGcV_fbU

#1055 – How Sweet the Darkness

When windows that are black and cold
Are lit anew with fires of gold
When dusk in quiet shall descend and
Darkness come once more a friend.

https://www.google.com/search?client=firefox-b-1-d&q=how+sweet+the+darkness+hymn+lyrics#fpstate=ive&vld=cid:66cc4fd8,vid:Jk-bTM_3Bo8

Songs

Gordon Lightfoot very early in his career

Song for a Winter's Night

<https://youtu.be/LfyDs6uXww0>

Simon and Garfunkel in the classic *Sound of Silence*

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4fWyzwo1xg0>)

Pearls Before Swine honors *The Sound of Silence*

<https://www.gocomics.com/pearlsbeforeswine/2022/10/30>

Slavery & Underground Railroad

Many Roads to Freedom – includes photos of many of the homes listed as past operators:

<https://www.libraryweb.org/rochimag/roads/underground.htm>

Representation of Christian icons – white-washed.



Representations of Jesus and Mary in Western art typically depict them as fair skinned, straight-haired, blonde, and blue-eyed. There is one important exception – the Black Madonna. Her images can be found in many countries throughout the world. Some are thought to be dark because of aging or the smoke from votive candles. Others were clearly crafted as dark, such as the one at the shrine of Notre Dame de Sous-Terre in the Cathedral at Chartres in France (Our Lady of the Underground).

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Black_Madonna#United_States

Books

Available in hard copy through the Monroe County Library System and electronically via the Libby or Hoopla apps.

Hope in the Dark: Untold Histories, Wild Possibilities, by Rebecca Solnit. Solnit makes a radical case for hope as a commitment to act in a world whose future remains uncertain and unknowable.

The City of Ember, by Jeanne DuPrau

Two hundred years prior, people left the surface of the earth and sought safety in an underground retreat. Now, the great lamps that light the city are going out, one by one. Two children, Lina and Doon, have grown up believing that “above” is a fairy tale, but the discovery of an ancient message leads them to seek a way to lead their people out of the darkness before

the last light goes out.

<https://catalogplus.libraryweb.org/?section=search&term=city%20of%20ember>

The Hidden Life of Trees: What they Feel, How they Communicate – Discoveries from a Secret World, by Peter Wohlleben. Part of the Mysteries of Nature Series.

The Hero's Journey

If you are particularly interested in mythology, you may want to pursue the meaning of the hero's journey. Many different belief systems have incorporated the theme of an underground journey that must be undertaken, at great risk, to reap a reward.

- In the Maya creation story, the Popul Vuh, the “Hero Twins” journey through Xibalba, the realm of the demons, surviving by their wits and excellent ball playing skills, and eventually defeating the Lords of Death.
<https://maya.nmai.si.edu/the-maya/creation-story-maya>
- In Norse mythology, the god Hermod rides nine days and nights through ever-deepening valleys to reach the underworld, which is ruled by the goddess Hel. There, he attempts to bring back his brother, Baldur the Beautiful, who was killed by Loki's treachery.
<https://norse-mythology.org/tales/the-death-of-baldur/>
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jMkz4FLc8hc>
- In the Zulu tradition, the hero Uncama discovers the underworld when he follows a porcupine that has been eating his millet. He goes through many trials before returning to the world above.
- The Ancient Greeks called this type of journey a “katabasis” (from the Ancient Greek words for “down” and “go”). For example, the story of Orpheus and Eurydice:
<https://www.greeka.com/greece-myths/orpheus-eurydice/>
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RhaepLsP5eg>
- The story of Pwyll meeting Arawn underground in Welsh mythology.
<https://druidnetwork.org/what-is-druidry/deity-and-mythology/mythology/welsh-mythology/pwyll-arawn/>
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sKSjRMj0LAW>
- Descent of Inanna (Ishtar): Sumerian mythology.
<http://people.uncw.edu/deagona/myth/Descent%20Of%20Inanna.pdf>



Humor from the UU Hysterical Society

Some responses to the Deep Theological Question of the Month: How many UUs does it take to screw in a lightbulb? <https://www.uuhystericalsociety.com/theology>

Curse you, darkness! — Everett Howe

I had to light a candle to see who was cursing the darkness. -Herb Tyson.

We accept the lightbulb wherever it is in its journey and being screwed in isn't a requirement to being loved here! -Katie Frooman