

**Thought to ponder at the beginning:**

*There are stars whose radiance is visible on earth  
though they have long been extinct.*

*There are people whose brilliance continues to light  
the world even though they are not longer among the living.*

*These lights are particularly bright  
when the night is dark.*

*They light the way for human kind. - Hannah Senesh*

**Reading "Singer's Prayer," Phyllis Capanna**

give me bird song in the morning  
give me silence after snow  
give me strumming in the evening  
the sounds my true heart knows,  
the sounds my true heart knows

give me dancing in the doorway,  
give me singing at the stove,  
give me laughter in the traffic  
give me lightness for the road,  
give me lightness for the road

give me a hammer for the building  
give me an axe for the tearing down  
give me plaster for the mending  
give me a home the world around  
give me a home the world around

**Sermon: Hoping for Light When Darkness Descends**      © Rev. Sylvia A. Stocker

Many years ago, I was enjoying a visit to Star Island, one of the Isles of Shoals off the coast of Portsmouth, NH. As you may know, Star Island is a conference center, jointly owned by the Unitarian Universalist Association and the United Church of Christ. Every summer, many Unitarian Universalists attend conferences and workshops at Star Island to nourish the mind, soul, and spirit – and it was one of those conferences that had brought me there that year.

One clear, dark night, a friend suggested we walk to the uninhabited back of the island so that we could marvel at the magnificent night sky, its moon and stars splayed across the vast heavens.

I love star-gazing. I was born to it, you might say. When I was a tiny child, my family moved into one of those 1950s housing developments that spread like wildfire across the American landscape in the wake of World War II. Once our neighborhood achieved a certain critical mass of people, the town meeting voted on whether or not to install streetlights on our street.

My father attended that meeting – an open town meeting – to voice his views on the topic. I wasn't there, of course, but in my mind's eye I have created a picture of what happened. Here's how I imagine it: My father is recognized to speak, and he rises to his feet. He speaks passionately in opposition to streetlights. I can just see the good people of that town turning in his direction, jaws dropping in astonishment, as he insists that streetlights will interfere with the view of the stars from the neighborhood.

My dad lost that battle. Indeed, the town installed one streetlight right at the end of our driveway. But my father never lost his love of the night sky. I remember him gazing skywards from our driveway, lamenting the interference of ambient light, but pointing out the few stars he could see nonetheless. And I especially remember him drawing our attention to the night sky in uninhabited areas, where, in the pitch-black sky, the stars seemed so close you could just about touch them.

My father instilled an appreciation of the stars and planets in me. And so, when my friend suggested we look at the stars from the darkened side of Star Island, of course I went along.

My friend always carried a flashlight. So I was really surprised when we didn't use it on our journey over the rocks and through the narrow paths bordered by thick, healthy crops of poison ivy.

“What about turning on your flashlight?” I asked.

My friend assured me my eyes would adjust to the darkness. Well, adjustment or not, my discomfort was high as I gingerly picked my way, careful of footing, nervous about where I was stepping and what I was brushing against.

I may love stars and planets, but, in my life, loving darkness has been more of a challenge. I like to know where I am stepping, I like to anticipate my journey, I like to plan, knowing exactly what is ahead. I like to *see!*

For most of my life, I have tended to view darkness as a backdrop against which I can celebrate the pinpricks of light – the dark sky that reveals moon, planets, billions of stars, even comets every so often, or the dark times of trial from which extraordinary people can emerge to set things aright again.

Those kinds of contrasts surely can be inspirational. But for most of my life I have failed to notice and to celebrate the power and healing *darkness itself* brings. As a result, this time of year, as the nights lengthen, my natural inclination has tended to be to resist the darkness and cold – as if my resistance counts for anything! The nights start to expand in length, and I start to pine for the light’s return, hoping for light when darkness descends. It would be easy for me to wish away nearly half the year instead of finding a way to love what is.

“Dark of winter soft and still” – the words to that hymn sound good, but in practice, accepting – much less celebrating – the dark of winter has usually been much harder for me. Even though I recognize the dark soil that nourishes the seed so that it can sprout or the dark womb that shelters the growing child, I tend to turn my head towards the light.

I love the various festivals of light that occur this time of year – Hanukah, Kwanzaa, Yule, Christmas. I love the candlelight; I love the decorative lights. My favorites are trees decorated with colored lights – the brighter the colors, the better. More colors against the night!

Oh, I know it’s not green to love such things. I know that. I know about wasted energy and light pollution.

I also know how our culture creates an oppressive climate when we consistently use darkness as a metaphor for things that are negative, and light as a metaphor for things that are positive. When darkness is always equated with things that are bad, that is, and lightness with things that are good, then how are we to view darker hues of skin color? I understand the damage such metaphors do to all of us, and I work hard to be conscious of the metaphors I carry within and communicate to others.

Even so, something primitive in me wants to push back against winter darkness. Sometime primitive in me yearns for color and light to return.

I know I am not alone. A 3 a.m. trip to the airport a week ago served as a startling reminder of that. As we drove on our route through Freeport, we were astonished by the number and degree of bright lights lining the streets. And I don’t refer only to Bean’s, which, after all, is open all night long. I refer to brashly lighted establishments that had locked their doors hours before. The ubiquitous streetlights added ample resistance to the night sky. But so did the plethora of porch lights and driveway lamps in private homes – brightly glowing, even though the occasion for visitors was long past.

In the heart of winter last year, I was professing my well-rehearsed lament about darkness to a friend of mine. Her response drew me up short.

“I like the dark season,” she said. “I like darkness. It invites me to spend time with myself. I’m always a little sad to see the darkness begin to recede. Darkness invites me into a quiet place,” she said.

A quiet place. In the midst of our confusing, fast-paced, noisy, insistent world – a quiet place.

Imagine.

And we don’t even have to make it happen. It will happen all by itself, with the turning of the earth. All we have to do is notice it and sink into it.

For months now, I have been reflecting on my friend’s comment. I like the idea of a quiet place. I like to think I am invited there. Might that quiet, might that darkness, be its own special gifting in a season that is often too busy, too loud, too bright, too brash?

Susan Chernak McElroy writes about a pet golden-manteled ground squirrel she had when she was a child:

*“She [the squirrel] lived in a large cage on Mom’s Formica kitchen counter. Each day, ‘Goldie’ was let out to scamper behind the canisters, over the faucets, and across the toaster to her alternate, napkin-lined hideaway behind the breadbox... We found her antics ... far more mesmerizing than television, and I have many sweet memories of my family... laughing, and of my father pointing at Goldie and giggling so hard that his whole body wiggled....*

*“Goldie’s first autumn with us arrived, and she celebrated by weaving a huge nest of shredded napkins, tissues, and one dish towel we hadn’t rescued from her small jaws fast enough. The creation was quite a feat of construction, filling up nearly all the space in her cage. Perhaps because I was busy starting school again, I didn’t notice that I rarely saw her after her nest was complete. In fact, the day came when I realized I didn’t see her at all. Worried, I poked my hand into the depths of her nest and was stuck dumb when my fingers closed around what felt like a ball of hard, rubbery clay. From out of the nest, I pulled something that looked like my squirrel but felt all wrong. She was curled up like a pill bug with her tail wrapped up around her nose. There was no rise and fall of her breathing. Her eyes were pressed shut and I could not open them with my trembling fingers, nor could I bend her legs. She lay in the palm of my hand, leadened and paralyzed, and it was my mother who finally told me about hibernation when she found me trying to warm my squirrel over a heating pad under a desk light.  
(Why Buffalo Dance, 167-168).*

Imagine a rest so deep as that. Imagine a place so quiet that one could actually rest. Imagine a night so dark that one could actually dream.

I am coming to understand that light may invite us to see things as they are, uncovered, naked, exposed. But darkness invites us to dream things as they could be – healed, refreshed, renewed, changed, balanced. I am coming to see stars as the reminders of dreams we might have, given ample time to slow our pace, to sink into the dark and quiet, and to rest.

Susan Chernak McElroy notes how the hibernation habits of another squirrel points the way to such dreaming.

*“The arctic ground squirrel sleeps away eight months of the year... and has a hibernating temperature two or three degrees lower than freezing. As the squirrel settles into this deep torpor, its brain waves slowly disappear, as if it were dead. Then, like all mammal hibernators, the arctic squirrel does something remarkable and mysterious. About a month into its torpor, it shivers itself back up to normal body temperature for a day or so. During these ‘warm’ times, the squirrel does not wake up. Rather, its brain waves indicate patterns that are the same as human beings in REM (rapid eye movement) sleep.*

*“The squirrels warm themselves this way about a dozen times during the winter months. The metabolic price tag of this warming is steep: to meet it, they spend more than half the calories they stored over the summer. Why do hibernating animals do this? Why waste 50 percent of life’s energy to dream?”*

(Why Buffalo Dance. 168-169)

Why indeed? Could it be good things come of that dreaming? Could it be life depends on that dreaming? Could it be the darkness serves as incubator for our dreams? Could it be that the dreaming is so important as to require both significant periods of rest and vast expenditures of energy to produce the dreaming?

I ask because our world seems much in need of new dreams these days. As we anticipate a military “surge” in Afghanistan, we are in need of new dreams.

As global warming produces December temperatures in the mid-60s in Brunswick, Maine, we are in need of new dreams.

As the food banks swell in numbers of people needing assistance while the amount of food available diminishes, we are in need of new dreams.

As the cost of health insurance, coupled with the medical bills that insurance does not cover, threaten to drive the middle class asunder, we are in need of new dreams.

As our economy teeters and seizes, as people lose jobs and homes and lives they have carefully built up, we are in need of new dreams.

Instead of filling our days with frenetic activities, impossible schedules, and inhuman expectations, might we use the season of darkness to slow down, to hibernate a bit, and to dream our world anew? Instead of filling our dark season with more lights, louder music, more glare and bustle, might we turn off a few switches, take a few deep breaths, and invite ourselves into a quiet place?

No more do I want to yearn for light when darkness descends. No more do I want to wish for what I don't have, wishing my life away. Instead, I choose to explore the gift darkness holds out to me. I choose to accept, with gratitude, the invitation to quiet. I choose to look to the stars to remind me of the dreaming I need to do. I choose to celebrate what I have – here and now, in this season of incubation and dreams.

One of the reasons I love the poem (and song) “Singer’s Prayer” is that so many of the things the poet asks for are things we already have, if we choose to embrace them:

give me bird song in the morning  
give me silence after snow  
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give me dancing in the doorway,  
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give me an axe for the tearing down  
give me plaster for the mending  
give me a home the world around  
give me a home the world around

I propose adding one more verse, honoring the darkness we already have and need to embrace:

Give me darkness in the winter  
Give me starlight in the night  
Give me wisdom from the resting  
And the dreams to make things right  
And the dreams to make things right.

## Sources

Capanna, Phyllis. "Singer's Prayer." <http://www.macjams.com/song/26020> (Note: This is not just a poem, but a song as well. You can listen to a beautiful recording of the song at this website.)

McElroy, Susan Chernak, 2006. *Why Buffalo Dance: Animal and Wilderness Meditations through the Seasons*. (Novato, California: New World Library.)