

Spirit of Life Celebrating darkness and light

BY THE REV.
DR. KHARMA R. AMOS

Spirit of Life

This is a season when candles are being lit with increased regularity. Many religious communities are kindling lights (i.e. on a wreath for Advent and Christmas, a menorah for Hanukkah, a kinarra for Kwanzaa, a Unitarian Universalist chalice for, well, everything, etc.). Individuals and families are putting lights on their houses or trees and, in traditional New England fashion, placing candles in their windows to welcome holiday guests.

On Dec. 21, we will observe what is perhaps the most terrestrially dramatic of the light-themed holidays: winter solstice. In the Northern Hemisphere, this is the longest night of the year. From our place on Earth, the days have been getting darker earlier and earlier. However, the pendulum between the dark and the light begins to swing again in the other direction on the solstice. In other words, the diminishing light begins to gradually regain its strength as the days lengthen. Since prehistoric times, this season has been marked with rituals and communal celebrations. At their best, these traditions provide beauty and meaning; they invite us to lean into hope and resolve anew to work together in the coming year.

However, a precaution may be in order. Because there is so much focus on light and dark in this season, we would do well to pay attention to how we are using language (now and always). We tend to praise “light” and associate it with things like insight and warmth, while simultaneously vilifying the “dark” as dangerous and cold. This language is powerful and has real-world consequences; it shapes our thoughts and influences our actions on many levels, some of which are subconscious. Several years ago, UU leader Jacqui James observed what many individuals and communities now understand: “Ascribing negative and positive values to black and white [and dark/light] enhances the institutionalization of this culture’s racism.”

For those of us who want to commit ourselves to anti-racist practices as one way to bring a more just and equitable world into being, this time of year presents a great opportunity for depth in our reflections and creativity in our speech. What are we saying or praying for as we kindle our candles? What do these twinkling lights stir



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up in our hearts? Are we celebrating the darkness as well as the light? Perhaps it could be a helpful exercise to name and focus on the quality of the light or dark we want to lift up; it may even enhance our use of these seasonal metaphors/practices in ways that surprise us.

Winter solstice offers an opportunity to think about and praise the nurture of the dark. Darkness provides time for rest, relief from overstimulation, space for introspection, permission to dream, protective cover for new growth, refuge from harsh heat, etc. Darkness also provides the contrast without which light would be meaningless. These same things are true of the spectrum of human colors.

To intentionally celebrate the dark as well as the light does not need to minimize the powerful imagery of the light. We kindle these candles for a reason. In my tradition, we talk about “the light of truth, the warmth of community and the fire of commitment” to work for justice. I surely don’t want us to stop doing that — I’m passionate about all of these things! I do, however, want us to be mindful of the ways in which our language could be reinforcing cultural systems we would rather eschew — particularly, language that equates positive values to whiteness/lightness and negative ones to blackness/darkness. Words matter, and we should use them with care.

This is not about political correctness. This is not about a list of no-no words we can no longer use. This is about a call to awareness of how we are being shaped by language and using language to shape our experiences of this season and life in general. It is a call to balance and intentionality. In this holiday season, may we celebrate the best qualities of darkness and light as well as all of the subtleties in between.

The Rev. Dr. Kharma R. Amos is the minister of the Unitarian Universalist Church of Brunswick, uubrunswick.org.