

December 18, 2016

## **Where The Sky's Light Leads U**

Melissa Spindler-Virgin

Wednesday is the Winter Solstice, the shortest day and the longest night of the year. The good news in this is that the days will begin to grow longer, the long dark nights will slowly begin to recede and sundown will come a moment later in the day. While science and clocks tell us this is true, it is also accurate that we face many weeks (months?) of cold and snow and freezing rain and black ice and not wanting to leave the house, not even wanting to stick a foot out from under the warm morning bed covers.

This month, as I researched Christmas traditions around the world, I learned that almost all cultures and religions have reasons to celebrate and exchange gifts with loved ones at the start of these most wintry months. At least in lands not too close to the equator, these rituals allowed the traditional gifts of newly knitted mittens or long-underwear to replace what had finally worn out in last year's cold season. These traditions asked us to make sure we helped keep our loved ones warm in the snowstorms to come.

But many of these different holidays and celebrations around the world focus on the giving of games and activities to fill the extra inside-hours. This seems logical – if you (alone or with your family) are bound to be stuck inside more than usual, the weather too icky to trek through, a new board game, book, or puzzle might be the thing that keeps the stir-crazy at bay long enough to make it through the evening and into bed without mutiny erupting.

These traditions, these holidays, are meant to provide us with the tools we will need to stay connected to the joy and love that might be a little more difficult to grasp during these dark, cold months ahead. *When* the snowy, slippery sidewalks have us trapped inside... *when* the temperature drops and leaves us huddled around the heater in so many layers we look like a walking marshmallow... *when* losses of jobs or loved ones or health fill our hearts with a heavy, dark grief... Let us think of our shepherd, Amos. The message of the celestial voices are different for each of us.

You see... just as there are many millions of stars in the sky, there are many millions of items or activities that might be identified as the joy that rings out through the dark, cold night. So many different places or people, foods or activities, music or movies, or furry friends that could bring a smile to our face when things are hard, when darkness abounds. But each of us has our own unique answer to the question of what brings us most joy. Some of us are white light people... some of us are colored light people...

You should have in your hands a sparkling star – a star decorated for you by our amazing youth group, and offered to you by one of our blessed, delightful children. I invite you now to think of the unique and special thing that brings joy to your heart when the world around you is a bit dark and cold. Write in big bright letters one thing/person/memory/whatever that you are grateful for because it speaks to your heart and fills it with joy. There are little pencils in the clear envelope in your pew.

When do you feel the sparkle of joy?

Is it the hush of snow falling that speaks in a whisper to your heart? Is it singing along to musicals with your children in the privacy of a long car ride that shouts joy into your heart? Is it a new puppy your parents brought home that is cutting through the loss of your beloved passed dog that shines brightly in your heart these days?

I invite you to fill in this star. Write clearly. Write boldly! If you wish, you will be invited to offer up this star to our children during the closing hymn, to be added to a mural of gratitude that will remind each of us of the countless joys that keep us going through these next few cold, snowy, dark months ahead.

This spiritual practice we have just done together, this act of giving thanks, this practice of gratitude can be life-changing. When we force our brains to direct our thoughts and energy towards memories and thoughts about things that bring us joy, we strengthen the neural pathways to those joys. We train our brain to go to those thoughts more quickly, more easily.

And in typical Unitarian style – it requires no particular belief system or creed. Practicing gratitude can be done by all people in all lands, and allows for more diversity than there are stars in the sky. It is a Universal human experience to look up to the sky and see not just one bright sun or moon

filling the air – but when things are darkest, it is the millions of tiny sparkling stars that smile back at us.

For some of us, naming a joy may not be an easy task at this particular point in time. For any number of reasons – holiday obligations that are more stress than not... the loss of a beloved relationship or a threatening illness that hangs heavy everywhere we look... feelings of failure or grief or apprehension can fill the air with a muckiness that aches – for any number of reasons it can feel impossible to see the stars through the overcast night. If you'd like, tuck the star in your pocket to try again tomorrow, and in the meantime: there are now pink prayer cards in the clear envelope in your pews that can be filled out and dropped in the offering plate, handed to the children with the stars being collected, or placed in the pastoral concerns box outside the parlor. Your ministers and the congregation surrounding you can and will point the light of their love to shine through to you.

Gratitude, like glitter, will – ever so slowly – spread out into every corner of your life if you let it. As we tune our hearts to sing our loudest praise, our hearts open more and more to the fount of love in the world. Pointing our attention to that which brings our souls the deepest and truest pleasure, we can find ourselves at home in that place of joy.

At the end of your order of worship is an invitation – stars of gratitude for you to take home with you, to fill out in the coming cold and dark days. Fill each star with something that brings you joy. Things you are grateful for, things you are grateful exist for others... memories from the past, held up in a momento... possibilities for the future...

When you've filled those stars, look out into the darkness of night and name these stars with your gratitude. As we wait for the days to get longer, for the sun to return and warm the earth – let us fill the waiting with our gratitude. Let us fill the dark skies with the sparkling, glittery light of our joy!

May it be so. Amen.