

“Winter Meditations”

Rev. Annie Holmes

What is the reason for the season? There are many reasons to this season, and one of them could be CHOICE. It took me years and years to realize this time of year does not HAVE to be hectic or frantic or even busy. Have you ever thought about all the time you may save by not reproducing a Dickens Christmas every year? Ever think of what life would be like without the kind of holiday we presume we must bring about each year? What if the shift, the stress, the emphasis was different? What if Christmas dinner was only popcorn and oranges? What if there were no presents except ones you made by hand? What if you found you had lots of extra time during this time of year, not less time? What would you do with the extra time? What if we truly utilized our freedom of choice? What would or could happen?

A friend of mine relates how the season changed for himself and his family by simply changing the focus of the celebration and beginning to make wise choices. In his family of origin, as he was a young boy growing up, Christmas was an extremely stressful time. His parents owned a restaurant and they and his sisters and brothers would spend months before Christmas, not only preparing the hundreds of different treats the restaurant offered only at Christmas, but also testing different recipes, trying to find the best one so they could be part of “The Competition.” This was a family tradition that had grown fierce over the years and it involved their private Christmas dinner feast.

He explains the tradition started out pretty innocently, as a friendly competition between siblings and parents, but as my friend became a teenager, things got ugly. There would be sabotage as certain family members would spy and try to find out what the others were preparing. As each was assigned a different part of the meal at Thanksgiving, there was prodding and teasing and often tears and downright anger when the secret was found out or someone succeeded in thwarting another family members plan. He remembers spending most of his savings one year on baked Alaska with rum and moose filling and it fell before he could serve it, Christmas dinner was awful. Everyone was glad when it was over and someone was proclaimed a winner by his Dad and they could finally think about

something else. The strangest thing my friend pointed out is that no one said, "Let's not do this next year."

When my friend married, he decided that he would not allow that competition in his new family as part of the Holiday time. Because he had grown up in a family where food preparation was done well, and often the basis of the celebration, he didn't want to lose that emphasis, but definitely did not want the competition. So, he and his wife every year decided on the cuisine of a different country, and they would then together with their children research the customs and recipes and as a family make the special meal come alive. The season for my friend and his new growing family became calm and fun as the family would research and share the making of the communal meal, not the competitive meal. That's utilizing the real freedom of choice.

One reason for the season is choice!! I had one of the best Christmas's I ever had the year I decided to go to a cabin in Northern Wisconsin. There were bunk beds, a cement floor, one picnic table in the middle of the room and over in one corner was a wood burning stove. I brought my dog and the food I love most. I packed a very large Michener novel, crafts, my guitar and warm clothes and boots. There I was alone on Lake Michigan, over Christmas day. I walked and talked to trees, I laid in the cold snow late at night and watched shooting stars, I journaled and read and took stock of my life. No electricity, no running water, an outside toilet, a picnic table, a bunk bed and a wood burning stove. It was by far the best Christmas I ever had.

Why? Because I chose what it was I wanted to do. I chose to put my time and energy into my life, not the demands of a crazy tradition. Making healthy choices often has to do with having the knowledge in order to make those choices. Do you realize that what we celebrate as Christmas is a Victorian fabrication? Queen Victoria loved parties. The Puritans and their government had just been put out of power in England, and with them went their message that said, "Christmas was frivolous and evil." It was a new day. Victoria's many children then married into many of the courts of Europe and they brought their Mother's brand of celebration all over the known world. Plum pudding, a tree, lots of presents, a feast fit for royalty was the way to celebrate.

The Industrial Revolution fabricated the rest of the season we find ourselves enmeshed in now, in order to make a buck. Because Christmas was very

much back in style and the English palace was anxious to bring Christmas back to the people, but there was also an underlying economic reason. Having Christmas cards and games and tree ornaments and all sorts of gifts for the first time ever in human history being mass produced, people could do something they never could have done at any other time in history; they could purchase their holiday already created and exactly like everyone else's Christmas looked like. People no longer had to create their own celebrations by hand. Everyone's Christmas could look the same and sold identically to everyone who could afford it. And what of those who couldn't? Oh, well...

Sometimes I find myself walking through the Malls and with Scrooge I say "Humbug!" I'm not against the love and the giving and the miracles that seem to happen at this time of year more than at any other, but it is the demands, the pressures, the rivalry, that all the obligations that we allow to be put upon us that I find every year more and more disturbing. The stresses make me feel like we are missing something here. A time like this should not be something that is mass produced, it should be personal and individually tailored.

This time of year was not always like this. In the beginning, this time of year was all about light and darkness. It was about how to preserve oneself through the dark, lonely and harshness of winter. The earliest peoples and the most ancient history tell us that this was the time of Saturnalia, or the celebration in honor of the gods of seeds and sowing. It was the birthday of the unconquered god, which was the sun itself. These early people kept reminding themselves that, yes, indeed even through the long, cold darkness, the sun would not be defeated, it would return. They built huge bonfires to drive away the fears of the darkness. A Yule log was taken into the house with singing and dancing. Lit with a brand from last year's log, the log symbolized light over darkness and was kept burning throughout the Solstice season.

The great symbols of light and darkness, and good and evil, life and death, survival and extinction were the reasons for the season so long ago. How far we have come with the plastic, commercial antiseptic way we have now of dealing with the darkness and winter.

This is not a happy time of year for many people. Besides the stresses of the season, the family pressures to be like a Norman Rockwell painting and decorate like Martha Stewart, it is also a hard time of year because of the weather. Many of us fight the winter blues. Depression during the winter

months, for many people revolve around conditions called seasonal affective disorder and carbohydrate-craving obesity. These are very real disorders with which many people suffer until the coming of the light again in Spring. Light is very important to each of us. For people who suffer from seasonal affective disorder, one cure is to sit in front of greenhouse grow lights for hours during the day.

From November on, many of us panic inwardly as it grows darker and darker each day. And because of our work schedules we often awake to darkness, we work hours and hours indoors, often without windows, and we come home to a dark house. We know the darkness is coming, it does every year. And every year we feel in the pit of our stomachs something, something deep and ancient, something animal that scares us. It is my opinion that each year a great gift slips through our fingertips if we do not allow the power of the darkness to teach us its great lessons.

What could the winter and darkness possibly teach us? The Chinese tell us it is only in the Mu, the void, the darkness that we will find wisdom or the meaning of life. The Native Americans, from all tribes and all times, have gone deep into caves and deep into forests to vision quest for meaning and wisdom. The Buddhist close their eyes and allow their minds to quiet to hear other voices than those of humans, other wisdom and meanings than what is said on the surface. Many peoples from the world over, take their drums in hand and allow the rhythm to lead them to new vistas of what, wisdom and meaning in life. The darkness takes courage, the darkness takes time, living in the darkness brings a different state of mind.

The quiet darkness consumes our world, soon it will be the darkest and the deepest night of the starwheel. The night hangs over us like death, but we remind ourselves and those we love, that it is here for a purpose, that is true, and it will not last. Icy coldness sweeps over the land. Greens have turned to orange and oranges have turned to yellow and yellows have faded with the waning season to brown. It is the time of sleep and stillness and rest, for the earth, for animals, for plants, why not for humans too?

From the north, icy fingers blow, piercing the spirit, separating the warmth from the fire. Frozen and still, the waters become quiet. The bear, the spider, the snake, the fox, all quiet down and sleep. If all of nature, at least in our hemisphere, is quieting down, sleeping, why are we insanelly on the run? Now is the time to journey deeply and come face to face with the simple, but often hidden mystery that is you. A mystery that is deeper and more

grounded than the credit card overages and the weight gain and the long lines on Dec. 26th to return gifts that were not appreciated. Rather, let this be a season when holiness is heard, and the splendor of living is revealed. Stunned to stillness by beauty, we remember who we are and why we are here on this earth. There are inexplicable mysteries to contemplate in this time of stillness and sleep. We remember in this time of winter darkness, that as the moon glows and the stars shine that we are not alone in the universe.

Rebecca Parker prays this prayer this time of year...

“Perhaps for a moment the teletypes will stop clicking, the wheels stop rolling, the computers desist from computing, and a hush falls over your house, your heart, your city.

For an instant, in the stillness, the chiming of celestial spheres will be heard as earth hangs poised in the crystalline darkness and then gracefully~tilts.

Let there a season when holiness is heard, and the splendor of living revealed.

Stunned to stillness by beauty we remember who we are and why we are here.

There are inexplicable mysteries. We are not alone.

In the universe there moves a Wild One whose gestures alter earth’s axis toward love. In the immense darkness everything spins with joy.

The cosmos enfolds us. We are caught in a web of stars, cradled in a swaying embrace, rocked by the holy night, babies of the universe. Let this be the time we wake to life, like spring wakes, in the moment of winter solstice.”

While I was doing my Clinical work for my seminary training I spent the Holidays that year with a woman who was dying of cancer and in a coma. At first I thought the nurses were just being mean sending me to visit a patient who was in a coma, and I was angry. But this woman had no family who came to visit her, the Doctors and nurses would quickly do what they had to do to keep her alive and in haste leave her room. There were not many other people on that floor for me to visit, so as time went on I found

myself gravitating to Lorraine's room more and more. As the light of the shorter days would set quickly, and the utter darkness of the blanket of night would fall over my tiny world, I began to look forward to the evenings when I could simply do nothing and sit in the darkness with Lorraine and hold her hand, or hum to her as I rubbed her arm or shoulders. I realized the doctors and nurses did not have time or take time to do anything with her but what had to be done. But I had time and as I visited there, more and more I was learning the graciousness, the poise, the wisdom and beauty of simply sitting there alone with Lorraine in the darkness. There were no Holiday songs, so blinking lights, no trees, no presents, just the quietness of the present moment.

One evening as I was making my way down to her room, I saw a whole group of doctors and nurses around her door. It seems that day she had come out of her coma! It was a miracle they were saying. After they all had left, Lorraine and I were finally alone, and I felt strangely out of place with her awake. For so many weeks I had had to be alone in the darkness and the silence. It was such a healing time and I learned so much from those time. I learned things like patience, inner strength and composure. Now my task was to take what I had learned and apply it to the rest of my life.

It seems the nurses had told her that I had visited her over the last couple of weeks every day. She thanked me for being there and amazingly she told me, she knew I was there all those days. Even in the coma she heard someone humming and felt someone holding her hand. I often think of Lorraine as the Holiday time comes around. She had given me a great gift in the time I spent with her. Taking the time to be with her in the space where she was, was the gift she gave me. She taught me the power and the preciousness of the simple act of taking someone's hand, sitting in the quiet, accepting people as they are and may need to be. None of these gifts comes quickly. As slowly as the evening takes to become night, relationships with ourselves or others takes time, patience and calmness.

Let your house be dark for awhile this Holiday season. Sit in the quiet softness of the early evening and think on nothing for as long as you can. Count your out-breaths, take a fearless inventory of your life and your loves, your struggles, your goals, the people who will surround you in the Holiday season. Hibernate in the peace and calm of the night, knowing there are answers for all you seek, guidance for your questions, solutions to life's mysteries.

But all of this is not found in the loud blaring of “Grandma got run over by a Reindeer” in the Mall, or the frantic and agitated pace we take, almost like deer caught in the headlights of an oncoming car, our lives run us over and we wonder why we hurt so badly inside. Rather, try singing a soft song of your life to the night, as the ancient peoples did,

“Night, you surround us. You are the mother of us all. You existed before all. You are the background, the fabric, the whole underpinning of the Universe. You are an inconceivable fertility, a wild and uncontrollable realm from which strangeness and power and creativity and mutation of life spring. The miracle of birth comes from you. And the finality of death also springs from you. That is why, mother night, you both comfort and frighten us. Night, you are mystery and power and ruler of all time.”

As we enter into this time of the longest night, let this be the time we wake to life, like spring awakens, in this moment of winter. My Holiday gift to each of you is probably the most unique gift you will ever receive. It's not from Borders, or Macy's or even K-Mart. Instead it is wrapped in the stars, it's from the wisdom of the ancients, and unfortunately they have no email address so you must access it the old way, by giving in to the darkness and the secret insight of the night of winter.

This is a gift that looks a lot like you, as you look into the mirror of your soul, and that mirror has so much to teach you, like vulnerability, self-knowledge and the real power of darkness. This just could be the season of the beginning of your mythic journey. And, as the angels said to the shepherds as they were told to go to the city and witness this great thing, I also say to you “Be Not Afraid” be of good cheer, for unto you this night is born a saving event of monumental proportions, it is the dark night of winter and all her secrets and gifts waiting for you.

Now you too have choices. You too can sink into the gift of the night given each 24 hours and sit and reflect and dream, and vision and meditate. Choices, choices. In the midst of cookies, wrapping presents, nippy noses, depression and flu, find a place for the power of the darkness in your life. And with the morning you will smile with new knowing.