

The Riddle of the Summer Solstice

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Words for Reflection

“Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey” (excerpt)
William Wordsworth (1770 – 1850)

For I have learned
To look on nature, not as in the hour
Of thoughtless youth; but hearing oftentimes
The still, sad music of humanity,
Nor harsh, nor grating, though of ample power
To chasten and subdue. And I have felt
A presence that disturbs me with the joy
Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime
Of something far more deeply interfused,
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
And the round ocean and the living air,
And the blue sky, and in the human mind;
A motion and a spirit, that impels
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,
And rolls through all things. Therefore am I still
A lover of the meadows and the woods,
And mountains; and of all that we behold
From this green earth; of all the mighty world
Of eye, and ear, - both what they half create,
And what we perceive; well pleased to recognize
In nature and the language of the sense,
The anchor of my purest thoughts, the nurse,
The guide, the guardian of my heart, and soul

Of all my moral being.

The Sermon

Well! Here we are, on the actual day of the summer solstice. The solstice can be on any of three days: June 20, June 21, and June 22. This year it's on the 21st. The reason for the different dates is that our calendar doesn't exactly reflect the earth's rotation, and thus the precise day and time shifts slightly each year, as the sun reaches its greatest height in the sky for the

Northern Hemisphere. This year the solstice will occur at 12:38 P.M. (mentalfloss.com) – so try to keep an eye on the time, so that we can all celebrate at the precise moment during the coffee hour, on this penultimate Sunday of our 2014-2015 program year.

The summer solstice in our culture, of course, doesn't seem to have the same kind of significance as the winter solstice does, in December, when people are fluttering around preparing for the "Holidays," and there are candles – both electric and wax – virtually everywhere, as the darkest day of the year is acknowledged and celebrated. There are a number of people around the world, however, people who've not forgotten the rituals and observations that Druids and other such ancient religious communities are known to have practiced, and these people are happy to point out (to a rather quotidian population) that they're missing some of the rather wonderful rituals that bind human beings to the "nature" of which we're all a part, and yet so many people don't seem to appreciate.

Although I don't have statistics on this kind of thing, I'm pretty sure that a good number of Unitarian Universalists churches and fellowships are celebrating the solstice today during their worship services, particularly in cities such as New York, San Francisco, Chicago, and other such places around the country. I wouldn't be surprised, for example, if members of the Fourth Universalist Society on Central Park West would be across the street in Central Park, at or near the memorial to John Lennon. Neither would I be surprised to find a solstice gathering a little farther uptown on Amsterdam Avenue, at the Episcopal Cathedral of St. John the Divine, a spiritual mecca that draws many, many people of various faiths (or no faith) into its welcoming arms.

It happens that I've never really been to such communal solstice services, neither winter nor summer, but I think it's all just fine, and maybe someday I'll stop by and see what it's all about – but that's a very weak "maybe," and it'll probably never happen.

Until then, we of the Kearsarge Unitarian Universalist Fellowship will probably be just carrying on in our own low-key way, as we navigate through the program year. The summer solstice of 2015 that we observe today just happens to be on a Sunday, but even if it weren't, it would still be a day that we'd celebrate as the longest day of the year.

As Leo Tolstoy put it: "Now it is summer, and as usual, life fills me with transport and I forget to work. This year I have struggled for a long time, but the beauty of the world has conquered me."

Or as F. Scott Fitzgerald wrote, in his "The Crack-up": "Is there anything more soothing than the quiet whir of a lawnmower on a summer afternoon?"

And, of course, there's Gershwin, in his "Porgy and Bess" :

Summertime
And the livin' is easy
Fish are jumpin'
And the cotton is high

Oh, your daddy's rich
And your mamma's good lookin'
So hush little baby
Don't you cry

Each of us, of course, knows better than to take such a thoroughly romantic position regarding summer. Listen to Sir Walter Scott: "Here is another dreadful warm day, fit for nobody but the flies. And then one is confined to town."

And then there are the local sayings here in northern New England, such as, "We have two seasons: winter and the Fourth of July." Another one, from Vermont, puts it: "Vermont has nine months of winter and three months of damn poor sledding."

When people in our part of the country observe the summer solstice we're happy to know that we're genuinely into the official summer season, which means that we have what's left of June, all of July and August, and around half of September, to spend outdoors in the leafy greenness. But there's another side of this whole business that comes along at about the half time of the season, when we take notice that a little past "suddenly," the days are getting shorter and shorter.

When I was a child and adolescent I spent my summers mostly in swimming pools. I was an age-group competitive swimmer, and later a Water Safety Instructor and Life Guard. The swim club where I spent the majority of the time closed at 9:00 P.M., and as the darker evenings of August, we turn on the underwater lights of the pool. There was something very magic and sparkly about swimming in that cheerful, blue light, with the crickets and tree frogs chirping away as if they were there as a magical soundtrack, making us conscious of the beauty of the evening, but also of the melancholic harbingers of autumn's coming before we'd know it.

I've called this sermon "The Riddle of the Summer Solstice." A riddle is a statement or question or phrase typically having a double or veiled meaning. It's put forth as a puzzle to be solved. Many of us will recall a riddle that goes like this: "What is black and white and read all over?" The Answer: "A Newspaper." This kind of riddle is a kind of conundrum, the effects of which relies on using a pun in either the question or the answer.

A conundrum, though, can also refer to a dilemma. For this morning's conversation, I've chosen to use this word in that second sense: While we're acknowledging the summer solstice, we're in a bit of a dilemma due to the circumstance of happiness of being in the summer season, the summer solstice, with its darkening days, reminds us that the winter solstice is a mere six months away. It all happens so fast. For those who love the winter enough (especially skiers) this may not be a problem. But for many of us it can be problematic.

My experience over the decades that I've dealt with this has been that, in the big picture, I'm at a place where I really don't much care. It's all good. And furthermore, I think that most of us are genuinely pleased with this whole business of Mother Nature and her seasonal changes. Knowing that it happens every year is actually very comforting when we think about it. The sun

does its thing, the planets do their thing, the moons spinning around the planets do theirs. And we adapt.

The coming and going and coming again has a rhythm that fits us human being quite nicely. We know what to expect, and how to deal with it; and for most of us, it works pretty well. Religions from the earliest human communities on earth have been based generally on the progression of the seasons. Stories of creation of the world, of birth, and of death – all of these come from observation of the “natural” world. In our own Judeo-Christian tradition – from which the Unitarians and the Universalists emerged – the stories that informed the people were of seasonal changes and the agrarian culture that brought about civilization as we know it.

Unlike most species, of course, human beings don't just observe their surroundings, but think about them. We are the species that knows that we are mortal, that once we were not, and that sometime in the future, we shall be not, again. We speak of the “seasons of our lives,” and of how life can fit into a pattern that replicates other forms of living beings, and of the planet itself. It's this kind of thinking that allows us to look back at our pasts and forward to the future, while balancing ourselves on the slippery edge of the present.

Our knowledge of being on this slippery edge of life causes us to stop and think; to call upon the strength our faith can bring to us, through our congregation, our Association, our caring for one another. And as we find ourselves slipping into the summer that begins this very day, we look forward to what's ahead in these heady, beautiful months in the place in which we live, and where we respond to the peace of summer that bids us welcome. Summer is a time to refresh, to catch up, to plan, to give thanks, and to relax and enjoy it all.

See you next week!