

Skipping The Light Fantastic: Celebrating Summer Solstice in a Modern World

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The first time I recall celebrating the longest day of summer was at a race in Brookings, South Dakota. This race, held at that time on June 21, was appropriately called the Longest Day Marathon. The event began at 8:00 p.m. and, although most racers might consider this a late start for a marathon and a half marathon, summer days in the Northern Plains provide ample light for evening races; the sky doesn't completely darken until about 10:30 p.m.

I was running the half marathon, and, as a slower contestant, soon found myself completely alone on a rural road. The road meandered west and the sun was low enough in the sky to nearly blind me. I stopped at the crest of a hill to catch my bearings and put on my sun glasses. I paused to notice my surroundings and the sensory experience was enchanting. I heard meadowlarks whistling, saw cattle grazing, and the June flowers of the Northern Plains blooming: black-eyed susans, cone flowers and the new interlopers – bachelor's buttons. I literally skipped down the hill to the intersection where I'd turn left to go into town and finish the race. The evening, the flowers, the birds, and the grass all provided that skipping-the-light-fantastic experience. I was grateful to be alive.

Summer solstice is the longest day of the year, which is logically followed by the shortest night of the year. It is the time of year when the sun reaches its climax and inevitably begins to make its journey back to longer nights and shorter days.

It is hard to think of this day as the beginning of the decline of the sun, since it is at this time of the year when we definitely feel the sun's strength and power and hopefully we continue to feel it for a few months more. We inevitably realize, however, that these days will not last forever. This transition to shorter days begs for notice and celebration.

So what happened to the celebrations surrounding the cycles of the sun, specifically the solstice festivals? Despite the fact that in ancient times summer solstice festivities were more popular and even more flamboyant than winter solstice festivities, Midsummer Day – as the day is also known – has become the forgotten and neglected festival. From my point of view, it is also the only pagan holiday that early Christianity was not really successful in usurping. The now defunct St. John the Baptist Day is on June 24. This forgotten Christian holiday was designed to work like the Christian Christmas celebration: which is, to gradually move early day Celtic pagans away from the Summer Solstice Celebration to a more Christian practice.

So, why ought we to care about a pagan celebration of the sun's zenith? To me, the ancient celebrations of the Summer Solstice tie in quite well with our first UU principle, which is this: *the* direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces which create and uphold life.

There's no denying that our sun is directly connected to all life on earth and that this connection holds mystery and wonder. Rise early in the morning and watch its daily

climb over the eastern horizon to its daily zenith. Its heat and warmth give us the bounty that the ancients cherished every Summer Solstice. The Celts and other peoples weren't the only ancients who saw the sun as vital to their beliefs. In the first sacred books of Hinduism, the Rig-Veda, written more than 3,000 years ago, the Divine itself was created by heat:

In the beginning was darkness swathed in darkness;
All this was unmanifested water.
Whatever was the One, coming into being.
Hidden by the Void,
Was generated by the power of Heat.

Echoing the Rig-Veda, the Judeo-Christian bible cries, "Let there be light" and the world begins. And, to this day we recognize the power of sunlight in our world and its connection to the bounty that sustains us.

The mystical celebrations behind the Summer Solstice might even be good for the mind. Carol Pearson, in her book, *Awakening the Heroes Within*, claims that ancient mysteries of the old religions can be sources of psychological truth. Pearson writes this:

"Essential to all mystery religions is an assumed parallel between the cycles of nature and of spiritual and psychological life. That is, individual and family life, the processes of nature, and the reality of the divine all were seen to mirror one another, and all were seen as part of an ongoing process that was beautiful...Such patterns of death and rebirth not only parallel seasonal changes, they also mirror the psychological pattern of renewal, as we die to what we were, we can then give birth to what we could be."

Maybe Unitarian Universalism's first principle recognizes, in a subtle way, that openness to the mystery and wonder of other cultures IS good for the brain.

While the mystical side of me loves the magic of Solstice, there is a rational, scientific side. I find that my great affection for the Summer Solstice is also tightly connected to the world of science, for ultimately the summer solstice **is** a creature of the scientific and rational world. Like gravity, it is a fact that all of us may observe; none of us has ever floated into space when we jumped into the air. Although...how many of us as kids tried to defy gravity by trying to fly? A show of hands?

To me gravity has an easily understood rational and scientific side; the rest of the natural world can be directly experienced as a place of transcending mystery and wonder even as we know the science behind our earthly world. Look into the night sky when the sun sets; the fact that the moon comes up every night and that the North Star anchors our sense of direction still fills me with a sense of wonder. Smell flowers on a June day; for me, the fragrance of roses and lavender surpass the Dillard's cosmetics counter any day.

I struggled to separate the magical side of Sun Celebrations from the rational science side, but as a rational, scientific sort, I don't want to skip into gratefulness too easily – without looking at the scientific side a bit more. This summer sun that dances down on us has become warmer of late. Many of us have read the reports and seen Al Gore's movie, *An Inconvenient Truth*. So it shouldn't surprise you to hear me repeat what the experts say: that our thinning ozone layer and polluted atmosphere act as a great

conductor of the earth's warmth. Such a great conductor, in fact that the National Center for Atmospheric Research reports that in Cincinnati global warming would increase by 90 percent (from 14 to 26) the number of days when ozone levels exceed the health-based air quality standard set by the EPA.

For example, Last year the Asthma and Allergy Foundation named Cincinnati as the twelfth worst place to live for sufferers of asthma – out of 100 other communities...you're right in assuming that only 11 other places beat us out as being worse places to live.

So, here we are in a community with air that acts as a super conductor of sunlight and ozone goo– the very light that sustains us bounces off the concrete buildings of our inner city, heating the air up to 10 degrees warmer than surrounding rural areas. The emissions from the thousands of cars on our area freeways only add to the soupy mix...the light rail plan for this area appears stalled. And, in my Kentucky county of residence – Campbell County – I have my own personal ecological crisis: there are no bicycling lanes on major north-south roads and I'd like to safely ride my bike to work, so that I can do something tiny to be kind to the sun and the fragile atmosphere it heats.

I have ridden my bike to work before and boldly used the streets – obeying all traffic signs – and have been honked at by irritated motorists. There are additional complications in my desire to cycle to work: I don't have a bike rack by my office at the university where I work. Getting one placed by my building has become a major headache: no one knows where the old bike rack went and no one wants to replace it...yet, my university is spending millions on a new arena and a new student center. Go figure. This is what this all means for me: I feel like a small cog in the cosmic scheme of things, unable to really change small, but important things. It's frustrating.

In some ways, it also feels like a collision of science and magic: Not respecting the science behind global warming directly impacts how we feel about the sun's magic.

From a broader, bigger perspective, consider this story: This past January, I went to the North Woods of Minnesota with Mimi Gingold and several other wonderful women from First Church. While there, I had the pleasure of having coffee with Will Steger – who walked into the local coffee shop where Mimi and I were drinking our coffee. Will Steger has been one of my favorite arctic explorers and heroes. His early expedition to the North Pole was a big feature in *National Geographic* many years ago. Steger and colleagues are currently completing a mega-journey through the Canadian Arctic's Baffin Islands. Steger told me; over coffee – when we met in January – that the subtle shifting of the earth's temperatures has drastically affected the economy of the Inuit of this northern region. Steger told me that the retreating ice has created such economic hardship for the Baffin Island Inuit that without air travel and regular shipments of food and supplies, they'd starve.

The Canadian Arctic's Baffin Islands are a long ways from Cincinnati. But, our 7th principle cries for respect for the interconnected web of which we are a part. To me this means that we ought to care about a group of people in the Canadian far north and the effect that a changing sun and changing atmosphere have on them.

The bottom line: What's a wannabe environmentalist to do?

First, what about celebrating the earth for one more day each year? We have Earth Day on April 22. But, frankly, I think we need to add another day to the calendar. Why not? Christians have several days to celebrate the life and times of their key

prophet/savior, Jesus. Shouldn't we create another day to remember the place we call home?

Secondly, advocacy is everything. I'm a newcomer to this UU community, but it seems to me that we are a mouse with a big roar. What other group in town can get the things done that we can? Look at what we do: our participation in the IHN, Refugee assistance, Simplicity group, and participation in the neighborhood's Peaceful demonstrations to mourn the effects of gun violence...these are just a handful of the things we do that make a difference. We CAN have an impact on our community as it sets policies for environmental issues.

Let's imagine Summer Solstice as an ultimate time of renewal – a time to let the light of summer in each of us connect with family and friends around us. We can also use that internal light as a call to action.

I'm closing with these words from a Celtic devotional that – for me – seems to transcend both the light within and the light without. I offer them as my way to skip the light fantastic and celebrate our sun:

Glory of the Day-star, hail!
Lifter of the Light, Burnisher of the Sky.
Gifts of love to Earth are bringing,
Summer's shimmer, dew's delight.
Dancing be the heart within us,
Open be our souls to bliss,
Courage vanquish every shadow,
Greet midsummer with a kiss.

Slainte.