

**“WINTER SOLSTICE MESSAGE”**

**By the Rev. Roger Bertschausen and Ann Barker, M.A.R., D.R.E.**

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**December 17-18, 2005**

Call to Gather

Reading # 446: “To the Four Directions” by Joan Goodwin<sup>1</sup>

Reading

“Winter Solstice” by Rebecca Parker

Perhaps  
for a moment...  
the wheels stop rolling,  
the computers desist from computing,  
and a hush will fall over the 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  
tilts.  
Let there 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.  
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,  
babes of the universe.  
Let this be the time  
we wake to life,

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<sup>1</sup> Reading #446 in *Singing the Living Tradition* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993).

like spring wakes in the moment  
of winter solstice.<sup>2</sup>

### Message

**Ann:** As I read Rebecca Parker's solstice prayer poem, I was strongly drawn to one image among the many powerful and meaningful word pictures she creates in this poem. I focused on the image of the Wild One who moves in the universe. The Wild One might have many other names such as Spirit of Life, universal life force energy, the Crone Goddess, or God. Some of you might see the Wild One as the Creator of the universe, or the primordial powers of nature. Within the context of this poem, many interpretations are possible.

What is compelling to me about this image is that it seems to run counter to most of the images we have during this season. Remember the Christmas Pageant of last week, with the tender image of Imogene Herdman stunned into silent tears by the story of Mary, Joseph, and their infant son. Think about the plethora of Santa's and merry elves in our secular culture. Santa is round and jolly, with rosy cheeks and flowing white beard. Slipping down the chimney he brings presents and eats cookies with milk. No Wild One there.

December 25<sup>th</sup> will be the start of the eight nights of Hanukkah, when Jews all over the world remember the great miracle that happened in Jerusalem. Following the retaking of their most sacred sight, oil for the sanctuary light, sufficient for only one day, burned for eight. This was a sure sign of God's presence and care.

Solstice, which we celebrate this evening (morning), is the ancient celebration of the darkest night that heralds the returning of the sun in the Northern Hemisphere. The children heard about the various rituals and festivities people have created to mark this natural phenomenon. This sacred time has deep spiritual meaning for many cultures. We are drawn to think of the darkness, the silence of the world blanketed in snow, the need to turn inward and to look homeward. We long to gather around the fireplace, drink hot chocolate, and snuggle up to children and tell stories. Many of us wish to pull the covers over our heads and hibernate for a time, replenishing ourselves in the dark stillness.

So why, I asked myself, does Rebecca use such a surprising phrase in her solstice poem. She speaks of a Wild One who "alters the earth's axis toward love." There's the wildness. The Wild One comes in this time of darkness not to alter the axis of the physical earth. That is a natural process understood by science. The axis the Wild One comes to alter, amidst the stillness, joy, and darkness of this solstice time is the human axis. The Wild One comes to orient our hearts, our minds, and our very souls away from self-focus, away from self-centered intention, toward radical love.

The Wild One calls us to perform the rituals that give meaning to our lives. The Wild One calls us to gather as community for mutual support and comfort. The Wild One invites us to turn the tables so that the wealthy and honored serve the needy and forgotten among us. The Wild One encourages us to send out scouts to look for the places where light is just a flickering ember. We are called to encourage that small spark of love, peace, and justice to become a blazing fire that enlightens the whole earth.

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<sup>2</sup> Rebecca Parker, included in a newsletter column by the Rev. Sarah K. Moldenhauer-Salazar, "Sea Light," vol. 5(2), December 2005, p. 2.

In a few minutes, we will enact the Return of the Sun. As the music builds to a crescendo, as the sun begins to rise again, as you take your turn to add sound to this magical moment, I invite you to listen for, to look for, the gesture of the Wild One. Toward what actions of love are you being invited to turn as the sun begins its return and the springtime of new life beckons us?

**Roger:** The image that captures me from Rebecca Parker's poem is that of waking up. Of course, to wake up, we must first be asleep. You can't wake up if you're not asleep.

So I have a confession to make: I love to sleep. Especially in winter, when it's cold out. When I was a kid, in the winter I'd turn off the heat in my bedroom and still sleep with only a sheet (because nighttime seemed to be when I metabolized my food). Now that my metabolism is a bit different, I'm colder at night. But I still love a cold bedroom; now I just need some blankets on top of the sheet. It's so cozy to be weighted down by blankets, toasty on the inside, the cold on the outside. During these darkest days, I like to go to bed as early as I possibly can and stay in bed as long as I can, too. Somehow I treasure sleeping more in the deepest, darkest, coldest time of winter.

Winter is a sleepy time of year for more than just humans. Some animals hibernate. Many plants and trees are dormant—a variation of being asleep. In the old days, no doubt, humans slept more at this time of year than we do now because they didn't have artificial lights or heat. Our ancestors were more attune to the rhythms of nature, sleeping long hours in the winter and much shorter hours in the summer. Our sleeping a little longer and feeling cozier in bed at this time of year harkens back to the ancient times. So as we honor the Winter Solstice, we celebrate the darkness and the sleepiness of this season of the year.

But with the arrival of Solstice, days will now start getting longer, imperceptibly at first and then more noticeably. Before we know it, seeds buried in the earth and buds on the trees will begin stirring. Hibernations will end. We'll start waking up earlier as the first light comes earlier, and eventually we'll go to bed later as the daylight stretches further into the evening. And so the Winter Solstice is the beginning of waking up, too. As Rebecca Parker writes in the poem I shared: "Let this be the time/we wake to life,/ like spring wakes in the moment/of winter solstice."

I love waking up, too. That time in the morning of dawning consciousness is wonderful: the first stirrings of body and mind. I begin to notice my surroundings, waking myself from the dream state I was in and adjusting myself to the reality of the new day that is dawning. This is a wonderful time to take a moment to survey the coming day, to look at how the day might unfold and what I'm especially grateful for. When I do this, I truly and deeply become awake to the day. Henry David Thoreau writes in *Walden*, "Only that day dawns to which we are awake. There is more day to dawn. The sun is but a morning star."<sup>3</sup> Thoreau is right: when I consciously wake up to the day, there is more day to dawn. I celebrate the sun as a morning star!

If we are attentive to them, sleeping and waking up can be very spiritual experiences every day. This time of solstice can remind us of this. It is the time of year when the earth and its creatures are on the cusp between sleeping and waking up. It is the

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/quotes/h/henrydavid165654.html>.

time when in a staggering variety of ways we humans celebrate the darkness and sleep as well as light and waking up. This is part of what we do in the “Return of the Sun” ritual we will do shortly. There may be no better solstice activity than simply paying attention to the miracle of sleep and the miracle of waking up. For those everyday miracles, I give praise and thanks!