

**“WHAT TO DO IN THE DARKNESS”**

**A sermon by the Rev. Roger Bertschausen and the Rev. Dottie Mathews  
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Reading

**“What to do in the darkness” by Marilyn Chandler McEntyre**

Go slowly

Consent to it

But don't wallow in it

Know it as a place of germination

And growth

Remember the light

Take an outstretched hand if you find one

Exercise unused senses

Find the path by walking it

Practice trust

Watch for dawn

Message

**Dottie:** Celebrating the Solstice has not been a lifelong practice of mine. I'm a bit baffled and more than a bit embarrassed now when I look back and realize how disconnected I was for so many years from the natural cycles of nature. Gratefully, I eventually came to understand and appreciate the significance of the seasons but, prior to moving to the Midwest, I'd have to candidly admit that I was fairly obtuse about such things.

Now, in my defense, upbringing smack in the middle of Los Angeles didn't really provide a very fertile ground for being “in touch” with the rhythmic patterns of nature. As is famously reported, in Southern California, for the most part, it truly is just one sunny day after another. And on top of that, it is far more than common than you'd imagine for folks to have a gardener. So with the subtlety of the seasonal changes, and with your plants, flowers and lawn being tended by others while you're working away at work, it's quite easy for the changes brought by the earth's tilt toward the sun to go by with very little notice.

Happily, I moved here. I quickly learned that ignoring these seasonal shifts is simply not an option in Wisconsin! Our Midwest lives are quite disrupted by it all. Our homes, our

cars, our wardrobes all need different kinds of personal tending as we enter and exit each of the seasons. There is no chance for any of us to imagine that we're somehow outside of this natural process. In fact, celebrations like today's serve as reminders that we are creatures of the earth too, full participants in the earth's changes going on around us.

This Solstice Day gives us another opportunity to remember that it's not just the skies and the temperatures and the ground under our feet that are responding so powerfully – we are too! We too feel the impact deep within our bodies and our spirits.

Some of us resist this time of year, this pull into the darkness. Some dread the low energy and emotional struggles that come at this darkest time of our year, when the skies are so frequently grey and the sun has all but disappeared by late afternoon. We use terms like *dreary*, *gloomy*, or *cold* to describe these days; none of which are very attractive words. And given that, when there's nothing else demanding our time, these are days that can seem worthy of simply huddling into our homes with a cup of tea and a favorite blanket ... and closing the doors tight!

But, in our reading, our wise poet is telling us that this season of darkness can be seen as something very good; not something necessarily to be resisted. “Go slowly,” she says. “Consent to the darkness... but don't wallow in it.” She encourages us to proceed into it without haste. To welcome it, to give ourselves over to it; not as if surrendering to bleakness or despair, she says, but to *know it as a place of germination*.

That is an exquisite line for me. It's wise, she says, to tenderly welcome and recognize our need for the dark spaces. It's not just the earth that needs this in order to prepare for all the abundance that will burst forth a few months from now. We need too, to enter our own times of internal darkness because it is out of that place that our own new growth, our own new ways of being can spring.

Since moving here, I have learned how wonderful it feels to plunge a seed deep down into dark moist earth and to gently cover it in a shelter of darkness, trusting that that it will use its time well and do the work that must be done to bring forth something beautiful. We often think of seeds needing the right soil, the right water, the right light – but just as needed is the darkness of that sheltered place; it is the womb necessary for sprouting.

What we know is that new life does come forth from the darkness. It is both the light and the absence of light that are, each in their own time, necessary components for nature to wondrously do its work of producing new life.

This is the message our poet draws from the Solstice. In this season, and throughout our lives, when we experience our own soul's dark times, perhaps we can consent to it in a new way, to welcome it as a needed time of spiritual **germination** ... and to patiently wonder what new thing is coming my way? What growth will I see when the sun of my soul returns?

**Roger:** Another key line in McEntyre's poem is *Find the path by walking it*.

This line reminds me of a backpacking trip in the Trap Hills of Michigan's Upper Peninsula. The trail a companion and I hiked for four days has to be one of the most obscure trails in all of the United States. I've shared before that at one point we happened upon two forest service workers doing maintenance work on the trail. It was late September—and, incredibly, we were the first two hikers they had seen all year. For four months, they had toiled forty hours a week on the trail and never seen a soul!

The segment of trail they were responsible for was impossibly long. Years and years would pass before they'd work their way through their whole segment and start over. Because of this, and the trail's lack of use as well as the lack of frequent trail markers, it was extremely hard to follow the trail. With some regularity it seemed to peter out and we'd have to scout around for it. A few times the trail stopped at a river—we'd have to cross the river (by jumping from rock to rock or by wading) and then search on the other side for where the trail started up.

Sometimes our searching for the trail took twenty or thirty minutes or more. With the undergrowth and forest so dense, we really couldn't locate the trail visually. It was kind of like we were searching in the dark. Instead, we had to wander around and hope that we'd somehow stumble upon it. We had to kind of feel for it. We were more reliant on our intuition than our eyes to find the trail. So as we searched, we'd think: "This feels like it could be a trail." And then we'd walk awhile on what we thought might be the trail, and, if we were lucky, finally come to a trail marker confirming that we'd found it. Or we'd figure out after awhile that we weren't on the trail, and we'd go back to searching. There was really only one way to find the trail: we had to find it by walking it.

Each one of us will have times in our lives when we find ourselves lost in the dark. Maybe it's when experience the death of someone we've loved, or a divorce, or a job loss, or a million other misfortunes and tragedies that are potentially part of any human journey. To be sure: it is scary feeling lost in the dark. And it is a place full of possibility and potential new growth.

In such times, how do we find the path back to wholeness and serenity? We feel our way for it. We try a path that we stumble onto and see if it works. If it doesn't, we search again for another path that might be the right one. And then we try that one.

It's important when we're lost in the dark to practice trust in the universe that we will eventually find our way. And it's important to reach out and grab any outstretched hand we can find. Increasing the likelihood of an outstretched hand being there in these times of darkness is a huge reason for spiritual communities like this one. One of the primary tasks of the Fellowship is to empower each of us to be there with outstretched hands for our fellow spiritual travelers.

And we have to watch for the dawn. I think that's almost more of a feeling than a visual experience, too. We can sense in our soul when we are on the cusp of dawn even before we see that first faint trace of light on the eastern horizon.

Celebrating the Winter Solstice is an exercise in watching for the dawn. On this darkest day of the year, we celebrate the darkness. And we celebrate that, starting tomorrow, the light is going to begin to return. At first this return won't even be perceptible, but it will be happening. And one day soon, we will realize that the dawn has come and we are back in the full, warm light of the blessed sun.

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