

Winter Solstice

Unitarian Universalist Church of Vancouver
December 22, 2024

Reflection on the Theme by Emily Layfield

This time of year, when it's the darkest outside, it always has struck me how many solstice celebrations are about reframing that circumstance. Not "it's gotten so dark" so much as, "hey, this is as dark as it gets and it's going to be getting brighter from here on out! The sun is coming back." - it's a reminder right when I usually need it most, since this time also tends to be fraught with a lot of complicated and sometimes hard dynamics, and intentionally widening the frame out from what is happening right now to the bigger picture can be such a needed reminder for me.

And that frame widening is also a thing that love can do. As I've reflected on our theme of agape and unconditional love, my mind kept on returning to this thing that my husband does. When I do something that annoys or baffles him, as we all inevitably annoy or baffle each other from time to time when sharing our lives, his response is usually - not always, but usually - to say out loud "I love you." Sometimes it's said with a laugh in his voice if I've done something absurd, sometimes with a bit of gritted teeth if it's a thing I have been told is frustrating, but always in this way that turns the annoyance into almost endearment. It's almost like he's intentionally widening the frame of the moment to not be zeroed in on the specific incident at hand but to the wholeness of me and our relationship where this particular thing is just one detail, and a detail without which the whole wouldn't be the same. And him bringing that feeling into being between us in those moments gives me a feeling of being unconditionally loved, and as a bonus, it also usually makes whatever the issue might be easier to address as well.

And I think for me, holidays, especially those that correspond with natural cycles, can be really helpful reframing devices that can nudge me out of my day to day frame and remind me to shift my focus - sometimes it might not be a widening but a narrowing, zooming in on a particular process or relationship or moment, like when I can be fully present to time spent with people where it feels like we're truly seeing and appreciating one another. But other times it might be intentionally practicing ways of frame widening, maybe trying to offer more unconditional love to the wholeness of a community or the world around me, because they can be such reminders that I'm just one small detail in this massive whole of which I'm a part.

Winter Solstice© by Rev. Kathryn A. Bert

I love this idea of re-framing - the way Emily notes that the solstice reframes the circumstance – *yeah it's dark out there, but only because the light is coming. Or it's cold out there, only because the warmth is on its way.* And the way love reframes our lives, as a beloved "other" reflects back to us their unconditional love of us with all our quirks and particularities. Or the way Daniel Gregoire actually buys physical frames to re-frame the past. Or how music so lovely as that we just heard shifts our focus and attention, lifts our spirits and quiets our minds. Thank you for that.

I had a tough week. Not a real tough week. Mostly, an imaginary tough week.

I know the difference because I've had tough weeks in December with a congregation. The worst was the year we had a double murder suicide. This was in Michigan, in the congregation I served before you. A mother and her high school-aged son were killed by her estranged husband who then took his own life. The son was in our youth group. The mother was the narrator of our Christmas pageant that year – scheduled for the week after she died. They had two other children who survived who were thankfully with their grandparents when this took place. That was a tough week.

It was a tough month, actually. We had three natural deaths that month also – older members, so more expected deaths, but nevertheless hard. And to top it off, after deciding to go ahead with the Christmas pageant with a different narrator, the night before the pageant we had frigid cold weather, like the kind you only get in the Midwest (or north). We discovered the morning of the pageant that the water pipes had frozen causing damage to the social hall – the ceiling actually fell in and we had no running water in the building. At this point, the story which thus far was nothing but tragic becomes funny because, as they say, you can't make this stuff up. The social hall was in the basement that we didn't use for coffee hour because of accessibility issues – you'd have to go down stairs to get there. So we could just let that damage sit for a bit. We had to quickly decide whether or not to cancel church that day, and given the painful circumstances leading up to that pageant, it seemed important to go on.... So we put buckets of water next to the toilets to make them usable or rather, flushable, and had hand washing stations. And we held the pageant. That was a tough week.

This week was not that kind of tough week. It was busy and hectic tough. We are just getting ready for two extra worship services this week – on Tuesday, and have changed bookkeepers, which doesn't sound like a big deal, but all our processes are changing – and though the changes are of our choosing, they come with a lot of work. In the midst of all that busy-ness I discovered that our church phone provider upgraded their systems, and as a part of that upgrade, the plan we were on no longer exists. Although they assured me we were grandfathered in for texting, nevertheless, we lost our texting ability. I had to troubleshoot the texting issue because our Administrator is overloaded with bookkeeping changes, and I spent hours on the phone or on hold, trying to fill out forms online which were flawed, and trying to send multiple text tests which all failed. The poor online support people tried to help as best they could, but it turns out the problem they created – the company, OOMA, by the way, that's the company – but the problem they created could only be solved by a company authorized by the FCC who keeps a registry of all company texting numbers and you can only imagine how long it may take them to fix our problem. So, if you've been texting with staff at UUCV, your messages are not being received and we're not ignoring you. Just please call us on the phone or send us an email. I may seem calm this morning talking about it, but that's only because I've finally given up and realize there is nothing I can do. Earlier in the week I was anything but calm as I called, emailed, tried to text, and called again. The obsession with our texting problems overshadowed preparations for Christmas eve, pastoral care, or the Religious Education program or any of my current duties as your minister.

As soon as I accepted there was nothing I could do about it, the frame changed. I was able to focus on other things again.

When in crisis our bodies narrow the focus so that we can deal with the crisis at hand. And our bodies don't distinguish between real crises – such as a double murder suicide – or a perceived crisis – such as the inability to send and receive text messages. Our bodies – which by the way, include our minds – just react. But because our bodies include our minds, a reframing of the situation, can – if it really helps us

think differently – that re-framing can help us regain perspective and widen the focus to include more data.

And, as Emily noted, so can love. I've been talking all month about how the unconditional positive regard of another person can change everything. Our theme is *agápē*, one of the many Greek words for love.

I feel that unconditional positive regard with the staff of this church. As we checked in at staff meetings in December – there are only four of our staff currently who attend these meetings – we're excited to add a fifth, Ashley, mid-January – but basically of the four in the room, we learned that two of us rather dread the holidays and two of the staff delight in them, or usually delight in them. I'm a dreader, again, because of the pressures in my job leading up to extra worship services and the pressures in the family around gift giving, but as I listened to one of the staff members who enjoys the holidays and giving gifts talk about the joy of finding just the right gift for the right person, my frame shifted slightly and I realized that all the pressure I feel around gift giving is primarily self-inflicted. I have a strong need for justice and fairness, and so I worry every year about whether I've given my nieces and nephews gifts that are commensurate, well, in some way I worry about that with all my gifting – did I treat the young ones equally, and did I give the adults gifts as good as the ones they gave me? Once I threw that frame out, and realized that my family doesn't really have high expectations with regard to the gift itself – that we're just acknowledging the holidays and our relationships with the gifts, I was freer to give big gifts here and little gifts there, and just a little something that says I see you, I love you, you're family and it's the holidays! The delight with which my aunt and cousin received the little jar of truffle salt I brought back from the Torda Salt Mine in Romania filled me with joy. I'm grateful for that different frame.

Holidays, holy days, as we talk about them in one of our religious education curriculums, such celebrations are considered holy because we take time away from the ordinary to celebrate meaningful markers of time – this birthday, that anniversary, this ancient story and that change of season. Time shifts as we step out of our routine to be with family or friends, to eat special foods, or hang lights and light candles.

The winter solstice marks an especially poignant moment of darkness – the shift took place at 1:21 am Saturday morning – yesterday – when the Earth's axis was tilted farthest away from the sun, giving us the least amount of sunlight in the Northern Hemisphere. It marks the official start of winter – which I always find fascinating that it is now that we begin to experience more and more light that we call this the season of winter. The natural world is so much slower than the world humans have created of artificial light and speedy internet. The natural world lags in a way we humans tend to resist. Holy days and holidays remind us to lag, too, or in the words of Kathleen McTigue, "to resist the headlong tumble into the next moment" and "to rest for a moment on the forming edge of our lives."

UU theologian and former president of Starr King School for the Ministry, Rebecca Ann Parker, has a poem called *Winter Solstice*, that describes this well: [Link to the poem, Winter Solstice, by Rebecca Ann Parker](#)

I've always found nature or the natural world, or the non-human part of our planet earth, a useful frame for shifting my perspective. Feeling old? Compare your life to a tree. Feeling rushed? Watch a plant grow.

Our dog, Chestnut, goes out into the yard and will spend considerable time watching the squirrels. She doesn't often chase them, much to our chagrin, especially when they've managed to climb past all the barriers and reach the bird food. She just watches the squirrels and birds and, I don't know, the plants blowing in the wind, or maybe she's smelling the air and the neighbor's fire and the scent left by a raccoon. I think of it as her screen time. She's out there watching Nature's TV and she's transfixed. And it reminds me that by joining her in the yard and focusing on the birds and the plants and the squirrels and the scents and the breeze, my heart rate will slow and my bliss will return and the things that mattered when I was inside seem hardly important out there in the backyard.

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

It is ironic, isn't it, that the holidays cause some of us so much stress, when the entire purpose of them is the reverse? The original purpose, I mean, not the colonized purpose. Some of that stress comes from the frame we put on them – the consumerist culture that demands we buy, buy, buy in order to celebrate when really we need to just be, be, be, and be with those we love.

Winter solstice is a holiday that celebrates our place in the universe, our place on this planet that revolves around the sun and tilts. Because of that tilt it is winter here as summer has just begun in the Southern Hemisphere. Each day after the solstice here in the north, we get one more minute of sunlight, which doesn't seem like much, but in two months, that will be about an hour more. That slow frame, that frame the Natural World provides us, is the one we should keep in mind as we rush around in preparation – what is the purpose of our hurry? What will result if we don't get it done? The earth will still tilt and turn, the seasons will still come and go,

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

When I get caught up in the busy-ness or hectic-ness or annoyance of the season, I have only to remind myself that what is going on is not as bad as December of 2013 – the year the Lansing congregation suffered those terrible losses and the collapse of a ceiling, or December of 1995 - the year my family suffered terrible losses. And I remind myself that this is the year some are suffering the worst losses of their lives, and that they too, will someday use this year as a marker of the worst December ever, and a reminder that other years, no matter how hectic, are not so bad. Using photographs and literal frames to re-frame the past, we (and Daniel Gregoire) re-frame the present.

For our planet is large and the universe is even larger.

*In the universe there moves a Wild One
whose gestures alter earth's axis
toward love. says Rebecca Ann Parker.*

May we all be wild ones *whose gestures alter earth's axis
toward love.*