

Stunned to Stillness

Lissa Gundlach

Dec. 20th, 2015

WINTER SOLSTICE *by Rebecca Parker*

Perhaps
for a moment the typewriters will stop clicking,
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 the
celestial spheres will be heard as earth hangs
poised in the crystalline darkness, and then gracefully tilts.
Stunned to stillness by beauty we remember who we
are and why we are here.

As the story is told Carolyn McVikar Edwards, author of *Return of the Light*,

For six days in the Northern hemisphere's December, the sun ceases its southerly crawl on the horizon and appears to rise and set in almost the same spot. The ancients watched this quiet drama with drawn breath. Would the sun begin to move again? Would the light grow anew on the great wheel of life? Would life itself continue?"

As December grows darker and darker, we find ourselves drawn into this ancient drama of the Solstice. By 4 pm the sun wanes in the sky, swiftly descending in a stunning display of color and light. Looking at the day length charts, you can see the hovering of the sunrise and sunset times, each day only seconds less than the last until we cross the threshold of Solstice on Tuesday the 22nd.

Solstice, from the Latin *sol stetit*, meaning *sun stood still*.

The stillness of the sun invites us to consider our own relationship to stillness. I believe our culture is impoverished in the stillness department. To see this at work, you need not look any farther to your default answer to the innocuous question of "How are you?" For many of us, the answer is often fired off "busy!" With ceaseless schedules, full of social engagements and work commitments, our lives often allow little down time, let alone time for stillness. Our electronic devices keep us tethered constantly to the world, both a blessing and a curse. We are constantly in motion. In his 2010 book *Childhood Unbound*, child psychologist Ron Taffel notes that children are struggling as mightily as adults to find a sense of stillness. He sees this most acutely at bed time. He writes:

Hundreds of parents have told me how hard it's become to help their get to sleep. For some, as soon as mom or dad leaves the room, they head to their cell phones or watch TV, or sneak laptops under the sheets to get right back online.

With the lure of technology always present to entertain, soothe or placate, children and adults alike have difficulty with stillness. We yearn for it, it is surprisingly elusive. While practices of meditation can help us to relax and train our busy minds, some of our most readily available moments of stillness are those we are forced to experience-- accidental, unplanned or spontaneous.

Maybe you or your family's schedules run at a frantic pace until you or your child are suddenly sick and you must slow down and rest. Maybe your cell phone runs out of power, you spill coffee on your computer or your internet goes out and you are forced to take a break from technology.

Or perhaps Mother Nature intervenes. Now's the time in the sermon when your east coast minister waxes poetic about her nostalgia for a particular northern phenomenon—the snow day. If you have had the occasion of the snow day in your lifetime, you know that these were coveted and magical days of winter. When a nor'easter blanketed the land, pausing buses and cars, my siblings and I would watch at the windows, crafting and reading by the woodstove until we could venture out into the frozen yard to shovel and build forts, fueled by copious amounts of Swiss Miss hot cocoa.

I'm sure you have your own stories, maybe not of snow days but these accidental moments of stillness. These moments intervene in our daily routines, often forcing us to being present to our lives. The theologian Rebecca Parker calls us to consciousness about the longest night of the winter solstice as such a time. "Stunned to stillness," she calls it.

As a part of the Pagan festival of Yule, Solstice falls during the Christian season of Advent, just days before Christmas. We often think of these days before Christmas as "full" of preparations, baking, shopping, and merrymaking with family and friends. Solstice forces us to slow down and pause from our preparations, an invitation to the stillness many of us have come to treasure on Christmas. Like the empty tomb before the dawn of Easter morning, Solstice lays before us the emptiness of the darkness before the coming of the light.

The poet T.S. Eliot, grandson of Unitarian minister William Greenleaf Eliot, wrote his series *Four Quartets* over a course of six years as fascism in Europe was rising and global conflicts escalated into World War II. The magnificent series of poems wrestle with the role of faith in the face of horrific acts of evil resulting in tremendous suffering and death. I commend to you the entire *Quartets* as required reading for times such as ours, but this morning want to read to you excerpts from the third poem. It begins:

O dark dark dark. They all go into the dark,
The vacant interstellar spaces, the vacant into the vacant...
And we all go with them, into the silent funeral,
Nobody's funeral, for there is no one to bury.
I said to my soul, be still, and let the dark come upon you
Which shall be the darkness of God. As, in a theatre,
The lights are extinguished, for the scene to be changed
With a hollow rumble of wings, with a movement of darkness on darkness...
Or as, when an underground train, in the tube, stops too long between stations
And the conversation rises and slowly fades into silence
And you see behind every face the mental emptiness deepen
Leaving only the growing terror of nothing to think about;
Or when, under ether, the mind is conscious but conscious of nothing—
I said to my soul, be still, and wait without hope
For hope would be hope for the wrong thing; wait without love
For love would be love of the wrong thing; there is yet faith
But the faith and the love and the hope are all in the waiting.
Wait without thought, for you are not ready for thought:
So the darkness shall be the light, and the stillness the dancing.

“I said to my soul, be still, and let the dark come upon you.” Now is the time to befriend the darkness and have faith that it will not overcome us. Today we are not stunned to stillness by the beauty of the star against the midnight sky, but rather the vastness of the midnight sky that the stars dance upon—the deep mysteries of the universe. When we surrender to the darkness, unmediated by our screens and daily routines, we feel our own terrifying and humbling finitude in an infinitely complex universe that will outlive us and our current age, our prejudices and wars, our grievances and conflicts.

So this Solstice, take time to be stunned to stillness, for time out of time to connect with all that is. Tonight, after dinner or before bed, turn off your phone, turn off your television, turn off your lights. Put aside your to do lists and your stacks of holiday cards. Sit in the silence for at least five minutes and feel yourself awake but enveloped by the darkness, safe and protected. Don't be afraid of the dark. Have faith that the light will come again.