Earth Consciousness
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Are you paying attention? Did you see yesterday's full moon? Did you experience the darkness? I celebrated the winter solstice this weekend, as I often do, with a long, cold, meditative walk in the harsh winter light. It was glorious! It is good to be reminded of our place on this earth. We are not the crown of creation, but merely co-participants in the interdependent web of all being. We balance the darkness and the light in our lives. U U poet May Sarton describes our pilgrim journey as coming forth from the dark earth, minerals and gem stones, with connections deeper then seeds or birth, emerging into the storms and clouds of this light-possessed atmosphere, we are one with the earth, the wave, the air.

The poet Mary Oliver reminds us we need not try to be good by someone else's standard, nor walk on our knees for a hundred miles, but only discover that which we truly love, and then let ourselves love. You have despair, and I do, but we can share it, and the world goes on. The sun returns this time every year, each day for two minutes more, on its annual pilgrim's journey. "Meanwhile, the wild geese, high in the clean blue air, are heading home again," as Mary Oliver writes. Life itself calls each of us to imagine our own place in the family of things.

The winter solstice is an astronomical phenomenon. The axial tilt of the earth and gyroscopic effects of its daily rotation creates a 365 ¼ day year taking us through the four seasons of life on this planet. In New England today, we will have roughly nine hours of sunlight, compared to Alaska which has only 3 1/2 hours of daylight, or our summer solstice when we'll have 15 hours of sunlight. Yet unlike Neolithic times, when the coming three months were known as the starving time, we can protect ourselves from the worst consequences of the deep winter.

Yet, with John O'Donohue, I believe it is important that we remain conscious of the emergence of life on this planet earth and humanity's emergence within it. It took eons for the seas to warm, for oxygen to appear in the atmosphere, for life to emerge on the land. There have been ages of warmth and ages of ice through which life has adapted and endured. It's important for our own spiritual journeys that we, as O'Donohue does, "Hold the memory of the seasons, the passion of the wind, the fluency of the water, the warmth of the fire, the quiver touch of the sun, and shadowed sureness of the moon. That we awaken to live to the full dream of the earth." We are a manifestation of life on the earth. It behooves us to acknowledge our place in the cosmos.

And contrary to what we sometimes hear, earth consciousness and Christianity need not be opposed to each other. Some of my favorite Christian mystics and theologians have written elegantly about earth consciousness. Particularly the *Canticle of the Sun,* a prayer by Francis of Assisi, where he describes our familial relationship to the cosmos*:*

Be praised, my Lord, for all your creatures,
And first for brother sun, who makes the day bright and luminous
And he is beautiful and radiant, with great splendor,
He is the image of you, Most High.

Be praised, my Lord, for sister moon and the stars in the sky,
You have made them brilliant and precious and beautiful.

Be praised, for brother wind, and for the air, both cloudy and serene.
And every kind of weather,
through which you give nourishment to your creatures.

Be praised, my Lord, for sister water,
Who is very useful and humble and precious and chaste.
Be praised, my Lord, for brother fire,
Through whom you illuminate the night.
And he is beautiful and joyous and robust and strong.

Be praised, my Lord, for our sister, mother earth,
Who nourishes us and watches over us
And brings forth various fruits with colored flowers and herbs…
Bless my Lord and give thanks to him and serve him with great humility.

This is Christian earth consciousness. But perhaps my favorite earth conscious Christian theologian was the early fourteenth century Dominican monk and mystic Meister Eckhart. He wrote:

When I was the stream, when I was the forest, when I was still a field,
When I was every hoof, foot, fin, and wing, when I was the sky itself,
No one ever asked me did I have a purpose,
No one ever wondered was there anything I might need,
For there was nothing I could not love.

It was when I left all we once were that the agony began,
The fear and questions came, and I wept, I wept.
And tears I had never known before.
So, I returned to the river, I returned to the mountains.

I asked for their hand in marriage again, I begged,
I begged to wed every object and creature, and when they accepted,
God was ever present in my arms.
And he did not say, "Where have you been?"
For then I knew my soul – every soul – has always held Him.

Yet, such earth consciousness predates Christianity by millennia. The Egyptian pyramids, and the Aztec step pyramids, were both built with orientations to the summer and winter solstices. Stonehenge is arranged such that an initiate can fall into a deep meditative trance upon glimpsing the failing light at sunset on December 21st, to be awakened reborn three days later at dawn on December 25th. This architecture aided earth consciousness. When I traveled a few years ago with the Pachamama Alliance through parts of Ecuador and Peru, an indigenous and western group devoted to bringing back to humanity the ancient love of the earth, I discovered that they were more earth conscious then anyone I had previously met. Earth is our mother. Not just metaphorically, humanity is newly born of the earth, which cares for us and nourishes us in our infancy, that we may grow to be wise.

In the Andean mountains we visited ancient temple complexes situated in protected valleys with sight lines along mountain peaks oriented to the progression of the solstices and equinoxes. The architects of these spiritual centers took the long view, marking out the sun's twenty-four-hour day, the moon's

thirty-day monthly cycle, the earth's 365-day yearly cycle, along with each 5,126-year long era or age, and the 26,000 years it takes the earth's axis of rotation to circumscribe a complete circle in infinite space. Humanity is only now catching up to the extent and accuracy of their mathematical astronomy. We are not, especially in spiritual matters and earth consciousness, as advanced as we think.

My indigenous guides pointed out it was only six years ago, on December 21, 2012, that the most recent 5,126-year age ended, the anthropomorphic age, and they felt that they could already see hopeful signs that humanity's childhood may be coming to an end, and over the next 5000 years humanity may begin to assume its rightful place within the interdependent web of all being. I was having trouble being quite that optimistic about the likely future of humankind, except perhaps on the winter solstice, where in the annual cycle of the year it appears that it will inevitably get better from here. Life itself always returns.

Six years ago, I left in early December on sabbatical from serving as senior minister at First Parish in Brookline in order to travel on pilgrimage with Sufi's in Turkey. We were traveling in the footsteps of Mevlana Jalal al-Din Muhammad Rumi, a thirteenth century Persian Sufi saint, who achieved mystical union with the divine mystery, or Seb-I Arus, on December 17th. So, Sufis from around the world gather to celebrate every year. Outlawed in Turkey, they often risk life and limb, crossing national borders illegally, on this their annual holy pilgrimage. I wanted to experience love's surprising joy and learn to dance with the Beloved (as Sufi's refer to the divine mystery). Traveling with Sufi's, I underwent initiations, even learning how to whirl like a dervish, and had miraculous spiritual experiences. Sufi's cracked me open spiritually and planted the Ka'ba of love in my heart. They taught me to soul share with generous spiritual beings. Two weeks later, coincidentally on the winter solstice, I traveled home with God as my Beloved.

Then this time two years ago I had my most remarkable winter solstice experience yet. I was traveling up the Mekong river with a group of scholars from Yale studying Theravada Buddhism as it is traditionally practiced in Vietnam and Cambodia. Near the end of our trip, as we approached the winter solstice, our local guide suggested we visit Phnom Bakheng, one of the holiest mountains overlooking Angor Wat, and that we approach it in the pre-dawn light. I write about this experience in my new book *SPIRITUAL PILGRIM: Awakening Journeys of a Twenty-First Century Transcendentalist,* so let me quote it here:

"We arrived at the base of the mountain about an hour before sunrise. The ascent in the dark was surprisingly steep. To save time, we went up a steeply inclined footpath rather than the wider, more gradual ceremonial elephant path. We reached the ramparts of the Phnom Bakheng temple just as the first cock crowed. The waning, nearly full moon beamed down upon us. The morning star was the only star still visible in the sky. Slowly the sky lightened in the east. The details of geography took on a more definite form as the world emerged into the light of day. The first birds began to sing in the predawn light. My heart soared! Life constantly renews itself. I was awakened!

It was nearly the winter solstice, so the rising sun lined up directly through the sacred portals. The Buddha sitting in the central tower was bathed in morning light. I sat in a sacred portal, bathed in morning light, aligned with the universe and all that is. All is one, and I was glad to be alive." One can wait a lifetime for such moments of awakening, or they can happen in a heartbeat, in a sacred place on a holy morning.

So, how will you honor the winter solstice? In what sacred way and holy place? There is a UU version of a traditional Hindu prayer translated by Abhi Janamanchi, a South-Asian Hindu Unitarian Universalist minister, that I offered to the universe that morning, and I offer it to you now:
May good befall all.
May there be peace for all.
May all be fit for excellence.
May all experience the holy.
May all be happy.
May all be healthy.
May all experience what is good.
May no one suffer.
What will be your prayer as we pass through this liminal time of the winter solstice? Can you and I maintain an earth consciousness that encourages us to be a blessing to the earth and all of humanity? I trust we can, and wish you a joyous solstice, and a happy Christmas.