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Count on the elements.

Light in the Darkness

A word about the elements! Earth, air, water and fire—always there and mind-boggling when we pay attention. Days, weeks can pass when we completely forget about them. We could grow closer to the elements, these building blocks of life. We could recognize them as something we count on. A source of hope. That would be a good thing for us, especially in these dark days. The earliest humans paid close attention to the four elements. To some extent, our early families did, too. Let's go outside.

Once upon a time, humans *lived* outside, 24/7. They knew the world of nature intimately. The stars. Every phase of the moon. Signs of the coming season. What was safe to eat. How to prepare for winter. How to navigate on land and by sea. What we call indigenous people—first or native people—used to live *in* and *of* and *with* the natural world. Some still do, like Arizona's Hopi Indians.

Today, we can only imagine the entire context of our life being the outdoors—its sounds, sights, what's in the air. Some of *you* spend whole days and weeks outdoors, I know, but for many of us, long periods of time outside happen a few times a week, at most. Nature's that place we like to visit—good for the body and soul, but only when time and weather permit! The natural world, outside our home today, used to *be* home to humans. Home—a source of comfort. A way to make meaning. Have you ever noticed yourself drawn to an ancient ritual—a vision quest, a coming of age ceremony, a naming ritual? Instead of feeling alien to us, they can appeal to us, tug at us, as if touching an old feeling of home deep down in us. A sense of ground.

Consider the mountain to the north. As LeGrand Cannon told the Tamworth story in his book *Look to the Mountain*, early settler Whit Livingston had a love-hate relationship with Mt. Chocorua. He'd gotten a land grant, staked out a property, cleared it, built a cabin and made this place his family's home.

Whit went everywhere by foot, walking through meadows and woods daily, crossing rivers and streams, climbing hills. He walked to Sandwich often. That was simply part of life—there he bought supplies, conducted business, visited and hunted with an old friend. Times the waters ran high. A stumble, not uncommon, could mean a cold wet icy walk or worse. Once, wounding his leg badly in a fall, Whit returned from Sandwich to Tamworth unable to put weight on it at all.

We think winter is long and hard? Imagine walking to Sandwich for Christmas presents. For company. Imagine living by candlelight. Only a fire in the hearth for warmth. No neighbors. Strange sounds in the night—sometimes strangers, not always with good intentions. Imagine having to find your food everyday—trapping, hunting, fishing. Imagine December, darker and colder by the day.

At one point, clearing brush, Whit Livingston collapsed, exhausted by this physical life. He looked up and there was Chocorua in the distance. Like Job, in the Bible, raging at God because

life wasn't fair, Whit raged at the mountain. That day Chocorua symbolized everything that was hard and unsurmountable. And yet Chocorua had spoken to him from the first time he saw it—timeless and majestic. It had given him strength and hope. When he walked toward it from Sandwich, it would stir his heart—much as it stirs ours today. This chunk of earth has been a presence through the ages. As it was in the beginning is now and ever shall be....We count on it.

'Tis the season for rushing around, and in our rushing the Christmas spirit can elude us. Trying to make it all happen can overwhelm us. The pace squeezes us. Wears us out. Or...we may be hurting. Feeling on the outside of the merriment and fun. Worried. Or ill. Lonely or low. Suffering from lack of light. We may be grieving a loss or caring for one whose life is ending. A relationship may be in crisis. Sometimes—and often—relief comes from an unexpected place. A measure of comfort could lie just outside our door.

Last week, the Board and the Committee on Ministry began our meetings by sharing symbols of the season that meant something to us. I heard echoes of wonder about snow and snowflakes. About the night sky that has captivated humans since the beginning of time. UU Rev. John Papandrew wrote: “The other night with the first cold of winter I went outdoors and stood in the stillness, looking up at the sky. The near fullness of the moon accentuated the blue, and the few clouds of a white stream silently moving to the east heightened the stillness. It felt so good to get out of the house and away from the books. I was observing a ritual. Although only a few steps from my door, in a few seconds I was at one with all time, with all the generations that have gone before me and will come after. Standing, looking up, as they have stood and will stand. A simple ritual to be sure, but from it I felt a quietness of spirit as if by looking up I had been lifted up.”¹ As it was in the beginning is now and ever shall be....

Finding peace in outdoor rituals is part of our birthright. What better way to soothe what ails us? To heal from what hurts. To find hope. Every December, I gather greens. The ritual of going to the same woods and visiting the same trees every year feeds my soul. “What are you, a pagan?” someone asked last week.

“You bet! You're not?” Science quantifies the effect of nature on our well-being. Science writer Florence Williams has a new book out in February called *The Nature Fix: Why Nature Makes Us Happier, Healthier, and More Creative*. Humanists, theists, pagans and everyone in between need hope these dark days. Sometimes it calls us from the mountains...sometimes from the stars.

One Saturday afternoon, probably writing a sermon, a minister I know called a salty matriarch of the church, a member since childhood. Her house, up on a hill, overlooked the harbor. The minister posed a question about faith. ““Tell me,”” she asked, “what do you know you can count on?”” Everyone needs to know what we can count on—what we can believe, where we can find some hope. The congregant, who'd lived eighty years on the coast, didn't miss a beat. “I can count on the tide. It will be high this afternoon at 2:20.”

Though memory loss had begun to creep into her life, there wasn't a day this woman didn't know the exact hour of high and low tide and how that would affect the weather and her plans.

¹ John Papandrew, *Celebrating Christmas, An Anthology*, ed. Carl Seaburg, Authors Choice Press (iUniverse), 1983,120.

She counted on that ancient dance between the ocean and the moon. More than fact, that rhythm was part of her. Part of what made her tick. When again this year you see the harbor boil with sea smoke or you watch the lake start to ice over, lean into the satisfying rightness about it. Notice how you count on it.

We don't think much about earth, air, water and fire. We don't think much about the sun...and then there are times they come into sharp focus. They pull us out of our thoughts and busyness, right into the now. And we see the four elements with awe and wonder. We overflow with gratitude for...creation—its goodness, its intricacy, the way it works so well...the elements in an amazing dance together.

The Winter Solstice is a day that the elements wake us up and get our attention. Since June the sun has been moving lower in the sky—shadows have grown longer, days shorter. We've been feeling it, haven't we? Many of us have looked forward to this day when, at 5:44 this morning, the sun stopped its movement away. We have placed hope on this day that the light begins to brighten, that it last longer, that it's coming back. We've counted on it.

Tomorrow the sun will set about a minute later than today, and every day after that we'll have that much more daylight. Soon, the sun will start rising earlier and bring days of even more daylight.

So let us count on the rightness, the familiarity, the hope of the Solstice. The human inventions of Christmas or Hanukkah may rev us up or wear us out. While they may remind us of our religious differences, the solstice is uncomplicated by humans and—would you say?—loved. It beckons to us, gently, with simplicity. Like our forbears, we look forward to it. We count on it. We feel excited, enlivened, that the light is coming back! If that's not hope, I don't know what is

In this season of waiting, some call it Advent—we close with the words of UU Rev. Gayle Lehman-Becker:

I waited all month long for a simple thing
 it lives in a sun that comes again,
 it lived in a flame that burned eight days
 it was born with a child in a stable
 I waited all month long for a simple thing...the rebirth of hope that springs from
 the human heart...²

May hope be yours this week of the Solstice and in this season of light.

So may it be.

² Gayle Lehman-Becker, *Ibid.*, 130.