

Circle of the Sun
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What do you believe?

Do you believe?

The sun is returning, the days are lengthening, the hope is coming, do you believe?

Do you believe in light and brilliance and beginning?

Do you believe in plants?

Do you believe in leaves?

Do you believe that the oak and the maple and the beech and the birch will flower and bud and be once again green and growing things?

Do you believe?

This is the season of our belief. This is the season of knowing it can be and making it so. This is the season of repairing old machinery and old relationships, of getting ready, of making whole, of starting again. This is the season of faith rewarded, of hope reborn, of promises kept. This is the season when maybe becomes yes, when word is made flesh, when the world is saved. This is the season when the sun still rises, once again rises, finally it rises and for one sweet day all the world's people are one—all of us are one.

This is what solstice is about, what the sun is about, about belief that is deep, about belief that is strong, about belief that goes beyond logic, beyond reasoning to truth embedded in our very souls, truth that needs no proof, truth that needs no testing, truth that we know like we know that our heart beats, that time unfurls, that the sun rises, that the sun always rises, because we are turning, days after days turning toward the morning.

We know, and we do not know. We hope, we pray, we anticipate. And it puts us in our places, this not-knowing, this life that is larger than our life, or any one life.

In these grey and uncertain days of fall and winter we are beyond knowing what the next hour will bring, rain or snow or sleet, sun or cloud, triumph or failure, joy or disappointment. We are beyond knowing; we are beginning to understand how little we understand; how little we control. And we are scared.

And we are unsure.

And we are unbalanced.

And we are hurting.

Because we have believed for lo these many years that we must know everything, we must absorb every idea, we must divine every truth; we have believed that we are only strong when we are in control, when the world is in our hands, when the earth is at our mercy, we have believed this as truth, like we know our breath and we know our hearts, but we were wrong.

We have been wrong.

And it is not the lack of control that is hurting, although we think that is what hurts.

And it is not the uncertainty that is unsettling, although we think that is what throws our balance.

It is the expectation that anything should be otherwise. It is the mistaken understanding of the world as under our control, it is the hubris, the mistaken belief that we can do less than our very best for this fragile planet and these, our people, and do no harm.

Do no harm. It is, it should be, a primary goal. But we know that it is not always possible, not really ever possible, that everything we do to stay alive harms something, somehow, eating and drinking, using the planet's resources for our living requires a full cycle of destruction and regeneration to be sustainable. It is hard, coming to terms with the price of our lives. It is hard, learning to look for the welfare of the collective, the institution, the group, the population rather than the good of the individual. To expect that we are somehow exempt from this cycle, more pure or entirely separate, is to forget who we are, to believe ourselves above living, above relationship, above life itself.

Whatever else we are, we are not immortal.

If we have *that of god* within us, that light of something that connects us to everything alive, it is not to make us bigger or more controlling; it is not to make us all-powerful, it is not to make us supreme. It is to make us wiser than we might have been, and gentler; it is to build connections among us and help us stay in community. It is to help us be graceful; it is to help us be humble by everything that is so big, so impossible big that we cannot possibly understand it, but perhaps—perhaps—we can be part of it.

Perhaps we can be grateful for it.

That spirit, that light is that of us and that of the holy and it connects us to the sun. And the sun rises—it always, always rises. We don't have to understand why to know that it is, but with it we rise, too. We have enough. We control enough. We know enough. And no matter how hard it is, we can pull hope out of the smoking ashes. The gift of humanity is the gift of hope, Pandora's last prayer for a broken world. We are the phoenix and we are once again reborn, with the light and the sun and the whole wide world we too come once again into the pureness of our being; we are once again a little child with all things and all people and all our days before us.

These are the days of restoration. In the dead of winter, in the cold, still night, our hearts are restored, our bodies are warmed, we sing flesh onto bones, we take the breath of life. The seeds of the forest defy all odds and sit, alive and waiting, waiting for the morning—and so do we.

Between now and Imbolc will be the preparation, the gathering of spirit and water and strength.

We will repair our bodies and rest our bodies and sit by the fire mending nets in the flickering light. The sun is born and the year's preparations begin.

All the world knows this cycle, be and become, be and become again. all the world tells its stories: Persephone's pomegranate; the temple's restoration; the messiah's coming. At long last the sun god is reborn and light returns.

Light returns and we are once more in a circle of the sun.

And our circle grows larger, our arms grow wider, our hearts become softer, our reach becomes bigger. What is lit we can see, and what we can see we can imagine: for ourselves, for the community, for the world.

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Barack Obama built his platform of hope—hope for change, hope for a brighter future, hope for a world of unity in our diversity, e pluribus unum, out of many, one. He has promised hope, he is elected on hope, we are asking him to lead us into hope, and through hope into restoration.

Thousands of years ago, the Maccabees, a small renegade band of Jews, pulled the long thread of hope from the garment of despair, resisting the occupying army, taking the only chance they had and using it to knit their people together, to win dignity and freedom, to take back their temple, and their faith was rewarded.

And the lamp stayed lit.

And the light returned.

We don't need to know the historical truth to know that the story is real. One writer whose name I have forgotten quotes a child as saying, "A myth is a story that's true on the inside" and these are the truths and the myths of our culture, our people, our time. In these diverse and global days we can claim as ours that from which we rise, our past as well as our present, and that past and that present may well span continents and centuries and it is for us to learn, to understand, and to embrace. To learn, to understand, to embrace.

We don't know how long we've been celebrating the return of the sun but it is built into our skin and bones in this hemisphere. The fear of losing that bright star that forms our days is visceral, hovering somewhere between our throat and our solar plexus, tight and hoping, wishing, knowing—mostly. Praying—mostly. It MUST NOT go. And if it is "he" or if it is "she" or if it is at the beck and call of some greater being, we must walk and sing and dance all night, we must pray that we will be saved from an eternal cold and darkness.

Later, we will remember the balance.

Later, we will embrace the dark.

Later, we will be reassured and know that we are warm and loved and take risks with anger and truth and justice.

Right now we just need to know that the light will return,
and so we pray.

This has been the truth for thousands and thousands of years. the Feast of Stephen, the celebration of a messiah, the victory wrested from a tyrannical empire, these are the layers built up over the form of our animal fears and our animal hearts. These are the stories with which we clothe the knowing that we really are that helpless; that we really are that small; that there is only so much we can do and something else, for good or for ill, will take care of the rest.

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In India there are countless roadside idols, built to local deities. People who cannot visit temples, people who cannot afford the offerings and the priests' fees, people who walk by on their way to work or to shopping, people who beg on roadsides, anyone can stop to worship.

These are usually gods and goddesses who were important before Hinduism became a conglomerate, before all the local customs were streamlined and absorbed. These are gods from before the Vedas, before castes, before the dawn of remembered time and over the years their shrines have become incredible mounds of the offerings left for them. Everyone brings something: flowers, a coconut, a betel leaf, and on special occasions, a tiny square of pure gold or silver leaf. That precious metal foil is pressed into place on the idol, turning stone carvings into shimmering, glowing manifestations of adoration. But when the idol is covered, they keep coming, they keep bringing the silver, they keep bringing the gold. Now it is tradition, and over decades or perhaps centuries the idol becomes a shapeless rounded mound of precious metal, literally buried in devotion. And still they come. the eyes are left visible, so it took me months of asking before I figured out that this wasn't some kind of customary holy shape like Shiva's lingam, but in fact a fully carved idol preserved in a mound of prayer.

And what have we done, preserving our sacred story of the sun's death and rebirth, the cycle of life, the ebb and flow, with all this devotion?

The dilemma is clear. The place and the idol are themselves sacred. Stripping away the devotion of so many generations of hope-ers and pray-ers would be sacrilege in the purest sense—desecration of a temple made holy by the tie between the god and the people. And yet it is also a loss to forget what we are praying to—it is tragedy to lose the face and the body, the dance and the pose under the weight of our own desperation.

How shall we have both? How shall we honor both?

And so our modern pagan communities have set about the delicate and complex task of resurrection. They have set up another shrine. they have chosen and sacred place and prepared the ground using fragments of stories of long-ago builders. On that ground they have set a stone that they are carving using fuzzy x-rays and folktales and local customs. They have their own memories and devotions and dreams. And they are building a temple with another idol so we can see and feel what the shape might have been, so we can worship at the feet of the goddess or the god once again.

Sometimes they build one; sometimes they build two or three—a cluster of possibilities. these idols are nearly always at a crossroads, near a main thoroughfare where it's easy to stop and pray. Busy, loud, but easy. No priests guard the doors—there are no doors. No offerings are required beyond what you are moved to give: a garland of marigolds; a stick of incense; a square of silver foil, the prayer of your own heart. There is, of course, tradition, but no one will watch and no one will know what you have done but you.

The new pagan rituals are also at a crossroads: poised where Hinduism and Buddhism and the various Native American traditions meet the religions of the Book: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, and where they all meet the ancient Europeans and an Asia we can barely even dream of—all across the northern hemisphere we cross over and back, weaving something new but familiar, and the pagans from everywhere are helping us remember, helping us tell our common stories and know the places where we worship together.

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We need no more than the sun, we need to believe in nothing more than what we have seen with our own eyes, to call the solstice our own. It is for all of us, for every one, for anyone who has seen the sun rise or has felt the sun's heat, who has known summer and winter or dry and rain. This is our holiday, our celebration, our holy day; this is our season of hope and this is the time to believe, this is the season of belief, not in the impossible, not in the difficult, but in the miracle—that which makes us smile, that which makes us laugh out loud and shot for joy, that

which invigorates; that which enlivens; that which brings us back to life, that which brings us to life at all and so we are rising up like the sun and so we are bursting out and so we are more alive than anything, more alive than anyone, ever because we believe, we believe, we all believe!

And I know you might be feeling a little tired; you might be feeling a little jaded, maybe you lost your job or your mother is sick or your injury isn't healed and you're challenging me, you're asking what do I believe? How do I believe? I don't believe. I can't believe. And I'm here to tell you, you can. I'm here to tell you, you already do. You do believe. We all believe. If you are depressed; if you are sick; if you are burdened and beaten down, I know you still believe. I *know* you believe.

You believe in the power of life, in the tree that cracks the sidewalk, in the ice that breaks the stone. You believe in goodness in the heart of a newborn babe; you believe in cause and effect, that what happens now changes what happens later; you believe in the balance, in good and bad, in night and day, in soft and hard; you believe in the beauty of your own tender and weary heart. And if you don't; if you honestly don't, if you believe in none of that--then you may think you are right, you may think you have won, you may think all hope is lost but I say to you now, you still believe. You *believe*. You believe. You believe that the sun rises, the sun still rises, we turn to the sun and we turn again and always, always the sun is there. It is astronomy and it is math but it is also heartsong and prayer; it is also laughter and relief and joy. It is also hope. This is our season of hope. This is the year of hope, when we know it is here and we build it light by shining light until all the world is bathed in the glow, and it is us, it is all of us, it is more than us. The messiah is come. The temple is restored. The hero is returned and we, we are dawning. Born once again in a circle of the sun we are here, we are here,

and we believe.

Let the light return.

Blessed be.

And amen.