

Solstice at the Valley's End

By [Beth Powning](#) • Dec 8th, 2009 • Category: [Essays](#), [Feature Post](#)



We live at the end of a valley. On December 21st, when the sun sinks behind the hill, barns and outbuildings vanish into the blackness of the year's longest night. Nothing stirs save the rustle of snow over snow. Wildflowered fields, brooks, fern beds: all are frozen and buried. Only the lights from our farmhouse windows shine bravely, like beacons, in a place of utter silence.

Solstice.

On this night, I feel connected to the past. It's easy to imagine the terror of neolithic peoples who watched the sun's inexorable descent into the southern hemisphere and tried to call it back. Or the mid-winter festivities of ancient Celts who could not be certain they would survive the deep winter "famine months," and so held the last feast celebration of the year, slaughtering cattle that could not be fed over the long winter, drinking wine and beer that had finally fermented. Feasts, dancing, singing - on this night, when the earth's axis tilts farthest from the sun, and darkness seems poised to overtake the earth, mid-winter festivals sprang up world-wide, for it was not only the dead of winter, but the eve of the return of the light. Flame was pre-eminent. The glow of candles and the crackle of bonfire fractured the black night, sent despair packing. On song and laughter lilted belief in life's fierce power; gratitude that tomorrow, the shadows would shorten.

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My husband, Peter, and I have celebrated Solstice for forty years. We celebrate Christmas, too: sing the carols - *Oh Come, All Ye Faithful* - whose words are less important to us than they way our mouths enjoy their shape, familiar as the taste of Christmas cookies, or the soft flannel of the stockings we hang over the hearth, or the cold-needle smell of the tree that stands in the corner. We walk to the Christmas service in the United Church just across the marsh and join in praise of the birth of a baby. We buy presents and have enormous meals along with everyone else.

Yet because there are so few of us here in our northern valley; because there are no cars on the road, no shops, no streetlights; because night, here, is truly silent; because the stars and the dust of the Milky Way over the farmhouse roof are bewildering in their infinitude; because the land is close, and frozen, and holds us like a chalice: Solstice is always the beginning, and, for me, the most necessary of the season's festivities.

In the earliest days of our celebration, when the children were young, we held a sit-down formal dinner for twenty-one, a long trestle table set corner to corner in the same room as the shimmering Christmas tree. Every room in the house was lit by candles. The rooms were dusky, alive with the pulse of shadows, smelling of garlic, cinammon, and the spruce tree. Afterwards, we moved to the piano for entertainment: a father-son trombone duet, performances on penny whistle and bodhrain, poems written for the occasion, singing.

Now, we've changed the format. Still there are the same four families who celebrate together; and although only some of us are related, we feel like family. We live within walking distance and can reach each other's houses either by road, or by following paths that wind through woods, over pastures, along frozen brooks. The evening starts at one house, with hors d'oeuvres. When we're done, dressed in our best - suits and ties, gowns, the little girls wildly excited in long dresses - we crunch across the dirt road to the next house, our breath ghosting. Moonlight gleams on the icicle-hung spruces. Soup, bread, and wine at the second house. Salmon or turkey at the third. And at the fourth, chocolate truffles, fruitcake, ice cream roll.

In-between is the traverse through darkness, feeling the icy breath of the forest, hearing squeak of boot on snow, bearing frost-smelling coats into warm

kitchens. In-between is the starry sky, the black universe beneath which we understand our need for one another. We progress from home to candle-lit home: grateful for food, for warmth, for companionship.

At the end of the feasting, we cover our finery with old coats and step outside. In the moonlight, windowpanes glint, ice crystals quiver; yet there's a new light, a path leading into darkness, each side lit with candles set in paper bags. The path winds in serpentine loops and ends at a pile of logs and brush. When we're gathered, someone stoops, holds match to paper. Silent fire; then a crackle, a hungry spread until the bonfire pulses, its centre white hot. Sparks shoot into the darkness, more human, somehow, than the blue and silver stars so far above.

It's still a kind of propitiation, akin to the ones made by the ancient peoples who begged the sun to return.

Perhaps ours might be: *May we live well and be not alone, here beneath the winter sky, in the chalice of mystery.*