

Lighting the Christmas Tree: An Invitation to Contemplation

It is December: we have entered the dormant, waiting time of the year.
Nature seems to be asleep beneath the blanket of snow and ice.

Or, in the words of longtime faculty member Loretta Dornisch, OP:

The world is wombed in whiteness;
From the death of yesterday
And tears
Has spawned a newness
That trembles with expectancy.
The oval curve of whiteness
Growing fuller with each breath
Is sign
Of holy freshness
And re-birth from hidden death.

The season is dark, and all that is becoming is hidden from sight;
we approach the Winter Solstice and the seeming end of light;
but its power has soaked into earth as gently and relentlessly as dew already germinating new
life beneath the frozen fields.

The ancient combination of these natural phenomena with multiple layers of religious symbolism
have given rise to numerous December festivals: 8 days of Hanukkah in the Jewish tradition, 4 weeks
of Advent and 12 days of Christmas in Christianity, the ancient Yule of Wiccans, *Winter Solstice* of
Native Peoples, the Shinto festival of *Tohji-Tasai* and the 7 days of *Kwanzaa* celebrating the ancestral
values of our African American/Canadian sisters and brothers.

It is Winter in Wisconsin: far out of the south, the winter light comes thin and milky.

The days grow shorter and colder and the nights longer and longer.

Try as we may, we cannot fully dismiss the fundamental feelings elicited by this experience—
feelings that lie deep at our roots, feelings that are a mixture both dark and sweet.

Will the sun, source of life, ever return or has the great light abandoned us forever?

Nature and Mystery together invite us to recognize--in our hopeful longing for the return of the
sun--the deepest longings of the human heart for
light and warmth in the midst of darkness and cold,
for connection and solidarity in the midst of division and repression of diversity,
for unity, harmony, justice and peace in our relationships
with friends, family, community, nation, world
and earth itself...
for new life to arise from the death of winter.

And so, like our ancestors before us--who wooed the sun back into the sky through various winter rituals--we bring a fir tree—ein Tannenbaum mit immergrün Blätter (= A fir tree with its' evergreen leaves)—into our dwellings, hoping that it might share not only its shape and smell and color, but its secret for staying ever-green, ever-living, ever-hopeful and ever serene in the midst of the darkness and cold of winter.

Note what we do to the tree once we have brought it in: Lights and ornaments, fruits and foods, gifts and gimmicks draw our attention each day to THIS tree, evoking our wonder, inviting our contemplation.

- ❁ Look ever more closely... perhaps you will learn something of the secret way of the tree: always ready to share its beauty, fragrance, oxygen and shade; the singing in its branches, and its dancing in the wind—all that it is and all that it has is freely, unreservedly, indiscriminately, unconditionally, all-inclusively given to anyone and everyone.
- ❁ Look again, see the many branches of different shapes, sizes and conditions; linked in community cooperating in a common task, making the world more wondrous and beautiful in its utter simplicity.
- ❁ Look again and perhaps we will rediscover the light we may have unwittingly covered with a barrel in the mad rush to hoard and consume, compete and control, pursuing the kind of success that leaves us empty, alone and cold.

Do we dare hope that this year, the hustle and bustle, the baking and decorating, the singing and celebrating--even the lighting of this tree--will touch us deeply and awaken us to the possibility of new life arising from the dark and apparent death of winter?

In the midst of rushing through to the end of the semester and multiple preparations for the coming feasts, this Tannenbaum shares its secret: there really is a light waiting in the darkness—ready to reveal that “Earth’s crammed with heaven and every common bush afire with God.” Perhaps we should “take off our shoes.”*

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* This final quote is from Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s poem, Aurelia. The allusion is to the story of Moses and the Burning Bush; see the Book of Exodus, Chapter 3.