

# The Long Night Ahead

Unitarian Universalist Church of Olinda

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*Solstice Eve Sunset © 2020 Rod E.S.Q.*

When the sun sets at 5:03pm tonight we will go through the two longest nights of the year, with only a short day in between.

We will welcome newly-lengthening days

in what has already been a dark season... not only have the days been shorter for the last few months, but we've come from even longer months of uncertainty, and a string of bad news, including sombre numbers that continue to climb worldwide.

And it's looking like, in many ways, it might get worse before it gets better. Even with slowly brighter days, there will be cold months, and for many among us, they may well be lonely months.

What can we look forward to in this long season upon another long season?

Kari Leibowitz is a health psychologist, who spent some time in Norway – during the winter. She spoke with many people around the country and her findings on how Norwegians cope with long and dark winters are outlined in an article from the Guardian called *Dreading a dark winter lockdown? Think like a Norwegian.*

Among her observations, she saw that Norwegians appear to have developed coping skills for long dark winters that go beyond solid housing and warm clothing – a lot of it seemed to come down to

mindset. Many Norwegians, it seems, have become used to looking forward to winter, shifting their sense about many of the things that might make winter feel dreadful, and regarding these as features, rather than bugs.

This shift in attitude also seemed to increase with latitude. And the further north she went, the more people exhibited strong anticipation for winter, to the point that they were puzzled at the idea that there were people who don't look forward to winter!

This was tied to the Norwegian concept of *koselig*, which – like its Danish cousin *hygge* – is a bit hard to translate, but in English we might articulate it as that sense of “coziness” that comes when we snuggle down with a blanket and a warm drink, for a quiet time in the winter, with some treats and maybe a good book or movie.

The concepts of *koselig* and *hygge* give witness to an approach in which, not only is embracing a measure of leisure acceptable, but that this can be outright glorified as a goal in itself.

For those of us to whom it is possible, winter may allow us some permission to slow down – to embrace the kind of leisure activities that we're conditioned to think of as lazy or unproductive. In the context of winter, sitting down and enjoying the space of our home curled up with a favourite pastime is perfectly reasonable – in the context of a pandemic, it is a public health imperative, as doing a bit less is precisely what the doctors are prescribing.

This is not to say that “it all comes down to attitude” – there are a lot of other social, economic, political, and environmental factors in play. There are realities about people's situations that cannot be fixed with an attitude shift. What Kari Leibowitz found in her research in Norway is not that people can get away from winter or pretend that it doesn't exist, but that we may have more agency on how we encounter it, than we might realize.

Already in this protracted pandemic season, many of us have been able to identify some advantages that weren't there before, such as finding that we might need to do less driving, for instance, or that other expenses we would otherwise incur might no longer seem necessary.

These specific examples will not be true for everyone, but chances are that you might find some opportunities, if you're in the lookout for them. In our church community, some of our members have found it easier to connect to Sunday services, and other church activities, when they couldn't before – although the opposite has also been true for other members.

The point of finding the opportunities in this extended winter is not to pretend that there aren't challenges – but to rather recognize them, and if possible, even embrace some of those challenges as potential sources of growth. And if we are fortunate enough to find opportunities in these challenges, we might also be able to offer what we can when we encounter folks who are struggling.

Many of you have done that, be it in connecting with members who could use further connection, or in volunteering gifts of time or even money to organizations that need additional assistance. This has always been part of the holiday spirit – and now is even truer than before.

Aside from bringing greater exposure to many of the social inequalities and environmental issues of our time, this protracted season has also shown surprising resilience among the world community. I have already spoken about the incredible news of such a fast development of several viable vaccines – and I'll continue to explore that story, as it is hard to overstate – because it shows that we *can* be capable of facing incredible challenges, even exceeding expectations about what could be possible. The most optimistic estimates were 12 to 18 months – approvals came in in just under a year... and just a few months ago, many were expressing doubts as to whether they'd even be possible.

Shifting our attitudes about winter and lockdown is not about ignoring the additional anxieties that come with winter... and with pandemic season – it is about being open to recognizing what is possible in making these seasons spaces for self and social improvement.

There seems to be a Norwegian saying: “There is no such thing as bad weather, only bad clothes.” And as winter arrives, reflecting on the story we tell ourselves about this time may just help us find the proper kind of clothes, the right tools, to endure, and perhaps even enjoy, this quieter time.

My friends, as we head out into the long night of the year that is winter, we do so with the knowledge that the longest night of the year will have already passed after tomorrow.

My friends, as of Monday, the days will begin to get longer and light will slowly be ever more present in our lives – just seconds and minutes at a time... barely enough to notice it day to day. And, day to day, we will come to a time when the light will be more than dark. We are now in the Great Advent as, day to day, people are gaining protection from the virus. This improvement will be small and slow, silent as whispers.

And as spring and summer arrive, my friends, it will eventually be clear that we can again breathe outside, and in each other’s homes, in the physical presence of each other. Each day from now on will still be important, as we cozy up when we can, and reach out, as we are able.

So may it be,  
In Solidarity,  
Amen

*Suggested Hymns:*

## **Opening Hymn #46 Now the Day Is Over**

Words: v. 1, Sabine Baring-Gould, 1834-1924,

~)-| vs. 2-5, Marye B. Bonney, 1910-

Music: Friedrich Filitz, 1804-1860

WEM IN LEIDENSTAGEN

## **Hymn #55 Dark of Winter**

~)-| Words & Music: Shelley Jackson Denham, 1950- ,

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WINTER MEDITATION

## **Closing Hymn #58 Ring Out, Wild Bells**

Words: Alfred Lord Tenyson, 1809-1892

Music: Percy Carter Buck, 1871-1947, © Oxford University Press

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