

A CELEBRATION OF DARKNESS

This is 'the darkest time of year', with the longest nights and shortest days. Late November and early December is a time of darkness, black tree trunks, grey skies, black water in ponds at dusk, all as we 'descend' into the deep midwinter and the solstice.

I think about the darkness and how we humans relate to it. Light comes from the sky above and darkness rests in the earth below. Much of the earth's animal life has gone into this darkness. They have curled into hibernation; frogs are buried deep in the mud or at the bottom of icy ponds, beavers are down in their lodges with sticks and mud, keeping light out. Bears have found dens and raccoons, skunks and woodchucks have burrowed down, away from the light, for the months to come.

For these animals, this time of dark rest and solitude is a part of their natural cycle. For millennium humans also lived surrounded by darkness in the deep mid-winter. Our forebears had only small fires to light and warm their winter world. Winter darkness pulled people close to keep warm, catch up on indoor chores and sing or tell stories by the fire.

At this time of year, we break the darkness with bright seasonal illuminations; Hanukkah Candles, colorful blinking lights in windows, and cheerful Christmas trees. We have music celebrations and exuberant parties filled with activity, noise, elaborate food and drink. Our naturally dark world is ablaze with light and activity.

These seasonal celebratory lights, however, are a small part of the lights our communities have installed everywhere. Flying over much of America at night makes one realize how little darkness there is in much of our country. When we walk outside our homes, there are lights all around us, from neighbors' homes, street lights, passing traffic or the 24-hour lights of businesses. Even away from suburbs or cities, we have ambient night light in most places. I have read that 70% of Americans have never seen the Milky Way, not because they haven't been outside at night, but because ambient night light dims this array of stars in our own galaxy.

I am lucky because we live in the Catskill State Park that has miles and miles of forever-wild land. The darkest place in New York State is in these mountains, The Pepacton Reservoir, part of the water supply for New York City. Standing out on a hillside by this water, the darkness *reveals* the universe above us. Each star, each constellation, the broad sweep of the Milky Way has a clarity and depth that is profound. There is also a silence in the winter night that reminds us that the many, many creatures we saw buzzing, grazing and scampering last summer are now down below, sound asleep.

So when I go back to 'civilization', I always ask, "Are all these lights necessary?" Lights that burn all night in shopping malls, parking lots, flood lights in yards or even street lights in certain areas; would our life not be better without all this illumination?

Environmentalists often talk about changing light bulbs to change the world. It sounds like a small thing, but it has sparked a controversy in the on-going political debates and it *is* something we, as individuals, can

do. Not just change the light bulbs but turn off some lights first in our homes and also in our communities.

There may also be a message for us in this time of darkness. Natural darkness reveals things to us. It is not void; it is full of nature's gifts. If we celebrate darkness, who knows what we may find?

The darkness of Nature in November and December is not permanent. After the Solstice we begin to get snow and ice that catches the light and reflects colors of white and blue. It's as though Nature celebrates darkness on the way to her own method of illumination in the white and sparkling clarity of January and February.

It is a balance that is always found in Nature, which can show us ways to balance our own light and darkness.