

LIGHT IN THE DARKNESS

Story by Barry Fields

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December 21. I'm standing outdoors in a circle of some thirty people at five o'clock. The New Mexico sun has just set after the shortest day of the year. The long, cold desert night has begun, chilling my body in spite of the layers I'm wearing. We all hold gloved hands in the backyard of our host and leader, Carolyn Cobelo.

Statues of Hindu and Buddhist deities that decorate the grounds begin to fade into the darkness as Carolyn talks about the winter solstice as a time to come to terms with our personal darkness. She helps set the mood of the group, expectant yet contemplative, and offers these words: "Let us pray that in the hour of darkness we find the light that dwells within our hearts. Let us pray that we let this light shine forth to guide us and to give us strength to recognize that within the light, there is darkness, and within the darkness there is light."

I have participated in Carolyn's ceremonies marking solstices and equinoxes for several years, gathering with the friends she invites. A spiritually oriented filmmaker from Santa Fe, Carolyn helps me find personal meaning as I take stock of my life, in sync with the passing of the seasons. A serious-minded woman who has traveled the world visiting sacred sites, Carolyn has a round face, throaty voice, and soft smile. She sees solstices and equinoxes as times of powerful alignments that affect our bodies, minds and spirits. "When those relationships take place there's an opportunity to expand spiritually, to find peace.... It's important to connect to cycles of the earth we're intricately involved with."

I ask her why she invites up to forty people to mark these events. "A ceremony with other people intensifies the experience and helps people feel they're not alone in their cycles of death and rebirth. They can do this by joining together. There's a sense of communion and reunion. In our world, loneliness is probably one of our deepest wounds, and it helps create a community." In bringing together this community, Carolyn enacts a modern version of celebrations that go back to Neolithic times, spanning many cultures throughout the world. Often, special places were designated for these events. Some prehistoric ceremonial sites were constructed along a line of sight with the winter solstice sunset, like Stonehenge in England, or sunrise, most famously New Grange in Ireland. The solstice may have marked the time when cows were slaughtered and the last feast was held before the famine months. The death and rebirth theme found expression in various sun gods, worshiped by civilizations as far flung as the Aztecs, Greeks and Romans, Egyptians, Hindus and Africans.

The winter solstice is that moment at which the sun is at its greatest distance and angle from our hemisphere, the instant when it stops its southern journey to begin its return to the north. The word solstice comes from Latin: sol means sun, and sistere, to

stop. In the West, December 25 (the day of the solstice in the old Julian calendar) marked pagan celebrations of sun gods, such as Apollo, at the time of the Roman Empire.

Carolyn always incorporates candles in her ceremonies to represent "light in the darkness." Moving indoors to escape the cold, we crowd into her dimly lit living room, each person holding a candle. Carolyn lights hers, and with its flame lights the candle of her neighbor, until all the candles in the circle are lit. "By lighting someone else's candle, you're recognizing the light within that person." The growing light in the room seems more intense because of the silence we keep.

I feel more connected to the group and my own heart as we sing and chant together. Carolyn calls chanting... "a unifying force. It raises the vibration level and the sounds themselves tend to be healing." Similarly, we sing uplifting hymns and songs. "The words remind people of the existence of spiritual reality," Carolyn says. She selects songs ranging from "Amazing Grace" to John Lennon's "Imagine."

Turning inward is part of winter and darkness. So Carolyn includes a brief period of silent meditation, which "takes us within to our inner self" She always prepares a prayer. True prayer, she contends, is "a method of opening yourself up to receive blessings. It can also be for forgiveness." Because I trust Carolyn, I allow her invocations to resonate through me. "Let us know, deep within, that out of the darkness comes the light, and that light is love in all its forms. Let us dissolve our fears of loving and being loved and stand in the light, naked and true."

A ceremonial element of Carolyn's own devising, one not necessarily found in ancient community traditions, is voluntary sharing. "For the solstice I ask people to think about what they've realized in the past year and what they'd like to initiate in the New Year. How we found light in the darkness... It's very cathartic to express intimate thoughts in a group where you feel secure and respected. People often come up to me afterward and say how much it meant to them." One time I talked about how yoga practice brought light into my life by alleviating long-time shoulder pain. I felt deep gratitude as I told the group about my experiences.

Then we feast, a traditional part of many cultures' winter solstice celebrations from time immemorial. Even if nowadays we don't fear starving in the winter, "it's a communal experience, and pleasurable. The feasting gives a sense of security and community." Carolyn generously prepares a main course for the group, a way for her to acknowledge and share Earth's bounty, and the rest of us bring complementary dishes. It's another form of sharing that makes the whole evening memorable and significant to me.

Carolyn encourages others to adapt these traditions to build their own rituals and festivities to share with their community of friends and family. If you already celebrate Christmas, she says, you can still add a solstice celebration to your calendar. "The purpose of all these ceremonies is to help us let go of the past, be in the present, moving forward in our lives, unburdened by pain and fear... It gives us nourishment and security and uplifts us in our evolution... I've always felt that these events bring an inner security." Which is as important now as ever.

For more information on Carolyn Cobelo's ceremonies & sacred journeys, visit her website at <http://www.AkashaEntertainment.com>