Seasons of Light and Darkness: Entering Winter's Dark Season

by Barbara Ardinger illustrations by Lauren Foster-MacLeod

The universe is holographic; therefore, each of us is a little universe. Just as the cycles of the seasons dance on cosmic levels, so do they dance in our personal lives.

To everything there is a season," wrote Wisdom ages upon ages ago. "To everything there is a season, and a time for every purpose under the sun." Even the early prophets and priests of the Hebrew tribes understood the concept of cyclical time; even they, whose tents and temples housed figures of Ashera along with the invisible Yahweh until the time of the Babylonian Captivity, even they, whose women persisted in serving cakes .and wine to the Queen of Heaven because they remembered Her mercies. Linear time didn't come till later, not until after the groves had been hewn down, after Lilith and Shekinah had been banished, after Astarte and Her other goddesses had been demonized, after Their daughters had been captured or murdered. In the beginning, though, even the old men knew the cycles that measured the days and seasons of the Earth and Her children:

A time to be born and a time to die; a time to plant and a time to pluck up that which is planted;

A time to kill and a time to heal; a time to tear down and a time to build up;

A time to weep and a time to laugh; a time to mourn and a time to dance;

A time to embrace and a time to refrain from embracing;

A time to lose and a time to seek; a time to tie up and a time to untie;

A time to rend and a time to sew; a time to keep silent and a time to speak (Ecclesiastes 3:1-7)

This ancient poem has long been recognized as an expression of a universal truth. It was even (remember?) turned into a rock 'n' roll hit by the Byrds back in the liberating '60s. But even as the 1960s brought some progress, brought much dancing and laughing and embracing; the cycle of the seasons turned as it always does. We came into the regressive 1980s, when, yes, fortunes were built up by some, but justice was torn down for many others; when some of us who had formerly felt free to speak now kept silent (and, of course, others decided it was their turn to speak out); and when a terrible disease kept many of us from embracing.

With Hallows and Yule, we're entering the dark season of another year, another cold season, another season of apparent death and disintegration. But Yule is not really the beginning of winter. As June 21 is Midsummer, so is December 21 truly Midwinter, for the solstice is the turning point of the season. For millennia before the birth of a certain Jewish baby, people celebrated a more vital birth. During the fall, the early tribes had harvested their fields, gone hunting one more time before the game migrated south or went into hibernation, and stored up as much food as they possibly could, even slaughtering livestock they thought might not survive the cold. They placated the Pooks and other earth spirits with treats so no unkind tricks would be played human­kind.

During the lengthening nights after the final harvest that some called Samhain, people preferred to stay indoors. This season was, for some, the only time all year they had to practice arts and crafts, to do their "inner work." As they worked, therefore, watching the days become shorter and shorter, they felt the sun grow weaker and weaker. As each month waxed and waned, so did each year, and the dark season must been as frightening as the dark moon often was. The winter season was a time for returning spirits, not always friendly and other manifestations, ambiguous and not always beneficent. Remember Ebenezer Scrooge and his three Spirits of Christmas? Dickens was working with ancient tradition when he wrote his Christmas Carol, and though we moderns have forgotten it, his Victorian readers still knew what those Spirits could portend.

Finally -Winter Solstice, which is also the year's dark moon . If we can get past this longest night, people must have said to each other, if we can survive the cold and the dark and the spirits and their tricks, then this awful corner of the year will be turned. The cycle of the seasons will restart itself.

And the next day -hooray! The sun's reborn!

We’ll have light and warmth for another year! The seasons turned, plants and animals will awaken in the earth's ever-renewing warmth, people will receive both cosmic and personal gifts, and life will go on.

Christmas was first celebrated on January 6 (about 350 years after the birth it commemorates). About 450 C.E. the date of Jesus' birth was moved to December 25 so the new god could partake of the ancient power of the solstice, which is actually the birth date more solar gods: Aeon, Attis, Baldur, Chango, Dionysus, Frey, Helios, Horus, Jesus, Mithras, Oiris, Quetzalcoatl, and Tammuz. The Romans called this festival the Birthday of the Unconquerable Sun. The night b..e. fore, Christmas Eve, was celebrated by Celtic and Germanic people as Madranicht, Mother's Night.

. In the winter solstice, light is reborn. It's party time in the middle of our long winter's nap, a time when we can dance and drum and chase away our fears of the dark and its threatening spirits. The winter solstice is also the first day of Capricorn, which is ruled by Saturn, an old god who is both Old Father Time and the ancient King of the Golden Age. Saturn's wife is Ops, from whose name the word "opulent" is derived; Her festival is December 19. The Romans held a week-long carnival, the Saturnalia, during which the world was turned upside-down and society was ruled by the Fool.

Other festivals of light reborn in darkness are Hanukkah, Yule, and Kwanzaa, a modern African­ American celebration of the Nguzo Saba, or seven aspects of traditional African life. On each day of Hanukkah and Kwanzaa a new candle is lit and lessons and blessings are recited. Many people also decorate their houses and yards with lights, string decorations on sacred evergreens, burn scented candles, and receive gifts from a chubby old shaman who wears red, black, and white, and flies through the air drawn by magical reindeer.

The Grinch (whose name comes from a French verb, grincher, to growl or snarl) is my favorite Solstice character. He literally sees the light reborn. In the wonderful Dr. Seuss/Chuck Jones cartoon, the Whos pay no attention to the Grinch's midnight burglary. Instead, as morning arrives they gather in a circle and join hands, and as they sing a sweet song, a twinkling spark is born inside their circle. It touches all the Whos, both large and small, then rises as high as t he top of Mount Crumpet, where the Grinch lurks. The light touches him, too, and like Ebenezer Scrooge, he is reborn a better being.

Occultists like to intone, "as above, so below," which means that what happens on the universal scale (the macrocosm) also happens on the human scale (the microcosm), and on the subatomic scale as well. Modern (quantum) physics agrees, and Bell's Theory demonstrated that the universe is essentially con­sciousness, just one big thought. Because the universe is holographic, therefore, each of us is a little uni­ verse, and just as t he cycles of the seasons dance on cosmic levels, so do they dance in our personal lives.

I described the vitality of this cosmic dancing through the cycles of the seasons in a poem. I wrote on Card 22, The World, of the Tarot a few years ago. As I read the card, this is where we meet the Goddess face to face:

 In the dancing of the universe season,

cycle, ever-present axis of the world

jumping atom, arching stone

dance the maiden dreaming

hungry leaf, shining star

dance the mother toiling

weary hill, singing water

dance the crone fortelling

dance again, three times,

seven times, twelve times, time unbroken

spring awakening, summer flying,

fall declining, winter sleeping,

dance the measure of your heart,

circle the cadence of your mind-

whirling indivisible

cosmos ever dancing

As women we live our entire lives in cycles within cycles, in our moon cycles and our emotional cycles. We spend our first dozen years as maidens, then we become mothers (of invention if not of children who come through our bodies) for forty-odd years, then at last we find ourselves as crones. During our increasingly long lives, we're more and more likely to careen time and again between home and the world.

Winter the season of death, is the season of the crone, the third aspect of the Triple Goddess. And who is the crone in our modern world? How does the modern Witch know she’s become a crone? Two commonly-accepted qualifications are that she has passed both menopause and her second Saturn return.

The word "crone" entered the English language in 1552 and has an informative etymology. It comes from Old English , from the Middle Dutch caroonje ("dead body" or "old ewe") before that, from the Old North French carogne ("carrion ") before that, and originally from the Vulgar Latin mronia. The Latin stem is caro, "flesh," and the lndo-European root may be sker, ker, or kar. Related words include some pretty wintry ones: carrion, carnal, carnage, charnel, carnivorous, cuirass, and excoriate. The crone's the one who prepares us for death, the one who buries us. She's dying flesh herself.

It's out of all this etymology, it seems to me, that we derive and revive the idea of the death-hag, the One who fetches m into Her realm beneath the land of the living, the uppity old woman who unmanned the fathers of the churches, the scary godmother, the Life/ Death/ Life Goddess.

It 's tempting to relate the word "crone" to Chronos and "chronology," or time. Mary Daly does so in her Wickedary: the crone, she writes, is the "Grea t Hag of History, [the) long-lasting one; [the] Survivor of the perpetual craze of patriarchy, whose status is determined not merely by chronological age but by Crone-logical considerations; one who has Survived early stages of the Otherworld Journey and who has therefore Dis-covered depths of Courage, Strength, and Wisdom in her Self" (p. 114).

In many of the circles I lead, we have a candleless altar at Hallows. We meet in the dark and we meet both our ancestors and our own dark selves there. We begin to see our shadow selves. We do trance work to encounter the Old One and make friends with her, whether she's our own sweaty, jittery, menopausal self or still a far-off potential in our lives. We meet and dance with the Dark One in There who can be childish, jealous, self-pitying, mean, and generally nasty. Don’t deny it; the persona that psychologists call the Shadow Self is in there, and if we repress or neglect her she'll do her mischief out here. Occultists and ceremonial magicians know the Shadow Self the Dweller at the Threshold. They know there are demons in the universe, both intrinsic to our psyches and extrinsic. Most of the Witches I've met, on the other hand, simplistically idealize the Shadow Self. They nod knowingly, put on their pointy hats, and do a circle dance around a cauldron. They pretend it's all patriarchal projection upon innocent old herb- women. Not so. Winter and danger and the death-hag are real. Winter can still be an awful season.

In many circles, we light a candle at the winter solstice. The light is reborn. We've met the Dark One and know her a little better. And what happens to us and to the world six weeks later? The cycle moves again and it's Candlemas, the true beginning of spring when (except here in Southern California), early flowers push up through the snow and bloom; it's a new season, the time of initiation and renewal. The Crone drinks from the Well of Immortality at Candlemas, and so can we, every one of us.

So let us all celebrate the winter season and its place in the seasons of light and darkness in our lives. Let's celebrate all we can learn in and from this season. Join my circle sisters and me and sing with us. Here's a revised version of an old Christmas carol:

Joy to the world,

The Light is born.

Let earth begin to sing.

 Let every heart

Rejoice in the Light.

And heaven and nature sing,

And heaven and nature sing,

And heaven and earth and nature sing!

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