

# “Seeking Stillness on the Solstice”

Sermon by Rev. Duffy Peet

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Tomorrow marks the solstice. The solstice that occurs in December is the day each year that, in this part of the world, has the shortest amount of daylight. Having lived in the northern tier of states in this country my entire life, I am very familiar with what this time of year brings—long nights, cold temperatures, snow instead of rain and ice on the streets and sidewalks. Tomorrow signifies that winter is definitely here.

Winter, with all that it brings, tends to require more time and energy than the other seasons. Winter is generally a time when my overall activity level tends to slow, sometimes only a bit but sometimes substantially. This year, with the current surge in the number of COVID cases, it is quite likely that my activity level may be lower than for any prior solstice I can recall. I imagine the same may be true for some of you. Just like most of this year, this solstice isn't usual. It isn't simply exceptional. This solstice will be extraordinary, and I don't use that term in a positive way. We are all facing challenges and difficulties that are extraordinary. And we are all attempting to do our best to make it through all of the trials and tribulations this time is presenting us.

With the recent approval of two vaccines, there is hope that 2021 will be a dramatic improvement over 2020. But it will be several months before enough people will have received vaccinations to turn the tide on this pandemic. Until the vast majority of people are vaccinated, we will all remain in a state of heightened alert, anticipation and even anxiety. After months of being under siege by the virus, how will we find a way to cope with the ongoing stress? It seems to me that one of the things we will need to do is come to terms with the fact that our lives will quite likely be less active for the near future. I would go a step further to say that it might be advantageous for us to add more stillness to our lives. Taking steps to embrace and even seek out stillness, both externally and internally, could be beneficial to us and those around us as well.

Those of you who heard my sermon last Sunday titled “The Power of Stillness,” may recall that I indicated I would be talking about some stillness practices this week. Stillness practices can increase our ability to cope during times of significant stress. Stillness practices can help us conserve our energy, our power, so we don't exhaust ourselves on things that are beyond our ability to change.

During last week's sermon, I mentioned two different kinds of stillness practices. I spoke about my own experience of seeking and finding stillness sitting on a beach for hours watching and listening to the waves roll in. I suppose if you live near the ocean in the southern parts of our nation watching and listening to waves rolling in might be possible tomorrow. But for those of us here in southern Montana I am reasonably certain we would need to sit on the beach for several months before we would notice any waves on the lake. By then, it is quite likely that we would suffer from hypothermia, frostbite or even worse. But there is another more seasonally appropriate way to seek moments of stillness during this time of year. For longer than we know, people have gathered around fires in the out-of-doors to celebrate on the longest night of the year. These gatherings go back in time much farther than any other holiday we celebrate today. From the history we have about solstice celebrations, we know that people would gather to keep warm, to give thanks for the food they had been provided that year, to entreat the sun to return, and to ask for a bountiful year ahead. I believe it is also quite probable that people in centuries past would do the same thing that many people of today do when standing or sitting next to a fire. They would stare into the flames until they would find themselves transfixed. I am sure all of us can recall times when we have sat looking into a fire, or at a flame, allowing our mind to wander to the point of having it go blank, and losing track of time. It is a universal human experience—an experience of stillness. I invite you to take a few moments now to recall a time when you have stared into a fire, or at a flame, and become transfixed. It could be a time from the distant past, from yesterday, or it might be a collage of times over the course of your life. See the fire or the flame in your mind's eye. Allow yourself to bask in the glow of the fire or flame you see. (Pause) Notice what begins to occur. (Pause) It is quite likely that many of you had pleasant memories float into your mind, memories that were accompanied by feelings. If

that was the case for you I imagine you may have noticed yourself becoming relaxed, calm, or even peaceful. I hope that is the case for many if not all of you. It is clear to me that during these very difficult times, all of us need to find ways to reduce the impacts of the stress we are under.

During my sermon last week I also talked about meditation as a stillness practice. Many of the world's religious traditions teach or encourage meditation practices. I know a number of you engage in meditation practices from the Buddhist tradition. The Fellowship has had a Buddhist spiritual pluralism group for several years. Since COVID arrived in Montana that group hasn't been meeting. I have been assured that once the pandemic has passed and we are back in the building the group will start up again. You can find the contact person for the group in the Fellowship's December's newsletter which is on our website.

If Buddhist meditation is something you are interested in exploring, you can check out the Bozeman Dharma Center. During recent months they have been meeting via Zoom. To learn more about this local organization go to their website at [bozemandharmacenter.org](http://bozemandharmacenter.org), all one word with no spaces or capital letters. Over the past several decades, the scientific community has even begun developing meditation practices. The research that is being done on meditation is quite convincing. Stilling one's body and mind for periods of time can have significant beneficial effects on a person's mental, emotional and physical well-being.

Something else I mentioned last week was prayer. My experience with Unitarian Universalists has been that prayer isn't often talked about. And there have been several times when I have used the word prayer in Unitarian Universalist circles when the response I received seemed to indicate prayer wasn't worthy of attention or consideration. I recognize that some of you may have little, if any, interest in prayer. For those of you who have a prayer practice or who are interested in exploring prayer as a way of finding stillness, I offer the following quote by Meister Eckhart. "If the only prayer you ever say is thank you, it will be enough." Like meditation, there are many types of prayer. One of the types of prayer is contemplating what there is to be thankful or grateful for, and then finding a way to express that thankfulness or gratitude. During this pandemic there is so much we have lost or given up. If we focus all of our attention on these things we can soon be overrun with feelings of sorrow, grief, frustration, anxiety, anger or any number of other emotions. Such emotions can become quite mentally, emotionally and physically draining after even a relatively short period of time. In order to reenergize ourselves, we need a way to shift our focus and lift our spirits. A prayer practice of attending to what we are thankful for can offer a welcome relief and can remind us of how much more there is to life than what we have lost or given up.

So far I have been talking about stillness practices that involve minimal bodily movement. But some stillness practices involve movement that is deliberate and slow. When I was in my twenties I studied a form of the martial arts known as tai chi. I had the privilege of studying with a man who lived in a Taoist monastery in Taiwan from the age of 6 to 16. Before he began teaching any of the tai chi moves to the new students, me included, we first had to learn how to breathe. And then he taught us how to take what he referred to as the horse stance. The horse stance didn't mean we had to stand like a horse. Instead we learned to stand in a manner that looked like we were sitting astride a horse. He would have us take this posture and stay in it for several minutes at a time while practicing our breathing. There are other martial arts, like Qi Gong, that similarly encourage a person to move the body slowly while focusing on the breath. Both of these practices allow a person to both center and root themselves physically while focusing and stilling the mind.

Another practice that involves slow, deliberate movement while focusing on the breath is yoga. Yoga is something that has become very popular in this country and other parts of the world. A 2016 study by the Yoga Journal and the Yoga Alliance reported that there were over 36 million yoga practitioners in the United States. That was an increase of 16 million practitioners reported by a similar study in 2012. From those numbers I imagine some of you have likely engaged in the practice of yoga. If you know anything at all about yoga you know that it involves a variety of physical stances or poses. Like the martial arts forms I spoke of earlier, it is important in yoga to learn to breathe properly. Some styles of yoga conclude a practice session with the practitioner lying still on their mat for a period of time. This is a time for the body and the mind to find quiet rest.

I could cite many other stillness practices but it is my hope that by now you have gotten the message I am attempting to convey. First, that there are many, many ways to engage in a stillness practice. And second, that engaging in a stillness practice can have an array of beneficial effects on a person's life.

So as we reach the solstice, a day that has been considered by many over the course of human history to be the beginning of a new year, this could be a good time to set an intention for the year that lies ahead—an intention to engage in a practice that will bring stillness into your life during this challenging time we find ourselves in.

So may it be.