

*Speaking of Faith* column – For publication December 19, 2019

### *Solstice Awe*

Before we strap ourselves into December's high-speed toboggan ride, behold the darkness! Step out into the starry outdoors of the longest nights. The Winter Solstice is nigh.

The pagan DNA in me rejoices these days. Don't get me wrong. I love my chosen faith. Brought up in the Episcopal tradition, I found the Unitarians in midlife. UU worship, relevant and doctrine-free, awoke the spiritual seeker in me and set my life on a new course. I delighted in its embrace of all beliefs, truth in poetry, and encouragement to search for meaning.

And...I love thinking way back and imagining a time before western religions had splintered into so many canons and entities. Visiting Santa Fe last week brought me within inches of such a time. On display at the Museum of Indian Arts and Cultures, dozens of cases of pottery, unearthed locally, depicted centuries of life of some twenty Native New Mexican cultures. Each one had (and still has) a clear identity – its own culture and beliefs, its own language, its own distinct look imprinted on every bowl.

The clay bowls dated back to pre-colonial times. Native hands had created them at exactly the time when, in Europe's "Middle Ages," monks in monasteries toiled over illuminated manuscripts. My most memorable discovery at the museum was a Native bowl dated the year 200 CE. Just as powerful Christian clerics were quarreling over which writings to include in the Bible, a skilled potter shaped it. A mother fed her babe from it. Imagine these civilizations thriving across the globe from one another, unaware of the other's existence.

This time of year takes me even further back to when the cold dark days, each shorter than the last, frightened people. Without the sun, crops had withered. People were hungry and cold. As they learned that the sun does return, solstice traditions sprang up. Bonfires in the fields, calling the sun back. Pouring spiced cider on crops and apple trees, so they'd produce well the next year. Gifts of fruit spiked with cloves, oranges and apples representing the sun. Baskets of evergreens – thought to be sacred because they didn't "die" – and holly, to invite nature sprites and fairies to join in the festivities. On the night of the solstice, called Yule, people would drag a giant log into the house – sometimes a whole tree – the largest end would go into the fireplace while the rest of it stuck out into the room!

Spared the uncertainty and fear of our ancestors, today we *celebrate* the solstice. To this day, the dance of sun, earth and moon awes us. The night sky invites us to time-travel back to those druids and monks and Native families who looked up and wondered, "Who am I? Why am I here? What does it all mean?"

Behold the darkness this week. Invite the intimacy of sitting 'round a fire with others; nursing a baby at night; leaning into a loving embrace. Let us experience awe in its many forms.

*Rev. Betsy Mead Tabor serves the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of the Eastern Slopes (UUFES) in Tamworth Village, a congregation known for its diversity and inclusion. All are welcome, all Sundays, at 10 a.m.*