



## Light in the Darkness

In the northern hemisphere, December 21<sup>st</sup> is the shortest day of the year, the Winter Solstice. On that day, there are less hours of daylight than any other day. And for us in this hemisphere, the dark hours are darker because we are tilted away from the sun and get less reflected light. Suicide rates go up, hospitalizations for accidents and mental disorders go up, new prescriptions for antidepressant medication are written and filled.

Our bodies take their rhythms from the amount of light in our surroundings. The hormone melatonin is produced in our brains in response to low light conditions. Melatonin causes drowsiness and may make our dreams more vivid. Melatonin is produced from another brain neurochemical, serotonin. Among other functions, serotonin regulates our moods, making us feel more contented and at peace. During the dark days and nights of winter, as our bodies make more melatonin, our serotonin supply is depleted. Many people experience a deepening depression at this time of year.

Perhaps that is why so many traditions offer us celebrations to light up the darkness. There is Solstice itself, celebrated with light in both ancient and modern times and in many places across the globe. Christmas lights up the night sky for about a month, with civic decorations, businesses decorated and lights on peoples' homes. Chanukah invites us to place our lights in the window for all to see for eight nights. And Kwanzaa candles are lit for seven nights starting on December 26.

But what does it mean to light up the darkness? It is simply a matter of candlepower and watt hours? In darkness, light can be a way of getting attention or a way of seeing ahead. If we let the lights of December be just candlepower and watt hours, we're simply getting attention with our light displays. It costs money to fuel all those lights, and it helps no one.

So, how does the light in the darkness help us see ahead? It helps when we gather together with friends and family to enjoy a meal. Looking around at the younger members of the group, it's hard to imagine that tomorrow won't come. Even if you fear that it won't be a better day. Somehow, we just can't think in terms of children not growing up and having lives. It helps when we invite new people into our lives, even for just a moment. Sharing the joy of neighborhood

displays on walk allows us to make new connections and see the world through each other's eyes. It helps when we are called upon to explain what the lights are for. Teaching someone else about our particular traditions reminds us of what's most important.

In the early 1990s, the county where I lived went bankrupt. The schools were all told that their budgets were to be cut by 23%, mid-year. Many teachers, myself included, were warned that layoffs were coming because of the crisis. Someone posted the following notice on the staff bulletin board, "Due to the current fiscal crisis, the light at the end of the tunnel has been turned off until further notice."

Now, that made us laugh because it felt so true. We couldn't see how we were to go on with our lives. I was one of those laid off because I had been one of the last hired. The other teachers were left with higher class sizes and smaller budgets for their classroom supplies. Like all of those laid off, I was left without a job in a market with lots of unemployed teachers. Many of us moved because of that bankruptcy. Our lives and the lives of our families were terribly disrupted.

The teachers at my school did something wonderful for us. Those who kept their jobs got together and ran a collection. Each one of us that were laid off received a "Light at the End of the Tunnel" box filled with items we might need. There were packs of resume paper, pens, copy cards for Kinko's, stamps, envelopes, and a letter of thanks and good luck from our colleagues. It was little enough and yet, it showed us a way forward. It was a light in the darkness.

The food bank where I do volunteer work was robbed on the day a special food drive was delivered to us. Someone opened the locked container and made off with well over \$1,000 worth of donations. It seemed a very dark time when someone would steal from those who are hungry. With the economy as depressed as it is, we weren't sure how or if we could make up for the loss. When the local newspaper picked up the story on the police scanner, they sent a reporter who started a whole cascade of events.

The story was printed in the next day's issue of the local paper, the Marana Weekly News. The editor reworked his front page to cover it. The morning team from a local radio station read about it and set up an impromptu remote show at a nearby shopping center. They told all of their listeners where they were and what had happened, asking them to drop by with food or money donations. One of the local TV reporters was on her way to work and heard the radio show. She got her boss to let her come cover the story in person. By the

end of that day, the community had come together to donate almost as much as was lost.

The next day, the people who had run the original food drive called to say that they were doing it all over again, to give folks a chance to make a difference. And one local homeowner stood outside his house collecting donations from everyone who stopped by to look at his 50,000-light bulb display. By the end of the week, we'd received much more than had been stolen. Our community came together to shine a light in the darkness of some very hungry people and those are trying to feed them!

This season, as we gather with those dear to us, may we learn to send that light ever farther into a world full of darkness. And if you are struggling now, may you see that light at the end of the tunnel growing ever larger and warmer in the days ahead.