

Standing on the Edge of Summer
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On the longest day of the year we stand on the edge of summer. The starwheel turns, clicking into place for the new season. Mary Oliver writes in her poem, *The Summer Day*:

*I don't know exactly what prayer is.
I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down
into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass,
how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields,
which is what I have been doing all day.
Tell me, what else should I have done?
Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?
Tell me, what is it you plan to do
with your one wild and precious life?"*

“Doesn’t everything die at last, and too soon?” Isn’t that the message of the Summer Solstice? The sun will stand still for a moment and the night will be short. Then, nearly imperceptibly, day by day, darkness will return. One day we’ll glance up at the clock and look out the window. The change in light will suddenly strike us and we’ll realize, in that moment, that the starwheel has turned again. Autumn will be upon us.

Here in the North, Winter Solstice brings hope in a time of cold and darkness – a promise that warmth and the harvest will return. But Summer Solstice brings a sobering message. Hope has come and filled our lives with light. Now it will begin to fade again, to bring us back to a fallow time, a time of darkness that all living things must experience. This is the message of the Summer Solstice. Enjoy the sun’s warmth. Enjoy the earth’s abundance, do something with this one wild and precious life. These things will not last forever.

It is no accident that celebrations of Saint John the Baptist fall within a few days of the longest day of the year. In many places in Europe, ancient records show that what was once a rite of celebration for the sun became a Christian celebration focused on Saint John. The old rites were banned and replaced, yet the traditions of burning bonfires remain; here in Quebec as well. In many places in the Northern Hemisphere, people will stay up all this night continuing the ancient tradition of tending large bonfires to symbolize the heat of the sun.

Still, why is it that this day comes with less fanfare than the Winter Solstice? Perhaps we feel less need to celebrate when the warmth of the days themselves are celebration enough. We who live in the land of two seasons, winter and roadwork, know what joy it is to simply leave the house without a coat. Perhaps that is

liberation enough, to walk out the door each morning feeling so amazingly unencumbered. There's a prayer for you: hands without gloves, arms without restriction, toes that reach out to touch the grass, hair that moves in the breeze. Thank you for this most glorious freedom. Amen.

But seriously, this is a good day to pay attention to the deeper questions. What will you do with this gift of summer sun? What will you do with this one wild and precious life?

Last month, when Nita Penfold came to lead the Spirit Play conference, she asked the attendees to reach back into their childhood memories, to a time when they felt awe and wonder or joy and freedom. She asked us to tap into those moments that are so present to children and that we often lose as adults.

What came to me was a summer memory: the late fading light of a long summer day; each blade of grass distinguishable one from the other; we children running and laughing; playing tag; hot and sweaty, dirt caked into our bare feet. We leaped with amazement that the adults had forgotten about us – and bedtime – as they sat and chatted on the porch. Their voices were soft and musical in the distance, while we children were free, free, free, running on a small patch of green accentuated by the dancing sparks of golden light from the evening's first fireflies. My brother tags me. "Freeze tag!" I stand frozen; but standing still is nearly impossible, I am so full of life.

That is my solstice moment. The sun standing still, night suspended forever, my life overflowing with happiness. In dark times, I reach back to that moment. Even as it ended in a flash, it is with me always – a wild and precious moment of life that remains, even as that summer evening has long faded away.

There are those who teach that the Summer Solstice is a good time to practice giving things away. We need to learn to truly appreciate the things we love. We must love what we love all the more, because they will not last forever.

That got me thinking of the film *Griefwalker*, a documentary that a group of us watched here not too long ago. Director and writer Tim Wilson tells of his own quest for meaning driven by a near-death experience, and a searing comment from his friend, palliative care counsellor, Steve Jenkinson. Lying in the hospital on life support after collapsing from a massive infection, Tim is joined by Steve.

"Steve came straight from the bush, in braids and buckskins, smelling of moose," Tim tells us. Steve sits beside Tim, says a prayer and puts a few buffalo hairs into a pouch, which he then places around Tim's neck. When Tim recovers, he resumes his life as if nothing had happened.

Not long after, Steve comments to him, "You don't sound like a man who has been given his life back." This shocks and angers Tim. The thought stays with him, and eventually leads him to make this film about Steve's work.

Steve is no ordinary Western palliative caregiver. He's a graduate of Harvard Divinity School, but he has embraced the ways of his Algonquin First Nation teachers. Throughout the film he shares a powerful and often startling philosophy of life and death that contrasts greatly with views of Western medicine and religion. We follow him through his encounters with patients and the wild beauty of his home territory. Really, it is a sparse but gorgeous film.

I've watched the film twice now, and there is so much that stays with me. Steve is almost shocking in his approach because he dares to tell the truth. Here I am, speaking about loving life, and yet, Steve would say, you cannot have life without death. The sun fills this day with light, and yet in the length of its stay is also the beginning of summer's ending.

"The cradle of your love of life is the fact that it ends," Steve tells Tim. "Death feeds everything that lives." This is the wisdom that other cultures know. Tim struggles to understand. Several years have gone by since his nearly fatal illness, and now his wife has given birth to a son who nearly dies. Tim wonders if he is paying a debt for having regained his own life. Is his son paying the price for Tim's lack of gratitude?

"No," Steve tells him. It is not about paying a price. "You walk around feeling grateful and indebted, yes, but you don't have to do something about it. You just need to walk around like it is true."

"Until you have the ability to see the flower and that it won't always be there...how much of the flower do you see? ...The real key to being grateful is not for the stuff that benefits you – that's easy. What about being grateful for the stuff that doesn't benefit you in the least? But you are grateful that it is in the world. Now you're seeing the big story. Now you're willing for life to be bigger than your life span, or your children's life span. Now you are getting somewhere."

I don't believe we each have to do great things with our lives. But I do believe we have to cherish this gift we have been given. No joy lasts forever. The sun does not shine down upon us without interruption. We live with clouds. We live with storms. We live with summers and winters, beginnings and endings. Can we learn to love it all?

The Fang people of Africa speak these words to the sun as it pierces through the dark:

*The fearful night sinks
Trembling into the depth
Before your lightening eye
And the rapid arrows
From your fiery quiver.
You tear her cloak*

*The black cloak lined with fire
And studded with gleaming stars—
With sparkling blows of light
Your tear the black cloak.*

Our lives can be draped in black cloaks. We can be overwhelmed by disappointments, illness, loss, and the uncertainty of the unknown. Isn't this the half of the equation that can be so hard to love? Yet the sun always returns to pierce that darkness. Even as it diminishes, even as we let it go, we know that the starwheel will turn again and again.

Let me end with this favourite poem of my husband's, one he has been reciting to me for years. It comes from the Italian poet, Salvatore Quasimodo.

*Ognuno sta solo sul cuor della terra
Trafitto da un raggio di sole:
ed è subito sera.*

*Each one stands alone on the heart of the earth
Pierced by a ray of the sun:
and it is suddenly evening.*

Make the most of the Summer Solstice. Evening will come. Make the most of this summer, whether you travel far or stay close to home. Pay attention. Fall down into the grass. Kneel down in the grass. Be idle and be blessed. Stroll through the fields or the park all day.

Whatever you do, make the most of this one wild and precious life, this beautiful gift you have been given.