

## NEGATIVE SPACE

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Yesterday was the shortest day of the year—the Winter Solstice, on which the sun appeared in the Northern Hemisphere's sky for its shortest period in this circle around our sun.

In these days of long nights and cold air, it is easy to see the negative. It is easy to see the grayness of the sky, the bareness of the trees. It is easy to let ourselves be sucked into the overwhelming dreariness of Winter.

But in the grayness, in the coldness, in the starkness of winter are necessary elements for the creativity of Spring. Just as the tulip bulb placed in the ground in the fall needs the cold of winter to burst forth into life come March or April, so do our spirits need the starkness of winter to rest and renew.

The Rev. Max Coots writes that “No one says much good of Winter / Except as something hard that exaggerates the Spring reprieve.” (Max Coots, “Winter,” in *Seasons of the Self*)

And while it is true that the hope of Spring is part of the celebration of Winter, I believe that Winter is something that should be celebrated in and of itself.

To practitioners of Wicca, the Winter Solstice is a holy day. Celebrated as Yule, the solstice marks the turning of a corner—from gradually diminishing daylight to longer and warmer days ahead.

Because of this, the holiday of Yule is often used as a time of introspection as well as a time of planning for the future.

In the 1960s and 70s, Roman Catholic priest (and decidedly unorthodox theologian) Matthew Fox articulated a theological framework called “Creation Spirituality” the basis for which is the wholeness and interdependence of all life, a resonant chord to many Unitarian Universalists.

Fox's Creation Spirituality seeks to connect Christian spirituality to the ancient and native theologies practiced in many places around the world—ancient Asian religions, indigenous North American spirituality as well as the Earth-centered ancient traditions of Europe.

Creation Spirituality, thus takes nature as a prime source of revelation, and views human beings as one small part of that nature. To Fox, God is everywhere—throughout all creation—and God takes many forms in our lives.

Fox teaches that humans need to work at finding our true selves—our deepest selves, the parts of us that are connected to the universe under layers of pain and affect and superficiality and fear. To Fox, the role of religious communities is to help people find this goodness within themselves and to make the connections necessary to foster what is good about all of creation.

In Creation Spirituality, the journey to what Thomas Aquinas calls “preserving the good” has four paths to it. Each of these paths corresponds to one of the seasons of nature, and each represents one way in which Fox views the interaction of God and humanity.

Spring is associated with the Creative Way—to Fox, the *Via Creativa*—the path of creativity, of birth, of new life. On this pathway, we are asked to see God in the freshness of creation and in the power of humanity to participate in that creation. The creative God is an artist whose medium is life.

Summer is associated with the Positive Way, the path of delight, awe, wonder and revelry. In the Summer Way, God is found in the brightness of light and the warmth of nature.

Autumn’s path is the journey of transformation, the *Via Transformativa*, in which we face compassion, justice, and healing. It is the path of the deepest and longest lasting work, the path on which “we take the energy of our creativity and apply it compassionately to the task of social transformation.” (Fox, *Sheer Joy*, p. 386)

The God of transformation is the God of generosity, of compassion, and of pure love. Fox challenges humans to imitate God through our own acts of compassion in life, and in doing so, to transform ourselves and our society.

And winter? The Winter Way is the *Via Negativa*—the Negative path—the path of darkness, silence, suffering, and, ultimately, of letting go. In the Winter Way, we face the God of mystery, of limitations, and of weaknesses. Along this journey, we face emptiness, nothingness, loneliness and isolation.

And while Fox intends these paths as ones to be traveled simultaneously—indeed he advocates for the development of worship services that touch on each of the four paths—this view of winter is a powerful and informative one.

In thinking about how to honor Winter most appropriately—to celebrate and find meaning in the Earth’s own *Via Negativa*—the time of emptiness and silence—the concept that comes to my mind is a Taoist one called *wu-wei*. I don’t pretend to understand it completely—and yet I bring it to you as something perhaps we can explore together.

I was first introduced to this concept as the notion of the “creative void,” that sometimes in order for creativity to happen, we must sit with emptiness first. Anyone who has ever had writer’s block is familiar with the frustrating side of that void—and anyone who has ever pushed through that block and written something new and wonderful is familiar with its power.

I’ve since learned that there are many ways to translate *wu-wei* from the Chinese. Some look at it as “natural action,” or the notion that we need to follow the rhythms of life in order to know when to act—and when not to.

Literally, the phrase means “without action,” and is often thought of as a state of perfect equilibrium, of harmony with all around you. ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wu\\_wei](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wu_wei))

It is also translated as “non-doing.” American Taoist teacher Ted Kardash describes the concept like this:

“*Wu-wei* refers to behavior that arises from a sense of oneself as connected to others and to one's environment. It is not motivated by a sense of separateness. It is action that is spontaneous and effortless. At the same time it is not to be considered inertia, laziness, or mere passivity. Rather, it is the experience of going with the grain or swimming with the current. Our contemporary expression, ‘*going with the flow*,’ is a direct expression of this fundamental Taoist principle, which in its most basic form refers to behavior occurring in response to the flow of the Tao.” (Ted Kardash, “Taoism—The Wu Wei Principle,” <http://www.jadedragon.com/archives/june98/tao.html>)

In the Tao te Ching, the concept is the subject of the third chapter, in which it is written:

*If you overesteem great men,  
people become powerless.  
If you overvalue possessions,  
people begin to steal.*

*The Master leads  
by emptying people's minds  
and filling their cores,  
by weakening their ambition  
and toughening their resolve.  
He helps people lose everything  
they know, everything they desire,  
and creates confusion  
in those who think that they know.*

*Practice not-doing,  
and everything will fall into place.*

(Translation by Stephen Mitchell, found on-line at <http://acc6.its.brooklyn.cuny.edu/~phalsall/texts/taote-v3.html#3>)

Later in Ted Kardash's article on *wu-wei*, he writes: “The principle of *wu-wei* contains certain implications. Foremost among these is the need to consciously experience ourselves as part of the unity of life that is the Tao. Lao Tzu writes that we must be quiet and watchful, learning to listen to both our own inner voices and to the voices of our environment in a non-interfering, receptive manner.” (Kardash)

He goes on to quote Chuang Tzu's interpretation of *wu-wei* as “purposeless wandering” and reflects on how difficult that is in a society where aims, goals and purpose are held in such high regard, where being a “productive member of society” is a high compliment.

And yet the pressures of our society are out of balance. Life cannot be a ceaseless Spring—endless creativity with no rest or transformation.

Every day, we learn more about what such living has done to our natural environment—living out of balance serves no one.

Again, Max Coots puts it so poetically. He writes, “When did we ever learn that life was always Summertime and Spring and harvest time? / When was it that someone guaranteed a year of twelve Julys, complete with everlasting picnics and never-ending potato salads? / What sort of quaint, mistaken almanac said Spring could come without December— / That life was all in June— / That May and August go on forever?” (Coots)

In order to let in creativity, one must experience the void—the negative space that Winter turns from metaphor into reality. In order for the time of productivity to happen, we must make room—room in our world, room in our hearts, room in our souls.

Over the past few weeks, I’ve had several occasions to marvel at (and occasionally, to curse) Winter. Though its slickness and hazardous footings can wreak havoc with the best-laid plans of any community, they also force us to stop for a moment.

Winter forces us to pause in whatever we are doing and understand that we’re not always in control of everything around us.

Winter asks us to cancel appointments and days of school, and to deal with its insistent reality, one shovel-full at a time.

Winter also gives us the opportunity for joy. To put aside our long to-do lists and marvel at the intricate beauty of big, fat, white snowflakes. To remember those days when we got up early to hear whether school was cancelled, and, upon hearing the name of our school read on the radio, burst forth into the yard in our snow suits, ready for angel-making and fort-building and snowballs flying through the air.

Winter, with its early nights, gives us the chance to light candles around the house and sit in their glow, and wait—ever so patiently—for the return of the sun.

Matthew Fox quotes Thomas Aquinas as having written that “the formlessness of darkness was removed by the production of light.” (Fox, p.248) In pulling out this quote, Fox reminds us that the Winter Way is interconnected with the creation of Spring.

Whether in Christian Scripture or the ancient practices of indigenous peoples, dark and light, rest and rebirth, emptiness and creativity, Winter and Spring are always connected to one another.

And so we come to the realization that to celebrate winter in and of itself is also to celebrate Winter’s role as the doorway to Spring. The seasons cannot be neatly separated into boxes, each one tied up with a neat bow.

Here at the darkest time of year, we can pause knowing that there will be enough motion in the coming months to make up for it. We can feel the emptiness and know that the creativity to come will soon make it a memory.

We can and should take this moment to look forward to Spring.

Cyndi Simpson, a Wiccan living in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, was recently interviewed by her local paper about Yule and her beliefs. Here’s what she had to say:

"When it comes to Yule there are a lot of ideas and images of rebirth and starting over,' Simpson said. 'Also, because of the solstice, we're now heading in a direction of when the days are longer than the nights. This marks the turning of the earth, and is a way of us celebrating the longest night of the year.'

"The 'dark half' of the year... is a time for planning, resting, nurturing and introspection. 'But with the return of the light we begin moving toward another kind of energy,' she said. 'It's a time to put plans in motion and acknowledge that we are heading toward the direction of spring.'" ("Wiccans, Pagans Ready to Celebrate Yule," by James Buescher, Lancaster County Intelligencer, <http://local.lancasteronline.com/4/213802>)

And so, in our lives and our spirits, let us embrace the starkness of winter. Let us revel in the time of stillness, in non-doing, just for a moment.

Let us together, enter the void, sit with the silence, feel the emptiness without succumbing to depression or letting the negativity overwhelm us.

Let us bask in the glow of candlelight, decorate our homes with greenery, and huddle together for warmth.

And let us wait... with great patience... for Spring to come, knowing with the utmost certainty that it will, soon enough.

May it be so.