

# *Hope In A Time Of Darkness*

Winterfest address<sup>1</sup> to the New York Society for Ethical Culture, December 18, 2005  
by **Tony Hileman**, Senior Leader

## OPENING WORDS

During these, the shortest days of the year when we burrow into the comfort of family and friends, I can't help but shudder when thinking of the fear that our ancient ancestors must have experienced as the cold of the long nights gripped them, and the lack of food gnawed at them. A fear that the warmth of the sun and the bounty of the earth had gone dark and dormant forever. A fear that gave rise to all manner of superstitions as to winter's cause, and an equal if not greater number of rituals intended to ward it off. Free of these things, the long nights of winter offer a time of personal introspection, renewal, and celebration.

This is how Susan Cooper expressed it in her poem, *The Shortest Day*.

So the shortest day came, and the year died,  
And everywhere down the centuries of the snow-white world  
Came people singing, dancing,  
To drive the dark away.  
They lighted candles in the winter trees;  
They hung their homes with evergreen;  
They burned beseeching fires all night long  
To keep the year alive,  
And when the new year's sunshine blazed awake  
They shouted, reveling.  
Through all the frosty ages you can hear them  
Echoing behind us - Listen!!  
All the long echoes sing the same delight,  
This shortest day,  
As promise awakens in the sleeping land:  
They carol, fest, give thanks,  
And dearly love their friends,  
And hope for peace.  
And so do we, here, now,  
This year and every year.  
Welcome Yule!!

Please stand as you are able and join us as Carole Chamlin leads us in singing *Let There Be Peace On Earth*.

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<sup>1</sup> The reader is reminded that this is the written text of an oral address and remains in that style. While the speaker's presentation marks have been redacted, there has been no attempt to edit it into an essay.

## ADDRESS

My remarks this morning will not be lengthy for two reasons, the task I have been given is specific and there's so many other wonderful things happening.

We come together today to celebrate Winterfest, the oldest and grandest of all religious feasts which, though celebrated in darkness, originated out of a worship of the sun. . Known by many names, it has been observed at the time of the winter solstice since the earliest days of humanity. Long before our recorded history began, ancient peoples worshiped the sun in a very natural way—as the provider of warmth and comfort, of life and growth, and of happiness and joy. So it is no wonder that worship of the sun is the oldest and most natural of humanity's religions, and one of the most poetic and beautiful.

Unlike many other religious celebrations of the solstice season, the celebration of Winterfest is not about the life of any single heroic figure—it's about all of us. It's about coming together in community to share our common hope for the future, and to share generously the warmth and light we find within us and among us.

When invited to speak I was asked to link the seemingly separate virtues of hope and generosity that seem to blend so naturally at this time of year. Hope, to wish for something with a reasonable confidence that it will come to pass, and generosity, the willingness to give. While not often thought of together, hope and generosity are entwined in the context of Winterfest.

Since the origins of humanity, the darkness of the longest night, the winter solstice, has brought with it both fear that the warmth of the sun had abandoned us forever and hope that the days would again lengthen. When fear of darkness dominates and we fall victim to our worst imaginings, despair rules. And in the face of despair, generosity becomes as dry and brittle as fallen leaves.

But even in this dark time, ancient peoples harbored hope that the earth, upon which we depend, would again turn lush, and green, and verdant, and that food would again be plentiful. And when hope holds sway, compassion blooms, and giving thrives.

How do we go about choosing hope over despair, compassion over self-interest, and charity over greed? That's what I want to address on this, one of the darkest days of the year.

We have an advantage over our ancient ancestors in as much as we understand and can predict with amazing accuracy the annual cycle of the seasons. They gathered, as I mentioned in my opening words, to perform all sorts of rituals to ensure the inevitable—the abatement of winter and the advent of spring.

They would, at the behest of their shaman or holy man, crawl around and pound the frozen earth in order to waken it. They chanted and beat drums to ward off the evil spirits responsible for their peril. And all the while the shaman danced and issued incantations intended to lure the warm sun back to the skies.

And, sure enough, the days lengthened, the earth awoke, spring came, and the shaman kept his job for another year.

One has to wonder at the courage of that first shaman who said, “We don't have to do all that, spring is coming anyway.” I would imagine he didn't fare too well in the face of the fear of his followers.

So we must also marvel at the courage of the first tribe the followed him and said, “Yes, let's gather round and enjoy the warmth and light of each other while we await the

inevitable return of spring. Let's rest gently among each other as our mother earth rests quietly beneath us, and let's profit from the beauty of the stars as our father sun takes a holiday."

That must have been something, that first Winterfest, that first time knowledge conquered fear and liberated our innermost warmth. Those earliest celebrations adopted some of the same symbols that we continue to use today. Evergreen trees have always inspired awe and reverence, seeming as they do to defy the winter with their greenery, even on the darkest days of the year. Evergreens, holly and mistletoe have served numerous cultures as symbols of life over death, and were used to show hope for the forthcoming spring.

So, while for many, this is a season of faith, for we who approach life and its challenges from a natural perspective, it is a season of hope. Hope is radically different from faith. To hope is not to assume that things will be better, but to be sustained by the sense that they can be better and to act accordingly. To act accordingly.

Our deepest longing is for peace and fairness. But ours is not a world at peace—though it could be. We live in a time of considerable inequity—but that need not be so. Our world is wracked by armed conflict, people go to bed each night needlessly hungry, and greed is concentrating wealth in the hands of a few while the many go wanting. We can't build a good society on the principles of self-interest and entitlement alone.

Without generosity, there can be no community. We must share what we have with others, and this is the season we pause to understand and appreciate that simple axiom. But what gift to give?

While a simple appreciation for the worth and dignity of others compels us to meet basic needs and comforts, the true gift comes from within. Ralph Waldo Emerson, said it well: "Rings and jewels are not gifts, but apologies for gifts. The only true gift is a portion of thyself."

That theme was elaborated upon by Wilferd A. Peterson [1900–1995] In *The Art Of Living*, where he offered a poem on giving entitled, *The Art of Giving*:

We give of ourselves when  
we give gifts of the heart:  
love, kindness, joy, understanding,  
sympathy, tolerance, forgiveness.

We give of ourselves when  
we give gifts of the mind:  
ideas, dreams, purposes, ideals,  
principles, plans, inventions, projects, poetry.

We give of ourselves when  
we give gifts of the spirit:  
[hope], vision, beauty, aspiration,  
peace, faith.

We give of ourselves when  
we give the gift of words:  
encouragement, inspiration, guidance.

Our celebration of Winterfest does that as it is about ideals and sentiments, a hopeful vision that, through our own aspirations and actions, we can change the world for the better

In the words of that great 19<sup>th</sup> century freethought orator, Robert Green Ingersoll, “Let us all hope for the triumph of Light—of Right and Reason—for the victory of Fact over falsehood, of Science over Superstition. And so hoping, let us celebrate the venerable festival of the Sun.”

Let us celebrate Winterfest with generosity in a time of bareness, with hope in a time of darkness, and with the conviction that, through compassionate action, we can change the world for the better for ourselves, and for others.

### CLOSING WORDS

My closing words are simple. Ethical Culturists seek to elicit the best in each other in order to make the world a better place.

The Winter Solstice is a time of contemplation; a time for thanks, for giving, for appreciating, and for renewing. A time when we create opportunities and search for words to express the things the go unsaid the rest of the year. Things like expressing thanks for what we have, sharing our time and resources with others, deepening the ethical relationships that sustain us, and renewing our commitment to eliciting the best in others and self.

That’s how the world is made better for us and for all.



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