

**Wisdom Circle – Light  
December 2014**

**PREPARATION**

**Words of Wisdom**

לְהַבֹּת וְהַצִּית שְׁנֵי שְׂרָפִים הַגְּפוּרִים אֲשֶׁרֵי,  
לְקַבֹּת בְּסִתְרֵי שְׂפָעֶיהָ הַלְּהֶבֶה אֲשֶׁרֵי.  
בְּכַבֹּד לְהַדֹּל שֶׁיִּדְעוּ הַלְּקַבֹּת אֲשֶׁרֵי...  
לְהַבֹּת וְהַצִּית שְׁנֵי שְׂרָפִים הַגְּפוּרִים אֲשֶׁרֵי.

*Blessed is the match consumed in kindling flame.  
Blessed is the flame that burns in the secret fastness of the heart.  
Blessed is the heart with strength to stop its beating for honor's sake.  
Blessed is the match consumed in kindling flame.*

~ Hannah Senesh

*"There is a crack, a crack in everything. That's how the light gets in."  
~Leonard Cohen (from the song, "Anthem")  
(YouTube <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e39UmEnqY8>)*

*Now is the moment of magic, when the whole, round earth turns again toward the sun,  
and here's a blessing: the days will be longer and brighter now, even before the winter  
settles in to chill us.*

*Now is the moment of magic, when people beaten down and broken, with nothing left  
but misery and candles and their own clear voices, kindle tiny lights and whisper secret  
music, and here's a blessing: the dark universe is suddenly illuminated by the lights of  
the menorah, suddenly ablaze with the lights of the kinara, and the whole world is glad  
and loud with winter singing.*

*Now is the moment of magic, when an eastern star beckons the ignorant toward an  
unknown goal, and here's a blessing: they find nothing in the end but an ordinary  
baby, born at midnight, born in poverty, and the baby's cry, like bells ringing, makes  
people wonder as they wander through their lives, what human love might really look  
like, sound like, feel like.*

*Now is the moment of magic, and here's a blessing: we already possess all the gifts we  
need; we've already received our presents: ears to hear music, eyes to behold lights,  
hands to build true peace on earth and to hold each other tight in love.*

~ Rev. Victoria E. Safford

## Spiritual Exercise –

The winter holiday season can be a time of joy and a time of stress. The lights of the season can be a warm hearth beckoning us to gather closely with those we love. They can also be the neon blinking signs urging us to buy, buy, buy in order to keep up with the demands of a consumerist holiday culture. Your spiritual exercise for this December is simply this: be mindful of the light. When you feel drawn to something bright, ask yourself, “Is this a light that nourishes the soul and brings me closer to others? Or, like the light bulb that attracts the moth, is this light going to leave me exhausted and burnt out? If you feel yourself getting burnt out by all the demands and distractions of the holiday season, remember to take some time to do whatever nourishes and warms your soul.

### Questions for Reflection:

- What is your most cherished memory having to do with the winter holidays?
- Are the winter holidays a difficult time for you? If so, what helps you get through the season?
- December is a time of relative darkness – shorter days and longer nights. This darkness is sometimes associated with introspection, retreat, and rest. What are the gifts of darkness in your life?

### Readings:

The following is a homily delivered at a service of the *Sanctuary Boston* community in December 2013. You can watch the video or read the text.

“Come Closer,” by Rev. Jennifer Channin

VIDEO:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rq167tX4KTU>

TEXT: Now is the moment of magic. Not yesterday, not tomorrow, but now. We might rush towards a time in the future when we'll finally be ready, but then we miss the moment of magic. Because the moment of magic is now. We might turn over and over in our memories the times in the past that felt special. But then we miss the moment of magic. Because the moment of magic is now.

I don't like to get up in front of people and give advice that haven't myself been following, but this is one of those times. I have not been very good lately at paying attention to "now." In fact, this year I think I have been the worst I have ever been in my life at paying attention to "now." I have been busy, too busy. When I do have time

to relax I spend it distracting myself from the moment - with television, computer games, shopping. When I do have the opportunity to more deeply connect with another person - say if I am having lunch with a friend - my mind is only half there. The other half is hours ahead, planning the tasks I must do. And I miss the magic moment. I don't notice that there is a beautiful and loving person sitting across from me. I don't recognize our shared humanity. I don't allow for that connection when eye-contact lingers just slightly longer and you know...you KNOW...that you are not alone.

Now is the moment of magic. That can be particularly hard to accept during the wintertime. Like many people, I am prone to experiencing seasonal depression. It's only been seriously and dangerously depressed a few times in my life, but even during the best years I feel a shift in my moods starting around October. I notice a tendency towards gloominess, introspection, and malaise. This is not what magic is supposed to feel like, I think. These moments don't sparkle with Christmas cheer. They don't pulse with excitement and joy. They are not moments I want to dwell in. I don't want to fully feel the way I feel when walking home on a chilly grey day and the sight of the grey sky fills me with a particular kind of sadness that I can't really justify but that makes me feel like I've been there already, walking down that street, seeing that same grey sky countless times before in this lifetime and perhaps thousands of lifetimes before it. So instead I make calls on my cellphone. I put in my headphones and play dance music. And I miss the moment of magic. I don't notice how my senses are heightened on the chill grey days. I don't notice the snap of ice cracking under my feet. I don't notice that underneath the gloomy thoughts there is self-knowledge about what it feels like to be me.

This past Sunday began the season of Advent. This is the time, in the Christian calendar, when we are waiting, anticipating the celebration of Jesus' birth. But the celebration time isn't here yet. For centuries, Christians have recognized the value in taking time to WAIT. If we jump the gun, if we try to skip ahead, we will miss what happens during the waiting. Today, though, the mainstream culture is all about jumping the gun and skipping ahead to the celebration.

A lot of the language we hear around the holidays has to do with finding light in the darkness, or the return of light after a season of dark, or a celebration of lights amidst the dark winter. It seems pretty natural that we seek out light when things are dark. Literally and figuratively. There's something fearsome about descending into a darker season without the certainty that it will be lit up from time to time.

Like a moth, I too am drawn towards the light, especially when affected by seasonal gloominess, or even more serious seasonal depression. I'm drawn to the bright glare of my television screen, to upbeat comedies and loud adventure stories. I'm drawn to lit up store fronts, beckoning me to cheer myself up with a new sweater or a sparkly thingamabob. I'm drawn to festive Christmas tree displays. I'm drawn to the Lady Gaga and the Muppets Thanksgiving Spectacular. I'm drawn to the caramel apple pumpkin spice latte with peppermint bark sprinkles that's only available this

time of year, and to all the YouTube videos of cats in reindeer antlers, and to the sales, Oh my God the sales! And I flutter towards all those bright lights. And I don't notice...what's happening to me.

Advent is a time of waiting. There will be time for celebration, but NOT YET. Rushing towards the bright lights can keep us in the dark about what is happening in the moment right now.

I have a good friend who I went to seminary with, who is always getting on my nerves by encouraging me to do things that are good for me. On Saturday he sent me a chat, saying, "Jennifer, I just realized that tomorrow is the first day of Advent!" Oh, that's interesting, I said, or something equally dismissive. I wasn't raised in a household that had advent rituals, or even that considered itself Christian on any day other than December 25th. My friend responded..."Do you want to do a daily spiritual practice together?"

Here's the thing. I am an ordained minister. I chose to minor in religion as an undergrad. I chose to go to seminary. I'm supposed to like doing "spiritual practices." But I don't. Spiritual practices require discipline, and I don't have a lot of that. Also, I tend to over think things. What makes a spiritual practice different from a health or wellness practice, or an intellectual practice? When is reading poetry spiritual, and when is it just poetry? Anyways, the point is, I didn't actually want to do a daily spiritual practice this month with my friend. But I know, and HE KNOWS, that I think that I SHOULD be the sort of person who wants to do a spiritual practice for Advent.

"What kind of spiritual practice do you suggest we do?" I ask? We chat about options for a while. I find a Presbyterian website that suggests "baking a cake for Jesus." I can do that! He vetoes the Jesus cake, as I expected. We settle on Psalms. I'm not much of a Bible reader, but I took a Psalms class in school and I find most of them to be quite pretty. I like thinking about them as songs that we've forgotten the tunes to. We agree to call each other at 9am each morning and read a psalm out loud together. We will not, despite his insistence that it would be so beautiful, chant the psalms. There are certain sounds I don't want my roommates to hear emanating from my bedroom while they get ready for work in the morning, and the sound of me chanting words like "therefore the wicked shall not stand upright when judgment comes" is one of them. They already think I'm weird for singing Amazing Grace in the kitchen. After reading the psalms we agree to have 5 minutes of silence, and then get on with our day.

4 days into our advent practice, I can't say whether it will bear fruits, but maybe that's not the point. I don't experience catharsis each time I read aloud a psalm. The 5 minutes of silence don't fill me with calm. In fact, during this spiritual practice I'm mostly aware of how gravelly my voice is in the morning, or how bad my breath is if I haven't brushed my teeth, or how hard it is to keep my thoughts from skipping ahead to the tasks of the day. But that, as unglamorous as it is, is self-knowledge.

And in those 5 minutes of silence I am aware that there is another person on the other end of the phone. A person with his own morning breath and flitting thoughts, and his presence is there in the silence too.

In that silence there is an uncomfortable intimacy.

I think that uncomfortable intimacy is the real opportunity of this season of darkness. The uncomfortable intimacy that comes when we notice things about the person we are with that we were too distracted to notice before. When that person notices us, and we feel SEEN and vulnerable. The uncomfortable intimacy we feel when we are alone and we become aware of ourselves, of the reality of our bodies, of our inconvenient feelings. The holidays provide us some temporary - AND NECESSARY - relief from all this uncomfortable intimacy, but they are not really what this season is about. They are just the oasis that we rest in for a while as we make our way through the desert. The moment of magic isn't in the future or in the past. The moment of magic is now. There's no swelling music or tinkling bells or whiffs of pumpkin spice to let us know just how very magic this moment is. There's just you, and there's me, and maybe the sound of ice cracking below our feet.

## Wisdom Circle – Light Session Plan

*This session plan is a suggested guide, not a rigid set of rules. You may adjust this plan as you feel is appropriate in your group.*

### Gathering & Welcome (~5 min)

#### Chalice Lighting (~2 min)

*Optional Song or Reading—if someone in the group feels comfortable doing so, they might sing the song once through and invite the rest of the group to join in singing the 2<sup>nd</sup> time:*

*Rise Up, O Flame*

*By thy light burning*

*Show to us Beauty, Vision, and Joy*

(Singing the Living Tradition #362)

(YouTube Video <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QyxpoqkN1R8>)

## Rise Up, O Flame

Unknown

The image shows the musical notation for the song 'Rise Up, O Flame'. It consists of two staves of music in 3/4 time, with a key signature of two flats (B-flat and E-flat). The first staff is divided into four measures labeled I, II, III, and IV. The lyrics are: 'Rise up, O flame, By thy light glow - ing,'. The second staff continues the melody with the lyrics: 'Bring to us beau - ty, vi - sion, and joy.' The music is written in a simple, accessible style suitable for a group setting.

#### Check-In (20-30 minutes)

*As you feel comfortable, take 2-3 minutes to share one thing that is lifting your spirits, and one thing that is weighing you down. This is a time for sharing, but not for discussion.*

#### Business (10 minutes)

*Use this time for any new business: Welcoming new members; Scheduling future meetings; Revisiting the Covenant; Answering questions about Wisdom Circle processes; Etc...*

## **Discussion (60 minutes)**

*Introduce Topic. Take Turns Reading aloud the “Words of Wisdom.”*

- What is your most cherished memory having to do with the winter holidays?
- Are the winter holidays a difficult time for you? If so, what helps you get through the season?
- December is a time of relative darkness – shorter days and longer nights. This darkness is sometimes associated with introspection, retreat, and rest. What are the gifts of darkness in your life?

*Silent Reflection (~2 minutes)*

*First Responses (Share in the order you feel moved)*

*Cross-Conversation (Ask questions that invite deeper reflection; Speak from personal experience, and use “I statements”; Avoid explaining or judging)*

*Final Thoughts (Share in the order you feel moved)*

## **Gratitude (5-10 minutes)**

*Share 1-2 things that have been meaningful to you from this session.*

## **Closing**

Optional Chalice Extinguishing Reading:

*“We extinguish the chalice here that it might glow gently in our hearts. May it light your path as you leave this place. May it guide your way until we are together again.”*

~Martha L. Munson