

## CHILDREN'S STORY: HOW RAVEN FREED THE SUN

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### MEDITATION: RR 568

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### SIRIUS RISING

I have to confess, this has been one of the hardest sermons to write of my career to date. What started out as a chance to explore the varied histories, and possible modern-day meanings, of both Lammass and Lughnasa, soon turned into what seemed an overwhelming task as news from our country and the world became progressively desperate, and painful. It is more than a little risky to supply a pulpit as a guest and talk about hotly debated and controversial topics, without the privilege of an established trust with you, the congregation. But I feel it

would be even more of a breach of my training, and a violation of my heart, to stand here before you and not make connections between the theme of our day and the agonizing stories from our own borders and others. After all, what good is religion, any religion, if it is not relevant to the experienced days of our lives? So I would ask for your grace, and your understanding that I do not consider myself an authority of any kind, but merely one voice amongst many—one of my very favourite aspects of being Unitarian Universalist.

Another personal favourite is how deeply embedded in our traditions and expressions is how we hold seemingly opposite things in tension together to not only break down binaries, but also create a new space in which those opposites offer up a new way of thinking or doing.

As I struggled with this sermon, I went back to read the description I had given months ago, and realized that I'd already found my way through the difficulty; I'd just managed to do it before it was difficult. If only all things in our lives happened that way. Among all the numerous and varied histories of this time of year, from all different cultures and places in the world — Corn Maidens, Harvest Kings, Lugh of the Silver Hand, and on and on — I found the juxtaposition between the ancient Greco-Romans' perception of the rising of the Dog Star, Sirius, with how the ancient Egyptians perceived the same astronomical event, to be the most fascinating.

As a pagan-oriented person, Lammas and Lughnasa have always been hard for me from a spiritual and religious perspective. I have a deep dislike of summer, and

must take vitamin D supplements to make up for all the time I spend indoors and in the shade to avoid the hot, beating sun. Living in Southern California for the last eighteen years has not helped. A superficial study of modern paganism treats this holiday as the first of three harvest festivals, and I simply never have the energy at the height of the summer heat to sing and dance about bread and berries, either physical and metaphorical, especially when there's two more harvest festivals to follow when I can make up for it. Not the greatest example to set for a religious life, I know, but we all have our limits. So when I was asked to come here in late July or early August, I jumped at the chance to repair this ongoing omission in my life.

In my research, I found, of course, more than I ever thought was possible about sacrifices of Harvest Gods, Corn Maiden and Mother legends speaking to the worst of historical patriarchy, and a veneration of Warrior Magic. It was all parties and celebrations, and as our summer progressed, not at all what I felt needed to be spoken.

But in the midst of all of this, I read about the ancient Egyptians, and how the rising of Sirius heralded the flooding of the Nile river. The rising of the waters would deposit rich soil on their land that would stay when the waters receded, and allowed them to grow crops and sustain a civilization that did not just survive, but flourished into a dominant power in the region and beyond. For them, Sirius rising was not about the harvest itself, but the

*promise* of the harvest to come. It was not about results, but about hope.

This is in direct contrast with how the Greco-Roman culture perceived the rising of Sirius, which preceded a period of time far more aligned with my own perception of late summer: a searing heat that destroys rather than nourishes. This is the source of the phrase “the dog days of summer,” and numerous ancient writers spoke of its ill effects. Pliny wrote that Sirius “sheds a killing light,” while Aristotle claimed it caused liquids to move of their own volition, leading to rough seas, bubbling wine, and stirring marshes. Hesiod believed it to be the cause of drought, sterilizing seeds in the earth. The most vivid description, however, comes from the astronomer Manilius:

*It barks forth flame, raves with its fire, and doubles the burning heat of the sun. When it puts its torch to the earth and discharges its rays, the earth foresees its conflagration and tastes its ultimate fate. Neptune lies motionless in the midst of his waters and the green blood is drained from leaves and grass... beset by temperatures too great to bear, nature is afflicted with a sickness of its own making, alive but on a funeral pyre: such is the heat diffused among constellations, and everything is brought to a halt by a single star.*

The nature of which he speaks is not exclusive of human beings, as he writes that this period of time brings out the worst in us as well: “anger, hatred, fear, impetuosity, frayed tempers, and arguments.” As I have

watched and read the news this summer, even just this week, I cannot bring myself to disagree.

A revolution against corruption in Ukraine is met with a retaliatory invasion instead of freedom for her people. In the ensuing conflict, not only are lives lost within the battles, but a plane of bystanders is shot down, by mistake, by someone frayed and on edge. Losing one person is bad enough, but there were entire families on that flight. More than one parent lost *all* of their children, and their own mother or father. The AIDS community lost some of its greatest minds and leaders, which will lead to even more sickness, pain, and death. The news cycles tell us that the rest of the world is appalled at this ongoing conflict, world leaders are bringing sanctions to pressure

Russia... but what do *we* do? How does one person, not a president or prime minister, make this better?

Then there is Israel, the political nation that arose out of thousands of years of Jewish struggles to survive slavery, famine, and genocide. Like some of the humans who grow up in an environment of persistent, unending abuse, the political leaders of Israel have now become the abuser, using their power to attack a people who literally have nowhere to go—the borders are closed. There is no escape. While much of the American and European communities are standing by Israel, South American countries are one by one severing ties and declaring Israel to be a terrorist state for their actions. But the political nation of Israel does not speak for all Jewish people, and there are those who have taken their people's tragic

history and see it as a reason to reject Israel's actions, to break the cycle of abuse. They want to find a solution that involves stopping the Hamas rockets *and* the Israeli invasion and settlements. They are for peace, as they remember, through the Tanakh and the stories of Jewish holidays, what it is like to be hunted, slaughtered, and starved. How can we reach out and support them?

Then there is the Dog Days right here in the U.S. People, children, dispossessed by horrific violence and untenable situations, risk their very lives to find a safe space and are met in our communities with racism, slander, and abuse. Our capitalist culture, unrestrained by our political leaders, has run rampant and turned our democracy into an oligarchy that survives on extreme binaries without nuance or thought. You're either with us,

or against us. The neo-con narrative of Jesus, whose blue eyes, blond hair, white skin, love of money, and adoration of guns is the modern Anti-Christ among us, betraying the memory of the brown-skinned socialist who defied the rich, power-hungry authorities who shunned the poor, the sick, and the hungry. I don't believe Jesus was a supernatural incarnation of anything, but I do believe in his life and his message. How can we live out our UU Christian heritage in meaningful ways?

Then, there is the earth itself. Climate change is here, and we are fighting it on two fronts: the actual devastating effects that wreak havoc and destruction on our communities, and the misinformation and denial campaign wrought by those whose extravagant lifestyles are threatened by the movement to stop the rape—a word I do

not use lightly—and pollution of our planet. People who carefully construct their image to be one of authority, expertise, and trustworthiness try to convince us that everything is fine while superstorms rage on our coasts and melting permafrost is exploding giant sinkholes in Siberia. If the positive loop of climate change has begun, how can we possibly stop it?

I don't know about you, but I am overwhelmed. I have a place to live, where my life is not threatened every day by cartel violence or bombs and machine guns. I have electricity, clean water, and healthy food. I don't have people screaming obscenities at me, or threatening physical harm, because of the circumstance of my birth or the color of my skin. I am so indulgent as to go to a small water park on a weekly basis with my family, and wonder

as I lie in the cold water that gives me respite from the oppressive heat how much longer such places will be, or should be, allowed. And I realize that moments like this are why I am, religiously, a Unitarian Universalist.

We don't have a particular sacred scripture, or a creedal test, or many other things that lots of religions rely on to exist. What do have, however, are seven principles that are not beliefs, but things that we covenant, together, to make manifest in the world. Where they already exist, we support them. Where they do not yet exist, we strive to make them so. We combine reason and faith to make visions into realities, and we try to do it as inclusively as possible. And this is where I finally found my way back to the modern Wiccan rituals and traditions, and the aspect of Lughnasa that celebrates Warrior Magic. To quote Anna

Franklin and Paul Mason in their book *Lammas*, “The warrior here is a psychic warrior; their weapons are body, mind, and spirit. These must be trained to work in harmony. The warrior will face their own fears; they develop their spiritual courage and hone their will.”<sup>1</sup> I have encountered the term “social justice warrior” a lot lately, used as a pejorative. I want to own it, proudly. As a denomination, we UUs are coming into our own identity, instead of the incoherent mishmash made famous by Garrison Keillor. We are not, as many think, the place where you can believe anything, but rather the place where your own personal beliefs, whatever they are, must be tempered by the understanding that we are part of a congregation, a local, a regional, a national, and a global

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<sup>1</sup> 137.

community, *all at the same time*, and that we are working towards something that brings compassion, healing, and nourishment to the multiverse. Let our warriors' weapons be our bodies and voices in witness to the pain and suffering in all places, including that of our planet's ecosystems.

It is fitting, I think, that as I put the finishing touches on this sermon last night, in the midst of a terrible drought that threatens our state and the livelihoods of so many, it began to rain. Each single drop is barely enough to moisten the dust of my backyard, and yet, if enough single drops fall at once, there is respite and relief. In these Dog Days, let us take the festivals of Lamma and Lughnasa with us, and be drops of cooling, healing, nourishing rain to quench the thirst of the world around us. Let our daily

interactions, from the simplest of errands to the largest of projects, be an opportunity to turn those around us into drops of rain as well. Let us rise up and be flood waters in the drought, bringing hope where there is none. Blessed be.

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## BENEDICTION

Whatever our beliefs, whatever our abilities, whatever our circumstances, let us never forget our covenant to each other and to the beloved communities of the world. May we always feel safe to share our sorrows as well as our joys. May we never turn away from those who need our help, and may we never be ashamed to ask for help ourselves. As we go forth from this sacred space and time,

please turn to your neighbors and say, “We will be rain in the drought.”