

What's In A Name?

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Have you ever looked up the meaning of your name?

My name, Craig, has Scottish origins and was apparently derived from a Gaelic word meaning "crag" or "rocks", originally indicating a person who lived near a crag. I live by a pond, not a rock. According to one website the name Craig peaked in popularity in the U.S. in late 1960's, which is when I was born. Still, I never knew of more than one or two other Craigs growing up. And to my knowledge I'm not named after some other Craig in my family or from history.

I asked my parents once why they chose to name me Craig and they said they just liked the name. And I suppose that's good enough for me even though occasionally people mess up or mishear my name and call me Greg, which has a different origin and meaning altogether. Sometimes however names are more than a personal preference or aesthetic choice, and are chosen to convey information beyond the name by which someone or something is to be known.

For example, the name Amaterasu, the Japanese sun goddess from our readings today, means, appropriately enough, "Shining over heaven." While the name of her mischievous brother, Susano, means, "Impetuous male." And indeed he proves to be just that, causing all kinds of trouble in his sister's, the Sun Goddess' realm. So much, in fact, that she goes into hiding thrusting the world into darkness and despair until she is coaxed back out by a ritual devised by the other gods and goddesses. As for her troublemaking brother, he is banished from the realm to reflect on his misdeeds.

According to Kristin Maier "The story of the Sun Goddess, Amaterasu Omikami, is found in the most ancient book of Japan called the Kojiki...a collection of ancient Japanese myths compiled by the nobleman no Yasu-maro in the eighth century. The roots of the Shinto religion are found in the myths of Kojiki, an ancient and appreciated source of imagery and meaning for the Japanese people."

And, as you may have noticed, the story of the Sun Goddess, Amaterasu Omikami, is a solstice story.

Solstice is the name given to an astronomical event scientists remind us occurs when one of the Earth's poles has its maximum tilt away from the Sun. The winter solstice, which happens later this week here in the Northern Hemisphere, is the day with the shortest period of daylight and longest night of the year.

We can imagine the story of the Sun Goddess of the Heavens being told and shared among people as an entertaining way of explaining a significant event experienced collectively. But it would be a mistake and do a disservice to the tradition from which this or similar stories come to read it merely as a fanciful way of explaining an event people from the past didn't quite understand. For the name solstice comes from a Latin word which means "sun standing still." And indeed, solstice, particularly the winter solstice is also associated, spiritually, with stillness.

Stillness may not be what stands out in your memory of the story of the Sun Goddess. As with our own lives, it is the action from the story that we tend to focus on and remember:

The wild child run amok.

The solar deity running off to hole herself up in a cave.

A frantic crowd scheming in the dark to lure her out and bring light back into the world. And her eventual re-emergence from the cave.

But the stillness is there, in between the action, like rests between the notes in a musical score. And as in music, is it that space between the notes, the stillness we write into our lives, that helps give it its unique shape and meaning. Something easily forgotten in a culture that makes, as Anais Nin observed, "a virtue of living only as extroverts...and consequently...discourages the inner quest for a center."

The winter solstice then is as much a call to stillness, to find our center again, as it is a celebration of action, of rebirth. Stillness, of course, can only be known in conjunction with movement. So it is not surprising the story of the Sun Goddess is chocked full of action. But we miss the point of even the action if we rush past that period of stillness- the time she spent in the cave with herself- in our eagerness to get to the "good" part, her re-emergence. Indeed, a cursory reading of the story might also lead us to conclude that it was the actions of others alone that drew her out of the cave.

The Irish poet and playwright Oscar Wilde observed, "It is tragic how few people ever 'possess their souls' before they die."

Of course we can't hope to "possess our soul" if we devote no time or space to getting to know ourselves. And so Wilde gives us another way to imagine Amaterasu's time the cave, time between the chaos and disorder that preceded it and her reemergence or rebirth afterward. Was she in there trying to figure out or plan who or how to be or was she there to find stillness and allow who is to emerge and shine anew in the world?

The winter solstice and the progressive shortening of daylight hours that lead up to what we call the shortest day of the year, not to mention the typically chillier climate, feels

especially conducive to carving out some time for stillness where we might find or reconnect to our center.

And, as with another observance due to arrive later in the month celebrating a certain birth in a manger, the call or message of the winter solstice actually applies year round.

In the blogosphere there's been movement afoot for a while around something called self-care. And while some bloggers write about it as it were something just recently invented in response to the hyperactivity of modern life, self-care is in fact an ancient spiritual practice. Indeed, contrary to the self-indulgence sometimes promoted as self-care by marketers and social media influencers today, genuine self care is nothing more than finding and making time for stillness in our lives.

This is about the time when I usually lose people who can't tolerate silence and have to have the TV or some other noise going in the background, so let me tell you a story.

Just over a decade ago, sometime mid-way through my internship at First Parish in Concord, I found that my preferred practice of self-care, contemplative silence, for whatever reason, wasn't cutting it anymore. It was clear to me that I needed to expand my repertoire. The problem was I was stuck. I had boxed myself into thinking self-care meant having to be alone and be quiet. To break out of this thinking, I resolved to reflect on three questions,

What is self-care?

Why is it important?

What forms does/can it take?

My responses to the first two questions were more or less in line with, or some variant of, what's been touched on this morning in the context of the winter solstice: finding stillness, the rediscovery of our center and the like. When it came to what form it does/can take, I wrote in my journal, "Self-care can take the form of quiet solitude or noisy celebration. It can be a walk in the woods or dinner with friends. One day it might be prayer, another day it might be a concert or movie."

In reflection I had come to realize stillness doesn't have to mean non-movement or even silence, but rather the stilling of whatever knocks one off center or keeps one apart from one's being. Naturally this could change from day to day. Some days a walk in the woods alone is just what I need. Other days being by myself only intensifies unhelpful ruminating over something that pushes me further from my center. Especially eye-opening to me, was the realization that I need not be alone to be with myself. That stillness can be had in the company of friends or family playing a game or sharing meal or watching a movie that makes us laugh or cry more than think. Likewise, stillness may

appear to be anything but still or quiet on the outside. It can be found doing the dishes or preparing dinner.

It is the internal effect more than the external form that defines stillness.

Still, self-care....finding and making time for stillness, is a hard sell in a world obsessed with efficiency and productivity and doing is hailed as virtuous and being derided as self-indulgent. Even many who admit some value to self-care, see only its potential to recharge us for later and ideally, greater, efficiency and productivity.

But as Amaterasu reemerging from her cave, Nin's commentary on extroversion, and Wilde's observation reminds us, stillness is not about resting now so we can do more later.

Notice that the time Amaterasu spends in the cave doesn't result in an increased ability to produce more or brighter light more efficiently when she comes out. She simply returns to who she is, Amaterasu, "Shining over heaven".

Stillness, regardless of the form it takes is not about doing or taking a break to recharge for "real life" afterwards. Its point is real life, that is, to connect us to the isness of life... to be.

If the astronomical event we call solstice teaches us anything it is that the sun acts in accordance to what it is, not as we might want it to. Recognizing its independence and our dependence on it, it's no wonder the sun has been conceptualized and worshiped as a deity across cultures over time. And while the worship of sun gods and goddesses has seen brighter days...no pun intended, spiritually, solstice... "Sun standing still"... continues to offer us insight into what it means and how to be. A lesson we're invited each winter solstice to deepen as we take care to find a stillness.

May it be so.

Amen and Blessed Be