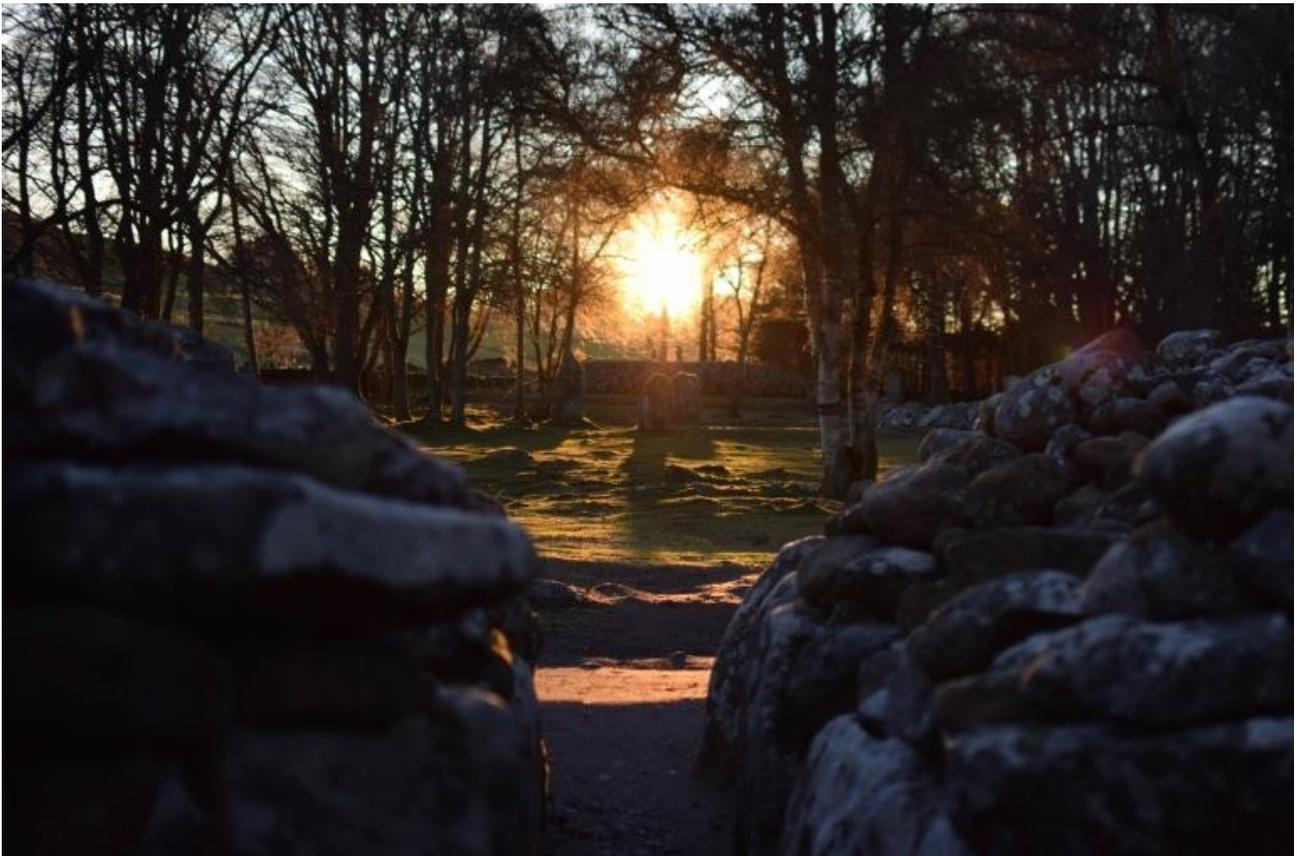


Pause



Looking southwest from inside the north east cairn at Clava
Stephen Mackintosh

Winter Solstice
22nd December 2021

Pause

At the Clava Cairns near Inverness, there are two large cairns of stones with a passage that leads into the centre. Along with many other stone circles and cairns it is recognised that, although we don't know much about the purpose of the cairns or standing stones, they are usually built with an alignment with the solar calendar.

At Clava, the cairns have a passageway that is aligned to the low sun of the midwinter solstice. Although the cairn is now open to the elements, when it was originally built this passageway would have been closed over and the sun would have shone right into the depths of the cairn.

It is difficult for us to appreciate life before clocks and calendars, before mass travel and knowledge of the universe. But for those who lived depending on their knowledge of the movement of the sun, moon and stars for their sense of place within the year, these moments of stillness, when the sun seemed to hover at a certain point on the horizon, must have been quite significant. These turning points show that the seasons move on but each has its own significance. The summer solstice, that the hours of daylight have reached their zenith and the winter solstice that the darkness will begin to wane.

We have a particularly strange relationship with darkness – it is mostly seen as a negative experience, we use darkness as a metaphor for evil, for loss, for danger, for uncertainty.

We live in an age of electric light when we can dispel the darkness with the flick of a switch and pretend the darkness is not there. Maybe this is why we experience the increasing darkness of the winter months as a deprivation, as an assault on our wellbeing, something that we dread and want to avoid.

But maybe we need to accept the experience of darkness and see what we can learn from it, what it can give to us.

For our ancestors, their understanding of darkness would have been quite different. Their light source in the darkness would have been either the moon or an oil lamp or candle, a less than adequate level of light to do anything significant. And so, their world would have of necessity been

slower, expectations of accomplishments would have been lower, and a period of rest and enforced stillness would have been the result.

In our time, in the era of the electric light, we can feel the pressure to live life at the same pace of the summer months when energy is high and the world is aglow. But maybe our ancestors understood better than we do the rhythms of the year, and the need to slow down when it is dark and allow ourselves to rest and reflect, to tell stories, to plan, to dream without the need to immediately get up and put anything into action.

If we respond to this pattern of slowing down, this pattern of stillness, it creates a space for us to fully experience the feelings that we have, without fighting or judging them. It allows us to acknowledge them rather than run away from them, to accept them rather than chase them away. For all our feelings and experiences are valid and none are more important than any others.

In the midst of the darkest time of the year, the sun reaches a particular spot. A light point in the middle of the darkness. A once in a year experience. A low point, but also a light point at the depth of the darkness. In the darkness the light is never completely absent. The ancient name for this period is 'yule' and the symbol of yule is fire. A reminder that the sun may be low, but it has not gone and from now on it will be an increasing presence in our days.

If we, like our ancestors, take note of these particular times of the solar year, if we make a ritual of the low points and the high points, it gives us a framework for understanding our lives. We do not always have to live at the same pace, we do not need to always be functioning in the same way. If our world has a pattern of waxing and waning, then maybe we do too, and maybe we need to surrender to the differing energies of the seasons, and learn what they have to offer.

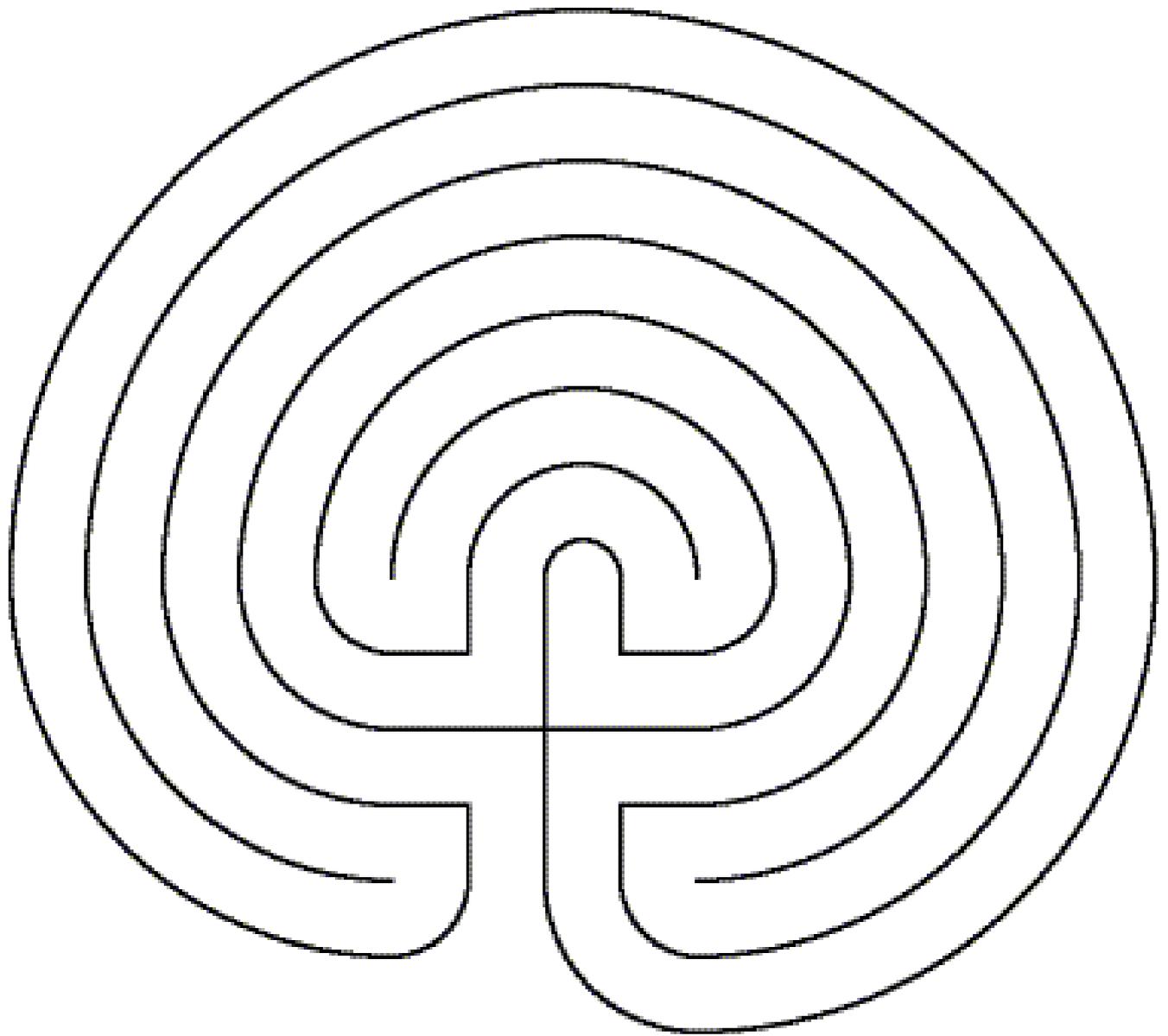
In connecting with the natural world in a way that honours the sacred immanent in all things, we establish a resonance with the seasons. Ritual helps to shift our consciousness to reflect the outer world inside our inner landscape: the sun stands still within us, and time changes. After the longest night, we sing up the dawn. There is a rejoicing that, even in the darkest time, the sun is not vanquished. Sol Invictus -- the Unconquered Sun -- is seen once again, staining the horizon with the promise of hope and brilliance.

We need to see that light. We need to feel that hope remains in the world, even in the face of young children shot dead in a classroom, or in a village after drone strikes, even in the face of rising waters and devastated forests. The sun is our symbol of that hope. Day and night dance together in the cosmos, just as beauty and fear dance among us every day.

T Thorn Coyle

But for now, the sun is still and so we can be too. We can accept the darkness, knowing that it is passing, that the light is now on its way back – slowly. There is still no need to rush. There will be time enough for that in spring when life overwhelms death and light overwhelms the darkness. But for now, we have the darkness, an opportunity to pause, to rest, to reflect, to dream. There is still more darkness to go through but it will now be diminishing, and the light is on its way.

As you take time to reflect on the past year, to think about the future, to examine where you are now, turn out as many electric lights as you can and light as many candles as you can. Enjoy the sense of the different feeling of light and dark with the candles compared to the electric light.



Walking a labyrinth

Walking a labyrinth is an ancient practice in many different cultures. Labyrinths have been found in all continents and in many forms. See information sheet.

In the many religious tradition labyrinths were used for meditation and also as a form of pilgrimage for those who could not travel to holy sites.

The use of labyrinths is being recovered today as we recognise that in our busy lives we need help to slow down, to create time and space to reflect and pray.

The labyrinth is a way of meditating and reflecting, and it often becomes a metaphor for life or a catalyst for insight.

For a finger labyrinth, use your non-dominant hand and follow the path of the labyrinth with your finger.

There is no right or wrong way to use the labyrinth, the path is yours, for your thoughts, feelings and prayers.

Pause at the entrance to the labyrinth, decide on your focus or meditation, then 'walk' at your own pace, stop when you wish and move on when you are ready. You may want to read the poems and take a line or phrase that resonates with you and reflect on that as you walk the labyrinth.

A labyrinth is not a maze – a maze has many options, dead ends and a path on which you can get lost. A labyrinth has one path which always leads to the centre, you cannot get lost. The path will always take you to the centre and then bring you back out again.

A maze is where you lose yourself:

A labyrinth is where you find yourself.

As you 'walk' the labyrinth some thoughts to keep in mind.

The labyrinth as a metaphor: use your experience on the labyrinth as a metaphor for your life or situation and reflect on it.

Try not to have any expectations as you walk, allow yourself to be open to whatever happens on the path.

If you get distracted, you can either refocus your attention or you can engage with the distraction, reflect on your response to the distraction.

You may feel a deep emotional response during a labyrinth walk or a reflective time. This is usually because we tend to keep these things at bay by being busy, keeping our minds occupied. But when we stop and are still in a quiet space it allows things to surface within us that we need to address.

The Guest House by Rumi

This being human is a guest house.

Every morning a new arrival.

A joy, a depression, a meanness,
some momentary awareness comes
as an unexpected visitor.

Welcome and entertain them all!
Even if they're a crowd of sorrows,
who violently sweep your house
empty of its furniture,
still, treat each guest honorably.
He may be clearing you out
for some new delight.

The dark thought, the shame, the malice,
meet them at the door laughing,
and invite them in.

Be grateful for whoever comes,
because each has been sent
as a guide from beyond.

To Know the Dark by Wendell Berry

To go in the dark with a light is to know the light.
To know the dark, go dark. Go without sight,
and find that the dark, too, blooms and sings,
and is travelled by dark feet and dark wings.

The Snow Man by Wallace Stevens

One must have a mind of winter
To regard the frost and the boughs
Of the pine-trees crusted with snow;

And have been cold a long time
To behold the junipers shagged with ice,
The spruces rough in the distant glitter

Of the January sun; and not to think
Of any misery in the sound of the wind,
In the sound of a few leaves,

Which is the sound of the land
Full of the same wind
That is blowing in the same bare place

For the listener, who listens in the snow,
And, nothing himself, beholds
Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is.

The Shortest Day by Susan Cooper

And 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, feast, give thanks,
And dearly love their friends,
And hope for peace.
And now so do we, here, now,
This year and every year.
Welcome, Yule!

The World by Jennifer Chang

One winter I lived north, alone
and effortless, dreaming myself
into the past. Perhaps, I thought,
words could replenish privacy.

Outside, a red bicycle froze
into form, made the world falsen
in its white austerity. So much
happens after harvest: the moon
performing novelty: slaughter,
snow. One hour the same
as the next, I held my hands
or held the snow. I was like sculpture,
forgetting or, perhaps, remembering
everything. Red wings in the snow,
red thoughts ablaze in the war
I was having with myself again.
Everything I hate about the world
I hate about myself, even now
writing as if this were a law
of nature. Say there were deer
fleet in the snow, walking out
the cold, and more gingkoes
bare in the beggar's grove. Say
I was not the only one who saw
or heard the trees, their diffidence
greater than my noise. Perhaps
the future is a tiny flame
I'll nick from a candle. First, I'm burning.
Then, numb. Why must every winter
grow colder, and more sure?