SEASONS OF LIFE

WE IMMORTAL MORTALS

Metaphors and reflections on winter solstice and the human condition

The trails of the Ward Reservation are welcoming and familiar to my feet. With these surroundings, a comfortable pace is all that is necessary for me to achieve the moving meditative state that hikers seek.

In between tracing memories back to their birth and pushing dreams forward toward theirs, I pause to acknowledge a darkly beautiful truth: Life is terminal.

On this morning, however, the pre-dawn darkness feels eternal. And with this thought I am connected to generations of people, both known and unknown to me, who have mourned the progressive loss of light. This loss is the result of a natural process, and rarely can processes be regarded as ‘good’ or ‘bad.’
Toting his son, William, Phil Starks enjoys the view atop Holt Hill in Ward Reservation, near the Andover-North Andover line.

I view this process as a cosmic gift. The progressive loss of light is not imagined, or even figurative. Each year, predictably, the length of time we experience daylight expands, reaches an apex, and then contracts. We often mourn the second part of this equation. The downward slope of daylight reminds those who—like me—may have passed life’s midpoint that the end is approaching. Of course, it always has been—life is terminal—but analogies confer comfort, a shared recognition, even if the ultimate message is unwelcome.

Here at the intersection of Andover and North Andover, at our latitude, we reach heights of just over 15 hours of daylight on the Summer Solstice, and reach depths of slightly under 9 hours on the Winter Solstice. One is tempted to superimpose our lives over this natural process; and when we do we recognize that the Winter Solstice represents both our births and our deaths, and that the Summer Solstice strikes at middle age.

I’ve viewed my own life from this vantage point. The statistics, cold and sterile, are there for anyone’s consumption. A man, born in the year I was born, is expected to live 67 years. The Summer Solstice of my life passed before my 34th birthday. Within this framework, I am in the late August of my
existence, fully two-thirds through my calendar life. I will reach the Winter Solstice of my life, perhaps before, or on, but hopefully long after my 67th birthday, and then my light will go out.

But the sun’s light will not. This is where the analogy fails and the beauty truly begins. The sun remains unconquered by the darkness. The Romans celebrated the renewed strength of the Sun God, as he pushed back against the night. Many cultures celebrate this ‘rebirth’, and it is this celebration that I am connecting with today.

I will watch the sun rise over our Solstice Stones in a manner similar to those in Wiltshire, England, who will watch the sun rise at Stonehenge. All of those who celebrate the unconquered sun, in whichever form their culture embraces, experience the immortal from within mortal lives.

When the sun penetrates the horizon, I will question the nature and meaning of mortality. That I was born and have lived is not in question, but death — as certain as it is — seems more fluid and less defined to me. My heart will stop, but my genes will live on in my son, and in those related to me, and in kin not yet born. My body is mortal, but it was built using gifts passed down to me from people I have never heard of. Some parts of me will live on long after I’ve stopped breathing.

And it isn’t just our genes that might live on; some actions have permanence as well: Mabel Ward’s Solstice Stones firmly attest to this. Our ideas, especially those we act upon, are not constrained by our lifespans. These ideas, once released, may travel to places we’ve never visited, and influence people we’ll never know.

And this is what I’ll ponder while sitting on the millstone center of the Solstice Stones. As the sun fulfills its promise, I will sit in celebration of outcomes that I will not live to see.

Our bodies are mortal, but perhaps we are not.

The sun begins to rise in the location predicted by Mabel Ward’s Solstice Stones on Holt Hill on the first clear morning after the Winter Solstice on Dec. 21, 2012.
Daybreak

Standing here, I'm waiting, not
Only for confirmation, but for hope of
Long days, long lives, lived with
Strength, passion, love, and
Tolerance, surrounded by those with
Integrity, intensity, and intellect
Collectively cherishing the changing times
Existing, joyfully, bathed in your light

And acrostic poem
By Phil Starks
The forecast for Dec. 21, 2012, was windy and stormy. Writer Phil Starks' planned hike up Holt Hill at Ward Reservation to the Solstice Stones would be difficult to pull off, and even more difficult to photograph.

The story, of course, was Phil's essay on the Winter Solstice. But could we shoot photos of the sunrise on a different morning and still get a similar result?

We decided that the view of the sunrise from the highest point in Essex County doesn't change that much in a day or two. We waited for better weather.

Arriving at Ward Reservation at 6:35 a.m. for this photo of Phil and his son, William, we drove up the hill. My car skidded on the ice, so I pulled over as best as I could and grabbed my gear, hurrying to the top by foot as the sun was rising.

Phil helped me while his wife, Caroline, in her four-wheel-drive vehicle continued to the top. Phil slipped on the treacherous, icy road.

I held my camera and asked Caroline to hold the flash to the side for me. William smiled from the Solstice Stones, the sun slowly rising behind him and his father, illuminating them from behind.

We got the shot.

— Amy Sweeney, Director of Photography
My essay "Seeking Pagans, Finding Myself," published in a previous edition of the Andoverers, received enough positive feedback that Editor-in-Chief, Tracey Rauh, thought it might be fun to revisit the trip, this time with more hikers.

Since the Winter Solstice was approaching, and I always hike then, it seems a logical goal to make the trek on following the same path at 6 a.m., Dec 21, 2012.

I notified overseers of the Ward Reservation and collaborated with them in its execution.

Individuals were invited and a few dozen expressed interest. A freelance photographer was hired by The Andovers to join the hike, too.

As temperatures dropped and the 6 a.m. start became too real, many "interested" hikers discovered other obligations, however. Meanwhile, the trip had to be postponed from Friday to Sunday due forecasted torrential rain, which would have rendered the sunrise invisible. Due to the change of schedule, the freelance photographer no longer could attend, either.

On Saturday night, it appeared that as in years past, the hike would be a solitary effort.

However, at 5:30 Sunday morning, Harry Bernheim — the man who helped hire me at Tufts — unexpectedly arrived at my house.

Richard Davis — a man I met because of my essay — arrived 15 minutes later.

At 6 a.m., the three of us, Andovers residents all, exited my house into a perfectly clear and cold predawn morning. Wrapped in warm clothing and wearing headlamps, Harry, Richard and I were bound for the Solstice Stones.

The air was cold, the night clear, and the hike perfect. Harry and Richard became fast friends and unlike my previous hikes, this one was full of conversation and laughter.

By the time we reached the halfway point our headlamps were no longer necessary, but our protective clothing still was greatly appreciated.

We arrived at the Stones at 7 a.m., 12 minutes before sunrise.

Adam Rollins of the Ward Reservation allowed my wife, Caroline, and my son, William, to drive to the summit.

There at the highest point in Essex County, the five of us watched the sun break the horizon, in exactly the location delineated by Mabel Ward’s Solstice Stones.

A glorious sunrise, indeed.

— By Phil Starks

Phil and his son William, center, with Harry Bernheim and Richard Davis.
PHIL STARKS
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Phil is a naturalist who enjoys spending time hiking through Ward Reservation. One of his particularly memorable treks took place on the winter solstice and is the subject of his Reader Essay (Page 30). Although this essay documents a solitary trip, he is aware that publishing the account may lead to having more company on the trails.

“That was probably a motivating factor,” he confesses. “I really would like to welcome the winter’s first sunrise each year with a community of nature lovers.”

Phil is a professor of biology at Tufts University. He lives in North Andover with his wife, Caroline, and their son, William.

GREG VELLANTE
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Greg has been writing about movies for The Andovers and its sister newspaper, The Eagle-Tribune, since 2007 when he was still a student at North Andover High School. A native of Massachusetts, he will graduate from Emerson College this year with a major in Media Studies.

Greg is a member of the Boston Society of Film Critics and a founding member of The Boston Online Film Critics Association.

HELENE SPOTO
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

“If making soup not only conjures up good food, but also great memories, I invite you into my kitchen,” says Helene, who writes Dining In (Page 24).

Helene owns Sentry Financial Planning with her husband and business partner, John. She also is a cooking instructor and has her own TV show, “Healthy Cooking for Life with Helene Spoto,” airing on several local-access channels. For more information, visit helenescustomcuisine.com.

LARS TRODSION, CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Lars long has hosted a fascination with thrift and consignments shops, so when asked to do a story on a few in The Andovers, he was a perfect fit for the job (“So A Guy Walks Into a Consignment Store,” Page 44).

“It’s interesting to think that the things you find there once had a home, were abandoned, and are looking for a home again,” he says.

A resident of New Hampshire, Lars is a longtime journalist, film and fiction writer with a passion for writing about New England, as he did in his first novel, “Eagles Fly Alone.”

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