

# Midwinter

By Robert Francis  
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The movie *Before Tomorrow* opens with this Inuit story about a raven, a whale, a fire and a girl:

One time a raven flew over the beach. Suddenly a bowhead whale surfaced and swallowed it whole.

Inside the whale, it was dark, like a cave. In the distance, the raven saw the flickering light of an oil lamp. A girl was trying desperately to keep the light from dying.

The raven heard the girl's voice: "You must be faithful to me. Promise never to touch this light."

The raven promised, "I'll never touch it." But, when the girl returned to her work, the raven forgot his promise and touched the lamp, and when the light went out, the girl fell over, dead.

The raven realized his terrible mistake. The girl had taken possession of the raven's soul, and when the light went out, so did the raven's heart.

That's the end of the story.



Midwinter generally falls around February 2. The European-Americans named it "Groundhog Day". In Europe, they watched for the timid little hedgehog to emerge in Midwinter and said, "If he sees his shadow, it will frighten him back into his hole, and we'll have six more weeks of winter. Otherwise, spring is just around the

corner. (only six weeks away)" Here there are no hedgehogs, so they substitute a groundhog.

You know it's Midwinter night when, as soon as the sky is dark enough to see the stars, The Boys are directly overhead, dancing around the Dojuwa Star.



February is called "The Bony Moon". In the old days, it was the time of year when food stores would be most apt to run short. Food would be rationed, and people would burn off the last of the fat they had

stored in the fall.



For a short time, before I met Janet and got married, I tried my hand at raising Blue Foxes for their fur. Blue Foxes are a color variation of the Arctic Fox. Fur prices bottomed out the year after I went into the business, so I didn't stay in it long. I was glad to go out of the business. Keeping such intelligent animals in four by six foot cages bothered me. However, here is something interesting about Blue Foxes:

In the fall and early winter, you let them eat as much as they will. They eat a lot and get roly-poly fat. But, in February, you only give them a few ounces of food each day, and they lose all the fat in just a few weeks. This mimics their natural food cycle. If you don't do this, if you allow them to keep their winter fat, they have difficulty breeding, and if they do breed, they have problems carrying and whelping their pups.

February is often a colder, wetter, snowier month than January. It is a time of sickness and death, taking a heavy toll on the old folks and on those with health issues.

It was in February, at or near Midwinter, long ago, when Panther's Child went up on Rattlesnake Mountain to fast, pray and sing. Imagine that. It's hard enough to go on a hill even in May or June. When you are exposed, even in the spring, and a thunderstorm comes with hard rain, Your teeth chatter. You think you're going to freeze to death. But in February, on a high mountain, where the snow remains through March? That's where Panther's Child was. It was as cold and wet and dark as you can possibly imagine, and that's when the Sacred Fire came streaking across the sky, to be entrusted to our people.



My Great-Granddad Graves had many health issues. He had bad allergies and was prone to attacks of asthma. He had the same hump-back condition that has been passed down to me along with all the problems that go along with that. As a young man, he was quite sure he would not live to grow old. So what did he do? He set all his energy to living. He married young, had a big family, worked as a farmer, merchant, burr-mill operator, postmaster and physician, not just one of these at a time, but all at once during much of his life. There are some things about Great-Granddad Graves that I am not sharing here, things that make me think that maybe I would not have liked him and that maybe he would not have liked me. I don't know that we could have been friends. On the other hand, there are many things about Great-Granddad Graves of which I am proud.

Mindful of the fragility of life and the imminence of death, he lived life to the fullest, serving others to the best of his ability. He did not die young. He lived to be 88 years old. He died from the effects of a gangrenous leg that he refused to have removed, continuing to practice medicine until just a few weeks before his death. I used to think it was foolish of him not to have that leg removed, yet he probably reasoned amputation would postpone death by just a few months while increasing the suffering, not only to himself but to his family as well. He died at Midwinter, February 2, 1959.

There is a saying common today among many Indians: "Today is a good day to die". I'm not sure, but I think this originated from a Cheyenne war cry generally translated, "Today is a good day to die; only Earth and Sky last long."

It seems to me that many people spend their whole lives trying to divert themselves from the inevitability of death or trying to postpone death at all cost. That's not an indigenous mindset. Death and life are two sides or two aspects of the same reality. No life, no death, no death, no life. It's funny, the one called Jesus did not see death as an enemy. He is quoted as saying, "...unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit" (John 12:24). Jesus did not see death as an enemy, but many of his followers have. Some early Christians went so far as to refrain from procreating as a way to finally defeat death. No birth, no death.

Janet was already a shepherd when we first met. I had never been around sheep very much. I remember going out to the barn with her in the middle of the night to check to see if any ewes were lambing and to give assistance as needed. This was in the winter, January 1984. I remember Janet saying, "A sheep is born to die; it's the job of a shepherd to keep a sheep from dying until it's time for that sheep to die."



Night and darkness are connected in the mind with death. Winter is connected in the mind with death. Going up on a hill, separating oneself from the people, going without food, praying and singing, this is also metaphoric of death.



In the darkness of Midwinter, the light comes.

From ancient times, a meteor has been called a Panther in the Sky. A comet is the Eye of the Panther.

The Morningstar shines brightest in the darkest part of night. The Morningstar is

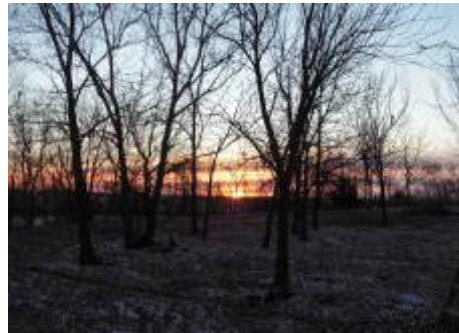
Creator-Offspring, sure hope of Sunrise, promise of a new day.

The Morningstar comes to Earth as the Eye of the Panther and the Panther in the Sky. And, every child born is Creator-Offspring. This is what the old ones said.

Modern scientists say the planets have been seeded by the comets which carry elements essential to the formation of plant and animal life, and when a comet comes close, meteors fall.

We are all Panther's Children. We are all Creator's-Offspring.

On Midwinter night, as soon as it is dark enough to see the stars, the constellation Cherokees call The Boys is directly overhead, in the center of the sky dome. The Boys are there, dancing around the Dojuwa Star, The House of the Sun, The Center of the Universe.... so far away and yet feeling so very near.



As the Morningstar is the promise of Sunrise, Midwinter is the promise of Spring, in death we find the promise of life.

Without darkness there is no light. Without winter, no spring. Without death, no life. Think on this and do not be afraid.