

The Winter Solstice in Business: Aligning our Work with Nature's Rhythms

Published by Sarah James Wright

21 December 2015

One of the ways we've discovered that supports work becoming 'generative', is aligning our work patterns with nature's own rhythms. Since one of the founding principles of becoming generative is working with wholeness, recognising that everything is connected and seeing ourselves as an active part of the natural ecosystem is very important. If we are to work *with* the mysterious, creative force of life, we need to recognise and observe it in ourselves.

My colleague, Ali Wooding, and myself have been experimenting with this in our own work lives and found that when we actively bring ourselves into alignment with natural cycles, we experience less stress, less of a 'push' energy and more of a spacious, creative flow with what we're engaged in. So how do you find that kind of alignment? There are many natural cycles that we can observe and here I'm going to share our experiences of working with the winter solstice.



Annual cycle: observing the seasons: winter

This idea is as old as the hills. Ancient peoples everywhere and every modern gardener recognise the wheel of the year, and even the most nature-averse among us knows the difference between the short cold days of midwinter and the long warm days of midsummer. How can this help us in our work activity and business planning?

If we observe what happens in the environment, it may look as if the riotous nature of last summer has shut up shop entirely, as branches become bare, gardens die down and birds fly south. It may look as if nothing's going on, but the life force hasn't gone away, it's gone underground. Bulbs wait in the dark for the warmth and light of spring, trees become dormant and many animals hibernate. As we ourselves are a part of this cycle, we might recognise the difference in our winter environment and adapt accordingly, but the work machine keeps us functioning at the same levels as in the summer. It may be dark from 4pm to 8am but the 9 to 5 routine carries on relentlessly, leaving many of us seeing little daylight during the winter and getting prone to colds, fatigue and feeling blue - witness the invention of daylight mimicking lightbulbs to artificially sunny up our days. Trees too can be tricked into avoiding dormancy by artificially controlling temperature and light patterns, but at a cost, as it shortens their overall life span. A period of dormancy is essential for healthy functioning in nature and we might benefit from allowing our bodies the same space for rest and reduced activity.

Although it might be nice to think about building a den and not coming out of it for a month or two, there are more practical ways we can observe winter in our work life.

- If you have control over your work hours, schedule less activity during midwinter. Shorten your diary day so that you start an hour later and finish an hour earlier. Try to sleep more so that you are better aligned with the hours of daylight.
- If you are in a 9 to 5 routine, you may be able to consider annualised hours, where you work longer days during the summer months and shorter ones during the winter. Or see if your work day can shift later for a while, so you get more rest in the mornings when it's dark.
- In your annual planning, try to avoid deadlines or big projects at this time of year. Recognise that everybody needs to slow down and the team may perform much better if you can shift the deadline forward or back a few weeks.
- Whatever your work pattern, get out for a walk in the middle of the day to ensure you get some fresh air and natural light. Spend time outdoors and observe the natural world in its winter state. What do you notice?
- Create a retreat space for peaceful reflection: even spending an evening or two at home in silence, away from music or TV, is nourishing. Know that you will return to full activity shortly, as the energy of the year begins to turn.
- Consider temporarily reducing your family's extra-curricular activities at midwinter to avoid too much rushing against the clock. They may also appreciate the extra chance to rest.
- Eat nourishing and warming foods - your system needs the fuel in the colder months. Take your time: make space for the ritual of cooking food and eat slowly.

I used to dread winter: I hated being cold, hated the dark days and the gloomy weather and getting through it felt like sheer endurance. As I began consciously to include the natural winter patterns, and adjust my work life accordingly, I came to appreciate the joys of the dark season, and now I love it as much as any other. During the middle of winter, I don't set an alarm clock unless I really have to. I wake up when it's light and the birds start singing. I don't schedule early morning appointments and I allow more time for all activity so I can go slower and allow for rests. It might look as if I'm spending less time at work, but I've found that I'm actually far more productive and I enjoy my work more.

Nourishing the growth cycle

Observing the seasonal changes does more than just serve your body's midwinter needs, however. It also acknowledges the inner cycle, the deeper growth journey, that can be harnessed to the changing patterns of the life force through the wheel of the year.

A key aspect of this – and one which we have noticed time and again since we've been exploring these themes of alignment – is giving death its proper place in the cycle. It may seem odd to include death in business activity, but we think it's very important to do so and it's a theme we return to often. Nature needs its dormant time, and so do you, and maybe even your business can allow for a slower season, depending on the nature of your work. In the natural world, death is merely an important stage in the growth cycle. We can learn how to be truly generative by observing the life

cycle at work in nature. New growth is fed by the decay of the old. The dormant period gives way to renewed life bursting forth in the spring, fed by the nutrients of last year's growth. If we apply this to organisational life, we can encourage new growth by allowing old material to die away. At some point in your business's annual cycle, you can allow for a fallow period, where you let things come to a full stop. In that dark, quiet time, you can reflect on what you've achieved during the year, what's worked and what hasn't, what is worth replanting for next year and what you need to dig up and put on the compost. You can prepare the ground for the new seeds of the next cycle of growth, and as every gardener knows, the better the compost, the better the yield of the plant.

We believe this activity is very important for every generative business. It may seem to run contrary to the established consumerist/capitalist view of non-stop activity and non-stop growth, but as we see with every fresh economic crash, *that* way of doing business is unsustainable. We can begin to imagine a new way of doing business, that includes this important winter element in a more natural cycle of economic growth. If we have the luxury of creating a business from scratch, we could envisage shorter winter operating hours, annualised growth projections and a designated space for retreat and reflection at this time of year for the whole team. If you're in a business where the Christmas holidays are your peak time, you would need to adjust the annual cycle to better fit your particular business model, but the fact remains that most businesses have a natural down time, and it's worth making the most of it.

Organisations are living systems that have their own life force running through them.

Stand back from the day to day activity of your business and consider its life cycle: see where it flows freely and where it may be stuck. Give yourself space to consider changes that need to be made to optimise your business. Bigger organisations do this as a matter of course but our view is that *all* sizes of business, from a solopreneur upwards, need to make time and space for this kind of midwinter reflection in order to support sustainable growth.

It takes some foresight and courage to create a dormant winter in an organisation, particularly if your work is currently run on the 'never stop' model, but there are ways to include elements of it.

- Schedule in an awayday for your team, ahead of the Christmas party. Use the time to review the year you've had and give proper space for evaluation, before you celebrate your achievements and let off some steam.
- If you're self-employed, or running a small business, take a day or two off at this time of year, to do your own process of reflection. Consider all the progress you've achieved over the year and congratulate yourself for all that you've completed.
- Give yourself the chance to review any habits, behaviours, activities or relationships that no longer serve you. It's a good time to take stock of where you are and what you would like to let go of in your life. What will you replant for next year and what will you let die down?
- Acknowledge all the support you have received this year; even if you also acknowledge that you would like more next year!

- Try to take some holiday at this time of year and allow yourself to come to a full stop. Encourage employees to do the same. (Again, if your business needs to be busy at Christmas time, find another time to do this.)
- As you begin to let go of the old year, you create a space that allows the seeds of ideas to come through for the next year's development.

This dark sojourn to the inner, underground realms doesn't last forever. At midwinter, the sun grows stronger once again and the days increase in length. The winter solstice marks the point of the great turning of the year, when the sun seems to stand still at the Tropic of Capricorn and then reverses its direction. From the Latin 'solstitium' meaning 'sun standing still', the winter solstice in 2015 occurs on Tuesday 22nd December at 08:04 GMT. It is celebrated by people all over the world who value the wisdom of the natural rhythms of the Earth, and even in modern organisational life, it can provide a still, sacred moment, before life rushes in and on again.

Photo credit: www.domagius.com