



# Seasons of the Slavic Soul

A Quest for an Authentic  
Polish Spirituality

 CLAIRE M. ANDERSON 





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# Preface



This book is written for anyone on a spiritual quest. It is inspired by Slavic—particularly Polish—culture, but it turns unique customs and experiences into universal themes. It is for everyone seeking ways that culture and everyday life can inspire wisdom for living. Emerging in the fifth or sixth century from various European tribes, the Slavs developed a unique cultural identity centered around settlement life and in tune with the cycle of seasons. Early Slavs believed in a direct relationship with the gods, particularly the god of the sun, and celebrated the seasons with rituals, dance, and special foods. The tribes were also cognizant of vegetative cycles and the migration of birds, and celebrated rites of passage with particular solemnity and festivity. When Christianity spread throughout Slavic lands during the Middle Ages, it fused with pre-existing beliefs and customs, forming a “dual faith” or, in Russian, *dvoeverie*.

By the ninth and tenth centuries, many Slavs had developed sophisticated levels of craftsmanship, commerce, defense, and transportation. In some places, tribes lived in commune-like *opole*, and in other locales an elected or hereditary leader governed various settlements.

Throughout the centuries, Slavic tribes grew from settlements to dukedoms to kingdoms (both sovereign monarchies and limited, elected monarchies) and finally into self-governing nations. Their vast regions are quite diverse geographically, religiously, and culturally. Upheaval, famine, and oppression drove millions of Slavs to emigrate to the United States, Canada, and elsewhere between 1860 and 1990. Today their descendants have largely assimilated in their new homelands, while also keeping certain traditions and cultural values.



# Prologue



Writing this book has changed my life. I no longer see my family history and ethnic heritage as an isolated backdrop to my spiritual life or a pleasant distraction from the “serious” focus of my primary energies. Rather, writing these reflections has been a journey of integration. It has taught me that anything can be a source of inspiration for spiritual growth and transformation. Everyday things—water, bread, gravestones, the buds of spring—are sources of wisdom to me now.

I like how Presbyterian researcher Susan Ebertz describes spiritual integration: “bringing together our internal and external life.” Throughout the process of spiritual integration, there are times when we hold certain dynamics in tension, times when we need to adapt or translate language or symbols, and times when we need to let go of difficult or painful aspects of a heritage or history. But life is the continual process of asking ourselves probing

questions and making those changes that lead to greater wholeness, greater “bringing together our internal and external life.”

This book is only one person’s journey through her genetic memory and life experience. What is *yours*?





From the Winter Solstice to Early February



*Remember, there will be sad, empty people,  
needed by no one—  
and who exchange not a word with anyone,  
who are uninvited to their own home.  
Take the white Christmas wafer in your hand,  
even if you yourself have no one with whom to share it,  
and wish happiness to the whole world....*

—ZDZISŁAW KUNSTMAN (1909-1968)  
IN “W DZIEŃ BOŻEGO NARODZENIA”  
 (“ON CHRISTMAS DAY”)



The last Polish wedding I attended was more like a cosmic phenomenon than a wedding. Two huge extended families seemed to collide like two giant asteroids in space. The weekend was filled with a constellation of emotions sparked by solemn rituals, boisterous parties, and every encounter in between.

The Polish-born bride and U.S.-born groom sur-

rounded themselves with multigenerational attendees. Godparents, aunts, uncles, and parents embodied tradition and aided the solemnity. The uncle who acted as host and emcee orchestrated the sentiments of the guests and the young couple deftly, igniting in everyone tears and laughter-induced belly aches. A galaxy of bridesmaids and groomsmen orbited around the young couple, basking in the solar glow of their friends and siblings. Children darted around the houses, churches, and dancefloors throughout the weekend like shooting stars in a night sky. The merging of two families, two cultures, was like two planets converging in space.

It is no wonder that ancient Poles used the same word for “new year” or “winter solstice holiday” as “marriage, wedding, or mating.” Two years collide—or wed—on the threshold of the winter solstice.



For centuries the rites associated with the winter solstice stood at the apex of the Slavic year. The cycle of seasons began in the darkness of the longest night. Pre-Christian Poles called the feast “*Gody*,” that is, the “mating” or “wedding” of the old year and the new.

The low arc of the sun over the horizon creates short days and long nights, lending itself to minimal work and many festive gatherings. The winter solstice was a time of

solemn festival and vigilant observance that the new year would be ushered in properly. The festive meal around which the family gathered was prepared meticulously, for what occurred on the winter solstice would foreshadow the entire coming year. The house was cleaned thoroughly and decorated tastefully, with a bundle of grain in the corner of the dining room, paper cutouts adorning the walls, or, in later centuries, an evergreen tree or manger scene.

The presence of grain—sometimes the sprinkling of grain throughout the house—was an expression of hope or prayer for abundant grain in the coming year. The table was set with the finest cloth, vessels, and utensils. Family members dressed in their finest attire, with the aspiration that such dignities would be enjoyed throughout the coming year. This belief is preserved in the saying, “*Nowy rok jaki, cały rok taki*” (“As the New Year, so the whole year”).

At one time, the food dishes on the solstice vigil table represented every source of food—the forests producing mushrooms; the fields producing cabbage, grains, poppy seeds, and other bounties; the lakes and rivers giving forth herring and other fish; and the orchards yielding pears, plums, apples, and nuts. In later centuries among Christians, the dishes represented a biblical number, such as the twelve apostles. A white tablecloth with straw tucked here and there transformed the Polish dining room into a contemporaneous Bethlehem stable.

In ancient times, extra food was set on the table for the ancestors to be nourished on their otherworldly jour-

neys. In later centuries, an extra place was set at the table for the unexpected guest—a sign of hospitality, openness, and true vulnerability, especially during times of occupation.

The Christmas wafer (*opłatek*), originating from a blending of ancient Slavic and Christian practices of sharing unleavened bread, is shared by over 90% of Poles. It expresses sentiments of warmth and friendship, of family intimacy, of reconciliation of past hurts, and of willingness to share bread and other resources throughout the year. For some, it is the single most important ritual of the year, expressing ultimate harmony and peace.

The festive Christmas Eve meal (called *Wigilia*, derived from “vigil”) is still enjoyed by family members and close friends, with children on their best behavior. The menu is typically meatless, in keeping with the early Christian practice of Advent as a period of pre-baptismal fasting, but it is still replete with an array of traditional Polish dishes. Families still set an empty place at the table and begin the meal at the sighting of the first star in the sky. After the meal, those gathered sing carols, exchange gifts, and share stories late into the night. Many Polish Catholics participate in Midnight Mass or in Mass on the following day.

The days after Christmas are spent visiting loved ones, hark back to the custom of caroling or house-to-house greetings. In earlier centuries in many regions in Poland, small bands of young men and boys walked house

to house bestowing wishes of good health and prosperity in the coming year. In gratitude for the wishes given to the household, the carolers received a few coins or sweets. Today, Christmas cards or other forms of greetings and wishes have largely replaced this tradition.

A similar custom among Catholics is that of parish priests visiting the homes of church members during the Christmas season. The brief visit typically covers matters important to the household, as well as a brief prayer. While living with my mother's cousin in Poland, for example, the parish priest visited our apartment. My "aunt" and the priest discussed her grief over the recent loss of her husband. After memories and tears were shared, the two prayed, and although the priest was soon off to other apartments, my aunt was visibly moved that her pastor empathized with her pain, listened to her sorrow, and offered words of comfort and peace.



In the centuries when the landed gentry dominated social life in Poland, winter festivities included a progressive sleigh-ride party called *kulig*. In a lavish version of the house-to-house greetings, the *kulig* provided an occasion for social arrangements to be made, squabbles to be settled, and the latest fashions to be shown off among aristocrats. The revelry began when young noblemen arrived



unexpectedly at a neighboring manor house, clamoring for hospitality. Lest the hosts be seen as unwelcoming, they brought out their best *bigos* (“hunter’s stew”) and mead. Feasting, toasting, singing, and dancing with the young ladies of the house lasted through the night. After a few hours’ sleep, the whole entourage left for the next manor house.

The caravan built progressively in number and merriment over the course of weeks. Horse-drawn sleighs, bedecked with ribbons and bells, glided through the snow, carrying men and women in furs and finery. Today, New Year’s Eve parties (called *imprezy Sylwestrowy* because they are held on the feast of St. Sylvester) or shorter sleigh rides fulfill the desire for winter merrymaking.



Gradually, as the Northern Hemisphere begins its slow tilt toward the sun, the days begin lengthening and warming. The swirling of cold and warm air often leads to late winter storms. The hope of averting dangerous weather was embodied by ancient customs appealing to *Pierun*, the god of thunder, and to *Mokosz*, the goddess of water and fertility. Mid-way between the winter solstice and the spring equinox, that is, around February 1st, ancient Slavs lit fires to “guide” the sun, the source of the harvest and of life.

In Christian practice, February 2 marks the Feast of

the Presentation of the Lord in the Temple, forty days after the Birth of Jesus. Once known as “Candlemas Day,” this feast celebrated Jesus as a “light to the nations,” and candles were blessed and carried in procession around churches.

The feast was also known at one time as the “Purification of Mary.” These two strains of meaning—the symbolism of candles and the invocation of a feminine entity—fused in Polish folklore. Especially in rural locations, the blessed candles were placed on windowsills with a prayer that *Matka Boska Gromnicza*, or “Our Lady of Thunder Candles,” would protect the household from severe winter weather, hungry wolves, and other calamities. These same blessed candles were—and sometimes still are—also lit when a family member dies.

Ending the season of festive vigil was a flurry of rich foods, such as hearty *bigos*, crisp *chruściki*, and yeasty *pączki*, served at parties lasting long into the night. Such moments were fully enjoyed because the revelers knew that a stark contrast awaited them: the austerity and barrenness of Lent and late winter.



On this cusp between seasons, as in a marriage, there is much letting go and much embracing. I feel this push and pull during winter’s womb-like darkness. I usually find

myself grieving the loss of the days and months of the past year that will never return. Whether I like it or not, I cannot bring back the old year or the old anything.

The darkness of winter, this beautiful blue-black canvas, is a field of infinite possibility and newness. I have watched through the telescope of self-reflection disappointments and confusions slowly implode like supernovae, leaving nothing but free, open space for something new, something fresh. Inside me, on this empty canvas, profound experiences of loss have crashed into new, unexpected experiences of life and slowly forge a new me out of the rubble. And, with this telescope pointed on the night sky of my soul, I have watched dreams die and reappear elsewhere and worldviews slowly swell to include stunning new horizons.

The impact breaks apart the old and fuses a new relationship, a new being. And the collision is necessary for the emergence. That is the winter solstice for me now—a tangible cosmic symbol of the unfolding of me and the unfolding of everything.

Now, mid-way through the 90-plus years I hope to live, I am beginning to absorb the reality that cataclysm is what gives birth. The invitation, even as I write this, is to trust that emergence, the crashing of the old in me into the creative prospect of the new.



Every Polish family who endured the Second World War and years of Communist rule knows what it is like to sit down to meager fare when tradition calls for abundance. There is a story of a family during Nazi occupation who, on Christmas Eve, had one carrot to eat. They cooked the carrot into soup, ate it, and celebrated as best as they could. Awaiting better times, they shared from the depths of what they had.

This story—and so much of Polish experience—invites us to consider that true feasting has little to do with food. Abundance is an attitude of the heart. Similarly, joyfulness does not come from the conditions that surround us. This is not to glorify squalor. It is simply to suggest that, while we work to eliminate pain or hardship, we have an inner hope, interior reasons for being joyful. The Slavic story is a story of human resilience. Perhaps every life can be seen in light of human resilience. The indigenous wisdom of the Slavic tradition of “joyous feasting” is an invitation to cultivate the sources of joy and abundance within us.



The sixteen hours of winter darkness every day lend themselves to vigil, to a conscious and observant waiting. “Vigil” means “strength for remaining watchful and awake.”

Those who have been pregnant and those who have accompanied someone who was pregnant know much

about waiting. Waiting implies a surrender of our real or imagined control of time. Even if we do not have a full picture of what is to come, we still await someone or something. This makes the expectation more poignant or the anxiety more excruciating: We can envision what we want and feel unfulfilled or incomplete until it arrives. In an age of near-instant information, services, and commodities, waiting can be experienced as unproductive and backwards. Waiting compels us to accept the fact, even for a moment, that we are not the ultimate rulers of our circumstances. There may, in fact, be a timing greater than our timing.

Keeping vigil also conveys watchfulness—attentive wonder without expectation of what will appear. Watchfulness implies a childlike eagerness to welcome the next delight. In the way that a child watches with awe as a caterpillar transforms into a butterfly, what if we embraced an inner posture of watchfulness? What if we released our own expectations of what will emerge in the future and simply kept watch for what is emerging? Something new is being born in the deepest moments of fertile darkness.

When I think of watchfulness, I am reminded of a woman I know in her late 60s who is a mother and grandmother. “Susan” had allowed a series of poor choices made by one of her adult children to affect her finances and compromise her health. She found herself struggling to find meaning in her life and goodness in life in general. After several months and much reflection, Susan came to



the difficult but important conclusion that the only one she could change was herself. She watched as a new self emerged, a self she never knew because her life had been filled with so many other concerns and activities. Stripped bare, her life now had focus and resiliency. When I last saw Susan, her whole demeanor, despite her physical ailments, was radiant. Awe and wonder and new life exist as long as we are watchful.



## Questions for Reflection

- ▲ *In the Orthodox Christian tradition, keeping vigil is one of the primarily ascetic practices. At what times have you kept vigil—at the bedside of a dying elder or a sleeping child or over an adult child from a distance? How have you kept vigil over the mission of an organization...or over family finances? In the prayer space of your heart, over whom do you keep watch?*
- ▲ *Is there something for which you are waiting in your life? What are your expectations regarding that for which you are waiting? What would happen if you surrendered those expectations?*

- ◀ *Recall a time you gazed at something with wonder, awe, or delight. How could a posture or approach of wonder, awe, and delight be helpful in your spiritual journey?*



## Suggested Rituals or Practices

- ◀ Organize a Christmas caroling outing or holiday visits among neighbors, within a religious or cultural group, or among family members. The group might visit an elderly neighbor, someone with a disability, or a struggling family. Prepare formal wishes or a prayer or blessing for the resident. Bring an *opłatek* to share with the resident or food items to leave behind as a small gift.
- ◀ Consider making your *Wigilia*—or other festive winter meal—from sustainably grown foods. As you consider where each food was cultivated and how it got to your table, offer a prayer or blessing for the farmers, the harvesters, the soil, the water, and all that helped the food have life and come to fruition.
- ◀ Select a meal this winter at which you set an empty place. Who might be your “unexpected guest”?

## About the Author



The journey of these pages began with my own search for integration of my Polish roots, studies in European History and theology, and my own soul-journey.

My maternal great-grandparents, the Przybyslskis, emigrated from villages in present-day Poland and settled in Wisconsin in the 1890s. During the Great Depression, my grandparents found work in Los Angeles, which is where my mother was born and raised and where she married and had her family.

As a child growing up in Los Angeles County, I was surrounded by palm trees, skyscrapers, and sprawling shopping malls, but I daydreamed about the lives of my great-grandparents, about hauntingly beautiful folk melodies, about the flavors of old family recipes, about serene panoramas of a land far away, and about the kind of nation that makes great heroes and artists and musicians.

When the Solidarity trade union, John Paul II, and

dissidents championed human rights across East-Central Europe, Poland was in the news almost every night, raising my teenage consciousness about my cousins behind the Iron Curtain.

As a college student, I watched on my dorm room television jubilant and determined East Germans chisel away the Berlin Wall and decided to live in Poland after graduation. I purchased a one-way ticket to Warsaw, in the hopes of teaching English for a year. With the address of my mother's second cousin scrawled on a scrap of paper in my pocket, I navigated to several distant cousins' homes, where I was warmly welcomed as a long-separated family member.

The 14 months I spent in Poland in (1992-1993) were extraordinary. From the third-floor apartment in central Poznań where I lived with my "*Ciocia*," I absorbed as much as I could of Polish life.

When I returned from my year abroad, I studied European History at the University of Wisconsin in Milwaukee. In that immigrant-friendly city I found many treasures: a geographical climate that resembled that of Poland, people who knew what *pierogi* and *pączki* were, distant cousins, a leading Polish song and dance ensemble, and a new home for my heart.

Since then, professional church ministry, theological studies, and serving as the director of a retreat center setting have exposed me to the stories and struggles of many people of various ages and life circumstances. I have grown

to appreciate the journey of spiritual integration that is part of the human story—how we make sense of the world around us, how we assign meaning and develop our core values, how we live out those values, how we navigate change and personal relationships, how we integrate the physical conditions we are given, and how we transcend ourselves.

My hope is that the reflections in this book—that draw on my eight trips to Poland, my years in Wisconsin, and wisdom I have gleaned from East-Central European history and culture—provide enrichment for *your* spiritual journey.



# What makes Slavic, and specifically Polish, spirituality unique and compelling today?

**T**he rich and long Slavic spiritual tradition holds that everyday holiness thrives on different seasons—through Spring, Summer, Autumn, and Winter and from consolation to desolation and everything in between. Claire Anderson, of Polish descent and currently the Director of Siena Retreat Center in Wisconsin, explores this tradition and expands it by connecting these seasons to the rhythms and practices in her own Polish cultural tradition and the physical world around her.

*The Seasons of the Slavic Soul* is an ideal companion for both nature retreat and spiritual pilgrimage—or a combination of the two. Drawing on the author's deep engagement through years of travel and research, the book introduces the reader into the vast spiritual and cultural resources within the Polish community and invites awareness of the connections between us human beings and the natural world. It reveals the gift that is at the heart of all life.

Anderson characterizes *The Seasons of the Slavic Soul* as “a journey of integration.” Readers who join her quest for an authentic Polish spirituality will be well rewarded.

*“A deeply rich and yet accessible look at Slavic culture through the lens of spirituality, poetry, art, mythology, and history. Claire Anderson shares stories, traditions, and insights that made my soul leap for joy. In so many ways, this book contains all of our collective stories, regardless of our ethnicity or background. Both profound and yet simple, this gem of a book has something for everyone.”*

—Julianne Donlon Stanz, Director of New Evangelization, Diocese of Green Bay,  
and consultant to the USCCB Committee on Catechesis and Evangelization

Spirituality/Polish

