



(Unsplash/Mira Kempainen)



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December 21, 2024

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Editor's note: *This letter was sent to our NCR Forward members Nov. 20, an incentive for our members. If you would like first access to the weekly Inside NCR, [sign up for a membership here](#).*

When I was growing up, my devout Catholic grandmother used to tell me that every year, on the winter solstice, her father would call her just to remind her that it was the "longest night of the year."

I never really understood why. It's not like there was anything my grandmother could do about it, and the Winter Solstice isn't exactly something a traditional Irish Catholic family celebrates or marks with any sort of fanfare.

Eventually, probably when I was a precocious teenager, I asked her why her father would call her up every year with such obvious news.

"I don't know," she said. "Maybe he wanted to remind me that there was some light coming."

As I've grown older and realized that just about everyone I know (including myself) contends with some form of [seasonal affective disorder](#), I've come to see the simple but profound wisdom in such a statement. Especially this year.

It's impossible to ignore the physical darkness of December — the shortening days, the low sun angle, the creeping north wind that beckons the winter cold — as the country and the world stand on the brink of unprecedented emotional and social chaos and darkness after the 2024 presidential election.

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Mass deportations. The desecration of public lands. The erosion of public health. A [disastrously unqualified cabinet](#). There is no escaping it — we are on the precipice of a long, cold and dark winter in America.

How do we contend with that darkness? I hope you [read our editorial](#) about living in that darkness, with hope. Not a naive, ignorant hope, but a genuine spirit of truth,

strength and companionship rooted in our Christian love for one another.

Though there is nothing we can do to expedite it, we have the benefit of knowing that our physical darkness begins to end: Dec. 21. Every day after that, we gain just a little bit more light. It starts slow and, for weeks, is imperceptible. There is a reason that the church fathers had the foresight to place Christmas around the winter solstice. It is the physical reminder of the spiritual reality we celebrate on the 25th — the inbreaking of the light of the world into our world.

My grandma is now in her 80s, and her father has long since gone to his eternal reward. I've taken on the mantle of notifying her about the longest night of the year. I do it in person, with my mother, my wife and my daughter, as we stroll around my neighborhood with some hot chocolate, admiring the Christmas lights. It's a small celebration before Christmas, our special way to remind each other that the light is coming. During this time in the life of our country, I hope you find yours.