

"I absolutely loved this book."

**Shannon K. Evans**

Author and spirituality editor at *National Catholic Reporter*

# A MIDWINTER GOD

*Encountering the Divine  
in Seasons of Darkness*

**CHRISTINE VALTERS PAINTNER**

A Midwinter God  Reflection Guide



## Introduction

- In what areas of your life are you seeking answers instead of trusting the questions? Practice naming your questions without rushing to provide easy answers.
- What resources can you call on to help sustain you in your experiences of feeling unsettled, challenged, and disoriented? Recall familiar prayers and traditions on this journey, as well as welcome new resources along the way.
- What griefs are you carrying which have gone unnamed and un-mourned, including ancestral trauma presenting as deep grief? Take a moment to consider how these losses have continued to echo through your life and shape who you are.
- Close your eyes and imagine your life as a tree. What adorns your branches? When these embellishments are released, what remains? Gently ask yourself what are the trunk and bare branches of your life? Your roots? What feelings arise when you imagine standing as a bare tree with all leaves and embellishments stripped away? Ground yourself in grace as you let yourself experience this.



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## Chapter 1: The Gifts of Winter and Darkness

- Where in your life do you feel the cultural demand to worship spring and summer energies? In what areas are you feeling invited to live counter-culturally? What are messages of compassion you can offer in the face of cultural messages to always be producing?
- When have you experienced true, literal darkness? Can you remember how that felt? How was it similar or dissimilar to any moments of true darkness of the soul? What are some ways you can begin to practice giving up control and surrendering to the rhythms of light and dark?
- Can you recall a time in your life when everything familiar was stripped away? How did you navigate the disorientation of the unknown? What does the invitation to lean into the grace of “being” rather than “doing” stir inside you?
- How do you respond to Winter’s invitation to slow down and rest into the quiet, to welcome in the growing darkness, and to listen to your dreams and to the mystery? What resources will help you stay awake and present to this process?
- When have you been called beyond your edges and said “yes”? When have you said “no”? How can you practice dancing at your own edges in order to expand your resilience so that you will be ready to stay present when life calls you beyond these edges?



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## Chapter 2: Spiritual Bypassing and Shadow Work

- Pause and reflect on the ways you have experienced spiritual bypassing — either from others or from yourself. Can you identify the root of this bypassing (shame, impatience to find meaning, other internalized ways of thinking)? What spiritual practices might you be using in attempt to avoid dealing with your psychological and emotional needs?
- Have you ever experienced episodes of synchronicity that revealed the deep interconnection of all life? What's your perception of these experiences now versus then?
- Consider the times and spaces where you've felt the most safe to feel your full range of emotions. Are there common threads that you can weave together to help find resources of support on this journey of welcoming your whole self?
- How aware are you of the multiplicity of your inner characters and voices? Who is invited to your inner table? Who is left out, waiting to be let in to feast and to share their wisdom with you? Pause to breathe, and listen for their messages in your body.
- Are you acquainted with your shadow selves? If not, how can you begin to listen and welcome in these rejected selves? Consider attending to what shadow material is showing itself in your dreams and in your interactions with others.



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## Chapter 3: Grief as Holy Path

- Do you have a holding space that feels safe enough to be with whatever is arising within you? Are there practices you've already intuited that help to ground you and create space? Are there any that call to you now?
- Do you seek to fill the emptiness that grief presents? What have you filled that emptiness with? Sit with the idea of leaving that space empty — what arises within you?
- Have you ever walked right into a place of feeling utterly undone? If so, reflect on that experience. Is there something you're avoiding walking into now?
- Where do you see the connection between wonder and presence in your life? How might you make a commitment to being present and witnessing yourself with compassion when you feel absent?
- Have you ever rushed to comfort, assure, or impose hope on those who reach out to you in their time of grief and loss? If so, offer yourself grace, and reflect on what new ways you're learning to be present in compassion, as a holy witness.



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## Chapter 4: The Apophatic Path or Way of Unknowing

- What is your gut reaction when you read the words that you are already united with God — that your spiritual journey is not about finding God, but stripping away everything that separates you from experiencing your union with God? Sit with this image for a few moments.
- What objects and representations of God and the Divine are you attached to in your spiritual practices? Can you think of any “certainties” you have about God that may in fact be moving you farther away from the Divine nature? What are ways you can explore another pathway along your spiritual landscape — a way that leaves images and “knowings” of the Divine behind?
- Take a moment to imagine what it would be like to be in a community (large or small) that actively creates rituals to help support each other, with wise elders holding space for those undergoing the dark night journey. What might it feel like to be part of such a community? What are some small ways you can begin that community of support now?
- Have you found ways of expressing your deep pain and anguish? When have you become numb from apathy? Are there ways you are discovering to emerge from that numbness?



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## Chapter 5: The Compassionate Fierce, Dark Feminine

- What are ways you can welcome the fierce, compassionate Mary into your life to abide with you and your sorrow?
- How can you consciously bypass culture's immersion in reason, logic, and certainties, and, instead, enter the realm of your heart? Pause and listen to the songs of lament your soul is singing: what do you hear? Welcome the Black Madonna to abide with you in the process, nudging you towards the fullness of your own becoming.
- Do you find yourself resisting the cyclical nature of life? Consider how you've already experienced the cycle of germination, fruit, decay, and dormancy manifest in your life.
- What adornments (societal masks of self-protection, ego-identifications, old patterns, and illusions) are you called to let go on your descent into mystery and deeper initiation?
- Who or what are your guides and protectors that accompany you through your initiation and transformation?



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## Chapter 6: The Transformative Mythic Journey

- Where in your life have you been abandoned, betrayed, victimized, neglected, or disillusioned? What shadow sides of the Orphan Archetype resonate with your experience? What are ways you've experienced the light side of the Orphan Archetype?
- Reflect on the relationship between your ego and the Destroyer. Recall times when your soul has been destroyed by your ego's demands. How will you respond to the call of the Destroyer to relinquish the ego's attachments and illusions?
- Imagine what it would be like to live in communities where death is regarded as a sacred threshold and where accompanying the dying on their final journey is a holy responsibility. What are ways you can begin to cultivate that community and begin to practice confronting mortality?
- What gift do you offer with joy as a blessing to the world?
- Contemplate your relationship to power — yours and others'. What is the power you are called to claim during your Midwinter journey?



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## Conclusion

- In what ways do you feel called to continue to engage with the pain of the world? How will you bring the fierce, compassionate energy you've cultivated into your community?
- What ideas and images arise when you consider the qualities of waiting, cultivating, patience, endurance, and surrender? Which of these comes more naturally to you? Which needs more attention and tending?
- Take a moment to revisit the art, writings, and rituals you explored in the previous chapters. What are some new revelations that glimmer to you when you engage with them now?
- Contemplate the place these practices might have in your life. Is there anything you want to strip away to allow space for these practices to continue? Try to resist language of obligation and shame. These practices are here to support you — approach your new beginning with grace.



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