

“SEEING IN THE DARK”
A sermon by the Reverend Dena McPhetres
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First Unitarian Society of Milwaukee

Well, I did it again: resisted doing my favorite spiritual practice at this time of year, and I’m not sure why. Some years I can’t wait to practice welcoming the dark during the four weeks before Winter Solstice, the longest night of the year. I look forward to bringing each evening to a close by turning off all the lights, sitting quietly in the dark for awhile and then singing a verse from our hymn “Dark of Winter.”

Sometimes I even get out the Advent Candles and light one on Sunday evening, each week adding another candle to symbolize the contrast between the increasing darkness outside and the growing light of joy inside, the nearer we get to the festival of Christmas.

Some years I do this and some years not and I’m not sure why. Maybe it has to do with a similar feeling I experience sometimes when I resist the daily practice of sitting meditation. Perhaps I don’t want to find out what is waiting in the silence. Perhaps I don’t want to find out what is waiting in the dark.

What am I afraid to see?

Darkness has a lot of negative connotations attached to it. Think about how the word “dark” figures in our speech. We say, “That was a dark time in my life.” “He’s gone over to the dark side.” “I’m having dark thoughts.” “Those people are living in the Dark Ages.”

Think about how the word “light” figures in our speech. We might say: “I’m holding you in the light” to someone going through a difficult time. Or “things will look better in the morning.” When we suddenly understand something or get a new idea we might say “the light bulb just went on in my head!” After a long persuasive argument, when someone finally comes to agree with us, we say “they saw the light!”

Religious communities might refer to their people as “children of the light.” In some religious traditions, the greatest spiritual goal is called Enlightenment.

By contrast, in her book “Learning to Walk in the Dark,” Barbara Brown Taylor wonders about the value of “endarkenment” – and conjectures that we don’t talk about the value of the dark because we are enthralled with what she calls a “full solar spirituality.”

As a former Episcopal priest and a current professor of world religions, she speaks with some authority when she says, “Christianity has never had anything nice to say about darkness. From earliest times, Christians have used darkness as a synonym for sin, ignorance, spiritual blindness and death.” As it says in the Gospel According to John, “God is light and in God there is no darkness at all,” and Jesus is referred to as “The Light of the World.”

Taylor writes, "Christian teaching thrives on dividing reality into opposed pairs: good/evil, church/world, spirit/flesh, sacred/profane, light/dark."

We can easily hear in the dualities she named, which side is valued and which is not. One could argue the valuation that goes with these dualities is used to uphold privilege and prejudice, racism and xenophobia – fear of "the stranger" or "the other," especially when "the other" has dark skin.

I believe imagery about light and darkness can be very powerful. And our actual physical and emotional experience of light and dark even more powerful. I think it's a problem that solar spirituality stigmatizes darkness, suppresses the value of what we can learn in the dark, and refuses to notice the healing powers of darkness.

Think for a moment about the positive aspects of darkness. Sleep and rest happen in the dark. Stars can only be seen in the dark. The seed planted in the earth must have darkness in which to germinate. A woman's womb is a place of darkness where each of our lives began to grow.

After we are born and as we grow up, we encounter different experiences of dark and light. We accumulate a personal history of the darkness, related to messages and experiences of danger and safety, fear and calm, courage and not.

Taylor claims, "Each of us has a personal history of the dark. A child who was locked in a closet as punishment will not register darkness the same way as a child who looked forward to family camping trips. A child who grew up in an urban housing project will fear things worse than coyotes when she bolts her doors at night. As universal as darkness may be, our experience of it is local."

For me, fortunately, my worst memory of darkness as a child was being asked to go down cellar to get a jar of home-canned peaches or cherries or pickles or jam from the pantry. There was a light on the cellar stairway, but then I had to turn a corner, open the door to the pantry and wave my hand in the air until I found the string to pull that turned on the light. I still remember the smell of the cellar pantry and my fear of what lurked in the dark, although it was never anything but a stray cobweb.

I am aware that many life-changing events can happen in the dark, some lovely and some horrible. Our personal histories of the dark vary by social location -- urban or rural, wealth or poverty, violence or safety, and the list goes on. So when I recommend that we explore the dark and its spiritual gifts, I bear this in mind.

Taylor cautions that the process of learning to walk in the dark is unlike other efforts. She writes, "This learning cannot be rushed, no matter how badly you want to get where you are going. Step one of learning to walk in the dark is to give up running the show. Next you sign the waiver that allows you to bump into some things that may frighten you at first. Finally you ask darkness to teach you what you need to know."

What can we see in the dark? We have to go there to find out. One summer when I worked at a camp, there was a group of us who walked over to the other side of the island at sunset for a sweat lodge. When we were done, it was dark out and on our way back to camp, a few of us got separated from the group and none of us had a flashlight!

One brave soul offered to go first down the forest path and the rest of us lined up one by one behind him. Everyone put a hand on the shoulder of the person in front of them. We involuntarily found ourselves on a Trust Walk.

It must have been a cloudy night or the dark phase of the moon. I remember opening my eyes as wide as I could and still not being able to see. I had to see with my feet. We walked very slowly, sensing the sides of the path with our feet, hoping and praying and striving to not veer off into the woods never to be found again.

I remember dancing with my fear as I experienced the dark forest through my feet and my ears and my nose like never before. Through my hand, I had to trust the person in front of me as they trusted the person in front of them, and the people behind us had to trust us.

One of the gifts of the dark is learning to trust senses other than sight. I hope I'll never forget how transformative that experience of "seeing in the dark" was for me. I suppose that trust walk could have ended badly, but it didn't. We made it safely back to camp.

Perhaps people used to have a better sense of the true dangers and gifts of the dark before there was so much artificial light and we got so unfamiliar with darkness. Some religious traditions still honor the dark. The Jewish Sabbath begins after sunset, when the first three stars appear in the sky. Pagan rituals honor the cycle of the moon, as it emerges from the "dark of the moon" when we cannot see it, to its luminous fullness at full moon.

Taylor points out that several of the world's great spiritual leaders had transformative experiences in the darkness of caves. "Guatama Buddha meditated regularly in caves. Muhammad meditated and prayed for days at a time in a small mountain cave two miles outside of Mecca. On what has become known as the Night of Power, the angel Gabriel came to him there and commanded he "Recite," from which came the first verses of the Koran." The famous stable in Bethlehem where Joseph and Mary spent the night while Mary gave birth to Jesus was most likely a small cave.

What does all this say to us? I think it nudges us to reframe our view of the dark. Consider this reframing of darkness. In his poem "To Darkness," Maria Rainer Rilke, as translated by Joanna Macy, wrote:

"You, darkness, of whom I am born—
I love you more than the flame
that limits the world
to the circle it illumines

and excludes all the rest.
 But the dark embraces everything:
 shapes and shadows, creatures and me,
 people, nations—just as they are.”

Jan Richardson writes in her book “Night Visions: Searching the Shadows of Advent and Christmas,” “the one who grew in the fertile darkness of Mary’s womb knew that darkness is not evil of itself. Rather, it can become the **tending place** in which our longings for healing, justice and peace grow and come to birth. . . Jesus came not to dispel the darkness but to teach us to dwell with integrity, compassion, and love in the midst of ambiguity.”

I think the search for how to live with **integrity** gets a bit heightened for many of us in during the month of December.

- We chafe against traditional religious rhetoric, even as we seek meaning in the season;
- we struggle against the demands of consumerism, as we try to satisfy our families;
- we re-enter (or completely avoid) our families of origin with their predictable complexities, while trying to stay true to ourselves;
- we yearn for permission to drop the obligatory happy face and grieve our losses honestly;
- we despair at the annual cycle of charitable giving that helps a little but does not stem the tide of need.

The force of violence, fear and hatred in the world right now is stunning. It weighs heavily on our hearts. We wonder how we can make a difference – how we can live out our beliefs with more integrity.

I saw a photo of a wayside pulpit sign outside a church that reads: “Christmas: A Story About a Middle Eastern Family Seeking Refuge.” The same day I read the article about German Chancellor Angela Merkel, named Person of the Year by TIME magazine.

The article says Merkel grew up in the dappled sunlight and dark forest of a small village in East Germany during the Cold War. She knows what it is like to live behind a wall with limited freedom and so she chose to open Germany’s doors to thousands of desperate Syrian refugees this year – up to one million asylum seekers are expected to arrive by the end of this year.

Unitarian Universalist congregations in both Montreal and Chicago have decided to provide a home for a Syrian refugee family. People in this congregation are talking about it, too. We don’t know yet what would be involved in doing that, but it surely is one way to act in this world with integrity.

I believe seeing in the dark means becoming curious about our fears and learning how to go places that are unfamiliar. It involves some risk-taking. It means relying on senses

other than sight. It means, as Taylor says, “to drop what you have been taught about the dark, to see for yourself what is true.”

My recommendation for this season of dark and light? Spend a little time getting to know the darkness for yourself. Next time, before you switch on the lights, pause for a few deep breaths in the dark. Notice what you feel and how it changes your perspective when you move into the light.

Make time on Christmas Eve to go outside and watch the full moon rise, which will reach true fullness on Christmas morning at 5:11 a.m., for the first time on Christmas Day since 1977 and the last time until the year 2034.

Are we really too busy to walk into the dark, sit down and watch the moonrise? Are we too afraid of the dark to welcome its wonder and its gifts? I hope not. I hope not.