

“Darkness and Possibility”

There is a familiar saying which comes to my mind often, in varied circumstances: “There is no way out, but through.” As we come into the season of long, cold nights, we know that darkness dominates the hours of our living. And there is no way out of this cold, dark time, but through.

There are compensations, of course. These days you don’t have to be an early bird in order to wake early enough to enjoy the sunrise. I see the sun coming up over the Green Mountains every morning, now. It is a beautiful sight. And in the dusk of late afternoon, holiday lights ranging from the transportingly lovely to the endearingly tacky twinkle with sprightly exuberance. As I am discovering, here in Burlington there are plays, and concerts, lectures and meetings aplenty; there are activities to keep us bustling all through this season of long nights. And if you don’t plan to go out, it’s possible to don your lounging pants or jammies at 7 p.m. without feeling indulgent - it’s been dark for nearly 3 hours, already!

We are coming into that liminal time when the sun is, as the ancients perceived, at its weakest. In the back of my mind, and perhaps in your minds, there is an awareness that there are only a few precious hours of light each day; every day is discernibly shorter as we enter the home stretch preceding the Winter Solstice. The dark itself seems deeper; it encloses us with a blackness looking back at us from our windows; the night is all around us when we walk outside.

Since darkness is so pervasive, this is an opportune season to consider its beauties. So often, we focus only on the perils of darkness. Dave Berry comments:

“All of us are born with a set of instinctive fears - of falling, of the dark, of lobsters, of falling on lobsters in the dark, or speaking before a Rotary Club, and of the words ‘Some Assembly Required.’”

Our instinctive fear of the dark may be more a matter of focus, than of necessity. Granted, no one wants to stumble over a lobster in the dark. And we can easily imagine early people huddled around the light and warmth of a fire, guarding against threatening beasts and spirits encircling them in the dark. I imagine most of us know what it is to wake in the night from a bad dream, and to reach to turn on the light to drive away our fear, and to restore order and reason to our troubled souls. The fear of darkness is deeply ingrained in the human psyche. Yet the comfort of darkness is just as deep within us.

Dr. Shepherd Bliss writes:

“I rise ‘In Praise of Sweet Darkness.’

...there is a benevolent darkness.

Chocolate would be an example of sweet darkness.

Where would romance be without the sweet darkness of chocolate, dark red roses, and dim candlelight?

Most of us were conceived in the dark,
Then nurtured for 9 months
In the sweetest darkness, comfort, and nourishment
of the womb.
Benevolent darkness takes many forms.
It could also be called pregnant darkness,
and even Divine Darkness.”

[<http://www.uupetaluma.org/sermons/sermoninpraiseofdarkness.html>]

The darkest dark I have ever known was in the Mammoth Cave, in Kentucky. The Mammoth Cave National Park encompasses a system of caves shaped by the Green River. It contains almost 400 miles of passageways and chambers. I happened to discover it because I was searching for promising stops on a cross-country trip between New England and the Rockies. It's amazing what you can find when you are forced to look for something interesting. On a hot summer day, my family and I descended into the coolness of the Mammoth Cave with a gaggle of curious tourists, a guide at the front and another park ranger bringing up the rear. For an hour or so as we walked and paused at points of interest, we heard stories of the Native Americans from thousands of years ago, and more recent European settlers, who had ventured into the blackness of the caves for crystals, minerals, and ritual purposes. Finally, we reached a beautiful, large chamber, marking the deepest place on our tour. And then, with little preamble, the guides turned out their lights.

I had never known such darkness. It was so dark I couldn't make out my hand held just inches away from my face. My eyes did not adjust to the darkness - the only adjustment possible was to accept the dark. It was awe-inspiring, chilling, and strangely freeing. There was a purity in that black nothingness. No-thing was distinct. There was no direction - and no lack of direction, because all was the same; there were no questions, no answers, no distinct "me," no distinct anybody. There in cave's womb of darkness, I felt blessed, as one feels blessed when an experience that is both frightening and beautiful occurs. Perhaps you have been blessed with an experience of such darkness. It may have been literal, as mine was, or perhaps you have experienced pure dark no-thing-ness in your meditations.

The first of the Unitarian Universalist Sources of the "living tradition" we share is: "Direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces that create and uphold life." We may think of these experiences as "mountain top" experiences - times when the wonder of life opens our hearts and minds to the bright Spirit of Life which animates all being. We might also think of them as "deep earth" experiences - times when we sense our roots and connection with the sources of life which run below the surface of our understanding.

The complement to daily living, when our rational mind is active, is nightly rest, when darkness invites us to entrust ourselves to Mystery. As I see it now, we may grow into being comfortable with ourselves and the experiences we undergo when we welcome

both light and dark into our lives. The “forces that create and uphold life” are known through the light of intellect and through the dark traverses of intuition. Both light and dark nurture our souls.

There is another form of darkness, beneath the surface of our day-to-day personas, and that is the darkness of hardship. When we say we are going through a “dark time,” we may mean we are suffering from depression, or difficulties of many different kinds. One of my favorite lines from a song says “Friendship is a diamond, and trouble is the diamond mine.” [“It’s a Pleasure to Know You,” Karl Williams]

When we are low down in the caves of spiritual darkness or physical illness, those who love us come to light - often folks we didn’t even know cared for us shine in those dark times. Even trees and animals and clouds we never noticed before can speak to us. We scrape right down to the bottom to discover strengths in ourselves which pull us through the darkness. And on the other side of those dark patches, which happen to everyone, the darkness itself may be seen as a blessing. It’s those dark times and the struggles they bring on that make us into interesting, compassionate people - they fire us into diamonds. I have a friend who has as her tongue-in-cheek mantra “Thanks, Universe, for another opportunity to become enlightened.”

In my experience, there are situations when I have to give up just about everything I think I know because I am humbled by what is before me. The mysteries of birth, or death, the overwhelming sense that I can’t fix things - whether it’s hunger, or injustice, or pollution of the earth. Sometimes I have to give up what I think I know because somebody is really annoying me and I can’t do a thing about it - so I just have to give up and sink into that darkness of not knowing what to do. I’ve given up what I thought I knew when I had to have biopsies on various body parts. In every instance, only the bare bones of what makes sense in my world remained standing. And even then, I couldn’t see them until the darkness around me made what is important stand in stark relief, and shine.

In her book *Kitchen Table Wisdom*, Dr. Rachel Naomi Remen writes [p309 ff.] “Light in various forms is commonly regarded as symbolic of the energies of healing.... But things are not always as we have come to expect and the mysterious may surprise us as it did [this man]. [He] was referred by his physician because his denial of his disease made it difficult for him to take care of himself. Over and over he would do foolhardy things like lifting heavy boxes soon after abdominal surgery and forgetting his medications.... Essential treatment had been delayed or even sabotaged several times and he had suffered a great deal of unnecessary illness because of this....

In our initial conversation, he described his cancer as ‘this black hole in the middle of my life that keeps pulling me in.’ When an image appears like this...it is rarely random and may tell us much about a person’s unconscious world, their deepest attitudes and beliefs, as the contents of their dreams. Without our knowing it, the dream maker in us may whisper our secrets directly to others.....

I called his attention to the picture in his words and suggested that it might be saying something important about himself and his life. Perhaps so much of his energy was being used up in resistance that it did not leave him a lot left over to live with. He nodded. I asked him what was in the hole. 'Just darkness,' he said simply. I invited him to explore this with me in his imagination, to allow himself to be pulled into the hole just to see what it was like.

He hesitated only for a moment. Then he closed his eyes and began to enter into his own image. He imagined himself pulled into the hole, into the darkness. The following comments are from my session notes....

There is darkness. Big darkness. I am floating.
The darkness is very soft...gentle...it supports me.
I have no needs here.... (Sighs)
I am tired.
I am at rest...totally at rest. Every cell is resting.
Every cell is open. I am filling up...filling up with life.
I could not fill up because I could not open up...let go.
I can open up in the darkness.
Life is everywhere.
Whatever happens, it will be okay...."

Dr. Remen goes on to comment "Darkness has suffered bad press for millennia. Yet is it really so surprising that spontaneous healing imagery may present itself in this way? According to the traditions of alchemy, darkness was the necessary condition for purification and transformation....As light represents the archetype of masculine energy, darkness suggests the power of the feminine, and it makes an intuitive sense that the experience of healing may be associated with darkness. Darkness is a condition of the beginning. The body first comes into being in darkness. It is nurtured, as a seed, in darkness. Some people may find their healing in remembering the beginning."

My hope for each one of us is that we will learn to trust the darkness. As we go through this season, may we be schooled in the beauties and strengths to be found in the dark times. May we practice letting go, so that we may be embraced; may we be reminded of all we do not know, so we may discover a deeper knowing; and may our spirits be nurtured and renewed.

AMEN