

Seeing in the Dark¹

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Allen Avenue Unitarian Universalist Church

Opening Words

In this dark and cold time of the year, let us remember to celebrate the darkness, which moves always in rhythm with the light. Let us welcome the mystery of these long nights.

Poems

“You Darkness” by Rainer Maria Rilke:²

“Sweet Darkness” by David Whyte³

Reading: An excerpt from *Dreaming the Dark* by Starhawk⁴

We need to dream the dark as process, and dream the dark as change, to create the dark in a new image. Because the dark creates us...

[Let us] tell of the turning dark, the velvet dark, [the] birth-giving dark... The dark: all that we are afraid of, all that we don't want to see—fear, anger, sex, grief, death, the unknown. The turning dark: change. The velvet dark: skin soft in the night, the stroke of flesh on flesh, touch, joy, mortality. [The] birth-giving dark: seeds are planted underground, the womb is dark, and life forms itself anew in hidden places...

How do we face the dark, on the edge of annihilation? How do we find the dark within and transform it, own it as our own power? How do we dream it into a new image, dream it into actions that will change the world into a place where no more horror stories happen, where there are no more victims? Where the dark is kind and charged with a friendly power: the power of the unseen, the power that comes from within, the power of the immanent Goddess who lies coiled in the heart of every cell of every living thing, who is the spark of every nerve and the life of every breath.

Reflection

The other night, I went outside after dark. I walked through the snow around the perimeter of our acre of land. I love how the winter reveals our night visitors. We rarely see deer in our yard, but their tracks show us how they pass through on their quiet journeys. I stood beneath the trees gazing at the stars. Perhaps I was asking, What shall I say to my congregation? What do we need for our journey? Then I saw a shooting meteorite streak across the sky. I felt warm in the cold, I felt at home among the trees. I felt a stillness in my heart.

Wendell Berry wrote:

To go into the dark with a light is to know light.

To know the dark, go dark, go without sight,
and find that the dark too blooms and sings
and is traveled by dark feet and dark wings.⁵

I used to be very afraid of the darkness. Women and girls, especially, were taught that the darkness is full of dangers. We were told not to walk alone at night, not to go into solitary places. We learned that bad things could happen to us there.

All cultures seem to have known some fear of the dark and of night. There are wild creatures that emerge in the night, and dangerous hunting animals on the prowl. The shepherds of the Christmas story watched their flocks by night, because otherwise wolves would attack the sheep. The herders were armed with staffs and rods, and kept their dogs close by for protection. The night is cold, dangerous, and hides what may be lurking in the shadows.

In the early days of the women's movement, women held marches and vigils to "Take Back the Night," in protest of violence against women. We began to question the logic that we should limit our freedom for the unfulfilled promise of safety. That which supposedly protects us, also imprisons us, and robs us of the fullness of life.

Now I love the night. But I still feel afraid when I want to go into it alone. Last summer I had the idea to sleep overnight in our backyard. We had purchased a screen tent, so we could enjoy being outside without the bugs driving us crazy. We set it up in the far back corner of our yard, an area we call the birch grove. It is near where the deer emerge to wander through—there is an open field on the other side of the trees at that corner. So I think of it as where the wild things are.

As I began to make plans for my night outside, my fears began to bubble up. I said to Margy, "What if a bear comes through?" But she laughed, and said, "There aren't any bears in North Yarmouth." I decided, rather than go outside when it was already dark, it would be easier if I went outside before dusk, and then watched as darkness fell.

So one evening in July, we built a fire in our fire pit, and hung out together for a while, and then Margy went inside and I set up a bamboo pad and sleeping bag in the screen tent. The ground was hard and my muscles ached with the damp and cold, but not overly so. The stars grew bright in the moonless night. I felt proud of facing into my fear, and drank in the solitude. The burdens of my heart seemed to grow smaller and smaller in that deep and mysterious retreat. The singing of birds woke me in the early dawn before the sun rose.

There is a funny ending to this adventure. Two days later, Margy showed me a clipping from our local paper. It was a picture of a bear, with the following tagline: "A North Yarmouth resident said her family was having breakfast June 25th when this black bear came out of the woods to snack at their bird feeder." I'm glad I didn't see that story before I slept out. "According to state statistics, there are some 22,000 bears in the state. They seldom attack humans, but are likely to return where they've found food."⁶

I first began to explore the night world at women's music festivals. There I was, camping out on land with thousands of other women, and we felt truly safe to walk about at night. Perhaps more safe than many of us had ever felt. I didn't realize how much it would change me—I noticed that something shifted in the very way that I held my body as I walked.

Later, at the Women's Peace Camp in Seneca, New York, I camped outside with other women for a whole summer. It was more challenging—there were only about thirty of us, and we were under constant surveillance from the military and occasional harassment from the neighbors. We kept whistles in our tents, to signal if any danger came near us, and we took turns

keeping watch at night around a campfire. Yet these night watches were not an onerous chore—they were the opportunity for long deep conversations, kindling enduring friendships and sometimes even romance. In the quiet of my tent, I became familiar with the night sounds of animals, attentive to distinguish them from the sounds of possible human intruders.

I was also at the Peace Camp through the winter of 1986; there were just a few of us then, and we stayed in an old farmhouse with a wood stove and no indoor plumbing. I remember one night I was there alone, and felt afraid and vulnerable. Perhaps it was a time when we were receiving threats from people in the nearby town. I went outside for a while, well-wrapped in snow pants and a warm coat. I sat in the shadows under a tree, and felt safer, there in the dark, watchful and hidden—I was at home with the night creatures, and knew that danger was likely to arrive only in a truck or automobile with lights on.

What do we miss if we never go outside at night? What do we need from the dark? The quiet, the night sounds, the change of mood. Darkness invites reflection, memory, story-telling, music, imagination. The darkness is the birthplace of mystery and vision. The winter dark invites us into a peaceful stillness, into listening and wondering, into questions that need no answers.

When I lived in Boston I would go at night with my women's spirituality group into the Blue Hills south of the city. We'd climb to the top of a particular hill, and gather around a fire under the stars, up where we could see all the way to the lights of the city and the waters of the harbor. The witches speak of something called wraith energy, the energy of the fertile soil, the mist, the plants and trees. One night on the hill, the fog came in, and when we finished our ritual, we couldn't see more than five feet in front of our faces. But we knew the way home was down, and so we let our feet find a path, like Capricorn goats walking in single file.

In Siberia and Mongolia, the word "shaman" means one who sees in the dark.⁷ We were seeing in the dark that night, walking down the mountain in the fog. The shamans of the northern peoples were the healers, the teachers. They lived in a world where the winter sun would disappear for days at a time. In the dark, they sought out the ancestors and the animals, sought guidance for their people.

In our culture, light is idealized and dark is devalued—they are set up as great enemies. The war of light against dark is a metaphor that under girds other great dichotomies: good and evil, sacred and secular, male and female, white and black—dichotomies that perpetuate fundamentalism, racism and other polarized oppressions.

We create an artificial extension of our daytime with electric lights—these lights shine throughout the night, and we don't have to stop working and doing. But human beings are biologically designed for rhythms of wake and sleep, light and dark, work and dreaming. The sleep is not lost time—it is the time of healing, of weaving our experience into the fabric of memories, of balance and beginnings, of loving and touching.

What do we need from the dark? I remember an evening when a few friends had gathered in my living room. We sat in the dark with only one candle lit, just quietly talking, and

began to share our despair for the world. We moved from despair to inspiration and found ideas rising like sparks in the play of shadows and light, ideas about how we would take action against the war in Iraq. It never feels like a meeting when the lights are out. Try it sometime. Notice how your conversations grow deeper and more whimsical.

The dark is a metaphor for what we fear—death, loss, sadness, despair. But the dark is also a fertile ground for imagination and discovery. For something unknown to be revealed, we need that stillness, that quiet whisper, that letting go of action and control. The dark is the time for asking deep questions, like, why are we here, and where are we going? It is the time to imagine a great presence stirring beside us.

To become whole, we need the darkness as much as we need the light. Dark and light are not enemies, but dancers in a unified rhythm. When we learn to embrace the dark, we bring back everything we may have rejected—the shadow side of our consciousness. There are many times when I am surprised that the world is not a kinder place, that people, including myself, are not as careful and upright and intelligent as I expect. Don't you hate it when the bank makes a mistake, or the customer service representative isn't very helpful on the phone?

Embracing the darkness opens up the doorway to forgiveness in my heart. I forgive the world and myself for not being perfect. And then I realize that we can be whole without needing to be perfect. We can only be whole when we welcome and embrace the imperfect.

We must welcome the shadow in order to heal and grow. Think about what we do with grief. We find it so difficult to embrace our pain and our loss; yet we must cry our tears and accept our sadness, before we can move forward. And even that is an incomplete way of expressing it—as if to say we must get through this dark part so we can get on with our real lives. Grief and loss are as much a part of life as joy and gratitude. To be whole, we must cultivate an attitude of welcome to all parts of life. When we are sad, welcome the sadness. When we are happy, welcome the joy.

If we never go into the dark, we cannot see what we need to see, when troubles come to our families or our world. In the dark we can see the stars. In the dark we can see the bigger picture. For millennia, our ancestors have watched the stars, followed the rising and setting of the moon and the planets. Without the dark, they would not have discovered our place in the universe, the circling of the planets and comets and meteorites, and the movement of the earth around the sun. They would not have learned the secrets of the far away galaxies and the origins of space and time.

What do we need from the dark? When we embrace the darkness, we shift our interior map from polarity to unity. Everything can be received as a gift. In the dark we can embrace each other as we are, in the dark we can see the stars, and imagine the future.

I want to close this reflection with an excerpt from a chant of darkness by the blind and deaf poet, Helen Keller, published in 1908⁸:

I walk in the stillness of the night,
And my soul uttereth her gladness.

O Night, still, odorous Night, I love thee!
O wide, spacious Night, I love thee!
O steadfast, glorious Night!
I touch thee with my hands;
I lean against thy strength;
I am comforted.

O fathomless, soothing Night!
Thou art a balm to my restless spirit,
I nestle gratefully in thy bosom,
Dark, gracious mother! Like a dove,
I rest in thy bosom.
*Out of the uncharted, unthinkable dark we came,
And in a little time we shall return again
Into the vast, unanswering dark.*

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² In *Rilke's Book of Hours*, translated by Anita Barrows & Joanna Macy, (Riverhead Books, 1996), p.57.

³ From David Whyte, *House of Belonging*, (Many Rivers: 1997)

⁴ Starhawk, *Dreaming the Dark*, (Beacon Press, 1982), p. xiv.

⁵ Thanks to Lois Howlett for bringing me this Berry quote.

⁶ From *The Northern Forecaster*, July 12, 2007

⁷ From Gloria Feman Orenstein, "The Shamanic Dimensions Of An Ecofeminist Narrative," at <http://www.feministezine.com/feminist/ecofeminism/Shamanic-Ecofeminist-Narrative.html>

⁸ "A Chant of Darkness," published in *Century Magazine*, (May, 1908)