

“Walking in Darkness” by Jacquie Wallen

October 11, 2015



Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost

It is Recommitment Season at Seekers. It seems fitting to me that our season of recommitment occurs during the time of growing cold and darkness that follows the Autumnal Equinox in September. The days are growing shorter and the nights longer.

On November 1st, Daylight Savings time ends and even our afternoons grow dark. We are heading into the darkness which does not begin to recede until after the Winter Solstice, which occurs right around the time we celebrate the birth of Jesus.

Susan Cooper’s poem about the Winter Solstice gives a sense of how humans have always feared this dark time of year and how much we rejoice when the light begins its return. I’ll read it.

The Shortest Day

By Susan Cooper

And so the Shortest Day came and the year died
And everywhere down the centuries of the snow-white world
Came people singing, dancing,
To drive the dark away.
They lighted candles in the winter trees;
They hung their homes with evergreen;
They burned beseeching fires all night long
To keep the year alive.
And when the new year’s sunshine blazed awake
They shouted, revelling.
Through all the frosty ages you can hear them

Echoing behind us – listen!
All the long echoes, sing the same delight,
This Shortest Day,
As promise awakens in the sleeping land:
They carol, feast, give thanks,
And dearly love their friends,
And hope for peace.

We count down the Sundays together during advent, anticipating the return of the light. We celebrate the return of the light together but we need each other most during the dark times. It is appropriate and reassuring to affirm our connection to one another and to the spiritual community of Seekers as the darkness grows. It is too frightening to be alone in the dark. Recommitment Season comes at just the right time. As Peter so often says, “Thank God we are all in this together.”

Today I would like to talk about darkness and about some of the things that can happen when we enter the darkness with faith and with connections to others. I am going to share with you some insights and learnings that came to me as I walked in the darkness with my son Eric following his leukemia diagnosis in the Spring of 2014. Of course, most of you know how that all turned out. He died on June 30th, 2015. But that’s not what I want to talk about today. Today I want to speak about the three months he and I lived in the Hackerman-Patz Pavilion for cancer patients and their families while Eric was preparing for, undergoing, and recuperating from a bone marrow transplant for his leukemia at Johns Hopkins. I had decided ahead of time to treat this stay as a spiritual retreat. I took my watercolor supplies and a lot of spiritual readings with me and used much of my time reading and painting and journaling on the subject of darkness, working a lot with a wonderful book by Barbara Brown Taylor called *Learning to Walk in the Dark*. The prayers of many Seekers went with me and my spiritual director, Marjory, read and commented on my spiritual journal entries almost daily. It felt like we were all in it together. But it was a very darktime. Eric went through a lot of pain and suffering.

Early on in her book, *Learning to Walk in the Dark*, Taylor sets the stage for her perspective on darkness by quoting a verse from Isaiah:

*I will give you the treasures of darkness and riches hidden in secret places,
so that you may know that it is I, the LORD, the God of Israel, who call you
by name.*

The darkness is full of treasures.

And God is in the darkness, Taylor says, alluding to the following verses from

Psalms, which I have always loved:

Where can I go from your Spirit?

Where can I flee from your presence?

If I go up to the heavens, you are there;

if I make my bed in the depths, you are there.

If I rise on the wings of the dawn,

if I settle on the far side of the sea,

even there your hand will guide me,

your right hand will hold me fast.

If I say, "Surely the darkness will hide me

and the light become night around me,"

even the darkness will not be dark to you;

the night will shine like the day,

for darkness is as light to you.

I couldn't see much God at first. I had to look really hard. I was like Job in our Old Testament reading for today. God afflicts and then allows Satan to afflict Job with any number of misfortunes and Job experiences a time so dark that he cannot even find God. Job says:

If I go forward, he is not there; or backward, I cannot perceive him; on the left he hides, and I cannot behold him; I turn to the right, but I cannot see him. God has made my heart faint; the Almighty has terrified me.

But little by little, dark as it was, I began to see some lights here and there. Light in the darkness. Marjory's responses to my spiritual journal entries. The kindness the patients and their families showed one another, the compassion of many of the doctors and nurses, the efforts that various community groups made to brighten our lives by providing us with entertainment and good meals. The prayers and good wishes of family, Seekers, and other friends. At Christmas, my daughter Sara surprised me by bringing my grandchildren and my two cats to Baltimore for a few days to visit us.

Every time I went from our residence to the hospital I crossed over a long bridge between the two buildings. It was awesome. Both sides were glass from floor to ceiling. The deep green floor tiles had mica or some kind of metal foil embedded in them. It made them sparkle with light. It was a very long bridge that seemed to go on and on and during the day the sunlight poured through the glass walls. At night the city lights were bright and colorful and car headlights streamed past beneath us. There were benches along the windows where one could sit and look out. The

glass walls of the bridge were covered with white arcs shaped like commas. They are probably there to keep birds from crashing into the bridge but they reminded me of the Hebrew letter, yod (), which is the first letter in YHWH and consequently has sacred significance in the Kabbalah. It is therefore used in some of the Tarot cards where it represents divine presence. There are a lot of yods in the Tower card of the Tarot which, among other things, can be seen as representing the destruction of illusions and the letting go of ego. In late morning the yods cast shadows on the sparkling green floors. It was magical and I did feel a divine presence when I walked across this bridge or sat on one of the benches to meditate. But I also felt a lot of fear for Eric. The dark is scary. We are hard-wired to find it so and this fear is something that has helped humans and other species survive. If we can't see God in the dark, it may be because God is not appearing in a form in which we are accustomed to visualizing him. In fact, the dark may be scary precisely because God *is* there.

Taylor talks about how darkness, even though it is not evil or bad in the way it is so often portrayed in the bible, is *dangerous* and part of the reason for that is that it is so often in the darkness that we can see God's true essence, which can be dangerous in the same way that staring directly at the sun can be dangerous. She calls it the "terrible and fascinating mystery of God—which exceeds human ability to manage it in any way." She talks about God coming to Moses in a dark cloud and says "The God of Moses is holy, offering no seat belts or other safety features to those who wish to climb the mountain and enter the dark cloud of divine presence. Those who go assume all risk and give up all claim to reward. Those who return say the dazzling dark inside the cloud is reward enough."

She quotes the *Cloud of Unknowing*, an anonymous medieval document, saying:

This darkness and cloud is always between you and God, no matter what you do, and it prevents you from seeing him clearly by the light of understanding in your reason and from experiencing him in the sweetness of love in your affection. So set yourself to rest in this darkness as long as you can, always crying out after him who you love. For if you are to experience him or to see him at all, insofar as it is possible here, it must always be in this cloud and this darkness."

It makes sense to me that the ultimate mysteries would be shrouded in darkness and beyond our understanding, not just because our minds are limited but also because our egos shape what we see so that only the tiniest bit of reality filters through to us. I love the tantalizing thought that though we can't see God directly here,

we may be able to farther along and somewhere else.

Taylor talks about what Miriam Greenspan calls “the dark emotions” such as grief, fear, and despair. Greenspan calls them dark emotions because our culture keeps them in the dark, along with other shameful things. People who are visibly experiencing these dark emotions often get the message from our culture and other people that it is time to “get over it” and move on. Many negative conditions such as depression and addiction can result from our inability to tolerate these dark emotions. After emerging from a dark period of her own, Taylor says that she “learned that sadness does not sink a person; it is the energy a person spends trying to avoid sadness that does that.” Taylor says that one of the most helpful things to do with dark emotions is to bond with and listen to other people who are also experiencing dark emotions. This is something that patients and families did for one another and themselves at the Hackerman-Patz Pavilion at Johns Hopkins. We all shared deeply with one another and listened compassionately and lovingly.

Greenspan, in her book *Healing through the Dark Emotions*, uses the term “alchemy of dark emotions” to describe how the surrender that comes from opening our hearts to darker emotions reveals the sacred, how this process can create a shamanic healing journey for us. She says in her book:

Finding the power of the sacred, not despite suffering , but in the midst of it: This is the alchemy of the dark emotions. Through this alchemy, grief moves us from sorrow for what we've lost to gratitude for what remains. Fear of life's fragility is transformed to the joy of living fully, with openness...a profound commitment to life as it is.

Greenspan gives the first interpretation of Job's trials that has ever really satisfied me. Job refuses to accept the glib explanations for his suffering provided by those who attempt to console him and he refuses to suppress his pain and rage toward God at the unfairness of it all. He won't deny his pain. But ultimately he recognizes God's higher power and that surrender is the alchemy that transforms him. We are not God and we don't control the universe. But we, in the words of the Serenity Prayer, change the things we can and accept the things we can't change. And we can look for light wherever we can find it.

Taylor talks about how in many ways we actually have too much light and not enough darkness, particularly since electricity was harnessed by humans and even more so as we have more and more electronic devices in our lives. Too much light can disrupt our circadian rhythms (often leading to depression) and keep us from seeing the stars. We need darkness to see the light.

Taylor says we are always hearing people say what a great thing enlightenment is but we never hear people talking about the importance of "endarkenment." She refers to Ken Wilber's observation that the experience of "enlightenment" often simply serves to elevate and strengthen the self rather than transforming it and says that endarkenment, on the other hand, is transformative and can dismantle the self, the self being the barrier that blocks us from true vision.

Thinking about Ken Wilbur's caution that "enlightenment" can serve to enlarge the ego/self rather than diminishing it, I remembered the Buddhist teacher Chögyam Trungpa's term, "spiritual materialism." Spiritual materialism involves treating spiritual enlightenment as something that can be "acquired" and that once "acquired," makes one better than others. It is related to spiritual narcissism or the belief that one deserves special praise and respect because of one's spiritual achievements. This is totally the opposite of the attitude of the Dalai Lama, who could claim the pinnacle of spiritual achievement but who instead is noted for his humility and often refers to himself as "just a simple monk."

Harry Tiebout, a psychiatrist and early member of AA, used the term "ego deflation at depth" to refer to the gifts of "endarkenment." "Hitting bottom" and "surrender" are two terms often used in AA to indicate ego deflation at depth. Tiebout characterizes the 12 Steps of AA as "ego deflating devices."

I like the Wiccan symbol for the dark female goddess, the crone. The crone is the old wise woman who sits at the door between life and death, helping people make the transition between the two worlds. I painted a picture of the crone several years ago and brought it with me to Baltimore. In my painting the crone's eyes are penetrating and seem to see right through us to our very essence. On her shoulder sits her familiar, the owl. Like the crone, the owl has been both venerated and feared and is also associated with birth, death, and vision or second sight. Unlike the crone, who looks straight at us, the owl looks off into the distance, perhaps seeing things to come. Both archetypes are associated with darkness and the night and both represent spirituality.

The crone's season is late fall and winter, a time of coldness and the dying light. Her element is metal which, in traditional acupuncture represents grief, letting go, and wisdom. The crone is strong and wise but she also symbolizes surrender. She doesn't decide who crosses over into life or death, she simply comforts those who are involved in the passage.

Throughout my son's illness I was the crone, sitting at the door between life and death with my him. I prayed that he would have many more years in this world but I knew that the outcome of his treatment was not mine to choose (it being the case

that I was just a crone, not God!).

Taylor refers to St. John of the Cross's concept of the "dark night of the soul." She says, that though people use the term in many different ways, two of the key features of the dark night of the soul, as John of the Cross described it are:

- Lack of control (as she says: "No one chooses the dark night; the dark night descends.")
- Lack of understanding ("One of the central functions of the dark night is to convince those who grasp after things that God cannot be grasped")

But this does not mean that we don't have a relationship with God in our dark night Taylor talks about feeling "more and more devoted to a relationship that we are less and less able to say anything about."

She says "I do not believe I am describing a loss of faith in God here. Instead, I believe I am describing a loss of faith in the system that promised to help me grasp God not only by setting my feet on the right track but also by giving me the right language, concepts, and tools to get a hook in the Real thing when I found it."

I really resonate with this. I have felt for a long time that I have a very close relationship to God but I don't grasp or understand God in the slightest. I think Marjory used this phrase once: "A personal relationship with an impersonal force." Or maybe I would say an impersonal energy field or an impersonal vibratory level, or something like that – who knows?

Taylor quotes Nicholas of Cusa's phrase "holy ignorance," which she says is "a divine gift given to those who are willing to embrace all that they cannot and will never know about the Giver." She says that Gerald May, who wrote a book on St. John of the Cross while he was going through his own dark night waiting for a heart transplant, "said that even near the end he had an abiding sense of God's presence. He could feel in anywhere, anytime...All he had to do was turn his attention toward it." But she also quotes him as saying "I love it and surely would hate to lose it. It's the answer to a very long prayer. But I know **it is not God. It is only a sense of God.**"

Sometimes people lose even the sense of God. I know that happened to Mother Teresa and it was very painful for her. It could happen to me. But I believe there are disciplines and tools we can use to increase our sense of the presence of God.

I noticed in reading Mother Teresa's letters that one way she coped with her darkness was that she learned to recognize that feelings are no more than that, just feelings. They are not reliable guides to steer by, especially if one is trying to

minimize self or ego. Feelings come from a very primitive part of our brain and are all about survival of the individual and the species. Where spiritual growth is concerned, one must learn to identify guides that are more about connection and wholeness, less about individual survival. The idea I have is that there is another kind of emotional input that we can have access to that is more subtle and more spiritual than "feelings." It is not survival oriented and therefore not as powerful, or compelling, or addictive, but it is a kind of emotional light that we can use to orient ourselves to God. It would be states such as serenity, gratitude, peace of mind, hope, or compassion. These are the light coming in through the cracks in the darkness and if we can turn our face in the direction of this light then we don't have to be so preoccupied with how we feel.

Barbara Brown Taylor argues that the invention of the lightbulb was the beginning of human spiritual decline because it deprived us of darkness. I think that's going a bit too far. First of all, humans have always drawn close to each other at night to appreciate whatever light there was. Before the invention of tools to make fire, people huddled together in the dark to stare at the stars. They observed patterns of light, told stories about them, and speculated on the origins and meaning of life. Once humans could control fire, they gathered around fires or slept together on hearths, feeling comforted by their closeness and by the warmth and light. We use candles in our churches as we come together to tell our stories, feel our connectedness, and give ourselves hope. All of the religions seem to have some kind of festival celebrating light. When I was a kid, we ate dinner late and by candlelight, which made it nourishing in more ways than one.

But I do like her criticism of what she calls the "solar version of Christianity" which manages fear and loss through a technique that she calls "spiritual bypassing." Scott Peck, in his book, *People of the Lie*, argues that denial is the original and foundational sin. Taylor mentions Pema Chodron, whose book *When Things Fall Apart* I love, noting Chodron's belief that denial is far more damaging than any of the things we escape through denial.

I had a very powerful reaction to a comment that Marjory made on one of my journal entries. It was sort of like when a Zen master whacks a student (though I'm sure Marjory would never do anything like that) and the student suddenly sees everything differently. Marjory said: "Marion Woodman (a special mentor for Marjory) says the journey is about making the flesh conscious – i.e., letting our senses inform what we know and can put into language ON BEHALF OF OTHERS."

It was that "ON BEHALF OF OTHERS" (capitalized by Marjory—I'm just quoting) that struck me (almost literally).

I have always looked to others to validate my perceptions and feelings and have felt crazy when they didn't. It has been a source of enormous confusion and emotional pain for me. Over the years I have learned that access to the dark world is unequally shared, for a lot of reasons. And people who do explore it often lack the ability to describe their experiences in words. But it is still very difficult for me. I have always been a voracious reader and I think a large part of that is because reading takes me inside the feelings and perceptions of people who are able to express verbally what they feel and sense. It is also why I like therapy sessions and AA meetings—these are settings where people often speak from the heart. But what Marjory's comment made me realize is that I have been looking at this whole thing kind of backwards. I have not really thought about how my attempts to understand and express my feelings and observations might benefit others. Looking back on my life, I can see that others have often benefited when I speak from the heart about my own thoughts and emotions. Of course, often they have not, as well. But the thing is, if I continue to be basically who I am, which is a person who tells the truth about what **I** am experiencing, it doesn't matter whether other people validate it or not. It's still the truth about what **I** am experiencing and it may benefit someone. I don't mean that I should ignore opinions that differ from mine—it's important to learn from others' experiences. But I can help others by sharing mine. It sounds obvious now that I say it out loud but thinking of it as something that I can do on behalf of others rather than in order to make myself feel better came as a brand new perspective for me.

So that is what I have done here today. I have spoken about my feelings and observations on behalf of others. And I'll conclude by repeating what Peter says: "Thank God we are all in this together!"