

Afraid of the Dark
By Michael A. Schuler
February 3, 2008

Gleanings from Classical and Contemporary Sources
From Novalis's *Hymns to the Night**

What it is that wells up so full of premonition beneath the heart and guzzles down the soft air of sadness? O dark night, do you take pleasure in us? What do you carry beneath your cloak that penetrates the soul with such invisible power?

Precious balm drips from the bunch of poppies in your hand. You lift up the soul's heavy wings. Darkly, unspeakably, we feel moved. . . .

How poor and childish the light now seems—how joyful and blessed the day's departure. . . . More heavenly than those flashing stars seem the endless eyes that night opens up to us. . . . They need no light to see into the depths of a loving soul. . . .

My secret heart stays true to Night and to creative love, her daughter. For in the day world we are bound by light's chains, as all things are. But in the night world, in the darkness of the greater life, we know freedom.

*The German-born Novalis was an early Romantic philosopher.

From Mary Oliver, "Sleeping in the Forest"

I thought the earth remembered me,
She took me back so tenderly,
Arranging her dark skirts, her pockets
Full of lichens and seeds.
I slept as never before, a stone on a riverbed,
Nothing between me and the white fire of the stars
But my thoughts, and they floated
Light as moths among the branches of the perfect
trees.
All night I heard the small kingdoms breathing
around me,
The insects and the birds who do their work in
darkness.
All night I rose and fell, as if in water,
Grappling with a luminous doom.
By morning I had vanished at least a dozen times
Into something better.

Reflections

Over the past several weeks I've heard many expressions of gratitude for longer days, more sunshine, and it has struck me how much human beings love the light. In some cases this strong pref-

erence may be health-related. Not a few people suffer from seasonal affective disorder, and light lifts their mood. Exposed to ultraviolet radiation, the skin produces vitamin D, a vital nutrient. But beyond these basic biochemical and metabolic issues, we appear to strongly—and perhaps unreasonably—to be biased in favor of light over darkness.

It's probably been that way for a very long time. Recall that in his very first act of creation as described in the book of Genesis, Yahweh brought light into being, for heretofore darkness had reigned. The cosmos were "without form or void, and darkness covered the face of the deep," the Bible tells us. But then, for reasons known only to himself, God made light, and he saw that it was good. Thus began a series of mighty acts culminating in the creation of an entity resembling God himself—humankind.

The sequence of the creation narrative is a little curious, however. Light appeared on the first day, but it wasn't until the fourth day that the sun, moon, and stars were placed in the heavens—*after* plant life had been created, in fact. In the absence of these celestial bodies, one wonders about the source of that original illumination. Doesn't the Bible put the cart before the horse? More relevant to today's discussion, however, is the fact that light is declared to be "good," and God rejoices at its appearance. Darkness receives no positive mention, and continues to be identified with emptiness and chaos.

This disdain for darkness, characteristic of Western thinking, is not universally shared. For instance, the Tupi Indian tribe of Brazil saw matters rather differently. According to one of their creation stories, in the beginning there was no night—only daylight. A single creature who lived hidden inside a lake—a serpent—knew the secret of night. But for many years she kept that knowledge to herself.

But then, the Tupi legend says, there came a time when the Serpent's daughter got married. However, her husband refused to make love to the girl without the night, so she sent three monkeys as messengers to her mother, asking her to give them the night.

Upon receiving the message, the Serpent agreed. She placed the night inside a coconut and sealed it with beeswax. Then she handed it to the monkeys, telling them to bring it to her daughter without breaking the seal.

But the monkeys grew curious, as monkeys will, and in the middle of their journey back to the Serpent's daughter they decided to make a smoky fire, melt the seal, and look inside. To their surprise, as soon as the seal was broken, night flew out and spread out all over the earth.

The Serpent's daughter immediately realized what had happened. She waited until the brightest star of night appeared in the sky, then she created one bird to sing for the dawn, and another bird to sing for the dusk. She also created many other birds to sing during the day, to distinguish it from the night.

By this device, day and night were separated. The husband was now able to embrace his wife. And to remind the monkeys of what they had done, their mouths were painted black like the smoke that filled the air when they melted the wax seal and let the night out too soon.

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Valid reasons can certainly be offered for the virtues of a light-filled world. For creatures as visually oriented as ourselves, darkness is intimidating, an opaque curtain behind which myriad terrors and dangers lurk.

Shakespeare once described the night as a "vast sin-concealing chaos"—an estimation with which many would concur who have found themselves out walking or camping alone under a cloud-covered, moonless sky.

I still recall many years ago being up in the high Sierras on a solo back-packing trip. From my small pup tent I listened to coyotes howling, the leaves rustling, pine-cones dropping from the trees with a soft, mysterious thud. I had planned to stay out for three nights, but managed to get through only one.

I felt somewhat chagrined about my timidity until I read an article in the *New Yorker* a couple of years ago that provided some solace. It is quite natural, Arthur Krystal notes, for human beings to begin feeling anxious at nightfall because for hundreds, if not thousands of years, night-wanderers were at the mercy of forces they could not foresee or forestall. As a result, fear of darkness became deeply embedded in our psyche. Prior to the 19th century, Krystal writes,

Moonless nights presented a darkness so complete that anyone bold enough to step out was at risk of losing his footing, his purse and his

life. Carriages tumbled into ditches; houses were broken into or set on fire; and town squares were filled with beggars, prostitutes, and crooks.... In many cities, gangs roamed the streets.... The night "was a forbidding place plagued by pestilential vapors, diabolical spirits, natural calamity, and human depravity." Come dusk, bells were rung, horns were blown, and drums were beaten; city gates were shut, drawbridges raised, and stragglers forced to scurry home to light candles and tend the hearth. No wonder that an Italian proverb admonished, "He who goes out at night is looking for a beating."

Krystal reminds us that reasonably bright, artificial lighting has been around for only a couple of centuries. Today we complain about "light pollution" that prevents us from recognizing familiar constellations, but that certainly was not a major concern for our ancestors. Indeed, when gas mantles—ten times brighter than oil lanterns—were installed on English city streets in 1807 the *Times of London* declared, "There is nothing so important to the British realm, since the advent of navigation...."

The ability to abolish night through technology was quite literally redemptive development and created exciting new opportunities for commerce and culture. The developed world is now bathed 24/7 in powerful artificial light, so we have consciously forgotten what life was like without them. But the *unconscious* surely remembers.

It's easy to understand why, in Western culture, light and dark long ago took on moral overtones. Heaven partook of light; hell was dark. Light reflected goodness while evil dwelt on the "dark side," personified in characters like the devil and Darth Vader.

Our biases are reflected in many of the metaphors we employ. We declare that someone who is cheerful has a "sunny" disposition," and when a person is sad we say they are in a "dark" mood. "Lighten up" we admonish the individual who takes things too seriously. A highly intelligent person is "bright" and when someone grasps a new concept they are said to be "illuminated." Without knowledge or understanding we are left "in the dark."

One could go on, but the point is clear: we tend to associate positive moods and mental states with light. It is, Huston Smith observes, "the universal metaphor for consciousness," and variations of this word are often used to connote understanding. All

of which is to say that for human beings throughout history, darkness has not been regarded as an “old friend.” Just the opposite, in fact.

That remains true even today. I recently ran across an essay on winter by New Hampshire writer Donald Hall in which he boasts that he is a “darkness lover” who “cherishes the increasing dark of November.” But in reading further I decided that he was being disingenuous. Hall doesn’t like darkness at all, for it is, he writes, “the prosperous warmth of the wood-stove and electric light, by which we hollow out islands of safety within the cold and dark,” that makes him prefer winter.

But the darkness of deep forests, alley-ways and the winter solstice isn’t all that disconcerts us. We also seem to have developed an aversion to its social and psychological manifestations. Consider, for instance, our deeply ingrained racial prejudices. What has made it so difficult for white Americans to transcend their bias against dark-skinned peoples, despite incontrovertible evidence that, in and of itself, skin color is irrelevant to any assessment of human aptitude, ability or virtuousness?

Part of the answer can be found, I think, in our generalized depreciation of darkness—an attitude that, with respect to human beings, has received theological reinforcement.

How is that, you might ask? Well, several centuries ago its supporters scoured the Bible for passages that would justify *not* just slavery—an institution that has been around for millennia—but *black* slavery in particular. Ultimately, they found the answer they were looking for in Genesis.

Here we find a curious story about Noah and his three sons—Ham, Shem, and Japheth. The Bible says that Noah was the first human to ferment grapes for wine, and thus he was also the first human being to get stinking drunk. One day Noah was lying naked and besotted in his tent and in walks Ham, who, in embarrassment, immediately withdraws. Nevertheless, when Noah is informed of this transgression he becomes very angry and curses Ham, promising that his descendents shall all become slaves.

Now, there is nothing in the Bible that explicitly links Ham to the people of black Africa, but that didn’t prevent slave holders from inferring a connection. Thus, Noah’s “curse” was used to morally down-grade persons with dark skin and to justify their bondage. The argument was spurious yet the racial prejudice it implanted continues to plague us.

Not surprisingly, people who have been spared

this cultural conditioning have a very different perspective. When early European missionaries tried to convert the natives of New Guinea to Christianity, they encountered strong resistance. The reason was simple. Among the materials the missionaries distributed were dramatic pictures of heaven and hell. The denizens of hell, the natives quickly noted, all had dark-skin and were armed with spear-like pitchforks. Heaven, on the other hand, was populated with grim, ghostly white people floating amidst the clouds. To the missionaries chagrin, the New Guineans expressed a clear preference for life in hell!

The way we handle our inner lives also reflects the desire to banish darkness. “We prefer Apollo’s to Persephone’s world,” Madeleine L’Engle writes, denying the obvious fact that “where there is only light and no shadow, there is no life.”

As Americans, we evince a distinct distaste for the so-called “darker” emotions—sadness, melancholy, grief, confusion, boredom, and even shyness. We deem them unacceptable and unhealthy and do not hesitate to use pharmacology or some other strategy to shift our mood back into more positive territory. It’s almost as if our cultural objective is for people to be 100% happy, even when it would be perfectly appropriate to feel distressed or sorrowful.

Thomas Moore insists that we do the soul a disservice when we disallow the experience of darkness. To care properly for the soul, he writes, “we must observe the full range of its colorings and resist the temptation to approve only of white, red, and orange—the brilliant colors....”

There is a place in serious soul-work for depression, for grief, for anomie. That is *not* to suggest that the symptoms of severe depression or thoughts of self-destruction should be left untreated—that it is better to “tough it out” rather than seek life-sustaining support. But when we are too quick to turn on the lights and decline to investigate the darkness, we are liable to miss something quite valuable.

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Moore points out that the ancients associated melancholy with the god Saturn, who was also called *sol niger*—the “black sun.” In Saturn’s darkness, Moore writes, “There is to be found a precious brilliance; our essential nature, distilled by depression ... that makes a real contribution to the texture of everyday life.”

Wrestling and coming to terms with the darker emotions *does* build character, produces profounder insight, helps us to meet life's challenges with greater confidence and resilience. "We cast out the darkness in ourselves at the price of our own wholeness," Madronna Holdren says, and in so doing we also leave ourselves vulnerable to much more serious bouts with hopelessness and despair.

For instance, the noted author William Styron once characterized his own severe depression as a disorder of mood so mysteriously painful as to beggar description. He concluded, however, that the malady had its origins in unresolved grief, "incomplete mourning" for the mother that died when he was only thirteen. We keep the inner darkness at bay, then, at our own peril. Often exposure to the more moderate darkness of grief can save us from spiraling down into a blacker night.

In this respect, we would be wise to integrate a bit of ancient Taoist wisdom into our thinking. Most of us are undoubtedly familiar with the Yin-Yang symbol with its curvilinear black-and-white design. The two equal hemispheres do not merely abut, but gently embrace each other, and each hemisphere also displays at its center a small circle of its counterpart. A better representation of the interpenetration and complementarity of opposites can hardly be imagined.

"Taoism eschews all sharp dichotomies," Huston Smith writes, and "those who meditate upon this profound symbol will find that it affords better access to the world's secrets than any lengthy discourses."

Taoism's treatment of this issue accurately

reflects our everyday experience of the universe. Were the earth to stop spinning on its axis and one side were to face the entire year, life as we know it would cease to exist. The dependable cycle of day and night is what makes our planet habitable.

Similarly, great moments of human illumination are typically preceded by a long period of gestation in the dark regions of the unconscious. Mythology helps us appreciate that mature wisdom and understanding only emerge after we've visited the underworld. At least that's what the works of Homer, Virgil and Dante seem to suggest.

A month or so ago I quoted from Philip Simmons, who lost his battle with ALS—Lou Gehrig's disease—in 2002. In struggling with the progressive erosion of his physical abilities, Simmons experienced a profound change of outlook. "I have become a seeker of the dark way," he wrote.

Yes, we all experience moments when we enter that forest clearing where dragonflies dance and sunlight descends as a kind of grace. But we know such bright moments only because of the darkness that surrounds them. The clearing needs the forest, and I've learned to be thankful for its deep shade.

So may it be for us, as we forge ahead along paths dappled by the friendly sun, strangely beautified by the interplay of light with shadow.

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