

Holy the Dark

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I wonder if it is some sort of cosmic screw-up. On mornings like this, when I wake in the dark. On dreary grey days when the sun doesn't shine at all, so that the brief hours of daylight seem briefer still. On days I huddle in front of the brightness of my Happy Light praying that the claimed benefits of light therapy are more than a myth. On so many days I wonder if it is some sort of cosmic screw-up, the darkness this time of the year.

Surely light is better than darkness. Surely we human beings thrive in the bright rays of the sun. Surely all living things crave sunlight as I do. But believers tell us God doesn't make mistakes. And evolutionary biologists tell us the same thing. Life evolves as it does according to need and in response to circumstance. And I suppose it is the same with the cosmos. I suppose there is a reason, beyond my comprehension, that the earth tilts as it does and rotates as it does and revolves as it does. Bringing us from light into darkness and back again, through the seasons and through the day and the night.

And when my eye falls upon my Christmas cactus, I know it is so. The cactus has eight full blooms this morning and three times again as many buds on deck. I don't force it. It sits in my bathroom window year round. Green and steady and just a bit dusty. Then a few days, perhaps a week, prior to the winter solstice it bursts into brilliant pink blooms. As it is supposed to. And I remember all over again that there is truth in the words of Unitarian Universalist poet Mary Sarton: *without darkness nothing comes to birth as without light nothing flowers.*

"You can't have a light without a dark to stick it in," says singer Arlo Guthrie. Pagans will burn Yule logs in a day or two. Jews will light Menorahs for eight nights beginning later this week. And Christians--of the secular variety as well as the religious variety--have strung trees and rooftops and more with colored lights. Looking at the myriad sparkling displays it is easy to know that the darkness is necessary to show off the candles, the fires, the lights. But Sarton's words have wisdom as well as truth and so do the words of this morning's reading from Jane Kenyon: *If it's darkness we're having, let it be extravagant. ... without darkness nothing comes to birth as without light nothing flowers.* The dark of night and the darkness of winter are holy in and of themselves.

Science tells us what happens to the light this time of year, in this northern hemisphere. Gone are the days when reasonable people lived in real fear of the sun never returning.

And modern technology helps us pretend it doesn't even disappear temporarily. We have light at the flip of a switch whenever, wherever we want it. In any color, in any wattage. But my Christmas cactus needs a particular ratio of light to darkness in order to bloom; other varieties of plants bloom only at night. Bright, artificial light filling a prison cell round the clock or at irregular intervals is an effective means of torture. And Seasonal Affective Disorder, though most common in dark winter months, does strike some sufferers in spring and early summer. There is no hard and fast correlation between light and goodness and dark and evil. Light is not intrinsically positive, nor darkness intrinsically negative.

We understand the ancients' fear of darkness. Some buried instinct deep within us calls us still to entice the sun's return this time of year with bonfires and candles and twinkling strings of light. So we turn the darkness into a festival of light and song, food and wine. Kindling flames to push back the dark becomes a reminder that we can kindle other kinds of flame to push back other things that blanket us with fear: Song and dance dispel isolation with their invitation into community. Potlucks, food shelves, and free meals assuage physical hunger. Toys for Tots and Santa Anonymous cast a glow around children in need. Free rooms at the Inn lift the burden of having loved ones in hospital, hospice or treatment this time of the year. Partner church relationships clarify misunderstandings and strengthen global community. Lighting candles is indeed better than cursing the darkness.

But sometimes, when it comes to real darkness, the best option is neither the curse nor the candle. Sometimes we do well to embrace the darkness and allow it to bless us. Sometimes, instead of imitating the ancients in their fear and their merry enticements, we might imitate other creatures instead, turning with the hibernating frogs and bears and fox into the restfulness of darkness. Settling in for long winter's naps--or at least slowing down, staying close to home, pursuing quiet activities and reflection. Welcoming the short days and long nights as a time for deep, deliberate stillness--hard, hard amidst the bustle of holidays--but a gift for our spirit nonetheless.

Everything about our contemporary society calls us away from rest--cell phones that accompany us everywhere; smart-phones and I-pads that turn home into work, work time into playtime, and every minute into shopping, surfing, connecting time; lighted baseball diamonds; rink time at all hours of day and night; light-rail and jet planes and satellite technology shrinking the world and speeding it up at the same time; microwave ovens and convection ovens and Keurig coffee-makers providing instant sustenance. Overnight shipping for last minute shoppers. On and on it goes.

Maybe darkness falls early and deep this time of year as a sign for us to rest awhile. I don't believe that. I don't believe overly busy, twenty-first century middle Americans are the reason behind an ageless cosmic reality. But once we let go the idea that it is some kind of cosmic screw-up, we can use it that way. We can view this season of darkness as a sort of anti-alarm clock. As a call to our beds, to our living rooms and kitchens, to our families. As an invitation to tend our souls.

We hear our heart beat differently in the darkness, and our breath, too. Our secret thoughts, longings, fears and hopes move more freely in the darkness. Our lips might even let go "I love you" under cover of darkness. *I love you self. I love you spouse. I love you judgmental and stingy and disappointing friend, parent, child, sibling, I love you all the same.* Icy tears might melt and flow, washing away bitterness. Some precious seed might take root, draw nourishment deep within us, readying it to sprout and bloom when the balance of light and dark is right for it and it alone.

*Again did the earth shift, writes Diane Lee Moomey,
Again did the nights grow short,
And the days long.*

*And the people
of the earth were glad
and celebrated
each in their own way.*

That shift will come again in just three days and you might welcome it as I will--scanning the daily reports in search of the exact number of seconds and then minutes of daylight we will gain each day. But in these last precious days of gathering darkness, *If it's darkness we're having, let it be extravagant. Amen.*