

Still the Days Grow Dark

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The days of the year have stiffened in ice, and darkness has grown upon the land. The season of cold early dusk is upon us. The sun has retreated down the sky, the living green has forsaken the earth, and the leaves have fallen. No longer do the flowers bloom and the birds have fled to the south. [1]

The winter solstice, when the nights will begin to grow shorter once again is nearly a week away. The darkness of winter will continue to deepen, here in the northern hemisphere for the next five days (and six nights). Even living, as we do, in an age when electricity means we are almost never in the dark unless we choose to be, it's not hard to understand why ancient northern peoples of all cultures grew fearful this time of year, noticing the sun's gradual withdrawal. I know it's coming back, and I've got lamps and street lights and headlights and holiday lights to brighten the world and guide me on my way in the meantime, and still I know, many dark winter mornings yet to come before spring will find me in my brightly lit house, eagerly, almost frantically, searching the Internet for word of how many more minutes of precious sunlight the next day will bring.

Feeling as I do about the dark of winter, I am all for festivals of light, such as fill the season we're in the midst of. I'm looking forward to our solstice celebration and our Christmas Eve service. My spirit, as much as anyone else's, needs candles and fire and music and rich food, this time of year, to banish the darkness and bid the sun's return. But I'm intrigued by Jane Kenyon's words: *if it's darkness we're having, let it be extravagant.*

Nature does little by accident—though we still feel the need to help her out from time to time. Most autumns I read in the newspaper or magazines or on-line how to force a Christmas cactus to bloom just in time for Christmas. The method called for a precise number of hours of darkness each day for a precise number of weeks leading up to the holiday. The same goes for tulips and narcissus and amaryllis—other flowers we try to

force to bloom in winter that they might lift our spirits. The key always seems to be in the proper ratio of light and darkness. And so, I wonder if, despite our very real craving for sunlight, we human beings are as much in need of the deep darkness this time of year as our flowers.

As a culture we are fearful of the dark for the very reasons Professor Diggins discussed with Orson. We don't see well in the dark, but we do have vivid imaginations, and, as Gary Kowalski points out, "[a]t the center of our being there is light and there is darkness," so we tend to fill the empty spaces in the room around us and the world beyond us with ghosts and monsters and villains and disasters and vague unknown terrors. We know if they are in us—ghosts and monsters and vague impulses toward wildness or destruction—then certainly they are out there, too, unseen, just beyond the edges of the light. And of course, marauders and bandits and thieves and vandals do come out of the dark to do harm, sometimes, and sometimes the darkness is the source of less malevolent unpleasant things, such as rugs that trip us or doorways we don't quite walk through on our way to the bathroom or child's bedside in the middle of the night.

But the dark also allows seeds to germinate, flowers to prepare to bloom, and our dreams to unfold. In the darkness edges blur. Boundaries between reality and fantasy, between friend and stranger, become fluid, leaving open new possibilities. In the darkness, undistracted by that which we see too clearly in the light, we can envision a different world—a more beautiful, peaceful, just world, perhaps—and when the light returns, inspired by that vision we can work to make it so. In the darkness, when our eyes rest, our ears tune more attentively to the sounds of storytelling, of lullabies, of wind, of loved ones breathing in night. And such sounds recall us from often mindless busyness of errands and chores and obligations, and remind us of who we are and what gives our lives meaning.

When stars come up in conversation, as they do at Christmas time, my mom often reminds me of the brilliance of a sky full of them on a long ago camping trip. I remember that particular evening well, but it is the darkness of the night, deep and vast and terrifying, despite my parents' reassuring presence, that I recall, not the light of the stars at all. It is the dark of night that gives us our view of stars. Indeed, paradoxically, darkness reveals much that cannot be seen in the light of day. Tradition calls for Yule

fires and Hanukka and Kwanzaa candles to be lit at night, when their flames will shine forth in stark contrast against the darkness. The sparkle of Christmas tree lights is all but lost in the brilliant light of day. The powerful, primal, meaning of passing the flames of our chalice from one person to the next, until our church is filled with the light of scores of candles (real candles this year!) would fade away to almost nothing, if we did that ritual in the light of day, instead of the dark of Christmas Eve evening. But darkness is more than simply a foil for the light. It is the right condition for quiet reflection, and deep, dream-filled and refreshing sleep, and it is an invitation to allow the dark, unknown, nameless, infinite aspects of our very being free reign for a time.

Ancient New Year's celebrations which were so entwined with Yule celebrations and eventually Christmas celebrations that they are nearly impossible to unravel, ancient New Year's observances often celebrated not only the triumph of light over darkness, but also allowed rampant disorder for a carefully prescribed time. Roles were reversed, masters did the work or slaves, and servants demanded gifts of their masters, and drunken revelry was the order of the day. These customs have come to us through the ages in the form of gifts given from parents to children, and in the festivities of New Year's Eve. We have within our nature wildness which needs expression, lest it escape and rule us in uncontrolled ways. What better time than in the deep of winter, when fears and cravings are potent, to let it have its way for a time?

Orson learned to fill unseen space of a darkened camper caravan with benign and beloved jellybeans, and eventually, as the Professor predicted, he tired of the forest of confection. We have learned to fill the dark of night and winter with light—the ordinary light of lamps and streetlights and night lights, and with the holiday light of trees and candles and fires, and with the symbolic light of parties and music and gatherings of loved ones. The light we create and invite fills the empty spaces and keeps our fears at bay for a time. But what might we discover if we were to trust the darkness, and allow the spaces it creates to remain 'empty, tranquil, and quiet'? What dreams might come? What answers might be heard whispered in the stillness? What flowers might blossom within us? And if we allowed the wild darkness with us to emerge, for a few days, what power might we discover in ourselves? What strength and heretofore unknown creativity?

We live by clocks, in this age, rather than by the sun. And clocks bid us awake and report for work and school and church at set times, whether it's light or dark outside our windows. This fact of modern, post-Industrial Revolution life isn't likely to change anytime soon. Most of us aren't ever going to be able to reclaim a cycle of waking and sleeping, working and resting, that is totally and solely in sync with the cycles of the sun. What we can do, perhaps, in these shortest, darkest days of the year, is embrace the darkness, even as we prepare to celebrate the light. We can acknowledge that life is complete only in their alternating existence. We can accept the blessings of the dark. Offer a word of thanks in the early morning for the darkness that wrapped us in our sleep, that received our dreams, that allowed us pause. We can notice the dark sky, the dark window, dark room, against which, into which, the stars, the candles, the lights shine, and give thanks that the darkness itself is no less holy than the light.

The Kenneth Patton piece I opened with continues:

From darkness will come light, and out of the cold will be born the flaming sun...[soon] the sun will again climb the heavens, and...the darkness will be pushed back each day. And the months of snow will give way to the months of leaves, and petals will fall upon the earth...In the midst of winter the promise is given of the summer season, and in the midst of darkness there comes the assurance of light. In the midst of cold comes a messenger of warmth, and in the days of death there is heard the good news of life.

So it has ever been, so it is and ever will be. In the meantime, “[i]f it's darkness we're having, let it be extravagant.”

Amen

[1] Kenneth Patton