

Dark Night of the Soul



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Very few of us walk, stroll, waltz through life without encountering what the poets, story tellers and religious thinkers have labeled the dark night(s) of the soul. At one time or another this dark night time will come, it is sort of like depression but more. It is a time of deep questioning, a deep sadness, fear, frustration, challenge and loss. It is a time of saying who am I, what am I supposed to do with my wild and crazy life, what and to whom do I turn when I am broken and downhearted, what do I depend on and what is the purpose of existence. To use the term depression, is as Thomas More in his book *Dark Nights of the Soul* says, too clinical a term. Depression is a condition that affects many people, it can be biological caused by hormones or chemical imbalances.

Depression can be a response to a series of difficult events. My mother, I realized years after her death, was depressed most of her life. She had a difficult childhood, adolescence and a lot of loss in her life. When she was 8 years old her mother died in childbirth. Her father, my beloved Grampy Fay was alcoholic during most of her early life and she took care of her younger brother and sister as her father struggled with his alcoholism, grief, loss of their home and inappropriate relationships.

Depression can be chronic such as my mother's, or periodic which I am sure many of us can relate to, following loss or grief or traumatic events in our life. Depression can be treated most often with, therapy, both group and individual, sometimes medication and the healing gift of time and renewal of the spirit. Whereas the dark night of the soul time can be both a time of depression but is more about questioning the meaning of life. The dark night of the soul time can hit even when all external things seem to be going well, when it hits it is a gut wrenching, soul shattering experience. And most often our first response is how to rid ourselves of it, how to overcome the experience as quickly as possible. However, because experiencing the dark night of the soul is crucial to developing our truest and innermost being, it is best not to run headlong into quick fixes. It is too easy to try to fix this time of challenge

and tough feelings by for example: ending a marriage, starting a new relationship, moving away, quitting a job, starting a new job, getting a haircut. (this is not why I cut my hair by the way.) One of the hardest things about emerging through the dark night of the soul times is waiting and working on the inner self, being brutally honest about who we are, what we believe, what life is and what we have control over and what not.

Thomas Moore said, “Some people speak of their dark night of the soul as though it were a challenge to be dealt with quickly and overcome. It may be profoundly unsettling, offering no conceivable way out. It calls for a spiritual response not a therapeutic one. It pushes you to the edge of what is familiar and reliable, stretching your imagination about how life works and who or what controls it all. it forces the spirit beyond human capacity.”ⁱ

The further danger is to think that dark is bad and the only way to feel good is to be in the light. Barbara Brown Taylor instead points out that there is Lunar and Solar Theology and we can't have one without the other. Solar theology provides the lightness of being but it sometimes doesn't do well with challenging thoughts, questions or doubt. Solar theology is optimistic but sometimes it doesn't do well when push comes to

shove, when loss or struggle rears up. This is when we need Lunar Theology. A theological point of view that is not afraid to enter into the fracas and fray, is not afraid of experiencing dark times. In my experience and thoughts, a balance must be sought and explored to have us be the most fully functioning spiritual beings ever.

Just as Thomas Moore in his book helps us to understand what the dark night of the soul is; Barbara Brown Taylor helps us know how to get through it.

I would propose that a bridge is nature, as this reading from the theologian Howard Thurman states. "That the day view follows the night view is written large in nature. Indeed, it is one with nature. The clouds gather heavy with unshed tears; at last they burst sending over the total landscape waters gathered from the silent offering of sea and wave. The next day dawns, the whole heavens are aflame with the glorious brilliance of the sun. This is the way the rhythm moves. The fall of the leaf comes, then winter with its trees stripped of leaf and bud; cold winds ruthless in bitterness and sting. One day there is sleet and ice; in the silence of the nighttime the snow falls soundlessly- all this until at last the cold seems endless and all there is seems to be shadowy and forbearing. The earth is weary

and heavy. Then something stirs – a strange new vitality pulses through everything. One can feel the pressure of some vast energy pushing, always pushing through dead branches, slumbering roots- life surges everywhere within and without. Spring has come. The day usurps the night view.”ⁱⁱ

Only night heals again. Night heals in the way the soul is tempered, one degree, one battle at a time, the way consciousness is built, through steady struggles with forces older and greater than ourselves. Have great faith in the regenerating powers of endarkenment and believe as Theodore Roethke wrote, “In the dark time, the eye begins to see. I meet my shadow in the deepening shade.”

Following the cycle of the moon is to my mind a significant way to learn how to emerge from the dark night of the soul. Barbara Brown Taylor in her book, *Learning to Walk in the Dark*, does a masterful job of presenting this concept.

First and foremost, she uses the concept of dark meaning that the feelings, emotions, thoughts, attitudes and struggles that we can get in the midst of are locked up and shuttered away, in an attempt to keep us from exploring and eventually embracing those thoughts.

Have you ever been very, very sad, anxious, fearful, full of grief and not been given the time you need to enter into the depth of that experience and feelings. I am sure most of us have. It is almost as if those around us have some sort of time line that grief, loss, sadness is supposed to adhere to. I am in agreement with Barbara Brown Taylor that we need people to walk with us into the depth, who will give us the time we need. I suspect we might even have a healthier society if we were given that time. She says, “I have learned things in the dark that I could never have learned in the light, things that have saved my life over and over again, so that there is really only one logical conclusion. I need darkness as much as I need light.” p. 5

As for me when I am in a time of the dark night of the soul one of the most helpful actions I can take is to go out into the night, instead of tossing and turning, and twisting about in bed like a mop needing to be wrung out, I get up and step outside. I breath the air, cold or warm, I look at the sky and I see the dark night and all the bodies of twinkling stars and planets or the moon in all its phases and I see my size in relationship to the enormity of the galaxy - I am humbled- and I see the blending of light and dark together - I am hopeful. An added bonus is to witness the moon in its cycle, full with energy and then into its

waning self, vanishing and diminishing till it is not visible as it rests (I am being poetic not literal here) for three days until it is visible again as it waxes, filling out and increasing until it is showing its full face once again. If the moon can change, if light can be seen and not seen, if stars can twinkle and shine, then I can learn from nature and I can lean into life. I try to find those whom I trust to talk about my dark times, I try to find those who will sit with me, I try to be honest about what the issues are that are facing me, I try to give over the ones I have no control over, I try to discern the wisdom to know which I can do something about, I try to find strength and courage to tackle what I can.

What do you do when you are in the dark night of your soul journey? Who do you turn to? What have you learned? What lessons have you brought back from the dark? I hope you spend some time reflecting on these questions and maybe even talking to someone.

May it be so.

ⁱ Thomas Moore, *Dark Nights of the Soul: A Guide to Finding Your Way through Life's Ordeals*. Gotham Books. 2004

ⁱⁱ Editor, Phil Cousineau. *Prayers at 3 A.M. Poems, Songs and Chants and Prayers for the middle of the Night*. p. 192
Thurman. Roethke p. 180