



Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

The Reverend Alison Wilbur Eskildsen, Parish Minister
The Reverend Don Randall, Community Minister

“To Know the Dark”

© by the Reverend Alison W. Eskildsen

Reflections delivered on January 17, 2017

At the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens, GA

Centering Thoughts:

It is during our darkest moments that we must focus to see the light. Aristotle

The lack of mystery in our modern life is our downfall and our poverty. Dietrich Bonhoeffer

*To go in the dark with a light is to know the light.
To know the dark, go dark. Go without sight,
and find that the dark, too, blooms and sings,
and is traveled by dark feet and dark wings.*

Wendell Berry

Together Time

Silent Night, by Juliet Groom and Tim Warnes (new words for an old song)

Reading

“The Nourishing Dark,” by Richard S. Gilbert in his book *In the Holy Quiet: Meditations*

[Note: online links are provided for you to access complete poem or writings]

(https://books.google.com/books?id=yH7H6GsHOtAC&pg=PA21&lpg=PA21&dq=Nourishing+Dark+Richard+S.+Gilbert&source=bl&ots=XCnjHq_QEH&sig=6Dz1703btX6_-wr906aeiIcVo68&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwiHhKbSoJTYAhWDqlQKHQR0DcQQ6AEIKTAA#v=onepage&q=Nourishing%20Dark%20Richard%20S.%20Gilbert&f=false)

Reflection:

I’m sure many of you wait impatiently for the winter solstice to arrive so that the days will lengthen with increasing sunlight. I’m looking forward to the solstice and this week’s choir celebration of it, but I don’t want us to move too quickly out of this time of darkness. Today we pause a moment to get to know the dark, and not just wait for the light.

Just like we retreat to our warm, blanketed beds at night to restore our bodies from the day’s exertions, winter’s darkness provides a time to restore our spirits, and to get ready for the more active seasons of spring and summer. As the late UU minister Richard Gilbert advised in Lee’s reading, ‘we forget the nourishing dark at our peril. There is mystery in the dark to be probed.’

I shared last week that although this month's focus is Faith and Hope, for our Advent candle lighting we are featuring the four themes developed by German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer. He chose mystery because his theology led him to believe God's love was a mystery. He believed God's incarnation in Jesus was a mystery. He believed Jesus' saving act was a mystery. And, he believed that if we try to understand these mysteries like we try to understand star formation or the genetic code, we miss the point. Speaking broadly to the need for mystery, in *God Is in the Manger*, a book compiled after his death, he writes:

The lack of mystery in our modern life is our downfall and our poverty. ... We retain the child in us to the extent that we honor the mystery. ... [C]hildren have open, wide-awake eyes, because they know that they are surrounded by the mystery. They are not yet finished with this world; they still don't know how to struggle along and avoid the mystery, as we do. We destroy the mystery because we sense that here we reach the boundary of our being, because we want to be lord over everything and have it at our disposal, and that's just what we cannot do with the mystery.... Living without mystery means knowing nothing of the mystery of our own life, nothing of the mystery of another person, nothing of the mystery of the world; it means passing over our own hidden qualities and those of others and the world. It means remaining on the surface, taking the world seriously only to the extent that it can be calculated and exploited, and not going beyond the world of calculation and exploitation. Living without mystery means not seeing the crucial processes of life at all and even denying them."

Significantly, Bonhoeffer claims if we reduce the world to base numbers or its consumerist qualities, then we destroy its depth and mystery, and I might add, its spirit, like bright light blinds our vision. Life is more than its ability to be quantified and categorized. Pure science and rational thought may explain the Big Bang, but it doesn't describe my awe and wonder that we exist. My *experience* of darkness is different than my *knowledge* of why it's dark. Religion, myth, poetry, music, and other expressive arts complement my scientific understanding of the world.

A common metaphor calls certain emotions, like sadness, as dark or black. The Dark Ages describe a time of superstition and lack of learning before the Age of Enlightenment. Darkness carries a white cultural negativity that contributes to the idea that black people are bad, and bad things happen in the dark. But all things dark or black are not all bad. There is much beauty and welcome mystery in the dark. We need the dark to see the light. In Wendell Berry's simple poem, "To Know the Dark," he affirms the positive in darkness:

To go in the dark with a light is to know the light.
To know the dark, go dark. Go without sight,
and find that the dark, too, blooms and sings,
and is traveled by dark feet and dark wings.

I love his phrase that the dark 'blooms and sings'. As he notes, have you observed that using a flashlight in the dark enables you to see only what is illuminated by that circle of light? Anything beyond that light boundary is lost from our sight. But if you turn off the flashlight you're less blind to what lies beyond. To know the dark we have to be willing to turn off the light.

In reading earlier, Gilbert suggests what we might see:

In the darkness we rest our bodies and our souls.
We escape that which distracts and confuses.
We come face to face with ourselves.
We come into the deep places of our being.

When you can't see what's beyond yourself, you can turn within. Winter's darkness offers a time to ask, "Who am I? Am I who I want to be?" And then we can decide whether to change our course in life or not. New Year's resolutions provide a time for us to commit to a change or staying on course.

Many of us don't want to come face to face with our being. We might not like what we see. But if we hide from who we are, we cannot change who we are. Remaining in the bright light prevents us from seeing or feeling what's within.

A poem by David Whyte titled "Sweet Darkness" from *House of Belonging*, suggest letting go of what doesn't serve us well and how the dark may help: (onbeing.org/blog/sweet-darkness/)

Something that makes me come alive is walking under the canopy of a clear winter night sky. Celestial bodies twinkle like scattered diamonds. Newly fallen snow also sparkles like diamonds when struck by sun or moonlight.

Joy Atkinson, in an excerpt from "The Womb of Stars," shares our creaturely connection to the diamonds in the sky: (www.uua.org/worship/words/reading/183090.shtml)

The womb of stars embraces us; remnants of their fiery furnaces pulse through our veins. We are of the stars, the dust of the explosions cast across space. We are of the Earth; we breathe and live in the breath of ancient plants and beasts. Their cells nourish the soil; we build our communities on their harvest of gifts. Our fingers trace the curves carved in clay and stone by forebears unknown to us. We are a part of the great circle of humanity gathered around the fire, the hearth, the altar.

Her description is true to science, but it's also truly poetic.

It's no wonder that many holidays are celebrated during the northern hemisphere's dark winter season. When hunkered down indoors near the warmth of fire, family or friends, what's better than to feast on rich food, sing traditional songs, and bathe in the warm waters of love?

During the holiday season, songs of winter wonderlands can be heard most places you go. Images of snowmen, snowflakes, and snow scenes abound. If you are lucky enough to walk outdoors during or after a newly fallen snow, you know how magical that can be.

A special dusky, blue-gray light suffuses everything, softening its edges. The blanket of snow muffles and silences the world. It seems like all living things come to a stop —no cars on the road, no birds in the sky, no squirrels hopping about—tranquility descends ... Until kids come out to play or adults begin to shovel driveways. As much of a hazard or inconvenience as snowstorms

can be, I miss them. Last week's momentary snowfall whetted my appetite for a decent dumping of snow on Athens.

Meteorological winter starts on the winter solstice. Since we're still waiting for that moment of solar equilibrium, as well as Christmas, this meditative poem by UU minister Kathleen McTigue titled "On the Cusp of Winter" from *Shine and Shadow* may resonate (www.pinterest.com/pin/423268064964113545/):

McTigue offers us the key for embracing this season of darkness—to 'ease out from beneath the burden of our speed and bustle, our fretful worry.'

Consider her advice. Slow down. Ease out from beneath your burdens. Try not to rush through winter. Experience what the darkness may offer you—be it rest, redemption, or simple appreciation for all that life offers. Perhaps Mother Nature knows what we need most: long, dark nights to linger awhile in peace, by ourselves or with those we love.

May you take time to savor a cup of tea, a mug of hot chocolate, an Irish coffee, or maybe a sip of eggnog. May you turn off the lights and enjoy what the dark offers. And, if you can find it in your hearts, may you join me in wishing for a blanket of snow for Athens. May it be so.

Meditation:

Lucinda S. Duncan, 'God of Life and Beauty'

www.uua.org/worship/words/meditations/submissions/19877.shtml

Reading:

"Reflections on the Resurgence of Joy" by Dori Jeanine Somers (#653, in *Singing the Living Tradition* hymnal)

Benediction:

Wendell Berry, from his collection titled *Given*.

We travelers, walking to the sun, can't see
Ahead, but looking back the very light
That blinded us shows us the way we came,
Along which blessings now appear, risen
As if from sightlessness to sight, and we,
By blessing brightly lit, keep going toward
That blessed light that yet to us is dark.

Questions for Reflection or Discussion:

1. Do you linger in the dark of night to experience or receive what it can teach? Or, do you banish the dark with light so that any fear or mystery disappears? What prompts your actions?
2. Do you hibernate from or embrace the dark, cold winter months? Share how winter affects you.
3. What do the winter holidays mean to you? Are they filled with joy or sorrow?