

“Who’s Afraid of the Dark?”
First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto
A Homily given by Stephanie Gannon
on 20 December 2015
Winter Solstice Service

N.B. – These sermons are made available with a request: that the reader appreciate that, ideally, a sermon is an oral/aural experience that takes place in the context of worship – supported and reinforced by readings, contemplative music, rousing hymns, silence, and prayer – and that it is but one part of an extended conversation that occurs over time between a minister and a covenanted congregation.

It's close to midnight and something evil's lurking in the dark
Under the moonlight you see a sight that almost stops your heart
You try to scream but terror takes the sound before you make it
You start to freeze as horror looks you right between the eyes,
You're paralyzed

Do these words sound familiar? They’re the first lines of Michael Jackson’s 80s hit song “Thriller.” Maybe you remember Vincent Price’s spooky voice and haughty laugh at the end of it too. The darkness depicted in the song and famous video contains demons, monsters, and other hellish creatures.

From pop songs to movies like *Friday the Thirteenth* and Hitchcock’s *The Birds* and *Psycho* to ghost stories, our culture is saturated with such fear-inducing imagery and narratives. Just think of the recent craze of zombie flicks and the whole *Twilight* series about vampires. Whether we realize it or not, we’ve been taught to fear the dark, and darkness tends to be treated as dangerous or bad.

At the end of October I found myself immersed in complete darkness, and it was terrifying. Maybe I’m not supposed to say that! I attended the O Noir luncheon organized by Barb Wentworth, Mark’s mom, at a restaurant downtown run by the blind. I was excited to have the experience, but my initial response was fight-or-flight. We had made our way carefully into the dining room by forming a human chain and being led by our waiter, who was visually impaired. I held on really tight.

As soon as I sat down and realized that I could see nothing at all—just utter blackness without any light or differentiation—I wanted to escape. It was irrational, I know. I was with a lovely group of people from the church, whom I thoroughly trusted and cared about, and yet my nervous system as well as the primitive part of my brain were screaming at me to get out of there and find safety. Where were the exit signs?? I saw none illuminated. What if someone came up and strangled me? How would I defend myself? How would my friends intervene to save me if they couldn't see me? The room was unusually cold too. Was this what death was like? I had many such irrational thoughts that day...

Although it took me what seemed like a really long time, I eventually calmed down and settled into the darkness. I took several deep breaths, talked nervously to the neighbour across from me, and gradually even closed my eyes. I found that helped me to relax more. I never became comfortable, but at least I could tolerate the experience.

The O Noir luncheon was an extreme immersion in the dark. Have you ever experienced anything like it? Are you afraid of the dark? When and how did you realize it?

As city dwellers exposed to enormous quantities of light pollution, we have to drive out into the country to see stars and the night sky. And so many of us spend most of our waking hours staring at bright screens. They're everywhere, and we're kind of addicted to them. Things are out of balance: we're too exposed to light. Somehow the mystery and beauty have been taken out of the dark.

It seems that only in rare power outages like the big blackout in the hot summer of 2003 do we truly get acquainted with the dark. That event in particular exposed our dependency on electricity for so much of what we do in our lives. Without it, many people naturally felt helpless, afraid, and a severe loss of control. These are some of the feelings that invariably come up in the dark.

In her recent book *Learning to Walk in the Dark*, Barbara Brown Taylor invites us to learn to walk in the dark. She believes this is a “spiritual skill some of us could use right now.”¹ I agree. She encourages us to become curious about our own darkness: What are we really afraid of in the dark? Where does

¹ Barbara Brown Taylor, *Learning to Walk in the Dark* (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2014) 13.

that fear live in our bodies? What can we learn about in the dark that we could never have learned in the light?²

Tonight in our Solstice ritual we'll be carrying light into the center of the circle and joining our individual lights as we walk along the spirals to symbolize the return of the light that begins after this longest night of the year. I'd like for us to wonder about what it would be like, though, to linger in the dark a little longer. We don't need to go to the extreme of my O Noir encounter. *What if we gradually waded into the dark, learning to trust it, opening ourselves to the possibility that it might be fertile ground for growth and transformation?*

To do this may take some courage. The end of the year and early days of winter hopefully provide us with a good time for quiet and reflection. What is it about the darkness that makes us so uncomfortable? What feelings does it evoke? Obviously for those of us who suffer from Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD), this can be an especially hard time of year. But more generally, I'm interested in our resistance to the darkness and to what that signifies.

I would argue that we are most fully ourselves, most whole, when we accept both the light as well as the darkness within. This idea comes from various sources: among them, my yoga teachings and Carl Jung's concept of the Shadow and healthy ego development.

Given the usual negative connotations of our shadow side—such as jealousy, anger, greed, envy, fear, sadness, and so on—it's not easy to see how we can accept, let alone celebrate, these qualities within ourselves. Real healing can occur, though, when we give ourselves permission to feel these darker, more primitive emotions when we need to. Another word for "emotion" is energy in motion. By sitting with the harder emotions and really feeling them we may be transformed. Listening to the night—the tears, dreams, and worries that often emerge there—can teach us this.

Barbara Brown Taylor coins the word "endarkenment" as a counterpoint to enlightenment, which so many spiritual seekers are in search of.³ She reminds us of the long tradition of Christian mystics and contemplatives. The darkness was often where they found the divine. It's where they wrestled most profoundly with their own doubt and anxieties about their relationship to God. We need only look at the titles of some of their books to get that sense—some examples being St. John of the Cross's *The Dark*

² Ibid, 185.

³ Ibid, 86.

Night of the Soul from the sixteenth century and the anonymous fourteenth century English text *The Cloud of Unknowing*. For monks historically too night is the time to pray and have their deepest revelations.⁴

The dark is vital to other spiritual traditions as well. Consider the exquisite lotus flower that needs to travel up through the mud and mucky water if it's going to blossom on the water's surface. In the yoga tradition and in Buddhism we talk about how we all need to go through the muck—challenges, uncertainty, suffering, loss—before we can fully bloom or awaken. We have so much potential, and it grows in and discovers its strongest roots in the dark.

This time of year offers a perfect opportunity to play with the boundaries between darkness and light and to surrender a bit to the darkness and even risk losing ourselves in it, if only for a brief moment. I hope that you will learn to embrace the darkness and see it as fertile and generative, the source of our creativity and deepest essence, where we might uncover our deepest desires. Our lives are framed by darkness: we are conceived in the darkness of the womb, and some day we will die and enter a darkness on the other side.

I'd like for you to take a moment to reflect on some part of yourself that you'd like to nurture in the darkness of the coming season. As Wendell Berry writes:

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.

May you find the dark full of potency and aliveness.

May it guide you too.

Do not be afraid.

Blessed be and amen.

⁴ Lonni Collins Pratt, *Radical Hospitality* (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2011): "In monasticism night is a holy time. God is experienced in the darkness in a way that is unique to darkness. And God in the dark makes the frightful thing less so. Fear chokes out love. We don't become people of love unless we have faced our fears..."(68).