

The Darkness and the Light  
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Mary Oliver has written a poem about the sun, which begins with these lines:

Have you ever seen anything in your life more wonderful  
Than the way the sun, every evening, relaxed and easy,  
Floats toward the horizon and into the clouds or the hills,  
Or the rumpled sea, and is gone—  
And how it slides again out of the blackness, every morning,  
On the other side of the world, like a red flower  
Streaming upward on its heavenly oils?

The sensation of day receding into night, and night transforming into day—the image and feeling of the sun appearing, arching across the sky, and disappearing on the other side of the world—this is one of the original experiences of being alive on the earth.

In those parts of the planet most affected by the planet's tilt, the places shaped by the greatest variations in season and temperature and length of day and night, the ancient peoples there had reason to fear the long dark, and to celebrate the return of the sun.

In all human communities, but especially in those places, as the darkness and cold took hold of the world, the fire became central to survival, central to community, central to the formation of culture.

Archeologists now have evidence that suggests that controlled use of fire may have started as long as one and a half million years ago (give or take a few hundred thousand years), meaning that our stocky, hairy hominid ancestors crouched around fires together, looking into the light, warming themselves, with the smoke of roasting game curling around them.

Another original, universal experience is that of being born. Every human being has gestated within the mother's womb, suspended for months in the wet, warm darkness, listening to the beating of the mother's heart, until finally being pressed out into the light and air. We all know the sensation of transforming secretly in the dark, until some readiness brings us to birth. What was hidden emerges into the light, a new thing, a changed thing.

So here we have just four primordial experiences of darkness and light:

- the cycles of night and day,
- the cycles of winter and summer,
- the circle of light and warmth created by a fire burning against the dark or against the cold,
- and the experience of gestating and being born, from an inner dark place to an outer bright place.

These experiences connect us back to a time before the layers and layers of mythic meaning had been fused to darkness and light, a time when light and dark were not symbolic ideas but were simply states, mere sensations. It helps us to remember where it all began, our feelings about the light and about the dark.

At some point in prehistory, people began to sing around the fire and tell stories. At some point we began to imagine the shape of the cosmos and our

place and purpose in it. At some point we started creating rituals to mark the seasons of nature and the passages of human life.

And as this happened, the darkness and the light became infused with symbolic meaning. The seasons of nature and the seasons of the soul echoed each other. Darkness and light were no longer just natural states, but spiritual states.

Here is a prayer from the Oglala Sioux sweat lodge rite of purification, as recounted by Black Elk:

O Great Spirit, I have just seen the day, the Light of Life. There where the sun comes up, you have given the power of wisdom to the Morning Star, who guards the path of the people. O you, Morning Star, who control that path where the sun comes up, look upon us with your red and blue days, and help us in sending our voices to the Wakan Tanka, the Great Spirit. You who have knowledge, give some of it to us, that our hearts may be enlightened, that we may know what is sacred. O morning Star, help us in cleansing ourselves and all the people, that our generations to come will have Light as they walk the sacred path. You lead the dawn as it walks forth, and also the day which follows with its Light, which is knowledge. This you do for us and for all people of the world, that they may see clearly in walking the wisdom path, that they may know what is holy, and that they may increase in a sacred manner.

There are countless examples of prayers and hymns from around the world that identify light with divinity and spiritual wisdom. While the shamanistic traditions are more able to embrace the spiritual value of darkness as a necessary part of every cycle and journey, some religions have developed radically dualistic cosmologies. In a dualistic cosmos not only is light associated with all that is good and holy and spiritual, but darkness is associated with ignorance at best and evil at worst.

These dualities have found their way into our own religion. We light the chalice each week with words praising the light. Here are some well-worn phrases:

The light of wisdom and truth, the flame of justice, fire of passionate commitment,  
the light that enables us to see clearly,  
the light shining out as a beacon amidst the darkness, gloom, and ignorance.  
Being a light for others,  
following the example of past luminaries,  
creating a bright future,  
Keeping the light alive,  
praising the dawn.

Such imagery is absolutely ubiquitous in the prayers, hymns, and wisdom words of our tradition. It is as if the darkness were only to be endured or avoided, not a thing of value in itself. Somewhere in all of this, darkness gets short shrift.

Is there no wisdom in darkness, no truth? Is darkness the absence of hope? We know about creative light, but what about creative darkness? We celebrate the birth of the light, but what about the pregnant possibilities of the darkness? What about the mystery and beauty of the night?

If we are to be spiritually whole, and not divided in a cosmos of good-light vs. bad-dark, then let us take some time to praise the darkness.

The interesting thing about our story today, the Brazilian folk tale about the creation of night, is that the story begins with the world knowing only a kind of relentless, blazing daylight—unrelieved by night with its own mysteries and its comforts.

In so many other creation stories, the drama of the story comes from the light being hidden, or stolen, or growing less and less until the world begins to suffer in the dark and cold. The primordial hero, or heroine, or trickster, must find a way to retrieve the light, so that balance is restored to life.

But in the story of the creation of night, we see a world bleached by unmitigated daylight, without the natural life rhythms nurtured by the darkness, and without the soft beauty of morning and evening twilight.

In the second reading, the poem by Theodore Roethke, we are shown a man journeying to a truer self through a hard, dark passage, as if into and through a cave. He begins with the words, "In a dark time, the eye begins to see. I meet my shadow in the deepening shade." Some kinds of truths can only be seen in the shadow, some wisdom comes only in the nighttime of the soul. He claims that paradox in the line "dark, dark is my light."

Although the poet is telling us of his psychic suffering, it is almost like the pangs and contractions of birth—a spiritual death and rebirth:

A man goes far to find out what he is--  
Death of the self in a long, tearless night,  
All natural shapes blazing unnatural light.

In the end he describes his birth into a new state:

A fallen man, I climb out of my fear.  
The mind enters itself, and God enters the mind,  
And one becomes the One, free in the tearing wind.

Sometimes being born to new possibilities first requires that journey down inward into darkness and dis-integration. Sometimes the most potent creativity erupts from a dark core of the self. Laura Dowd, who has played so beautifully today, chose these pieces by Schumann because, in their emotional intensity, they expressed the composer's inner darkness and inner light, a man who struggled with madness.

But not all darkness is stormy. Some spiritual darkness is still and silent and strangely radiant. Mystics call it the uncreated light. Taoists call it the pregnant void, mother of all things. Buddhists call it emptiness.

Some darkness is wet and earthy. In these wintry climes, as the sun's rays grow weaker and briefer in the days before the winter solstice, we are touched and beckoned by a deep understanding of the earth's need for hibernation, for stillness, for turning within. Something in us may feel pulled to follow her into that inner place.

I will close with a poem by Meinrad Craighead, from her book of paintings and poems celebrating the Great Mother, the Soul of the Earth.

I am winter out of autumn's death,  
Seeds resting in wet rot,  
And woolly mould of summer's thick flesh  
Watched by moons, and lonely birds,  
And the long vaults of naked trees.

Now the fourth turning is into sleep  
When I recall all time enfolded in my living flesh.  
Then I can count every bone and blade of grass  
Remembering whole forests now buried in my depths,  
And rains that lasted a thousand years.

On the beach of some great sea,  
Beyond the distant hills,  
At the west rim of the last edge of my ragged silhouette,  
As old and far away as my beginning,  
As the great night silence  
Pegged down at the four corners.  
Long before remembering,  
I am deeply dumb,  
The first altar, standing from age to age.

Love the Darkness, with its all its gifts, even the difficult ones, for it is as  
much a part of our world, and as necessary to our becoming, as is the Light.