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What Canst Thou Say?

Friends • Mystical Experience • Contemplative Practice

*You will say, Christ saith this, and the apostles say this: but what canst thou say?
Art thou a child of Light and hast thou walked in the Light, and what thou speakest,
is it inwardly from God?*
—George Fox

Darkness

Experiencing God in Darkness

Carol Bosworth

“...the ocean of Light of which Fox and other writers speak so movingly does not simply roll in and cover the ocean of evil, violence, hatred, and selfishness. On the contrary,...it is enriched, even transformed, by a recognition of the darkness...we are citizens of two Kingdoms—the Kingdom of Light and the Kingdom of Darkness, and the highest citizenship of all, the allegiance beyond all others, brings with it passports to them both.”

—quoted by Helen Hole in *Friends Journal*

My experience of God’s presence has always been immersed in darkness. As a child and for most of my adult years, this darkness was terrifying and total. I sought many ways to avoid this experience, but every effort I made to pray eventually stripped away my securities of images, stories, or promises from the Bible and plunged me again into darkness.

For years I was afraid to pray with my eyes closed, because of insecurity and lack of sureness that I could return to a lighted world and my known life. I did not know what this darkness was. I wondered why I couldn’t find God in the way other people reported, as a Being in Light, a guide, a friend and giver of openings and certainties and leadings. I couldn’t find others to talk to who understood, and didn’t fear, the darkness as I experienced it.

When I tried to share my experiences in worship-sharing groups, I met with discomfort in my listeners, with absence of understanding, and occasionally with earnest efforts to help me

“see the light,” “change my attitude,” “repent,” “accept Jesus as my Savior,” “leave my life of embracing the Devil, and return to God’s people.” The loneliness I felt in all those years was intense. None of the people I knew shared this spiritual experience.

When I was fifty, I spent a year at Pendle Hill as a resident student. There I found a few other people who recog-

nized my experience of darkness as a spiritual one. Through talking and shared reading, they helped me reach some sense of rightness in my experience. Gradually I could trust enough to close my eyes when I entered prayer, to settle into the darkness, and to rest there. I began to expand my awareness to receive what had been there seeking me all those years.

From the Editor:

In the beginning...Darkness. Each of us grew in the darkness of the womb, seeds germinate in the darkness of the soil, without darkness we cannot see light. Friends’ dependence upon the Light as our central metaphor makes *Darkness* a difficult, yet poignant, subject for us. This theme generated many heartfelt submissions, more than we could publish. Our authors write of “experiencing God in the darkness,” of choosing darkness so that true light is “easier to discern,” and “finding that God is there even when my sight and sense seem dim.” Others use darkness as a metaphor for depression, psychosis or fear. All challenge us to look at the dance between dark and light which is life itself.

In this issue the Naylor quote (page 7) was submitted by Brian Drayton. All other quotations from the journals of Friends (pages 4,5,6,9, and 11) were provided by Stuart Mays.

Judy Lumb, Editor for this issue

It was then that I felt the arms of God stretched below me as I fell into the dark of my prayers. It was then that I began to feel (in my inner body) a “push” when I needed guidance in my prayers. I learned to accept the pushes, and I sought to stretch open my awareness to God’s energy and Being. I felt like a baby having to learn anew how to receive information with senses I didn’t know how to name. I could see but not with my eyes, and hear and feel and know but not with my ears, body or brain. Slowly I grew in this new awareness and followed it deeper. I learned, from occasional crises of prayer, that if I stayed present in the darkness, God would catch me and hold me safe.

St. John of the Cross, a Carmelite mystic from 16th century Spain, wrote about the darkness we can experience in God’s presence. He likened this to our experience of light passing through a window into a room. If the window glass is dirty and the room dusty, we see the light as it comes through the glass and follow it as its beam lights up the dust motes in the air of the room. We “see the light,” we say. However, if the glass is perfectly clean and the room is dust free, the light passes through, invisible until it strikes an object in the room and lights it up. The light now is invisible, or dark to us, while present and normal otherwise. God’s light is like this to our ability to know it.

In my experiences with God, I was taught about God’s energy within this darkness. I learned by “seeing” (though not with my eyes) the energy around people’s physical forms; this energy resembled dark topographic lines in background darkness. The lines were close together near a person, spaced farther apart at more distance, fairly diffuse but not absent where there was “nothing there,” and

then more dense again near another person’s physical form. The dark background was not “empty.” It was like a fabric, and the energy lines rested in it.

A person’s body is thus a denser area of energy in this fabric. There is no edge of a person but rather a graded energy shading off and then thickening again to appear as the next person. Thus I was shown how we are all connected, not separate—and we are each embedded in or made of the dark fabric of energy. I perceived this fabric as the Being of God and knew it extended to the outer edges of all creation. Thus we are each part of the whole universe as well as of each other.

If everything material and knowable to us is a part of God, I have much yet to learn. What appears to be evil, for example, may have pieces of God’s light while appearing dark to me. I may be called to seek God’s being even there and to bring those fragments of God into his presence and love as I offer my prayers. I try to imagine this in the moments when I despair deeply over my communities, my world, my relationships.

This experience of God’s presence and instruction in darkness is not the

same experience for me as the Dark Night of the Soul. In the dark night I experience myself being stripped of sense and mind, of concepts and daily truths and emotions, of connections and meaning, as God pulls on my life to bring me to him face to face. I must learn to let go of everything I have known. It takes a lifetime.

I was held in the darkness of the maternal human womb, out of which I was born. I am held daily in darkness as well as in light. Each new day and each moment, within this darkness, I pop into a new space of God’s creation like a bubble rising in ginger ale—and then I pop through into the next space of a moment of my life. In all the moments I am held in the dark, in the love of God. At the end of my personal earthly life, I may evaporate into the dark fabric of God’s being. It is my lifelong work of faith to trust the darkness of God.

Carol Bosworth is a member of Corvallis (OR) Monthly Meeting. She is retired from raising children and working as a research scientist, a bus driver, and an office assistant, and now she is happily learning how to write stories and being alive.

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I Chose This Darkness

Shelly Angel

A few years ago my daughter and I attended what was called a “psychic fair” in our hometown. This was my first, and I enjoyed it. There were people doing Reiki and physical healing work; all sorts of things one could buy in the candle/crystal/card line; persons giving psychic readings, medicine card readings, Enneagram readings.

I was not interested in psychic readings until a woman we knew came over to us in a huff complaining that the woman doing the psychic drawings had done one of her and it looked to her more like her ex-husband than herself. She wouldn’t even show it to us. That tweaked my curiosity and I signed up, using only my first name.

When my turn came, I sat down in a chair and the artist began to finger through a pile of construction paper—coming up with a large black sheet. She then started making those strange passes that people who draw make over a paper before they actually touch down. When she worked, she used pastels and pens.

She first asked me if I had ever considered that I might be an angel. I wasn’t about to tell her that was my name, so I just said, “Yes. I am an angel.” She didn’t seem too overawed, but her question got my attention. She said two more things that riveted me.

First, she told me that I had a gift of being able to perceive the potential in others, which often made me too demanding of what they were at a given moment.

I translated that to mean that I expect way too much and am hypercritical and judgmental. She nailed me on that one, but also offered a positive way of looking at things. Since then, whenever I get into a twist because someone is not living up to what I think is

their potential, I’ve tried to remember that I am seeing beyond the present.

And then, when she finished the drawing of my spiritual self, she explained that the black paper meant I had chosen the dark so the true light would be easier to discern. I have no idea what paradigm she was using or how or where I had made this choice, but with both statements she gave me lenses to use in viewing my spiritual self.

Paul says in I Corinthians 13:12, “*For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known.*”

By choosing the dark, I apparently chose the ability to know, instinctively, the depths to which we can sink, to never be surprised at what people can do willingly and consciously to hurt other people.

I was given a very clear glass through which to view my darkness. I would offer this lens to anyone who, like me, struggles continually with an inability to simply rest in the beauty, goodness, and love of just being—anyone who has the spiritual and emotional equivalent of having no visual ability. Like a person who cannot see, anytime we venture a few steps into a new environment, we bump into and fall over things that other people seem to handle so easily.

By choosing the dark, I apparently chose the ability to know, instinctively, the depths to which we can sink, to never be surprised at what people can do willingly and consciously to hurt other people. I struggled for years trying to figure out why I had such an awareness of what some might call evil.

It seemed warped to me. I’m not a pessimist; I’m not a particularly fearful person; and I don’t suffer from depression. I had no traumatic childhood introduction to evil that clouds my vision. I can be seen as cheerful, and I have a strong sense of humor. I’m not phobic.

I can see the heights that people could reach, but I can also see the depths. More than that, I can feel them. And being judgmental, in the past I have also been intolerant of those who weren’t so acquainted with the darkness. Most unfortunately, I tried to block the pain around and within me when the world seemed too unfair and wrongly constructed to bear or when my own hard work to lighten up seemed to bear so little fruit.

Occasionally I work with hands-on healing and therapeutic touch. There as well, I work in darkness. All of the books on seeing light or color are lost on me. If someone is doing a visual imagery exercise, like one where you image a computer screen filled with beautiful blue, everyone else has finished the fantasy while I’m still constructing the computer.

The other day I was doing some energy work on a friend who is having trouble with her chemotherapy treatments. At one point I had the most incredible feeling of lightness and joy about what was coming through my hands. I sensed that if I had not chosen darkness, it would have been like weaving beautiful, multi-colored strands of light and energy. My friend can see shapes and color and movement when I work on her. I can’t. I just simply wait in the darkness until something true happens.

When I was studying poetry in freshman English at the university, I grew a little tired of holy sonnets. So many seemed to be about struggling in the darkness or being enclosed. John

Donne's poem:

*BATTER my heart, three person'd
God; for, you
As yet but knocke, breathe, shine,
and seeke to mend;
That I may rise, and stand,
o'erthrow mee, 'and bend
Your force, to breake, blowe, burn
and make me new.*

began to seem like some kind of masochistic neurosis. I wrote a kind of parody that went something like this:

*Once I was one of those who prayed
to see the light and be God's
slave, making a lot of noise and
expending a lot of emotion on
that prayer.
My prayer was granted, but that
light was too searing, too bright
and blinding.
And now my prayer is to be con-
tent with lightning in the night.*

I have given up worrying about why things seemed so dark and started concentrating on what lightning in the night looks like.

Shelly Angel lives in Richardson, Texas, and is a long-time member of the Dallas Monthly Meeting of Friends, a student of spiritual healing in all forms, and a technical writer by profession.



Lukewarmness and indifference had come over me, when my Heavenly Father had been pleased to withdraw some of His blessings. How often do we look upon these blessings as our own, enjoying them without gratitude, and murmuring when they are withdrawn!

—Christine Majolier Alsop (1805–1879)

Darkness to Light

Janet Minshall

Several times in my life I have found myself faced with awful responsibility for family members in my care. In each instance I felt as if I was enveloped in darkness waiting for fog to clear or daybreak to come. I didn't panic, I just waited. Eventually I saw a glimpse of light on the horizon, and then the light appeared.

The first instance was soon after the birth of my first son. He was small when he arrived, about five pounds, and when he was three months of age I had an experience with him which still causes me to shiver. He was crying without stopping for breaths and had turned red in the face. I was holding him and as I held him he became quiet, stopped breathing, turned blue and became very stiff. I prayed for him to start breathing.

I had completed CPR training for infants and so I turned him upside down and held him by his feet as I had been taught. It seemed like an eternity, waiting for him to breath, but he gasped and then was breathing normally again. I called his pediatrician and was told that I must have imagined it all, that there was nothing wrong with my son except that I was a hysterical first-time mother.

A month later something similar happened, and this time I remembered that I had taken my son for his baby shots to protect against diphtheria, whooping cough and tetanus a couple of days before the episode when he

stopped breathing. I realized, too, that the month before when he stopped breathing, it was just a couple of days after his first baby shots. This time I took him in to the doctor's office but was patted on the shoulder and told not to worry about him so much.

When my baby's breathing stopped the third time I was out at the grocery store and my husband and his parents were baby sitting. My husband called the doctor's office and the doctor told him to bring the baby to the hospital emergency room to be examined. My husband and his parents went with my son by car and they were believed when they described the episode to the emergency room staff. They admitted my son to the hospital immediately and after a few days of tests they told us that my baby had encephalitis and moderate brain damage.

We were told much later, by one of the young residents who had attended in the emergency room when my son was admitted to the hospital, that my son probably had post-vaccinal encephalitis, caused by the baby shots. His regular pediatrician had been afraid to tell us that because he thought he might be sued for not paying attention to me the first or second time my son had stopped breathing.

At that time I was working for that same hospital, a large well-endowed big city teaching hospital. I was editing and typing medical papers for publication that entailed my doing some background work at the research facility affiliated with the hospital.

After I knew what was wrong with my son and knew, also, that the doctors caring for him didn't have any idea how to treat his condition, I had a strong leading which took me to the research institute where I sometimes worked. As a prognosis, (an idea of what to expect as a result of the illness), the doctors had told me only that my son was likely to have difficulty

with fine motor control growing up because of the area of his brain that was damaged by the encephalitis.

I learned at the research institute that the Japanese were the only ones who had done any research at all on the after effects of post-vaccinal encephalitis at that time, and that they had found that high doses of B Complex vitamins were sometimes effective in countering the associated brain damage. It was like a message from God. I found a liquid form of B Complex and for the next three years or so, gave my son several doses of the vitamins every day.

Also, because of the concern about his fine motor skills, I investigated various early childhood educational systems and found that the Montessori method uses motor skills as the basic means of teaching very young children. My son was enrolled in a Montessori School as soon as he was old enough. He loved the Montessori School and did very well there for several years until I felt he was ready to go to public school.

When he was eighteen, after he had graduated from high school, I had my son evaluated by a team of neurologists. They found absolutely no evidence of the earlier brain damage and indicated that my brief foray into medical research may have been the source of his apparently complete healing. I, on the other hand, think that my son and I were blessed and held in the arms of the Holy Spirit and brought through the darkness into the light.

Janet Minshall has been disabled for the past thirteen years and lives with a wonderful partner, Free Polazzo. She and Free are the parents of five grown young men and live in Douglasville, Georgia, where they founded Annaweki Friends Worship Group.

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My experience has long been that of walking through the valley to which I see not the end; yet a quiet hope generally prevails that I shall be upheld through it.
—Priscilla Gurney (1785–1821)

In the Valley of the Shadow

Eric E. Sabelman

During the intermission of Bach’s *St. John Passion*, one of the singers told us she has gained a new participatory perspective on the Crucifixion by becoming one of the crowd crying “Crucify Him!” When the chorus sang this verse during the second half of the *Passion*, it served as an opening for a vision, a lifting of the veil:

I am the one on the cross, feeling the rough wood, the nails, the aching for breath. I look down on a world that denies, that turns away, that cannot comprehend.

To my left are all those who suffered before me, to my right all those who come after.

All the slaves in chains, all the refugees starving in exile, all the Jews sent to the ovens, all the burned, all the frozen, all whose bones lie unnamed in all the killing fields. All are there, in my company. (If this is the first vision one sees when one’s soul is opened, it is no wonder we are so fixed in the material world and so determined to avoid the spiritual.)

All those who suffer stand beside me, each bearing the mortal pain of a single individual. How unfair it would be to require the one on the cross to bear it all. It occurs to me that the valley of suffering that stretches so far to my left and right is a narrow valley—no broader than the human body that suffers.

In paintings, the cross is always seen face-on. But it does not have to be so. Turn the cross through a right

angle. Now from my cross, I see my fellow sufferers before me and behind. Their (and my) pain lies in a single plane aligned along the row of heads and hearts—it is no wider than our bodies are.

If we reach out the left hand (mine is nailed to the cross, so I am reaching always), we touch the world of life. With its pain all now in the center of the valley, this world is one of sensible joy: sun and wind, waking and sleeping, laughing with and caressing one another, joys like hills rising above the valley.

Reach out with your right hand, and you touch another world, deep beyond the imagining of the physical self. This is the world of God’s love and compassion, broad and high as a range of mountains. Our knowledge of God’s love passes to us across the valley where stands the cross.

Before, I faced from the valley toward the living hills, and could feel only the enduring presence of the mountains at my back. Now, my hand has touched the vastness of God, and I know that the valley of pain is itself no thicker than a veil.

Eric E. Sabelman is a biomedical engineer and member of Palo Alto Friends Meeting. He is assembling a collection of writings that originated in meeting for worship, to be published under the title Stories out of Silence, of which this piece is one.

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Facing Darkness as a Child of Light

Jeanne Kimball

“Facing the Dark as a Child of Light” is a difficult phrase for me as I think of “facing” as standing up to something. In my experience there is nothing I can do to face the dark. I can’t see the darkness ahead, instead I am just somehow in it. I feel it is one way the spirit works in our spiritual life and often new insight comes after a period of darkness. Light and darkness are just part of my life in the spirit.

My spiritual life is a path that goes up and down and weaves in and out. It is sometimes desert-like, stark and bleak. Then I come out into sunny, bright places with flowing water, fountains and beauty to nourish and feed me. Then there is the dark night of the spirit. It is cold and dreary and I am lost, reaching out for love and assurance, but finding only sadness and pain. Then again I come to a place of calm and peace and love. The ups and

downs, the twists and turns, the darkness and light are all there as the path goes on. I meet myself on the path, sometimes in joy and sometimes in sorrow. I meet others too, those who give me support and those who seem to just be a hindrance. But God is always there in love even when my sight and sense seem dim. My faith is such that I know she is there, reaching out to me, holding me, loving me.

“In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.” (John 1:4-5)

No matter what the darkness in my spiritual life is, these verses have given me reassurance that the light is still there. The spirit does not leave me even in the times when I feel distant from God. At times I go through all the motions of prayer, going to worship, reading from the Bible and other

books and there seems to be no response, no answers, no end to the darkness and despair. Somehow even in those times there is that feeling that the light is there waiting to break through the clouds.

In my experience, darkness comes at times in my spiritual life and there is nothing I have found that can stop it from coming or make it any easier at the time. All I can do is somehow continue to be faithful in prayer, attending worship and reading even though it feels like I am only going through the motions. Just as spring and new life come after a long winter, new life and joy come into my heart as well. As the poet Rabindranath Tagore says,

“Faith is the bird that feels the light and sings when the dawn is still dark.”

Jeanne Kimball attends the Florence Worship Group in Florence, Oregon, and is a member of Eugene Friends Meeting.

How often do I lie, sighing, groaning and weeping; being as it were, shut up in darkness; my Heavenly Father seeing proper to withdraw Himself from me that I may feel my own weakness and poverty, and hence the greater need of his strength.

—Mary S. Lippincott (1801–1888)

“an Ocean of Darkness ... an Ocean of Light”

Sharon L. Shelly

Samuel Johnson’s “black dog;” Andrew Solomon’s “noonday demon;” Ann Brownson-Keiffer’s “dark angel”.... So many metaphors of darkness and light have been coined to refer to clinical depression.

Metaphors are efforts to describe the indescribable. Different metaphors for depression reflect each person’s unique experience with the disease. For Johnson, it was a faithful companion walking at his side, shrouding him in gloom. For Solomon, it was a fiend from the underworld invading his universe in broad daylight. Brownson-Keiffer sensed a celestial presence

cloaked in black despair. All three experienced depression as a separate being, an uninvited guest bearing darkness and pain.

Those of us who live with chronic, long-term depression may see it another way. My own four decades of struggle with the disease led me to create a different kind of metaphor. For me, depression was not a *being* separate from myself. It was the *state of affairs* that defined my universe.

I called it “being a Martian in hell.” Life was constant torment. Every day was a burden, every task an ordeal, and even blessings of love or pleasure were

always tinged with fear and guilt. I was in hell all right, but I wasn’t like the rest of the damned. I felt no solidarity with the people around me. Many of them seemed quite at home in the torture chamber we inhabited. They had a mysterious ability to live happy and productive lives in this nightmare world—a secret strategy that I could never comprehend, and that they never revealed.

Others, who did suffer, seemed to experience suffering in a way I couldn’t understand or emulate. They felt pain, but didn’t get lost in it. They felt sorrow, but weren’t consumed by

it. Eventually their wounds healed and they moved on, leaving me gaping after them in amazement.

I sometimes wondered what I had done in my previous life to be condemned to this hell – and to have to share it with an alien species.

While my Martian metaphor is different from the others, all of these images suggest a sense of alienation: from self, from other people, from joy. After years of suffering and denial I finally sought treatment, including cognitive therapy and antidepressant medication.

As helpful as these have been, I have come to see that depression is above all a kind of *spiritual* alienation. Our souls hunger for a feeling of unity with our environment, with our sisters and brothers, and with the Light that creates and sustains us all. Depression creates a barrier between us and this spiritual nourishment. Without Light or Love, we languish in the stale air and murky gloom of what Sylvia Plath called the “bell jar.”

Medication can address a possible chemical imbalance. Therapy can help us control our thoughts and actions. But on a much deeper level we can only

be healed by breaking out of this spiritual bell jar, and by opening ourselves to the cool, fresh air and brilliant Light of the Creator.

And so I have found myself drawn back to Quakerism and to the spiritual path I had abandoned many years before. Managing—and I hope someday recovering from—chronic depression requires courage, humility, hard work, and a sense of humor. I have come a long way in three years. I am shedding my Martian skin and becoming a member of the human race. I am learning to love, and to accept love from, my fellow Earthlings. I am learning to laugh at my own self-absorption and to seek a true Center outside myself. I am trying to learn the art of positive and constructive thinking. I am trying to be patient with myself. Most of all, I am trying to open myself to the Light and to “walk cheerfully over the Earth” in joyful illumination.

Sharon L. Shelly is a member of the Wooster (OH) Friends Meeting. She teaches French and Linguistics, plays the piano when she can, and is deeply grateful for the love and support of family, her partner Lloyd, and their three cats.

Art thou in the Darkness? Mind it not, for if thou dost it will fill thee more, but stand still and act not, and wait in patience till Light arises out of Darkness to lead thee.

—James Nayler, Works: xlv–xlvii

Be Still and Stop Your Seeking Curt Lefferts

I was sensitive as a child, loved animals, and read everything in sight. Children routinely abused me verbally and physically. My parents did not demonstrate affection and forced me to have sex with a male family friend. Two lovers belittled my ability to provide. “You can’t improve my position in life” cut through my heart like a knife. The very core of my soul felt as if it were dying.

I had learned the world valued me by the volume and types of things I owned and my bank balance. I forgot about God. I climbed the corporate ladder in the U.S. nuclear power industry. Able to buy almost anything, I felt unfulfilled, inadequate, depressed, spiritually empty. There had to be more to life, something I was missing, something to fill the deep void in my soul. I began to pray.

I met a beautiful spirit who loved me with all her heart. Tenderness, unconditional love, and trust made our life together. Yet something was still missing. Again I had forgotten God. Married in the Methodist faith, I began attending services. Weekly messages did not fill the void, and I felt uncomfortable when asked to pray aloud. They told me friendship with people of a different sexual orientation could prevent one from going to Heaven. This could not be right—God is not prejudiced. Invited to a tea by a member of Salem Friends Meeting in June of 2001, I began regular attendance.

But I was still captured by the material world, desperately depressed and spiritually empty. Simple outward displays of love or compassion reduced me to tears. On the way to work I stopped outside the Hancocks Bridge meetinghouse and cried, but someone noticed and I had to move on. I prayed for guidance and love; *Teach me Thy ways O Lord; show me Thy paths*. Over and over and over, I pleaded.

The plate mounted in the front of Salem Monthly Meeting read *God is Love*. After a year of contemplating it, I was enlightened with *Love is God*. What mattered was my relationship with the Father and my compassion for all living beings—not material goods and net worth. *Open your heart to me, speak in a low sweet voice, release the things of this world so that you may be close to Me. Do not let go. Be still and stop your seeking, for you have found*. I will never forget this moment of enlightenment in December of 2003 at Toronto Monthly Meeting.

Curt Lefferts is a member of Salem Monthly Meeting, New Jersey. His mystical experiences have moved him ever closer to God, and to others who have had similar occurrences.



The Dark Night of the Soul

Joyce B. Adams

It often starts with waking at three or four in the morning in a panic. Next come crying spells, helpless feelings, even loss of appetite and insomnia. Recurrent depression with remissions is a long journey. As I go on, I have been encouraged by persons whose paths have taken them from night to day. I hope I have learned some lessons along the road. Depression, of course, is not the same as the dark night of the soul in a spiritual sense.

However, parallels between them are useful to draw. The dark night brings a thought that God is away; in depression, the Self is away. The new occupant of our consciousness interrupts our story—the interpretation we give our lives—to tell us a distorted tale of worthlessness and hopelessness. The most fully realized aspect of the Self dwells next to God Within, the Inner Light. So the disease that has driven the Self away lets darkness obscure our own Light. Moreover, in one night as in the other, we do not cease to hope for God's presence, especially the presence of the Inner Light.

Early on in life, for example, I learned to stop my automatic negative, self-critical thoughts by focusing on music, an object, a person, a scene. Attention is required in contemplation, all the more so when God seems absent. In the dark night the soul stays attentive to God rather than to the distance that removes Him.

This takes perseverance. Likewise, I persist in trying to trust the apparently absent Self and continue to seek contact with it, just as one seeks in the Dark Night to reach the Divine. Self-love, like Divine Love, must be trusted even when not directly perceived.

In both states we come closer to true humility. In depression we lose our feelings of power in the world, of long-term security, of other people's approval. Stripped of all this, I hope only for God. "Help me," I cry; and in that poor prayer is a small act that renews my faith, that expresses hope. In times of wellness, I hope to approach God humbly rather than desperately, to voluntarily put aside thoughts of power, security, approval. Eventually, I find recovery again, with medication and/or counseling. God breaks the silence. I give thanks. Then I realize that God was never silent, but rather answered every prayer by giving me strength to ask for His return.

Joyce B. Adams writes poetry, which has been published in Friends Journal and Friendly Woman. She is a member of Bloomington, Indiana, Monthly Meeting. "Writing can be a spiritual exercise, as can music. I hope some day to live mindfully. There is very little to regret in life, for our mistakes hold some of our best lessons."

The Next Breath

Anne C. Highland

"Just take one day at a time," my friends told me when I confided how intense my emotional pain was. Clearly, they had never felt pain like this, because one day of it was far beyond bearing. And this pain in my inner life was lasting for months, in strange contrast to my outer life, at home and at work, which was going well.

"Sounds like a dark night of the soul," said Sr. Mary, as she loosened my knotted muscles on the massage table. "Have you ever read St John of the Cross?"

"No," I said. I did not add that my brief foray into St. Augustine in college had ended any desire to read medieval theologians.

"We have it in the Convent library. I'll get it for you after our session," she said.

At home, opening the frayed volume of the *Dark Night of the Soul*, I

Driving into the Darkness Esther C. Darlington

Driving into the darkness on the small wooded road, having just left the lighted highway after driving and thinking all day, my mind switched to a different level. I began to receive two phrases over and over. The lines came in a symmetrical shape that reminded me somewhat of an evergreen tree. They were so powerful I had to stop to write these down:

*Darkness
hides the trees,
but they are still there.
Forgetfulness
hides God,
but He is still there.*

felt as if a friend had joined me in my living room, one who had walked a path that felt like mine. With his words, my path was not so lonely.

As he said, it was a time of testing, a time of pruning, a time when we outgrew who we had been and were giving birth to the next phase of our lives. But how was I going to survive being tested, being pruned, when it meant enduring day after day of such intense pain? I felt myself becoming worn down by the burden of maintaining my outer life when nothing external seemed capable of cutting through my inner pain. I refused to consider medicating the pain away.

A year went by in this way, and then another. One day I simply reached my breaking point. Aloud, I said to the Universe, "That's it. I've done more inner work than anyone I know, and if this is what I get, then I quit. From now on, I am going to live in my anger at life! I know that living in that bitterness will probably bring back my cancer, and that's okay. I've had enough."

Instantly I heard a sweet inner voice say, urgently, "Oh, don't! You have come so far!" I was floored. My inner guidance generally informed me with subtle nudgings—a word, an image, a connection. Rarely had I heard clear sentences. But I was shocked into

staying on the path of seeking growth and enlightenment.

I had to find a way to survive. One day at a time was too long. One hour at a time, one minute at a time were too much. As the days of pain went on, I fell further down, fearing that this well was bottomless. But the day came when I found the bottom and it felt like a stone floor. I had reached the maximum emotional pain I could endure, and I was still alive, still functioning. Standing on that stone floor, I owned the courage to breathe into the next moment of pain—to live one breath at a time.

Paradoxically, I began to appreciate the gifts of being present with the breath without expectation. And then, as spring sun warms the frozen earth, new life began to flow through me.

Anne C. Highland is a clinical psychologist in private practice in Philadelphia. She attends Gwynedd Meeting. She is writing a book from her experiences.

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No language is sufficient to set forth to the full what my soul passed through for many months, such unspeakable poverty of spirit with failure of inward strength, and almost all outward help, when, through the complicated provocations and temptations I then met with, I stood in the greatest need that in any stage of life had done, I was bereft of all outward consolation, even those with whom I had taken sweet council became stranged from me, and I really believe it was the will of God to thus enclose me in a veil of darkness from the sight of my Friends that I should not in the day of proving make man my refuge or flesh my arm, for our Lord is a jealous God and will have the praise for his own works, which are marvellous indeed.

—Elizabeth Hudson (1722–1783)

Maybe God Holds It All

Ann Tarbell

Darkness! How do I describe twelve years of psychosis, twelve years of on-again, off-again craziness? Psychosis is defined as a break with reality and I broke. I heard voices inside my head that led me to imagine shapes on the wall of a deserted cabin instead of going to my weekly therapy appointment. I heard the voices of friends and believed that they were actually communicating with me along a special spiritual transmission channel. Auditory hallucinations and delusions were the symptoms—my struggles.

One therapist misdiagnosed me with dissociation, so I came to believe that the voices I heard when I was not acutely psychotic were the voices of three parts or sub-personalities—Ann, Inner Ann, and Third Part Back. I experienced a loss of control when Inner Ann took charge and did destructive things—breaking, ripping, and throwing things.

A new therapist helped me see that the dissociation was another delusion, part of the psychosis. That consciousness has been enough to rid me of most of the voices and restore the control to a strong unified self.

It is frightening to lose oneself in this way. I've lost sanity, my career, my apartment, my car, and jobs. My illness has robbed me of a normal progression in my life, the building of career and family, a set of stable relationships that give one's life continuity, support and connection.

When I first asked myself how God has been present in the darkness, I yelled at the wall in my apartment, "You weren't present at all!"

I felt only anger at God and at the therapist who misdiagnosed me. But once I got the anger out, I felt a sense of God's presence that I hadn't felt for years, a sense of God gentling me, not

angry at my anger but grateful for the honesty.

So now I can answer my own question. Even in the darkness there were tangible signs of God's presence, signs that I clung to as I struggled. The signs came as consolations, not taking away the illness, but letting me know that I was not alone. Once, when I was about to give up, a friend called and shared with me lines from Etty Hillesum's journal about allowing oneself to be a battlefield. Those lines gave me the strength I needed.

Just last spring I decided not to go to the Friends Conference on Religion and Psychology, which I had regularly attended. I made that decision because I felt inadequate and not up for the challenges of the Conference. Edith Ballard had asked me to give her a ride, but I told her I wasn't going. Then I got a phone call asking for Mrs. Ballard. I took that wrong number as a sign nudging me to attend the conference. I trusted that I belonged there and didn't need to deprive myself of the significant connections I had established over the years.

God has been evident in the people given to me to accompany me through the darkness. My darkness began in 1992 when I had a nervous breakdown as a result of getting trauma memories back. At that point I should have gone to a psychiatric hospital but I went to Pendle Hill instead. Things only got worse for me there. At the end of the term I reached out for help to someone on campus. That woman responded generously to my need. Monthly calls to her were a lifeline that got me through some very lonely times. She carried me psychically for several years, until I got into a secure therapeutic relationship.

God has also been present to me through my family. My parents have responded to my illness with empathy and care, not by shaming me, as I thought they might have done. As a

child I did not feel cared for by them, so the care I feel now is a big change.

When I ask myself what has grown in me in this dark time, I don't yet know. I want again to shout "nothing" in my anger about my circumstances. My mother said I must be stronger as a result of having endured as much as I have.

Only once did I come close to giving up and then a friend called and saved me. I haven't given in to despair, partly because I was steeped in God's care when I was part of the Church of the Saviour in Washington, DC. I just kept putting one foot in front of the other. That refusal to give up finally led me to the therapist I have now. She specializes in psychotic disorders and is finally giving me the help I need. She promises me that I can live a fully productive life if I learn to manage the symptoms of my illness.

As I write this final paragraph, I begin to feel discouraged. So I do some movement and connect to what is real, which is my anger. That lifts me out of my depression and I feel ready to fight for a life that is full and rich. I remember that I have a job interview next week that came from a leading I had last spring to volunteer at a senior center. So God is at work, helping me rebuild my life. It has been a dark time. And there has been light. And maybe God holds all of it, the darkness and the light.

Ann Tarbell attends Stony Run Friends Meeting in Baltimore. She works with the elderly in a senior center and enjoys the connections there. Her spiritual practices include running, yoga, and a daily quiet time where she seeks to be honest with God.

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What Canst Thou Say is a worship-sharing group in print. Its richness comes from the generous sharing of readers with one another. WCTS has a vision—we want to tell the world God is much more various and wonderful than our skeptical culture allows. We hope to help Friends be tender and open to the Spirit. We need your experience—it may be just what someone else needs to know!

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In these seasons of extreme strippedness I feel the necessity of being disrobed of all self-adornings—of waiting as at wisdom’s gate, endeavoring to know a daily dependence upon the divine Source for knowledge without looking backward or forward—to the right or left. Oh! for patience to hold out to the end—for faith to believe, in God, for strength and trust in Him, and for submission to yield all unto Him.

—Elizabeth Newport (1796–1872)

A Friend of the Darkness

Christine O’Brien

The moon is a friend of the darkness. Some creatures come alive and live their entire lives in darkness. Fireflies and stars would not astound us without darkness. As for me I have pulled my chair up to the door opening onto the garden and watched long into the night as the twilight and then the night descend over all. At some point the trees become silhouettes in the darkening sky and the colors fade. Darkness smoothes over all of the imperfections and makes a magic world of shadows and darker shadows.

I can walk through my house in darkness and lay my hand on what I want. I take a strange pride in that. Darkness is beautiful to me and often I am called outside to walk with my arms reaching overhead as though I could touch the sky, tickling the stars with my fingertips. Other times I hold my arms wide open in simple love and gratitude.

However, when I am very ill with little chance of being well soon the darkness can seem very long indeed. Sometimes I feel that this night could be my last and I consider the mystery of change that touches all. Death and thoughts of death are also friends of the darkness. I have not made perfect peace with my death or the death of others but I do not want to “rage against the dying of the light.” I want to “go gently into that good night.” I want to make friends with this mystery and let it work some grace in me that will turn

me always towards gratitude.

And what of the darkness in the hearts and lives of those who bring me their sorrows and fears? What of the darkness in our world that seems to grow larger the more we know about it? I hope to be guided in what I am called to do. Though I believe we can “listen each other into wholeness,” I have never seen my light eliminate the depth of darkness that has shaped someone’s soul. I hope that in walking the path a ways together and holding each other up with a tender hand we

will find resting places and friends along the way.

I believe each of us can be cradled “in the everlasting arms” that seem more present in the darkness. The earth turns to darkness every day dressing our lives in dark velvet. Soft darkness whispers over me and is my rest. I too am a friend of the darkness.

If I say “let only darkness cover me, and light around me be night,” even darkness is not dark to thee; the night is as bright as the day, for darkness is as light with thee. (Psalms 139:11-12)

Christine O’Brien is working on creating *Circus McGurkis the People’s Fair*, which is thirty-three years old and is sponsored by St. Petersburg Meeting.

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February 2005

Loving God with Our Whole Being

Editor: **Patricia McBee**

Some strands of our spiritual heritage focus simply on loving God—not straining for truth or right action, just focusing on God and on loving God ever more fully. From this, they say, flows not a reclusive contemplative life, but a grace-filled engagement with our world, loving all we meet, and living with a natural clarity and fearless faithfulness. How have you cultivated this single-minded love of God? How has it affected your engagement with the world around you?

Deadline: November 15, 2004

May 2005

Spiritual Emergence(y)

Editor: **Jennifer Elam**

with Kathy Tapp

Many people have experiences of God for which they do not have words or frameworks for understanding. In a moment or in a day, new understanding, visions, voices, or bodily sensations break through. It can be profoundly disorienting. Family and friends may fear for our mental health. Have you had an experience of spiritual emergence or helped another through such an intense encounter with the Spirit? How did you navigate this intense time? What was helpful?

Deadline: February 15, 2005

August 2005

Seeing

Editor: **Sue Spirit**

with Mariellen Gilpin

Sometimes we look at the world around us—a sunrise, an old oak covered with fireflies, mist over a river bottom, birds taking flight, the glisten of Spirit in another creature's eyes—and see straight through to God. Sometimes what we see changes us forever. Tell us about a time you really saw. What did you see? Did you go looking for it, or was it pure Gift? How were you changed? Is seeing a part of your practice?

Deadline: May 15, 2005



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