

Dark Nights of the Soul

Rev. Mark Hayes

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Novelist and story-teller Gioia Timpanelli, in her award winning book, *Sometimes the Soul*, writes:

Sometimes the soul is tested. The body feels sore, the mouth dumb, the big red hands hang useless on their arms. Time passes. Surely the soul will have its way. It lolls. Time passes. And the soul waits. Nothing happens. Come on, make something happen. Make lists! There are always urgent things to do, things to do for this morning, for today, for next week, for a month, for an entire year. But then a laziness takes hold, and nothing on the lists proves as urgent as this lethargy, so the lists are left out in the sun in a shopping bag, become bleached, illegible, are rained on, and finally forgotten under the beach chair. . . Minutes pass, hours, maybe a year, possibly a decade. At last, the soul is refreshed in the sweet company it has made.

Then, one day, it gets up and stretches. Today is not like yesterday. The soul notes the difference. To the neighbors, opening and slamming shut their doors, nothing seems to have happened. Nothing at all. Finally, now, the soul lifts its arms and with its graceful hands brings down the fertile rain.

There we have one description of a “dark night of the soul,” which is the topic of my remarks this morning. What is a dark night of the soul? We shared earlier this morning about some of our sorrows, along with our joys. When we do that, we’re usually dealing with events or experiences that are relatively fleeting. In fact, we typically encounter numerous joyful and sorrowful experiences in the course of a single week, perhaps even in a single day.

A dark night of the soul is something like an extended sorrow. It may or may not be tied to particular events or difficulties, and may go on for days, weeks, or even years. It is characterized by a deep sense of loneliness and desolation, of spiritual or emotional anguish.

At this point, you may be thinking to yourself: “Oh, you’re talking about depression.” Well, no. The dark night of the soul may have some similarities to depression, but it is really a different phenomenon. Clinical depression is a psychological sickness, and can usually be treated with medication. The dark night of the soul is a spiritual trial. It has to do with the struggle to find meaning in life, often triggered by having the rug pulled out from under what had previously been embraced as meaningful. It’s like having your spiritual world turned upside down.

It may be that the dark night is accompanied by depression, and if so, then that part of the condition may well respond to medication. And I strongly encourage you, if you have symptoms of depression, to seek medical care. But no medicine can sort out spiritual chaos and restore order and meaning to life. There is no simple medical cure for an existential crisis like a dark night of the soul, which, according to Thomas Moore is “not just a feeling but a rupture in your very being.”

Let me pause here and give a little background on the concept of the dark night of the soul. The phrase comes from a poem by St. John of the Cross (1542-1591), a Spanish Carmelite monk and mystic. His eight-stanza poem outlines the soul's journey from the distractions and entanglements of the world to the perfect peace and harmony of union with God.

He taught that, as an inevitable part of that journey, the soul must pass through a time of testing and agony, accompanied by confusion, fear, and uncertainty. The concept fit with Catholic teachings about purgatory as a process of purification in preparation for Heaven. But Protestants have also used the phrase, to describe a period of doubt and questioning about one's salvation. And of course, it has been used more generically to describe any type of mental, emotional, or spiritual anguish.

It is in this generic sense that I am using the phrase "dark night of the soul" this morning, not tied to any particular theological content. This is because I believe that it is a common human experience, independent of particular religious or spiritual orientations. The search or yearning for meaning, which is at the heart of the dark night experience, is a universal component of the human condition.

Thomas Moore, whom you may know from his best-seller, *Care of the Soul*, takes this generic approach in another of his books, *Dark Nights of the Soul: A Guide to finding Your Way Through Life's Ordeals*. As this title reflects, any consideration of dark nights of the soul will most probably focus to some extent on how to get through to the other side.

One approach is to just hunker down and wait it out. One of the lessons we repeat frequently at this time of year is about the turning of the seasons. Tonight may be the longest night of the year, but that means that starting tomorrow the light will return and grow daily until summer is here again. We put our faith in the return of the light. And so, we simply resign ourselves to bear the suffering, because we believe that it, too, shall pass. Or you may take the "fake it till you make it" approach. That is, suck it up, keep moving forward, making those lists and ticking them off, rather than lying around wallowing in your misery.

Moore, in his treatment, takes a different angle. He suggests that we shouldn't necessarily set out to solve the dark night, but rather to be enriched by it. In fact, he lists a number of what he considers gifts of dark nights of the soul. One of those is the opportunity for transformation. Here he invokes the metaphor of the caterpillar, passing through a time of darkness and apparent death, only to emerge transformed into a graceful butterfly.

Another potential gift of the dark night experience is the growth of empathy. Having gone through it yourself, you may be less likely to be so impatient with others going through their own dark periods, wishing that they would just get over it. Our dark night might also help us learn the importance of reliance on something beyond ourselves to help make it through. That may be a higher power, it may be a faith community that embraces us with love and support, or it may be other individuals, who don't give up on us even when we may feel like giving up on ourselves. The dark night is a reminder that "we need one another when we are in trouble and afraid."

And a final gift that may come through the dark night is a reminder to embrace our vulnerability, to surrender control, and open ourselves to wisdom from wherever it may come. A part of that wisdom is understanding that, even if we can be assured that the dark night will end, there is no assurance that things will turn out as we wish or expect. The caterpillar may just want things to get back to normal, but its rebirth as a butterfly opens up a whole new world of possibilities.

In keeping with the butterfly metaphor, Moore likens the dark night experience to the culturally universal concept of a rite of passage, which consists of three phases: separation, liminality, and re-incorporation. This formulation is very similar to Joseph Campbell's archetype of the hero's journey, which includes a departure, an initiation, and a return. Some common examples of this process are the American Indian vision quest, and the Australian aborigines' walkabout.

The separation phase, in the dark night experience, is a sense of being cut off and alone, isolated from "normal" existence. You will likely feel that no one else can really understand what you're going through.

The liminality phase represents contact with a different, unfamiliar realm. The word "liminal" means "on a threshold." In this case, we're talking about a threshold between known and unknown, a kind of twilight zone between ordinary life and total wildness or chaos. One example that should be familiar to most of us is adolescence, that confusing and frustrating no-man's land between childhood and adulthood.

But that, too, shall pass, and ultimately there is re-incorporation – a coming back into normal life. But you come back changed, transformed. The profound experience of the rite of passage, or the dark night of the soul, does not leave you unchanged. The surrounding world may seem different now, but it is within yourself that the transformation has occurred. And as you renew your relationships, you must recognize that your family and friends have been enduring your dark night too. They may not have shared your inner experience, but they will see the change in you.

So while you're in that twilight zone, that place of darkness and confusion, how might you best navigate your way through it? First, you can recognize the state of apparent meaninglessness as an opportunity to find or create new meaning. One way of doing that is to continually tell your story, especially to yourself, but also to others as they are willing and able to listen. You may do so through words or images or art. You do so not to garner sympathy, but to explore possibilities and to make meaning out of your experiences.

Another part of a healthy strategy for navigating the dark night is to live in and with the darkness. Allow all experiences, positive and negative, to have their place and to do their work on you. As you move through the night and approach the dawn, the end result may not be a final victory or an end of suffering, but rather moral development, making you more fully who you are. The kind of healing that can occur through a dark night of the soul doesn't necessarily solve all problems or remove all pain. But it can make you more alive and more present to the world around you.

I haven't said much about the external circumstances that may trigger dark nights of the soul, because the essential nature of the dark night experience is what happens inside you. What defines your life – for good or ill – is not what happens "to" you, but what happens "in" you; that is, how you respond to what happens to you.

That being said, there are a number of common human experiences that can potentially plunge you into a state of gloom and negativity if you are susceptible: lost love and broken relationships; financial struggles; health issues; the loss of loved ones; the whole constellation of losses that accompany the aging process. And beyond those personal issues, there are the social issues of the day: the challenges of healthcare, climate change, economic collapse, war.

I don't know about you, but I sometimes find it difficult to keep hope alive in the face of such seemingly intractable problems. But one thing that helps me do so, at least some of the time, is a sense of humor. Thomas Moore writes:

A dark night of the soul may make you more serious, and that is a good thing, because becoming serious can have the effect of deepening your humor. As everyone knows, all laughter is not the same. It can be cynical, manipulative, and egotistic, or it can be joyous and guileless. You can feel the weight of a confused and murderous world and still know at a far deeper level that life is basically good. You can have a broader viewpoint, even in the face of tragedy. You can laugh and cry simultaneously.

Another thing that helps me get through almost anything is the idea that we are all in this together. As we struggle together to bring more joy and justice into the world, we may not have any assurance that we will solve the problems at hand, but we can be assured that, working together, side by side, hand in hand, we will become more fully human, and we will find meaning, not in the ends we seek, but in the process of the struggle. We're all going to die. But let's die knowing that we lived lives of integrity, that we embraced the world as it is, with both darkness and light, and that we joined together to let our collective light shine out into that world. Listen to Thomas Moore one final time:

I believe that the best way to deal with a dark night of the soul is to use the emotional and intellectual darkness to help you see your own luminosity, to discover exactly how you shine when you are at your best. . .

It may be painful, discouraging, and challenging, but it is nevertheless an important revelation of what your life is about.

So as we go forward, let us not seek out dark nights of the soul and the anguish and confusion that come with them. But when we find ourselves in the darkness, may we embrace it, and use it as an opportunity to transform and rebuild the foundations of our lives, of who we are.

So may it be.