

Dark Nights of the Soul

A sermon delivered by Marilyn Sewell

January 23, 2005

Presented to the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Sheridan

by Bruce L. Andrews

December 7, 2014

Dark Nights of the Soul is one of the sermons in Sewell's book, Threatened with Resurrection: A Book of Sermons II. Although she refers primarily to a spiritual darkness and to grief and despair brought on by loss through death, the process of working through grief is similar and is relevant to losses of less intensity or significance. She also addresses working through grief and once again achieving a grasp on hope.

Sewell begins, "I think it would be safe to say that I am a reflective personality – I lean to the dark side. Perhaps it's a biological predilection or a trait of temperament, but I've always preferred night to day, sunset to sunrise, autumn to spring. In fact, I have a cartoon that has been affixed to my refrigerator since last spring. It's entitled 'Spring Guilt', and it pictures a rather morose woman at her breakfast table, listening to the radio, which is blaring the news 'It's 68° outside, and Perfect!' And she is thinking, 'I should be outside, frolicking and gamboling ... Yet I don't like to frolic or gambol'

I don't think of darkness as negative, – but rich. Night brings quiet, candles, wine, mystery, passion, possibility, stars, rest, dreams. The future is dark, and it is the darkness of the future that keeps life constantly interesting, full surprises – this is the place where hope rests, where the imagination grows.

First of all I would like to distinguish among various kinds of conditions which might be mistaken for ‘dark nights of the soul.’ A dark night of the soul is not just ‘a bad day’ – we all experience these days of depression from time to time, sometimes we know the reason, sometimes not, but then the mood lifts. The dark night of the soul is not depression, either, though one can mimic the other. A situational depression is one in which a person has a loss of some kind and goes through a period of grieving, or is in a situation which is chronically unhappy for him. When the situation is resolved, the depression lifts. On the other hand, a biological depression – though it may be triggered by a loss – is a change in the bio-chemistry of the brain which requires treatment by a physician. [And I would add counseling with a counselor.]

Sewell continues, “This is a kind of darkness that I have dealt with off and on all of my adult life, though as I age, depression seems to have less and less sway over me. For my money, biological depression is the worst kind of affliction, and I can understand why depressed people are so at risk for suicide. I myself have never seriously considered killing myself, but just a year and a half ago, I lost a friend to suicide. Depression is so intolerable because of the isolation. You feel numb, set apart, absolutely cut off, as if you’re behind some invisible glass, and there’s nothing to be done, no active will, no cheering up, no friends’ warm offers of help – nothing. Fortunately, almost all depression can be treated successfully with drugs, and often, additionally, with psychotherapy, and I would encourage anyone who experiences serious depression to seek medical help.[And once again, I would add counseling with a counselor.]

What, then, is this “dark night of the soul”? The phrase comes from St. John of the Cross, the Spanish mystic. John was a member of the Carmelite order, where he tried to introduce reforms. For his efforts, he

was imprisoned for eight months, during which he wrote a series of poems, one of them was that title. He embraced the night, and the darkness of his prison cell, using it as a symbol, a retreat for his union with God, his Beloved. The dark night of the soul is an extended period that many of us – including literally all the saints – fall into where we feel that there is no place out, or despair is our constant companion, where grounding that gave our life meaning gives way, and we find ourselves bereft. As F. Scott Fitzgerald described it, “in a real dark night of the soul, it is always 3 o’clock in the morning, day after day.” Like depression, this state may also be triggered by job loss, betrayal, serious illness, or the death of a loved one, for example. But the dark night of the soul is a spiritual condition and is not an illness to be “cured” – it has to be moved through, blindly and courageously, until at last this place of confusion and meaninglessness eventually propels us into a new vision of who we are and what we can do. Poet Theodore Roethke writes: “in a dark time, the eye begins to see”

This is a period of transformation in which we are pushed deeper, spiritually, sometimes whether or not we want to be. It is in this dark place that St. John believes we are most likely to find union with the divine. Let me be clear: the dark night of the soul does not necessarily lead to happiness and security, or health in a new and better job, or the relationship which is right for us. It may, or may not. It leads rather to a transformation of the soul. Sometimes the resulting giftedness is more for others than for ourselves.

Sewell notes, “One of our congregants has given me permission to tell of a time when she went through a dark night of the soul. Her son, age 27, was killed in a cycling accident. In her own words this is how she experienced her terrible loss: “He’s gone. Dead. The one you loved is no longer here. I put my hands over my ears when the chaplain told me my son had died.’ I can’t hear it!’ I was angry with the chaplain I lay on the

ground in my garden and cried. For many days there were no feelings but fear, fear that I would be drawn into a deep void from which I could never escape.” She could have echoed the words of Job:

The life in me trickles away.
Days of grief have gripped me.
At night-time, sickness saps my bones,
I am gnawed by wounds that never sleep.
It has thrown me into the mud
Where I am no better than dust and ashes.
I cry to you, and you give me no answer;
I stand before you, but you take no notice. (Job 30:16, 17, 19)

The woman continued, ‘Days passed, weeks turned into months. I knew I had to feel my feelings, and I did. I knew I was beginning to heal when I began to notice once again – to hear the birds singing, to see the colors of flowers and in the green of the trees. I remembered Hildegard of Bingen and her greening visions of God – veriditas. Yes, God is present here.’

‘The church of my childhood had too many should’s, and so I left – I had to learn to trust myself – to come to my own truth, and to have a space to honor that process. However, I knew that God did not leave me – and I didn’t give up on God. A favorite Benedictine Nunn reminded me: ‘<Our God> is not a wimpy God.’

‘I knew from the beginning I was not alone. An old man had said to me, ‘I don’t know your pain, but I know pain.’ I was connected, and I knew it. My pain, my loss was the universal loss. This loss deepened my compassion for others. I felt my mission would be to help others know

they are not alone. They're not crazy when the darkness takes over. There is a tiny light burning.'

'I remember a February, almost 3 years after <my son's> death. I was sitting on the couch in the very early morning, journaling in my lap, candle lit. It was clear to me that I had changed. My inner vision of my sorrow had been a river rushing through me – taking all my strength to keep it in its banks. It was powerful and its surges could drown me. That morning I noticed that the river had become many streams. The water was there, the grief would not go away, the river would never dry up. But, it would continue in life-giving streams. It is here with me now. I have discovered that I have strength and patience and perseverance and courage. The streams are watering my soul. “

As your presenter, I need to interject here that, as I read the above paragraph, I was taken back about 30 years to the time when my younger sister committed suicide after a 20 year struggle with depression. I was in her living room attempting to deal with my own grief and calling 50 or 60 people in her address book to tell them what had happened. Somewhere in those many calls, I began to realize I was supporting her friends in their grief as much as they were supporting me. With the many repetitions of that story, even then, early in my grief, I was beginning to move to a different emotional place. In addition, as I returned to my counseling practice in the weeks and months ahead, I found that I was much more aware and in touch with the pain of those who have experienced such a loss and the pain of other types of losses as well.

Sewell goes on, “In the dark nights of the soul, those who have faith often lose that faith. Where is God? Is there a God? If so, what is the nature of God? These are kinds of questions that come to the surface.

The hard thing that must be done is to let the night be night, let grief be grief – to feel deeply, though it hurts intensely. Anger may come first – that would be understandable – but often anger is the cover for what is deeper: sadness and grief.

Remember the words of the poet David Whyte: “Those who will not slip beneath/Turning downward through its black water/To the place we cannot breathe/Will never know the source from which we drink....”

Here, again, I’d like to step aside from Sewell briefly and share the thoughts of another author, J. William Worden in his book Grief Counseling and Grief Therapy. His thoughts speak directly to the “the black waters” and “the deep place” noted in the paragraphs above.

Although Worden doesn’t say it specifically, he suggests that time does not heal all wounds. He describes what he calls “the tasks of mourning” which are active processes rather than passive. The first is “to accept the reality of the loss”. He says, “When someone dies, even if the death is expected there is always a sense that it hasn’t happened. The first task of grieving is to come to full face with the reality that the person is dead, that the person is gone and will not return. The second task is “to process the pain of grief.” He notes, “The German word *Schmerz* is appropriate to use in speaking of pain because its broad definition includes the literal physical pain that many people experience in the emotional and behavioral pain associated with loss. It is necessary to acknowledge and work through this pain or it can manifest itself through physical symptoms or some form of aberrant behavior. The third task is “to adjust to a world without the deceased.” “There are three areas of adjustment that need to be addressed after the loss of a loved one to death. There are the external adjustments or how the death affects one’s everyday functioning in the world: internal adjustments, or how the death affects one’s sense of self; and spiritual adjustments, or how the death affects one’s beliefs, values, and assumptions about the world. Finally, the

fourth task is “to find an enduring connection with the deceased in the midst of embarking on a new life.”

Sewell goes on to say, “We find that when we arrived at this deep place, we are somehow comforted in being with the authenticity of our pain. Grief is not self-pity – it is not “Why did this happen to me?” Rather, it is acceptance. It is, “Yes, this did happen to me. And it hurts like hell.” And then staying with the hurt. In this place of grieving, we move to new understandings, for our old assumptions about how life works just don’t hold anymore. This stretching of the spirit, this opening of the heart, doesn’t come without pain and discomfort, for we are making room within for a larger presence of the Sacred. We’re changing, and change always comes with a price.”

“One way to bear the suffering which comes during these dark nights of the soul is to offer it up – to offer it as a kind of spiritual gift to all who suffer, for our own suffering is a reflection of all the suffering that all humanity must bear, and that no one escapes. This moves us to a place of compassion and loving kindness.”

“To be in this hard place creatively requires trust – trust that this experience, though we cannot see it or feel it or anticipate it, is a time of birthing, of transformation. Through swimming blindly to the Source, we are becoming what is ours to become. In order to rest in this kind of faith, we have to let go of control. Now I’m going to use some words that are difficult for Unitarian Universalist hear – because we are so smart, so capable, so logical, so educated, so in charge. We have to – here’s the first word – surrender. We must – and here’s the second – relinquish. What do[I mean], to relinquish? I mean to give up, to abandon, your plans, your policies, your sense of order of the universe and your place in it. All that, falls into chaos and must be reordered.”

D. H. Lawrence asks,

Are you willing to be sponged out, erased,
Cancelled,
Made nothing?
Are you willing to be made nothing?
Dipped into oblivion?
If not, you will never really change

“We, poor animal creatures, want so desperately to be in control. But circumstances tell us that we are not, can never be, that control is an illusion. We move to a place where we know nothing, and yet we give ourselves wholly to that which we do not know. A place for “the mystery becomes the certainty.”(1) The essence of spirituality is to be given over. We ask only the question, “What does my Angel want of me?”(2) Because at last it is the only question that makes any sense. “

“I have a bit of a scare last Thursday, says Sewell. I was flying back home on the last leg of my journey from a lengthy trip, looking forward to getting back to my house, unpacking, and getting reacquainted with my good cat Molly, when all of a sudden about 30 minutes outside of Portland, we ran into some turbulence. I had been in worse storms, but apparently the pilot was worried, because he told the flight attendants to immediately gather all the plastic cups, and told us to all put our seats in the upright position, lock our tray tables in place, and be sure our seatbelts were securely fastened. So the flight attendants raced up and down the aisles collecting cups, and then came the announcement from the cockpit: “If we are forced to do a water landing, don’t forget to leave your carry-on’s behind.” WHAT? A WATER LANDING? My palms started getting a bit sweaty, but the plane seemed to be all right, so I immediately put on my administrator hat: “Why in God’s name would the pilot make an announcement like that, and better scare everybody?

He should say nothing unless we are about ready to make a water landing, and then give us the details of how to do it. When we get on the ground – IF we do – I want to report this guy!” Then my next thought was, “Gee, I guess if we make a water landing, looks like I won’t be preaching on Sunday. Next I thought about death, and I thought that would be too bad to not write those books I want to write. Experiences like this tend to focus the mind. Sort of a mini dark night of the soul.”

“At this moment I asked myself if I had any regrets about how I was spending my days – not really. I then wondered if I should write any good-by notes to anyone. Not really – I mean, my kids know I love them, and you guys have over 270 sermons – that should do it. As a song goes, “If you don’t know me by now....” Finally, I asked myself, “Am I ‘finished’? Completely fulfilled?” Well, no. And I realized once again that life was really not about solving all my problems and being happy. Not that I wouldn’t mind solving all my problems and being happy – but life is about being fully engaged. It’s about living intensely and trying to live up to values you believe and failing to be your best self and trying again. It is about giving into your weaknesses and forgiving yourself and forgiving others their weaknesses and learning and deepening. It’s about being able to cry one minute and laugh the next. It’s knowing that the path of sorrow, which we must all tread, can lead to more and more loving, if we will but allow it. May it be so, for all of us.”

Endnotes:

1. Florida Scott Maxwell’s phrase, from The Measure of My Days
2. A question posed in this form by James Hillman

UU Dark Nights of the Soul Quotes and Ideas

1. We must bury the darkness of yesterday if we are to uncover a brighter tomorrow. (Amy Andrews 12 years old at The Wall 1988.)
2. One has to grieve in one's own way – not the way someone else needs one to or tells one to.
3. One needs to grieve at one's own rate.
4. I suggest allowing one's self at least the four seasons from the time of loss before making any big decisions. This allows for the first Christmas or other holidays, the first birthday, the first anniversary, the first of many important things after a significant loss. This may be shorter or longer in length depending on a number of factors including, but not limited to, the manner of death, the suddenness, how prepared the deceased and family members were, the age of the deceased, the emotional strength or fragility of the mourner, etc.
5. Anniversary effect – Sights, sounds, smells, activities, etc., that occur at the same time of the year when the loss occurred and trigger memories, feelings, etc. about the person that died or loss that occurred.

6. In Worden -

“ There is a sense in which mourning can be finished, when people regain an interest in life, feel more hopeful, experience gratification again, and adapt to new roles. There is also a sense in which mourning is never finished. You may find the following quote of Sigmund Freud to be helpful. He wrote this to his friend, Binswanger, whose son had died:”

‘We find a place for what we lose. Although we know that after such a loss the acute stage of mourning will subside, we know also that we will remain inconsolable and will never find a substitute. No matter what may fill the gap, even if it be filled completely, it nevertheless remains something else.’
(Freud S., 1961, p.386) *Letters of Sigmund Freud*, (E.L. Freud, Ed.). New York: Basic Books

7. “...the only way out is through” Robert Frost

8. “They tried to bury us. They didn’t know we were seeds.” - Mexican Proverb

Opening Words for UU Presentation December 7, 2014

Today is the 73rd anniversary of the attack on Pearl Harbor in which over 5,000 people lost their lives. A month ago, we doubled the number of troops returning to Iraq bringing the total to over 3,000 - a number that will be diminished by further deaths. Thus, it is fitting that my presentation is Marilyn Sewell's work entitled Dark Nights of the Soul.

On the other hand, I want to open with the words of a 12-year-old girl who had witnessed some of the struggles - the "dark nights", of her father, a Vietnam vet. She visited The Wall in 1988 with classmates and she laid a wreath of paper cranes there. Her words to her father upon her return were, "We must bury the darkness of yesterday if we are to uncover a brighter tomorrow." Her nine-year-old brother said to his Dad, "All I can say is peace, Pop." Thus, there is hope. I have heard it said, "...and a little child shall lead us...." These two kids are now adults and you know them as our Amy and our Doug.

Closing Words

Hope knows no fear. Hope dares to blossom inside the
abysmal abyss. Hope secretly feeds and strengthens
promise.

Sri Chinmoy