

Rev. Kim K. Crawford Harvie
 Arlington Street Church
 15 December, 2013

The Fruitful Darkness

There are nine hours and five minutes of daylight each today, tomorrow, and Tuesday. Starting on Wednesday, there are nine hours and four minutes of daylight, and that's as much as we're going to get for a long winter week, day after day of almost fifteen straight hours of darkness, until Christmas, when we regain a whole minute ... and begin the long journey back to the light. This is about as dark as it gets.

So we have to stop relying on our eyesight, those of us that do that, and draw our vision from other senses. Spanish poet Juan Ramón Jiménez writes,

I have a feeling that my boat
 has struck, down there in the depths,
 against a great thing.
 And nothing
 happens! Nothing ... Silence ... Waves ...

– Nothing happens? Or has everything happened,
 and we are standing now, quietly, in the new life?¹

Silence. Very little light, and silence. We go within. Perhaps, in the silent darkness, we can really learn to see. Naturalist John Muir wrote, “I only went out for a walk, and finally concluded to stay out ‘til sundown, for going out, I found, was really going in.” Perhaps, in the silent darkness, we can really learn to listen. Poet Kathleen Raine wrote, “It is not that birds speak, but [we] learn silence.”

As a rule, we're not too keen on darkness or silence, but it can be a fertile place, a healing place from which we can go forth to reengage the world. Spiritual teacher Joan Halifax enumerates its gifts: “inquiry and listening, nonviolence and nonduality, patience and concentration,

¹ Juan Ramón Jiménez, translated by Robert Bly

connectedness and intimacy, authenticity and stillness, understanding and compassion, and seeing beyond language and intuition.”²

Joan Halifax continues, “We in the ‘developed’ world seem to have many auditory strategies that insulate us from the presence of silence.... When I return to Western culture after time in desert, mountain, or forest, I discover how we have filled our world with a multiplicity of noises, a symphony of forgetfulness that keeps our ... thoughts and realizations, feelings and intuitions, out of audible range....” She decries “the ceaseless song of longing for more; the mindless tunes of elevator music; the crackling of ‘news;’ the grind of transiting vehicles; endless chatter ... [that fills our days and] our minds; the remorseless electrical hum and whir.... [S]ilence is a medicine.”³

I learned to speak Spanish so I could talk with my daughter’s birth mother. But when my Peruvian friend and lawyer pulled his orange Volkswagen bug to the curb in a residential section of a tree-lined street in Lima; the passenger door opened and the passenger seat was tipped forward; a beautiful, impossibly young woman handed me a bundle of blankets from the back seat; and my lawyer friend said to me, simply, “This is the birth mother,” all language failed me. I sat down, hard, on the running board, cradling the still-hidden baby in one arm, and reached into the back seat to take the hand of her birthmother. Everything and everyone else disappeared. We sat like that, in the most profound silence I have ever known, for a long, long time.

Much later, her sister, who had been riding shotgun, told me that before that meeting, she had worried ceaselessly that my intentions were evil, and that harm would come to the child. But when she saw my silence, as she said it, she experienced a deep assurance; everything would be all right. Silence: correcting the perception that we are separate from each other; silence: louder than words.

German author Hermann Hesse wrote,
 Sometimes, when a bird cries out,
 Or the wind sweeps through a tree,
 ...

² Joan Halifax, *The Fruitful Darkness*, p. 27

³ *ibid*, p. 30

I hold still and listen for a long time.

My soul turns and goes back to the place
Where, a thousand forgotten years ago,
The bird and the blowing wind
Were like me, and were my brothers.

...

Then, changed and odd, [my soul] comes home
And asks me questions.
What should I reply?

*

In the fruitful darkness, our relationship to silence can deepen. In the fruitful darkness, there are other gifts to open. In the book of Isaiah, G*d says, “I will give you the treasures of darkness, and riches hidden in secret places.”⁴

When we have received those treasures, those hidden riches, it is time to begin the journey back to the light, back ... to joy.

One winter in the mid-1970s, the Huichol corn farmer and spiritual leader Don José flew from Mexico to the United States, dressed in his finest ceremonial clothing to celebrate the journey: white deerskin sandals, brightly embroidered pants and shirt, and a wide-brimmed straw hat with hawk feathers fluttering at the crown. The pilots were convinced that he was Carlos Castaneda’s teacher, Don Juan.

When Don José arrived, he settled into the home of some students in the basement of a brownstone on Waverly Place. After two weeks, joking about North American “cave dwellers,” he pointed out that the sun had not yet shone in New York’s stony canyons. He was concerned – disturbed – that Father Sun was sad and withdrawn. Clearly, his students did not understand, he said, that Father Sun depends on the offering of human joy in order for his light to shine.

Beloved spiritual companions, let us journey together in the last of the light, opening our minds and hearts and hands to the treasures of the fruitful

⁴ Isaiah 45:3

darkness. Especially, let us receive the gifts of silence. And when we emerge in brighter days, let us remember that so much depends on sharing joy!

In closing, here is artist and author Jan Richardson's *Blessing for the Longest Night*.

All throughout these months
as the shadows
have lengthened,
this blessing has been
gathering itself
making ready,
preparing for
this night.

It has practiced
walking in the dark,
traveling with
its eyes closed,
feeling its way
by memory
by touch
by the pull of the moon
even as it wanes.

So believe me
when I tell you
this blessing will
reach you
even if you
have not light enough
to read it;
it will find you
even though you cannot
see it coming.

You will know
the moment of its
arriving
by your release
of the breath

you have held
so long;
a loosening
of the clenching
in your hands,
of the clutch
around your heart;
a thinning
of the darkness
that had drawn itself
around you.

This blessing
does not mean
to take the night away,
but it knows
its hidden roads,
knows the resting spots
along the path,
knows what it means
to travel
in the company
of a friend.

So when
this blessing comes,
take its hand.
Get up.
Set out on the road
you cannot see.

This is the night
when you can trust
that any direction
you go,
you will be walking
toward the dawn.⁵

Amen.

⁵ ©Jan L. Richardson at janrichardson.com Please visit adventdoor.com

