



Dark Night of the Soul:
How We Live Through Dark Nights and Short Days
 Sunday, October 23, 2011, 11:00 a.m. – 12:15 p.m.
 Worship Leader: Rev. Nancy Palmer Jones

Call to Worship

Rev. Nancy Palmer Jones

How are you, *really*? How is it with your soul, your psyche, your spirit?

When the Spanish mystic Saint John of the Cross pens the poem “*La noche oscura del alma* / Dark Night of the Soul” in the 16th century, at first he doesn’t see darkness as the source of “quiet calm,” or of “comfort and caressing,” as that beautiful winter hymn we sang puts it. No, he sees the dark night as the site of the ultimate spiritual struggle, a time of utter desolation, alienation, abandonment. As F. Scott Fitzgerald writes, centuries later, “In a real dark night of the soul it is always three o’clock in the morning.”¹ Today, from Mother Teresa of Calcutta, whose “dark night” lasted 45 years, to heavy metal songs, to soap opera episodes, we use the term “dark night of the soul” to describe the most difficult birth of all: the passage through a kind of “death”—the despair of the spirit—to hope and faith in life just as it is.

So, when we go through our own dark night of the soul, what *is* it that we need from others? When we know that loved ones or community members are walking that lonely road, what can we offer, as their spiritual companions?

The late Unitarian Universalist minister Elizabeth Tarbox puts it this way: “None of us ever really walks in another’s shoes or knows the innermost rooms of a person’s heart. None of us truly knows the lonely places of another’s journey or the causes of the lines around another’s eyes. Therefore, let us be gentle with one another. Let us listen more than we speak and accept more than we judge. Let our open, outstretched hands reach and touch that we may walk along together for a little while in friendship and in trust.”

Come, let us offer ourselves and each other this friendship and trust. Let us worship together.

[The Story for All Ages this Sunday was an adaptation of A. A. Milne’s story of Eeyore’s birthday, from Winnie the Pooh, in which Eeyore’s friends Pooh and Piglet try to bring Eeyore some very imperfect birthday presents—a burst balloon,

¹ F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Crack-Up*. Quoted in Wikipedia article on “dark night of the soul,” which is the source for these references.

an empty honey jar—to cheer him up, and Eeyore finds that he can cheer them up by making the most of these presents and appreciating their friendship.]

Reflection

Judy Ross

I love the story of Eeyore's birthday because it shows how all his friends have to do is accept their friend AND SHOW UP.

I'd like to share a part of my story in hopes that it will benefit the whole congregation.

I HATE this time of year. When it's warm and sunny, I can forget it's Fall. But when the weather changes with less sunshine, becoming rainy and colder, I feel myself falling into a black hole. I hate the Fall even more than Winter because I feel such a sense of dread. I'm afraid that I will get lost in in these feelings forever. Spring is just too far away.

I suffer from Major Depression, which is characterized by low self-esteem, feelings of worthlessness and lethargy often accompanied by thoughts of suicide, and unfortunately by actually committing suicide. This state can last for a few days or weeks. It is episodic, often giving a false sense of hope. It can be a reaction to one's home life or hereditary or both.

When I would try to talk to people about my depression, people would say, "Oh, I know what you mean. I get depressed too." But these people were basically happy and just had a case of "the blues." Or people would say, "Just think positively!" Now I know these people meant well, but their words made me feel worse. It made me feel that my depressive feelings were my fault rather than involuntary.

So I stopped talking about my depression and developed a "Social Persona." But that's so exhausting. And it has often left me feeling very lonely.

After attending the First Unitarian Church off and on for a couple of years, I wanted to become a part of it. But I was afraid that my depression would inhibit me from contributing. Finally, I took a risk and asked to talk to Rev. Nancy. I told her that I had such positive feelings about the church that I wanted to join. But I was afraid that if I became a member, my depression would keep me from contributing. I felt so ashamed revealing this, just as I had in the past.

Her answer surprised me. She said that it makes a difference to her AND to the whole congregation just to have the chairs filled. I thought, "I can do that!" And so I did. This made me feel so good and a part of the community.

A few months later, after a long-term relationship ended by my being dumped for another woman, I entered the hospital for treatment of depression.

While I was there, church member, Bob Miess, whom I had never met, left me several messages about making a pledge to the church. When I left the hospital, I returned his calls, saying that I had been out of town. After I hung up, I thought,

“I just can’t do this anymore.” I was so tired of making excuses and lying. So I called him back, saying that I had actually been in the hospital being treated for depression. Without hesitation, he said, “I like you even better now!”

BLESS YOU, BOB! BLESS YOU!

In this community, I have received acceptance and non-judgmentalness more than I have experienced even from my closest friends. I can drop my “Social Persona” and be myself. What I need most is what I have received: people here whom I can lean on.

I hope that my sharing helps all of you to feel that you too can be honest about who you are and be accepted. There’s a place for you here, too.

But if you know you are experiencing depression, please seek help from a professional. It can get better.

When I was a little girl, the lullaby “All Through the Night” gave me a truly comforting feeling that helped me handle my abusive home life. It gave me the sense that I was connected to the universe. In this spiritual community, I believe we can all feel like we are being cradled by a large, nurturing universe.

So, I’d like to share this lullaby with you as my gift for all that this congregation has given to me.

Reflection

Frank Bosche

I never liked Eeyore. The only thing I’d heard about him, having not read the Pooh books until 3 years ago, was that he was relentlessly negative, always seeing life in the darkest way. There wasn’t anything really wrong with his life. It was just the way he experienced and expressed himself about it. What a downer! Who would want to be around that?

I worked for a Tupperware distributorship for 24 years. The whole culture of that business was built on positive thinking, fueled by the self-improvement literature of the time, all the way from Norman Vincent Peale to Wayne Dyer and everything beyond and in between. From age 22 to 46, I grew up in that culture. At first I had thought it was unrealistic and silly, a cover-up of the real nature of life. As I absorbed it, though, I found it did make my inner life brighter. What you think and say to yourself can really alter your reality. It works great as long as moderate winds bear you through fairly calm seas on your voyage through life.

It didn’t work for me when I came to a Dark Night of *my* soul. It wasn’t enough. I was trying to sail through a big storm on my own.

On my own. That’s the way I was brought up to deal with life.

That first Dark Night didn't pass without help, though. My boss, Stan, sat me in his office and told me that the heavy drinking I'd been doing to medicate myself had been noticed and that it had to stop or I would lose my job. My job was the thing I valued most in my life. It was the closest thing I had to a community then. I listened, I heard, I did. Stan really cared. He still does. Was he a Pooh or a Piglet? He brought the gift I needed to realize that my life had importance beyond the despair I had been feeling.

Years and other Dark Nights passed with or without the help from others I still hadn't learned to ask for. Once, a doctor was involved and some pills that really helped. Wow, who knew?

Now, I'll tell you the story of Eeyore's two vacations.

Three years ago, Eeyore decided to take two weeks' vacation in San José. (He lived there and couldn't afford to go anywhere else.) He had no particular plans, and after a couple of days of doing nothing in particular, he was very tired and sad. He didn't even feel up to calling his friends to plan some fun. He just stayed home sleeping and thinking gloomy thoughts. When he went back to work, he was soon his old positive self. He told all his friends about the terrible vacation. They said that they would never let that happen again. That made Eeyore feel good, but it was still a year and a half before he would risk another vacation. This time, his friends had plans for every day. There were fun day trips, lunches, dinners, and times just to be together. There were fun things going on at Eeyore's church, too, as I recall. It was the best vacation Eeyore ever had!

I guess by now you've figured out why I never liked Eeyore: He's a big part of me; a part that I didn't want and never had accepted until recently. Now I do, and so does everyone I know. I have lots of Poohs and Piglets in my life now, and maybe the next Dark Night won't be so long or dark.

Reflection

Rev. Nancy Palmer Jones

You know, don't you, that in this community, we are *all* called to be ministers? Every single one of us.

Does that sound daunting, especially if you are new? Or does it sound like the *invitation* you have been waiting for? You don't have to quit your day job, if you have one, or the ten other organizations where you're already a volunteer. You don't have to find the money to go to seminary, or leap into the professional ministry.

No. Your ministry is to step into the transforming crucible of this community; to discover your authentic wholeness, just as you are, imperfect and beautiful; and to share your unique gifts. Ministering to ourselves and each other, we embody these core Unitarian Universalist truths: that each of us deserves to be

loved; that each of us has something to offer; and that our every move affects the wider web of all existence.

Maybe you have been here forever, or have just arrived; maybe your particular gift is filling a chair, or sharing your story; working for justice; teaching—or learning; empowering and witnessing with our youth; reminding us all how to have fun; reminding us all how to be serious—or maybe it’s a little bit of all of the above. When you take up your ministry, you help to create this loving, connected community, where difference is embraced and listened to and puzzled over and celebrated—and we begin to transform the world around us.

Today we’re talking about our ministry of *caring*. What do we need when we are living through a dark night of the soul? What can we offer when someone we know is in that dark night?

Many of us feel awkward and helpless in the face of another person’s pain. Many of us feel lost and lonely and helpless in the face of our own pain. We feel tongue-tied by social taboos, too: is it OK to tell each other how we *really* are? Is it OK to *ask* how another *really* is? Is it OK not to have the “answers,” for ourselves, let alone for others? What happens when a condition or an illness is *chronic*? Often we know how to show up, how to leap into supportive action in a moment of *crisis*, like a death or a contained illness. Like Pooh and Piglet: “It’s Eeyore’s birthday! We’ll find some presents ... Well, even if we don’t have *real* presents, at least we’ll *show up*. And that helps!” It’s harder to know what to do, how to be, when a “problem” just doesn’t go away. “Eeyore stays so gloomy, no matter how often we show up.” That’s hard on Eeyore, and it’s hard on his friends. But not if we realize that ministering to each other is not about *fixing* but about *walking with*.

Thomas Moore’s book, *Care of the Soul*, helped me through a long “dark night of the soul” years ago because it taught me that I didn’t need fixing; I needed to care for my truest self, the mixed up and the sparkling, and I needed to allow others to care.²

Moore explains that “soul,” here, doesn’t mean “an object of religious belief or ... something to do with immortality,” but rather *soul* is a “dimension of [how we experience] life and ourselves ... with depth, value, relatedness, heart, and personal substance.” “Care of the soul” is about connecting deeply to life as it really is, “moments of darkness[,] periods of foolishness,” everyday joys and sorrows, great crises, persistent problems, inner world, outer world, *all*. Caring for our soul means *not* assuming that we’re “doing life all wrong” when we feel bad or when our circumstances are falling apart. Care of the soul means listening, quietly,

² Thomas Moore, *Care of the Soul: A Guide for Cultivating Depth and Sacredness in Everyday Life* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1994 [paperback edition]).

patiently, to what our woes, and our joys, are trying to tell us about the fullness of life we hunger for. It means listening, humbly, patiently, as others tell us *their* stories, knowing that in the midst of the muddle are the beauty and the wisdom of their soul.

There's a huge difference, Moore says, between *care* and *cure*. "Care of the soul ... isn't about curing, fixing, changing, adjusting or making healthy ... it isn't about some idea of perfection or even improvement.... [Care of the soul] remains patiently in the present, close to life ... day by day." This is where our true religion and spirituality—our true depth and meaning—lie.

When the Greek philosopher Plato talks about the care of the soul, he uses a term that means *both* caring for oneself *and* "honoring the gods and the dead." Caring for myself, my ancestors, and what I hold to be holy are *all the same*. This is what we'll experience next week with our Day of the Dead celebration.

So, here, we can drop the "superficially adjusted" "Social Persona." Here, we ask ourselves and each other to live (in Moore's words) "profoundly connected in the heart to ancestors and to living brothers and sisters in all the ... communities that claim our hearts."

How do we do this? We step up to a stranger or a friend—in social hour (find a quiet place if you need to), before or after a meeting, at the table over dinner, and with our heart pounding, we ask, "How are you, really?" Then we listen humbly, patiently, as the other person, with heart pounding, answers as generously and truthfully and bravely as he or she can. We look around—in this sanctuary, at an event, a retreat—and we ask, Who's missing? And we think, *I* can make a phone call, or pay a visit, or pick someone up, or make that personal invitation that in many cultures is the only way to say, "You are family. You belong here."

The beautiful thing about Eeyore's birthday is not *just* that his friends accept him for who he is and show up for him—but that he discovers how much he loves them as *they* are, and that he too has gifts to offer them.

What's your take-home today? May your own truths—sparkling or dusty, fragmented or whole—come to you in the silence.