

Friends of Silence

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“Is there enough Silence for the Word to be heard?”

In the aftermath of Robin Williams’ death, I read a piece by a Buddhist practitioner* who pondered whether it might sometimes help to perceive depression as one of many layers of co-mingling life-states that ebb and flow within us. Not in any way meaning to negate the inexplicable, heart-wrenching reality of mental illness or medical and mental health workers’ avenues of support toward healing, might there sometimes be another way to frame the experience of depression within a context that could offer insight and hope? Jesus faced Gethsemane, the psalmist cries out from the soul’s depths, and poets and spiritual leaders draw from desert and wilderness times to understand themselves and the world. Given that many wisdom paths speak of the “dark night of the soul” or befriending the dark or learning what our shadow side has to teach, what insights and hope can our faith traditions offer?



Looking at me in the gentlest manner, the hermit said, “You are afraid, aren’t you? You don’t need to be afraid.” His power lay in that he had no power. He merely looked deeply into my soul.

A tension broke within me, and much to my horror I began to weep. The tears quietly drained the hurt and terror from me and replaced it with peace.

“We are all deaf. The way of emptiness teaches us to hear...One day you will know that the emptiness is your friend.”

~from STRANGERS AND SOJOURNERS by Michael D. O’Brien

The emptiness of the dark night is a yielding emptiness that gives way to the fullness of all possibility....If all your spiritual activities have grown empty and you are compelled to walk away, tie yourself to one practice only: contemplative silence. Abandon discursive prayer if it has become mechanical and meaningless. Let go of holy images if they no longer evoke the sacred. Refrain from spiritual discourse if it tastes like idle gossip in your mouth. But do not turn away from the silence.

~from DARK NIGHT OF THE SOUL by Mirabai Starr, translated by Fr. Iain Matthew

* “Is Depression Always an Illness?” at thankingthespoon.com

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I saw that there was an ocean
of darkness and death,
But an infinite ocean of light
and love flowed over the ocean
of darkness. ~ George Fox

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If you are in the dark, it does not mean that you have failed and that you have taken some terrible misstep. For many years I thought my questions and my doubt and my sense of God’s absence were all signs of my lack of faith, but now I know this is the way the life of the spirit goes.

~Barbara Brown Taylor

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The Uses of Sorrow

(In my sleep I dreamed this poem)

Someone I loved once gave me
a box full of darkness.

It took me years to understand
that this, too, was a gift.

~Mary Oliver

The rooting (of trees, of our selves) is as important and as necessary as the rising. We have the opportunity to sink roots into soul and rise up with branches in heaven...

Our spiritual growth is meant to go in both directions, toward the fertile darkness and the glorious light, each of us having the opportunity to bridge earth and heaven—the underworld and the upperworld—through the trunks of our middleworld lives....

There's no conflict between spirit-centered being and soulful doing, between transcendence and inscendence.

Each supports and enhances the other. Like Rilke, we discover we can have both:

You see, I want a lot
Maybe I want it all;
The darkness of each endless fall,
The shimmering light of each ascent.

~from SOULCRAFT by Bill Plotkin

“Sit quietly and contemplate,” said the Lama.
“Get to know your anger, your fear, all your emotions. Dissect them and speak with them. Accept yourself and know every part of your own being. To understand oneself is to have compassion for everything.”

~from TRIBE OF WOMEN by Connie Bickman

Trust yourself in the deep, uncharted waters.
When there is a storm, it is safer on the open sea.
~Howard Thurman

The dark night of the soul refers to an extended period of acute purification that a spiritual practitioner undergoes immediately before making the final transition to deep spiritual awakening. It emphasizes purification and the act of letting go of what no longer serves after many lesser trials have been navigated.

~ from “Stepping into the Fire” by Chris Bache in IONS REVIEW, Mar-May 2002

“Will you abandon me forever, and
leave me comfortless in my
distress?

Where is your steadfast Love that
made my soul to sing?
Are your promises empty,
that I feel so alone?”

The Power of your Love seems
too much for us;
your Light unveils the secrets
hidden in our heart;
Can You wonder that we tremble?

Yet, You stand beside us as we walk
through our fears to
the path of wholeness and love,
though our footsteps are unsure.

~excerpt from Psalm 77 in PSALMS FOR PRAYING, Nan Merrill

The spiritual function of fierce terrain (in the apophatic tradition) is to bring us to the end of ourselves, to the abandonment of language and the relinquishment of ego. A vast expanse of jagged stone, desert sand, and towering thunderheads has a way of challenging all the mental constructs in which we are tempted to take comfort and pride, thinking we have captured the divine. The things that ignore us save us in the end.

~from THE SOLACE OF FIERCE LANDSCAPES by Belden Lane

The ancient mystery of the “sun at midnight,” symbolizes the spiritual light that lies hidden within the dark. The Celts knew that light emerges out of darkness and so their days began at dusk, as if the sun was seeded in the black earth of night.

~“Tir na Sorcha” by Mara Freeman in Parabola, May 2001

I had done everything I knew how to do to draw as near to the heart of God as I could only to find myself out of gas on a lonely road, filled with bitterness and self-pity. To suppose that I had ended up in such a place by the grace of God required a significant leap of faith. If I could open my hands, then all that fell from them might flower on the way down. If I could let myself fall, then I too might land in a fertile place.
~Barbara Brown Taylor

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Absolutely Clear

Don't surrender your loneliness
So quickly.
Let it cut more deep.

Let it ferment and season you
As few human
Or even divine ingredients can.

Something missing in my heart tonight
Has made my eyes so soft,
My voice
So tender,

My need of God
Absolutely
Clear.

~Hafiz

I am the one whose praise
echoes on high...

I call forth tears,
the aroma of holy work.

I am the yearning for the good.
~Hildegarde of Bingen