

The Mystery of Darkness

People who grow mushrooms keep them in the dark because that is where they best thrive. That's a fact. It is also a fact that we are like mushrooms because, although we don't necessarily thrive there, we are often in the dark mentally and emotionally. We experience the darkness in two ways: the way of being kept in the dark around the secrets of God and the mysteries of the universe AND the way of a darkness of the soul, of despair, grief, and fear.

God has granted us enlightenment in the life of Jesus and the wisdom we glean from His time on earth. We are certainly not kept in the dark about *God's will* – God's will for us to love and care for each other, about God's direction for us to seek justice and resist evil. And science, over time, has explained mysteries of God's *creation* that once kept us in the dark.

Romans 1: 20

Ever since the creation of the world, God's eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been seen and understood through the things God has made.

But, at the very root of it all, we are kept in the dark about the nature of God and the workings of the universe and, in that darkness, there is a lesson for us.

Romans 11:33-34

***O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!
“For who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor?”***

In an article entitled, ***“You Do Not Need to Understand Everything Now”***, author Jon Bloom writes:

“Not only is the universe stranger than we think; it is stranger than we can think” and he asks the question, ***“If this is true of the universe, how much more should we expect it to be true of God himself?”***

God has created us with a healthy urge to discover and understand but has tempered the freedom to *follow* that urge by the fact that there are some things we can and will *never* know: the specific nature of God, the creation of this universe, when and how it all began - IF, indeed, there *is* such a thing as the beginning. This ignorance keeps our egos in check. It creates a humility that all too often eludes us. We

have choices and opportunities but God has the upper – but loving – hand. That we know, but how it all works we have no clue. We are in the dark.

Bloom further writes,

“The deeper scientists have delved into the nature of nature, the more mysteries they have discovered.... Physicists know that quantum mechanics works, but they don’t know how....The Bible reveals some things we find extraordinarily hard to understand ...[b]ut nature reveals traces of the same designer. When we run up against conundrums that show us the limits of our intellectual capacities, we don’t need to follow cynical doubts. But like Paul, our limits can lead us to awe-filled worship.”

On a level that is more personal, we are kept in the dark about so many things that befall us. We all ask why babies die, why illness takes our loved ones, why natural disasters decimate lives and homes. These circumstances lead to the question of why God “allows” such things if God is “all powerful”. We are torn between our concepts of God and our reality. “God knows best” is a phrase of little comfort when you’re in the throws of life’s tragedies. All we can know is that these things happen and we will NEVER understand why. Whatever comfort we can find lies in the fact that LOVE exists and that love’s

source is beyond our imagining and that it is infinite, as infinite as the universe. All we can know, because of nature's cycles and because of Christ's life and story, is that there is life beyond this life. What it's like we don't get to know. Acceptance through grace and humility are requirements. It's where the nature of our faith comes in.

The bleakest and most difficult experiences with which we grapple often lead to that second type of darkness: darkness of the soul. Not just tragic experiences but grave disappointments, psychological turmoil, and toxic thinking lead to the emotional quicksand into which we all sometimes fall.

The phrase "dark night of the soul" comes from a poem written by Saint John of the Cross, a 16th century poet and mystic. The author narrates the journey of the soul to the mystical union with God. The journey is called "dark night" in part because darkness represents the fact that the destination "God" is unknowable.

The author says of his poem:

"The dark night of the soul is ...is marked by confusion, helplessness, stagnation of the will, and a sense of the withdrawal of God's presence... The final stage is union with the object of love, the one Reality, God."

So, according to St. John of the Cross, the dark night of the soul leads to a better place, a true and meaningful union with God. He presents the darkness through which the soul progresses as a wonderful thing, a blessed thing. It certainly doesn't feel that way when we are experiencing the darkness – when we are IN the darkness.

In my experience, when we're in that dark night, the best we can do is hang on. Just hang on and, if you can move physically or emotionally or spiritually at all, put one foot in front of the other. Just that will take all your strength. But when *our* strength has waned, we have the promise of tapping into a *greater* strength.

Crucially, Jesus Himself went through dark nights of the soul both over the period we call Lent and in his final moments on the cross. Of his article entitled, "Jesus' Dark Night of the Soul", Bill Gaultiere writes,

"Think of Jesus on the cross meditating on these Scriptures. Think of him crying out to God ... 'Abba! Abba! Abba!' ... Jesus is praying, 'Papa! Hold me!' ...Jesus went to the cross and endured the Dark Night of the Soul so that in our dark nights we would know that we are not in fact alone: Jesus is embracing us in Abba's love."

Now that's something to which we can "hang on".

There is a psychological take on this subject which Jodi Wellman addresses in her article, “Embracing the Dark Side of Life...” She writes, *“Moments of crisis call upon and refine our character strengths... It appears that the well-lived life is reached in part because of the poignant contrast that exists between the highs and the lows....”*

Eckhart Tolle is on board with this perspective and writes, *“The “dark night of the soul” is ... a kind of re-birth... [S]ome people who’ve gone through this transformation realized that they had to go through that, in order to bring about a spiritual awakening.”*

That all may be true but it doesn’t help in the moment. To the extent that we can sometimes look *in hindsight* on challenges that sent us into dark nights of the soul and realize that we may have come out stronger, or having learned important lessons, or even come to acknowledge the truth of “This too shall pass”, I can agree with this idea. BUT, in the moment, if you were able to grasp that concept, you wouldn’t be in a dark night of the soul in the first place. The journey from mind to heart is a long one when you’re in the depths of darkness.

I believe this is especially true when we are dealing with the death of a loved one. In my experience – and I know we all experience death

differently - nothing helps one grieve with any less sorrow but a grounding in faith holds the promise that we will have the strength to carry on. Knowing we can tap into God's infinite strength or, more likely, that God will *bestow* that strength on us when we are too weak to reach out – *that* is what makes those dark nights of the soul at all bearable.

In my dark nights over my husband's death, as irrational and contradictory to my faith as it is, I feel the need to know that he's alright, that he's in a wonderful place. Believing he's okay diminishes my pain.

Luke 23:43

"And Jesus said to him, Verily I say to thee, This day shalt thou be with me in paradise..."

In *that*, I find comfort.

Italian psychiatrist, and clearly a man of faith, Roberto Assagioli writes:

"...the soul, perfect at last, into complete, constant and inseparable communion with the Spirit enters."

In *that*, I find comfort. Isn't that what we hope our departed loved ones have experienced?

Churches everywhere are being thrust into necessary transitions that often bring dark nights of the *communal* soul. But the very nature of who we are – a Christian community, that the basis for our gathering is a spiritual one - is also the nature of our redemption from dark nights... To diminish those dark feelings, we root ourselves more firmly in faith - in the promises of God, the movement of the Holy Spirit, and the resurrection story of Jesus Christ.

Just as we need the humility to accept that we don't get to know everything - that God does keep us somewhat in the dark - we need faith that the same God holds for us a light, a beacon, to guide us out of our dark nights of the soul *when we are able to make that journey*.

Let us know that – *feel* that truth deep in our souls.

And may God bless and help all of us mushrooms.

Amen.