

The Dark Night of the Soul

This article is lovingly dedicated to those readers who are going through difficult times in the life.

We've heard the proverbial term, 'dark night of the soul,' to refer to a particularly painful, seemingly hopeless point in the life – a period where nothing makes sense anymore. When we're in such a state, no matter where we turn, it feels like there is only emptiness. But this isn't the sort of spacious emptiness or soul "spaciousness" we yearn for and aim for in meditative living. No, it is a deficient emptiness. Even to muster hope feels utterly useless and meaningless.

I've experienced my fair share of Dark Nights of the Soul in my life, yet it wasn't until recently that I learned it is a term first used by 16th-century Christian mystic, Saint John of the Cross. The Dark Night of the Soul has at times been referred to as the Spiritual Emergency or spiritual crisis.

I'm here to remind you of something that you may remember the next time you're way down in those gloomy depths: Believe it or not, The Dark Night of the Soul is a good thing.

Last spring, while in a spiritual transformation process, I went down to the bottom of my soul in a bucket – numb, uncaring, depressed... a pitch-black venture down into the earth's molten core of my being - 'taint pretty in there! It's raw, it's real, and it's necessary.

A dark night of the soul primarily occurs when the old self-image is ready to go. This is the outdated identification of who you think you are – the ego structure. When the self-image becomes calcified in any way, a dark night of the soul comes rumbling in like storm clouds. Of course, there are myriad ways we try to push it away, like distractions and self-medication. But eventually, even those stop working, and we can't resist. It is not just depression, though it can feel like it, and it is a form of 'low pressure' internal meteorology situation.

There is apathy, and a near-suicidal feeling, like "I'm just plain DONE." It feels like an end of life – and, in effect, it is. There is a sense of "I don't know what could come next and frankly, I can't muster any feeling to care."

A Dark Night of the Soul can last months, years, or even lifetimes. Perhaps the time correlates to the degree of ego identification – how hardened that self-image is. Who you thought you were is dying. It is not your physical body passing away.

One of the most curious appearances of the dark night is when it crops up in otherwise truly positive, 'spiritual,' healthy folks. How could this occur? Two reasons: first, the positive, healthy, loving, spiritual emanation has itself become a self-identification (even "nice" personas are eventually painful); second, the soul knows you are ready to enter a dark night experience; the soul is strong, aware, and courageous enough to go through this period of consciousness.

For spiritually inclined people, one of the hardest parts of a dark night is that it seems even God (Consciousness, Spirit, Higher Power, Existence, the Universe) has abandoned us.

The self-image is an invisible shell that comprises who you think you are...

I had a vivid, wild dream last spring around the time of my dark night of the soul. I dreamt I had an exoskeleton – an external shell that was like a human cage. It was made of metal. It appeared that it would protect the soft underbelly and vulnerable human within, but in reality it was uncomfortable, cramping, cutting, and even biting me with its razor-sharp edges like teeth. It was a violent shell, and I couldn't move about without harming myself in the process.

When I woke, I knew immediately that it was symbolic of the self-image – the body-life mask we wear to protect ourselves, but is ultimately harmful.

The key with the dark night is to not resist; JUST SAY NO to the glomming self-image that says you need to be pretty and pleasant. Be depressed. Hate everything. Be ugly. Do you need medication? Maybe. Maybe not. You and your health care advisor will decide. Most often, I'd venture to say the answer is NO. You can 'give in' to the experience. It's a death process – a part of you IS dying.

THE DARK NIGHT AND SPIRITUAL AWAKENING

Even in 'awakened' people, the dark night process occurs. Eli Jaxon-Bear, a non-dual spiritual teacher whom I respect along with his wife Gangaji, faced a dark night that he calls a "resurrection through hell" upon coming out about an affair (Shift Network webcast, spring 2011). This occurred some twenty years after his primary spiritual awakening. Eli admits that even in being awake, there is still a state – the blissful state – that is also a TEMPORARY place. After coming out honestly about his affair with another woman, the whole façade, the self-image of what it meant to be a 'Spiritual Teacher' came crashing down: slander, rejection – all of it flew in through the window. Yes, it was hell. And yes, it passed to reveal a new cycle of spiritual evolution. As many spiritual masters have explained, waking up is just the beginning.

THE GIFTS OF DEPRESSION

Author and Christian mystic Thomas Moore has a great chapter called "The Gifts of Depression" in his book *Care of the Soul*, in which he states, "...we may have to develop a taste for the depressed mood, a positive respect for its place in the soul's cycles."

In 2007, I wrote Mr. Moore directly to thank him for these insights. He in turn replied how perfect it was to hear from me at that exact time because, you guessed it: he was going through dark tunnels himself. One does not simply get a 'degree' of graduating; the transformation goes deeper throughout a spiritual life.

EVOLUTION OF THE SOUL IS NOT LINEAR

The cycle of expansion of consciousness is hardly linear; it is more of a spiral. When we grow higher and brighter, the soul has capacity to plunge into deeper and darker territory. When we go further into dark places, it appears (though there is no guarantee) that a growth spurt of fresh awareness and expansion follows. Expand, contract. Contract, expand. When we plummet to the depths, the place where 'you'

barely exist at all, it is likely you will emerge with a gift. It is like the Hero's Journey described by Joseph Campbell in the Power of Myth. There's a grail in that there murky, monstrous place of meaninglessness.

The last time I went through a dark night, the usual raging flame of awareness became a tiny dot, a wee spark of "I." It was as if "I" might completely disappear into the inky black void, and yes, it feels like borderline madness.

Luckily I've experienced surfing of consciousness, and I know that it is OK to dissolve into the Nothingness that is Everything, to release the illusory separation and settle into EXISTENCE.

Remember:

(1) you're not alone

(2) you're not crazy

(3) you are okay

(4) allow it to take as long as it takes

Let me reiterate an important point: resistance is futile. Attempting to do anything to FIX a real dark night of the soul may only make it worse or last longer. See, what you are most likely going to try to do, courtesy of the superego of society's 'should' approach, is attempt to DO something. That very doing-of-something will likely help perpetuate the very ego structure, the self-image that is dying.

Guides, therapists, healers and shamans can be useful at this time. Priests and priestesses, monks and nuns who have the understanding may be able to hold space for the unraveling. Yet, if the counselor or therapist attempts to fix things, sugarcoat, or make you feel better, they probably don't get it, and they certainly haven't gone through the eye of the needle themselves. Remember that the best source to 'hold' you in this dark place is the very Self.

By Erin Reese