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"Let There Be Darkness"

(Note: words in **dark red boldface** are clickable links to resources on the web)

A few years ago I came up with the idea of marking the holiday season, in part, by stringing lights around the inside of the waiting room in my old office.

The colleague with whom I shared that office suite was open to my idea, so he brought in his step-ladder, we spent a few hours one afternoon installing "hooks" at aesthetically pleasing intervals up near the ceiling, and then hanging the lights so that they encircled the room in graceful, looping, inverse arches.

My idea was to then turn *off* the lamps we normally used to light the waiting room, and let the holiday lights take over that job for a few weeks. My colleague, looking around at the now dimly lit room, wasn't so sure: "**It's a little...dark.**" He was right. It was, indeed, quite a bit darker than usual...and that was exactly how I had intended it to be.

For untold thousands of years before the invention of artificial light, part of the collective experience of the deepening of winter was experiencing the deepening dark that came with it. And I wanted our waiting room to reflect those ancient rhythms, to evoke those ancient feelings, to stir those ancient reflections, making it a fitting transitional space for people taking a rare quiet moment to prepare for their therapy sessions.

My colleague and I settled on a compromise--we'd add the light of the "three-way" lamps (each with 50/100/150 watt bulbs), but at only one-third of their usual brightness: holiday lights plus two lamps turned up only to 50 watts each.

I've always been partial to lights as a way to decorate for the holidays, in part because the theme of light is so prominent in what many of the ancient wisdom traditions pay attention to at this time of year: the pagan celebration of the solstice (marking the return of the sun after the longest, darkest night of the year), the Jewish festival of Hanukkah (whose 8-canded menorah commemorates the re-dedication of the temple, when one day's worth of oil burned miraculously for 8 days until supplies could be replenished), and Christmas (marking Christianity's celebration of the coming of the messiah, the "light of the world").

Such lights only mean something, however, in the context of darkness. If we want the illumination, the insight, the comfort of the light, we have to first allow and face and experience the darkness itself.

I was reminded of this the weekend before Thanksgiving when I pulled the *Pacific Northwest* magazine from my Sunday Seattle Times and saw the cover headline: "Blinded by the Light--Wrapped in an earthly glow, we're missing the wonder of stars."

The story accompanying that headline ("**Things Are Not Looking Up For Dark Sky Watchers**," beautifully written by Seattle Times staff reporter Ron Judd), was about the impact of "light pollution," about **the absence of "true darkness"** due to the ways that artificial light has filled the night sky in North America and Europe. The article points out that "99 percent of Americans never routinely see a true dark sky."

The implications of this, the article suggests, are profound: "The current bunch of us will be the first in the history of the planet to go most or all the way through life failing to grasp our place in the universe. Because we simply have never seen it." Those are the words of **Dave Ingram**, who practices what he calls "guerrilla astronomy" by setting up his telescope in an unlikely place--amidst the blazing lights of the parking lot of the Albertson's supermarket on 208th Street in Kent--and invites passers-by to take a look. "You can," Ingram continued, "put anybody out under the stars for 30 minutes, and they begin to start **asking the big questions**."

Our contemporary lack of the experience of true darkness, it turns out, comes with consequences on a number of levels. The article cites research "suggesting links between perpetual light exposure and interruptions of the body's natural hormone cycles--perhaps contributing to obesity, depression, and other maladies. One study showed a doubling of breast-cancer risk in women who work night shifts and suffer likely hormonal imbalances caused by interruptions in exposure to natural light and darkness."

But the intangible consequences of losing our experience of true darkness, the ones that play out at what might be called the level of the soul, may be even more important.

Paul Bogard, an English professor at James Madison University, and author of *The End of Night--Searching For Natural Darkness In An Age of Artificial Light*, put it this way: "We've taken what was once one of the most common human experiences and made it one of the most rare. I think it has huge implications to our spirit, our psyche...It's the difference between coming face-to-face with the universe and realizing your problems are just not that big--a real humility kind of thing. It's pretty easy, if you never see the universe, to think this world is all there is. If you really see the night sky, you can't help but evoke feelings of awe and wonder and gratitude and spirituality."

Only in darkness can you see the light. And that's why I wanted my old waiting room to follow the rhythms of the natural world, and get a little bit darker during the the holidays, the high holy days, of winter.

I moved into a new office this past March, with a waiting room I share with a dozen other offices, a waiting room out in the building's common area, with light streaming in through the windows, and where I no longer have any say about holiday decorations.

So late in the afternoon, on the Saturday after Thanksgiving, I intervened where I do still have a say: I hung those same lights around the inside of my **new office**. By the time I finished, it was already dark outside. I removed the 100 watt bulbs I normally use in my new floor lamps, and replaced them with 60 watt bulbs, making things inside just a bit darker, if only for these few weeks. It was a gesture both literal and symbolic, a reminder to myself, to those who sit in my office, and to those who pass by my door, of the importance of the life-giving darkness that we so rarely experience anymore.

A few days later, I was closing up my office a little before 5:00 on a Friday. Seattle's meteorological

prognosticators were predicting a low temperature that night of 19 degrees, due in part to the clear skies we'd had that day. As I walked to my car in the parking lot, I looked up and saw, perched above the silhouette of three trees with their bare, leafless branches, a brilliant crescent moon in the waning light of dusk. I pulled out my cell phone and snapped a photo. The photographer in me knew that cell phone cameras don't do well in such lighting conditions, and the poet in me remembered what Seamus Heaney once wrote: "Useless to think you can stop and capture it more fully..." I looked at the photo I'd just taken: the camera's wide-angle lens made the moon appear much smaller than it did to the naked eye, and its "auto-focus" capabilities had rendered the tricky lighting of dusk...a little blurry...in stark contrast to the light of the crystal clear, cold, winter night sky. It was then I noticed something else about the photo: a streak of orange light, protruding, from the upper left corner. I realized immediately that this streak was the product of the street lamp that had been just to the left of the frame when I snapped the photo: "99 percent of Americans never see a true dark sky..." I put away my cell phone, and simply stood for a few minutes looking up at those trees, the night sky, that **crescent moon...**

Psychotherapy at its best is about helping us learn to listen to the rhythms of our own psyches. To do this we must, from time to time, turn away from the artificial "lights" that constantly bombard us...and sit in the darkness, beneath our own inner night sky, so that we can discover there a deeper and more authentic wisdom, a source of guidance as steadfast and true as the light of the stars.

As you navigate your way through this holiday season, remember to "let there be darkness."