

Welcoming the Night

Nighttime, darkness, is often clothed in negative metaphors suggesting a fearful time, a sinister time, a stretch of time in which one feels particularly vulnerable. We humans are a species that seems ill-equipped to survive and flourish in the night-time hours, dependent as we are on being able to “see”. Members of the sight impaired community know this even more keenly than the rest of us. We for the most part have been able to drive the darkness out beyond the boundaries of our living space, first through fire and now through the immense grid of technology that delivers electricity to illumine the darkness, keep us entertained, and let us continue our work tasks far beyond sunset – indeed all night long if we desire.

We have infused the dark metaphors with myth and narrative most of which play upon our frailties as a species, the companion uncertainties which journey with us though life. Alienation from others, from all that is around, even from the Heart of the Universe, finds vivid expression in these images of darkness. We talk about the “dark side” of our personalities which incline us toward behavior that is not acceptable to us and yet which seems to hound our daily experiences. To hear of our possible eternal destination being “cast into utter darkness” conveys sufficient motivation to behave in such a way as to not be sentenced to such a fate. Violations of the moral codes cohering community occur, it would seem, mostly at night. “Keep the lights on so you will be safe” is common sense guidance for protection from incursions.

Yet one of our prime creation stories suggest strongly that it is night which precedes day, both of which are pronounced “good” by the One who has created the Universe; the daily marking of time begins with the evening hour and ends at the close of the next day.

How do we learn how to welcome the night, to set alongside the dominant narrative of the sinister news of something creative and good? For me it came in watching how night approaches. As my little place on earth turns slowly from the light of the sun, I notice on the trees around me – or any other part of the landscape that is taller than I am – how darkness slips in: it begins at the very base of the tree and perceptibly moves up until the entire tree is covered with the darkening dusk. That same dusky blanket soon envelops my entire landscape, growing darker and darker, unless of course I fire up my artificial illumination that pushes the blanket out a distance.

One can palpably experience a release in the enveloping dusk, as the landscape prepares to rest from its work of transforming the Sun’s energy into pluriform life. That same release of energy transformation can inform how we welcome in the night with its gift of rest.

Evolutionary biologists, such as Jaak Panksepp, have come to understand that we humans, in the early days of our life and continuing though out it, experience surges of energy which transform our basic genetic structure and cognitive activity into the unique human beings we become. Panksepp talks about these energy surges as emotional drivers and has classified them into at least 5 emotional systems.

- There is the emotional energy that drives our seeking, fuelling our curiosity, our searching, our motivation, how we make sense of things and experience, how we evaluate our context, how we go about investigating what’s around us.
- There is also a bundle of emotional energy that fuels our efforts, both conscious and unconscious, to secure our well-being and nurture ourselves with sustenance.
- A third energy system drives our anxieties, our rage, and our anger.
- A fourth stimulates a sense of panic when we experience separation, vulnerability, the need for care and protection.

- Another energy system drives us to seek pleasure, joy, playfulness, sensuality and sexuality.

These descriptions help provide a framework for articulating the extensive work we are doing each day and suggests what work we can release into the night's rest, permitting a time of refreshment and reenergizing for the next day.

In addition to rest, another gift comes to us each night: our dreamer who comes to play with the narrative themes of the day, recasting them into dramas that help resolve the lingering conflicts, confusions and uncertainties. By deliberately inviting our inner Dreamer to attend us during the night, we invite the healing and wholeness which dreaming offers. We may or may not remember our Dreamers work, we may or may not want to explore them in open dialogue, but we can be in touch with the fact that the healing is taking place.

In the sketch for a ritual that follows I have tried to incorporate these elements. I bring the ritual to a conclusion with an offering to all around us, the gift of Peace and Well-being as we go into the night.

The Ritual

- Drumming, using a prayer bowl or stones – to be in touch with the Heartbeat of the Universe
- A Night chant is sung ***
- A Night Psalm to be read and contemplated:

You darkness, that I come from
I love you more than all the fires
That fence the world.
For the fire makes a circle of light for everyone,
And then no one outside learns of you.

But the darkness pulls in everything,
Shapes and fires, animals and myself.
How easily it gathers them –
Powers and peoples!

And it is possible a great energy
Is moving near me.

I have faith in nights

Rainer Maria Rilke, from *The Selected Poetry*

- Attuning the non-visual senses
Slowly become aware of the odors in the air, letting them stir memories;
Become aware of sounds that can be heard, letting them form without
thought into kaleidoscope patterns.
Experience the ambient temperature and other skin sensations
- An Evening Prayer is offered:
Beloved Father and Holy Mother, the light of this day is but a lingering whisper,
as we your creation drink one last time from the pool of the Sun's energy. With
great caring you have helped me this day to walk as your child, a pilgrim on a
sacred path. At one with you and all of your creation, I enter into the night. Still

me that I might listen to the sounds of this night. You are the source of my existence. Your heart is my home. From you I have come and to you I journey this night. (Prayers of intentions and intercessions are offered). **

- Releasing the work of our emotional energies. With naming each one, the gesture is to touch the earth with the hands and then slowly draw the hands up along the body reaching up beyond the head and opening the palms to the sky (following the way evening flows across the landscape)
 - I release all my seeking
 - I release all my caring
 - I release all my fears and angers
 - I release my panics
 - I release my pleasures
- Inviting The Dreamer – A sacred gesture of stretching the arms out and ‘sweeping’ the air with the hands as if brushing it toward the eyes and ears.
- The Gift of Peace, of Shalom, of Well-being. (If this ritual is done in a community, the group concludes by offering the Gift to one another; if done alone a gesture of embracing the ‘great hosts of witnesses’ as well as particularly named persons while intoning The Gift

**An alternative prayer might be:

An Evening Psalm of Inventory

As Earth turns outward into space
And the light fades into turquoise,
I step aside to inventory
The thoughts, words and deeds of my day.

I carefully scan today in the light
Of the far-flung dimensions of the universe.
Have I failed this day by shrinking its vastness
To the narrow limits of my life, my needs and my desires?
Has the smallness of that space caused my heart to contract as well?

How I have fulfilled the cosmic dimensions of my purpose
as co-creator and co-explorer with God?
Has my limited view of life’s scope given me permission to fill my time
with negative thoughts and careless assumptions, while judging as insignificant
The needs of my fellow pilgrims and all of creation?

Mindful that You have already forgiven and pardoned me
The very moment I forgot who I am, the moment I forgot the journey, the calling,
I give you thanks, O Scared Mystery, Gracious God who forgives so unconditionally.
From “Prayers for a Planetary Pilgrim” Edward Hays p.169.

***An example of a night hymn that could be used:

Day is Dying in the West

Lyrics: Mary Lathbury

Tune: Chautauqua, 77.774 William Sherin

Day is dying in the west,
Heaven is touching earth with rest,
Wait and worship while the night
Sets her evening lamps alight
Through all the sky

Refrain: Holy, holy, holy, Lord God of hosts.
Heaven and earth are full of thee
Heaven and earth are praising thee
O Lord Most High.

While the deepening shadows call,
Heart of love enfolding all,
Through the glory and the grace
Of the stars that veil Thy face
Our hearts ascend.

Refrain