

Redeeming Dark
Palomar UU Fellowship ~ December 5, 2004
Rev. Beth A. Johnson

Whether we like it or not, change the time on our clocks or not, or wish it were not so, we're moving through the cycles of time – into the dark time. And as we move into the dark time, consciously or not, the ways in which we think about the dark will inform the ways in which we will experience it.

Jacqui James, author of our reading, lifts up the power of language to shape our thinking about things black and our experience of the dark. She breaks open the construction of light and dark as dualistic categories that have been at the core of the institutionalization of racism, the colonization and occupation of countries, and the denigration of bodies.

The consequence of this dualism has been to split our view of reality. Some of the old stories of science, philosophy and religion – no *one* alone is responsible – have constructed a view of the world as composed of dead, inert bits of matter ~ the cosmos, the earth, bodies – devoid of life. Bodies, then deemed the only “things” worthy of soul or mind -Man-made in the image of God who could not be thought to dwell in the world below, is therefore, above – out of this world and the dark was doomed.

A lifeless earth and creatures - here for the taking -
 Degraded, pillaged, left scarred.
Human bodies – worn ambivalently
 Ranked accordingly –
God-like - Earth-like
 dismissed – a temporary home
 pillaged – the spoils of war
 Left scarred – racism, sexism, classism, heterosexism
 split – searching – there must be more than this story....

Do you know? Do you know?

There is more to this story...and there are other stories as well, that help us to reimagine our relationship to the dark...to create fuller, more nuanced understandings of the dark and ourselves and our relationship with each other and the world.

There are, of course, new and ancient stories from science, philosophy and religions, which render simplistic and, hence, irrelevant the bifurcation of reality and truth into black and white, dark and light, good guys and bad guys.

These stories tell us of the interconnectedness of reality, the pulsing of life in and through all that is, the creative power of giant black holes to shape galaxies;

These stories are told by voices from the margins - a dark, unseen place - where subjugated knowledges irrupt in a plurality of truths,

These stories tell us of divinity found in rich, black earth and the cycles of life. These stories expose the thinness of dualistic analysis and reveal the complexity and ambiguity within which we live and struggle...

These stories are rich and messy; disturbing and elating.

They lure us to possibilities hither to unheard of...to shades of color not revealed in the only two dimensions that dualism permits.

Ancient stories, too, can take us other realms to connect us with the deeper wisdom that our reading is pointing to...

One such story is the myth of Demeter and Persephone of the famed Eleusinian mysteries...

There are various versions of this ancient story and many interpretations...such is the power and purpose of myth...

But in all versions this is a myth of transformation and the inescapable cycles of life.

In the best-known version of this story Demeter, the earth and grain Goddess, cheerfully spends her time with her only daughter Kore who represents youthful innocence. They revel in each other's company.

One day as they are walking in the fields, the earth opens and Kore is abducted by Hades and taken to the underworld and raped, held captive by Hades. Demeter, in her sadness and fury, rages at the loss of her daughter and withdraws her life-giving powers from the earth, causing all the plants to die and the people to suffer from hunger.

Bereft, Demeter wanders the earth entreating the gods to help her find her daughter. Only Hecate, goddess of the crossroads, helps her, whispering where Demeter might find Kore.

Demeter negotiates Kore's return through the messenger, Hermes, who retrieves Kore – now become Persephone through the transformation of her journey. Before leaving the Underworld, Persephone eats three (or four or six) pomegranate seeds, which insures that she will return to the underworld for a portion of the year.

In another, some say earlier version, of this story reconstructed by Charlene Spretnak, Kore is enjoying the company of her mother and the lovely earth. Kore's joy is life-producing for where she steps sweet, green shoots often appear.

Resting in reverie one day she tells her mother of her encounters with the spirits of the dead, wandering lost and restless. Moved by their pain, Kore vows to go to them to assure and ease their transition.

Despite her mother's pleas to stay in the warmth, sunshine and beauty of the world above, Kore is compelled by her love to journey into the underworld.

It is in response to her grief at her daughter's absence that Demeter withdraws her power until her daughter returns.

Persephone enters the underworld with three poppies (her favorite flower) and three sheaves of wheat. Taking her torch below, she finds the spirits aimless and in despair. She beckons each one to come to her and gazes into the eyes. She squeezes the seed of a pomegranate and paints the forehead with the juice, saying,

“You have waxed into the fullness of life
And waned into darkness;
May you be renewed in tranquility and wisdom.”

Which ever of the versions we look at, Kore becomes Persephone, the Queen of the Underworld. She returns to the underworld to initiate them into their new world. She entered the world of the dark mystery and was transformed by the encounter and transforms those she touches.

This foundational myth of the Eleusinian mysteries reveals the wisdom to which James is calling us – that the dark is a place of germination, depth, mystery - that we move within the cycles of the seasons – inevitable, rich, challenging.

Demeter and Persephone embody the cycles of birth, growth, fullness, release and rebirth in which dark and light, light and dark fold into each other –

Spring to Summer, Summer to Autumn, Autumn to Winter
New moon to waxing, waxing to full moon, full moon to waning moon, waning to dark moon.

These cycles ubiquitous. They are there in every breath. The in-breathe, pause, out-breath...

Every exhale a little death

Every inhale a little rebirth

And at our last breath, She is there.

To live in rhythm of these cycles brings us balance
All things live in that rhythm – from the cosmos to quarks –
all things becoming and perishing
becoming and perishing.

There is a time for light and dark.

For we would be impoverished if we sought, or saw, only light – as if that were possible...

And we do not need to negate or abandon Light –

It is a symbol of hope in troubled times –when we need to know that there is light at the end of the tunnel - and it's not a train.

Because there are times when the journey to the depths *is* that of the rape of Persephone.

Times, perhaps, of illness, despair or loneliness.

And we rage and we journey in...for this, too, will bring with it transformations of which we could not dream.

We are held differently in those dark nights of the soul that we all at one time or another face if we have consciously embraced the power and transformation that the dark brings – indeed - often it is those dark nights that lead us to our most powerful insights.

And always and everywhere we abide in the Great Mystery.

We need the dark for there are some things that can only be learned in the dark.

The dark of night to sleep, to dream, to imagine, to rest, to be restored.

The dark of winter – transforming dark. And it is the dark that nurtures and sustains all life.

Seeds in the womb

Seeds germinating in the ground -

Animals hibernating in frozen stillness, breathing ever so slightly,

Yet, still sustained by the breath of all Life.

All are born from the redeeming dark....

As the days get shorter, and many people wake up and go to work in the dark, and come home in the dark, we hear folks bemoan the loss of the light. You know, I think that this is a function of a part in all of us that longs to *slow down* with the lessening light.

A part of us that is connected to some dimly remembered, indwelling past, that yearns to live in and through the natural rhythms of cycles of nature and life, so central to the myth-making of Persephone and Demeter.

We live at a frenetic pace are...engage in non-stop activity. There is constant stimulation everywhere – sensory overload - from electronic sources, bombardment from advertising where ever we go, wherever we look. All of this amidst the obligations and responsibilities of family, job, church – and concerns for the world

Just at the time when the winter dark beckons us to rest, to be still, to dream, to shhh – we are in the most frantic of times.

We can, however, balance and reclaim the dark in our own lives.

Of course, we can't return to some romanticized version of the past – you know, when we rise with the roosters, plow the lower forty, and are sitting around the fire by sunset - but we *can* give the dark a place in our lives...

and open to depths productive of truths not otherwise exposed...

When we open to the depths we enter the place of infinite beginnings...

In a couple of weeks we'll be celebrating in story and song the various traditions that tell of the return of the light, but I'd like to suggest that we not go there too quickly...

Let us pause...listen for the voices from the margins... refuse the dualisms of black and white constructions.

Take time to slow down and be still. Turn off the car radio and be with the silence – pay attention to how you feel. Simply notice it.

Take breaks at work, unapologetically – know that it's an act of love and nurturance for yourself.

Have dinner by candlelight, even if you're by yourself, or with the whole family.

Try for a day not to turn on the lights, use candles when it gets dark – just be meditate.

See what comes up.

Notice your dreams and write them down. What is your unconscious saying to you?

Be gentle with yourself – compassionate with others.

Simply be mindful of the pace you keep. How fast do you want when going from place to place? Are you going at a breakneck speed?

Walk slower. Look up at the sky. Listen for birds. At night look up and be enveloped by black velvet.

Try not talking for a day. Write a poem.

Take walks outdoors. Allow the earth to nurture you.

Join Persephone in choosing to enter the depths - the luminous darkness –embrace the dark and let that dark and stillness embrace and teach you.

Know that you are of infinite value – just as you are.

May you be renewed in tranquility and wisdom.

As we spin inexorably closer to the longest night,

As we await the birth of light...

As day gives way to night...

As in-breath yields to out-breath...

May we find rest to do the work at hand...

To act justly...to live fully...to Love deeply...to right the story

May we find rest for our bodies, comfort for our souls, and peace among us.

May Dark Redeem us.