

“Courage for the Dark Night of the Soul”

A Sermon by Rev. Dick Weston-Jones, March 9, 2008

For the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Hillsborough

This morning I'm going to talk about climbing out of depression, an awful experience that most of us have at some time. I'm not referring to chronic or clinical depression. That's a condition that calls for medical treatment. "The Dark Night of the Soul" is a deep sadness reflected in a normal angst that can come and go and come again. It's a time when laughter seems a luxury though it might be the best medicine.

That must have been true for the minister who went into the hospital with what he thought was a bad case of heartburn and wound up with a quadruple heart by-pass. The Moderator of his church came to see him in intensive care, and tried to cheer him up by telling him about the supportive message the Coordinating Council wanted to send to him.

"The Council met last night," he told the minister, "and they asked me to visit you to tell you of their hope for a complete and quick recovery, and that they hope you will soon be back among us, by a vote of 5 to 4."

Democracy has its attributes but providing comfort to a person experiencing the Dark Night of the Soul is not one of them. You feel completely alone when the Dark Night comes upon you, even when loved ones reach out to comfort you.

Recovery from a life-threatening operation may be easy compared with coming back from self-doubt, from what seem to be overwhelming contradictions and emptiness. T. S. Eliot spoke of this kind of depression in "The Hollow Men" as "shape without form, shade without color, paralyzed force, gesture without meaning." In his novel *The Crack-Up*, F. Scott Fitzgerald said, "In a real dark night of the soul it is always three o'clock in the morning." That's a time too late and too early, a time of cobwebs and regrets.

St. John of the Cross gave us the phrase "Dark Night of the Soul." It was the title of a book of essays and poems about depression that he wrote 400 some years ago. He said his solution to the emptiness and sadness was to reach "union with God by the Road of Spiritual Negation." He found resolution in self-denial. His comfort was his belief in the power and vastness of the Almighty Other who was so great while he, a mere mortal, was so insignificant.

That wouldn't work for me. As a religious naturalist, I look elsewhere for the strength to face and overcome my spiritual angst. Some of the people I've known in my ministry have taught me a lot about overcoming it with what they did with their lives.

Forty years ago, just as I was becoming a minister I met Stella di Geronimo, a quiet woman whose defeat of cancer still inspires me. I'm sure none of you has ever heard of her. Stella was an athlete in her mid-40s. She played tennis every day, sometimes between odd jobs as a temporary worker, but she always played tennis. She was very good at it.

Life was not easy for her though her husband, whom she didn't like much, provided a good income. Her high school-aged son was a poor student who had dropped out of school in the 10th grade. He had banged around from job to job, the kind a not-very-motivated 16-year-old dropout can get before he came to me.

He found his solace in sexuality. His girl friend became pregnant. They asked me to marry them. I wanted them to have counseling before I would agree. They refused, and eloped. That

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was hard on Stella but she stood firm. She kept playing tennis daily and doing her motherly tasks. One day she and a partner won the California doubles championship for their age group. Ecstasy was deeply carved in the leather of her tanned face when I saw her that day. The victory contrasted with everything else in her life. The next day she entered a hospital. In 3 weeks, she was dead.

I said she had defeated cancer. Stella had had the disease for years. Once she was so weak she couldn't stand, and doctors told her she would never walk without help again. But she came back to play tennis and her game only got better.

She was a wonder. The doctor said he couldn't explain her strength in the face of the illness. He didn't know how much time she really had—not much, he thought. He often told her not to exert herself physically because that might cause a relapse. She went out to play tennis. Courage for the Dark Night of the Soul? Where did she get it? Her Dark Nights were many. Courage? I'm sure sometimes Stella was terrified. But she did what she had to do. That was enough. Stella would have said she had no courage, only that she had her life to live. She took from each day what it had to give, gave each day what she had, doing it, doing it.

Bill Williams was an obese 55-year-old in another congregation a few years later. I didn't know Bill well, certainly not as well as Stella. He had been ordered into the hospital by his doctor who found that his arteries were so clogged that a heart attack was likely at any time. The doctor said he needed open-heart surgery to repair the damage. Bill was scared but he refused to agree to the operation. His family called me in. I really think it was the first time I had ever talked with him.

Our conversation was not profound, not about the seriousness of the operation or the meaning of his life or anything like that. I was about to go off on vacation the next day. I was feeling excited, hopeful for the future. I'm sure I shared that with him. Honestly, I couldn't remember what we had talked about three days later when his wife reached me on my vacation to tell me that Bill had died on the operating table that morning. I was floored.

She said he had changed his mind when I visited him, that something happened in that room between us from which he got the courage to have the operation, the operation that proved to be too late. Still she was grateful he had tried to save his life, though it failed.

"What did you say to him," she asked. I had to tell her that I had no idea. We only talked about how we felt that day, about where I was going, about little things in our lives—lots of little things, for a couple of hours. I think it was the little things that did it for him, as he realized how much they meant to him. Things like time with his daughters, about the job he mostly enjoyed and did well. But I really don't know. I know it wasn't my profound counseling skills that gave him courage.

"What a man does, that he has." Those are the words of the Unitarian architect Frank Lloyd Wright that are built into the wall over a fireplace in our Jacksonville, Florida UU church. What a woman does, that she has. It worked for Stella. It worked for Bill. It works for us all.

In *The Anatomy of an Illness*, another Unitarian, Norman Cousins, told of visiting Pablo Casals when he was 90. Casals, the most famous cellist in the world, was so racked by arthritis that his fingers curled up. His wife had to help him rise each morning, and supported him when he walked. But when he touched his cello, his fingers uncurled. He took the instrument in hand to create music as beautiful as any a decades-younger cellist could produce. They made him the master of his illness.

Each of us has a Dark Night to endure, but some transform that night into blazing day in spite of impossible contradictions.

Here is how I have known the Dark Night, as I described it in my meditation this morning:

Into the hollow,
the dusty space where nothing breathes,
only a whine buffs, and a howl scours
the emptiness within me.

Oh, that loneliness when no one knows
the hollowness within me—
only the whine and the howl
echo from the empty walls.
I doubt my being. I am afraid.

Open—open—
touch me gently.
Let me know you care, you hope.
You cannot fill that emptiness within me.
You can help me bear it.

Touch me with your eyes alone,
with your caring eyes.

I have no strength for more.

That's the Dark Night of the Soul that I have experienced. I don't ask my religion to take it away, or look to a wise person to heal me.

I don't believe that knowledge of a "right way" to live lets any of us avoid the dark night. No one finally escapes it. Dylan Thomas advised

Do not go gentle into that dark night;
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

He was speaking of a final Dark Night, death. Long before it, there are others aplenty for many of us, and knowledge cannot remove them.

In one of his poems E. E. Cummings said

(nor could all earth's rotting scholars guess
that life shall not for living find the rule).

There is no safety, no way but courage to face the Dark Night. For me the courage has two aspects. First, direct and simple action. And second, the caring of others.

My own Dark Nights have come from self-doubt, a sense of failure because I hadn't met my expectations of myself. Sometimes those got confused with expectations that others had of me, but the ones that led to my Dark Nights were my own. Compared with that, cancer was easy when it grabbed my body 10 years ago and said, "I own you." It did not.

When I centered on my sense of failure I depressed myself and moved into irresolution. The

night grew darker and my strength ebbed. Courage? I wasn't aware of it. When I escaped, it was because I took the action I had been avoiding, going into the face of that which I dreaded the most and confronting it.

Imagination makes the source of despair seem larger. Facing it does not mean we will destroy it. Stella did die. But she had life before her death. Bill did die. But he took the little things that he had always taken for granted and used them to remind himself what it was that gave meaning to his life. Pablo Casals tore the beauty of his music from each day of arthritic pain. He took it and found strength in his crippled hands.

My Dark Night and yours may not be as dramatic as theirs. When I've been most down, the way I got out was by going straight to the source of the pain and confronting it. Did it disappear? No, but I got my proportions straightened out. I knew where I was and that gave me courage to face my next Dark Night.

Do it. Take action. You have to find the difference between paper dragons and real ones, and you can do that only by confronting them. Real dragons can slay you as they slew Stella and Bill, but not until you have wrested your life from them. Most dragons are made of paper, even the ones that can kill you. Find out. Do it. Act on it!

The second source of courage for my Dark Night is in the caring I've known from friends, and from my wife:

Open—open—
Touch me gently.
Let me know you care, you hope.
You cannot fill that emptiness within me.
You can help me bear it.

For each of us there can be someone to share the Dark Night even though each of us finally goes through it alone. For some of us a spouse or intimate friend can help the most. You don't have to be alone.

You can take action to find someone who cares, who will listen and, by listening, help you find your own strength: a counselor, a psychologist, a minister. My door is open, my phone available if you choose me. But only you can choose. No one else can make it happen.

Each of us must take responsibility to find someone to touch and be touched by. In that contact, she may begin to develop Courage for her Dark Night, to learn who the real adversary is and where her strength lies. I believe you'll find it in the same place where despair rested its head.

The space within me gives me room to grow.
I am not closed, full to the brim only with the anger,
the fear, the loneliness and pain.
They are there.

But also there are joy and courage,
a piece of you you brought to me
and a secret hope that no one knows.
Even I only sense its presence,
not its fullness.

Let it dance within me in that empty place
that gives me room to grow.

Let my emptiness never be filled,
but nourish my dance with its space,
its freedom and its conflict.
Let me open to myself
and know my strength.

Let me dance.

Ultimately I think the Dark Night of the Soul is the source of our deepest spirituality as well as our greatest testing. Its form is unique to each of us just as our lives give us all different challenges and different opportunities.

Many religions claim they reduce the pain and difficulty of the Dark Night, or make it go away. I don't think there is any way to do that, nor do I think it is even finally desirable. I would not give up the joy of creating myself to be free from the difficulty and ambiguity of freedom. Maybe I could have a few less cobwebs and regrets but no less love and no less pain. The end will take care of itself.

But if I ever have open-heart surgery, and come out of it alive and well, please keep the Moderator of my church away from me for a few days longer unless the vote is stronger than 5 to 4.

Meditation

I

I see you and wonder what abyss looms—
or if this time you are solitary only,
not alone and lonely.

It is so hard to know if the void within you
has given birth to hope
or lies empty.

Within me a hope grows,
nourished by the birdsong
that woke me from my sleep today: a hope.

Does it have size and weight?
Is it real?
Can I tell you so you will know
where I am alive?

Can you tell me so I will know
where you are alive?

I will try.

II

Into the hollow
the dusty space where nothing breathes,
only a whine buffs, and a howl scours
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III

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Opening Words

Sometimes I feel like the spoils in a battle
between good and evil, right now,
or that I'm both sides doing the fighting,
and I'm not even sure of the outcome nor
the terms.

—from *The Cancer Journals* by Audre
Lorde