

Dark Nights of the Soul....

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In the dark night something of your makeup comes to an end... You may find in that darkness a key to your source, the larger soul that makes you who you are and holds the secrets of your existence. It is not enough to rely on the brilliance of your learning and intellect. You have to give yourself receptively to the transforming natural powers that remain mysteriously dark.

You don't choose a dark night for yourself. It is given to you. Your job is to get close to it and sift it for its gold

Enter the darkness with all your strength and intelligence, and perhaps find a new vision and a deeper sense of self.

The dark night of the soul provides a rest from the hyperactivity of the good times and the strenuous attempts to understand yourself and to get it all right. During the dark night there is no choice but to surrender control, give in to unknowing, and stop and listen to whatever signals of wisdom might come along. It's a time of enforced retreat and perhaps unwilling withdrawal. The dark night is more than a learning experience; it's a profound initiation into a realm that nothing in the culture, so preoccupied with external concerns and material success, prepares you for.

The dark night calls for a spiritual response, not only a therapeutic one. It pushes you to the edge of what is familiar and reliable, stretching your imagination about how life works and who or what controls it all. The dark night serves the spirit by forcing you to rely on something beyond human capacity. It can open you up to new and mysterious possibilities.

If the dark night is indeed a rite of passage, your job is to let the transformation take place. Be sculpted, renewed, changed. You are the

caterpillar becoming the butterfly. Your task is to let the change happen. Do what you can to participate in and cautiously and artfully further the process. To be a person means that you are always becoming, and a dark night of the soul is one sign that you are alive.

Here is the key idea: stop thinking of your dark nights as problems and begin to see them as opportunities for change

To do this important work, we need the wisdom of a good spiritual guide who can keep our attention to the spirit without ignoring the deeper soul.

What does the soul want? Answer that one and you are well on your way toward healing. Note that the question is not, what do *you* want, but rather what is *wanted* at a level beyond and beneath consciousness.

Tell your story to whoever will listen to it with respect. It is helpful if you have a friend who will respond to your story with good questions and observations. I have learned as a therapist not to succumb passively to the story a client tells me. A story is often rather rigidly formed and has its own will and ego. I usually ask for a dream as well, and I notice how the dream, in spite of its mysteriousness, will shed light where a story controls and conceals. The combination of stories and dreams works best for me. I treat them as in counterpoint, one correcting and complementing the other.

The tales that emerge from your dark night deconstruct your existence and put you again in the flowing, clear, and cool river of life.

In the dark night of the soul you need not give up your intelligence, but you may have to change your idea of what it means to be wise in the conduct of your life. You may have to adopt a different kind of knowing, one is suited to the darkness and not in conflict with it. You need special vision for your dark night because the ordinary ways of thinking may not work. Seeing in the emotional dark is a special talent that might draw out resources you never knew you had.

We all have qualities that are opposed to the ones we want the world to see. Some are innocuous, some serious. This material we repress holds large quantities of vitality. We suppress it out of anxiety, fearful of what would happen if it ever got out. We are often afraid of the dark because it is so alive.

You can expect unusual occurrences during your dark night of the soul. It is a time of special vulnerability, not only the kind that makes you feel weak, but also the kind that opens you to signals in the world around you. You may not know what it all means, but in general it is inviting you to exist in a bigger world, where magic happens and the mysterious is all that counts.

Against the greatest odds, you have to keep your wits about you and refuse to surrender to anyone or anything less than divine. You have to be faithful to the mystery taking place in your heart, rather than to any idea or system that would try, with the best of intentions, to disempower you and make you theirs. All of this requires an active reframing of your situation, turning it inside out, knowing that what appears to be defeat is actually survival. And none of this has to be a denial of your tragedy or the repression of your feelings. I am describing a spiritual attitude rather than a psychological technique. It requires a transcendence of your situation and a vision of things that is far more expansive than the circumstances imply. It asks for a degree of strength and imagination that can only come from a spiritual point of view.

A spiritual outlook sublimates the darkness. It takes suffering as a starting point and as the means of seeing things anew. The suffering penetrates the status quo. It is life moving onward. You go forward from exactly where you are in your thoughts, feelings, and fantasies to a place you have never known. Living creatively, you don't manufacture a future; you grow the life that is present. You have joy because you have found something that has life in it. Your soul is awake, and you have some spark of divinity in you.

People often ask how life can be good, how there can be a God, if tragedy is part of it. Maybe an answer eludes them because they are looking for logic.

Sorrow can remove your attention from the active life and focus it on the things that matter most. When you are going through a period of extreme loss or pain, you reflect on the people who mean the most to you instead of on personal success, and the deep design of your life instead of distracting gadgets and entertainments. You may be more open to the beauty of your world as a relief from distress. Beauty is always present, but ordinarily you may not notice it because of your priorities or your absorption in other things.

Educate yourself in your emotion, so that you not only get past it ultimately, but you gain from it from having penetrated deep into its nature.

A dark knight of the soul also reaches deep, usually through sadness, emptiness, or anxiety. You can't always explain it in terms of life events, and you can't get rid of it through sheer understanding or willpower. It is deep-seated. It may connect up with hidden memories from childhood and with emotions that are too vague to deal with easily. Many people walk through life defended against all positive influences. They are not open to the invitations and messages coming at them at every turn. They wonder why life feels empty and meaningless, when the problem is not the absence of meaning, but their blindness and deafness to it.

Especially during its dark moments, you can serve your soul best by being vigilant to what is going on. This is not the same as trying to figure out what is happening. Look closely at what is happening in your life. Don't judge everything too soon. Take it in and savor each element. Take note of the most subtle flavors.

Things are happening to you that you don't initiate, and you have to look at those things carefully and closely. This kind of self-interest may then turn into a positive kind of self-love, and that is the beginning of healing.

Just as the beauty of nature includes storms, droughts, and geological eruptions, so the beauty of a person includes emotional storminess, dry

periods, and occasional explosions. To care for the soul in earnest, you have to learn to appreciate the dark elements as well as the light ones. As you come to appreciate your darkness, you may also understand that some of your lightness may be a defense against the dark. You may present a calm exterior, whereas your interior life is stormy and turbulent. You may not even allow yourself to confront your darkness.

On the other hand, you may realize that your happiness and tranquility are due to having established a relationship to your dark side. A rich and stable sense of security can arise from appeasement with your darkness. The dark has much to offer your pursuit of happiness. The two work in tandem, one feeding the other.