

Moving through the Darkness  
A sermon of Music and Verse  
Rev. Charles Blustein Ortman and Mitchell Vines  
January 6, 2008

**Introduction: Music:** Our Evenings

Leos Janacek

**Part I:**

**Verse: It Is the Season;**

Through frosted windows glow the hearth's warm light,  
As fading day casts shadows 'cross the lawn,  
And grey meets grey as winter gathers might,  
Undaunted as the chimney starts to yawn.  
Farewell brave day as twilight draweth nigh.  
Perchance on morrow sun will gather high.

(From: *The End of a Winter Day*, by Dan Young)

In olden days, no matter our heritage, our ancestors were a rural people. The whole world operated on an agrarian calendar. Seasons of festival or fasting were tied to seasons of human husbandry with the earth. Liturgical calendars, ecclesiastical schedules of spiritual life, developed to keep religion in synch with the more natural rhythms of bodies: men and women, the earth, the moon and the sun.

In olden times, when the harvest was brought home and safely stored for the season ahead, when the darkness of night stretched to cover the edges of the day, when the rhythms of plant life slowed, the rhythms of the people relaxed, too, in a kind of syncopated harmony.

In olden times, this twilight season was a time for healing, a time for the mending of harness and plow. It was a time for solitude, for turning thoughts inward, and for remembering. It was a time for discovering the wear and tear from another year of aging, for uncovering losses and reconnecting with strengths. It was a time to gain perspective as the season just past settled into its place among its kin of yesteryear.

In olden times, in our provincial, ancestral past, this was a season for gathering around the stove or the fire, for long conversations, for sharing the solitude and the memories with family and community. It was a time for the sharing of discoveries, and losses, and insights. It was a time for households and communities to join in review of the season just past and to brace for the one to come.

In olden times, in some parts of the world, this season was a time of marking time, of putting things away, and waiting; a time of emptying out and of expectancy. To everything there is a season, and this one holds both a time to seek and a time to lose. It is a season of twilight, heading into darkness.

This is the season beyond the festivals of most liturgical calendars: on the eve of the Epiphany, on the Christian calendar; post Hanukkah in Judaism – the reminder of the dark days of Syrian oppression, ; in Islam, these are the days just past Ramadan; days of fasting and soul searching, of spiritual and physical discipline, days of turning inward.

In our culture and in this time, we are just past the winter solstice. Now is the season of the long-haul, a season of cold and darkness, of still almost momentary days and interminable nights. It is a good time still though, a natural time, a spiritual time, this season of darkness. It is a good time still, for looking inward to meet our innermost selves – there waiting to meet us – like the germ of a seed waiting to meet the plant it is destined to become. Retired and much loved, Unitarian Universalist Minister, Max Coats once wrote:

When love is felt or fear is known,  
When holidays and holy days  
and such times come,  
When anniversaries arrive  
by calendar or consciousness,  
When seasons come, as seasons do,  
old and known, but somehow new,

When lives are born or people die,  
When something sacred's sensed  
in soil or sky,  
Mark the time.  
Respond with thought or prayer  
or smile or grief,

Let nothing living slip between  
the fingers of the mind,  
For all of these are holy things  
We will not, cannot, find again."

**Music:** Divided Arpeggios

Béla Bartók

## **Part II:**

### **Verse: Entering the Dark;**

The medieval mystic, Meister Eckhart wrote:

This word is a hidden word  
and comes in the darkness of the night.  
To enter this darkness put away  
all voices and sounds  
all images and likenesses.  
For no image has ever reached into the soul's foundation  
Where God herself  
with her own being is effective."

We are invited by the long nights to enter the darkness. Eckhart said, "The ground of the soul is dark." It's frightening sometimes to enter such darkness, to dive so deep. We can't know what we'll find there.

The soul is as deep as the universe is wide, and it is in the darkness of those great depths where D. H. Lawrence tells us that in the clearings, "gods come and go." It is a place where our inmost fountains spring forth. It is in the darkness of those depths where we are invited to come, to meet ourselves, to sit, on that dark soulful ground with the gods of our own making and finding. It is there in the dark that we are invited to come to our center, there to meet the source of our strength.

A while ago, a young man came to see me. He was on a spiritual quest, he said. But he was struggling to find the time, the time to engage his spirit. "There's so much to do," he said. "My work is so important to so many people. I just can't find the time, the time for my own discipline."

He told me about the god he worships in public, the god of success. But closer to home, the god that makes him tremble is the god of failure. The god of success is all around us, of course. Its altar of sacrifice is bathed in glitter and in bright shining lights. He is a demanding god that requires the burnt offerings of our creativity and love; he requires the burnt offerings of our faith, any faith in that which abides.

The god of failure lies low, in the shadows, just on the edge of the darkness. It poses there, an imposter, pretending to be the deepest and the darkest. But it is not. It only lurks on the edges, like Hera's watchdog, Argus, at the entrance of the cave, guarding the path inward.

As the young man sat and talked, he began to see that beneath even his fear of failure was a deeper fear of stepping into his fullness of being, into his fullness of power, into his creativity and into his capacity to love. He began to see that beyond – below – his successes and failures, is a passage into what he truly hopes to make of his life. And he began to see, that he has to spend time in the dark, adjusting his eyes to see the dark soulful ground, in order to find his path to that future.

What gods, I wonder, come and go in your dark clearings.

The Dream Keeper, Langston Hughes

Bring me all of your dreams,  
    You dreamer,  
    Bring me all your  
    Heart melodies  
    That I may wrap them  
    In a blue cloud-cloth  
    Away from the too-rough fingers  
    Of the world.

The darkness of this winter season invites us in to meet ourselves being within the universe itself.

**Music:** Visions Fugitive no. 9

Sergey Prokofiev

**Part III:**

**Verse: Being in the Dark;**

Unitarian Universalist poet and songwriter, Shelley Jackson Denham writes in, "Dark of Winter."

"Dark of winter, soft and still,  
your quiet calm surrounds me.  
Let my thoughts go where they will;  
ease my mind profoundly.  
And then my soul will sing a song,  
a blessed song of love eternal.  
Gentle darkness, soft and still,  
bring your quiet to me.

Darkness, soothe my weary eyes,  
that I may see more clearly.  
When my heart with sorrow cries,  
comfort and caress me.

And then my soul may hear a voice,  
A still, small voice of love eternal.  
Darkness, when my fears arise,  
let your peace flow through me.”

Being in the dark is like giving in to death... a little. It's not so much acquiescence as it is a surrender. It's letting go of what we know and embracing, for all we are worth, the mystery that lies below that which we know. Whether it is now or later, death awaits us all. Whether we engage in it now or never, the mystery sustains us all.

In “Measure for Measure,” Shakespeare wrote, “If I must die I will encounter darkness as a bride and hug it in my arms.”

An unknown poet writes, “We are all amateurs at facing death.” In so many ways it's also true that we are amateurs at facing *life*. In death we let go of life. In the darkness though, we embrace it. “The paradox is,” author, Catholic priest and theologian, Albert Nolan suggests, “that a [person] who fears death is already dead, whereas the [person] who has ceased to fear death has at that moment begun to live.”

Feminist theologian, Susan Griffin writes, “Nothingness spreads around us. But in this nothing we find what we did not know existed.” When we let go, when we go into the dark, we come face-to-face with nothingness. Experiences of nothingness are never superficial; they are about the essence of our being.

In the darkness of winter, below the surface of the ground, the seed lies quietly waiting. So imperceptively moving within it are the stirrings of Life. In our own darkness, beneath the glitter and the bustle, beneath the successes and the failures, beneath the joys and the sorrows, life stirs in us and calls us to itself – for more than our own individual sakes, it calls us... for the sake of Life itself.

18th Century mystic, Indian poet, Rabindranath Tagore wrote:

Peace, my heart, let the time for the parting be sweet.  
Let it not be a death but completeness.  
Let love melt into memory and pain into songs.  
Let the flight through the sky end in the folding of the wings over the nest.  
Let the last touch of your hands be gentle like the flower of the night.  
Stand still, O Beautiful End, for a moment, and say your last words in silence.  
I bow to you and hold up my lamp to light you on your way.

20<sup>th</sup> Century Indian sage and saint, Mahatma Gandhi wrote, “True individuality consists in reducing oneself to zero. The secret of life is selfless service. The highest ideal for us is to become free from attachment.”

**Music:** : Prelude in C# minor

Dmitry Shostakovich

#### **Part IV:**

#### **Verse: Finding Life and a Faith to Live It;**

Alfred Lord Tennyson:

Ring out, wild bells, to the wild sky,  
The flying cloud, the frosty light;  
The year is dying in the night;  
Ring out, wild bells, and let him die.

Ring out the old, ring in the new,  
Ring, happy bells, across the snow:  
The year is going, let him go;  
Ring out the false, ring in the true.

Contemporary American author, poet and sage, Wendell Barry writes,

“When despair for the world grows in me and I wake in the night at the least sound in fear of what my life and my children’s lives may be, I go and lie down where the wood drake rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds.

I come into the peace of wild things who do not tax their lives with forethought of grief. I come into the presence of still water. I feel above me the day-blind stars waiting with their light. For a time I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.”

When we’re in the midst of things, when the lights are ablaze and action is overly apace, that’s when we’re merely skimming the surface. But the holidays pass and the long winter nights persist. It’s when we wake late in the night, or go into the darkness of our own bidding that we see the ropes of those ties that bind. It’s there in the darkness we are tested.

What will our answers be? Are the ropes that hold our worlds together gnarled and frayed from overuse? Or have we tended them carefully with this time and our diligence? And isn’t this, the season of darkness, a time to pay attention, to mend our souls, to shore our faith?

J. Krishnamurti, writer and speaker on philosophical and spiritual subjects wrote of this season, and its starkness, its inherent promise and of the faith that might be evoked in it all:

Have you ever noticed a tree standing naked against the sky,  
How beautiful it is?  
All its branches are outlined, and in its nakedness  
There is a poem, there is a song.  
Every leaf is gone and it is waiting for the spring.  
When the spring comes, it again fills the tree with  
The music of many leaves,  
Which in due season fall and are blown away.  
And this is the way of life.

Margaret Williams Baxton builds on such faith:

Once upon a time I was  
Now I am  
Some day I will become

Once there was  
And now there is  
Soon there will be  
And some day there surely shall be

Once upon a time we were  
Now we are

And some day (Hallelujah!) we shall surely become.  
Amen. Amen

Baxton writes out of her faith; she has the audacity to anticipate that which is yet to even exist. To everything there is a season and a time for every purpose under heaven. It is this season, it is this time of darkness, which is the season for becoming, which is the time for building a faith in becoming.

19<sup>th</sup> Century philosopher and psychologist, William James wrote, "...one may say that faith is the readiness to act in a cause the prosperous issue of which is not certified to us in advance."  
O, come; O, come, Emmanuel. This is our time for making ready.

Let us put down the busy work of our hands and our minds. Let us drink in the waters of fountains that run deep. Let us be filled again and anew, and in the filling find ourselves to be ready, to be eager – to love... and to live.

Again from Langston Hughes:  
So since I'm still here livin',  
I guess I will live on.  
I could have died for love –  
But for livin' I was born.

Though you may hear me holler,  
And you may see me cry –  
I'll be dogged, sweet baby,  
If you gonna see me die.

*Life is fine!*  
*Fine as wine!*  
*Life is fine!"*

Welcome to the invitation of this dark season;  
An invitation: To mark the time;  
To love winter when it's time for waiting;  
To enter the dark and the deep;  
To let go of fear, and to embrace instead life and a faith in living it.  
*Life is fine! Fine as any wine! Life is fine!"*

The nights have already begun to shorten. It goes so fast. I bid you:  
To take the time in this season for the mending of your soul;  
Take the time in this season for the experience of your breath;  
Take the time in this season to learn again – who you are.

**Music:** Good Night!      Leos Janacek