

## **Trusting the Journey: The Transfiguration of Grief**

When you leave a lighted room and go out into the night, you are almost totally lost and blind at first. Then, as your eyes grow more accustomed to the night, the outlines of things begin to loom more clearly; shadowed presences becomes visible. There is an inner depth and texture to darkness that we never notice until we have to negotiate the absence of light. (John O'Donohue - *Eternal Echoes: Celtic Reflections on Our Yearning to Belong*)

With another holiday upon us, many people may be feeling the sting of grief. Holidays lend themselves to emphasizing our current life circumstances, both joyous and painful. For some, the observance of a Thanksgiving and Christmas can bring a sense of longing and emptiness to those in early grief...without the physical presence of a loved one. Because of the tragic death of my beloved nephew, this holiday (1993) is particularly poignant for our family.

O'Donohue's words so aptly describe the darkness of grief and also the opportunity for transfiguration. When we are thrown into sudden darkness, there is usually a feeling of shock and disconcertion. As we wait with the anticipation, the feelings of helplessness and hopelessness may quickly follow when the lights don't come back on quickly...particularly if we are in an unfamiliar place.

As we become more acclimated to the darkness and slowly begin to get our bearings, we may begin to recognize familiar landmarks and objects. Our halting steps forward are often interspersed by feeling uncertain and vulnerable. If we are in a strange place, we eventually move slowly, extraordinarily aware of what we are sensing – sounds and things we feel or smell. We look for clues to guide us.

The phrase "Dark Night of the Soul" that St. John of the Cross coined, promises that our Dark Night brings us spiritual gifts we may not notice or accept at other times in our lives. What the Night beholds will become clearer as we become less afraid.

The beauty of the stars - sometimes shooting across the sky – thousands or millions of miles away, is a sight we cannot see with the naked eye during times of light. We are reminded that stars are always present, even though we cannot see them. By befriending the darkness, we can also find a stillness – which isn't always welcomed - that we may never have noticed before. During the Night we experience things, sometimes frightening, sometimes beautiful and peaceful, that the noise of day does not allow us to hear.

As a young child, a wise person took me by the hand after I cried out in the darkness of a closet after a terrifying experience. I felt certain that someone was trying to get into my room from outside. The firm hold and gentle voice of my father began calming my fears. As he told me there was nothing to be afraid of he took me out the front door of the house, and showed me my bedroom window. There we discovered the culprit. A paracantha bush was blowing in the wind of a passing summer storm and scratching on the screen of my window.

As darkness progresses, we may still yearn for the light of day, but we no longer need to be terrified that we won't survive the Night. As surely as night follows day, day also follows night. This is the rhythm of our existence.

Listen to the night and (as John O'Donohue says) "Be open to learning what the night wants to show you." Take hold of someone's outstretched hand, befriend the stars and marvel that they never leave us.

Our lives are forever changed during our Night Journeys, not just in painful ways, but also in beautiful ways. We are all charged with the responsibility of parenting (meaning: to bring forth) and caring for those around us, whether we have the official role of parenting or not. For we can each be there with an outstretched hand. As we help to "bring forth" one another during our times of difficulty and when we do we are each transfigured. This is what God has asked us to do for one another.

"Transfiguration is when something changes so much it is actually more fully itself than ever and it is irradiated with beauty." (John O'Donohue) This is what occurs during the Night, for it is the wisdom and rhythm of Spirit.

May all those reading this have a blessed holiday and remember the stars are forever with us.

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