

Wednesday January 8, 2014

The hushed and holy darkness

By Jim Taylor

Two weeks ago, I published parts of an article by Alan Reynolds, that contrasted light and life with darkness and death. This week, I want to say a good word for darkness. Darkness has been too easily equated with sin and evil.

“Hello darkness, my old friend,” Simon and Garfunkel wrote many decades ago. I feel that way about darkness too. Not that I’ll object to longer days and summer warmth. I hate getting out of bed in the cold and blackness of a winter morning.

But winter evenings are different. When I take my dog for a walk on a clear night, the stars glitter overhead with a burnished brightness.

I carry a flashlight only to make sure I don’t fall on stairs or ice. And to make sure cars can see me at the side of the road.

When a flashlight illumines a small pool of pavement, that’s all I see. I might as well wear blinders, the way horses used to.

In the rural area where I live, I’m blessed by darkness. I’d far rather walk in darkness than in the cold glare of urban streetlights attempting to create artificial day. The darkness wraps itself comfortably around me. It almost feels sacred.

Seeds germinate in darkness. Plants spurt upwards during the night. We make love in darkness. In darkness, we experience the healing of sleep, sleep that knits the raveled sleeve of care....

Darkness is the womb of daylife.

Greatness comes later

In the darkness, we read, a child was born who would change the world.

Of course, no one knew that at the time. As John Spong wrote in his *Jesus for the Non-Religious*, “Birth stories are always fanciful. No one waits outside a maternity ward for a great person to be born.”

Crowds did not gather outside a hut in the village of Qunu waiting for the first black president of South Africa to be born. No one expected a baby girl born in Albania to become Mother Teresa. Christian tourists did not flock to Bethlehem (or wherever it was) to cheer for the first wail from an infant who would later be hailed as their saviour.

The greatness came later. With it came the stories.

Alone at last

Christmas is long gone, now. The Christmas lights have gone. I miss them. Unlike streetlights, they don’t attempt to drive away darkness. I see Christmas lights as bright spirits dancing (as an old hymn put it) “amid the encircling gloom”.

Gloom? Well, sort of. Night is a time for subdued emotions. Musically speaking, life becomes a haunting, bittersweet nocturne rather than an allegro vivace. Nocturnes are often written for solo instruments -- appropriate, since darkness is when we find ourselves alone. The guests have gone, the nurses have changed shifts, the family slumbers.

It’s hardly surprising that people often die at night – they’re finally left alone.

“Is a puzzlement,” Yul Brunner mused in *The King and I*. Ironically, as, the days grow longer, I recognize that my own days grow shorter. My father lived to 93, my uncle to 94. I should still have many years ahead of me. But each day that passes leaves me with one day less.

In the hushed and holy darkness, I can think these thoughts, and not feel frightened of the future.

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YOUR TURN

The metaphor of walking, and how we walk, caught Lurna Tallman's interest: “I saw a psychological study recently that found seniors fall because fear interferes with their natural gait. I have fallen rather badly twice in the past few months. In one case I was upset, and in the second, fear of uneven ice was involved — I was trying to think my way across the ruts instead of trusting to experience — one of those times where the holistic right brain should have been allowed to lead. Thus, I have a scientific reason for reminding myself to walk confidently, despite my inner turmoil or the ragged environment. You have made beautifully clear your message that trusting ourselves and trusting the Master of the Universe are intimately entwined: one of the loveliest encouragements I have read for welcoming the New Year.”

Cliff Boldt thought I had “woven a very powerful metaphor into your column. Some of us will need a care giver close by, others a walker or cane, but we'll go.”

Suzanne Edgar also promised to walk boldly: “I am undergoing knee replacement surgery in a few weeks, and am looking forward to pain meaning it's getting better. I love the image of stepping forward boldly!”

Charles Hill wrote, “Great insight. Maybe there is also an opportunity to assess the direction in which we are walking and make a change. For instance, those who are walking in the direction of personal acquisition could redirect their path towards giving of time, energy and assets to those in need. Yes, we will all walk forward in some manner. The direction of our walk is the thing. If the direction of our walk is not what we would choose [like aging? JT], we can choose to walk with dignity and grace.”

In a second e-mail, Charles added, “Taking a risk by walking out of the comfortable (because it is predictable) rut. I am going to use this material as the basis of a devotional this Friday evening at a homeless shelter. The residents frequently ‘convert’ to Christianity but other than avoiding hell, it is meaningless to them. For most of them to make any changes in their life circumstances, they are going to have to move forward out of their comfortable but destructive habits and risk failure in such things as taking classes or even going to a church where they may be rejected by the ‘nice’ Christians. For them, any step forward is a ‘leap of faith.’”

Fran Ota had a comment about the previous week's column (and perhaps about this week's column, too) on light and darkness: “Whenever the darkness vs light discussion comes up, I tend to refer to Psalm 139. Darkness may be the absence of light, but there is never total darkness. So verses 11 and 12:

If I say, “Surely the darkness will hide me
and the light become night around me,”

even the darkness will not be dark to you;

the night will shine like the day,

for darkness is as light to you.

To God there is no distinction between the darkness and the light -- those are human limitations we have set on ourselves.”

Jeannette Liberty-Duns also wanted to clarify those images of light and dark: “I felt it necessary to respond about the thoughts around black and white. Although I am Caucasian I have a grandson who is brown, so maybe I am a little more sensitive to the image of black and white, good and evil, than most folks. I was once at a General Council committee meeting when someone was speaking about an issue and used the words ‘it wasn't black and white.’ I happened to be sitting beside a wonderful black woman so I asked her how those words made her feel. Her answer has always remained with me. She put her hand over her heart and said, ‘It hurts my heart’. There are many things in life that ‘hurt our heart’ but we don't need to knowingly use words that hurt another person’s heart.

Alan Reynolds had used the word “chesterfield,” and a few people still react. Pat Brush noted, “I grew up with a chesterfield. As an adult I started having a couch and later a sofa. I learned to stop using the word chesterfield as people would look at me funny and say ‘A what?’ Could possibly be because of globalization -- if I remember correctly, a chesterfield in some parts of the world is a small, often decorative, writing desk.”

Judy Fetter sent her condolences (as many of you have) on the death of my friend, and connected it to the calendar: “Not many of us are strangers to the mixture of joy and sorrow at this time of year. My theory is that as the sun moves south and light levels drop, so does the life force in us...and many of us just flicker out if we are ready to go. My father died in Dec. 23, fifty years ago, and my husband on December 9, seven years ago.

“We buried my father on Boxing Day, and the minister took as his text the line from the carol: ‘Christ was born for this.’ Very true.”

Judy also added a “Thank you also for Everyday Psalms, which I use almost every week, suitably credited, for prayer sheets I write for a Morning Prayer program at one of the local churches. Attended mostly by street people. I find your words so much more relevant to their -- and all of our -- needs, than the older versions.”

PSALM PARAPHRASES

According to the lectionary, this coming Sunday calls for Psalm 29. My NRSV calls it “The Voice of God in a Great Storm.” Given the storms that have swept most of North America recently, this paraphrase seemed appropriate:

- 1 Blow, blow, you winter winds.
Polish earth and sky with your power,
- 2 until every street and sidewalk is scoured clean,
until a whiter-than-snow earth reflects the glory of the heavens.
- 3 The spirit of the Lord roars across the oceans;
it bursts upon the mountains, and cascades down to the sea again.
- 4 The blast of the wind drowns out all other sounds;
the force of the wind drives the clouds like wild horses.
- 5 It bends birches and willows to the ground;
it breaks the strongest branches of the mighty oak.
- 6 Snowflakes swirl before the storm;
mice and gophers scurry for their holes.
- 7 Lightning skewers the sky;

8 Thunder rolls across the land;
the whole earth shivers.
9 Before the might of the Almighty, nothing stands unbent;
The leaves fall off the trees;
the cities empty their streets;
The mountains hide their heads in clouds.
10 The Lord commands the storm;
God surfs on the wind like an ocean wave.

11 May the wind be always at our backs, Lord.
Lend the strength of the storm to your people.
Then we can weather the worst,
and come through to the calm on the other side.

For paraphrases of most of the psalms used by the RCL, you can order my book *Everyday Psalms* from Wood Lake Publications, info@woodlake.com.

YOU SCRATCH MY BACK...

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For other web links worth pursuing, try

- Ralph Milton's HymnSight webpage, <http://www.hymnsight.ca>, with a vast gallery of photos you can use to enhance the appearance of the visual images you project for liturgical use (prayers, responses, hymn verses, etc.)
- David Keating's "SeemlikeGod" page, www.seemlikegod.org;
- Isobel Gibson's thoughtful and well-written blog, www.traditionaliconoclast.com
- Alan Reynold's weekly musings, punningly titled "Reynolds Rap," write reynoldsrap@shaw.ca
- Wayne Irwin's "Churchweb Canada," an inexpensive service for any congregation wanting to develop a web presence, with free consultation. <http://www.churchwebcanada.ca>
- Alva Wood's satiric stories about incompetent bureaucrats and prejudiced attitudes in a small town are not particularly religious, but they are fun; write alvawood@gmail.com to get onto her mailing list.

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I write a second column each Sunday called Sharp Edges, which tends to be somewhat more cutting about social and justice issues. To sign up for Sharp Edges, write to me directly, at jimt@quixotic.ca, or send a note to sharpedges-subscribe@quixotic.ca
