

17 | Finding Our Way In The Dark (After The 2016 Election)

Every December, winter's darkness curls up inside me. It incarnates as a palpable energy. Even as I relish the beauty and mystery of Christmas, I notice the familiar melancholy, left over from too many losses at this time of year, pulling me inward.

This year, though, the darkness I experience doesn't even belong to me. Its center of gravity is neither in the solstice nor inside my psyche, but instead in the world around me. So many of us are in mourning. A terrible specter has come crashing through the pale winter skies ahead of Santa's sleigh, announcing itself with a broad flourish of trumpets.

Some shrug off the sense of cataclysm. They point out we need these dark times to confront our illusions. They remind us that our country has always been controlled by power-hungry narcissists. You just couldn't see them behind the curtain. Even the progressive departing president we so love has had to make a few offerings at the altar of the powers-that-be, the oil barons, the one percent.

But somehow so many of us had come to believe we were finally on the right track these last eight years, ushering in a

better world. Were we completely deluded?

I feel the despair of these times lapping at my very sense of self. Am I then no longer a child of the Sixties, my heart beating with ideals of social transformation? The ever-hopeful lens through which I have viewed the world for these many decades has seen me through three or four pointless, horrific wars, the propping up of numerous corrupt regimes in Latin America, the enduring devastation of Reaganomics, the terrors of nuclear “mutually assured destruction,” and the careless disregard for the fate of the planet. I always chose to hope through it all.

But now, with each day’s news of one nightmare appointment after another, I am beset by visions of a behemoth who “slouches toward Bethlehem to be born” (W.B.Yeats). What do I do with my hope?

I am perpetually restless. I can barely concentrate on projects that used to impassion me. They seem so trivial. I constantly peruse stories on social media with the same grim focus I remember my parents displaying as they watched the funerals of JFK and Martin Luther King. In the weeks following the election, I chastised myself for my sudden addiction to social media. But then I saw that we are all just gathered around together, watching another funeral.

Last night in a dream I missed the turn-off to the highway somewhere on the edge of Appalachia. I met an older couple perched uneasily in lawn chairs on a grassy hilltop high above a bend in a river. Their beautiful, sweeping vista was somehow marred. I could not place it at first, but then realized they were gazing out amidst fracking wells. They told me they had voted for Trump. They were defensive about it, and about the ugly machinery all around them. By way of explanation, they murmured the word “money.” The thing there was far too little of.

I felt too heartbroken to speak. I got in my car and drove away.

Many say that it was such failures in the art of dialogue that have led us into such deep trouble. I don't doubt this. I know I will have to learn to do better with the outraged thudding inside my heart. But it feels like a lesson for another day. Right now, I need to reach for the light being gently passed around by my fellow mourners.

And I am watching these companions with heightened wonderment. Maybe we have been underestimating one another. Our presence might just render our country less susceptible to the kinds of fascism and demagoguery that wreaked havoc eighty years ago, during World War II.

Many in our generation have chosen to go deep into our own personal darkness and to embrace it, often at great cost. We've worried at times that we were self-centered navel-gazers. But in fact many of us have realized intuitively that the darkness in our psyches and family systems and spirits needed to be acknowledged, tended to, and transformed even as we sought to effectively confront the gathering darkness outside of us.

Our generation has sought out healers of all stripes, a dazzling array of soul-menders the likes of which the cocky, wounded, alienated, repressed Western world has never seen. We brought out into daylight our own shadows, so that we would stop projecting them. We have gathered in creative and spiritual circles and practiced vulnerability. A sizable handful of us have learned to meditate and pray in myriad ways that have led us straight into the darkness of the Divine.

It may be that the awakening of a new, more expansive and clear-eyed consciousness will matter deeply in the current crisis. Maybe Carl Jung was speaking of us when he said, "Such a man knows that whatever is wrong in the world is in himself, and if he

only learns to deal with his own shadow he has done something real for the world” (*Psychology & Religion*, 1938).

Even now we can see the first fruits: Our eyes have gradually opened, our old rigidity and fear of the “other” have inexorably fallen away. We have come a long way in breaking down the strict boundaries of gender, sexual orientation, race, and tribe that other generations took for granted. The backlash is inevitable, but it does not have to triumph.

And yes, somehow we brought up a generation of children who may be the most open-minded, most grounded, least neurotic cohort our society has ever known. Though they cannot really imagine the price we paid for their strong sense of self, our children are an extraordinary gift to the world.

Is it just possible that we are now ready to find our way together in the darkness?