

## **Praise then darkness and Creation unfinished**

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Delivered July 17, 2016 at the Unitarian Congregation of Taos, NM

Praise then Darkness and Creation unfinished.

These words of benediction come from a novel by Ursula K. Le Guin, titled “The Left Hand of Darkness.” This is the fascinating story of a man named Genly Ai and the gender-fluid people of the planet called Winter, and it contains a great deal that is worth exploring. But we only have so much time this morning, and this one phrase contains whole worlds within it.

Praise then darkness and Creation unfinished.

The phrase grabs our attention. We know the words, but they reveal a different way of understanding the world.

Creation unfinished? Wasn't everything created complete and whole and done?

This is one of those ideas that underlies our perception of the world and the cosmos. It's embedded in our Western way of seeing the world, which got it from our Judeo-Christian heritage, which got it from earlier peoples. God made the world. Everything in the world was fixed in place and being. God made it all - and so it must be perfect - or imperfect - as it is.

A lot of this is still inherent in our language, in our ways of describing and knowing the world, ways that invisibly shape our thinking. Creation is a noun. A thing, filled with things. I'm a thing. You're a thing. There are things all around us. Bad things. Good things. Things acting on other things.

To the people of Winter, Creation is a verb. A process, filled with processes, acting in concert with other processes. Creation is ongoing, still unfolding, becoming one thing and then another. It's not finished because Creation is still becoming whatever it is it will become, the outcome unknown. That which doesn't change, that stays fixed, is problematic.

We find this idea deeply rooted in Taoism, and many other indigenous worldviews. I'll return to this in a few minutes, so I'll ask you to place a mental bookmark right here.

Praise then darkness. Why should we praise the darkness?

There was a time when every sighted human being could walk out under a moonless night sky and see thousands of stars, stars of many colors glittering against the deepest darkness. The glorious expanse of the Milky Way arced from horizon to horizon. And if you paid attention, it all moved. Planets rose and set. The stars wheeled across the sky. Hourly, daily, monthly, yearly, and even across the centuries, it all moved. It was, and still is, one of the most breathtaking and awe inspiring things a human being can see with the naked eye.

We can actually view eternity. Endless space-time stretching out as far as the eye can see and beyond.

And we are losing sight of this.

Starting in the 1950's human beings started taking pictures of the planet at night. And much of the Earth was dark at night. The bigger cities showed up as blobs of light, connected by fine lines of light, but mostly it was dark at night. We kept taking pictures. And now, a mere half a century or so later, most of the land mass of the planet is lit up at night. And it is lit up very brightly.

This light reflects back from our atmosphere, blinding us. It masks the night sky so that we can no longer see eternity. One third of the world's population can no longer see the Milky Way.

The darkness of the night sky is measured by its brightness - on something called the Bortle scale of 1 to 9. The more stars that are visible, the brighter the night sky is. A truly dark night sky is a 1. You can see those thousands of stars, and the light of the Milky Way actually casts shadows.

Here in Taos, the night sky is a 4 on a good night. The sky in the inner cities is a 9. You can only see the moon, and a maybe very few of the brightest stars and planets, if you look closely.

There are no longer 1 or 2 scale dark skies east of the Mississippi anymore. There are almost no 1's west of it. A 2 is about the best most of us will ever experience, unless we sail out into the ocean.

Who would have thought that light could be pollution?

This has any number of negative effects on wildlife. It wreaks havoc on the ecologies of night. It interrupts bird migrations, many of which take place at night, causing the deaths of thousands of birds. It impacts animals that forage at night, like bats and mice. Insects are confused to death by all the light at night. The list goes on.

Eight of every ten children born in the United States today will never experience a sky dark enough to see the Milky Way. 40 percent of Americans live in such bright environments that their eyes never transition to night vision—from the cones to rods.

And the health effects of the lack of nighttime darkness are even more startling. It disrupts our endocrine systems, robbing us of the necessary physical renewal that the dark brings. There are strong links to increased rates of certain types of cancer, especially in women – and supporting evidence for these links are mounting. Other studies show higher rates of diabetes, obesity, heart and other health problems for those exposed to excess light at night. Which is almost all of us.

It will come as no surprise that there is a class aspect to all of this. It is the less well off – white, black, and brown - who work the night shifts under bright lights. It is the less well off among us who live in areas that are fully lit at night to “prevent crime”, and so suffer these ill effects to a greater degree than those who are better off – who can afford to live in darker neighborhoods.

But doesn't all this lighting make us safer and more secure? Surprisingly, no. It turns out that criminals are just as afraid of the dark as law abiding citizens. They feel safer in well lit places because they can see what they are doing and who is coming. Several studies have shown that increases in the lighting of public spaces also increased the crime rate in those locations. Criminals feel safer there. The bright lights obscure camera images, making it more difficult to identify perpetrators. It turns out that you can hide in the light just as easily as you can hide in dark. All the light does is give us a false sense of security.

Light can be used as punishment. Did you know that in a SuperMax prison, bright fluorescent lights are on in the cells 24 hours a day? If a prisoner tries to cover their head to sleep, the guards wake them up, and make them uncover their heads. There is no escaping the relentless light. No darkness into which they can escape to renew their souls. Or simply have a little privacy. Few leave a SuperMax prison with their mental health intact.

To bring something into the light is to expose it. Are not all aspects of our lives becoming more and more exposed? What we buy, eat, drink? Where we go? Who we talk to? Our lives are constantly lit up these days, in more ways than one. Our world is beginning to feel a little like a prison, where one cannot opt out of the constant exposure. Eventually, we will all be lit up, exposed, from birth to death.

And all this light energizes... but in a frantic way, a hollow and insubstantial way.

I'm going to switch modes of thinking here. Our brains like to work in a couple of different modes, and one of those is the linear language of logic and reason that I've been using up to this point. Lay out the facts, make the connections, draw conclusions. But there is another modality that our psyche – our soul - prefers. This is the language of metaphor, of symbols, of myth.

Somewhere in the past, American culture began to associate light with good, and darkness with evil. God was light, Satan dwelt in darkness. The spiritual – the Heavens - are light. The physical – the Earth - is dark. Light is positive, dark is negative. The dark is home to everything bad or corrupt, and we populate it with all the demons of our fears. And we have lots of fears to fill the dark with.

We began to light the world to drive out the darkness – both physically and metaphorically. We demonized the dark other, people of color. The dark ocean depths were filled with monsters. The Earth was seen as a place of decay and corruption. The feminine Earth powers were oppressed. The Earth itself became a dark way station on the way to the light - which was anyplace but here. Salvation lay on a linear path, a story with an ending in the sky, in the heavens, far from Earth.

And somewhere in the last few decades, we began to distrust and devalue thinking that was not light-filled, not upbeat, not happy, not positive. One hardly dares to be sad or depressed or melancholy in this world of ours. This relentless drive to illuminate, to transcend, is, in my opinion, spiritual and psychic light pollution.

We have been seduced by the light. We now privilege one half of a binary - light - over the other half - dark, and we have sought to elevate the light to permanent ascendance over darkness.

This is, to put it bluntly, madness.

Earlier, I asked you to make a mental bookmark when I referenced Taoism, and other indigenous worldviews, and I'd like to return to that now.

Any system of thought concerning human beings and their place in the cosmos must have a way of describing what is healthy and what is unhealthy. For those who thought, and still think, in these ways, balance and flow describe a healthy system, imbalance and stuckness describe an unhealthy system. This applies to all the human realms - physical, mental, emotional, spiritual; and to the external realms of Earth and Cosmos as well.

This is well expressed by the Taijitu - the ancient yin-yang diagram - with its swirling lobes of light and dark, each marked with a tiny dot of its opposite. Within the light, there lies the seed of the darkness it will become. Within the dark, there lies the seed of the light it will become. Indigenous worldviews use the turning of the world and sky in a similar fashion, usually symbolized by some form of mandala. The wheel turns, the seasons change and change again, the dark becomes light, the light becomes dark.

These stories are ones of the wheel ever turning, world without end. Salvation lies in harmonious interaction with the eternal and ever-changing world.

Light energizes, the dark fertilizes. Without the darkness, nothing grows. Nothing substantial anyway. Darkness breaks down the old, makes it formless, so that the new may arise.

Lay a seed out upon the bare ground and it will not grow. It needs the darkness and the water to germinate. Its roots need the darkness to grow, and they grow downward into the darkness. Into the Earth. Even that which is growing above the ground needs relief from the light, needs a time to rest and renew.

The night is necessary for new dreams and new myths to coalesce out of the formless void, the deep reaches of our individual and collective psyche. Without darkness, we cannot truly sleep the sleep that allows our dreams and myths to grow enough so that they can be born. They will be stillborn in the constant light, the constant exposure.

Remember the unblinking Eye of Sauron from the Lord of the Rings? Always open. Always seeing, casting a beam of light with its gaze. And where did Frodo and Sam hide from this gaze? In the dark shadows. It was the physical darkness that allowed them to overcome evil and restore the world.

How do we get unstuck? How do we restore balance?

If we are to restore the world, my friends, it will begin in the still depths of the fruitful darkness.

I'd like to repeat the second verse of Genesis: And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters.

Notice what is present at the beginning. Earth. Formless earth. Darkness. Water. Deep dark earth and deep dark waters. Stillness.

This is the yin power from which all things begin, as our earlier reading from Lao Tzu tells us. Even in this story, the world did not begin with light. It began with the still earth and the still waters, deep and dark and unformed.

If we are to restore balance to the world, we must cultivate these qualities. It's going to take a lot of deep stillness to balance out all the frantic action. It's going to take a lot of darkness to balance out all the light.

The poet Wendell Berry wrote:

To go in the dark with a light is to know the light.

To know the dark, go dark. Go without sight,  
and find that the dark, too, blooms and sings,  
and is traveled by dark feet and dark wings.

We can see without all this light. Our eyes know how. We can stop fearing the dark feet, and the dark wings. We can cultivate stillness, and learn again how to sit unafraid in the deep dark places of our souls and the deep dark places of the world. We can restore the lost darkness.

We can turn down all the lights so that we can see the stars again. I want our children's children to be able to see the Milky Way, and to stand awestruck at the vastness of eternity. I want the creatures of the night to have their children's lives restored to them.

I beg you, turn off your night lights, inside and out. If you must have security lights, put motion sensors on them. A light that goes on only when needed offers more security than one that always burns. Make your sleeping rooms dark. Your eyes can see quite well in the dark if you let them. And your dreams may flourish again.

There are other senses waiting to come alive in the night. Touch and hearing and smell.

Make friends with the darkness again. Take a chair out into the night, and sit, and listen. Hear the faint cries of the birds migrating high in the ebony skies. Hear the rustle of wings. Feel the night breezes on your skin. Smell the flowers that only bloom in the dark.

Take night walks, in your neighborhood at first, then on dirt roads far out into the desert. Learn again to walk under starlight, and moonlight, and the light of the Milky Way. Know the night again, and know a part of yourself long abandoned to fear.

Let there be darkness so that our dreams may grow to maturity without interference. Let us resist the urge to give form to things before their time. Let the deep stillness of the earth and the waters embrace us, and feed us, individually and collectively. There is a deep power there, darkness within darkness, waiting to nourish us.

There is a world waiting to be restored to balance.

It is waiting for us.

Praise then Darkness, and Creation unfinished...