

## Passages: Moving from the Dark toward the Light

Lakehead Unitarian Fellowship

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Julie Stoneberg

This sermon takes its inspiration from the Eskimo folktale, "The Boy Who Found the Light."

Tulugac, an orphan, lives in a village where there has been no sun and no moon for as long as anyone can remember. All the elders' and shamans' best efforts have not been successful at getting the sun to return. Tulugac offers to go and find the sun; everyone laughs at him, but off he goes on a long journey to the south, with his prized possession, a birdskin from his mother. Along the way, he is helped and accompanied by several animals.

When he finally finds the sun and moon, he sees that their light is being obscured by shovelfuls of snow thrown by a huge man. Tulugac tricks the man, steals the sun and moon, and his birdskin enables him to turn into a raven. He flies home, returning the sun and the moon to the sky.<sup>1</sup>

The story of Tulugac, the little Eskimo boy who finds the light, is one that touches me. Maybe it's his pure hope, his simple willingness to try. Maybe it's because in the end, it's the young, orphaned outcast who triumphs. What I really like is that in this folktale, I find many layers and nuances of meaning...like piles of sleeping skins, parkas, and snowdrifts that both offer comfort and obscure clarity.

There are but a few pictures in this book, and yet I can make out very clearly an image of Tulugac, cuddled in the corner of the village meeting house, in near darkness, but for the dim light provided by seal oil lanterns. He sits beyond the edges of the inner circle, a circle in which the grandfathers tell stories of a distant past and where the shamans battle to re-call the light. He huddles in the corner and he dreams...he imagines something that he has never seen...and his dreams cross over into reality. Pure, unadulterated hope, maybe even naiveté, made sacred by a call to action. What does the child see that the adult cannot?

Certainly, we in the northern latitudes can imagine the origins of such stories. What must these people have thought, before the advent of scientific astronomy, about why the sun would leave them for long periods of time? They sat around a fire, or a lantern, and told stories about what they knew best, and what they knew best was the absence of light. Darkness. How could they explain that it would come again, but then only for

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<sup>1</sup> DeArmond, Dale, *The Boy Who Found the Light: Eskimo folktales* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1990)

brief periods? How could they trust it to return at all? In the depths of a story, a primitive art form born in the intoxicating haze of a common fire, a community touches both the depths of their fears and the promise of something new that is yet to unfold.

Today we live at a great distance from such ponderings. Aside from the anxious meanderings in some science fiction, we trust that the sun will come up each morning without any shamanic coaxings. We can calculate the moment it will arrive and the moment it will drop beyond the horizon with exacting precision. We predict, sometimes accurately, whether tomorrow the sun will be obscured by clouds 40% of the time or 75% of the time. The phases of the moon are scientific measurements; its unadulterated romance has been spoiled by our knowledge.

Today, many of us listen to this story and hear little more than a quaint folktale. Obviously this couldn't really happen...the sun never deserts a village for generations, a child is never sent out into the snow to travel for days in the darkness, no one can obscure the light with shovelfuls of snow, no one, especially not a boy-turned-raven, can carry the sun around under his arm and toss bits of it into the sky to illuminate the world. There's simply nothing credible about this story.

We Unitarians exist within a tradition that historically has honored reason... so much so that reason holds a place in our trinity, along with tolerance and freedom. We are products of the Enlightenment, the Scientific Revolution and modern times. The last thing we want is to be suckered into believing, or even honoring, something that is frivolous and un-provable. A common response in conversation is "really?" "Are you speaking the truth?" "Did that really happen?" I remember an old poster for the Children's Theatre Company in Minneapolis which was captioned... "Imagine a world without imagination." This speaks to my feeling that we've perhaps worshiped reason (at least reason of the purely intellectual type) at little too ardently. For me, this means that we've compromised our ability to enter into the primal story, to engage with a level beyond reason, anything beyond what our minds deem as credible. In our haste to

enter into the light, we've left behind the other light, the insights and the magic, that can only be seen in darkness. We have flooded everything we can with the light of research and instrumentation and critical examination... exposed every nook and cranny to the intensity of the sun, and in so doing, we've cut ourselves off from the mystery of the darkness.

I read that after an earthquake in California, an earthquake that knocked out the power and with it all of the light pollution...many residents of the state called the police and radio stations, worried about the strange appearance of stars and a misty band in the sky that they thought must have been caused by the quake.<sup>2</sup> Apparently, large numbers of people in California had never seen a pristine sky. Because we are obsessed with bright lights, the average person has essentially lost the simple birthright to look up at the night sky and to commune with the vastness of the universe.

A few Sundays ago, during our dialogue time, someone mentioned a Tom Post song that I really love...some of the lyrics are "just remember that you're standing on a planet that's evolving, and revolving at a hundred miles an hour..." I don't know how better to understand our relative place in space than to have the experience of standing, or lying, under the night sky. When I'm asked if I have ever experienced God, I often recall the night of December 31, 1999. At midnight, as we entered a new millennium, I was lying on my back in the snow, on a frozen lake, staring at the brilliant night sky, and watching the occasional falling star. If it were never dark, this experience of 'god' would escape me. (By the way, you all should be congratulated for the Torrance Barrens, Ontario's Dark Sky Preserve, which when designated, was the first of its kind in the world.<sup>3</sup>)

This desire to see the sky is but one manifestation of a desire to re-connect with the earth, with ancient tradition, and with incredible flowing myth. Such desires might, in part, explain why neo-pagan earth-based spiritualities, Wicca and witchcraft, are

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.fvas.net/dsp2.html>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.rasc.ca/light/print/muskoka/dsr.htm>

thought to be the fastest growing religious groups in the United States, and I daresay within Unitarian Universalism. One of the dominant traits of these religions is their acknowledgment of the power of the things we cannot understand...a willingness to embrace the idea of gods and goddesses, natural mysteries, and to honor the march of the seasons of life. I tend to view these belief systems as embracing an ability to sit, like Tulugac, in the darkness, to experience a connection beyond reason, and to dream.

Now, I have to say, that in this particular story, I can't quite cipher (as my nephew would say) the huge man shoveling snow. I mean, what's he about? He's throwing snow, something that is ever-present in the Eskimo world, maybe an indication that snow is also the bane of their existence. He's detached, but not really malevolent; he seems willing to take Tulugac into his home...yet he's not quite tuned in either, and rather disinterested in the fact that his shoveling is causing darkness for the people of Tulugac's village. Is he an archetype for all of the things that remain outside of our control?...all those things with which we have a love/hate relationship? For the time being, I am content to imagine him as the god of clouds and snowstorms, the very things that obscure the sun in the winter months. But, the very fact that I cannot make reasonable heads or tails out of this figure is an indication to me that he has something to teach me...that there is something of the unknown in his being.

Often, what we cannot control, the paths we do not know, the things we do not understand, are a kind of 'darkness' to us. Maybe we are afraid of these things, because they are unknown, and we begin to generalize that all things dark are bad, and all things good are light. We associate the lack of light with the lack of happiness. We put negative labels on dark emotions, the good guys are dressed in white, a lack of sunshine is synonymous with death, and some have even opined that our preference for light has played a role, albeit subconscious, in racism.

One basic premise to my life philosophy is that any extreme dualities are not beneficial to our wholeness. Dualities split us apart, and divide things into categories of black and

white, light and dark, as it were. While the dominant narrative in this story is one of the triumph of light over darkness, we can also find a few inklings of a more holistic worldview. The village may be without the sun, but they do get some light from their seal oil lanterns and campfires. Tulugac's journey is made in darkness, but he is given guiding lights from the natural world and his mother's birdskin as he travels. And, his struggle to capture the light is not limited to the light of the sun, but also includes the light of the moon, so that the special lights of the night will also be available to the people of his village. The snowstorm may obscure the sunlight, but the fallen snow reflects all available light and brightens our days. It is because we know darkness that we understand light. It is because of the sun's reflecting light that we see the moon, so that, as Sy Safransky has said, 'so that even in the darkness, the sun lights my way.'<sup>4</sup> Dark and light are but aspects of one another.

At our New Year's Eve service, we sang a song called "There's a Light in the Darkness." The tone of this song is hopeful, encouraging, willing us to see that there is a light at the end of the dark tunnel. But another way to see this is to understand that there is always light in darkness, and there is always darkness in light...they co-exist. The sun always shines, the moon is forever hanging over our planet, there is always darkness, whether we are aware of it or not. Hhmmm. Awareness. Perhaps this is a key.

Buddhist teacher Pema Chodron says that an awakening, an awareness, often appears like a "flash of lightening in the dark."<sup>5</sup> It's that moment, when dreaming of a world where a moon hangs in the sky, that moment sitting in a dark corner listening to the chant of the elders, when there comes an awareness that is like an opening in the clouds. Suddenly the words fall out of our mouths without forethought... "I think I can find the light." Fear falls away because of the presence of, no, the awareness of, a possibility. For a moment it seems that we can conquer the darkness, that we can make a difference. We confidently head out on our journey.

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<sup>4</sup> The Sun, "*Sy Safransky's Notebook*," February 2003

<sup>5</sup> Chodron, Pema, "*Stay with the Soft Spot*", Shambhala Sun, <http://www.shambhalasun.com/Archives/Features/2004/May>

And then the opening closes again. The clouds reconnect and seem to block the sun from us. The earth turns a bit on its axis, and the nights grow longer. We enter a season of darkness. The absence of light, and its accompanying heat, makes it impossible for things to grow. There's not enough light, it seems, and quite literally for some of us, we suffer a light-deprivation that suffocates our energy. We wonder, with the villagers, will the light ever return?

The ultimate awakening, says Chodron, is to attain bodhicitta...when you open a doorway and realize that the sun is always shining... when you see your place in the universe and your link to all humanity...a realization that makes it palatable, even enjoyable, to sit in the darkness. The heart of bodhicitta is a soft spot – a spot that you don't allow to harden over. This soft spot, she says, can be touched when we interrupt the flow of our fixations. Don't be fixated on only seeing the light...honor the dark as well. Tulugac's journey was made bearable because he was able to touch his soft spot, that birdskin from his mother, that reminded him that he was loved and part of a greater whole. There's a light in the darkness.

Writer Margaret Wheatley, in reflecting on the sometimes unbearably dark places of destruction in our world, suggests the use of virtual night vision goggles.<sup>6</sup> I can imagine putting them on...not unlike the Junior Birdsmen wings of cereal box tops...to give us courage and hope...an ability to trust that we can see clearly even in the darkness, or maybe even because of the darkness. Standing in the night, being willing to confront our fears, feeling the pain of the world, seeing all that has been destroyed...it is from this place, this deep well, that there is the possibility of seeing stars.

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<sup>6</sup> Wheatley, Margaret, "Where Are the Stars in This Dark Night?", Shambhala Sun, [http://www.shambhalasun.com/Archives/Columnists/Wheatley/200307\\_margaret\\_wheatley](http://www.shambhalasun.com/Archives/Columnists/Wheatley/200307_margaret_wheatley)

The time of solstice is a liminal time....like bedtime...like those soft moments of waking in the morning....magical times for tenderness and quiet.<sup>7</sup> We are now directly between the deepest darkness and the brightest sunshine. The great dimmer switch that is the planet's axis is beginning to slide toward the light, and we rub our eyes and stretch to meet the new day. Irish poet John O'Donohue would have us recognize that in many ways we are always living in this in-between place...between the act of awakening and the act of surrender. He says:

“ Each morning we awaken to the light and the invitation to a new day in the world of time; each night we surrender to the dark to be taken to play in the world of dreams where time is no more. At birth we are awakened and emerged to become visible in the world. At death we will surrender again to the dark to become invisible. Awakening and surrender: They frame each day and each life; between them is the journey where anything can happen...”<sup>8</sup>

Today we honor the darkness and we celebrate the coming light. We stand out under the stars, put on our night goggles, and sense that even in darkness we're connected to something that can wake us up. These are moments of intense beauty, when we both awaken and surrender in the same breath. Now, here, we understand that light and dark are sisters...tied together by a blink, an instance, a momentary awakening, and mysterious interconnection.

Today I honor the spirits of the NUU moon group, for their invocations that call for us to be aware of the presence of the light in our lives...the four directions...the sun...the darkness... always present, always with us. They invite us to be confident that all of us have the potential to wake up fully and to live our lives to the fullest, these lives of awakening and surrender.

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<sup>7</sup> Berry, Thomas, “*Singing to the Dawn: On our Broken Connection to the Natural World*”, The Sun Magazine, May 2002, p.7

<sup>8</sup> O'Donohue, John, “Awakening to Beauty: An Irish Poet Examines the Global Crisis over the Nature of Beauty”, Utne Reader, March/April 2005, 79-80

Thank you, each of you, for sharing your journey with us. May we be rabbits and mother bears and snowy owls for each other...whispering in each ear, "yes, you're on the right path. Keep going." Light will emerge out of the darkness.

Blessed be.