



TO *Learning*
Walk *IN THE* Dark

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New York Times Bestselling Author of *An Altar in the World*

Learning to Walk in the Dark

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For all the children of the night



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Introduction: Treasures of Darkness

*I will give you the treasures of darkness and riches hidden
in secret places, so that you may know that it is I, the LORD,
the God of Israel, who call you by your name.*

—Isaiah 45:3

Come inside now, it's getting dark." That is my mother speaking, saying the same thing she said every night when she looked out the kitchen window and saw that the sun was going down. It did not matter whether the window was in Kansas, Ohio, Alabama, or Georgia. Dark was dark, and she wanted her children inside. It must have cost her a lot to call us, since it meant that the quiet house would soon be filled with

the noise of three small, loud girls, but she did it anyway. She loved us enough to let us play outside until the cicadas cranked up and bats started swooping through the sky; then she loved us enough to call us inside so that nothing bad would happen to us in the dark.

The dangerousness of the dark was like the law of gravity. No one could say exactly how it worked, but everyone agreed on it. When night fell, children were gathered inside, front porch lights were switched on, curtains were drawn, and doors were locked. The inside of the house became a showcase of artificial light: the fluorescent ring on the ceiling of the kitchen, 40-watt appliance bulbs in the oven hood, 25-watt bulbs shaped like candles in the dining room chandelier, standard 60-watt bulbs in the lamps in the living room, the phosphorescent glow of the television set in the den. There was nothing you could not do in a house like that. Even if you got up in the middle of the night to go to the bathroom, small night-lights plugged into every baseboard outlet would guide you to your destination like an airplane making a landing after dark.

I never questioned the need for all this light, since the dangerousness of the dark was more apparent to me inside the house than out. After one or the other of my parents had kissed me good night and turned off the light by my bed, there was always a moment of bliss under the tent of my sheets while my eyes adjusted to the low light coming through the window. Had I been an easy sleeper, I might have drifted off on that tide of contentment, but I have never been an easy sleeper.



Once the smell of my parents had faded away along with their footsteps; once I could feel their protection dissipate as they moved away from me; once it became apparent to me that they had checked me off their list for the night and had turned their attention to other things, then all the loose darkness in that room started to collect in the closet and under the bed, pulling itself together with such magnetic malevolence that I could not keep my mind away from it.

Without benefit of maturity or therapy, I had no way of knowing that the darkness was as much inside me as it was outside me, or that I had any power to affect its hold on me. No one had ever taught me to talk back to the dark or even to breathe into it. The idea that it might be friendly was absurd. The only strategy I had ever been taught for dealing with my fear of the dark was to turn on the lights and yell for help. Even then, when my parents came back to ask what I was afraid of, they took my answers at face value. “There are no monsters under your bed,” they assured me, getting down on their knees to look. “There are no witches in your closet,” they said, opening the door to show me, as if scientific proof would make a bit of difference once they had turned out the lights and left the room again.

Since I am only five years old in this memory, there is no telling what I might have said if they had asked me what color the monsters’ eyes were, or what the witches were planning to do to me. If they had, I might have learned to become more curious about what the darkness inside me was dishing up. I might have learned to look more deeply instead of looking

away, but one thing my parents and I shared was the wish for a quick fix. They wanted to get back to whatever they were doing in the living room and I wanted to stop being afraid, so we settled on a solution that worked for both of us: eliminate the darkness. Leave a light on in my room at night so that it was never dark.

You would have to ask an anthropologist how well this childhood history matches the history of the human race, but when I look around the world today, it seems clear that eliminating darkness is pretty high on the human agenda—not just physical darkness but also metaphysical darkness, which includes psychological, emotional, relational, and spiritual darkness. What do I mean by “darkness”? I guess that depends on what color your monsters’ eyes are. Most people do not know what they mean by “darkness” except that they want to stay out of it. Just say the word and the associations begin to flow: night, nightmare, ghost, graveyard, cave, bat, vampire, death, devil, evil, criminal, danger, doubt, depression, loss, fear. Fear is the main thing. Almost everyone is afraid of being afraid. Beyond that, no one’s list is exactly like anyone else’s. It fits the way a shadow fits, because darkness is sticky. It attracts meaning like a magnet, picking up everything in its vicinity that is not fully lit.

If you decide to read the rest of this book, you will learn plenty about what darkness means to me. For now, it is enough to say that “darkness” is shorthand for anything that scares me—that I want no part of—either because I am sure



that I do not have the resources to survive it or because I do not want to find out. The absence of God is in there, along with the fear of dementia and the loss of those nearest and dearest to me. So is the melting of polar ice caps, the suffering of children, and the nagging question of what it will feel like to die. If I had my way, I would eliminate everything from chronic back pain to the fear of the devil from my life and the lives of those I love—if I could just find the right night-lights to leave on.

At least I think I would. The problem is this: when, despite all my best efforts, the lights have gone off in my life (literally or figuratively, take your pick), plunging me into the kind of darkness that turns my knees to water, nonetheless I have not died. The monsters have not dragged me out of bed and taken me back to their lair. The witches have not turned me into a bat. Instead, I have learned things in the dark that I could never have learned in the light, things that have saved my life over and over again, so that there is really only one logical conclusion. I need darkness as much as I need light.

The problem is that there are so few people who can teach me about that. Most of the books on the *New York Times* “How-To” bestseller list are about how to avoid various kinds of darkness. If you want to learn how to be happy and stay that way, how to win out over your adversaries at work, or how to avoid aging by eating the right foods, there is a book for you. If you are not a reader, you can always find someone on the radio, the television, or the web who will tell you about

the latest strategy for staying out of your dark places, or at least distract you from them for a while. Most of us own so many electronic gadgets that there is always a light box within reach when any kind of darkness begins to descend on us. Why watch the sun go down when you could watch the news instead? Why lie awake at night when a couple of rounds of Moonlight Mahjong could put you back to sleep?

I wish I could turn to the church for help, but so many congregations are preoccupied with keeping the lights on right now that the last thing they want to talk about is how to befriend the dark. Plus, Christianity has never had anything nice to say about darkness. From earliest times, Christians have used “darkness” as a synonym for sin, ignorance, spiritual blindness, and death. Visit almost any church and you can still hear it used that way today: *Deliver us, O Lord, from the powers of darkness. Shine into our hearts the brightness of your Holy Spirit, and protect us from all perils and dangers of the night.*

Since I live on a farm where the lights can go out for days at a time, this language works at a practical level. When it is twenty degrees outside at midnight and tree branches heavy with ice are crashing to the ground around your house, it makes all kinds of sense to pray for protection from the dangers of the night. When coyotes show up in the yard after dark, eyeing your crippled old retriever as potential fast food, the perils of the night are more than theoretical. So I can understand how people who lived before the advent of electricity—



who sometimes spent fourteen hours in the dark without the benefit of so much as a flashlight—might have become sensitive to the powers of darkness, asking God for deliverance in the form of bright morning light.

At the theological level, however, this language creates all sorts of problems. It divides every day in two, pitting the light part against the dark part. It tucks all the sinister stuff into the dark part, identifying God with the sunny part and leaving you to deal with the rest on your own time. It implies things about dark-skinned people and sight-impaired people that are not true. Worst of all, it offers people of faith a giant closet in which they can store everything that threatens or frightens them without thinking too much about those things. It rewards them for their unconsciousness, offering spiritual justification for turning away from those things, for “God is light and in him there is no darkness at all” (1 John 1:5).

To embrace that teaching and others like it at face value can result in a kind of spirituality that deals with darkness by denying its existence or at least depriving it of any meaningful attention. I call it “full solar spirituality,” since it focuses on staying in the light of God around the clock, both absorbing and reflecting the sunny side of faith. You can usually recognize a full solar church by its emphasis on the benefits of faith, which include a sure sense of God’s presence, certainty of belief, divine guidance in all things, and reliable answers to prayer. Members strive to be positive in attitude, firm in conviction, helpful in relationship, and unwavering in faith. This

sounds like heaven on earth. Who would not like to dwell in God's light 24/7?

If you have ever belonged to such a community, however, you may have discovered that the trouble starts when darkness falls on your life, which can happen in any number of unsurprising ways: you lose your job, your marriage falls apart, your child acts out in some attention-getting way, you pray hard for something that does not happen, you begin to doubt some of the things you have been taught about what the Bible says. The first time you speak of these things in a full solar church, you can usually get a hearing. Continue to speak of them and you may be reminded that God will not let you be tested beyond your strength. All that is required of you is to have faith. If you still do not get the message, sooner or later it will be made explicit for you: the darkness is your own fault, because you do not have enough faith.

Having been on the receiving end of this verdict more than once, I do not think it is as mean as it sounds. The people who said it seemed genuinely to care about me. They had honestly offered me the best they had. Since their sunny spirituality had not given them many skills for operating in the dark, I had simply exhausted their resources. They could not enter the dark without putting their own faith at risk, so they did the best they could. They stood where I could still hear them and begged me to come back into the light.

If I could have, I would have. There are days when I would give anything to share their vision of the world and their ability



to navigate it safely, but my spiritual gifts do not seem to include the gift of solar spirituality. Instead, I have been given the gift of lunar spirituality, in which the divine light available to me waxes and wanes with the season. When I go out on my porch at night, the moon never looks the same way twice. Some nights it is as round and bright as a headlight; other nights it is thinner than the sickle hanging in my garage. Some nights it is high in the sky, and other nights low over the mountains. Some nights it is altogether gone, leaving a vast web of stars that are brighter in its absence. All in all, the moon is a truer mirror for my soul than the sun that looks the same way every day.

After I stopped thinking that all these fluctuations meant something was wrong with me, a great curiosity opened up: what would my life with God look like if I trusted this rhythm instead of opposing it? What was I afraid of, exactly, and how much was I missing by reaching reflexively for the lights? Did I have enough faith to explore the dark instead of using faith to bar all my doors? How much more was in store for me if I could learn to walk in the dark? This book is a record of where I looked and what I found, which makes it more a journal than a manual. You are still welcome to come along, especially if you too have noticed phases in the brightness of your soul.

If you and I do not know one another, it may help you to know that I have spent half of my life as a priest in the Episcopal Church. I was ordained in my early thirties and served a couple of churches until I was close to fifty. Then I decided to leave

parish ministry for a whole host of reasons, including my loss of faith in the institution I was serving. By writing a book about that experience, I discovered my part in my lover's quarrel with the church. Let's just say that an introverted romantic with a touch of obsessive-compulsive disorder does not make the best pastor. But I also discovered a number of things about my Christian tradition that had not been apparent to me while I was busy upholding it.

Chief among these is the way Christian teaching thrives on dividing reality into opposed pairs: good/evil, church/world, spirit/flesh, sacred/profane, light/dark. Even if you are not Christian, it should be easy to tell which half of each pair is "higher" and which "lower." In every case, the language of opposition works by placing half of reality closer to God and the other half farther away. This not only simplifies life for people who do not want to spend a lot of time thinking about whether the divisions really hold; it also offers them a strong sense of purpose by giving them daily battles to engage in. The more they win out over the world of the flesh, the better. The more they beat back the powers of darkness, the closer they get to God. The ultimate goal is to live with that God forever, in a bright heaven where the bottom half of every earthly equation has finally returned to dust.

After years of using this language to pray, teach, preach, and celebrate the sacraments, I fell out of love with it—not just the words themselves but also the vision of reality they represent. It was a huge loss, as full of grief as any other. The language



had come as such blessed relief at first, naming the tug-of-war going on both inside and outside me. Why did I often feel so uncomfortable in my skin? Why did I do things that I knew were wrong? Earlier in my life, questions like these kept me up at night wondering what was wrong with me. When Christian teaching offered me an answer—that I was caught up in the fundamental struggle between spirit and flesh—it also offered me a strategy for victory. If I would commit myself to following Jesus, then every day, in every way, he would help me turn from the dark to live with him in the light.

Of course, my language evolved through the years as I became more mature in faith, but the essential worldview did not change. Even after I found a church that affirms the goodness of creation as much as any I know, Sunday worship still turned on the axis of blood sacrifice, which made the death of the body the way of eternal life. After I became ordained, I led the congregation in achingly beautiful prayers thanking God for the gifts of the earth, the church, and the Spirit—but also in prayers asking God to deliver us from the deceits of the world, the flesh, and the devil. Since this language matched much of the language in scripture, it blended in. Plus, it seemed to work for a lot of people, the same way it had worked for me.

It was not until later, after I had resigned from saying these words on a regular basis, that they began to sound lame. Their explanation for what was wrong with me was no longer a relief but an ongoing source of injury. Their description of divine reality no longer struck with the force of revelation but resounded

with the clang of a truth claim that bore closer inspection. Saying them over and over again in a sacred place, it had been possible to overlook the way they divided people in two, teaching us over and over again that we had two minds, two natures, two sets of loyalties, two homes—and that only one was close to God. Too much of this can make a person crazy.

So I wrote a book in which I focused on spiritual practices rooted in ordinary, physical, human life on earth, like going for a walk, paying attention to a tree, hanging a load of laundry on the line, and treating other people like peepholes into God. This is how I learned that people of faith do not get much help in thinking of their ordinary, physical lives as being particularly sacred. All you have to do to get a thank-you note from some of them is to set down in print what they have known all along: that the days of their lives are not easily divisible into good and evil, spirit and flesh; that some of the best things that have ever happened to them have happened in the darkest places, and some of the worst in well-lit churches; that their bodies have been the source not only of great pain but also of great pleasure; that they experience the world as a place of wonder as well as brokenness; and that they have a hard time warming up to any kind of salvation that divides reality in two and asks them to forsake the bottom half.

In many ways this book is the third in a trilogy dedicated to scooping up the bottom halves of things, or at least the words used to describe them—first the world, then the flesh, now the dark—not only because those words have been libeled



long enough but also because there is so much life in them that has been rejected on bogus grounds. If there is any truth to the teaching that spiritual reality is divided into halves, it is the truth that those pairs exist in balance, not opposition. What can light possibly mean without dark? Who knows spirit without also knowing flesh? Is anyone altogether good or altogether evil? Where is the church that exists outside the world? People of faith who are committed to fullness of life have our work cut out for us, if only in changing the way we talk.

This book is called *Learning to Walk in the Dark* because I believe that is a spiritual skill some of us could use right now. As I said earlier, “darkness” packs a different punch for different people. I do not know a thing about the darkness of living with chronic illness or trying to raise a child in a refugee camp, for instance. My eyes work well enough. I have never been sexually abused. All in all, my experience of physical darkness does not extend much beyond reading a good book by bad light. If I have any expertise, it is in the realm of spiritual darkness: fear of the unknown, familiarity with divine absence, mistrust of conventional wisdom, suspicion of religious comforters, keen awareness of the limits of all language about God and at the same time shame over my inability to speak of God without a thousand qualifiers, doubt about the health of my soul, and barely suppressed contempt for those who have no such qualms. These are the areas of my proficiency.

If even one of them rings a bell, it is possible that you too could benefit from learning to walk in the dark. Maybe you are



a young person in deep need of faith right now, but the kind you inherited from your parents is not cutting it. You want something with a sharper edge, a keener sense of purpose. You want something that asks more of you than to sit and listen quietly while someone else tells you how to live. You know it's out there, but where? It may be time for a walk in the dark.

If you are in the middle of your life, maybe some of your dreams of God have died hard under the weight of your experience. You have knocked on doors that have not opened. You have asked for bread and been given a stone. The job that once defined you has lost its meaning; the relationships that once sustained you have changed or come to their natural ends. It is time to reinvent everything from your work life to your love life to your life with God—only how are you supposed to do that exactly, and where will the wisdom come from? Not from a weekend workshop. It may be time for a walk in the dark.

If you are my age, you are losing a lot more things than you once did—not just your keys and your vision, but also your landmarks and your sense of self. You are going to a lot more funerals now than before. When you read your class notes in the alumni news, they are shorter and nearer the top every time. You know full well where all this is heading, but you also know that you are not ready yet. So how are you supposed to get ready? What is the work you have left to do before you enter the Great Beyond? Clearly, it is time for a walk in the dark.



Since I have spent at least half my life in churches, I am especially aware of how many old-time Christians are looking into the dark right now. Attendance is down; debt is up. Plenty of smaller churches are closing or at least putting their buildings up for sale. All the divine energy seems to be going to the southern hemisphere, leaving the old-timers up north with a bad case of solar affective disorder. Learning to walk in the dark is an especially valuable skill in times like these—or maybe I should say *remembering* how to walk in the dark, since people of faith have deep pockets of wisdom about how to live through long nights in the wilderness. We just forgot, most of us, once we got where we were going and the glory days began.

The remembering takes time, like straightening a bent leg and waiting for the feeling to return. This cannot be rushed, no matter how badly you want to get where you are going. Step 1 of learning to walk in the dark is to give up running the show. Next you sign the waiver that allows you to bump into some things that may frighten you at first. Finally you ask darkness to teach you what you need to know. If you have never had a spiritual director before, you have started near the top. Let this one guide you, and you will soon have new companions as brave and curious as you are about the nightlife of your soul.

Meanwhile, here is some good news you can use: even when light fades and darkness falls—as it does every single day, in every single life—God does not turn the world over to some

other deity. Even when you cannot see where you are going and no one answers when you call, this is not sufficient proof that you are alone. There is a divine presence that transcends all your ideas about it, along with all your language for calling it to your aid, which is not above using darkness as the wrecking ball that brings all your false gods down—but whether you decide to trust the witness of those who have gone before you, or you decide to do whatever it takes to become a witness yourself, here is the testimony of faith: darkness is not dark to God; the night is as bright as the day.

Since this is a book about learning to walk in the dark, the structure may sometimes be hard to see. The chapters track the phases of the moon, starting and ending with full moons. In between, the path winds, as the moon empties of light. Then, after a chapter on nights with no moon, the light begins to grow again. Once I decided to explore lunar spirituality, I resolved to follow darkness wherever it led, which is why this book has cosmology, biology, and psychology in it as well as history and theology. Anything that added to my wisdom about the human experience of darkness made it in, since that experience accounts for what we both love and fear about the night. Readers are free to take the science at face value, though I confess to taking much of it figuratively. Once, when I stood at the entrance of a very large labyrinth in a very old cathedral, my guide said, “From this point on, everything that happens is a metaphor for your life.” Perhaps you will accept what follows



in the same spirit. Whatever I meant to put into these pages, what you take from them is a metaphor for your life.

I have never written a book I have been sadder to finish, since I have enjoyed the writing of it so much. My consolation is knowing that I can walk out on my porch tonight and see the moon—one day past full—shining down on me like another mother, saying, “Come outside now, it’s getting dark.”

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