

Psychotherapy Newsletter

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Dark Night of the Soul

A dark night of the soul can last for a single evening. It can last for a couple of days. Sometimes it lasts a couple of weeks, a couple of months, a couple of years, or a couple of decades. When we grow up with severe dysregulation, distress, and abuse, it can feel like our entire life is characterized by a dark night of the soul. It is a state of intense restlessness and dis-ease. We lack a sense of well-being. We want to crawl out of our skin. Other times the intensity abates, but we are aware we are in a season of our life where there is a theme of struggle, of feeling undone. Sometimes we need to enlist the aid of a medication. We have to get our sleep. We cannot function with excessively high levels of anxiety or depression. We are fortunate in this day and age to have this option. It wasn't long ago that Virginia Woolf loaded rocks in her pockets and walked into a body of water to end her life when her psychic pain became unbearable. Sometimes the use of a medication can contain us well enough so that we can begin to process what we need to in order to make sense of what is stirring in us.

It is important to know on some level that a 'dark night of the soul' is a useful season of our life. It signifies a death that can lead to greater living. In the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, the 'bardo' experience is a symbolic ego death, coupled with a state of confusion and the possibility of an awakening or rebirth. In the Christian tradition, it can symbolize a metaphoric 'crucifixion' before a 'resurrection' – dying to ourselves in order to have life more abundantly.

It is absolutely mandatory that we enlist the help of others when we are lost in this dark place. We cannot go it alone. If we are fortunate, we can access a comforting presence of God at times. If we are fortunate, we have loved ones who can comfort and support us. If we are fortunate, we have a competent therapist alongside us – one who 'gets' the importance of what we are going through and can help us access the important themes of growth that are presenting themselves. Most often this dark season signifies the break down of an old defense system – one we had to enlist as a child, but that now prevents

us from fully living life and allowing others close. When our old defenses shift, it can create an intense and disturbing feeling of uncertainty. It can feel unbearable. We can no longer project feelings of anger, greed, lust, envy, weakness, and pride as easily onto the world, but find ourselves carrying our own unwanted emotions.

We need someone to create a 'narrative' with us – to help us formulate a story about who we are, where we came from, and what we are going through. We need to take advantage of a 'holding environment' and sit with someone who can translate our undigested psychic bits into morsels that are metabolized and useable. We need to allow old, intractable perspectives of our self and the world transform and yield to something softer, more pliable, and characterized by more acceptance.

Margery Williams says it profoundly in her children's book, *The Velveteen Rabbit* – It doesn't happen all at once. You become. It takes a long time. That's why it doesn't happen to people who break easily, or have sharp edges, or who have to be carefully kept. Generally, by the time you are Real (and this is what a dark night of the soul season of our life can produce) most of your hair has been loved off, and your eyes drop out, and you get loose in the joints, and very shabby. But these things don't matter at all, because once you are Real you can't be ugly, except to people who don't understand. And once you are Real, you can't become unreal again. It lasts for always.



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