

DARKNESS IS ALSO A FRIEND

Many months ago, I was in a committee meeting and the point came up, as it does again and again, that we need to always be positive in our approaches and always stress the happy, successful possibilities in life. I did not say anything for a while, but apparently my face reflected something less than serenity. Somebody finally asked whether I agreed that we should always think positively, assuming success and satisfaction as the outcome. I do not remember the exact conversation, but I suspect I replied to the effect that I was glad I was not that emotionally stunted.

God has given us the capacity to weep as well as smile, to repent as well as rejoice, to feel great sorrow as well as high elation. To program myself to be cut off from all but a tiny portion of this rich spectrum of awareness in order to wear a happy smile all the time is a severe loss. Moreover, I am much impressed by the Christian religion, its Founder, its teachings, and its heroes, who declared a faith that was unafraid of suffering, failure, loss, or death. Having spent a good portion of my life enamored of the Crucified One and His friends, who even dared to head into death to find Life, I was not about to exchange it all for what seemed a crass and shallow posturing: that we should always act happy and positive, whether we mean it or not.

Of course, there is power in positive approaches. Christendom itself is always positive, if we take the long view and are talking about God's Kingdom. I only become uneasy when people want to be positive on the short view too, and about all matters having to do with success in this world. What I want to lift up for your consideration is the surprising, outlandish, incredible discovery of Christianity: that darkness is also a friend – that failure is often a great blessing. In fact, God's clearest and most powerful blessings may come more often through our dark moments than they do through our success, contentment, and satisfaction. Only those who have experienced failure, no longer fear it.

Dr. Leslie Weatherhead, one of England's great religious seers, wrote: "I can only write down this simple testimony. Like all men, I prefer the sunny uplands of experience when health, happiness and success abound; but I have learned more about God, life and myself in the darkness of fear and failure than I have ever learned in sunshine.

There are such things as the treasures of darkness. The darkness, thank God, passes, but what one learns in the darkness he possesses forever.”

Despite his great reputation, I do not think Dr. Weatherhead’s words would ring so clear and true if they did not remind us of themes we have heard and read and felt ourselves through the years. A friend of mine whose son had committed suicide told me that he would have given anything to prevent that tragedy, but he wonders if he ever would have found the Lord or the church if it had not happened. I have friends who are actually grateful to be alcoholics, because the path to recovery led them into the spiritual life they had hungered for but did not know how to find. From accidents, cancer, strokes, losing jobs, broken relationships, and shattered dreams, the saints awaken and begin their journey toward God. That is what I have seen and watched and experienced.

I read *The Power of Positive Thinking* by Norman Vincent Peale for the first time back in the seventh grade. In the eighth grade, I was given Dale Carnegie’s *How to Win Friends and Influence People*. Over the years, I have read a lot of the progeny of those books, taken courses, and listened to hours of tapes. Each time, I try to get into it for a while. It always turns out too shallow or too false, and I am reminded of Paul’s statement, “*When I became a man, I put away childish things.*” If Jesus had gone the way of positive thinking, He would never have been crucified. Paul would never have converted. Peter would never have heard the rooster crow. Would I really want to trade their darkness for positive thinking’s light? Not likely!

Next to Christendom, I am drawn to Buddhism. Have you ever contemplated the Four Noble Truths (on which all Buddhism is based) and compared them with psycho-cybernetics, Robert Schuller’s teachings, or any of the recently pictured roles of the successful American male? I just cannot help but suspect that some folk have not thought about it very much, beyond a temporary and shallow desire to be acceptable or well-off in the next few years or so, as if there were nothing more to life than that.

Aeschylus, one of the greatest playwright-philosophers of all time, *had* thought about it some and wrote: “God, whose law it is that he who learns must suffer. And even in our sleep, pain that cannot forget falls drop by drop upon the heart, and in our own despite, against our will, comes wisdom to us by the awful [awe-filled] grace of God.”

What can we say, then, about darkness? There is truth to the saying, “It is always darkest before the dawn.” It also seems true of life that there is no growth without pain – no conversion without some form of despair.

Sometimes we look around and see the sunsets, hear the birds, and see the moonlight playing on the ocean, and we are in awe of the loveliness of nature and the incredible beauty and order that exist all around us. We say it brings us closer to God. Sometimes we see a news-cast and wonder what it would be like to be caught in the maelstrom of war or to flee as refugees with nothing left but a cloth sack and one relative. Sometimes we also cut in for a moment on the anguish of people out of work or the helplessness of people in wards in large hospitals everywhere. Does that also bring us closer to our Creator – closer to God? Is it more spiritual to hike the trails of Mount Rainier than to walk the wards of County General Hospital in Los Angeles? Are they not both revealers of nature, part of God’s creation? I wonder if we do not need to do both – to face both – to be afraid of neither.

Sometimes darkness is a friend, albeit in disguise at first. I worry a great deal about people who are afraid of the dark – who insist on acting positive, successful, and happy all the time, as if it were some creed one dares not transgress. Do we really want to become people who cannot cry for the pain of this world – who have no compassion, even for ourselves? Is it not a relief and a rejoicing to discover that we are not always pleased with some things (or some people) the way they presently are? Rather, we have hopes and dreams and goals – and faith in God, who is bringing all things to what they are intended to be.

On a more personal level, it is dangerous to operate on the premise that we should always act positive and happy – that there is something wrong with us if we feel discouraged. Then soon we avoid awareness of our own inner condition. We start pretending, which is a form of denial and self-deception.

“The attempt to avoid legitimate suffering lies at the root of all emotional illness,” according to psychiatrist M. Scott Peck in *The Road Less Traveled*. “Neurosis is always a substitute for legitimate suffering,” said Carl Jung. Underneath both statements is the realization that our pain and despair are trying to alert us to both the crises and the opportunities of the spiritual life. The darkness we encounter most frequently bears the message of change and healing that we desperately need.

What does it do to us as a people if we think we must always be positive, always act successful, always put on the face of confident achievers who have neither qualms nor doubts nor any hidden weaknesses or fears? If we have no self-pity, we can have no compassion for others. *“You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”*

What do we do when it gets dark? We do not have to run or hide or pretend, or be afraid of life’s dark times. After all, we begin the Christian Life by accepting death. Baptism is a drowning. When a dark time comes, we assume it is another form of the spiritual path we follow – another time in which we will learn and grow and eventually discover new wonders about God’s plan and purpose for us.

In order to let that happen, the first requirement is to accept and feel the darkness for what it is. If it is sorrow, let it flood in. If it is remorse, let it voice its worst accusations. If it is loneliness, let it tear the heart. If it is fear, let it howl until its warning is clear. What good is it to know Jesus if that knowing does not allow us to face the darkness?

The saints tell us, “Surrender to the worst.” Whatever form the darkness takes, imagine it turning out as bleak and dark as possible. If you are caught in the dark, never play it light. Never comfort yourself with “Oh well, it’s not so bad” or “It will probably never happen” or “It could be worse.” Picture the outcome as darkly as you can. Surrender to the worst.

Then bring your faith to bear. Can you handle the worst outcome if God stays close and helps you? Once you know that, the fear is back in proper perspective. If it comes to the worst, it *will* be okay. Together, you and God can handle anything! Then you are free to see and cope with the situation as it really is.

Secondly, assume there is a reason for what you are feeling – sorrow, discouragement, depression, shame, frustration. Do not try to talk yourself out of it. Let the darkness speak to you. It has a message for you. Behind that message is God with some important prospects and the power to accomplish them, but first the darkness has to speak. Welcome it, listen to it, learn from it.

Remember that it is not wrong to “feel this way.” Indeed, you may not be in the wrong. Sometimes dark times are the result of staying faithful in a separated and broken world. Sorrow, sadness, and discouragement are not always the mark of *your* deficiency. Joseph,

Moses, Elijah, David, Jeremiah, all the great prophets, Jesus, Peter, Paul – all the greatest we know had such moments. Very often it was when they had been most faithful. Even so, out of their darkness came new marching orders. (*“What are you doing here, Elijah?”*)

Face the darkness when it comes; surrender to the worst and bring your faith to bear. Then listen for the message the darkness is bringing. Finally, double the watch. Count on this: Out of darkness, God will show a new path, a new purpose. When it comes, you will realize without a doubt that there was no other way to get to this new place except through the dark time.

We worship a God of death and resurrection. In Christendom, we do not move from light to light. We move through death to LIFE, through sorrow to JOY, through pain to LOVE. The glory is not in the suffering, but suffering must not be allowed to turn us aside.

Good days are wonderful and the light is what we seek, but darkness is also a friend, if we keep walking with Jesus Christ our Lord.