

Lighting up lives-by walking in the dark

Overview

I wish commend making the space to explore our lives just below the surface of everyday living. I refer to this as the 'dark' as we rarely look there-it is like going in the attic and shining a torch into a dark space. My assumption is that spending time listening to what is happening within is hugely beneficial. Paradoxically, we can light up our lives by walking in the dark. We are also inviting the light of God to shine brightly.

Introduction

I wish to investigate how dark is thought of in relation to patterns of living, science, literature and the biblical narrative. I refer to the Jewish Sabbath, scientific thinking on dark matter, storytelling about the natural world and Nicodemus from the Gospel of John.

The pattern of the day: The Jewish Sabbath

In a number of cultures, the new day begins with the evening. An example is the Jewish Sabbath. The Sabbath celebration is often held with family and with friends. It involves bringing light into the darkness of nightfall, the light of God into hearts, minds and relationships.



Darkness precedes the light. To quote John V Taylor, 'Before there can be any sunrise you must pass through the dark'. With the cycle of night and day this is true. It is also true in a more metaphysical way. We all have the opportunity to go through periods of darkness in our living. Often we might try and avoid such darkness as it often involves pain. I suggest that it might be worth welcoming such darkness as a gift especially at this time of the year characterized by long dark nights.

Learning from Science: The relationship between Ordinary and Dark Matter

I am encouraged to discover something about the seen and unseen, dark matter and ordinary matter. For the physicists dark matter is not sinister. It is present alongside ordinary matter. Dark matter does not reflect light and so cannot be seen. We see ordinary matter as it reflects the light.

Lisa Rendall writes, 'Dark matter constitutes 85 percent of the matter in the universe while ordinary matter-such as that contained in stars, gas and people-constitutes only 15 percent'. Rendall encourages her readers to become aware of the presence of the whole of matter, dark and ordinary. Rendall again, '[...] people are mainly preoccupied with the existence and relevance of ordinary matter-which to be fair, interacts more strongly'. So there perhaps needs to be a little bit more exploration to get a sense of the whole and not simply the most noticeable.

Rendall continues, '[...] as with humanity, it doesn't make sense to focus all our attention on the small percentage that is disproportionately influential. The dominant 15 percent of matter that we can see and feel is only part of the story. I will explain dark matter's critical role in the Universe [...]

and in maintaining the stability of these structures'. Here I am struck by how dark matter helps to maintain stability. Furthermore, according to information from CERN, dark matter has gravitational effects, and this is how it is detected.

Drawing a parallel with our inner lives, it is worth paying attention to that which is less visible and often hidden or submerged. Acknowledging the presence of an internal darkness, that is having an effect upon us, can be healthy.

Storytelling: The natural world

I wish to bring this macro scientific perspective alongside storytelling inspired by the natural world. John Lewis-Stempel writes about the 'Secret Life of the Owl'. The epilogue of his book is a short story, 'The Lord of the Night'. In this he contrasts the narrator's interaction with the night darkness with that of the owl, Old Brown. He writes, 'But I have lost my sense of where Old Brown is. The wood (to my ears) has slept into silence. Old Brown, however, can hear the turn of a leaf [...] and the scamper of rabbit on grass'.



The owl is very alive to what is happening within the darkness. The owl's senses are finely tuned. With courageous practice tuning in to what is going on in our inner self can aid us to live more fruitfully.

Spiritual Practice

Being Still and Quiet: 'Be still and know that I am God'. ■

To pay attention to what is below the surface I often have to turn down the bright lights available to hand that can provide temporary distraction, such as the screen. I find that the most effective way to pay attention to the internal is to just sit. I am alert, open, and quiet. For me this might be for a few minutes once the house is settled in an evening.

I am not sure what I will discover. Sometimes thoughts and feelings come bubbling to the surface. I sit with them and often find that I can acknowledge what has happened and how I might respond and/or let go. I have learned from the wisdom of Paul Bradbury. He writes, 'I am slowly letting the darkness come, to lean into it, wrestle with and trust if for the gift I firmly believe it to be'.

At other times I intentionally engage with others in the disciplined practice of Centering Prayer. Centering Prayer is often known through the work of Thomas Keating and Cynthia Bourgeault. Centering Prayer is part of the weekly pattern of spirituality offered at Alabaré through the spirituality chaplain. Each Monday morning a small group meet and greet, share briefly but quite deeply how we are, and then spend twenty minutes in silence. When my thoughts wonder during the prayer time I say internally a brief two word phrase. I also know that every time my mind begins

to wander again I have another opportunity to return to God. In practicing Centering Prayer I believe God touches me at my core in a way that I cannot adequately articulate.

Learning with Nicodemus



I take great encouragement that Nicodemus meets Jesus at night. For the writer of John's Gospel 'night' is a code word used to indicate uncertainty and keeping things hidden. Other forces are potentially at work. It is a dangerous time. Nicodemus journeys in three key stages. He seeks contact with Jesus secretly (John 3.1). In vulnerability he openly challenging colleagues concerning offering Jesus a fair trial (John 7.50). Finally he is involved in the intimate act of caring for Jesus' body following his death (19.39). Nicodemus explores his questions about life. As Jewish Leader he is inspired and provoked by Jesus' words and actions. He wrestles with his internal worldview and courageously begins a journey of change.

Being like Nicodemus

Whilst Bradbury comments extensively on Jonah, a prophet whose life is turned around whilst in the darkness of the belly of the large fish, his words may equally apply to Nicodemus. 'The dark night is a continual process of transformation, of varying intensity, throughout our lives. Much of the time when we thought life was easy we were simply not open to or aware of the darkness knocking at our door [...] So we must learn to embrace it, value it and discover the gift within it'. For Nicodemus, following his instinctive heart, leaning into the uncertainty of the dark, led to a transformation of his life.

Lighting up lives by exploring the dark

We are called to transformation. Within Alabaré opportunities exist for the Christian chaplains to accompany all who wish to be open to the wider dimensions of their existence and to do work with their inner selves. This can have an essential place within the transformation of those who use Alabare services. We also offer a time for Centering Prayer which is open to all.

I think we should have courage to explore the inner landscape of our lives. Living in the footsteps of Nicodemus and other biblical characters such as Jonah and Jacob. Reflecting on the story in Genesis 28, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks comments, 'Jacob was the man whose greatest visions came to him when he was alone at night, far from home, fleeing from one danger to the next'. The brightness of the vision happened at another time when there is darkness, whilst sleeping. Jacob with his vision could move forward with courage. Following his dream at Bethel, Jacob exclaims, 'Surely the Lord is in this place-and I did not know it!' And he was afraid and said, 'How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God and this is the gate of heaven'. As we bring light to our lives by exploring the darkness, may we know God's loving presence and care, and make more space for God in our living.