

DARKNESS TO LIGHT: Death as a Teacher

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(These are the introductory remarks from the 1993 KARA conference for professional and volunteer caregivers. Kara provides counseling services for patients and families facing life threatening illness and bereavement. For more information about their services contact KARA at 650-321-5272.)

The Old Testament relates the transition from darkness to light.
“In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth.
And the earth was without form, and void;
and darkness was upon the face of the deep.
And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters
And God said, Let there be light;
and there was light.
And God saw that it was good.
And God divided the light from the darkness.” (Old Testament, Genesis i, 1-4)

The Hindu tradition as described in the Rig Veda antedates both the Old Testament and the modern scientific Big Bang theory. The first event was consciousness becoming aware of itself as a primal “Ah ha!” This created the tripartite division between Rishi, the knower, Chandas, the object that is known, and Devita, the process of knowing.

In Ancient Greece Hades is the Lord of Darkness and the underworld. Known by his Roman name, Pluto, he is also the source of riches, gold and precious stones that are buried deep within the earth. (Hence the word “plutocracy,” the rule of the wealthy.) This establishes the connection between that which is hidden and things of great value.

There is a widely known story of Hades rape of Demeter’s daughter, Persephone. Demeter, Goddess of Corn and grain, grieved so terribly when Hades carried Persephone off to the Underworld that she caused winter to fall upon the earth. At Zeus’s intervention she was freed, but, because she had eaten 6 pomegranate seeds and was condemned to cycle between light and darkness, creating winter and summer.

Darkness and light are joined dramatically in the person of Lucifer. His name means literally, “bearer of light” and is described in Isaiah 14:12 as the “shining one, son of morning.” His character is most developed in Milton’s Paradise Lost. Most powerful of the angels, his sin of pride and revolt against God condemns him to Hell. Hence contained within light is also darkness.

What is darkness and what is light, anyway? A child, asked to draw black, will take crayons of different colors and scribble hard until the white paper is covered and obscured. We know scientifically, however, that darkness is really the absence of light.

What, then, is light? According to the Oxford English Dictionary, it is an electromagnetic radiation of a certain frequency and energy that excites the optic nerve so we can see things. It is also the source of these rays. It is also liveliness and animation, as in “the light in one’s eyes.” It is a spark that ignites a fire. Light is the opposite of heavy or ponderous. It is swift, graceful and elegant in form. Light is easy to bear or endure, requiring little exertion. It is free from the weight of care or sorrow, cheerful and

merry, as in “lighthearted.” It is humorous and full of mirth. It is also knowledge and understanding, as in “enlightenment.”

We all have a shadow. Or does our shadow have us? The Shadow includes our unconscious and unacknowledged thoughts, feelings and memories. Shakespeare called it “This thing of darkness I acknowledge mine.” Like many things dark, it is fearful. Only the bravest and most committed willingly enter its dim caves. The majority, like Prosephone, are taken there unwillingly by losses great and small.

C.G. Jung noted, “Everyone carries a shadow, and the less it is embodied in the individual’s conscious life, the blacker and denser it is. One does not become enlightened by imagining figures of light, but by making the darkness conscious. The latter procedure, however, is disagreeable and therefore not popular.”

For our own sake we have to explore the darkness or we cannot proceed with our lives. Otherwise we will be trapped in our projections, Freudian slips, and ignorance of our true selves.

The gate to our private darkneses is guarded, like Hades, by the terrible three-headed dog, Cerberus. It seems that he can be pacified only through our pain and the sacrifice of our pride. In death our precious relationships and attachments are torn from our grasp. We are bowed down by grief. Eventually, if we have the courage and perseverance, and if we enter the shadows far enough, we may begin to own it.

By accepting death as a teacher we come into right relationship with our shadow. We are lead back to our buried potentials, to a more genuine self-acceptance based upon more complete knowledge of who we are. Such acceptance frees us from the guilt and shame associated with our negative feelings and actions and to heal our relationships through more honest and direct communication.

From Rene’ Daumal’s, *Mount Analogue* comes,
“I am dead because I lack desire;
I lack desire because I think I possess;
I think I possess because I do not try to give.
In trying to give, you see that you have nothing;
Seeing you have nothing, you try to give of yourself;
Trying to give of yourself, you see that you are noting;
Seeing you are nothing, you desire to become;
In desiring to become, you begin to live.”

Deep within each of us a creative spark, a tiny piece of God, that is not content to curse the darkness, but strives to light a candle, however small. Brought to the unfamiliar territory of death we begin to explore and learn from our new environment. Death becomes one of our most important teachers.