

Occasional Note # 9

The Soul's Dark Light: Differentiating Darkness on the Spiritual Journey

I have not written an occasional note for some time, though I have thought of doing so often, and took notes for this one while I was preparing to teach in Norway last summer. I needed to wait until I felt I had enough experience and perspective in order to begin to explore this topic through writing. I needed to live certain experiences of the darkness of my own path before I could begin to reflect on darkness in a wider way. And in the last several years I have been doing this--passing through a dark night of the soul which has challenged me to my limits, but also brought me a fuller understanding of what it means to be a soul on earth and to seek to live as such. The note is not about the details of this personal journey, but about what I am learning from my own life and the life of others I have worked with about the place and power of darkness on the spiritual path over the course of a lifetime.

Much is known about the light of the soul, but the dark of the soul has not gotten the same attention and I believe it is equally important. We tend to avoid it, or, if we face it, we fail to make the distinction between different kinds of darkness within the soul and lump them all together. And in either case we do not fully honor the dark's presence and its gift, but rather seek to bear it blindly until it goes away and light returns. This is a great loss, for one half, so to speak, of the soul is denied, or feared, and so it is more difficult for the integration of light and dark in our souls to occur.

What I want to do here in this note is to explore what it means to welcome darkness as an honored and important aspect of the spiritual journey. I want also to propose a differentiation of this aspect of our experience so that we can recognize different kinds of darkness that exist along the path as they arise. I want to explore this topic of darkness so as to better understand how to approach it, both in our own experience and in that of the people with whom we are working, and how to honor it in a way that it can give its gift.

As with all these notes, nothing is written in stone. They are rather intended to stimulate thought, response, and dialogue among a community of practitioners to whom I send them, and perhaps collaboration in further exploration of a complex topic. This note builds on the previous three (OCN #6-8) and takes the thinking there a little further and in this specific direction. The context for all four, and, indeed, for the earlier ones as well, remains the exploration of the principles, parameters, and practice of a spirituality of earthliness, of living as a soul on earth here and now-- one that does not posit a place apart as Divine, but rather sees the earth herself as sacred and the Divine immediately present everywhere and in every being. It is a vision of spiritual life that focuses on how we live here on earth as souls, as spiritual beings, on the process by which we incarnate and become

fully alive and ourselves in our daily lives, and on how we gradually transform our ordinary living and the life of the planet so that all beings can thrive within this sacred cosmos. Other terms for this orientation are “incarnational spirituality” or “embodied spirituality”. Women’s Spirituality has been a leader in this exploration, and now the principles and practices are emerging in a range of languages and disciplines. Most religious systems speak to this orientation in some way, but the major emphasis has until recently remained on what lies beyond our immediate experience as most important. Fundamentalism, east and west, has taken this otherworldly orientation to an extreme, projecting the Divine out into the ether as a Paradise, or Heaven, that can be attained only by the chosen few, whoever they are. The spirituality of earthliness does quite the opposite, positing that spirituality is the birthright of every human being and calling us to be fully present here on earth as souls and to bring those qualities of the Divine within us here into our daily lives now. Paradoxically, as we do this, we find the Infinite and Eternal right here without going anywhere, but the doorway to this experience is through full embodiment of our being here on earth.

Dark and Light as Human Beauty

Generally, in spiritual work, as I said above, light has been the preferred experience and the implication often is that, as we mature spiritually, we inhabit the realms of light more and more, or we are filled with light, or light drives out, or overcomes, darkness. Light is associated with pleasant spiritual experience and we seek the light as relief from the darkness of our human condition. I think of the white spiritual “I am a poor wayfaring stranger, wandering through this world of woe. But there’s no sickness, toil, or danger, in that bright world to which I go.” Light and love are close to each other; darkness and hate, grief, and fear are kin. Very seldom are we encouraged to go into the dark and explore it as a means of deepening our spiritual connection and to honor it as an aspect of our soul.

This same preference accorded to light is also generally given to the experience of transcendence—it tends to be preferred to descending into our experience. We are encouraged to step back, or rise above, our immediate experience and learn to observe it without being drawn into it. This is the core of spiritual practice, east and west, and is an incredibly valuable skill to have. It brings perspective, freedom from attachment, and an experience of being centered and rooted in one’s essential being. But it can also be used to move away prematurely from dark places within us, and lead to a “premature transcendence” that keeps us ungrounded, partial, and identified with the lighter sides of the soul. The extreme form of this occurs in spiritual cults where members are promised eternal light and joy, and become obsessed with this, and, incidentally are soon consumed by their own darkness, but it is a tendency we all have – to use light to move away from darkness that is unknown and perhaps uncomfortable to us.

The antidote to this tendency is what I call “descendence”, which is the movement in consciousness “down and in” rather than “up and out”. This is not

the same as immanence, which is often associated with transcendence as a paradoxical pole, as in “Transcendent and Immanent God”. Rather, this is a choice, based on prior transcendence and the perspective gained through it, to reenter the experience and to live it fully, to participate in it, and to let it work in us. It is a choice to hold this “dark” experience as an unknown aspect of our soul that is coming to us in this form, and to enter and mine it for the presumed gift it brings.

This does not mean diving indiscriminately into all dark experience, which could be termed “premature descendance”. We have often said in Psychosynthesis “you need to identify before you can disidentify”, and here I would say, “you need to transcend before you can descend”. Transcendence is a precondition for healthy descendance, for this perspective provides the container for the dark experience in which it can be held and fully lived. But “descendance” is another dimension of spiritual work that I think needs to be more fully acknowledged and worked with, for it is necessary to the process of incarnation and it brings us more fully into our bodies and into being fully alive on earth as souls. It takes us below our personalities, much as transcendence takes us above them. Both are needed, but the latter has been neglected.

Another way to say this is that the spiritualities of transcendence have brought us as far as they can, and we have learned this skill. We now need to take another step and bring this skill to bear on learning to descend and embody our spirit fully within our given earthly lives.

The importance of this principle of descendance (see Occasional Notes #6 and #7) lies in its function in the process of incarnation, or embodiment. It is the principle by which the soul comes ever more and more into its given life on earth and claims the full range of its human experience, every aspect of it, in order to learn and express. You can think of the soul as your capacity to live every experience and to learn from each, to bear its intensity, and to express its full gift within the context of a given and very particular human life. In order to descend, to incarnate fully, we need to learn to face into the darkness and welcome it, to explore the dark corners of our experience and include them in our spiritual practice. And eventually we need to face into the dark corners of the world where our spiritual destiny will take us as we mature as souls.

Darkness is the path of incarnation; there is no way we can get “down and in” without facing and working with it. Without it we remain mere light, without depth and dimension, we deny the destructive aspects of darkness which are within us, and we fail to own the creative aspects that are needed for a full life on earth.

How then do we proceed? As a first step, we need to hold dark and light as equal in our experience and to welcome both as aspects of a complex humanity that we are seeking to realize as souls. We can’t shy away from one and toward the other. We need to hold both equally. This choice, in itself, brings balance and relief, and a greater groundedness to our lives. We are no longer trying to avoid

anything. Then, as a second step, we can begin to differentiate the kinds of darkness we experience and learn how to work with each (see below).

The choice of descendance also brings us into alignment with our spiritual will which is seeking full expression and realization in this lifetime. You can say that the soul intends, and is yearning, most deeply for earth, not heaven, and is happiest here on earth fulfilling its/our calling. When we seek the light only, or seek to leave and keep our distance from the dark, we work at cross-purposes to our spiritual intention and calling. When we welcome the dark, and bring the light of our awareness to it, we come more directly and fully into alignment with our soul's purpose and begin to work out how to be here fully as ourselves. Further, if we descend and enter the dark, the light will follow, and in time we can then discover how they combine in a mature spiritual being and expression.

This choice to descend not only grounds and aligns us, but also immediately brings us closer to an experience of human beauty, which is always composed of dark and light elements, of suffering and joy. When you think of older people who have lived their lives deeply and well, you can recognize their human beauty, their authentic being, and how this always arises from the fact that they have embraced the full spectrum of their human experience as it came, and not shied away from anything. The beauty of a mature soul that we so admire and are drawn too is always composed of dark and light elements, integrated into the uniqueness of this person and the life he, or she, has lived. It is in this sense that "Beauty will save the world" (See OCN #8).

Spiritual maturity and human beauty are the outcome of including the darkness and integrating it with light. It is here that we get the full power and beauty of the soul embodied in human form, or what Joseph Campbell described as the "experience of being fully alive, the rapture of being fully alive" as a soul on earth. This beauty is the fruit of a long journey, and yet it is never not there at those moments when we embrace the full spectrum of our experience. You see the essence of this spiritual beauty in children, but a lifetime of encounters with the darkness enriches and deepens it. It flowers out of the dark as well as the light of our lives and we are always grateful, when it does, for what we have been through to realize it. It is strange to say that the spiritual path is one of seeking the dark in ourselves and the world, but it seems that this, in fact, gives the soul's light the opportunity too shine more brightly and for true beauty and maturity to be realized on earth.

The Differentiation of Darkness

I want now to turn to this question of distinguishing kinds of darkness on the spiritual journey. In beginning to embrace and differentiate darkness in our experience, the first thing to do is to remove any negative connotation from it. It is simply an aspect of our experience, neither good nor bad, one that is yet to be known and needs the focus of our awareness on it. There is no negative bias in this attitude, but rather curiosity and interest in what this unknown might be.

What is coming to me from this unknown, even if it is uncomfortable, and perhaps frightening to some part of me? This is the attitude to cultivate in working with darkness throughout the differentiated spectrum, for it allows the dark unknown to reveal itself for what it is and thus to contribute to our journey. What arises from the darkness may be many different things, and each will be worked with according to its nature. To cultivate an attitude of acceptance and interest, even when the experience is difficult, helps to welcome and work with the darkness.

With this basic acceptance and the willingness to live what comes as a context, I want now to lay out a spectrum of the different kinds of darkness we encounter in the life cycle and say a bit about how we can work with each of them. This is clearly only an outline, and much more detail is needed for a comprehensive treatment, but it will get us thinking. For didactic purposes here I lay them out in sequence, but it is most often the case that these aspects are layered and combined in ways that are often subtle, and it takes careful sensing and examination to discern what is truly going on in any particular experience.

It is important to remember, as I lay out this spectrum, that the essence of darkness in the soul is the unknown. In choosing to face into it, whatever it is, we are, therefore, choosing to embrace the unknown in our life and mine it for its gift. Out of this dark unknown different “knowns” will emerge, with different qualities and needing different treatment. For example, there is a difference between the darkness of existential despair and the darkness of the spiritual adversary, and each will be worked with according to its nature and gift. At the same time, in making these distinctions we need also to remember that in essence all darkneses arise from the Unknown, or yet to be known, and each bears to us, no matter how trying, a gift of a particular experience and learning for the soul.

Pre-incarnational Darkness—This is an experience of darkness that remains unconscious for most, but occasionally emerges and needs to be acknowledged and worked with, for it sets a pattern that affects the whole life. The image that occurs is one of separation from Oneness as a soul moves toward human birth. In this passage there are experiences of loss, betrayal, anger, resignation, hurry, grief, anxiety, as reactions to the seeming separation from the Unity of Being. These reactions begin to shape our worldview and our consequent learning. They bias the whole life system and are aspects of the soul experience pre-birth. They do not reside in personal biography, though they influence the personality and its development. They can be seen as karmic biases that a soul “brings in” in order to work further with them, but they can also simply be how the soul reacted to the experience of separation from Unity. Work with this kind of darkness entails making conscious the pattern and exploring its impact and meaning within the life as a coloration of all subsequent experience.

Darkness of Birth—This is the darkness of the birth passage and the terrifying and confusing experiences of actually coming through the birth canal. These

experiences are both literal and symbolic and have been detailed by Stanislav Grof in his various studies of the “Perinatal Matrixes”, as he calls them. These traumas also shape our overall orientation to the world, but they are closer to biography and have root in the experience of this lifetime. They also can resonate to karmic patterns and reinforce pre-incarnational patterns. We can get stuck at different stages in the process of moving through the Matrixes, and this affects our development as personalities. They color and bias the personality identification system until they are brought to light.

Grof also posits and demonstrates that the Death/Rebirth pattern works throughout our lifetime to move us through the whole series of matrixes to full birth again and again in what is sometimes termed “ the spiral of growth”. These root identifications, formed in that peri-natal darkness, give rise to what I have called pan-systemic identifications which color and bias the development of the whole personality system. Work here is to bring this configuration to awareness and then cooperate with the process of death and rebirth to move the person through the stages that he/she has not yet fully experienced. Usually catharsis is part of this work and Stan Grof and others have developed a methodology called “Holotropic Breathwork” to support this movement through the peri-natal matrixes to full birth.

Both these darknesses—pre-incarnational and birth – can be rooted in karma, and in unfinished learning from the last life, they can hold patterns that need further work, or they can hold patterns that orient work to be done in this lifetime, and predispose the life to the learning that will come from this. They are a substrate that particularizes the soul’s life learning in certain directions. They do not become conscious in all people, but they are there and in some cases the dark here needs to be penetrated and worked with in order for a soul to take its next step in maturation. In both cases a person/soul is stuck in a certain deep pan-systemic pattern, and through awareness, acceptance, and then, in the latter case, active psycho-spiritual work, the experience transforms and the soul is released from the pattern with whatever we have learned from this experience.

The Soul Wound—This is the wound of non-welcome that is often the soul’s first encounter with the world and the culture into which we are born. In most cases this takes place in the immediate family from the limitations of consciousness that the soul finds there and from which we suffer, because we are not fully seen and received as who we most deeply are. But the wound can happen at any time where we are not welcomed as a soul. Most painful is when the personality is received and even nurtured and revered, and the soul is not, which makes the wound more subtle and invisible. Compensations for this rejection soon begin to develop in the personality to deal with this wound and the personality is built on these as well as on the processes of enculturation and normal development, combined with the powerful drive to develop a vehicle of expression that is inherent in the spiritual will of the incarnating soul. There are always allies

along the way who do see and receive our soul and encourage us, but the wound can be very deep and the compensations distracting and/or destructive in keeping the person from that primal darkness and generating decisions that take the person further away from his/her path. The personal will can get caught in these compensatory identifications and inadvertently feed them with its energy, and it is possible for someone to become a “lost soul” in the sense that they have truly lost their way on earth. In extreme cases, this person can become virulently destructive to self and others. Conversely, when the personal will is freed by disidentification and the building of a center of awareness, the “I”, or “observer”, then choices can be made that both deal directly with the dark pain of the soul wound and move us closer to the spiritual will of the soul which is seeking full incarnation.

What is striking about the soul wound is that it is treated with the practice of spiritual presence, or what John Firman and Ann Gila call “spiritual empathy”. A deep spiritual connection between beings has been broken, or never existed, and this connection is restored through a steady and empathetic presence which radiates welcome and acceptance, no matter what. Carl Rogers was pointing to this with his idea of “unconditional positive regard” and others have made this practice central to healing the pain of the soul wound. Loss of soul can only be healed through presence of soul, whether in parent, teacher, therapist, or friend. Psychological work can help, but the essence of the treatment is a silent, welcoming presence. And where there has been no human presence that can do this, Nature often provides this healing force. John Firman and Ann Gila’s groundbreaking book, *The Primal Wound*, treats this wound in detail.

Personal Darkness—During the period of personality development with its various developmental crises there are always times of darkness. These can come from personal trauma in the person’s life and they can also occur at times when there is a developmental crisis and some new attribute is being added to the personality system. Both can be worked with actively with psychological tools, for they are aspects of the personality’s development into a more, or less, coherent vehicle for the soul force to flow through into the world. Something is being added.

There will always be some degree of connection to the soul and some ways in which we are thwarted. People will pursue their path partially, but compromise it in order to survive, or fulfill social expectations. People will be blocked in trying to pursue their path, but will find the facsimiles of its energies in addictive and distorted behavior that is a result of the conditions they found themselves in. People will start out on their path and lose their way. There is always a mix of soul infusion and personality wounding. From the soul’s point of view, this is a first beachhead, so to speak, an imperfect place on earth, but workable to some extent. There is a vast spectrum here—some souls get quite well “in”, others suffer terribly and buffer this pain with distractions/addictions, even suicide. If the soul is allowed to guide personal development, then there is less of this personal

darkness. But if the forces of development and enculturation are working at cross-purposes to the soul's intent, there can be a great deal of personal darkness that needs to be worked with. This darkness is the major focus of psychotherapy, and, when it is treated within a spiritual context--implicit, or explicit-- the work is more effective and the personality system can be healed, changed, and developed to be more in line with the force of the soul and intent of the spiritual will.

This period of personal work is where the personality is developing and the focus is on helping the personality get established and fairly functional. The major job is to heal, develop, and align the personality as much as possible with the soul, and help it find a place in the given culture and times. There are allies along the way, as I have said, and obstacles to be overcome. It is a long work and familiar to Psychology. There are various crises where the system is broken open—beginning of adolescence, leaving home, Saturn return, etc.—and there are periods of unknown, darkness, and change that allow the soul to have more experience, or change the personality system to express more fully. Soul and personality are learning to work with each other, so to speak. A person is becoming more aware of who they are as a soul and as a personality and how the two are working together, or not. Again, personal darkness can be actively worked with, with the intent to explore it, and to enable further psycho-spiritual development to occur.

Existential Darkness—This darkness occurs in our experience when the personality has reached a certain level of development and has defined and taken a place and part in the world. The soul needs now to go further and so we begin to experience the limitations of the very system we have created and developed thus far. Midlife crisis is the popular term for this, and it can be either what in Psychosynthesis we have called the “existential crisis”, or the “crisis of duality”, depending on how the personality has developed up to this point. It is a dark time for the personality as a whole, for its “operating system” no longer works and meaning dries up, or there is an experience of being in the dark, lost and confused as to where to go with life. What is happening in this darkness is that the personality is being reoriented to the soul's intention more fully. It has gone as far as it can, so to speak, on its own, and whatever personal meaning has been made, which has provided motive for staying alive on earth, wanes and can disappear.

A shift in figure/ground is beginning here, as the soul comes forward in the second half of life and the personality begins to recede in importance and begins to serve the soul more directly and fully. Death is an influence here, and issues of mortality, which adds urgency to the reorientation and brings the personality more in line with the intentions and values of the soul. What is important to note here is that you do not work with existential darkness as you would with personal, for there is nothing to be added to, or changed in, the personality. Rather, you help the person bear the darkness by simply being in it, living it without trying to change it, and thus cooperate with the reorientation that is happening in the darkness. What is new is the shift of figure/ground between soul and personality, and this happens

outside our control in the dark. In time meaning and light do return, but only by our being willing to bear the darkness without doing anything about it.

Spiritual Darkness – Then there is a period of psycho-spiritual work around the issues of this reorientation and spiritual awakening, including many different kinds of feelings, and also a fuller embodiment, sometimes forced by aging and illness, but generally by the need for greater care for the body in order to sustain health and avoid sickness and death. There is a growing realization that we are embodied as souls, that we need to care for this vehicle of expression, and that we will not live forever. There are also crises of expression in this darkness as the arena of service for the soul expands and the personality resists. If all goes well in this process of spiritual crisis and awakening, there is increasing infusion of soul force and greater integration of the personality around that flow, and we become both more ourselves and more alive on earth. There are allies along the way who support us in this work and there are adversaries, and obstacles, which whet the intention of the soul to go deeper into life and the world and strengthen our resolve to cooperate with this process. This is a long and fruitful period, and one in which many different kinds of work can be done—psycho-therapy, body work, spiritual direction, meditation practice, to name a few.

Often the spiritual adversary shows up more explicitly at this point because the soul's intention is more foreground and the person is seeking to express spiritual will more fully, using whatever personal will has been developed. The spiritual adversary, though controversial and unpleasant and sometimes frightening, is a noble opponent, which appears both within and without as a foil to the soul. Its essential character and function is that it opposes the spiritual will and uses personal needs and desires to distract the person from this expression (see OCN #5). It can be a very dark, shadow force and figure, frightening at times and coming from outside the identification boundaries of the personality, but it needs to be welcomed and included and worked with in order for the process of incarnation to proceed, for it is an integral aspect of who we are. Here again the work is active, and there are very specific ways of dealing with this spiritually adversarial force and distinguishing it from sub-personalities and complexes within personality and psyche. At the same time the central way to deal with it is with what I have termed “benign non-attention” and a continued commitment to fuller realization of the will of our soul.

Each step that we now take as a soul is deeper into the body, into a commitment to be here and express, and into outer darkness, in the sense that the soul is learning to live on earth and enters the dark of the world to do this. We want to be here, but it is dark, if you are descending. This is a turning point for the soul, much as the existential darkness was a turning point for the personality. Spiritual light does break through as you reorient and go deeper, for you are bringing the light of your soul to bear on living here, and there is a balance between light and dark that begins to emerge and a fuller humanity, or realization

of what it means to be human. Some people are humbled, some are raised, but a realer sense of being here on earth as a soul begins to emerge from this work with spiritual darkness. You clarify who you are most essentially and stand more fully in your place and part in the world.

Spiritual darkness also purifies motive and during this period there are usually successive spiritual tests of one's power and integrity. A person can fail here in the sense that they become distracted, lose the flow of force, and drop away into the darkness of their own unaligned places—an experience that, though painful, yields further learning. There are no mistakes in an ultimate sense, but there can be spiritual failures at this period in this sense that the person can not hold the force of the soul well enough and is not willing to look into the darkness that needs to be dealt with in order to go deeper into life. Political and Spiritual leaders are particularly prone to this.

The soul wound can be revisited at this time and very early traumas that were part of it. Pre-incarnational and birth darkness may have to be revisited and reworked. And the spiritual adversary, as I said above, needs to be confronted and tracked. All this darkness needs to be taken on and worked in order for the soul to be more deeply embodied and more widely expressive. Work here again can be active and transformative, for you are working to bring more and more soul force through, so to speak, and to remove the impediments to this flow. The beachhead of the first period is now the journey inland on a spiritual path of being and intention. Every experience is needed and put to use as the soul expands its influence in a life and blocks to this process are worked through.

This is the realm of psycho-spiritual work that has become familiar within Psychology in the last thirty years, and of which the first pioneers were Jung, Assagioli, and Steiner.

The Dark Night of the Soul – This is yet a further step of incarnation, in which the ego structures of the personality totally dissolve and die as sources of identity and meaning. They are no longer needed to keep the soul in expression, much as scaffolding is no longer needed after a building is completed. The forms of the person have been reoriented and reframed by the soul force in such a way that they now serve the soul without existing in their own right. They become empty. This is what the Buddhists mean by “no separate self”. The soul is sufficiently here and embodied to be able to enter a very deep darkness of letting go of everything we have conceived ourselves to be. This can be terrifying, for every source of identity is lost, along with a personal sense of direction and meaning, and in this darkness, often called “the descent”, we need to bear whatever it takes to loosen us from these sources of identity and personhood and align us completely with the soul and its/our intention. There is a purification of motive also here, personal motive is no longer needed, and the spiritual will becomes the motive, so that the soul is now most joined to the Divine, to its original intention, AND is most here on earth in the dark of the world. Faith is tested in this crisis, for there is no personal motive,

or satisfaction, to keep one going. Everything within the personal realm goes, loses meaning, or becomes an impediment to the degree that there is any attachment to it. This is true both of outer attachments and also inner orientations, even the most precious and cherished. Fool's Crow, the Lakota shaman, describes this passage as "becoming an hollow bone through which the Great Spirit moves". St. Francis describes it in his prayer "and it is in dying that we are born into eternal life". You realize that there is no strictly personal reason to live, and that meaning now flows from the spiritual will and the being of the soul.

You also, as part of this passage, come up against how hard it is to be a soul on earth without these buffering personal motives, and you have to face the emptiness and despair that often underlies these motives. At times it feels too hard to go on in this stripped state and you want just to disappear. At the same time in this dark night you are the most alive and are becoming fully alive as a soul on earth, with no impediments to the full expression of your will. As a soul, you are learning to pour spiritual force directly and unadulterated into the world through a personal vehicle, including your body, which is fully aligned with this purpose.

There is always guidance through this dismemberment of the personality, and joy, even in the midst of the intense suffering. Personality and its foundations are all being dismantled and the elements used, in new combinations, to build a vehicle for the essence of who you are, and you no longer get in the way of your own soul, for everything has been sacrificed to this end. Rather, soul force pours directly and steadily through the personality, now shaped to the soul's calling. Personal will does not now exist apart from spiritual will, but is joined in such a way that you do the will of the soul as your will, almost without thinking about it. There is complete alignment, along with an equally complete awareness of how we can be distracted from this flow and intent. There is a great amount of self-discipline needed to do this, and a commensurate amount of learning that comes from it, as well as humility and perspective. Nothing is important in the way it used to be, and yet everything is important and precious that is life-giving, that is alive.

Work with the dark night of the soul is again, as with the existential darkness, a matter of witnessing and helping the person bear the intensity of the experience. It cannot be worked through; it can only be lived through with no control except the willingness to choose and bear whatever experience is deemed needed for this death of the ego to occur. And the fruit of the dark night, of entering and journeying through this darkness, is the full realization of the soul on earth, embodied and fully alive, fully expressing without personal impediment, or bias, the spiritual will. The figure/ground between soul and personality has shifted fundamentally, and the soul is free to be and express itself in human form and a very human life.

Darkness of Death – As death approaches, there is another darkness to accept and face, and again our faith is tested, and we are asked to go deeper. But if we

have done this previous work, death is not frightening, but a next stage in the darkness and the learning and letting go that it entails. It can be a preparation for the return journey to the Divine, a rehearsal for the ultimate letting go after death. People die as they have lived for the most part, and for a person who has not done this deep spiritual work, whatever form it takes, death will be terrifying and denied. For people who have traveled in this way, it will be another darkness to learn from and to live fully, a further stage of growth. Death is a passage with stages and learning, a final harvesting of the soul's experience on earth and the process of incarnation and embodiment. This darkness has been documented in the studies of the process of dying and near death experiences. The work here is to actively accompany people through the stages of death and to help them complete and integrate their life in the process.

Post-incarnational Darkness – After death there seems to be, from what several traditions say, a period of reckoning and a process of return to the Divine which can have several stages and makes available to the soul what it has learned and has yet to learn – karma that is completed and karma that is still in place and will need further work in successive lifetimes. This is all sorted and stored in this darkness, so to speak, and available for the next lifetime as the soul journeys to Unity again, from whence it started, and at some level never left. There are images of this transition in different traditions—Bardos, Afterlife, Nirvana—and it seems that the soul returns to the One through this darkness and rests there in Unity of Being until the life process starts again.

The Spectrum of Darkness

We can now see a spectrum of darkness throughout the life cycle and beyond, and we have said a bit about how to work with each. Clearly there are differences in the quality of darkness and how we respond to it. And from this we can posit a spectrum that goes as follows—

- Ontological (pre-and post-incarnational, birth and death)
- Spiritual,
- Existential,
- Psychological,
- Diabolical (spiritual adversary)--

and we as souls deal with this full spectrum during the course of a life on earth—a spectrum that curls around on itself in a seamless continuum. We can move across this spectrum in many ways and, in actual experience there is likely to be a mix of these, with one in the foreground at any particular time and requiring a particular kind of attention. The spectrum can help us locate where we are and then work the details within that, provided we do not take it too literally, or begin to favor one kind of darkness over another. Each has its value, place, and learning, and the soul needs the full spectrum in order to learn and express fully. What is important is to distinguish between them, not take one for the other, and to respond appropriately

in such a way that the gift from that darkness can be given and received.

There is, of course, a paradox in all this, for the soul never is actually cut off from the Divine; otherwise the Divine could not be present on earth in the soul. The separation is an illusion, but it is a real illusion that needs to be worked with throughout the lifecycle. We are exploring here how the soul can incarnate and bring its vitality, or force, fully into human form, and part of this is to work with this very illusion. This is why welcoming the darkness is important, in all these forms I have described, for it enables the soul to realize itself as sacred here and now, to dispel the illusion of separation, to affirm our particular presence as souls, and to be here on earth in a way that we learn most from life and life benefits most from our being here.

The Dark of the World

It is important also to include here the dark of the world in its various forms, which is, of course, in us, but also “out there”, and again spirituality can be used to avoid this and stay close to the light, however we conceive this. What I have seen over the years is that more mature souls are, in fact, drawn to the dark of the world, to the suffering and hardship that exists on the planet. It’s as if the soul seeks out a suffering that it can respond to, as if the spiritual will intends this direction in order to fulfill itself. You can think about the spiritual will as that tendency in the soul to find and take on a piece of suffering and respond to it. This intention is behind the Buddhist idea of compassion and the Christian idea of love. The soul fulfills itself by getting as close to world darkness as it can and working to transform it, and, strangely, is happiest doing this. The Tibetan Buddhist practice of “Tonglen” is an example of this in a spiritual practice, but more generally you see mature people seeking out suffering and attending to it, often at some sacrifice and even hardship to themselves. They want to respond, they want “to give back” or “make things better”. And again and again the report comes back, not of sorrow and depression, but of joy and gratitude to be able to do this work and to respond in this way. How strange and wonderful that the soul on earth seems to thrive on darkness and its transformation, and seeks to go deeper both into the Divine and into the world with this work! If this is so, then we could say that the soul of the earth, of which we are all a part, is seeking the darkness of the world in order to enter and transform the planet, and it does so through each of us finding that piece of darkness we are called to and want to work with.

I have a particular example of this in the story of my older son going to teach non-violence in Rwanda and Burundi in the post-genocidal conditions there. We heard little from him in the first weeks and then letters came back describing his work and expressing such joy and gratitude to be there and that he had a much clearer sense of who he was as a soul, he was being seen for this, and that he was in touch with a deep love, for himself, for the Africans he was working with, and for the world. Again and again I have worked with people who have found work that took on a darkness in the world, sometimes one they knew very personally

from their own life, sometimes one they were drawn to without quite knowing why, and were so grateful, even if it was a great personal cost in doing it. It seems the incarnational process is toward and into world darkness, so that the soul can darken its light as well as light the dark world.

Earthliness and the Soul

The soul then, in this way of seeing spiritual life, is not seeking Heaven, but rather Earth, and I am positing that we realize ourselves through incarnation and embodiment by taking on the darknesses of our lives and of the world and bringing our soul force to bear on them. We need the dark in order to deepen and eventually transform ourselves and the world.

Of course, light is important in this too, and, as I said above, both need to be held in equal esteem, and only here have I been emphasizing this dark side of the soul. It is in embracing both that we find the dark light of the soul and our human beauty and maturity. To do this we need a spirituality that supports this intention to incarnation and sees the spiritual will as manifesting in full embodiment and the experience of being fully alive on earth. Darkness in all its forms is essential to this process, and is an ally throughout, rather than an enemy. If we are willing to welcome the dark as it comes and work with it, the light will follow. If we seek the light to move away from the dark, the soul is blocked and stillborn, for it needs the darkness to thrive on earth, to learn its lessons, and to grow in wisdom and maturity. Again the key is to hold both and to remember that the soul in essence is neither light, nor dark, but pure being that contains both. Full human spiritual beauty and maturity rises out of our holding both light and dark equally as souls and letting them work in us toward our realization and the transformation of the world.

My sense is that this new spirituality of earthliness is emerging on the planet now from many sources because it is needed if we are to fully inhabit the earth and care for it. As long as there is somewhere else to go, then we can neglect the planet, or exploit it. If we really accept that this is where the Divine resides, then we will act very differently, and it is clear that we are just beginning to learn how to live this way. I believe we need a spirituality for the Twenty-first Century that will support the further evolution of the species and the rebalancing of the how we live on the earth so that all beings can thrive. We have outgrown many of the forms, spiritual and religious, that have brought us to this point and we need to be brave in exploring what to let go of, what to develop, that will enable us to move through what is a very dark time for the planet and humanity. Many people, with many languages, are hard at work to find this way, and it will take time to discover what works now for individuals, groups, and the species. We have a long way to go, and yet everywhere there are good beginnings. I consider my work a tiny contribution to this great movement in human nature, and these ideas about darkness part of that effort. And I am so very grateful to be able to offer them to you.

I included in the last Occasional Note a poem by Rilke, and it seems appropriate to cite it again, as it speaks so clearly to this experience of earthliness and a spirituality that would embrace our human condition and not seek the Beyond. I also have closed previous Notes with my poem "Love Now" from the "Soul Canticles" and I will do so again here for the same reason. Both speak to this experience of an earthy spirituality that is seeking to emerge now in response to the needs of the times. And then, finally, there is a poem by Mary Oliver that I received recently from a colleague that speaks directly and immediately to this experience.

So, I will end with the poems and only say here again that none of this is written in stone and that I welcome your response. I send you every good wish for your life and work, wherever you are on this troubled and most beautiful planet, and look forward to the ways in which our paths will cross in the years ahead.

Warmly Tom

All will grow great and powerful again;
the seas be wrinkled and the land be plain,
the trees gigantic and the walls be low;
and in the valleys, strong and multiform,
a race of herdsmen and of farmers grow.
No churches to encircle God as though
he were a fugitive, and then bewail him
as if he were a captured, wounded creature;
all houses will prove friendly, there will be
a sense of boundless sacrifice prevailing
in dealings between men, in you, in me.

No waiting the Beyond, no peering toward it,
but longing to degrade not even death;
we shall learn earthliness, and serve its ends,
to feel its hands about us like a friend's.

Love Now

Strange this journey leading
in the end no where but here,
the path our breathing,
the road our blood.

Yet every step is needed to arrive
where beauty inundates our veins,
suffuses living flesh with darkened light.
No wonder we, so long the wanderers,
can't see at first we're home,
and reach among our gatherings
for further guidance and a map of God.
It seems we've garnered just the things
we needed to resume our way--
wisdom, knowledge, skill, endurance--
but no route opens-- up, or down--
no inner finger points, or probes,
no voice conspires to draw us on.
And yet such sweetness now surrounds,
such nearby celebration,
we scarce can breathe--
no more from ancient fear,
but from this standing still
so close to God.
Amazed, we wonder can this be--
our bodies rooted in the firmament,
sun, moon, stars, and earth confiding
in our hearts and minds?
What is this marvel of a world
that no more falls away
and leaves us longing,
but presses close to see
its cherished progeny?
Stunned by love, we sense
the primal innocence returned,
but nearby dark still spreads its wings.
No, this is new, unknown and intricate,
something of earthy fuse and force
that pours through every living thing.
Here, yes, here is home at last!
We step across the threshold stone,
alive as we have never been,
yet somehow also knowing this was ours
at every step along the way.
And God, who once embraced,
then bade farewell, is here again
so near we breathe together one vast love.

O who can say when earth will end?
Not I, nor you, nor one,
but some sweet breath
that sweeps the planet's face
to keep us company as we lose
and find again our O so ever
human grace.

Messenger

My work is loving the world.
Here the sunflowers, there the hummingbird-----
equal seekers of sweetness.
Here the quickening yeast; there the blue plums.
Here the clam deep in the speckled sand.
Are my boots old? Is my coat torn?
Am I no longer young, and still not half-perfect?
Let me keep my mind on what matters,
which is my work,
which is mostly standing still and learning to be astonished.
The phoebe, the delphinium.
The sheep in the pasture, and the pasture.
Which is mostly rejoicing, since all ingredients are here,
Which is gratitude, to be given a mind and heart
and these body-clothes,
a mouth with which to give shouts of joy
to the moth and the wren, to the sleepy dug-up clam,
telling them all, over and over, how it is
that we live forever.