



DARK

SHARON BROWNING
WWW.JUSTLISTENING.NET

As we move ever deeper into seasonal darkness, it's tempting to get even more discouraged than usual by the dark, depressing news greeting us daily: the wrenching reality of human suffering all over the globe, the horror of Iraq, escalating violence at home, and dire warnings about our fragile climate, all against the backdrop of official incompetence and seeming indifference. I recently read Laurence W. Britt's list of the early warning signs of creeping fascism. As a nation, we are clearly manifesting most, and arguably all of them.

So I've been giving a lot of thought to 'regime change' recently. The old ways aren't working and never really did, we know we need a new approach, and so we preoccupy ourselves with wishful thinking about the already-numbing '08 elections. I'm weary and it isn't even 2008 yet.

One of our many problems is that we humans are a muddled and confused bunch, much more comfortable with replacing our temporal rulers than with doing the hard, radical work of *interior* regime change, an overthrow of the gods of our own manufacture and design in whom we obstinately place our trust and faith and hope. We can all fill in the blank, naming our personal gods of choice: politics, self, security, family, whatever absorbs much of our thinking and energy. Who or what rules our hearts and dictates our priorities and actions on a daily basis? Even we who profess to be people of faith continue to act as if salvation will come if we can just get rid of the current President, or Congress, or Whoever is the target of our angst and dismay. And we fervently and fearfully pray that our 401(k)s survive the turmoil intact, if not enhanced. But first steps first: we are sorely in need of a revolution of the heart, and Advent is the perfect season in which to deepen this interior journey. We need the nourishing dark to see more clearly.

The Dark has gotten a bad reputation. We think of it as so sinister and scary that we have covered the planet with artificial light in an effort to banish the dark. In "The Dark Side," an article by David Owen in the August 20, 2007 issue of *The New Yorker*, the author documented the resulting problems of light pollution. He pointed out that it is now rare for humans to experience total darkness. Due to the pervasiveness of light diffusion, there are only two places left on earth that have 'true dark' nights: the mountains of Peru, and the outback of Australia. From my own urban perch, I cannot see the stars clearly, and I long for the dark nights remembered from a mid-western childhood: sky as dome,

horizon to horizon, so vast, so mysterious, so holy. We have blanketed ourselves with so many glaring lights that we're losing the gift of darkness. And as mystics have pointed out for millennia, darkness is a great place to encounter God.

“O Guiding Night!” wrote John of the Cross. “O Night more lovely than the dawn!” Lovely and guiding because when all is dark and still, we can more clearly recognize the only Light that matters, the Fire that is God, that is Love. This paradox of the illuminating darkness is at the core of both our spiritual and physical capacity for creativity and growth; there is great ferment and generative possibility in the dark. As Brian Swimme, Thomas Berry, and others have pointed out so beautifully, the dark is the most fertile place in the universe. It is in darkness that everything is created and born. But in order to savor and experience this ourselves, we must be still. Contemporary culture militates against this, however, with the accelerated pace of life, the constant background light, noise, and distraction of electronic media, and the near-total absence of stillness. No wonder we continue to find peace illusive.

∞

About 9 years ago, on a cold, dark day, my oldest daughter, then a sophomore in college, called home to speak to her Dad. She was feeling sad, unmotivated, slightly depressed and restless, and hoped that he might have some words of wisdom for her. “Look outside your window,” he said. “Tell me what you see.” She reported on the bleak winter sky, bare trees, brown plants and withered vines; all seemed very dark indeed. “Yes,” he replied. “But remember what’s hidden out there, too: all of the seeds, resting in the darkness of the earth, gathering their energy, just waiting for the light. Maybe this is your seed time. Just rest, be still, and wait for the Light.”

Advent is like that; a seed time: time to be quiet, rest in the dark, discern, gather our energies, be still, and wait for the Light. This liturgical season, designed so intentionally to correlate to the Northern Hemisphere’s simultaneous seasonal movement into both greater darkness and the coming of Light, is a perfect opportunity to explore the mystery and meaning of the dark. December 21, Winter Solstice, is, after all, the fullness of darkness. When my children were younger, we marked the Solstice in pre-Christmas darkness, using only candles to light our way, celebrating both the deep, deep dark, and the illuminating power of a single candle. No premature Christmas lights, only the guiding night to focus us on the impending birth of Light and Love, to evoke the wonder of a long gestation ending in the birth of the Sun/Son of Justice.

What is gestating in each of us this Advent? What manifestation of the Divine is seeded only in our heart, waiting to be born through the uniqueness of our life, our giftedness? Can we let ourselves be enfolded by the darkness and stillness necessary to recognize and enthrone Love in our hearts this Advent? Everything, absolutely everything, can be transformed by Love. Most people know first-hand the impact of love on their own lives; can we even imagine this power magnified, unleashed, moving through the world? Jesus saw it this way: “I have come to set the world on fire, and how I wish it were ablaze

already.” And Teilhard de Chardin observed, that when humans “harness for God the energies of Love,” we will “for the second time.... discover fire.”

We are the sparks, capable of being fanned into flame. Why not experiment this Advent? Turn off the lights, both literally and figuratively. Cultivate darkness. Befriend it. Forswear the frenzy of pre-Christmas consumer craziness and choose instead to rest in the fertile womb of deep December. Incarnation is stirring, gathering energy, in the depths of each of our souls. Let’s embrace the nourishing dark, obey the angelic invitation to “fear not,” and answer the call to birth God into a weary world wanting so desperately to rejoice. The dark just might show us the more significant and transformative regime change we need.



CATHOLIC PEACE FELLOWSHIP NEWSLETTER, DECEMBER, 2007.