sermon
the coming darkness
Sept 21, 2008
Ellsworth, ME
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The coming of the dark is the coming of limits, the coming of boundaries, the coming of edges. Our summers here are vast, open spaces of mile-long days; as the equinox comes we feel the shift, close windows, don sleeves and sweaters, light lamps to hold the edges of the evening back for a few more days. It is in our cultural nature to fight limits, turn on the lights, turn up the heat, hold tight to that perfect-weather day. It is our habit to resist the darkness.

But it comes anyway.

It lets itself in at the kitchen door, puts the water on for tea, and boots up the computer. One day we arrive home and it's got its feet up in the living room with our favorite novel.

It comes uninvited, stays as long as it wants, and doesn't do its own dishes or use coasters on the good furniture. When it leaves our home looks like it's been hit by a tornado. It could be anything: death, depression, divorce, children going to college, a change of jobs, a change of fortune, or a change of seasons. It comes. And it stays.

resistance really *is* futile.

Discipline is not.

In her book, *Eat, Pray, Love*, Elizabeth Gilbert writes about several struggles she has while studying and practicing at an ashram in India. One of them is the voice in her head while she tries to meditate. Another is her resistance to the Gurugita. The Gurugita is a 182 verse Sanskrit chant that she describes as "The murderous thing we do here." She doesn't like the tune. She doesn't like the words. It makes her smoke and steam and sweat. It makes her so mad that she

skips out in order to meditate or call home, even though she traveled halfway around the world to stay at this place. And the hardest part is that the ashram won't give her anything to really rebel against. One of the people she consults says, "You're not here as a tourist or a journalist; you're here as a seeker. So explore it."
"So you're not letting me off the hook?"
"You can let yourself off the hook anytime you want, Liz. That's the divine contract of a little something we call *free will*." (Gilbert, Elizabeth. *Eat, Pray, Love.* p.164)

And yet she goes, fuming and full of rage she goes, full of irritation and resistance she goes. And then one morning she oversleeps. As she is grouchily preparing to leave the room she discovers that her roommate has accidentally locked her in, and that's with a padlock.

Something--coincidence, conditions, God--has handed her a perfect excuse. What does she do?

She jumps out the window, drops about 14 feet to the cement, and runs, barefoot, to the temple. Because she has to be there.

It occurs to her about three or four verses in that she actually doesn't want to be there. And then she hears her Swamiji's voice laughing: "That's funny--you sure act like somebody who wants to be here." (as above, p.168)

In that moment something shifts for her and she makes a conscious choice to have a different relationship with this practice that clearly calls her. It's a chant of love, so she finds someone she loves deeply, unconditionally, intensely--a dear nephew named Nicky--and she chants it as a lullabye for him, on the other side of the planet. She chooses the shift, and it happens. She cries through the hour and a half, which feels like ten minutes, and then drops into deep meditation. She writes, "Needless to say, I never missed the Gurugita again, and it became the most holy of my practices at the Ashram...and of course I called my sister the next week and she said that --for reasons nobody could understand--Nick suddenly wasn't having trouble sleeping anymore."

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I've met a lot of people who come to church daring the minister to do something useful, do something relevant, do something interesting, do something right. But we, your clergy, don't *make* worship be anything. What we *make* is a container. We sit down at a potter's wheel and throw a lump of clay on there, one that's been pug milled and wedged and thrown and milled and wedged and thrown at least a million times. We say a prayer, blow on our fingertips, drizzle a little water from a sponge, brace our elbows on our knees, and begin. Sometimes it doesn't even center. It simply won't. So we slice it off and try again. If it centers sometimes that initial dip into the center is off-center. So we cut it off, say another prayer, and try again. And eventually we make a thing that looks like a chalice and feels like a bowl and we offer it up and see if it holds a congregation, see if the sides are tall enough and the angle steep enough, if the opening is wide enough and the pour spout smooth enough, if the walls are just thick enough to be sturdy, to withstand the bumps of congregational life.

And then we hold it.

If we have made a good enough container, we may hold it for years. Imagine, if you will, a chi gong posture beautifully named "Embrace moon on chest", arms extended to hug an imaginary sphere, perfectly rounded, elbows ever so slightly dipped, hands relaxed but not floppy, fingertips just barely not touching. Imagine holding this posture for long minutes, five or fifteen. Now imagine that the hands are holding a chalice.

There is a disciplined meditation in holding a container. Some flexibility is required, some movement, some stillness. A good deal of sturdiness; a substantial dose of strength. But in the end we are still just holding the container. What goes on inside--whether you sweat and swear or cry lullaby tears--is up to you. Even the sermon is just the barest coating of oil or flour on the inside, barely present at all in its best form. What we strive for is a kind of transcendence, where you are present and moved but not *thinking* in the usual sense. You can think later, when you climb out and go to coffee hour or alone in your car. What you heard and saw and felt should come echoing back to you all week. But in the moment of worship it should be possible to simply *be.* Anyone leading worship must strive to walk that fine line between complete

disappearance and too obvious a presence, because what is going on inside your heart must not be interrupted, must simply be urged along in a kind of spiritual peristalsis.

If the container works, then after a while its sides become slick with the passing of a thousand thousand feet, and within its walls you can relax and be moved. The rhythms and shapes of worship will comfort and cradle you, even as your own spiritual or personal journey turns you inside out.

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In Cloister Walk, Kathleen Norris writes about the monks' journey through the book of Jeremiah. Jeremiah is a tragic prophet of the Old Testament, condemned to speak truth after truth and have it fall on deaf ears; to watch his people and the kingdom fall despite his vivid warnings. His frustration and anger come through in the writings which have survived, his grief and his sorrow intense and unabated. He and his editors go on for some 52 chapters of lament and prophesy, and there are no breaks. The monks' practice of lectio continua--continuous reading aloud--gets them through the whole New Testament and large portions of the Old Testament each year. One monk comments that he is glad they are reading Jeremiah in the morning and not at evening services where there are more likely to be guests. (Norris, Kathleen. Cloister Walk. Riverhead Trade (April 1, 1997) p. 34) The text is hard to hear. It's hard to read. But the monks, being monks, wade in anyway. In their practice they stop at nothing--they include books that are disturbing and books that are enlightening, and even the Song of Songs, which reads like an erotic dance between lovers. They understand practice as discipline, and strive to interfere as little as possible with practices that are hundreds of years old.

Elizabeth Gilbert had a different approach to ancient practice--she avoided it. It often seems that criticism and analysis are a double-edged sword. On the one hand, I would not want a faith without critical thinking, without analytical thought, without reason. Without these things we would not have humanism, we would not have most of the Protestant Revolution, we would not have the vast works of science which have deepened our understanding of the universe and transformed our world. We would have precious few decision making tools and very little way to determine what was fair or just. On the other hand, any tool can be destructive, and for those

of us trained to thought in a contemporary school system, rationalization and overanalysis are prime suspects for trouble. It is possible to use them as one might a scalpel, to cut the mind from the heart. The mind and heart are not naturally opposed, despite ancient Greek theories to the contrary. The rational and the instinctive are designed to work together. Recently the NYT reported on a new discovery. Contrary to popular thought, the way that we perceive approximate numbers (a gut-level understanding of the world that's hard wired into us and into most animals) and the way we handle specific numbers (the kind of thing we learn as "math" in school) are actually intimately connected, and the ability to estimate is predictive of a person's ability to succeed in math class. (http://www.nytimes.com/2008/09/16/science/16angi.html accessed Sept 18, 2008) So it's not "natural" to separate the two, but analysis can do it anyway. It was easy for Gilbert to sidestep the anger and fear of the Gurugita with logic--meditation was enriching; she had to call her mother; she needed the sleep. But it was only when she acted on instinct--attending chant NO MATTER WHAT--that she stepped through the sweat and shaking and out the other side. Once she was committed, her decision to change her relationship with the practice had all the hallmarks of supportive and helpful rational processing. The danger is not in thinking, but in using thinking as a barrier to experience.

Our usual experience is of light as a "thing" and darkness as the absence of the "thing", and physics bears that out. But imagine instead a world where darkness spills and light only exists where dark is not present. Imagine that it is darkness that "shines", and that light recedes before it. Imagine darkness as a fog--imagine taking down the walls of your home at night, or opening a curtain, and thereby plunging everything into darkness.
The darkness, when it comes, changes everything. It takes the thinking away, that thing that we tend to use to keep feelings at bay, and we are immersed in a world where sight is the least of our senses. We are, with some force, invited to step forward anyway.

Most of us will resist; they freeze us, these moments of transformation. We stand stock-still, not sure what happens next. But if we don't want spiritual paralysis, then we need to find the learnings in the experience, we need to find the other tools we have.

If you are sighted, when you close your eyes you may *see* darkness for a moment; you may even

feel it closing in on you. You are accustomed to seeing, and using sight to determine what kind of space you occupy. In a few minutes, though, you will likely feel the space around you open up as you stop attending to input from your eyes and start living into your other senses. At its best, this is what any limit will do.

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If you are not accustomed to the dark, then your steps will still be uncertain. This is where routine can help. Like a child getting a midnight drink in the house she's occupied all her life, we can know without seeing how to follow a path, and the path can keep us steady.

There's science behind it. Take depression. Depression is, at root, a chemical state of the brain. Some chemicals are more present than usual some are less. There are a lot of ways to change brain chemistry: drugs, exercise, social interaction, touch, fear, stress (not always changes for the better)--pretty much every single thing we do or think or see--everything the brain processes--impacts its chemistry. And we can be trained. Smiling, for example, can be not just symptom but cause. And if you have a routine and it usually goes with good feelings, then going through your routine will at least nudge your brain chemistry back toward neutral.

Our spiritual and religious practices really do have the ability to transform our lives.

This is why coming to church weekly is important. Not because we always feel like it; not because we will burn in hell if we don't; but because the routine *itself* is healing --it reaches a place deep in our guts where words and logic are too rigid to go. It sets up our brain chemistry with a place to come home to.

That home base can be a rock, a reality check, a lighthouse in a storm...and while the community is here behind it, some of the work and some of that precious peace is beween you and your own sweet spirit. The very fact of church can ground you. The blend of variety and ritual helps the service be engaging but stabilizing, helps newcomers feel at ease, gives us all a sense of what to expect. It embeds in our bodies the peace of our spirits.

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In the book of Exodus God speaks to Moses: "Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you stand is holy ground." (Exodus 3:5)

Moses is in the middle of nowhere, not in a city, not in a temple, not even in a cave. What it emphasizes is that the place where you stand--any place where you stand--is holy ground. All the earth is sacred. But there is more--because not just the place but every motion you make, every act of living is likewise blessed, blessed by you. Choose something daily and make it deliberate, make a commitment to it, and thereby make it sacred. Choose something nightly and make it holy. And come to church. We don't like to say it here, and sometimes I wonder if we believe in this service as a religious experience, but I say it now, come to church, make a commitment, come every week for a year, not to argue--although you may do that, too--but to rise and sing, to stand and speak together, to light the chalice to be engaged and cradled and transformed. Do not plan to agree with everything, but plan to receive it as ritual as well as information. Come to church as a way to be, exquisitely and specifically, every week. Come when it is hard. Come when you are tired and sad--come especially then. Come when you are hung over. Come with your family. Come with friends. Come alone. Just come.

This is not about me, or any clergy. It is about practice older than the oldest hills. It is about bears and deer and falcons with regular feeding and resting habits. It is about the animal part of you that craves security, stability, regularity. Come. let the content become secondary and your presence be primary. Your presence, you *being*, is what will make this place your home.

And if it moves you, if it heals you, if it supports you or changes you, bring a friend, for if it can be yours, it can be others'.

The beauty of church, of temple, is so old that it can be found everywhere. Religion is really as old as the hills. But the unique message of UUism can open the healing power of faith to millions for whom the traditional messages are alienating or wrong. OUr message--of love, of

treating the world as sacred, of an examined and questioning spiritual journey, of discipline without dogma, of democratic process, of diverse and educated theology--is a challenging but rich structure--a stairway that allows us to descend carefully into the place where body and mind meet awareness of the vast and incomprehensible that is all around us. And that place, the feeling of being unique and connected, the peace of being in routine, the joy of belonging and giving to a greater whole--can be reached by religious practice.

It will change you. As the darkness gathers, and when it at last burns away, you will be transformed, and there are ways, if it works on you long enough, that it can even heal. Come skeptical. Come doubting. Come begrudgingly. Just come.