

Dark Night: The Breakdown of the Mythology of Me

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Few issues can be brought to psychotherapy that better straddle the worlds of spiritual teachings and psychology than the dark night of the soul. This experience heralds the breakdown of the mythology of “me” and thus initiates an intense, comprehensive and life-changing spiritual crisis like no other. Given that therapy is the most common place people reach for help in darkness, it is vital that psychotherapists have information about this unique passage in order to treat, refer or offer resources to those who experience this phenomenon. It is critical for our world to see and support the emergence of beings living from tender-hearted nobody-ness, the living of life from a selfless and heart-based ground.

In the year that I was pregnant with my daughter and planning on marrying her father, I was plunged into an inexplicable darkness that ruled my life for four years. During that time, much of what had characterized me became eclipsed - I was no longer sociable, brilliant or on top of anything. My sole focus was a gnawing discomfort, a total loss of meaning and an inability to find what was "true" in order to right my life. Between working, mothering and doing the basics of daily life, I desperately searched inwardly and outwardly, and mostly mentally, to find clues to this mysterious stalker who had performed a hostile takeover of my life.

I consulted therapists about birth trauma, and doctors, web sites and herb store owners about depression and pregnancy, post-partum depression, and the effects of nursing hormones. I read the DSM IV to see if I could diagnose myself with a mental illness. When I came up with nothing, I simply searched for anyone who could normalize or bless the wretched experience I was having, looking for any news that conveyed to me that this wasn't all about my failure at doing something right, that this wasn't about a wrathful God punishing me for being bad in some way. The sense of loss of control was deeply unnerving, and the resulting anxiety and grief nearly unbearable.

As the months and years passed, as possible causes were exhausted, I entered into a sort of resigned despair. At the time, nothing felt redeemable about the years I was spending in deep angst and suffering. Every possible attempt to understand what was happening in an effort to solve it spectacularly failed. It seemed there was nothing I could do to alleviate the tremendous anxiety in my body. The world looked like a meaningless Hades and I had gone from a giving, highly functioning woman, friend and lover to a dark-filled desperado.

At some point a few years into the experience I found spiritual teachings that helped me put my experience in a context. While at the time it was nearly impossible to believe that what I was experiencing was a spiritual transformation, the support from those teachings helped me to move from having all my attention on fear-based thinking to meeting the experience below the thoughts about it. The energy of presence that I found at meetings helped my body to relax, and the emphasis on now helped me endure the experience with a bit less suffering. It wasn't until the darkness

lifted and my entire way of being in the world had radically shifted that I suspected the experience had some redemptive aspects.

Even the most sophisticated of self-growth aficionados and spiritual seekers are flummoxed by a dark night experience, and this ability to flummox is at the heart of its effectiveness and purpose. The coping strategies of conditioning must be entirely frustrated, the arrogance of the “me” must be thoroughly met with a humbling, so that the being is left with absolutely nowhere to turn to “solve the problem.” Thus the brilliant survival strategy that has the illusion of separation at its base is brought to its knees, made obsolete, so that a new reliance on the organic flow of the Divine may rise.

Spiritual teachings are of huge inspirational value to the seeker and provide a context within which the dissolution of the “me” mythology can take place. Such teachings, whether written or embodied, can trigger the demise of the illusion of the separate self and all that that means. However, many spiritual teachers are not available on a regular basis, nor are all willing and/or equipped to provide a regular container for patiently holding the person as she goes through the pain of death and the birth and embodiment of the new that a dark night presents.

Knowing can take place in a flash, but full embodiment is a process, one that takes place in the body. This process consists of the deconstruction of the creature’s coping mechanisms which are rooted in the survival system of the animal, so that living from radical openness can replace them. This set of coping mechanisms, the pride and joy of conditioning, has fingers into the way the organism perceives, thinks, feels, attends, moves and relates in the world and cannot be underestimated in its power to draw attention repeatedly into delusion.

During a dark night, the mental application of spiritual concepts does little for the terrified “badger in the basement” of the creature’s essential terror of non-existence and death. And though immeasurably valuable in realizing who we are, pointers to the absolute (such as “you are awareness” or “you are not the body”) can be of limited value in addressing the very real and gnarly experiential phenomena that can rise in the demise of “me.”

Enter spiritual psychotherapy. Psychotherapists have the time and the training to begin to provide this kind of container, but a valuable adjunct in addition to the skills of a therapist is a familiarity with the dark night: the infantile terror and grief that rise, the typical challenges presented from the dying coping system, and the bodily experiences that may accompany such a passage. This article is an attempt to provide some familiarity and spiritual context for psychotherapists. Even without being a living embodiment of ultimate reality, a therapist can be useful with the general knowledge of psychological crisis and information about this predominantly spiritual one.

The dark night of the soul can signify the onset of a radical shift of allegiance from mind to heart, and a reducing of the person to a quaking and humble transparent portal to the Beloved. Imagine wresting away from an uncooperative creature all the strategies that it believes it needs to survive. That is what the Holy is doing in a dark night experience, and it's ugly, messy, and heinous. For a client who has a spiritual context, it can be a terrifying experience. For a client who doesn't, she can resist with everything she's got, which only intensifies the suffering involved.

The beauty of a true dark night experience is that it moves through the body making space for the embodiment of Love. A dark night can precede an awakening experience or follow it. Though there is no guarantee that any experience of darkness will result in a spiritual awakening, many times they do result in some level of freedom from the encumbrance of rigid and outdated egoic structures. After accompanying a number of clients through the dark night and out the other side, I have not met one who would have traded the experience and its outcome for anything. And yet, during the experience, it's another story.

Identifying a Dark Night

Many issues that enter a psychotherapist's office look dark and lots of precipitating factors can bring on a sense of darkness and meaninglessness. In order to address a client with symptoms of darkness, a therapist must assess what the causes are and address any issues that actually can be addressed. Compared to a medical condition or a chemical imbalance that results in depression, nothing can or should be done about a dark night because **it is not a problem**. This statement is the single-most therapeutic bit of information that exists and simply being reminded of this regularly is tremendously useful and relieving to such clients.

Similar to birth, the dark night is simply a natural evolution of consciousness, a passage that some human beings go through. You would not try and help a woman solve suffering from pregnancy, though you would seek to make her as comfortable as possible, educate her about the process, provide a context for her symptoms, and do your best to accompany her as the process happens. You would not try and circumvent the process by hurrying it along, nor would you try and find the cause of the problem in order to solve it. You would wait for the baby and rejoice at the culmination. Even though the woman's cries from the pain of labor would chill you to the bone as you attended her, you would not try and eliminate the cause.

With the host of weird afflictions that assault our bodies in this modern environmentally-compromised world of ours, it's important for each client who is suffering from dark symptoms (depression, despair, anxiety, grief, terror, excess energy, sleeplessness, loss of meaning) to be screened for any medical issues such as thyroid problems, Lyme disease, chronic fatigue, and other auto-immune disorders. These medical challenges can share some of the bodily afflictions that come with the dark night, and in those cases, medical attention is often required. In addition to symptoms that can be a direct effect of a medical disorder, the psychological challenges of

such a medical issue can also bring on further symptoms of a dark night or actually initiate a full-blown dark night as the identity is challenged by the loss of functioning and/or control.

Psychological issues should also be screened for, such as mood disorders, substance abuse, surfacing abuse memories or ongoing physical abuse. A dark night can also accompany these symptoms as well, complicating the diagnosis. A dark night is generally much more active than depression and can generally be best described as an active and persistent agony, most often accompanied by deep and nearly constant anxiety.

There can also be what I would call a “dark life of the soul,” an individual who doesn’t have a particular chemical imbalance, but whose lifetime has been so challenging that she suffers from all manner of symptoms such as lifelong depression, complex trauma and various challenges coping with living.

A dark night can co-exist with any of these other issues, which can make it more complex and puzzling to identify. Just as you would not want to try and solve a dark night, you would not want to ignore issues that do need addressing. It is important to appropriately diagnose the client’s situation, including the influence of medications, the client’s home, social influences and self-care abilities.

Once the solvable issues are addressed (medical, psychological disorder, etc.), and the darkness is still present, it is best to stop the approach of “solution” and get down to what is of real assistance: helping the process along by assisting the client to meet the rising shadow material, and if you are familiar with it, helping the client learn how to live from a radical reliance on the Divine in the present moment by becoming acclimated to living entirely from the unknown and opening to the ground of being.

The dark night can most easily be seen and recognized in someone who is not medically challenged, does not have any sort of psychological disorder, has had a relatively trauma-free childhood and simply, whether through a precipitating experience such as divorce or loss of job or for no apparent reason, is plunged into an inexplicable darkness. It is incomparable to anything that has visited the individual before, and generally terrifies them. A common feature is a nagging sense of fear that feels as if it is portending doom, a sense that something is “wrong.” As well, the meaning drains out of previously meaningful activities and relationships, and the individual cannot figure out the cause. It’s often the case that the person has been engaged in spiritual work (though not always), or has said some sort of “dangerous” prayer, whether consciously or unconsciously, such as “Thy will not mine” or “All I want is truth” or “Make me an instrument of your peace.” Spiritually and romantically delightful at the time, some prayers are apparently answered in a rather intense way. For any of those prayers to be answered fully, the illusion of the separate self needs to lose its hold.

In a pure dark night, where the phenomenon is most easily recognizable because of the lack of

other factors, the person is typically a high-functioning human, psychologically pretty sound and flexible, whose usual approach to life doesn't work anymore, often in any area such as work, relationship, recreation or spiritual practice. In essence, the person just can't "get happy," and nothing seems to help. As the coping mechanisms fail to provide fulfillment, the core pain that spawned them in the first place rises to the surface to be met.

Psychological issues will arise as the Light moves into the being, sending shadow material up to the surface. Any undigested trauma that has been experienced by the individual will need to be met and healed. Already an overwhelming experience, the dark night can be further complicated by the surfacing of traumatic memories and issues of which the client was unaware previously. It is wise to remember that if you feel you are in over your head as a therapist, you probably are, and should refer the client to another colleague.

Just as treating the dark night as a problem to solve is not useful, attempting to give the client a "better perspective" is also detrimental. The pull of the dark night is to go down, down into the darkness and pain that has been ignored and covered over through conditioning and control. Though common in western culture, going "up" actually violates the client's inherent body wisdom and further delays the inevitable meeting. Similarly, pointers to the absolute such as "You are awareness" or "You are not the body" are often a spiritual bypass and can actually be used to evade a true meeting of what is rising. Positive thinking and manifesting are also not useful, as the material that is rising has life energy invested in it, and will not be thrown off by an attitudinal adjustment. What the soul of the client is after is not a temporary influx of light, but a thorough deconstruction of the false that results in the embodiment of a light that shines through the darkness.

Holding a Spiritual Context

Many who experience a dark night have already been exposed to spiritual teachings and most have been on a spiritual path for some time. If not, it will be useful for the client to start exploring in this direction to create a spiritual context that casts the whole experience in a light that differs from the culture's failure perspective. This is an initiation, a sacred passage, a dying of the old and a birthing of light enfleshed. It seldom feels this way, because in the darkness there is only darkness. In the birthing canal having left the womb, there is no knowledge of the light, love and welcoming that lie just outside. There is only the dark unknown, and a sense that going back is no longer an option (though many try).

Without a spiritual context, the internalized messages of conditioning will reign, assaulting the client with advice to master the situation, while the situation continues to be un-master-able. The whole point of the dark night is not to master, but to be mastered. Those close to the client who have not experienced such a passage will offer the same messages that rise in the client's mind, hoping all she needs is a bit of good advice to get back on track. The only possible interpretation within a conditioned context is that one must be a failure, insane or just "losing it" and should

“get a grip.” Without a spiritual context that puts the situation in the right light, the client will continue to spin in circles attempting to fight and solve the process rather than surrender to it. Many cultures throughout history have had rituals and initiations for those who enter such a passage – western society does not.

Being With Versus Fixing

When someone’s mythology is breaking down, she is moving from relying on the mind with its future-based trouble-shooting, “analyze and address” mentality to relying on the heart, on a radical and surrendered being-here in the moment and meeting what’s here in its most fundamental energetic form. It is remarkably soothing for the client to be met by a relaxed, open therapist who has the sense that “all is well” no matter what symptoms the client is experiencing. Contrastingly, it is remarkably distressing for the client to be met by someone who is unconsciously or consciously unnerved by her condition who disguises that as being alternatively “helpful” and then frustrated when the client does not use or benefit from her suggestions.

It is tremendously useful for a client to be in the presence of a being who does not view the passage as a travesty, but rather as a necessary though painful transformation from reliance on a sense of separated personhood to a joyful reliance on God. In truth, how fortunate is the one who is besieged by the Dark Lord! Yet, the client’s agony and desperation to solve the dark night will bring up anything that remains in a therapist that is not comfortable with simply “being here” in the unknown and embracing whatever rises. It is easy to become identified with the need to be a “good therapist” and provide a solution, but this is exactly the opposite of what is useful. Any suggestion or hint at trouble-shooting, any desperation on the part of the therapist about the client’s situation, will further plunge the client into despair. The very mentality she has failed at applying and is leaving behind through no choice of her own is that of fixing or troubleshooting. By the time she has found you, she has already tried everything in her power to “fix” herself and has failed. By far the single most helpful characteristic of a therapist for such a client is the willingness to be with whatever arises without any sense that anything is wrong.

Meeting What Rises

One of the most unnerving aspects of the dark night is the myriad of ways the body behaves (or doesn’t!) as a result of the rising shadow material and cessation of effectiveness of one’s coping mechanisms. The freakiest for me was a constant sense of dread and terror that showed up not only as a haunting or sense of impending doom, but also as a clench in the solar plexus that stayed for four years. I have seen people who have this sort of tension in every part of the body imaginable. It is as though Love is calling for an embodied radical openness and surrender, and out of fear, the creature fights that invitation somewhere in the body and a clench results. It’s as though the creature of the body is screaming, “Noooooo! Remember what happened to us the last time we were this open!” It cannot be underestimated how deeply disturbing it is to suddenly have one’s body displaying symptoms that are not only uncomfortable to painful, but

also are inexplicable and out of one's control. It is as though the control mechanism of conditioning has failed in the closest quarters imaginable. Yikes!

One of the primary ways a therapist can assist the client is by providing a space within which to meet and metabolize the rising shadow material, as well as teaching ways for that to be met. Not only will unprocessed pain rise, so will the delusional beliefs we were forced to take on in order to find some security in a sea of confusion and hurt. Part of the challenge of this rising shadow material and its nasty messages is the way that its historic reality can paint itself all over the present, making it appear real that the individual IS bad, hated, a failure, alone and unloved. The primary conflict at the root of separation is normally very difficult to address – it hides in the unconscious and seldom shows itself for healing. During a dark night, this material rises where it can be “gotten at” and felt through.

Clients need to be taught how to identify delusional moments, so that they don't attempt to solve the fictitious problem that the delusion displays as real, and instead put their attention in the body where the underlying pain shows itself. Presence digests pain as it is abided in and met.

In the process of this deconstruction, the various identities that the person utilized to feel good within conditioning will be assaulted and start to dissolve as the initiate is unable to keep up the behaviors that brought them a sense of safe identity. Similar to the pulling of a sliver out of a child's foot, Love is removing the sliver of the illusion of separate self upon which the person has built their world, and that is woven into every bit of their being. The initiate will feel like she is dying, and in a way, she is. It is very common during this time to have a deep desire to die physically – which is simply the longing for oblivion, the longing for freedom from the separate self and all its conflicts and pain.

During my dark experience I longed for death often, and came upon an article that suggested that what suicide attempters were really searching for was “egocide,” not the death of their bodies. That just looks like the quickest route! It helps for the client to have someone who can witness such feelings without freaking out. (And as with all therapeutic issues, it's vital to have training in how to recognize and respond to the signs of actual suicidality.)

Much of the therapist's job is to assist the deep meeting of the feelings that underlie the identities, and racing thoughts and self-limitation that accompany those feelings. For example, someone who has built an identity of “worthwhile citizen” may find herself unable to or disinterested in keeping the behaviors going that give her a sense of worth. As the coping mechanisms for feeling worthy drop off, the underlying feelings of worthlessness will rise, including at times the experiences that led to this conclusion of “worthless me.” Though storytelling can help to access the emotion, it is not necessary – the emotion will present itself in the body without that. No digging or figuring out or remembering is required; the feelings will emerge in the present to be met. To meet worthlessness is to drop out of the mental concepts and messages that the mind assaults the client with and drop into the set of sensations that she calls

“worthless.”

There is no need to counter the bad thoughts with good ones or find external activities to make her feel worthwhile. Instead she can be supported to drop completely out of the worth/worthless duality altogether in trade for a direct experience of the rising sensations that trigger the denigrating thoughts. We sit as the worthless one and feel whatever the worthless one wants to feel, rather than trying to send her back into the basement. And through that pure meeting, gradually that set of sensations, along with its persistent mind chatter, will burn away, revealing the essential self in its unconditional value.

A major source of suffering during a dark night is unmet fear in the body. As the creature gets wind that its usual survival strategies are failing, a fear can rise that is challenging to meet energetically because of the sense that there is actually something to fear. It can feel like the fear portends doom, and that if only the client could find the cause and address it, all would be well. In actuality, the fear is primal and infantile, a ghost of the past, and not portending or meaning anything actual in the present. It is simply ancient fear that was not digested at the time of the precipitating experience, and it only needs to be energetically met and digested.

I have found it tremendously useful to assist clients to drop their attention into their felt sense of being in the moment. Anything from the feel of breath, to tension in the body, to sounds, to the feel of the chair beneath them, will let attention drop out of being fused to the content of thought (which is the major source of suffering during this experience) and be instead used to meet the overwhelming set of sensations, whatever they are. This anchor of felt sense in the moment can begin to allow the person to take her attention off of the useless and terrifying thoughts-gone-wild that only exacerbate the terror, and start to meet the felt energy and discomfort. Imagine an animal cornered, fighting for its life. That is what our unconscious being feels it is engaged in, and there's nothing conceptual that will help the unconscious creature to calm. Creature speaks in touch and energy, not in thought and word.

Allowing the body to do what it feels like doing during the process, such as curling up, crying, shaking, making sounds, and moving in all manner of ways is useful. The body is highly intelligent and knows itself how to untie its own knots. To allow the body to lead can at first be challenging to the conditioned being, but when the creature of the body experiences how satisfying it is, it becomes second nature (as it was first nature when we entered the world). Authentic movement is a wonderful adjunct to therapy in these cases, because it allows a deep immersion into the body and a following of its lead.

Any resources that can assist with dropping out of the mind into felt sense are helpful, such as recordings of guided meditation or calming music, and any other kinds of body-centered activities such as yoga, sports or digging in the garden. Anything that helps the person to drop out of mentally “meddling” with the process by figuring out, obsessing, and freaking, that instead allows them to put attention in the simple felt experience of being, is useful. It turns out,

dropping attention out of the content of thought allows us to open to and be in the unknown, which is precisely where the dark night is taking us.

Addressing Helplessness

When helplessness or hopelessness rise, it's important to name them and allow the client to feel into those experiences. The whole structure of the "me" is designed to combat the feelings of helplessness and hopelessness, and to find solace in any sort of sense that "I am in control," "I am going somewhere," "I can improve my lot," and "I can move toward nirvana and make things better." When it is no longer feasible to feel in control, it is time to face an essential fact of human existence – we are entirely at the mercy of the Divine, in every way, and always have been. To meet and feel the utter helplessness and "at the mercy of" feelings can be deeply challenging with all the conditioning to avoid that experience at all costs, and is a primary thing to be reckoned with in this transition.

To surrender to God we must meet the truth of the helplessness and powerlessness of this fictitious agent called "me," and allow the terror that rises to be experienced, met and released. It is not inherently terrifying to experience one's helplessness as a separate "me;" the nonexistence and impotence of the "me" is a general experience of awakened living and is actually a relief when the fear burns off. The terror lies in the rising of felt memories of past experiences of helplessness in the face of trauma that were never digested and released. Much of this sort of terror has no mental memory associated with it because the experiences occurred so young. And no heinous act had to take place – a wide open infant can feel terrified simply in the presence of the average, run of the mill harsh energy that is expressed in the voice and manner of a caretaker living from conflict, or from a moment of feeling unsupported in mid-air, or alone in an incubator.

Hostility/Aggression

Another experience that can rise during the deconstruction of "me" is irritability and aggression. The body and psyche of the individual is being asked to meet too much all at once, so much so that it can feel like a full-time job and one can have little energy for anything else. Similar to asking a woman who is giving birth to smile so you can take her picture (for anyone who has experienced birth, this will most definitely elicit a snarl), someone whose attention and energetic resources are down in the basement being used to take apart the structures of coping that have accumulated over decades will find even the simplest of demands from the outside to be an imposition and at times an impossibility. Snarling is commonplace out of the tremendous pain one is in. The therapist can normalize this – this sort of behavior is to be expected when you have a sliver being removed from your innermost being.

It is tremendously useful to have an outlet for the irritability and aggression that rise sometimes as an uncontrollable force of life energy. I played a lot of aggressive soccer at the time of my

undoing. Brisk walking, martial arts, making sounds from the belly, any kind of outlet for the energy is useful, as is asking for mercy and understanding from those with whom one is in close relationship. Sorry for the bitchiness, I'm being taken apart, please forgive me. Apologizing a lot can be helpful.

Meaninglessness

All the activities and relationships that were constructed by the "me" coping structure will no longer be satisfying because the client is moving from investing her life energy into the coping "me" to returning it to being in and moving from the divine unknown. As the mythology surrounding the coping structure collapses, meaning will drain out of the things that were built. Everything must die and be composted for a new birth to take place. This may involve a lot of grieving – and no amount of new meaningful activities will help. The death of the old sense of self must be tended, much as the death of a loved one. What begins to take the place of meaningful activity and meaningful relationship is the inherent embodied meaning of living as an instrument of the Beloved. External meaningful objects are no longer necessary – one experiences one's breath and existence as enough.

Loneliness, Disconnection and Separation

At the root of separation is an incredible feeling of isolation and aloneness, desolation in fact. As the methods for distracting from this pain fail, tremendous feelings of disconnection can arise. No matter where the client goes or who she attempts to find connection from, the gnawing loneliness persists. This is good! She is being weaned off of external distractions and temporary solutions for this predicament so that she can face it full-on and burn through it to the sense of unconditional love. There is no master better than Hafiz for explaining exactly how to meet this particular aspect of the dark night (or any other aspect for that matter).

Absolutely Clear

Don't surrender your loneliness

So quickly.

Let it cut more deep.

Let it ferment and season you

As few human

Or even divine ingredients can.

Something missing in my heart tonight

Has made my eyes so soft,

My voice

So tender,

My need of God
Absolutely
Clear.

Grief

The things in which we invested our energy in an attempt to feel good, connected, important, valued and worthwhile will start to fade and the resulting grief at the farewells can be immense. When we talk about attachment and letting go of being focused externally, we seldom include how the heart flesh of our comfort-safety-familiarity-loving-creature is woven in and around these external objects. Hours and hours of crying are not unusual, and clients should be encouraged to cry as often as the feeling rises, as this is the way the creature digests this dying away.

Dreams will die, relationships will die, and the whole sense that the “me” can somehow get some place beautiful if she just runs her coping strategies hard enough and long enough will die. The dream of “getting there” that the being invested all her life energy, hours, and efforts into is suddenly seen to be a mirage. There is a significant amount of hope that was invested in these futurizing strategies that turns to hopelessness in the dark night. This is good! Trying to get to nirvana with strategies IS hopeless, and the sooner a being has that insight, the sooner she can dispense with efforts in that direction. And mere insight is often insufficient: the coping strategies generally have to fail utterly for a new reliance on living radically open and unprepared in the moment to be fully embraced.

Self-Care

It is important that a client do everything she can during this time to care for the simple needs of her body – getting enough sleep, healthy food, exercise and any activities that allow the large amounts of released energy to move through as well as that allow her to sink her attention into her simple felt experience of being. It can also be useful to find activities that help her to channel the large amounts of energy being released in the body, such as sports and exercise of all types. Grounding activities and body-centered activities are also useful. As well, it can be soothing to have non-harmful ways of taking a break from the constant obsession with the process, such as watching movies and reading frivolous novels.

It is highly advisable that such a client spend as little time around people who are distressed by her condition and thus attempt to get her to be different than she is or to be “her old self.” Spending time in solitude is preferable to spending time feeling like one must answer for one’s self or stretch beyond where one is. However, the company of beings who can be with the client in a relaxed way is delicious and some who love the client can be trained to simply hold her while she cries, or relax their need for her to show signs of being “normal” again. Nature, as

well as animals, can be deeply nourishing during this passage, as it embodies a sense of harmony and beingness that few human beings have fully embraced or express.

Sensitivity

Part of the package of conditioning is protection and body armor in the form of numbing and rigidity. This is part of what is assaulted in the dark night, as the client is forced into the dissolution of this protective gear and the meeting of the painful emotion underneath it. As the emotion is met, as shaking and crying ensue, the body softens and opens, the system is cleaned out of rigidity, and the remarkable finely tuned instrument of the body is allowed to reclaim its incredibly sensitive functioning. There can be a sense of being newborn, of being wide-eyed in a very speedy and harsh world. Anything and everything can send us into tears, or into hiding or wanting to go away. Suddenly anything false is experienced as painful in the body. Messages from one's childhood such as "you are too sensitive" will start to rise and we will think this sensitivity is a bad thing. Not so. To be sensitive is to be able to feel deeply, both the deliciousness of being alive, and the agony of it. To hurt is to soften, and the body is brilliant at re-softening and reopening as it digests harshness and hurt. As well, this opening to sensitivity also allows the being to discover and develop new aptitudes such as clairvoyance and clairsentience.

As children, we were not allowed to mature wide open, and so when the coping mechanisms of our maturing fall away, we are left feeling as open and soft and unprotected and unequipped to deal as a newborn. Patience and tenderness toward one's being are vital. This sensitivity must be embraced (it's not going to go away!) and the client must start to listen to the body and intuition to take care of her newly softened self. This can be a difficult stage as the client faces the fact that much of the way she lived prior to this may no longer feel good. The remaining conditioning will pull her toward activities that were once doable, fulfilling, even fun, that are now obsolete. She will be naturally pulled toward more solitude, more quiet, less harshness. Ignoring this and following the pull of conditioning will result in discomfort and even pain. Especially social interaction, which seems so harmless, and with which we so easily dealt as a defended and coping "me," suddenly becomes the greatest source of distress and inability to function. Relating wide open means feeling into the unconscious material that others carry below their shallow everyday conversation and can be incredibly uncomfortable when we are not yet able to address it consciously.

Goodbye Normal

There is a large pull within the conditioned being to return to "normal," to become someone who does not stand out for being strange, someone who belongs by being similar to others. This is yet another feeling, that of isolation and fear, that surfaces when the conditioned identities and coping mechanisms start failing. The exact unhelpful thing to do is for the client to attempt to "fit in" or find belonging externally. She is being weaned from conditional belonging so that an

unconditional belonging in God can take its place. Thus, it can be useful to encourage clients to say goodbye to their lifelong dream of fitting in and belonging by becoming normal, and instead invite them to focus on the unique being that they are, and the unfolding and revealing of that being as they are willing to listen to their moment to moment guidance and tendencies rather than what others say or what their conditioned thoughts say. The client is finding her legs in being “in the world but not of it.”

In summary, there are a few key points to remember once a therapist suspects her client is going through a dark night of the soul. The process is a passage or initiation and not a problem. Huge amounts of shadow material will rise, identities will fall, coping mechanisms will fail, and tremendous amounts of energy, mostly as emotion and interesting body phenomena will emerge to be released. The initiate mostly needs a spiritual and relaxed context within which to feel and meet the rising shadow material as her “me” coping structure undergoes a massive deconstruction, and the fresh, innocent, wide-eyed and present essential being emerges from the rubble. When in doubt, simply be.