

STANDING IN THE LIGHT

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At last the dark days of winter are here. It seems we have been waiting for them a long time. Do recall that not long after Halloween, the Christmas decorations magically appeared in my local shopping center? This weekend marked the official beginning of the Holiday season with the Lighting of the Christmas Tree in the downtown Mall, and what a sight it was! Little by little, bit-by-bit, all over the town and countryside, people have been adding bits of light and brilliance to counteract the darkness of winter. Until at last all the lights will be lit, each night bringing a full array of colors blinking, winking, flashing, lighting up the world.

This is the season of light. This is the time of year when we celebrate Hanukkah, Christmas, the Winter Solstice and other festivals of Light the word over. We have put our brightest and most joyful celebrations in the darkest season of the year. The lights are symbols of hope for the future. It is indeed a joyful time.

And yet this time of celebration often brings with it unfulfilled expectations, over-indulgence, and false happiness. This year in particular, the celebrations are overshadowed by fear and a sense of scarcity. Some try to counteract these feelings by making a game of it, challenging themselves to spend less and find new and different ways to make the season a happy one. But the lights are not diminished. I read in the news that the purchase of lights and decorations is at an all time high. This year and every year, it seems that our celebrations are designed to make us forget the darkness.

For some folks, lighting up the world is an attempt to cover what brings us pain. As for myself, I have always dreaded the darkness of winter. I am a person who craves light. The darkness feels oppressive. I know that I am not alone in this feeling. Many people experience a seasonal affective disorder as a reaction to light deprivation.

Kenneth Patton's poem, *Winter Light*, suggests that there is another way to think about this dark part of the year. He suggests that the darkness and barrenness of winter allow a clearer light to shine.

Try as we might to brighten these nights with artificial lights and merriment, it is the darkness of a long night and the light of a winter's day that allows us to see what is really there. And so it is for me that this winter has brought memories of a clearer vision and a greater appreciation of those short but farsighted days.

Some holiday experiences stand out and refuse to blend into a blur of similar celebrations. I recall the year my winter began the Monday following Thanksgiving when I got a phone call from a friend who, with her husband, had just spent a wonderful Thanksgiving at our house. For the purposes of this sermon I'll call them Ella and Tom. We ate and drank and laughed and talked. We marveled at the changes all of us had undergone and speculated about our futures.

We watched the movie, *Field of Dreams*, on TV Thursday night. We all slept late on Friday and spent a leisurely day resting and snacking on left over turkey and dressing.

When the two of them left on Friday afternoon it was with a round of fond hugs and kisses and promises to get together again soon.

When the phone rang on Monday afternoon I was surprised to find that it was Ella. I didn't expect to hear from her so soon. But it was she; calling to tell me that Tom was dead. Killed in an auto accident.

The dark days had begun with a vengeance. The next two weeks were very sad indeed for me, for all of Tom's friends, his family, and certainly for his wife, Ella. It would be a painful Holiday season for her, with her loss so fresh, so raw. Every Holiday season from then on would be the anniversary of her husband's death. The long dark nights cannot cover the reality the light of day reveals.

The memory of this sad and tragic story brings up other deaths, other losses. I think of my own father's death in a bizarre accident and the tragic death of my niece. You, too, may be thinking of people who are gone from your life. O, how we miss them at holiday time! We feel their absence so much more acutely. The pain of their absence will always be with us.

But experience shows us that even though we are terribly hurt and broken, that happiness can be ours again. We know that even though our lives are unalterably changed, the light will come unto us again. Sadness and happiness exist together in the dark and light of our lives.

I think this is part of why we have festivals of light in the winter... not to deny the dark times, but to remind us that no matter how dark it gets, no matter how long those nights, there is still light in our lives.

I drive along the roads at night looking at all the twinkling lights in the windows of the houses, and I am reminded of the happiness in my life, and I am reminded of the light that my friend Tom brought with his life.

He was a tender and loving man. He was a great hugger, an inveterate traveler, and a deep thinker. He loved being with people, especially children.

I think of Tom's memorial service, and all the wonderful stories people told about him. I am amazed that amid the deep sadness and wrenching loss, his friends and family were able to laugh, to reminisce, to enjoy each other's company. But laughing and crying and being with one another are what we needed to do. We needed to feel life among us. On that day we stood in Tom's light, the light of his life that was left to us in the darkness of his loss.

A tragedy like the death of a loved one often comes with a mixture of feeling, deep despair, anger, emptiness, and somehow, unbelievably, gratitude and love for the life we have known with the person who has died. ... Gratitude and love for those who are with us who care, who give their presence, their support, those who bring food to the funeral, those who take care of our transportation, those who call to give their sympathy, those who cook and clean and look after the children and take care of the dog.

Truly it is in the harsh bare light of a winter's day that true love and grace are revealed. In that light unobscured by the lushness of summer's growth, we can see the simple unadorned gift of loving friends, of community, of those who care.

How sweet it is to find in the midst of darkness and despair that the clear light can give us a foothold, a place to stand.

There are so many memories at this time of year.... In this holiday season in the dark of winter, I recall a winter celebration that was very different from the one dominated by death and loss. In another congregation, I celebrated a very special child dedication. That day the congregation and I stood in the light with Gabriel, an eight year old child adopted by a pair of loving women. We helped him see that the darkness in his life, while very real and very painful, also brought with it incredible love and happiness. For a small boy named Gabriel, the realities of dedicated love and caring were revealed in the clear light of the winter of his first realization of loss. You see, not long before that day Gabriel realized for the first time that his birth parents had given him away. It was a bitter and frightening feeling. And in the same moment he felt that loss, he also had the realization of grace. He had been chosen, saved, picked up and loved, never to be left behind again. It was the winter of Gabriel's grief that gave him the gift of a clear understanding of love.

Nature has given us a great gift in the changing of the seasons, in the ebb and flow of days and of light and darkness. It shows us that light can best be appreciated when balanced with dark. It shows us that the dark is necessary even though it can be painful.

And nature knows that the dark times are a time of rest, a time of reflection and quiet. We are not meant to live life at the same pace all year long. The time of darkness is the time of loss. It is the time when we realize that life has an end. It is a time when we confront the pain and despair in our lives so that we can achieve a depth of understanding and appreciation of our aliveness.

In the dark I see the ugliness of my friend's death; I see families bereft and lonely. In the dark I see a terrified child undone by the knowledge of loss. I see families torn apart by disagreement and conflict. I see harried and desperate people scurrying to recreate a Holiday that never existed in their childhoods.

In the dark I see crass commercialism and garish displays of brilliance all designed to dispel the darkness. But the long nights will not be done away with. We must endure what the darkness holds. We must go into the darkness with a brave and open heart and experience fully whatever pain it holds. There in the darkness we may find that hope and beauty exist in the midst of despair and ugliness.

On a clear, crisp night not long ago, I looked up at the sky and saw stars I had not seen in many a night. Usually starlight seems rather paltry in comparison to the blinking and winking of artificial lights. But that night I was astonished by the multitudes of constellations, modest in their brilliance.

Unlike the garish holiday lights, designed to excite and enervate, the effect of the stars was calming and serene. In the starlight I found nothing to buy, nothing that had to be done, only a vastness, a twinkling beauty, which brought peace and wonder. I stood for a long, long time, my head tilted up toward the stars, the frenzy of the season far away. There was only myself, the night and the stars.

Winter darkness is the time for us to be with ourselves, to go deep inside and find the faith and hope within us. It is a time to know ourselves so that when we emerge into the cool clear light of the short days, we are able to see the truth at last.

Having experienced the peace of darkness, we can emerge into the light ready to see what the light reveals.

Standing in the light I see the beauty of the life of a friend. I see the tender caring of two women for their adopted son. I see the overwhelming love of the communities of which I am a part.

As we move deeper into this season toward the longest night, let us remember to take time from the busyness and rapid pace to rest in the darkness. Let us use this time that nature has given us to quiet ourselves, to reflect on what life has brought us. Let us use this time to dream and vision what our lives can be.

When we celebrate, let us light the world with true appreciation for the miracle of life, the miracle of hope, the miracle of freedom. And when the day breaks let us stand together in the clear light of love.

Amen