

Light that wants to shine needs darkness:

Exploring the shadow side of Christmas Stories

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WHAT IF some of the Christmas stories we have inherited are biased or “one-sided”? Woven from broken threads? What if their hidden biases and omissions unconsciously incline us to make war rather than peace? To hate rather than to love? To divide and conquer rather than to unify and embrace?

Many of the stories of Christmas celebrate the triumph of Light over darkness:

- Jesus is the “light in the darkness” and light overcomes darkness.
- Jesus is THE Light of the World (John 1, I Cor. 4)
- Jesus, as the Creative Word Incarnate, is one with the Father (John 1) who created this world by saying “Let there be Light” (Gen 1).
- Jesus is the Light-house for sinners who wander in the dark far from home.

I’m focusing on the Christmas story because that seems to be the most powerful narrative in our Winter-Light culture, but I could make a parallel analysis of other December Celebrations: Buddha’s Awakening (awakening to the Light within), Hanukkah (the Light of religious Liberty) or Solstice (the return of the Sun).



I. The Pre-Biblical Roots of the War Between Darkness and Light

This peculiar idea that there is an eternal struggle between Darkness and Light did not originate with Jesus and St. Paul, or Abraham and Moses or Mohamed and his followers. It can be traced back to a much earlier prophet named “**Zarathustra**” who lived and taught in Persia (modern Iran) between 600 and 2000 years before the birth of Jesus. Zarathustra had a miraculous birth and a call as a Prophet/Messenger of God. He saw the world as forever caught between the forces of Light/Truth (sat) and Darkness/Lie (asat). He called upon his followers to side with Truth and Light by living an ethical life, by participating in rituals of purification, and spreading his gospel of the War between Light and Darkness.

Each of the strands of Biblical religion carries this theme of eternal warfare forward in its own way: by imaging Creation beginning with the Light that dispels darkness (Genesis 1), by communing with a Deity who communicates through Light and Fire (Ex.3-4; Ex. 13-14), by choosing a Prophet or Savior who is called a “Light to the World” (John 1), by formulating rituals and ethics which aim for holiness as “purity”---with stain, without sin.

There are many tragic consequences for those who live by this mythology of an

eternal struggle between Light and Darkness. Those who claim a “Holy Land” as a gift of God have often been cruel to those who possessed a land before God’s bequest to them. Christian soldiers and crusaders have killed millions of Jews and Muslims even though all are “people of the Book”. The light-skinned Aryan invaders who swept through India 600 bce killed the darker-skinned indigenous peoples and created a caste system with light-skinned people on top and the darker skinned peoples as “out-castes” for many life-times. In our own country, white European land-grabbers waged war on Native Americans for several centuries condemning them as “godless sons of Satan” as evidenced by their red skin and pagan religious rites. Some Native American religious rituals were banned until the 1970’s when President Jimmy Carter restored the right to practice one’s own chosen religious rituals. Even UU ministers can become rasty and intolerant when infected with the virus of a Light vs Dark, Us vs Them mythology. All over the world, “fundamentalist” versions of religious and political cults embrace a “Dark” vs “Light mythology. If they can’t find an evil Adversary, *they invent one*--- often by projecting their own myths of Darkness and Evil upon people who are poorer, less well armed and often darker skinned.

The first problem with the mythological theme of Darkness vs Light is the harm it inflicts: it encourages strife, intolerance and warfare. It has cost untold millions of lives. It is a toxic virus capable of replicating itself in countless forms of religious and political Fundamentalism.

II. Testimony from the Natural World

Where in the natural world do we find evidence of the battles between Darkness and Light? When I turn my attention to the world in which we find ourselves, this is what I see:
1. At dawn or dusk, as the sun appears to rise or set over the horizon, I do not see a battle. It looks and feels like a sacred occasion, heralded by bird calls, as the sun appears to pause that we might catch our breath and reclaim the high ground of wonder and delight. As it says in the Hindu Upanisads: “*When before the beauty of a sunrise or sunset, we pause and say Ahhh!---in that moment we participate in Eternity*”. (Joseph Campbell, *The Power of Myth*)

2. At mid-day on a clear day there is a continuous ebb and flow of light and shadows, inflected by the clarity of the air, the position of trees and houses, and the angle of our vision. No battle, no war, just light and shadow dancing together composing the world we see around us that fulfills a deep hunger for beauty and belonging.

3. At night we see the light of the stars only because the light of our star the sun is bathing the other side of mother earth with enlivening light. Without the encircling dark we could not see the stars, and much the world would become uninhabitable, with arctic cold on the dark side and desert heat on the light side.

4. IMAGINE says Emerson in his first essay called “Nature” if our planet had more than one sun so that night came only once every hundred years---- **IMAGINE** he says the delight, awe and wonder that would attend the eclipse of binary stars and the astonishing appearance of millions of stars. How people might fall to their knees and worship or turn their telescopes to

study the stars? No fight, no war----just the ebb and flow of darkness becoming light. (See Isaac Asimov's "Nightfall" for a tragic version of this story).

III. Testimony from the Human World

Light and dark in our psyches

We know that our bodies and minds need both darkness and light,
night and day, dreaming and waking.

If we slept all day, we might have lovely dreams but what kind of embodied life?

If we were wakeful all day, or prevented from deep sleep and dreaming,
our bodies might be unable to repair themselves
and our minds, deprived of dreaming, would begin to hallucinate.

Consider Alaska, Iceland or northern Scandinavian

in Winter Solstice they are blanketed with almost 24 hours of darkness
and thousands of people slide into depression.

In Summer Solstice they are bathed almost hours of sunlight
and thousands of people become manic,
and do strange and wild things.

The health of our psyche seems to require a balance of darkness and light.

Light and dark on our bodies

Our bodies also require a harmonious balance of darkness and light.

If we deprive our skin of sunlight, we may not get enough vitamin D
and we may sink into depression or disease.

If we get too much sunlight through literal sun-worship,
our reward may be skin-cancer.

The health of our bodies seems to require balance between darkness and light.

Light and dark in society

In the socially constructed world, terrible things happen
when light-skin and dark-skin are set at war or arranged in social hierarchies.

In India, the caste system which held millions captive
was directly related to skin color: the lighter the skin,
the higher the caste, power and privilege.

In our country, the habit of over-valuing light skin
and under-valuing dark skin helped produce 2 centuries of slavery,
2 centuries of an undeclared war against Native Americans
and 400 years of white privilege that is comically reinforced by light-skinned people
who "go native" by working on their tans.

In sum, this idea from Zarathustra of an eternal war between Darkness and Light

has no basis in our experience of the natural world
and has done great harm wherever it has been applied---
it has brought conflict within and without,
alternating waves of depression and mania,
centuries of racism, white privilege, and the enslavement of those with darker skin.

These deeply rooted, often unconscious patterns can be revealed by careful critical analysis
but criticism *by itself* cannot alter the pre-rational grip that myths and stories have on us.
The “power of myth” depends upon its capacity to slip by the guardians of critical thinking.

Only a story can replace a story.

Only a myth can replace a myth.

Only new rites, spiritual practices and ethics
can replace an all-encompassing system of beliefs that reaches in our unconscious depths.

IV. A New Beginning

New stories

One way to begin to transform darkness vs light myths
is to review the stories we have received and amplify the role of night, darkness and dreams.

Where did baby Jesus live before his birth?

In the warm, encircling darkness of Mary’s womb
where he was bathed in nutrients and Mother-love
and attuned to the music of his mother’s heart-beat.

What would have happened to the Christmas story

if Joseph, Mary and the Wise Guys had not remembered their night dreams?

In their dreams, they were warned of an unnatural but chaste pregnancy
of the necessity to “fear not” but be open to the unknown.

And, in the case of the 3 Wise Guys
they were told NOT tell King Herod where Baby Jesus was born
but instead to return to their own country by night.

The stable where Baby Jesus was born
was not a well-lit upper-class suite at the Ritz
it was a dimly lit, stinky, dark barn filled with fragrant hay and not so fragrant offal
that was warmed by the body-heat of cows, sheep and peasants.
Baby Jesus like his Jewish parents probably had brown skin, brown eyes and dark hair.
He was not a blue-eyed, blond-haired cosmic surfer---
he was an poor under-caste Jewish refugee
born of an unwed mother, a Holy Bastard, living off the charity of others.

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New rites & spiritual practices

Instead of burning candles and lighting millions of twinkling lights
our holiday celebrations might begin to **re-focus on how dark serves light.**
We could go out under the majestic night sky
feeling how tiny we are and open our heart, mind and senses to the dark canopy over-head
and the twinkling light of distant stars---
each of them a “sun” far away in space and time----
many with planets whirling around them,
and an as-yet untold number of planets
basking in the temperate twilight zone like Mother Earth
capable of supporting life both like and unlike our own.

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And instead of seeking our personal Enlightenment
we might instead take up the challenge of **Endarkenment.**
We might begin, as psychologist Carl Jung invites us, to reclaim our own “shadow”---
the dark, unconscious and unwanted parts of our selves
that we tend to fear and loathe and therefore loan to others
who we then attack for carrying our own shadow projections.

By claiming and owning our own shadows,
and by tenderly befriend the parts of our selves we have reject,
we might become less dangerous beings,
more capable of compassion and justice,
more likely to reach out and welcome
the out-caste, not rich, and not-white people
who we have relentlessly exploited for thousands of years.

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New world-view

Finally, this ethical, spiritual and mythological revolution
might lead us to reclaim neglected some spiritual classics and to compose new ones.

Here’s one of my favorite celebrations of the “middle way”,
the ebb and flow of seeming opposites which are beloved partners in the dance
of life and death and transformation:

Tao Te Ching Chapter II

*Under heaven
we know attraction because of repulsion,
we know virtue because of vice,
what is and what is not
define each other.*

*Hard & easy,
Long & short
High & low
Sound & silence
Light & dark---
all opposites are deeply intertwined
and mutually dependent.*

*Therefore the Wise
act without forcing
and teach without words.
She cares for all beings
without being bossy.
He creates without clinging.*

What is accomplished without a trace lasts forever.



DAO

- 1. When yin and yang come together**
- 2. to form an organic unity**
- 3. a natural order is revealed**
- 4. and life unfolds naturally
like a person walking a road
or a river flowing home to the sea.**