

## Finding Inner Peace in Dark Times

As paradoxical as it may sound, this article on the dark night of the soul is meant to be inspirational. For those of you who have had a “dark night” (or dark months or years!) you may have an idea of the amount of pain and confusion involved. For those of you who aren’t familiar with this experience, it was coined in the 16<sup>th</sup> century by St John of the Cross who used it to describe spiritual crises; it has now also come to describe psychological ones. One of the symptoms of the dark night is no longer having any sense of solid ground...and that is so. You’ve found that the solid ground you’ve created up until then was not completely based on reality.

In describing one of his dark nights, Carl Jung wrote, “I often had to cling to the table, so as not to fall apart.” I had exactly the same experience during my first major mid-life dark night; the table was the most stable thing that I could count on.

Sometimes a dark night stems from a death, an illness, a divorce, a tragedy, a betrayal or some other kind of wake-up call. Sometimes we have to lose something in order to change, or sometimes change in order *not* to lose something.

Dark nights seem to be the result of events bringing unconscious material to light. Jung thought that the psyche itself organizes these events in order that the individual grow and evolve. One of the definitions of enlightenment is to make the unconscious conscious. Dark nights are one way to get there. Another way is more slowly, through bite-size morsels of realizations to chew and digest over time.

Marion Woodman, a Jungian analyst, wrote “Creative suffering burns clean; neurotic suffering creates more soot.” There is a big difference between wallowing in non-productive and repetitive pain and using the opportunity of these deep and powerful emotions to bring greater self-understanding and ultimately greater liberation from our stuckness and repetitive patterns.

In the dark night, we wrestle with our demons, who are also our angels since they bring gifts that ultimately heal. The author John Sanford wrote about this in recounting the biblical story of Jacob: “Jacob refused to part with his experience until he knew its meaning...everyone who wrestles with his spiritual and psychological experience, and, no matter how dark or frightening it is, refuses to let it go until he discovers its meaning, is having something of the Jacob experience. Such a person can come through his dark struggle to the other side reborn, but one who retreats or runs from his encounter with spiritual reality cannot be transformed.”

Dark nights tear down old systems of being that aren’t in sync with reality or our own growth. We learn to stay connected to ourselves and start developing new inner muscle, new ways of being, which are more authentic and less strategic. Old ways are demolished so that new ways can be built, and along with it a hopefully higher level of consciousness. This can also be called soul work or even building character, forcing us to find the richness of our depths, what we’re made of, an invitation to become more deeply ourselves.

Sometimes we have to descend to ascend. I find through my own dark nights that I am endlessly humbled, in the best possible sense, a continual casting away of my defense mechanisms and my false self. If you ever find yourself in your own dark night, persevere with strength, courage, faith and self-love. Remember there is gold at the end: your own liberation and growth and more and more inner peace.

*Marla Estes, M.A. is an Ashland writer, mentor, teacher and workshop facilitator. She will be speaking about "Embracing the Dark Night of the Soul" on October 3<sup>rd</sup> at 6:30 p.m. at the Talent Art Gallery, 108 S. Market Street, Talent, as a part of Betsy Lewis' art events. Also she will be presenting a film and discussion night on the dark night at the Rogue Valley Metaphysical Library on October 7<sup>th</sup> at 6:30. Visit her website at [www.marlaestes.com](http://www.marlaestes.com) or Betsy's at [www.arteventproductions.com](http://www.arteventproductions.com)*