

Dark Time

By Dr. Serena Patterson and Monika Grünberg, RCC

Winters in the Comox Valley may not be known for extreme temperatures, but we certainly should take bragging rights for surviving the dark and the grey. With little snow cover at sea level and frequent overcast skies; sometimes the evergreen forests seem to absorb the light like sponges absorb water. Neither of us has lived anywhere else where the dark and grey seemed so thick as it does here at the wet coast. Even in the depth of a Yukon winter, Monika remembers the beauty of light, even starlight, reflected upon snow, the crispness of the cold air, and of course the Northern Lights. Serena braved one bitter winter of square tires and morning ice fog in Saskatoon, but the sun was bright on the snow.

Not that Serena minds the dark much anymore. Fond of good food, conversation, reading, sleeping, and making crafts, Serena looks forward to the months when she needs no excuse to stay inside and dream by the fire. She thinks of seeds tucked into the ground, soaking up energy and perhaps looking forward, in their plant-like way, to being trees. This is a creative time of year, of slow food, needles and thread, words, and warm company. Her first year on the Island, the dark took her by surprise. What saved her winters was learning to ski. Now her indoor activities are balanced by exercise up in the snow, where, for a few hours, she is above the cloud cover. That is enough; after a few hours of skiing or snow-shoeing, with a pot of soup waiting at home, Serena finds life to be about as good as it gets.

For Monika, balance is important. Even though she likes it when the leaves in the forest behind the house finally fall, and sunlight once again streams into the house, she also loves the dark and its mystery and silence. Favorite winter time memories are about going up to the mountains in the afternoon, at about the time when everyone else seems to head down, to ski or snowshoe in the solitude, with the dogs and something lovely and hot to drink in her pack and a headlamp and a cell phone, just in case.

Monika frequently finds reassurance and calm when open to experiencing nature: the slow heartbeat of the tides and the ocean surf, or the vastness of the night sky telling about an even slower heartbeat: where stars and galaxies shine whose light has traveled since way before civilization, as we know it.

Where Serena finds these experiences unsettling (yikes, we are so tiny and insignificant), Monika feels the frantic pace of everyday stresses and worries slow down and fade compared to the really big picture we are a part of (sigh of relief, we really are but a tiny part of a much larger picture, and that shrinks many of my worries into their proper and perspective: insignificance).

Many people do find the dark to be difficult. On a physiological level, we need natural light to regulate our body's sleep and wake cycles, and to trigger the production of natural melatonin, a hormone that helps to regulate our mood and energy level. Winter is a time of higher costs and more seclusion. In old times, food and warmth were definitely harder to get in the winter, and many people still find it a harder time for survival.

Winter Solstice is probably one of the very earliest holiday seasons in the Northern hemisphere. With the food gathered in, winter brought time for music, crafts and stories, and people came together to share warmth and light, as well as companionship. Later religions, including Christianity, adopted this time of the darkest, longest nights for their own celebrations of new beginnings and hope. The "Sun King" of the pagans gave way to the "Son King" of Christianity, and images of the Goddess become incorporated into images of Mary, the Queen of Heaven. It still seems right to us, as we pass the longest nights of the year, to welcome back the infant sun, the beginning of light returning, with



candles and hope and song. By whatever name we give it, the dark of the winter is a time ripe for magic, stories and music.

And just as the darkness of the season can be overwhelming to some, the brightness of the holiday lights can bring a despair of its own. Next to the hardships of being lonely, of missing a loved one, of having financial worries, or of just not feeling particularly happy, the cheeriness of the holiday season and its consumerism can feel contrived, incessant, and oppressive. In the shadow of the holiday lights there are many people among us who fight depression or who grieve strongly. Like those people who tell us to “smile!” when they don’t even know us, the relentless blinking of the Christmas lights seems to order us to feel better than we do, and threatens that, if we don’t cheer up and join in, sour-puss grinch we are. At times like these, we long for the gentleness of candlelight, which comforts and accepts a wider range of feelings for the season.

It is said that we need the dark in order to fully appreciate the light. In the dark, a candle is more beautiful, and a stained glass window reflecting on snow can take your breath away. Perhaps we also need light in order to best love the darkness. After a day of bright snow we can best love the comfort of a dark room, a cozy fire, a blanket to snuggle under. Serena, who loves word play, spends part of each Solstice playing with the words of light and dark. “Lighten up!” is followed by “darken down”, “let some light in” becomes “let some dark in”, “enlightenment” becomes “endarkenment”, and so on. She loves to sit with these expressions, listening to them and tuning in to feelings and thoughts, deep in side, like the seed under the ground.

The dark may bring gifts of its own. Under grief lies appreciation for how beautiful and irreplaceable a loved one was in our lives. Under despair may lay a reservoir of hope. When we feel most alone, we may also become aware of being connected to the whole world around us.

Both of us make a habit in the winter of lighting candles. We name some of the flames after loved ones who are not here and who we miss. We name others for people for whom we hold wishes and hopes for healing, people we want to “hold in the light”, as our Quaker friends say. Some of these are people we personally know, who are struggling. Others are people we do not know personally, and who are spending the dark season in war zones or out in the cold without safety and comfort. We name candles for our wishes for the New Year—wishes for our own happiness, for projects we want to complete, and for a better world of peace and justice. The purpose is not to push back the darkness, but to play with the balance, bringing together the gifts of the light and the dark.

Monika Grünberg, Registered Clinical Counsellor and Serena Patterson, Registered Psychologist can be contacted at their practice in Comox at 339-3269, or via their website at grunbergpatterson.ca.

©Grünberg Patterson Counselling & Psychological Services, 2005.
This article was originally published in the Island Word newspaper.



Grünberg Patterson Counselling and Psychological Services
206-156 Manor Drive, Comox BC V9M 1C6
phone: (250) 339-3269, fax: (250) 339-3291, Campbell River office: 1-877-339-3269
www.grunbergpatterson.ca