

Awakening Through the Dark Night
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I find myself returning to certain books in my library time and again. One of those books is by Rabbi Harold Kushner. It is entitled, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*. It was written 25 years ago. I think it was a ground-breaking work. In his writing, riveting and honest, he challenged the notion of an all-powerful God. He would rather have a God that is all-good rather than all-powerful. Any explanation for suffering that was a defense of God or that somehow suggested that God could have stopped suffering but didn't was not adequate for Rabbi Kushner.

As I understand Kushner, his idea is that suffering, tragedy, pain, and the dark night of the soul, happen. Suffering is part of life. It is not fair. It is not even. There is no metaphysical or divine reason for it.

However, according to Kushner, this does not mean that God is absent. God is with us. God is suffering with us. God is hope and God is compassion. God is kindness. God is strength. God is laughter. God is a rainbow in the dark clouds. God is the surprise that we can find this God (or that God can find us) while we are in the midst of a dark night. Sometimes God is simply the gift of death so suffering can end.

Kushner wrote his book from experience. His son, Aaron was born with a disease that caused him to age prematurely. Since Aaron's birth the Kushners knew that he would leave them someday. Aaron died at the age of 14. Kushner knew that one day he would have to write this book. He has done more than that. He not only wrote this book. He has written many books. I have some of those other books on my bookshelf as well. I am grateful that he has written them. He has helped me and he has helped many others.

His experience with Aaron made him more sensitive to these things. He grew spiritually. He awoke to insights that he might have never seen had he not had this experience with his son. Some might say that God had that all

planned out. God created Aaron and his disease so that Rabbi Kushner would write books and help others. Kushner will not go there. I will not either. I can accept that spiritual awakening can come from a dark night of suffering. I cannot accept that God causes a dark night of suffering so that spiritual awakening will happen.

Here are Kushner's words:

*"I am a more sensitive person, a more effective pastor, a more sympathetic counselor because of Aaron's life and death than I would ever have been without it. And I would give up all of those gains in a second if I could have my son back. If I could choose, I would forego all the spiritual growth and depth which has come my way because of our experiences, and be what I was fifteen years ago, an average rabbi, an indifferent counselor, helping some people and unable to help others, and the father of a bright happy boy. But I cannot choose."*ⁱ

Kushner was able, by grace, and whatever other forces there are in the universe, to move through this dark night. He became a deeper person—compassionate, sensitive, sad, joyful, wise and complex.

Not everyone survives these dark nights. Some turn to alcohol or excessive work or entertainments--anything they can find to avoid the darkness. Some become bitter and envious. For some their only comfort comes at death. I have absolutely no judgment regarding those for whom the dark night is too hard to bear. I pray that they and we find some comfort and guidance.

A dark night of the soul is a spiritual condition. It is more than depression. It is more than grief. It is not something you get through or get over. It is a shattering of your world. It is a stripping away of meaning and of value. The bottom falls out. A heart attack, a mid-life crisis, the death of a spouse, a loss of a job, a divorce, a sudden awareness of one's mortality, or any number of external or internal events can plunge a person into a "dark night of the soul."

Rather than to try to ask and answer, "Why?" instead I am grateful for compassionate guides who offer insightful and practical help for those who are in a dark night of the soul. One of these guides is Thomas Moore. His

latest book is entitled, *Dark Nights of the Soul: A Guide to Finding Your Way Through Life's Ordeals*.ⁱⁱ

Moore was a Catholic monk and became a psychologist. He uses insights from religion, psychotherapy and mythology to help people care for their souls rather than try to cure them. He suggests that if you are in a dark night of the soul, your task is not to fight it, to get through it, or to get over it, but to allow it to guide you.

In your dark night you may find parts of yourself that have been repressed. You may find parts of yourself that are ready to awaken. While Moore is very careful not to be directive, he does encourage his readers to talk about it, write about it, paint it, sculpt it, sing it, whatever it. Care for it. Care for your soul. Care for yourself.

In your soul-work, in your caring, you may find that you are deeper, more complex, darker. We generally have a hard time with sadness, especially others' sadness. Their sadness makes us uncomfortable. When we meet a person who is sad, we tend to avoid them or try to cheer them up so they will put on that happy face. Because we all know that, there is a temptation to paste a happy face on ourselves before we face the world. Not wanting to make others sad or have them notice our sadness, we pretend to be happy. While this is sometimes necessary, there is a cost. Keeping up appearances is like keeping a lid on a boiling pot. At some point, something needs to give. A dark night of the soul might be an opportunity to be more complex than you let on. It is an opportunity to allow others to see a different side of you. A richer, fuller, deeper, and yes, darker side.

Taking my own advice, I will take a risk and share with you this morning that I have been in a dark time for about a month. I am not sure why. I think it has to do in part with the topics for Lent. Taking on the evils of the world might have been a bigger bite than I could chew. I wasn't prepared for the emotional impact that some of these issues had on me. That coupled with the recent changes in my life this past year, changing jobs, moving across the country, living in a big empty nest of a house, put me into a reflective mood, I would say a dark night of the soul.

I am attempting to care for my soul through this. In addition to tending to church duties and to home duties, I am journaling. I am reading: Thomas Moore's book has been helpful. I am attempting to be more conscious of

taking care of my body as well as my soul. One of the advantages of being a minister is that creating and delivering sermons is soul-work. I have to be careful of that, of course, that I don't use you as my therapist!

I realize that there is no quick fix for a dark night. You never go back to where you were before. You awaken. You change. And that is not such a bad thing. A dark night, Thomas Moore warns, is nothing to brag about. You wish you never had to go through it. But as Kushner said, you don't have a choice. The only choice you have is whether or not you will respond to it.

I share this with you in part because I need to do so. But also, to say that if you are going through a dark night, you are not alone. Not only am I a fellow traveler. We are in a community of fellow travelers. And I hope we take the time and energy to know and appreciate each other.

If you are in a dark night you are not bad. You haven't done something wrong. There isn't anything wrong with you. You are a human being. Human beings suffer. The good news is that human beings also love.

It was a treat for me to see and to hear the poet, Maya Angelou, at ETSU this past week. She reminded us that there are rainbows in the dark clouds. We are those rainbows for each other. To be a rainbow is to be kind. It is important to be kind to friends, family, and strangers, she told us. You may never know if someone is going through a dark time. You never can know what comfort your kindness can bring to that person.

I close with one piece of directive advice:
Remember, always remember, to be kind to yourself, too.

ⁱHarold Kushner. *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* (New York: Schocken Books, 1981) p. 133-4.

ⁱⁱThomas Moore. *Dark Nights of the Soul: A Guide to Finding Your Way Through Life's Ordeals* (New York: Gotham, 2004).

