

THE SOUL IN WINTER: Discovering Gifts in the Dark Night

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Picture Winter. What images and feelings emerge? Do you think of the holidays, filled with memories of gifts, family, food and fun? Do you see yourself skiing down a powdery slope, your nose freezing but your spirit feeling free? Do you hear the silence Winter as snow gently falls? Can you feel yourself sitting before a toasty fire, wrapped in a blanket, sipping cocoa?

Or, do you dread the onset of this season, filled with memories of holidays gone wrong, family arguments, financial stresses, physical and mental exhaustion by the time the holidays are over? Are you prone to holiday depressions and feelings of emptiness, loneliness and despair?

Consider the possibility that both the positive and negative experiences we have during Winter are learned responses based upon cultural and family expectations. Perhaps there is another way to perceive and experience this powerful season.

Winter gives us the opportunity to explore its darkness and mystery. It is a catalyst for embracing the deeper recesses of our being. If we are willing to surrender to the natural process in Winter of hibernation, where we are still and listen and feel, we discover aspects of ourselves we cannot possibly know while we are running around in panic because we haven't found the right gift for Billy or Aunt Sue or are drinking too much at a party we didn't really want to go to in the first place.

I recently attended a Medieval Revel to celebrate the season. As I drank in the beauty of the meticulously created period clothing, smelled the mead, heard the exquisite authentic music, something moved within me. It was my natural pagan heart and Soul being tweaked to deeply recall my roots. I was transfixed as the Shaman and stag dancers reenacted the centuries-old ritual of the battle for sovereignty. I could relate this to recent inner battles in regard to my own Dark Night of the Soul.

In the summer of this year, I moved to Nevada City from southern California, where I had lived for fifty-seven years. It was clear that Spirit had moved me here, but what I hadn't known was how the beauty and power of this place would change my life. I was to discover how it would resonate so completely with my Soul that I would be able to clearly hear its voice and feel its urgings to express itself through my human self.

And because that human part of me had always had sovereignty over my Soul self, I had developed limited ways of being and relating to my world. This came crashing to a halt when I made the geographical move, which I see now as an inner move toward wholeness because my Soul was in its element here. It would begin pulling me toward its embrace and freeing me from stagnation and inauthentic living.

The first four months here were classic components of deep and alchemical transformation. The first month after my move was involved with physically organizing and orienting myself. The second month involved business aspects of my life. The third month proved to be emotionally challenging in how it was becoming clearer to me and some of my family who were still living in Los Angeles that I had actually made an irrevocable commitment.

Then the fourth month came and threw me into feeling true loneliness for the first time in my life. I could feel its old wound acutely. I sensed there was more to this than just missing family and old friends. This had deep roots and I felt drawn to digging down into the most profound but unusual Dark Night of the Soul I'd ever experienced.

It was different because I was not defended this time against feeling true emotion. Nor was I afraid of what I was feeling. I knew the feelings were not a judgment against me, but rather a revelation of something of great value within me. I went willingly, but not weakly. I found I could take my strength into the darkness and with it, find additional powers that had been lying dormant within me. I felt like both the Shaman, who consciously set the stage for deep and dramatic growth as well as the Deer Dancers, battling for independence from anything that stood in the way of total wholeness of being. I knew this process required sacrifice and I agreed to release my old defenses against authenticity. I was now free to express my needs for companionship and community without shame. As a result, my Soul has responded surprisingly quickly by bringing into my life many beautiful new friends who share my commitment to being fully and Soulfully human.

As I write this article, I am aware the Dark Night still hovers around and within me and I welcome its shadowy presence because I know what it holds for me. It is the key to my creativity as a spiritual teacher, artist, musician, writer and so many other things. By embracing and allowing the Dark Night within to embrace me, I have confirmed something I've always suspected and have taught my students for years: that the Power of the Dark, balanced with the Power of the Light, is the key to inner and outer freedom, creative expression, and most importantly, an authentic relationship with God.