And Then There Was Light

by Gail Thomas

"In the beginning was darkness—and it wasn't good enough." This heart wrenching comment on Genesis 1 burst forth from a middle aged African American man in a class on Racism and the Bible. Instinctively I knew this wasn't true, and as a white person I had never thought of reading the text in this way; I could think of nothing to say.

So much of western Christianity and Quakerism, in particular, uses images of light for good and images of dark for evil. Quakers routinely refer to Fox's vision of an ocean of light overcoming an ocean of darkness and a number of our songs for children rejoice in light overcoming dark. As adults, we may rationalize that, of course, we are not referring to skin color. But then I remember another story told me by a Quaker of African descent. She felt she had made her peace with these metaphors and was using them in her First Day School class; then one day a young African-American girl in her class asked, "Why does God hate me?" So even when we are careful, subconsciously the message that dark is bad comes through. How can we make Quaker language more welcoming to people of color?

The solution, it seems to me, is not getting rid of images of light. A candle does shine in the darkness, and morning light ushers in a new day. I have had personal experiences of the Light. Expressions such as holding someone "in the light," and "the light of Christ," are powerful and convey truth. What we need, rather, are equally positive images of darkness. As I have had spiritual experiences of light, I have also experienced darkness; it is warm and sensual and womb-like as well as powerful and formidable. Fox's image of the Seed works for me as one image we could use more often. A seed needs the darkness of the soil to grow as well as light. Darkness also helps us to rest, and, for me, can be a metaphor for silence, for times of transformation, for deep holding.

We can also be more nuanced when we use words that contrast with light. Chris Ravendal in his Gospel of John class at Pendle Hill likes to remind us that the word in John 1:5 usually translated as "dark" more accurately is the Greek word for "shadow." It may look like a small change, but a shift in words can help break what may seem like a relentless equation of darkness with evil.

Do I have negative associations of darkness? I thought about how the Light can search my soul, but it reveals what is hidden, what I have been ignoring or denying; I do not experience these places as dark but, rather, unexamined. If I use metaphors of darkness, it is from custom not from experience. Do I experience emotions as dark? I have felt anger, jealousy, self-righteousness, self-pity, but, to me, these feelings are not associated with a color. The only emotion I associate with darkness is fear. Being in a dark place without light can feel scary. But should it? Isn't that my ego fearing the unknown, fearing a loss of control? "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil for thou art with me." The message of most religions is that love overcomes fear, therefore, darkness should not be scary if I have faith. The so-called "dark night of the soul" may feel like God is absent, but, again, it is part of the journey to a more secure knowing.
anxiety of our ego self may call this "dark" and attach a negative charge, but it can also be seen as positive. Usually what is happening in a dark night is a deepening; the seed growing underground. A new relationship with God is forming, as in a womb, or, if painful, as in the birth channel.

I may be going too far here, but it seems to me that racism, with its making "other" of people because of their skin color goes along in many cultures with treating women as less than men and a fear of sexuality. Most religions have positive images of light, but few see light and dark as simply ying and yan, two sides of one reality without judgment. Rather, light is usually associated with male energy and reason, while the dark, to be feared, is associated with women and emotions. Even in the Bible, as the man who is mentioned at the start of the article noted, "the earth was without form and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep." Then God creates and sees the light "was good."

We cannot change ancient metaphors or how ancient people made sense of their world. We can try to change how we use these metaphors, how often we use them, and whether we actively search for different metaphors to convey the same reality. A Friend suggested to me a way to interpret the Biblical creation story. In the beginning was a "void," a "mishmash." The creation of light and firmament provide a rhythm and beauty to things, with the alternation of darkness and light creating the measurement of days and months and years, providing the order and structure necessary for life. Both darkness and light are necessary. Both are divine gifts. In the beginning was God, and God wove the darkness and the light into the miraculous tapestry of contrast and complement that is this cosmos, this life, and all our knowing. And it was good.