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MENU



FINDING-YOUR WAY

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by **Emily Linstrom**



In Catholicism and Christian mysticism, there is a term known as ‘the dark night of the soul.’ The Catholic context refers to a spiritual crisis encountered on one’s journey to a union with God, while the latter is symbolic of the mystery and unpredictability of the journey itself, as illustrated in the 16th century poem by Spanish mystic St. John of the Cross.

There is a somewhat laughable misconception about Pagans, that we enjoy a year-round party while our religious counterparts bend their heads in more devout reverence. Our icons, celebrations, imagery, and liberties could certainly

support this impression. And while (I think) Paganism boasts infinitely deeper, more poignant roots and culturally intersecting ancestral connections, those of us who study, meditate, and practice the Old Way can absolutely experience that dark night of the soul, which finds us fumbling along the path towards unity and enlightenment right alongside our Christian brothers and sisters.

From roughly September to mid-December, I experienced my own dark night of the soul. It was a difficult season for me, for a number of reasons, but those reasons themselves were not what brought me low. Familiar energies and entities somehow eluded me, and my own guiding light seemingly sputtered, before going out altogether. When I meditated in prayer I heard only static, a faint muffle of a response at best. My routine offerings appeared to go unacknowledged. During my hikes in the mountains and among the ruins, where other-dimensional activity pulsates, I felt only a disquieting air of vacancy. I began to doubt my own faith, and consider that perhaps our world had finally become too ugly, too cruel, too void of organic love and imagination and *potential* to be visited—let alone inhabited—by those sacred forces.

Make no mistake, this has not been a gentle year. (Then again, life is not a gentle thing...) Political and social atrocities, as well as the reckoning of human behavior carried out in abusive secrecy, have all been borne up to the surface. Many of us have had to acknowledge both previous and ongoing traumas, as well as regard ourselves and our abusers with renewed clarity. The stress of the commercial holiday season doesn't help, and when the hullabaloo is over in a few days then what? Thus, the long stretch of winter and feeling of despondency really looms overhead.

Those of us who live with clinical depression, anxiety, or PTSD have no doubt become well-acquainted with the dark, and have learned by necessity to adapt to it, work within it, and thrive despite what persists in the shadows. I believe that our faith, what we put our energy and soul's work into, acts as a kind of lantern in that dark. We follow it, tend to it with love and focus, and in return it illuminates the uncertain path ahead. It casts a light on what we fear and what we are in denial of, but also spotlights our best qualities, and potentially greater selves. When that dark night of the soul descended on me, projects and deadlines dwindled and expired, I felt perpetually sluggish and unmotivated, and fell prey to overwhelming feelings of paranoia, agitation, and hopelessness. My drive for humor, for sensuality, for pushing on past obstacles as I've always done, was failing me. The other side had gone quiet, and I kept asking the same question over and over: *why?*

In the practice of Paganism, and Witchery by proxy, what is given and received is a two-way street. Honesty of intent and the acknowledgement of one's truth are crucial when working with energies and asking for the assistance of higher entities. When one is in denial of their truth—and I deliberately leave that word open for personal interpretation—they are in return denied. In this regard I refer to Hecate, ancient goddess of witchcraft, night, necromancy, magic, and the moon.

I embraced Hecate much later in life than I wish I had, though she's been with me since childhood. I cherish her as my guardian and patroness, and she's helped bring about some of my most life-altering transformations, the most recent being my marriage and move to Italy. Hecate is to be found at crossroads and cemeteries, places where life and death intersect. She has been known to assist lone travelers in the night, and as a loner who savors her own nocturnal strolls, I often invite her to join me. The wonderful site, goddessgift.com, created by *Goddess Gift* author Sharon Turnbull, tells us:

“Hecate’s ability to see into the Underworld, the “otherworld” of the sleeping and the dead, made her comfortable and tolerant in the company of those most would shun out of fear or misunderstanding. In her role as ‘Queen of the Night’, sometimes traveling with a following of “ghosts” and other social outcasts, she was both honored and feared as the protectress of the oppressed and of those who lived “on the edge”. In Rome many of the priests in her sacred groves were former slaves who had been released to work in her service.”

Earlier this month I began to visit Hecate more frequently in a sacred spot I often walk to at night, a chapel drive lined with the bones of those who perished during the plague. The church above the drive is simple and elegant, and always bathed in the kindest glow. Even the teenagers who occasionally gather on the steps of one of the chapels to smoke seem more like a respectful chorus, their presence a means to enhance, rather than deter. In the center of the churchyard stands an elaborate fountain my husband's family tended to during renovations, which lends an even deeper meaning. Hecate herself lingers around one particular chapel that receives the least amount of light, and is cornered by two stone walls that suspend it in a perpetual gloom. Since our increased 'visits,' the light along my own path has slowly begun to ignite once more.

Hecate has forced me to take inventory of what I've carried with me over the Atlantic and course of the past year, the past decade—all my life, really. She has forced me to examine wounds I continue to reopen, rather than put the work into sealing for good. She has forced me to acknowledge myself, my truth. Hecate is not subtle; her love is a tough love, and she will demand that you answer to the tough questions before rolling up her sleeves and getting to work in your name.

We are mere days from the Julian new year, which can mean as much or as little as you like. Every Pagan's mile marker lies along a different point on the calendar, and only you can determine 'when strikes the new hour. Till then, now is the time to walk in the dark and examine what might be compromising your light. What facets of the past are holding you back? What relationships are you dwelling in that no longer enrich your wellbeing or that of the other? What damaging habits, obsessions, and thought patterns are you repeating, to the same unsuccessful outcome?

Just as crucial, do not be afraid to ask these things of your faith as well. One of the biggest fallacies humans commit is the refusal to check in with their belief systems, to reevaluate the legitimacy—and humanity—of certain time-honored values. Examine where in your studies and practices you feel you aren't making progress, and deepen your research into other deities, rituals, and energy work.

Winter is a period of death and fallowness, but I welcome it as a reminder that solitude, introspection, and self-care are vital, that there is work taking place that I cannot see. There is merit to the Danish practice of *hygge*, even if it has been somewhat co-opted by luxury trend seekers. Surrounding yourself with what comforts you—a crackling fire or warm blanket or stack of books you've been meaning to dive into, all those rich hot (and maybe even a little boozy) beverages—can go a long way where spiritual comfort may be temporarily faltering.

Safety permitting, bundle up and take that long, solitary stroll in the night, and invite Hecate to join you. If you have a dog, even better; Hecate is a lover of all creatures, particularly her loyal hounds. (I bring my own rescue dog Olmo on such walks, and without fail as soon as we approach Hecate's chapel he's a changed little mutt: he slows down and cocks his head, his ears perk up, and he wags his tail as if greeting a beloved former owner. He knows.) I would suggest bringing a bit of wine or honey, a candle, piece of fruit, or a little pastry to leave at the crossroads or a sacred cemetery spot in thanks for her company, and do not look back once you've left your offering. Let her be your guide in the dark and listen, even if there is only silence at first. To conclude with another passage from Goddess Gift,

"The Greek goddess Hecate reminds us of the importance of change, helping us to release the past, especially those things that are hindering our growth, and to accept change and transitions. She sometimes asks us to let go of what is familiar, safe, and secure and to travel to the scary places of the soul. New beginnings, whether spiritual or mundane, aren't always easy. But Hecate is there to support and show you the way."

And always, the souls at The School of Witchery are here to offer a supportive arm while you make your way in the dark.

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Image: *The Night of Enitharmon's Joy*, William Blake, 1795.



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PUBLISHED

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3 THOUGHTS ON “THE (WITCH’S) DARK NIGHT OF THE SOUL: LOSING–AND FINDING–YOUR WAY”



Tracey Smallwood

December 30, 2017 Reply

Hi, your timing is impeccable. I really needed to here that. Thank you and Happy New Year! 🎆

Sent from Tracey Kats iPhone

>

★ Like



jointlyg

January 1, 2018 Reply

Perfect piece to start the new year. Thank you x

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violentroses8

January 27, 2018 Reply

I loved your article...The timing was perfect for me and my journey...thank you!

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