

*Chiaroscuro: In Defense of Darkness*

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People who call themselves energy-workers have many ways of effecting change in the world, as they deem such change is necessary. One colleague uses a technique she calls “pinking”. She waits on table. If one of her customers is rude or aggressive, she imagines that person surrounded by pink light.

When she first spoke to me of it I felt a visceral resistance. I felt she was interfering in a process which could be allowed to play out safely by another means. I’m not promoting rudeness nor condoning it, but it seems to me in spiritual work that it is our responsibility to allow and support processes rather than to interfere with them. Many practitioners want to make everything okay right now! Interference is, to my way of thinking, an unwise witchcraft.

Let me address this another way. Several years ago I was receiving a Rubinfeld Synergy treatment from a gifted therapist. In an effort to neatly finish up his work on my - in compliance with the clock rather than the process - he began scooping “stuff” away from my belly. I was alarmed by his presumption. Hey, whoa, wait a minute! For me it was like theft. This is my belly and my stuff. I wanted to take the time to move through it thoughtfully, not whisk it away in a surgical strike.

Many of my ideas about “intuitive healing” sprang from that experience. Rather than sweeping away emotion and dis-ease from people, we can gently lead them, through guided visualization, journeywork and soul retrieval, allowing them to make their own discoveries and rediscoveries, supporting them as they delve deep into their emotional - their soulful - depths. Dive, or maybe for starters, just stick a toe into the ancient waters.

My therapist was surprised by my choice. Perhaps I was his first client who chose to keep what I had not yet spent time with, acknowledged and released - more consciously.

Addressing the issue further, I have other friends who engage in the shamanic practice of “extraction” which can remove “unwanted” entities and other junk, both symbolic and real, depending on one’s belief system. One friend whom I rely on to drum and guide me in dreamtime journeys now allows me to address directly what she might have simply extracted from me before she understood my predilection.

My colleague who “pinks” people doesn’t describe it as self-defense, but that is what I find when I track it back to the heart. Self-defense is a natural and healthy response to a dangerous reality. We are easily provoked. There is much danger. Even so, nuclear warheads seem to be an ironic self-defense given their ability to destroy us all, wild ones included. Where is the self-defense in weapons of mass destruction?

It's obvious that "pinking" someone is a far cry from storing or rattling nuclear warheads, but it is the essential motivation which interests and concerns me. What if instead of intending a specific effect on the other person, we imagine the same pink at the edge of *ourselves*, so that all who come in contact with us would be affected? This slight shift in intention and effect still honors our sense of safety, but also our responsibility not to interfere with another person's autonomy.

It seems to me the changes need to be made within! We need to "pink" *ourselves* - not others - or at least certainly not without their permission.

This leads me to another bone of contention that I have with the "light bearers" –*what is wrong with darkness?* Sure we have associations with ignorance and evil, but are those not our own fearful inventions? There's nothing inherently hateful about darkness. It can be a refuge, the quiet place where seeds begin to sprout... the womb... a place of dreaming. I imagine us softening with each further understanding and appreciation of darkness. Instead, what I witness among my colleagues is a brandishing of light, as though they are "Star War" heroes. I think our work calls for a deeper kind of courage, without posing enemies.

Not long ago, in a sweat lodge for women, a thunderstorm came upon us. This same friend who "pinks" revealed that she had placed a protective layer of light around the little lodge to protect us from the lightning. When she revealed to us what she had kindly done on our behalf, I protested "Please don't do that for me!" Her need to surround us with light revealed her fear, and I did not feel protected by her fear. Rather than feeling safer, as she does, by her action, I felt compromised, less safe.

Again, it feels like interference rather than supportive allowing. If, in that lodge, we were doing sacred work in non-ordinary reality - which I choose to believe we were - why would we need this primitive self-defense? What if her action, and perhaps more fundamentally, her fear was the attractive nuisance, as she imagined the strike entering the lodge by traveling down the trees and into the tangle of roots beneath us? Instead, we could have trusted the darkness... protecting us— "under dark of night".

Imagine with me, if you will, how our overall health might improve if we could release our "addiction" to light. Imagine how the land could rest again at night, without the creeping light of cities, shopping malls, prisons. Imagine the possible implications of welcoming darkness, of dwelling in it, returning to a rhythm which *allows* night... *and* darkness. I would feel safer in a world that does not sanctify light above darkness. The production of electricity, our main defense against the dark and fear, is in many ways costly. Imagine the desirable consequences for our air, water and land if we did not fear dark but rather learned to work with it and to sleep and dream when the earth and sky called us to do so.

We seek enlightenment. When will we also seeking endarkenment? Darkness is the dreamtime, whether at night cozy in our beds or when entering the journey, the alpha state of

what is called non-ordinary reality. Darkness is what was (and perhaps still is) feared in women, her very womb as replicated in the tradition of the sweat lodge, and in the moon, coming and going through its phases, dropping us sometimes into total darkness. In many cultures the moon is symbolic of woman. Is it this darkness in woman that has led to her oppression worldwide? Is it something so primal in us as fearing the dark mystery, the potential of the womb?

Does our attention to light illuminate other oppressions, including the connection between our fear of darkness and the oppression of dark-skinned people around the world? In this short essay I leave us each to puzzle it through.

When we experience another's rudeness, thoughtlessness, or condescension we can wither from it, rise to it with like demeanor, or by "pinking" them. Or we can engage with them in the moment, with the intention of changing us both. This technique may be most difficult and yet most revelatory because it insists that we recognize our fear and be incited (insighted?) by it to choose compassion over fear. This is the choice I am practicing, although feebly, I admit. It feels like the most dangerous response until we recognize the safety of compassion. Is compassion light? Is it darkness? From where in us does it spring? Our hearts? Our bellies? Compassion may turn out to be our last, best refuge.

Rather than "throw light" at our problems, I invites us to encapsulate them only as a last and temporary resort, to put them on hold and engage instead in the fear in ourselves: shaping those warheads into plowshares of compassion.

In the last year I remembered that fear and compassion cannot simultaneously occupy me. When I am fearful, which is much of the time, I am "outside", threatened, keenly aware of my vulnerability. When by choice I shift to compassion, my heart sighs relief. I see my fear for what it is: a force with many dispositions and faces. Then I feel the solace, the comfort of courage and compassion – for my self and for the other, formerly obnoxious human being. In that state of grace we transcend our fear, and embrace our humanness. We turn toward our fear, choosing to expose our vulnerability. We choose, empathically, to bask not in the light this time but in the deep, safe darkness.

With compassion, evil reveals its true self as fear. Yours, and mine.

*Afterthoughts: In general, this defense of darkness still stand for me and I am all-the-time clearing my throat, ahem, when people speak of "dark thoughts", being in a "dark place" and similar phrases. Nononononono, I gently interrupt. Can't help myself. But— now that I'm almost twenty years older— the thrust of this article feels a tad self-righteous and sanctimonious for my current sensibilities. Forgivable? Yes. I still deserve my own compassion. I'm still a work-in-progress. Still unfolding. (2019)*

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