

Chapel Talk
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Holderness School

For years I've had ambivalent feelings about the night: I loved the stars, the romance, the glitter of a banked fire against reflecting windows, the peace at the end of the day. Yet I also feared the dark, as most children do, because of what was hidden, or because of what was only partially visible within my lurid imagination. When I was a child, I always had to have the hall light on outside my opened door; I can remember the anxiety of watching my father come upstairs later and turn off the light, because then I'd hastily have to switch it on again for security. I'm not sure where these terrible visions came from--we lived in a Norman Rockwell town in Connecticut, and enjoyed wonderful family relationships. Something, though, made me terrified of the dark. Once I tip-toed into my parents' room because I couldn't sleep through a dream; I was maybe six. I stood at the foot of their bed at some bleak hour, not wanting to wake them because I felt I was too old for this "stuff," not sure what I would say to them, yet pleading with the shadows that one of them would wake and see me, even walk back with me. Alas, they slept too well, and I soon retreated in that hollow silence of a house where everyone sleeps but you, a solitude of darkness which envelops you, forces you without the light of sight to look inward. Returning to my small bed with now more unknown creatures lurking under it and behind the curtains, I tried to force sleep upon my racing heart. I was alone.

Ironically, my fear of night became more acute during summers up here on Squam Lake, idyllic, Edenic Squam Lake, because we lived so far away in the woods. What was it outside that kept the dog alert at the end of my bed? What were those sounds? Did I dare peer out the screen to see, or would I be accosted with a ghastly face exploding out of the darkness? When my wife and I were married, she instinctively, bravely I thought at the time, turned out all the lights in the house as we went to bed,

while I tried to sneak night lights into our bedroom or the hallway. Even a few years ago, as we planned our own house on a spacious pasture down a dirt road in Sandwich, that chill, what Emily Dickinson labeled the "zero at the bone," resurfaced: I silently trembled at the distance from other people, uncertain how I'd sleep, dreading that immense, furtive forest surrounding us.

Fear, I believe, stems not just from uncertainty, but from isolation and from a lack of faith to bridge the unknown. Certainly becoming a parent has prescribed some therapy for my problem, because I am now more concerned with my children's innumerable frights, especially as they begin in their experiences to reflect back my own myopic terrors. Our son Joshua, then four, returned home last fall from his first day at the Sandwich Child Care Center. When I asked him how he liked it, he asserted with slightly quivering lip, "I was scared of the peaches and peas." There can be much horror upon a lunch plate, perhaps more legitimately than in my nightmares. Yet as Joshua grows, as he learns more about peaches and peas and playmates, he will be less frightened, still cautious, but more sure of himself as he confronts those strange shapes and tastes.

During OutBack, I read a book called The Night Country by a professor of anthropology and paleontology, Loren Eiseley. In one essay he speaks directly to this fear, and especially my own neurosis of the dark:

Maybe that is the real reason why men string lamps far out into country lanes and try to run down everything with red eyes that happens to waddle across the road in front of their headlights. It is cruel but revelatory: we are insecure, and this is our warfare with the dark. It began when man first lit a fire at the cave mouth and the eyes he feared--very big eyes they were then--began to blink and drawback. So he lights and lights in a passion for illumination that is insatiable....Even man's own domestic animals, the creatures he has chosen to bring in to the fire beside him,

grow suspect in the evening. His cat hunts alone through the weeds, and his dog whines and snuffles at the door. They all have that allegiance to the dark. They are never wholly his.

Eiseley clearly understands our frail nature, how we "light and light in a passion for illumination that is insatiable," a passion which paradoxically blinds us further from what we could see, fear less, respect more. Think back to your solo fire, and how big it became as that gloom encircled the woods.

I think Eiseley's book and that passage affected me so much because I had already begun to move beyond this dark paralysis into another, more enigmatic problem. (The cost of electricity in New Hampshire alone quickly changed how I felt about keeping lights on at night.) As I look back on this year, much of that transition has to do with Holderness, with my sabbatical, and with the opportunity to experience OutBack. During this year my fear of the night gradually gave way to an uncertainty of where I'm going in life; I found myself looking inward, alone, and in relation to a foreboding uncertainty beyond: what will I do with this existence? continue to teach? be a headmaster? stay at Holderness and become bored with victory after victory over Mr. Bristol and Mr. Macomber in squash? let my wife's new career in medicine dictate what happens? return to Delaware? What do I want to be doing? Such questions came hurtling at me this year, probably as fast as they did to many of you juniors and seniors, as you tried to figure out how Holderness and that vague, very expensive entity called college will shape your next five or six years. It's easy to answer a friend's query of "Where are you going?" with the name of a college or a small co-ed Episcopal prep school in New Hampshire or Delaware; but those are places, not directions; they are temporary mailing addresses, not commitments. Our oldest son Christopher recently asked: "When birds flap wings, I understand how it makes them go up, but how do they go forward?" Isn't that where many of us are--possessing the power to move, but unsure how to propel in any meaningful direction?

Has anything changed for me this year with this fresh phobia? Having more time to reflect, write, listen and observe has nurtured me, my *self*, in critical ways, because I feel less paralyzed by those formidable questions. Secondly, that peculiar experience of OutBack impacted much of how I now think and cope, both solo and as part of a group. True, I've always believed the trail was more important than the summit, that the journey was more rewarding than the accomplishment. But during OutBack, I was forced to walk those clichés, to trudge through dense or slippery snow with a heavy pack, an itchy scalp, cold toes and a sore bottom to arrive at a wooded peak suffocated by clouds. Beyond my own fear and misery, I had to expand my trust to others: I had no choice except to live by Josh's or Maura's compass reading--a frightening act of faith. I had to contribute to the momentum of all of us heading in one direction together. Indeed, during OutBack, as its intent is, I learned from my teacher Mr. Hendel that getting to a place didn't matter at all. What counted was a sense of where we were, a flexible idea about what we were headed toward, and an enjoyment of the process. Janie Starks in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* went on an OutBack experience of her own, and her conclusion was "You got tuh go there tuh know there."

Yet there was one more moment during OutBack which shook both my dread of night and my anxiety about the future. One cold evening, encamped within my warm sleeping bag, I was reading Eiseley's book by the fading batteries of my head lamp, when I came across this seemingly innocuous incident. Eiseley writes:

I had come into the smoking compartment of a train at midnight, out of the tumult of a New York weekend. As I settled into a corner I noticed a man with a paper sack a few seats beyond me. He was meager of flesh and his checks had already taken on the molding of the skull beneath them. His threadbare clothing suggested that his remaining possessions were

contained in the sack poised on his knees. His eyes were closed, his head flung back. He drowsed either from exhaustion or liquor, or both. In that city at midnight there were many like him.

By degrees the train filled and took its way into the dark. After a time the conductor shouldered his way in, demanding tickets. I had one sleepy eye fastened on the dead-faced derelict...

"Tickets!" bawled the conductor.

I suppose everyone in the car was watching for the usual thing to occur. What happened was much more terrible.

Slowly the man opened his eyes, a dead man's eyes. Slowly a stick-like arm reached down and fumbled in his pocket, producing a roll of bills. "Give me," he said then, and his voice held the croak of a raven in a churchyard, "give me a ticket to wherever it is."

I haven't been able to remove that encounter from my mind since reading it. I know it resonates with me because of how it weaves together darkness and unknown directions and solitude, the gripping solitude even on a crowded train. It is a drama as bleak as anything Sophocles or Shakespeare or Beckett could have imagined. It echoes what some of you have experienced in reading Conrad, Job, Hemingway, O'Neill, Morrison. The resignation in that man's voice terrifies and cripples.

But as I have heard that statement over and again, "'give me a ticket to wherever it is,'" I have also sensed a hope, a stark but cable-strong faith which pulses with heroism and humanity. "Wherever it is" becomes secondary; "wherever it is" becomes Bates, Bowdoin, Denver, Middlebury, Williams, Holderness, St. Andrew's: the ticket, the witness to the journey, the relic from the encounter--*that's* the holy grail, the sinew and the mettle which can sustain us in caverns of blindness and confusion. Hold onto that talisman, wherever it takes you. "Believe your pain," as a poet once wrote. Embrace

with an energetic grapple the night outside and the night within. As you make that leap, as you take that step from firm footing to the Great Unknown, you will know what my friend Milkman discovers at the end of Toni Morrison's Song of Solomon: "If you surrender to the air, you can *ride* it."