

Night Mindedness

We suffer today from serious complications of “psychospiritual nightblindness” – a far-reaching failure to understand the significance of night in our lives, health, and spirituality. Over the past century, “civilized” nights have grown significantly shorter. A culture of zealous industrialization has polluted the night environment with excessive artificial illumination. Blinded by this light, we have lost our regard for the natural milieu of dusk, dawn, and the intervening darkness of night.

And we are losing sleep over it. Inundated by day, we suffer by night from an unprecedented epidemic of sleep disorders that take a substantial toll on our health, well-being, and productivity. Our negation of night, according to Dr. Rubin Naiman, in Healing Night, is further complicated by widespread damage to our dream lives – a literal and figurative loss of our dreams. Like sleep loss, dream loss affects virtually all aspects of our lives, especially our personal sense of spirituality. An equally serious casualty of our night blindness is a common proclivity for weary and mindless morning awakenings that have subtle but disturbing repercussions on the quality of our daily lives.

Disordered sleep, suppressed dreams, and disturbed awakenings all tangle together into a dense obstruction of awareness. By day, we experience ourselves and the world around us through a depleted and dulled sensorium. We lose sight of the bigger picture, our peripheral vision, our imagination. Far too many of us live in a kind of foggy bubble – a chronic, low-grade, and insidious daze. But, somehow, we manage to conjure sufficient energy to maintain our relentless drive.

Our chronic depletion then results in an insatiable hunger for personal energy. To compensate for our sleep- and dream-deprived daze and maintain our frenetic drive, we reflexively spike our waking hours with counterfeit energies. We are a society of energy addicts, with lifestyles designed to provide us with quick fixes of caffeine and sugar on demand. Or, more subtly, with overstimulating information and excessive light at night. Unfortunately, such energy spikes inevitably backfire with jittery withdrawals. Our desperate need for rest, then, is met only with a sputtering restlessness that conceals an underlying exhaustion. Beyond damaging our waking consciousness, the use of counterfeit energies further damages our nights by disrupting nature’s essential rhythm of activity and rest.

But we just take something for it. Evening appears to be the most common period of substance and medication use in our world. We consume vast amounts of alcohol, marijuana, antidepressants, sleeping pills, and tranquilizers to modulate our restless waking energies, and, even more so, to blunt our uneasy encounter with dusk and darkness. These substances may help us temporarily negotiate our discomfort with night, but only at a terrible cost.

As a culture, we have failed to achieve the necessary balance between these separate but equally important realms of consciousness. “Like night and day,” solar and lunar consciousness have become increasingly polarized. Daylight is dominant, overvalued, and even deified, while darkness is dismissed, devalued, and often demonized. From divine light to light beer, things associated with the metaphor of

light suggest goodness. We want to shed light, see the light, and lighten up. We want nothing more than to avoid dark times, dark nights of the soul, and of course, the dreaded “prince of darkness.”

Sleep and dream disorders are largely symptomatic of this deeper fear of night and its damaging segregation from day. In our attempt to excise darkness from our lives, our very consciousness has been cleaved. With the loss of night, day loses its partner in the sacred dance of circadian cycles. Yin is torn from Yang, and activity becomes dangerously devoid of rest. We lose our sense of the basic pulse of night and day – our precious awareness of life’s natural rhythms. Ultimately, we lose our experience of the lovely, seamless continuity of consciousness, our sense of oneness.

An integrative approach to sleep disorders seeks to reaffirm the marriage of the sun and moon. This sacred union restores the essential connectedness and continuity of sleeping, dreaming, and awakening. It also incorporates spirit back into science. It calls for complementing sleep medicine’s objectivity with a depth psychological and sacred view of night consciousness. Such a spiritual perspective of night is certainly not new. Regard for sacred dimensions of night and night consciousness is found in all major Eastern and Western religious traditions, including Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Ancient and indigenous spiritual beliefs and practices, as well as metaphysical teachings, also acknowledge the sanctity of darkness, sleeping, dreaming, and awakening. Rudolf Steiner, for example, a prolific nineteenth-century Austrian philosopher, lectured extensively and passionately about the critical role of sleep and dreams in spiritual life. The integration of sleep science with personal meaning and spiritual perspectives opens the way to a more expansive, magnificent, and mythic vision of night, a vision that will both clarify the central challenge of our fear of darkness while mapping our journey toward its healing.

Nyx, the forgotten primordial Greek goddess of night, is calling for resurrection. And there are unexpected gifts to be found in the darkness she brings, if we choose to be more nightminded. Night has been celebrated and sanctified with rich social and sacred rituals across cultures and time, but perhaps the greatest gift of becoming more nightminded is the restoration of a kind of night vision – a fundamentally different way of seeing or perceiving. Because sleeping, dreaming, and awakening are nonordinary states of consciousness, their exploration calls for nonordinary ways of perceiving – a sort of nocturnal lucidity – a way of seeing in the dark; a kind of third-eye sightedness. And when applied to our view of day, this expanded frame restores a sense of the big picture to our lives. It restores the numinous.

Beyond all of the psychological, and biomedical complexities, we come to discover that sleep itself is a spiritual path, dreaming a means of walking this path, and awakening its gracious gift. We come to learn that there is something we can safely place our faith in – even in the dark.