

From the Faraway Nearby

Rebecca Solnit

HUGGING THE SHADOWS

And basking in the dark

FOR THE LONGEST TIME, my friend Val has tacked a passage of Martin Luther King's to her e-mails: "Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that. Hate multiplies hate, violence multiplies violence, and toughness multiplies toughness in a descending spiral of destruction...." I agree with the meaning but the metaphor bothers me every time, because why should a man who was called Negro and then black, a man who was wringing justice from a white-dominated society, endorse the old metaphorical Manichaeism of light and darkness? Yet this denigration of darkness is a common phenomenon.

Bill Clinton, whom Toni Morrison famously called our first black president, wrote in his autobiography about the scales of our psyche, saying, "If they go too far toward hopefulness, we can become naïve and unrealistic. If the scales tilt too far the other way, we can get consumed by paranoia and hatred. In the South, the dark side of the scales has always been the bigger problem." Clinton returned to the metaphor when he preached against the second President Bush with the New Testament line about "seeing through a glass, darkly." Has anyone ever made a metaphor out of snow blindness? That experience was, admittedly, not much available to the writers of the New Testament, but they must have

known what all desert dwellers do, the solace of shade and reprieve offered by approaching night.

Another e-mail yielded up a Jungian analysis of Bush, arguing that he is out of touch with his shadow—"those parts of the personality rejected by the ego"—and adding, "Until one is conscious of the shadow, one continues to project this rejected self onto others." Thus it is that the war on terror, which sought "to eliminate evil from the world," claims the simple binaries that began with "you're either with us or against us." Such stark

dichotomies disguise the ways that Christian and Muslim fundamentalists have much in common, and the compelling resemblance that violence bears to violence, whether it is termed terrorism or the war on terror. Differences are not necessarily opposites, and manufactured oppositions are often disguises for interdependencies and affinities.

Metaphors matter. They make tangible the abstractions with which we must wrestle. They describe the resemblances and differences by which we navigate our lives and thoughts. Recently I wrote a book



called *Hope in the Dark*, which the inattentive routinely call “Hope in Dark Times.” Dark times, like dark ages, are gloomy, harsh, dangerous, depressing—when the good stuff has fled. But the darkness I was after was another thing entirely. This wasn’t hope despite the dark; darkness was the ground and condition of that hope, drawn from a line of Virginia Woolf’s: “The future is dark, which is on the whole the best thing the future can be, I think.” For Woolf, the future was dark because it was unknowable. Hope in the dark is hope in the future, in its constant ability to surprise you, its expansiveness beyond the bounds of the imaginable. That dark has the richness of night, of dreams, of passion, of surrender to boundless mystery and possibility that shrink out of reach in the light, as do the stars. Other writers, too, have found complexity in the dark; John Berger wrote recently, “In war the dark is on nobody’s side, in love the dark confirms that we are together.”

Yet another writer, Joseph Conrad, called his most famous novella *Heart of Darkness*, but in it he plays with light and dark like a master of shadow puppets, sometimes inverting his own ingrained Victorian racism. Early in the novella the narrator, Marlow, describes his childhood passion for the blank spots on the maps that still existed then: “I would put my finger on it, and say, ‘When I grow up I will go there.’” And so he went to the Congo. “By this time it was not a blank space any more. It had got filled since my boyhood with rivers and lakes and names. It had ceased to be a blank space of delightful mystery—a white patch for a boy to dream gloriously over. It had become a place of darkness.” Here the white spaces are, like Woolf’s darkness, the spaces of potentiality, but Conrad’s African darkness is a complicated thing. Marlow has already said of England, “And this also has been one of the dark places of the earth.” The Congo he goes to is “the heart of darkness,” but that is because imperialism has

indulged the most savage urges of the imperialists come to carry out the ivory trade. The white bones of elephants and skulls of native victims are the key emblems at the heart of white men’s darkness.

On the imperial maps of Conrad’s era, cartographers filled in what colonialism had claimed. The maps of our own time include the spectacular satellite images of the world at night, the ones where the elec-

Dark times, like dark ages, are dangerous. The darkness I was after was another thing entirely.

trical lights of western Europe, the eastern United States, Japan, and the crest of Brazil glare white in a beautiful nocturne of deep blue land and black sea, letting us see literally the dark places of the Earth and the light ones. Africa is once again a dark continent with little energy consumption, and one’s eyes can bathe in the beautiful darkness too of the Andes and the Amazon, Siberia, Greenland, Canada’s far north, and much of interior Australia—which is to say the lightly inhabited and often still-indigenous places of the Earth, the ones that have thus far escaped dense populations and industrialization (though the darkness in North Korea is just about poverty). The map tells us directly about the amount of light emitted at night, the glare that eliminates the stars from view, and about the dusky blue velvet places beyond. It gives us a less direct sense of where energy consumption and population clusters are greatest, and it’s in the white places of the Earth where many people together light up the night that some of our largest catastrophes are being prepared, including the ozone thinning that has made the sun more pernicious than before to the pale-skinned.

One of the dark places on that map of the Earth, New Mexico, has outlawed excess light pollution. The state passed a bill in

1999 banning powerful and sky-directed night lights, counting the darkness of night as one of its natural resources. There, unless you’re in one of the few real metropolises, you can see the Milky Way, which was invisible in modern San Francisco until the brief darkness of the blackout brought on by the 1989 Loma Prieta quake. And the 2003 blackout across the Northeast revised that unnerving night map; the area from

New York to Toronto fell off it, returned to the darkness of untrammelled night. In the great blackout of 1977, the Milky Way presided over Manhattan for the first time in perhaps a century.

Ursula K. LeGuin once noted, “To light a candle is to cast a shadow.” Conversely, it’s in the dark that faint light shines: starlight, candlelight, fireflies, the bioluminescence of the sea. I don’t want to reverse the binaries, to make darkness good and light problematic. I want a language and an imagination where they are not enemies but perhaps dance partners, whirling each other around this globe that spends half its time away from the sun, in night. I want people to remember how photography works, that medium that depends on perfect darkness within the camera to capture the images made by light. An image of boundless light would turn the film black, while an exposure in perfect darkness would show just the white of unexposed paper. The visible world depends on both, as surely as night follows day. Or day follows night. ✎

Among the accolades Rebecca Solnit’s book River of Shadows received was the Western Writers of America’s Spur Award, which includes a plaque with a spur—and a rowel that actually rotates.