

Gifts of the Dark Wood: "Where We Find Ourselves"

By Patrick E. McCoy

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"The LORD is with you, you mighty warrior."

Tonight, we begin a 40-day journey through the Dark Wood. The Dark Wood is not a destination advertised in magazines, or listed on the website of your favorite travel agency. No airlines schedules flights to and from the Dark Wood. You can't buy a bus ticket and Google Maps will not create a route for you. Uber will not take you there and it certainly won't pick you up and take you out of there. But you will eventually get there, in fact you will probably visit many times throughout your life. You may be there right now. I am.

The Dark Wood is where you find uncertainty; emptiness; where you are overwhelmed; where you get lost; where you are tempted; where you learn humility; where you meet other misfits who are also all of the above. You are never alone in the Dark Wood, though you can certainly feel lonely, but trust me, you are never alone. It's full of people, millions of people live for a season in the Dark Wood. Some will tell you that all three years of middle school was a Dark Wood for them.

The Rev. Kent Taylor is Director of Pastoral Care at Presbyterian Hospital of Plano. I picked up his newsletter yesterday while attending a hospital committee meeting. Chaplain Taylor walks with people in the Dark Wood every day, so he knows something about it. On the front page is a poem he calls, "All the Buried Seeds," and it begins with a quote from the philosopher and poet Mark Nepo: "All the buried seeds crack open in the dark, the moment they surrender to a process they can't see." From that, Chaplain Taylor writes:

Sometimes when we have tried everything we know to try,

when we have fretted, pleaded, anguished, knelt down, worried long over some scenario, some need,

we may come to an end in ourselves.

But here, maybe now, a softening, an opening, subtle and small, more like a whisper comes

from some deeper place in us

where all the buried seeds wait.

The Dark Wood is where seeds get cracked open.

Dr. James Loder was one of the more interesting professors at Princeton Theological Seminary, and one of my favorites. His book, *The Transforming Moment*, was at the publisher not yet released the spring I took his class on the theory of Christian education. He had an interesting childhood. His mother recited poetry to him each afternoon when he came home from school (she later became a professor of speech and drama at the University of Texas). His father was a school principal. He was a gifted track and basketball player who went on to study physics at the university and then switched to philosophy. He attended Princeton Seminary and his roommate said that he read Freud, Jung and philosophy to relax. He went on to earn a second master's degree from Harvard and then a PhD from Harvard. He managed to study or work with nearly all the great psychological and educational theorists of the 20th century.

But what really changed his life was an accident. In 1970 he was on vacation with his family and stopped to help two women change a flat. The driver was standing by her car door waving a handkerchief while each passing car nearly blew her nose. Thinking she would soon be struck by a car, Dr. Loder pulled his camper over to help. While trying to attach a rusty jack to the front bumper of their car, a 69 year old man fell asleep and drove into the rear of that stranded car at 60 miles per hour. The impact pushed the car along the shoulder grinding Dr. Loder through the gravel and he eventually was wedged underneath the engine. Arlene, his wife who was barely 5 foot tall and weighed all of 115 pounds, grabbed the front bumper and began to pray over and over, "In the name of Jesus." She lifted the car up off the ground, her husband crawled out seriously wounded, missing a thumb, broken ribs, a punctured lung, unbelievable road rash, but alive. She blacked out and it was discovered later than she had broken her back. Both reported overwhelming personal experiences of the Holy Spirit in that Dark Wood that haunted them for the rest of their lives. For two years, he couldn't talk about the accident without uncontrollable weeping. It had left him physically disfigured. Some thought he was losing his mind, but in fact he was overwhelmed by the experience of the Holy Spirit that came upon him during that accident. (read from book)

Dr. Loder said all learning comes from conflict. You learn from what you don't know, can't do, can't see, can't start, can't stop, can't hear, can't move, can't touch, can't change, can't fix and so on. Learning comes through failure. It's when we are stuck, wandering about in some Dark Wood, that insight comes to us. Mark Nepo calls it "awakening" in his book of the same name. Dr. Loder called it the "aha" moment. Aha is the flash of insight, the sudden realization that there might be a solution, an answer, a means of doing what so far hasn't been doable. Or maybe just an overwhelming awareness of survival.

And this is one of the gifts of the Dark Wood. When we are in a place we don't want to be; when we are stuck, struck and getting nowhere; when we have exhausted all the platitudes and our bag of tricks is empty – that's when we are most likely to discover something new and vital about ourselves, the world, and others. St. John of the Cross called it "the dark night of the soul." Saint Teresa of Avila called it the fifth mansion. Dionysus the Areopogite called it the "cloud of unknowing." "All of them insisted that the Dark Wood is a place where one receives strange and wondrous gifts.... The Dark

Wood is where you meet God.”¹ It’s where the Holy Spirit gives you an aha that opens your eyes, heart and mind to an unseen possibility hidden within your despair.

So rather than curse God when you find yourself in the Dark Wood and wail at the injustice of it all, we are going to suggest there is another approach. When you find yourself in a place not of your choosing and when you can’t simply turn around and extract yourself by retracing your steps, we are suggesting you open yourself to the possibility that in this challenging place you will learn valuable lessons, that God will meet you there in the Dark Wood.

In the Old Testament reading this evening Gideon is in the Dark Wood. Basically, the entire people of Israel are in the Dark Wood. The Midianites, a neighboring people, were the first to use camels for military purposes and for a time enjoyed the upper hand over the Israelites. The history between the two peoples was troubled and no love was lost between them. The Midianites suddenly found it easier to let the Israelites plant seeds, hoe the weeds, harvest the wheat, separate the straw from seed and then swoop in on their camels, grab the bags of wheat, throw them on their camels and run away. You know the US Army tested camels after the Civil War here in Texas and they put horses and mules to shame.

Gideon wasn’t a big guy. He was kind of young and his family was not prominent or powerful. But he was smart, he knew that threshing grain in a wine press would throw the raiding Midians off track. A wine press was a stone, circular structure half buried in the ground. Think hot tub for six, eight maybe ten people. He probably was on his knees whacking bundles of wheat against the sides and floor of the wine press, which had a catch pool for the grape juice that is now filling with kernels of wheat. This is when a stranger walks up and says, “The Lord is with you, you mighty warrior.” If you can’t see the irony in that statement you have no poetry in your soul.

I believe we all have our wine vats, our clever hiding places. We have our excuses and like to blame others for our troubles. That’s human nature. But much to his surprise Gideon discovered that the answer to his problems and his fellow Israelites had been threshing wheat in the wine vat. With God’s help, he possessed a strength he did not know he had and from that hiding place, that Dark Wood, emerged the next judge of Israel, a mighty warrior.

Gideon confessed his weakness. Tonight, in this Ash Wednesday service the entire Christian community is reminded that we usually don’t have the answer, the power, the wisdom to fix even ourselves. It is by grace that we are saved through faith, and this is not our own doing, it is the work of God in Jesus Christ.

¹ Eric Elnes, *Gifts of the Dark Wood: Seven Blessings for Soulful Skeptics (And Other Wanderers)*, p. 6