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The Surprising Benefits of Shorter Days

Darkness can bring depression, but it can also have a bright side

By Akiko Busch
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For much of my adult life, winter had been a time of ebbing spirit. As the days became increasingly shorter and the pale, watery light thinned in daily increments, a melancholy settled in, and with it, some strain of seasonal affective disorder, or SAD.

My imagination, had it come to life at all, reached no further than to reveries of furnishing the house with sunlamps and light boxes, swallowing handfuls of vitamin D supplements, and stocking the medicine cabinet with a buffet of antidepressants.

Having spent a big part of my life at the northern latitude of 41.875, I feel deeply rooted in this position on the globe, a bit of rural landscape in New York's Hudson Valley. And at this time of year, it's not hard to find a spare beauty in the smoky hue of the mountains, the leafless trees and pale grass. It's the fading light that undoes me.

Even as a child, I recall an atmosphere of withdrawal. Self-help jargon had not much come into fashion, and acronyms like SAD weren't in play in the 1960s. Still, I remember a mood of quiet retreat and the down-throttling of family life, my mother settling in on the sofa with a stack of Thomas Hardy novels, my father gazing for long spells into the fire.

Recently, though, I have been introduced to another view of the season, offered to me by friends who not only understand the restorative power of darkness, but who acquiesce to it and appreciate and value it entirely. John, a novelist, is most creative in the hours just before dawn. He gets up at 4 a.m. and works until 6:30; when he sees the sky begin to take on light, he knows his most productive writing time is over.

And Sally, a Jungian, yields willingly to the evening that seems to begin in the midafternoon.

Grasping Jung's belief that the seed of creativity was found in the shadows, she welcomes the interior voyages into the far recesses of the psyche that one embarks on naturally when the light fades. The twilight days of December grant permission for a frolic in the subconscious.

To these people, there is nothing oppressive about nighttime. They face the season not by strategizing around it — that is, not looking for ways to mitigate the loss of light or minimizing the depression that so often follows — but by recognizing that human experience can benefit from being "in the dark."

While it is unlikely I'll ever go so far as to regard darkness as the most important part of the diurnal cycle, it occurs to me to consider that it *can* nurture its own reflection; that it can spark imaginative power rather than snuff it out; that the absence of light *can* offer its own solaces; and that it may make more sense to acknowledge and use this natural cycle of seasons than to defy and resist it.

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The Bright Side to Darkness

Linnaea Tillett, a lighting designer in New York City, puts this principle into practice. With a background in environmental psychology, she is tuned in to how we respond to both light and its absence. Tillett has a unique approach to her work. Whether she is burying fiber optic cables in a pool of ice or bringing color alive with phosphorescent powders, she does not so much illuminate space as find shape and beauty in the shadow world.

Tillett considers the human response to darkness from an evolutionary perspective and says: "We evolved in a geophysical environment, and our bodies are physiologically attuned to the seasons. As we go into winter, our metabolic rate goes down. We get less energetic, we slow down. If you feel hungry or need more sleep, that's human. It is not an illness, a disorder or a mood problem."

And she suggests that if there is a disconnect between our interior and exterior lives, it is because while our bodies may be decelerating, our lives aren't. "There are changes in humidity, temperature and light, our time-giver," she says. "The body is going into a new phase. This *is* the time to slow down; don't pathologize it."

Nightfall and shadows are important to us as a species, Tillett adds. “Light is a stimulant — it’s what we see, how we feel. But darkness is less about optical experience and allows us to explore other aspects of our senses. But what does that mean? How do we do that?”

As multisensory beings, we also appreciate texture, touch, taste, sound and scent, and so Tillett suggests that the winter months may be a time to experience life through those senses. “I just bought a Meyer lemon tree, and it is flowering now,” she says. “It has an amazing fragrance that I am especially appreciative of now.”

Her words resonate: In mid-December, some kind of psychic solace is released in the perfume of the blossoming paperwhites on my desk, in the balsam scent of the small Fraser fir we have just installed in the next room. There are even moments when it seems possible to believe that their aromatic comfort drifting elsewhere through the house may be enough to set things aright.

But if our pace slackens during these dusky weeks, they also subtly shift direction. When the light of the exterior world has been dimmed, it feels instinctive to turn to the interior realm.

And if these weeks, and sometimes months, turn us inward, it need not be in a solipsistic, self-absorbed way, but rather in the way a novelist searches his own mind for meaning and motive — for the threads of human narrative, for all the reasons that people do the things they do. Or the way a student of Jung investigates the obscure world of her unconscious mind and all the machinery of its suppressed thoughts and desires.

Not that such deliberations have to be anything as intellectually or spiritually strenuous as these. The inward course can be a matter of simpler introspection — as all of us know from childhood, there is something in a darkened room that brings the imagination to life.

Perhaps, then, it is enough to know that these short, dark days can simply serve as a kind of designated zone for creative and self-searching, a grand pause offered to us by the natural motion of the planets. And these prescribed periods for private reflection might even work as some seasonal equivalent of the designated 50-minute hour with an analyst.

But if those minutes are set in stone, the ephemeral seasonal darkness is something we can

respond to with a greater degree of individual choice. For some of us, it may be of profound influence for two or three weeks; for others, 10 or 12. Whatever its duration, it is a time that allows us to wander within, an occasion to become reacquainted with ourselves and to fine-tune the mechanics of our own beings before the light returns and we step outside again.

Which is why I now look to the December days that have always been so troubling as a time to rest, restore and replenish reserves. This view to the shadow hours of winter has been for me almost, well, illuminating.

By Akiko Busch

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