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OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

The Solstice Blues

By Akiko Busch

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IN mid-June, the twilight seems to go on forever, the sky awash with translucent shades of rose, pearl, gray. These are evenings of enchantment — but also of apprehension. The moment the sun reaches its farthest point north of the Equator today is the moment the light starts to fade, waning more each day for the following six months. If the summer solstice doesn't signal the arrival of winter, surely it heralds the gradual lessening of light, and with that, often, an incremental decline in disposition.

It is easy to associate sundown with melancholy, to believe that temper can be so closely tied to degrees of illumination. The more floodlit our nights, the more we seem to believe that a well-lit world is part of our well-being. But equating the setting of the sun with that of the spirit may be misguided, at variance with some essential need humans have for darkness and shadow.

In his book, "The End of Night," Paul Bogard notes that two-thirds of Americans no longer experience real night. "Most of us go into the dark armed not only with 'a light,' " he writes, "but with so much light that we never know that the dark, too, blooms and sings."

Certainly, that is true where I live in a rural area of the Hudson Valley in New York. It may be the country, but the gas station and convenience store down the road emit a halo of orange light; across the street at Stop & Shop, high-intensity-discharge lighting casts a radiant glow across the parking lot and beyond. The garish gleam of illuminated signs and street lighting further drenches the crossroad. Illumination, albeit artificial, bathes my world.

It occurs to me now that such an extravagance of light can work to diminish our comfort with nightfall, encouraging us to link darkness to fear, brightness to security. But it is a flawed connection.

In his 1933 anthem to obscurity, "In Praise of Shadows," the Japanese writer Junichiro Tanizaki cataloged the oppressiveness of the illuminated world. An advocate for opacity, he lamented the bright, shining sterility of hotels, hospitals, Western living rooms and bathrooms, the glitter of diamonds, the glare of silver, steel and nickel tableware. "Were it not for shadows," he wrote, "there would be no beauty."

Tanizaki's appreciation for the subtleties of the shadow world resonate all the more today, when we tend to equate light with clarity and transparency, and assume that brightness and exposure in the environment have some corollary lucidity in thought and behavior. But of course, that is not so. We have a need for the shadow world, those things that cannot be easily explained, those things we suspect or imagine but do not know. And all those other areas in our lives that are defined by their gradations of uncertainty. Such ambiguity has a place in human thought and perception.

Here, when the sun finally falls, is the time one hears more acutely the cry of the coyotes, the courtship call of the barred owls. And if I am far enough away from the crossroads, from the floodlights of the town park and the headlight beams of traffic, I can make out the distant pinpoints of Orion, the dim shadows the white pines make in the moonlight, the random flicker of fireflies. The water in the marsh catches just a bit of the star shine.

One can have a similar experience in a city. Linnaea Tillett, a lighting designer in New York, spoke to me of a nighttime walk in Central Park, of listening more keenly to bird calls, the screech owls, foxes. But most of all, she spoke of understanding more fully night as a place of life. All species have their own cycles, and nocturnal rhythms are part of that, she said. "Standing at the edge of the pond, I heard an animal plunge into the water, maybe a raccoon or badger, I don't know. It is still a mystery."

Such experiences, she said, are important at a time when many of us are looking for ways to reconnect with the complex ecologies around us. Light, and its absence, are essential parts of this, and of the weeks that lie ahead now, Ms. Tillett said. "It's not about going from light to dark, but of being more sensitive to this progression of light, looking more acutely at the degrees of twilight, being more attentive to the nuances of half light."

The summer solstice may be a good time to recalibrate the impulse we often have to equate dusk with depression. Perhaps it makes sense to use the coming months of declining light as an opportunity to recognize the value of nightfall, the blooming and singing of the dark, in an increasingly illuminated world.

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