

Let There Be Dark

FOR AS LONG AS humans have been able to tilt our heads back, we've been entranced by the night sky. We sailed vast seas using the stars as guides; planted and harvested according to the phases of the moon; built telescopes to probe our universe and beyond—stretching our understanding of who we are within this vast celestial fabric.

Then, in 1879, Thomas Edison debuted his electric lightbulb. Little by little, darkness has all but disappeared—and with it, our intimate connection to the night sky. Roughly two-thirds of the world's population and 99 percent of those living in Europe and the continental United States now inhabit areas where the night sky measures above the threshold for light-polluted status.

Light pollution refers to sky glow, light trespass, glare, and overillumination. The celebrated glow of city lights often exceeds that of natural twilight—meaning the sky in urban areas never gets truly dark. Stars are invisible beyond the glare of streetlights, lit buildings, and flashing billboards.

"I worry that our lack of contact with the sky is doing something to us," says science writer Ann Druyan in *The City Dark*, a documentary that explores light pollution. "Who knows what the ultimate effect will be?"

Researchers are asking this very question, and uncovering some troubling answers. Beyond disrupting astronomical research and the simple joy of stargazing, light pollution poses serious consequences for human and ecological health.

"Most people are not aware of the negative impact light at night has on our body function," says University of Haifa Professor Abraham Haim, who studies the relationship between artificial-light exposure and health.

In June 2012, the American Medical Association adopted a policy acknowledging nighttime light as a health hazard. Excessive light at night—including that from computer screens and other electronic devices—disrupts sleep, particularly in young people. Light at night also inhibits the body's production of crucial hormones, which may lead to weight gain and even cancer. The glare from unshielded lights also creates unsafe driving conditions.

Civilization's glare does more than interfere with stargazing; scientists have found that light pollution harms the environment, wildlife, and even human health.

Haim's studies have found that people exposed to nighttime illumination are more susceptible to prostate and breast cancers. "[Light at night] harms production of melatonin, a hormone that is released from the pineal gland during the dark part of the twenty-four-hour cycle," he says. "When this hormone is suppressed, the occurrence of cancer rises."

Light pollution has widespread ecological ramifications as well. Animals' mating, migration, sleep, and foraging behaviors are disrupted by unnatural increases in light. Nocturnal animals, such as bats, coyotes, deer, and moose, suffer from increased predation, lower reproductive rates, and impairment of night vision when their night ecosystem is compromised. Fireflies and glowworms are less visible to their mates in lighted environments.

Sea turtles are particularly vulnerable. Female turtles prefer nesting on dark beaches—a commodity that is increasingly hard to find. Baby sea turtles hatch from their nest at night, and instinctively crawl toward the brightest horizon, which used to be the ocean, glittering beneath the moon and stars. Now hatchlings are disoriented by the bright lights of beachfront resorts or

EVERY YEAR, AN ESTIMATED **100 MILLION BIRDS ARE KILLED** WHEN THEY FLY INTO BUILDINGS AND TOWERS AFTER BEING LURED OFF COURSE BY ARTIFICIAL LIGHTS.



WHAT YOU CAN DO

If You Have a **Minute...**

Flick the off switch. Light only what you need, when you need it. Turn off porch lights and flood lamps when you come indoors.

If You Have an **Hour...**

Talk with your neighbors or host an informal workshop about the impact of artificial light at night, and share ideas for reducing light pollution in your neighborhood.

If You Have a **Month...**

Work with your local government to push for outdoor lighting codes. The International Dark-Sky Association's website, www.darksky.org/resources, has suggestions on how to reduce the impact of everything from sports lighting to historic lampposts.

If You Have **\$100...**

Reduce your personal light footprint by changing your outdoor lighting, suggests Richard Wainscoat, of the Institute for Astronomy at the University of Hawaii. Look for shielded light fixtures that direct glare downward rather than up or to the side. Then swap out incandescent bulbs for low-pressure sodium lamps. They produce a limited color spectrum—low-level yellow wavelengths, rather than blue or white—which doesn't attract insects and bats.

roads and often crawl away from the ocean and into roads.

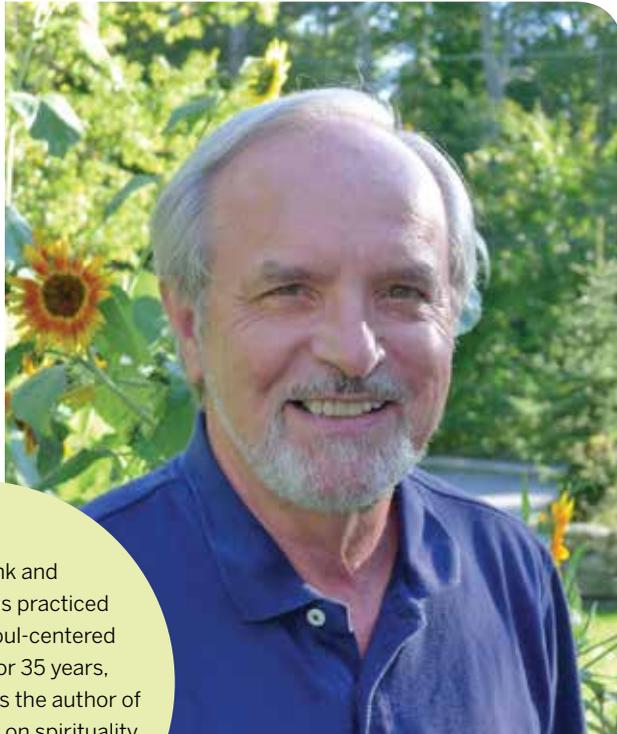
"It's a major issue for seabirds," says Fern Duvall, PhD, a wildlife biologist who regularly rescues downed birds in Hawaii—including some of the world's

rarest species. "Seabird chicks leave the nest at night," he says. "They are attracted to lights and smack into them, or simply fly around them until they drop from exhaustion."

The good news, though, is that

unlike many causes of pollution, light leaves no residue and can be 100 percent reversed. By rethinking our approach to lighting, we can recover the magical dark skies of years past.

—SHANNON WIANECKI



A former monk and musician who has practiced archetypal and soul-centered psychotherapy for 35 years, **THOMAS MOORE** is the author of more than 15 books on spirituality and holistic medicine, including the best-selling *Care of the Soul*.

SEARCHING FOR NYMPHS

WHEN I WAS A CHILD, every summer I would visit the family farm in upstate New York, sometimes spending the entire season in the old farmhouse that had no running water and seemed to be right out of the nineteenth century. As soon as we arrived, I would tear off across the pastures to a creek that ran through the farm and could be known by the small, hanging willow trees that edged its progress through the cow piles and patches of grass. Nothing gave me more pleasure than simply sitting by the side of that stream—we called it “the crick”—absorbed in the private lives of polliwogs, minnows, and an occasional water snake.

Years later at Syracuse University, not far from the old homestead, I studied Greek spirituality in some depth and was intrigued by the ancient attention to spirits of nature. I came to believe that the Greeks were highly sophisticated in their religious views, including their piety toward nymphs, whose presence they felt in all kinds of flowing streams and pooling waters. I knew right away what they were talking about, because I had experienced nymphs at that old crick on the farm.

You don’t see nymphs like you see a person crossing the road, but you can sense their presence. One of the most perceptive theologians to study the Greeks—there have been many—was Carl Kerényi, who said that religious experience often begins in an atmosphere you feel in certain places. The Greeks went from sensing that atmosphere, to building temples and shrines based on what they sensed, to telling elaborate stories and creating statues and works of art to embody the mystery they had found.

I’ve written and lectured about nymphs over the years, but I haven’t had much response. The very word “nymph” seems too fluffy to be taken seriously. But I think the Greeks had a better feel for natural religion than we do. We prefer the hard language of science when talking about nature, but then we overlook an important part of how we experience the world—the part that is mysterious and spiritual and poetic.

We could restore a sense of the nymph in our modern world, but that would require a shift in the way we imagine spirit. We’d need first to be more serious about the special presences that draw us to lakes, ponds, streams, and oceans.

Why go to the beach? Why sit, as I do on Cape Cod, and contemplate a marsh, one of the reputed favorite haunts of nymphs? We go because we find the spirit of the place refreshing and restoring. After all, the Greeks said that nymphs are healers.

There are different kinds of nymphs, like naiads or oceanids. Everyone knows that the spirit you sense at the ocean is different from the one at a pond. Sometimes the ancient nymphs were attached to a great spirit, a god or goddess. Aphrodite, the goddess of the sea, the garden, and the human body, had her own particular nymphs, as did Artemis, goddess of the forest and the mountain spring.

You can meditate on these goddesses with the aid of

ancient Greek statues and stories, or by contemplating Botticelli's *La Primavera* and Lucas Cranach's several versions of *The Nymph of the Spring*. You can read D. H. Lawrence's poems about how an old intelligence about nature religion is still accessible. You can read a spiritual nature poem, like Jane Hirshfield's "The Gods Are Not Large," about fish going about their lives, like the ones that captivated me so completely in the crick in front of the old farm. —S&H

practice

FINDING YOUR NYMPH

- Choose a place where you can sense a special spirit in nature, and feel its capacity to heal you.
- Make a sketch of the nymph as you imagine her, write a story or poem about her, or build a little shrine or pile of rocks.
- Take a child with you and try to see what he or she sees.
- Select and read a few poems that evoke nymphs, even if the word isn't used.
- Take a photograph of a special, haunting place in nature and look for the nymph in the photo.

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GERI LARKIN spends every spring happily watching seeds in her garden sprout. This year, onions, kale, and tomatoes are already growing to beat the band. She has given up on basil. Maybe forever.

AN UNEXPECTED GRATITUDE

IN ALL MY YEARS of following the Buddhist path, there has been only one teaching that made me cringe. Whenever I heard it, my reaction was, “Are you kidding me?!” Here’s the story: Buddha is approached by a monk, who asks for advice regarding desire. It is distracting him from his spiritual practice, not to mention his life. What should he do? Buddha’s response is to tell him that it is important to remember that seeing our desires fulfilled always leads to suffering. Once we get what we want, we’re afraid we’ll lose it—which, when you think about it, we always will in the end. Better to know that the less we pursue our desires, the less we’ll suffer. So far, so good.

The monk thanks him for his advice, then mentions that he will be heading out for the village of Sunaparanta. Buddha is taken aback. He asks the monk if he knows that the place is known for its “fierce roughness”—what will he do if they abuse and threaten him?

The monk responds, “Then I shall think these people are truly kind in that they did not give me a blow with a fist.”

But Buddha can’t leave this alone. What if they *do* punch you? The monk says, then he will think that they are truly kind because they didn’t hit him with a clod. Well, what if they hit him with a clod? He’ll be grateful that it wasn’t a stick. What if it was a stick? They were truly kind to not stab him. And if they did stab him? Well, at least they didn’t kill him. What if they did kill him?

The monk’s response is to tell Buddha that he knows that there are some monks who, “being humiliated by the body and by life, sought death.” He would consider himself lucky to find death without seeking it.

Are you kidding me?!

You can see why I shrugged the teaching off, figuring it must have been changed somehow as it was retold over and over throughout the centuries. I knew there was no way that I would be able to respond with gratitude to being punched, stabbed, or killed by what was essentially a pack of bullies.

But then a funny thing started to happen. Whenever a health crisis hit, I’d find myself thinking about that monk. Strep throat, mono, pneumonia, the flu—after an initial fear that I could be dying (hypochondria hit me hard after I turned 50), I found myself taking comfort in the monk’s story. By emulating his expression of impersonal gratitude for whatever is going right, I am able to ease away

I KNEW THERE WAS NO WAY THAT I WOULD BE ABLE TO RESPOND WITH GRATITUDE TO BEING PUNCHED, STABBED, OR KILLED.

from my neurotic anticipation of escalating medical disasters, giving this body some room to heal. The teaching slows me down, reminds me that we all spend some of our days in the realm of bullies, and that the best possible thing I can do to be OK in a difficult situation is to listen to what the situation itself is telling me to do, without hiding under a cloak of fear. Sometimes this means going back to bed for a week. Once in a while it has meant heading

for an emergency room. Mostly what the monk's impersonal gratitude teaches is that, given time and care, healing happens, whether it is physical, spiritual, psychological, emotional, or all four. What we need is the monk's willingness to notice where we are getting in our own way and, when we do, to stand down. Feeling gratitude for all the things, people, and places in our lives that support us during a crisis helps us to do just that.

When I was a seminary student, I had a teacher who taught us that gratitude practice could transform everything, from dissatisfaction to depression. For a year, we had the assignment of listing 10 things for which we were grateful every night, just before going to sleep. We slept better, shrugged off petty irritations more easily, and were quicker to apologize, say thank you, or tell someone we cared for them. This didn't come from the gratitude alone, but the practice gave us a different lens to look through. And when we did, the world became magical. —S&H

Getting “Close” to Geri Larkin

In her new book, *Close to the Ground*, the S&H columnist and Zen practitioner explores Buddhism's seven factors of enlightenment: mindfulness, investigation, effort, ease, joy, concentration, and equanimity.



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Which of the seven factors do you think is the most misunderstood?

Joy. I don't know what it is about joy that is so confusing. My experience is that most people equate pleasure with joy. Although there may be joy within some pleasures, it is so much more. Quieter. Lighter. Braver.

There is a Buddhist saying, “Ten thousand joys, ten thousand sorrows.” We've got the sorrows down. I want people to remember the joy part and how important it is to spiritual maturity. Happily, when we give ourselves permission to feel it, just about everything we experience can trigger it, starting with seeing a baby bird hopping around on its first official worm hunt just outside our window.

Mindfulness is a real buzzword right now. Do you think that's a good thing?

I'm happy *mindfulness* is a buzzword. It means we are at least thinking about it

and how it matters in our lives. Having said this, let me add that genuine mindfulness is a hard-won skill. One quick way to position ourselves to be more mindful is to simply ask ourselves randomly, “What am I doing?” If we answer honestly, it will teach us where we need to pay more attention.

The work of enlightenment can seem so sober—being alone, sitting in silence, the years of practice—yet you call it the recipe for a “sweet, juicy life.” Isn't that a contradiction?

I can only speak for myself. I needed years of meditation practice, solo retreats, and living in temples just to settle down enough for a “sweet juicy life” to appear. It probably took 10 years to get over the shock of what a frigging kaleidoscope of thoughts ran my life. Once I eased into welcoming them, I was able to get a kick out of them more and more, not taking them or myself so seriously. That, in turn, led to the spaciousness that allowed for a (mostly) grounded, ordinary life, where every day is just fine.

—ILIMA LOOMIS



Read an extended interview with Geri Larkin at spiritualityhealth.com/larkin-book.

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Financial consultant **PAUL SUTHERLAND** is the chairman and founder of the Utopia Foundation, which operates under the philosophy that its work will be done when every child and adult goes to bed feeling safe, healthy, full, and optimistic about the morning.

BUILDING RESILIENCY

Q When I give money to international agencies that work in developing countries, I worry that my money doesn't reach the intended recipient. How can I be smart about choosing which programs to support?

Paul Sutherland: Don't enable! Be wise about the consequences of your giving. Investigate who is getting your money, and know specifically how you are helping.

My wife, Amy, and I went to Haiti a year ago to review some of the organizations we support, but physically "kicking the tires" is not a requirement to understanding the end result of

your charitable giving. Any organization should be able to spend time with you on the phone answering your questions.

There are many factors to consider when making charitable contributions, including reviewing a potential recipient's IRS Form 990 (if it's a nonprofit organization, this is a public record), the composition of its board of directors, and some measure of stated and real outcomes.

Here are a few of the questions Amy and I asked when we were visiting organizations in Haiti: Who is running the organization and who comprises its staff? What exactly does the organization do, and how, specifically does it do it?

And how does the organization see itself being sustainable—and finishing the job?

Amy and I have experienced well-intentioned organizations that seem to be more in the business of fund-raising and fostering dependence. We want to avoid those organizations that are long on flash but light on solving problems in a sustainable and resilient way. We try to support organizations that have a vision of working themselves out of their own jobs someday, because they will have sustainably met the needs of whatever populations they are serving.

In planning ahead for unexpected life events, such as accident or injury, how can I cultivate financial and personal resilience?

Humility, gumption, financial savings, low fixed expenses (such as rent and car payments), skills that are readily tradable for income, and strong friendships are the "stored energy" that gets us through times of injury, job loss, and other calamities. My to-do list for a financially resilient life would include:

Without health, life is not life; it is only a state of languor and suffering.

—FRANÇOIS RABELAIS

- An emergency fund sufficient to cover your expenses for at least six months.
- A lifestyle in which your fixed costs are easily covered by your existing income, giving you the flexibility to “lower your outflow” if a financial emergency arises.
- A “what if I lose my job” plan. Employers fail, or lay off workers every day. If you lost your job would you say, “Oh, shit”? Or would you shrug and say, “I guess it’s time for me to go back to school” or “At least I can freelance until I find another job.”
- Nurtured friendships. Are your relationships supportive and committed? Or are they casual Facebook pokes? In my life, I have found that real friends were more important to me and my family than anything money could buy.

My daughter cycles through one binge after another. She lives for months like a pig—an organic, free-range pig—then flies off to an expensive spa to “cleanse” on yoga, saunas, and fancy juices. She justifies all this spending because it’s for her health. But guess who bails her out of credit card debt? Me!

I was taught to practice moderation: eat healthy foods—and stop when you’re full; get enough sleep; spend less than you make; save some, give some; don’t overcommit; and don’t go crazy for anything. And my parents had some good

To ask Paul a question, email him directly at paul@spiritualityhealth.com.

people backing them up: Buddha’s “middle way” and Jesus’s chat about the straight gate and the narrow way both call for the virtue of moderation.

Today we seem to have moved from the virtue of moderation and simplicity to extremes. Society embraces extreme sports, competitive eating, speed dating, and the belief that a weeklong get-healthy boot camp or a 10-day meditation retreat is better than simply living each day in a sustainable, resilient way.

Talk to your daughter about moderation. Live your life in a way that shows her that she doesn’t need to go to extremes to be happy and healthy. Then tell her you won’t enable her binges any longer by paying off her debts—and stand your ground. —S&H



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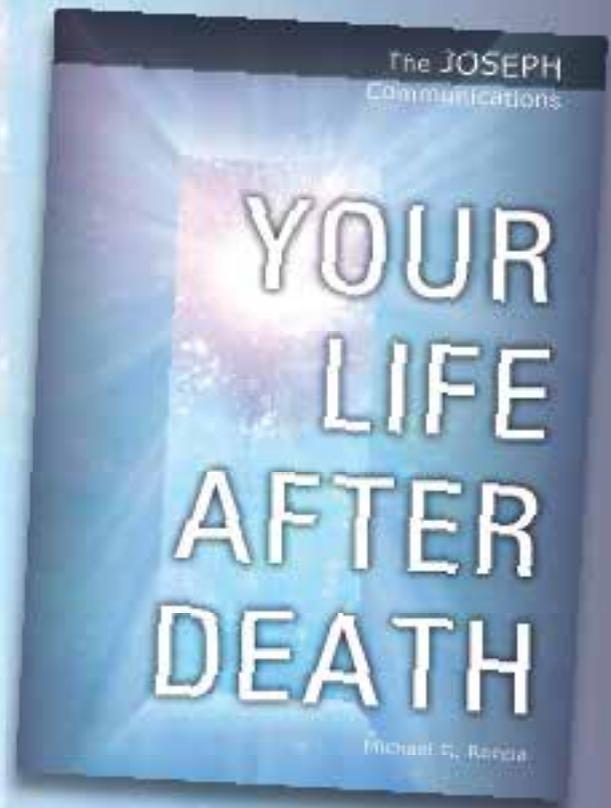
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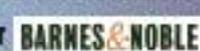
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Resiliency

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If you fell down yesterday, stand up today. —**H.G. Wells**

The noble one stands alone without fear, and can withdraw from the world without sorrow. —**The I Ching, Hexagram 28**

Hope begins in the dark, the stubborn hope that if you just show up and try to do the right thing, the dawn will come. You wait and watch and work: you don't give up. —**Anne Lamott**

Remember that not getting what you want is sometimes a wonderful stroke of luck. —**Dalai Lama**

I can be changed by what happens to me, but I refuse to be reduced by it. —**Maya Angelou**

No matter how many times you get knocked down, keep getting back up. God sees your resolve. —**Joel Osteen**

DENG MING-DAO is the author of *The Lunar Tao*, *365 Tao*, and seven other books. He has studied qigong, philosophy, meditation, and internal martial arts.