

Mid-winter Darkness

Noirin Sheahan · Noirin's Essays · 4 min read

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Since my laryngectomy, I've started writing a column on living mindfully with this condition for a laryngectomee support group called Webwhispers. The column is called 'Dear Lary' (Lary being short for 'Laryngectomee') in an effort to cultivate a friendly relationship with this new phase of my life. Here is the column I wrote for the January edition – I hope it speaks also to the Satipanya Sangha.

It's Sunday morning, 21st December, the mid-winter solstice. From now on the days will start to get longer – such a lovely thought! I love springtime and am always so sorry when 21st June comes along and know the light is starting to ebb away again. I snuggle back into the bed-clothes and luxuriate in their warmth for another five minutes.

Five minutes turn into ten as thoughts and feelings rise and fall away. I love this time of day, and if I can get my mind to settle, can appreciate the wonder of just being alive and warm and comfortable. Then the various pressures of my 'to do' list die into the background. I often forget about you altogether at these times Lary, as well as the other troubles of the world. (I still think of you as trouble, Lary, though deep down I have to admit you may actually be a blessing.)

I suppose I've always been a bit of a dreamer. Maybe that's why meditation appeals to me so strongly. As I relax, I notice a bright light in my mind. It's very ordinary – just a mental image, not any kind of apparition. Just as you might have an image of your friend or husband or daughter in your mind. Or your sitting-room, or the colours of sea and sky as you remember a day at the beach. It's the same thing. But I've only recently started to notice it. As soon as I do, I feel a surge of attraction towards it – as if I want to swallow it up, to let it light up my whole being. But from experience, often bitter experience, I've learned that my longing to get closer to this light, to get more of it, to swallow it, are all in vain. It's always tantalisingly beyond my reach. I tune into the feeling of breathing to try to keep myself grounded, not get so lost in my passionate desire for this ... this what? A dream of light? Of life? Of love? Or all the beauties of the world?

The feeling of breathing, by comparison, that sensation of the tummy and chest rising and falling with each breath, seems strange ... light years away ... a different world altogether. It even frightens me for some unknown reason. But over the years of meditation practice I've learned to appreciate the body despite all its associated

strangeness and fear. I know that attending to simple sensations cultivates kindness and courage and other strengths. So I bear with my aversion for the body. And then, another miracle, I sense a darkness which is equally as enticing as the light. While the light seems to represent life, the darkness represents something equally beautiful beyond life. I first noticed it on the night after my laryngectomy – after meeting you Lary. Since then the darkness has become my best friend. And it's very close to my own body, as if my

breath is just barely brushing against it. Something so peaceful, completely beyond words. For a while all my wishes and longings die out willingly into the darkness. It's such a relief to know there is this outlet for deep longings. When I can't find the dark channel this longing for life and beauty and love just fire me up with restless energy and the frustration of unfulfilled desire. But for now, they flow unobstructed and die away peacefully into the blessed darkness.

So this is something I have to thank you for Lary. Perhaps it was the terror I felt for you that drove me to this edge of my known world, to sense the peaceful darkness beyond, and the possibility of dying in peace.

I can't yet rest for long with this pouring of my life energies into darkness. Sooner or later my mind wanders, or I get pent up with desire to know just a little bit more about the light or the darkness, or to sense a deeper peace. Basically my natural human longings tip me off balance. Then it's the work of bearing with the sense of loss or frustration or anger or whatever surfaces. The light and darkness still hover as mental images but now it's a struggle to see them through the turmoil of emotion. But I know that this is an equally valuable stage in meditation – learning to bear with emotions, to name them, allow them come and go without judgement or any effort to change them for any preferred state of love or bliss or wisdom. I'm more and more willing to bear with this struggle, trusting to this painful path towards peace.

So, Lary, on this mid-winter's day, let me thank you for what you have brought into my life - a love for darkness. And in the darkness, some glimpse of what lies beyond life.

Once you showed it to me, you planted a seed in my heart and now there is a growing trust in this ocean of peace into which all our energies can sink.

May we both rest easy in the peace of mid-winter, Lary.

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