

Reverence for night in our world of light



Highland Views
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Guest columnist

A colleague gave me a remarkable book by an unfamiliar author. His name is Henry Beston and the book is "The Outermost House." Written in 1929, it's a narrative of one year the author spent living on Cape Cod. Having lived for a few years myself in a small cabin on an island washed by salt water, I immediately felt an affinity with Beston.

In the Foreword he reveals one theme of his work: "It is the meditative perception of the relation to Nature (and I include the whole cosmic picture in this term) to the human spirit." In his mind, "Nature is a part of our humanity, and without some awareness and experience of that divine mystery man ceases to be man." Since he doesn't refer to any particular religious belief, I assume we can interpret his use of "divine" as another layer of mystery—another great unknown in the vastness of the natural universe.

In a particularly vivid chapter, "Night on the Great Beach," Beston observes that we "have fallen out of touch with many aspects of nature, and with none

more completely than with night." Given our darkness-phobia and addiction to flooding the night with light, I'd have to agree. He says: "With lights and ever more lights, we drive the holiness and beauty of night back to the forests and the sea." Like him, I wonder if we are simply afraid of night, or the unknowns in the dark, or both.

Beston poetically expresses a celebration of nighttime on Cape Cod: "Night is very beautiful on this great beach. It is the true other half of the day's tremendous wheel; no lights without meaning stab or trouble it; it is beauty, it is fulfillment, it is rest." Unaframed to walk the invisible beach at night, under the stars, or in thick fog, he seems to breathe in the unity of sand and sea, sky and seabirds. Later in the chapter, the writer feels the waves of sensations and mystic-like connections, exhorting the reader: "Learn to reverence night and to put away the vulgar fear of it, for, with the banishment of night from the experience of [humanity], there vanishes as well a religious emotion, a poetic mood, which gives depth to the adventure of humanity." Almost meditative in imagery, Beston weaves a web of day and night, light and dark, sun, moon, stars and beach. Those awake and alive enough to notice sense an "awareness of the mystery of being." A walk on the

beach—or in a forest grove or mountain meadow—when the sun is hidden, awakens something primal, and primary to what makes us naturally, wildly, human.

The "forces of darkness" seem to be a major fear-driven theme in various religious traditions. Who rules the dark underworld but the personification of dark: Satan, whose shadowy demons stalk the earth seeking to seduce the faithful. In popular culture, the Dark Knight of the bat cave is balanced by the Dark Lord of the Dark Star. In color-conscious cultures, blackness is often feared. Darker skin becomes a threat to the "purity" of "light-skinned" people. Heroes and gods look like the dominant hue. From Snow White to images of Jesus as a white man, a preference and reverence for one shade of body permeates the worldview, even the otherworldly realms. Earth-tone pigment seems too earthly, literally soiled.

It wasn't until camping in the mountains that I had to face my own fear of the dark. If there were no stars, it could be, as we say, "pitch black." Not being able to see what was out there was literally a wild experience. And maybe that's what I was fearing the most: wildness and wild things. No wonder the discovery of fire by our distant ancestors was so momentous.

Lightning strikes illuminated the night and drove away some of the indigenous fearfulness. Not to mention the technological advancement: they could now cook the wild things that roamed the night.

Henry Beston emerges from his tiny cabin nestled in the dunes of Cape Cod, wraps himself in the ebony cloak, and steps into the unknown, the beauty of a shoreless environment. A beautiful obscurity—dark beauty, night beauty. "For a moment of night we have a glimpse of ourselves and of our world islanded in its stream of stars." Our eyes begin to adjust, our senses expand, we breathe deeper and fall into the void (with some fear but mostly joy), to open ourselves to step forward courageously, "pilgrims of mortality, voyaging between horizons across eternal seas of space and time...ennobled by a genuine moment of emotional dignity, and poetry makes its own both the human spirit and experience."

We too might reverence the ocean of night.

Chris Highland was a minister and interfaith chaplain for nearly 30 years. He is a teacher, writer and humanist celebrant. Chris and his wife, the Rev. Carol Hovis, live in Asheville. His books and blogs are presented on "Friendly Freethinker" (www.chighland.com).