

Skipping Stones on Easter

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FUFON

Marian Stewart

CALL TO WORSHIP

PHOENIX

by D.H. Lawrence

Are you willing to be sponged out, erased, cancelled,
made nothing?

Are you willing to be made nothing?
dipped into oblivion?

If not, you will never really change.

The phoenix renews her youth
only when she is burnt, burnt alive, burnt down
to hot and flocculent ash.

Then the small stirring of a new small bub in the nest
with strands of down like floating ash
shows that she is renewing her youth like the eagle,
immortal bird.

READING/MEDITATION

SKIPPING STONE

by Dan Johnson

Flat, but not too flat, somewhat obtuse,
But also grippable, and when you

hold it in the right kind of light
it shimmers. The target is to see

how far this pretty stone can
skip across the water. Ready,

aim, fire...there it goes, can't
wait to see how far it flows

across the blue green surface
on summer's pond. One large ripple, wide

Are the rings, another kerplunk
And the ring narrows, but ripples

flow like a well orchestrated band,
the third ring, narrower yet, but

still quite impressive. The right wind,
form of arm in the throw, smile on

The face, what a simple joy to watch
The skipping stone, as it joins it's

Band of brothers, going plunk, plunk.

Meditation

Now, as you follow the stone across the water, think about what happens after the last skip, the last bounce, the kerplunck that only goes plunk or dunk or plop.

On a good throw, the stone whirls from your hand and makes several good crisp skips that take you a long way from shore before

it drops out of sight, on another throw, the stone might go plop and drop out of sight not far from the edge, with maybe no skip at all.

Feel the stone tap the water, fly through the air, tap again, and again, flying a little lower each time until finally it drops. The stone loses its angle as it drifts down. It settles onto the bottom.

Can you see the stone on the bottom?

What does it look like? Is the water cloudy or clear?

Is the stone all alone or is it crowded?

Is the stone settled comfortably or is it angled precariously?

Is the water temperature warm or cold?

Is there any light filtering through?

Is it quiet?

Is there any motion?

Pretend you are the stone. You've landed on the bottom.

Have you been there before? Are you there now?

What does it feel like?

Are you in control?

Where do you look for help?

How do you surface?

Now, pick up the stone and come back with us. Remember the times when you skip through life and the times when we dip below the surface. It is part of what makes us whole.

SERMON

Skipping stones can be a lot of fun. It can be competitive or it can be a lone venture. Skipping stones across the water's surface can while away the time when we are bored or give us mindless mechanical motion when our heads are full – or empty – of thought.

Most of us have either skipped stones across the lake or bay or least, we are familiar with it. Often we learned how to toss the stones when we were young. For some, it was second nature; you just 'knew' how to do it. For others like myself, no matter how hard we tried, one bounce, maybe two. That was about it.

For those of you who might be curious about just how many times you can skip a stone across the surface of water, the current world record is forty bounces across a river in Pennsylvania¹. Studies suggest the perfect angle is about 20 degrees. And the speed should be 25 mph with a rotation of 14 revolutions per second².

For me, all that is theory. My experience is quite different. I've 'thrown' a lot of stones in my life, but they all seem to build up into a mound about ten feet from the water's edge. I think of my stone skipping practice as more of an adventure in island building. You'd think the stones would break the surface by now from the bottom up, but not so. And I think they still sink just as deep.

Life is like skipping stones. We skip along and sometimes we go for a long ride before we tap the water and skip again, and again, and again. But we can't skip forever. Each time we tap the water or bounce off the surface, we lose a little height; we get a little closer to the water. As we are skipping along, we are not quite so far above the surface as we might think. And then it happens. We go plunk, dunk or plop.

I'm not talking about the little dips we take, but the big ones. The bad day syndrome or temporary depressions or setbacks are more mundane. Nor am I talking about clinical illness. The dip below the surface I'm referring to is what spiritual leaders often call 'the dark night of the soul'.

These are times when you feel like you have no shape, no form, no meaning. It is like you are alive but dead. You are just going through the motions of living – and sometimes not. To me, it feels as if I'm in a deep, dark well. Time is forever slow and voices become remote and distant. They even echo or become hollow.

I don't have dark nights of the soul often, at least in the extended form. But I do know them. Dark nights of the soul are not fun and are not the things that you set out to do. *Oh, shall I go shopping or shall I dive into the well?*

Dark nights are not to be avoided though. Our culture, even our religions steer us away from diving down. We are often offered “platitudes and false assurances”³ to keep us afloat, to keep us skipping along the surface. But dark nights still happen.

There is a truth about dark nights of the soul that are to be treasured. For me, it is in these times of going inward, of sinking below the surface, that I become connected with something greater: a truth, or truths. I see things more clearly, more sharply. While my senses are deadened to the mundane motions of life, I am keenly sensitive to the bits and pieces that seem to fit into a mental, psychological or spiritual puzzle. I begin to understand how things, people, action fit into meaning. In this dark night, underpinnings are explored. Foundational understandings are tactile and pliable. The dark night is a journey taken alone and at pace that is sometimes bearable, and sometimes not, but not necessarily controllable – or optional.

As awkward, depressing and inconvenient as these dark nights can be, they are the times when we are the most connected to our inner selves. We are in touch with the rawness, the edge, the abyss. It is no wonder that this is also the time when we are the most creative. Poets and artists have long drawn on this well of the dark night. Music, dance, art, poetry, story, movement are like sea-languages. When you are underwater, things flow to a different rhythm. Emily Dickinson often wrote from this vantage

point. She seemed to capture life's essence in her writing. When a dear friend died, she wrote

*Each that we lose takes a part of us;
A crescent still abides,
Which like the moon, some turbid night,
Is summoned by the tides.*⁴

In his book *Dark Nights of the Soul*, Thomas Moore wrote, “Only when ideas are poetic do they reach the depths and express reality.” He quotes Emerson who views the poet as one who “stands one step nearer to things and turns the world into glass.”⁵

A question that has arisen for me from my experience concerns how we surface from these dark nights of the soul. Some of you have heard me ask, “Did you find your way out from the inside or outside?” By this I mean where did you find resources or strength to aid you in your bid to resurface.

I know some people find God or Jesus or another savior figure to rely upon. Others pull themselves up by their own bootstraps. For me, my most profound re-surfacing lesson came when I found no spiritual force outside my self but realized my truth to be both inside and outside. I found that I needed to be in connection, in community. It was only through slowly re-integrating myself into situations where I could appear, observe and then

gradually participate that I reconnected with the ‘regular’ world. That is how I resurfaced. That is why I value community so dearly.

Years ago when I first began asking the question about finding strength from the inside or outside, I did not know that I was tapping into the classic east vs. west religious tension. Most of us have grown up with the notion of a god ‘out there’. Religion teaches us how to have a relationship with this god. For Christians, Jesus is the mediator, the connector. For Muslims, Muhammad is the link. Even if we don’t have an active belief in god, we still have the notion of something not of ourselves, but out there.

Religion in the east, in the Orient, the god image is everywhere, including inside the self. Divinity is not something to connect with. It is there by default. It is in you, it is outside you, it is everything. There is no connection or relationship; it is a state of being.

In surfacing from my dark night, I found strength not from the western notion of an ‘out there’ god, but from within and within others. I can only surmise that a piece of my dark night was to shake loose my western religious foundations and finding strength, connection and divinity within all, including myself.

We talk about resurfacing from the dark night, but let us take a moment and look at the story of the dark night as it is told in myth and religion.

Long ago, the ancients looked to these times of inward journey and compared them to waxing and waning of the moon, the ebb and flow of the tides, and the coming and going of the seasons. Dark nights were an inevitable part of life. Dark nights were a part of the maturing process. To become spiritually well-developed, one must have been through dark nights. Without this experience, our spiritual life is shallow and has no depth. The dive below the surface is absent and wanting.

With the connection to the moon, we have the image of being constantly reincarnated. With the tides, we sense the motion and flow. With the seasons, we have a larger sense of the cycle of life and death and birth again. While the moon was viewed as always being reincarnated to find the light, the sun was a constant source of light. In myths and religions, we gain a sense of ourselves as being forever becoming with a goal of becoming as the light.

The pagan traditions of the ancients celebrated all of these movements of the moon and the presence of the sun. The Egyptians had three interchangeable solar gods, or gods of the sun: Horus, Osiris and Ra. This solar god was the forerunner of Jesus. Horus did many of the same things Jesus was said to have done. Horus and Jesus were each called the lamb of God, the son of man, the Word and fisher. Both gave sermons from the mount, and were referred to as the 'road to salvation'. Both were crucified

between two thieves. At the resurrection of Horus and of Jesus, it was the goddesses or women who proclaim and announce the resurrection. There are over two hundred instances of connection between the mythical Egyptian solar god Horus and the more literal, written-as-history, Jesus.⁶

But the point of the stories is not to debate the literal truths. The Egyptians knew the story was myth but the Christians tried to make the myth true.

In *Who is Jesus?* John Dominic Crossan writes

*My point, once again, is not that those ancient people told literal stories and we are now smart enough to take them symbolically, but that they told them symbolically and we are now dumb enough to take them literally.*⁷

In writing the Christian story, Easter was about death and resurrection of Jesus, but the timing is a nod to the ancient order of the seasons. Easter is a movable holiday and always falls on the first Sunday after the first full moon after the spring solstice. Easter with its story of reincarnation is forever tied into the lunar calendar with all of its ebbs and flows and change.

If we understand myth as never true in detail, but always true in the larger sense, we can look at these stories about reincarnation and human nature. There are lessons to be learned, and insights to be gleaned. The light and dark cycles of our lives are ancient. Diving down under the surface, out of

the light and then being reincarnated into the light is a part of life. It is how we are. It is as inseparable from humanity the same as divinity is inseparable from eastern spirituality.

Dark nights of the soul are spiritual in nature. Physical healing may also accompany the return to the light but not necessarily. Joseph Campbell says, it is the spiritual growth and understanding that is important. Reincarnation is not a literal physical rebirth, but acquisition of spiritual truth.

In his poem *Crucifixion*, Hayden Carruth uses the language of the resurrection scene to talk about his own dark night of the soul.

CRUCIFIXION

by Hayden Carruth

You understand the colors on the hillside have faded,
we have the gray
and brown and lavender of late autumn,
the apple and pear trees have lost their leaves, the mist
of November is often with us, especially in the afternoon
and toward evening, as it was today when I sat gazing
up into the orchard for a long time the way I do now,
thinking of how I died last winter and was revived.
And I tell you I saw there a cross with a man nailed

to it, silvery in the mist, and I said to him: “Are you the Christ?” And he must have heard me, for in his agony, twisted as he was, he nodded his head affirmatively, up and down, once and twice. And a little way off I saw another cross with another man nailed to it, twisting and nodding, and then another and another, ranks and divisions of crosses straggling like exhausted legions upward among the misty trees, each cross with a silvery, writhing, twisting, nodding, naked figure nailed to it, and some of them were women. The hill was filled with crucifixion. Should I not be telling you this? Is it excessive? But I know something about death now, I know how silent it is, silent, even when the pain is shrieking and screaming. And tonight is very silent and very dark. When I looked I saw nothing out there, only my own reflected head nodding had nodded to me, all those writhing silvery images on the hillside, and after a while I nodded back to him.

In this time of Easter, we celebrate the time in the year when the moon and sun have shifted in balance and there is more light than dark. We are coming out of the dark from below the surface with self-knowledge and understanding. As we are incarnated into the light of longer days, may we be kind to ourselves and others. Figure out a way to tell your story. Be

honest. You don't have to tell all the detail, but tell the meaning, what you discovered on your dive below the surface. And be sure to listen to others and their stories as well.

Blessed be and amen.

BENEDICTION

May your days be filled with light and sunshine.

May you skip stones far and long.

When you do go 'plop' onto the bottom

Be fully present and learn the language of water

And when you surface, live your life with new understanding.

¹ <http://physicsweb.org/articles/world/19/2/6>

² http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stone_skipping

³ Moore, Thomas. *Dark Night of the Soul*. Pg. 15.

⁴ Moore, Thomas. *Dark Night of the Soul*. Pg. 10-11.

⁵ Moore, Thomas. *Dark Night of the Soul*. Pg. 9.

⁶ Harpur, Tom. *The Pagan Christ*. Pg. 83-85.

⁷ Harpur, Tom. *The Pagan Christ*. Pg. 1.