By the mid-1990’s I had lived in the Seattle area for twenty years. In that time I had found that most people had one of two responses to the cold, dark, rainy weather that visited the region for six months of every year: either we rejected it - escaping, if we could, to a warm, bright clime for however brief a sun fix - or we learned to become creatures of darkness, spending time outdoors throughout the winter and not minding the long, wet nights.

Either way, there was no question that the legendary wet darkness of the Pacific Northwest affected everyone deeply, creating a deep longing for spring. No wonder that the Winter Solstice took on a spectacular weight, and often was celebrated with abandon - nevertheless leaving folks with months more to slog through before the light really returned.

Observing this - coupled with my spiritual awakening in the mid-1980’s, and with many years of political reading, writing and dialogue around race, gender and language - gave me pause at the Winter Solstice. I realized that celebrating the return of the light rang false for me, that it felt not only like a denial, but a rejection, of our actual experience. I began to feel that what we actually needed in the Pacific Northwest was an affirmation of the extended darkness we experienced each year.

SHAMANIC BEGINNINGS

In the early 1990’s I did intensive training in core shamanism with Sandra Ingerman and other faculty members of the Foundation for Shamanic Studies. I had become comfortable with creating and performing conscious rituals for healing and positive transformation. I also read Starhawk, most notably ‘Dreaming the Dark: Magic, Sex and Politics,’ which spoke profoundly to me about recreating our world through intention and action. The book affirmed Darkness as a place of creativity and mystery. I also was blessed with the opportunity to study with Malidoma and Sobonfu Somé, Dagara teachers from West Africa.

During my early years of serving as a shamanic healer and teacher in Seattle, I witnessed my clients and students struggle with the dark time of the year. In my bones I began to feel that what we needed at the Winter Solstice was a celebration of the Dark itself, rather than the return of the Light. Given the negative connotations that ‘Western’ culture projects onto the innocent Dark, I knew that such a ritual ran the risk of bringing up tremendous fear for many people. I was very concerned to find a way to manage the negative associations so that the ritual would be a healing celebration of Darkness as Source, and transmute fear. I didn’t want it to devolve into calling forth the very demons and devils our culture projects onto it, in hopes of keeping them at bay.

SAAMI WISDOM

About this time, a shaman from Norway, Ailo Gaup, was hosted by the Foundation to teach indigenous Saami traditions from far Northern Europe. During the Samhain weekend I spent with him, he introduced a Saami ritual form to bring through the spirit of the full moon for healing for the group. I asked him whether this form might be used to bring through other spirits for healing, and he said yes. A ritual to honor the Dark began to take shape within me. Why not use the Saami form to bring through the spirit of the Dark for healing the group? Now, about three years from when the idea of a solstice ritual to honor the Dark first took root within me, the time felt ripe and I felt ready.

SOLSTICE RITUAL

In Autumn 1995 I had the joy of teaching one of several excellent circles of students how to journey. Each circle had its own personality, and with many years of political reading, writing and dialogue around race, gender and language - gave me pause at the Winter Solstice. I realized that celebrating the return of the light rang false for me, that it felt not only like a denial, but a rejection, of our actual experience. I began to feel that what we actually needed in the Pacific Northwest was an affirmation of the extended darkness we experienced each year.

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LENORE NORRGARD
adapted a Saami tradition to create a new kind of Solstice ritual.

Her own experiences, and those of the practitioners who shared the ritual bring new insight into the healing power of the Dark.
end of this extension, I invited them
to play a special role in the solstice
ritual I was planning.

At a special preparatory session
I explained to them the Saami ritual
form, and that we would use it to
bring through the healing power of
the spirit of the Dark. Upon hearing
this several students took a deep
breath. I explained that each of
them now could make a journey to
meet the spirit of the Dark to
resolve any questions or issues they
might have prior to the ritual.

I reminded them that everything
has a spirit, and every spirit has
power and wisdom to share with us.
Also that things often are not what
they seem, and the gift of
shamanism is to begin to experience
dance directly with the Mystery
of the Universe, rather than
analysing it, trying to figure it out, or
control it. I reminded them that their
own experiences had shown that the
universe is a benevolent, healing
place, and that the Dark is only the
Dark - no light - a physical-energetic
phenomenon neutral in value or
meaning, until we load it on. They
understood, and each agreed to
meet the spirit of the Dark.

On their individual shamanic
journeys, each met a different
aspect of the spirit, reflecting the
multitude of gifts the Dark offers
us. As they returned from and
shared their journeys, the energy in
the room noticeably shifted, and we
finished with a lovely warmth and
wholeness. I described to them the
ritual we would perform two weeks
hence, and asked them each to
bring a large scarf on that evening.

CAREFUL PREPARATION
In the meantime I prepared a
carefully written invitation to the
ritual for the students and clients I
had served to date, and a handful
of colleagues. I wanted to invite
only people with whom I’d worked
in some depth, with whom I shared
a bond of trust, to ensure a strong
container for swimming against the
cultural tide to honor this spirit.

I titled the event ‘Dreaming the
Dark: Celebrating Our Source’ to
emphasize the mystery, wonder and
nourishment the Dark gives our
lives, and wrote a text noting some of
the essential gifts the Darkness
bestows upon us. I asked each
person to bring festive food to
share, and an object that
represented for them some
essential good they personally
receive from the Dark.

Thirty-odd people attended the
event. We began with cordial
socializing over smoked salmon,
berries, and other festive foods
set upon an altar with a dozen
candles blazing.

When the time for the ritual
arrived, we cleared the food and
candles, locked the door, turned the
lights low, and formed one big circle.
I asked each person to say their
name, introduce the object they
brought and what gift from the Dark
they represented, and to place it on
the vacant altar in the center. In this way
we built an altar to the spirit we
would bring through: bed pillows
representing sleep, eye pillows
representing journeying, stuffed
animals representing power animals
or night-time friends, condoms
representing sex, seeds representing
gemination, and so on.

Once the altar was built, I led
the group in an invocation of the
helping spirits in the Dagara
tradition, as I’d learned from
Malidoma and Sobonfu Somé. This
tradition involves the whole group
singing to the ancestors, asking
them to be with us. As each person
sang from their heart, we felt the
room swell with the presence of
loving ancestors.

I then selected three people to
drum with me, and stationed each
of us in the Four Directions. I
demonstrated the slow, steady
rhythm the drumming would take,
and taught the outer circle the
joik, or chant-song, that Ailo had
demonstrated the slow, steady
rhythm the drumming would take,
and taught the outer circle the
joik, or chant-song, that Ailo had
taught us, to support the inner
circle in journeying.

Once everyone was set, those
who had prepared at the previous
session sat in a circle on the floor
with backs to the altar, facing the
outer circle, with their thighs and
arms touching. They draped their
heads with their scarves to remove
their individual identities and more
easily bring through the spirit of the
Dark. At our preparatory session I
had instructed them that as the
drumming and joiking began, they
were to invite the spirit of the Dark
to come into them and fill their
bodies. They were to sit still until
they were so filled with the spirit
that they had to move, and at that
point they were to rise and follow
the promptings of the spirit to offer
healing to those in the outer circle.
I instructed those in the outer
circle to continue joiking and
drumming until I signalled an end to
the ritual with my drum. I explained
that those in the inner circle would
bring through healing from the spirit
of the Dark, and might bring it
through by touching those in the
outer circle. If, for any reason,
anyone did not want to be touched,
they could take a step back outside
the circle, and their wishes would be
honored.

INTO THE DARK
We turned the lights completely
out, and since the few windows
were draped, it was very dark, with
only four votives burning at the far
corners of the room. We began
drumming and joiking, and soon the
room was filled with a deeply
resonant, hypnotic sound. Some
singers began to sway. In the
darkness, we couldn’t see much of
the ‘ordinary’ world.

After some time, the first inner
circle member rose and began
slowly moving about the outer
circle, offering healing. One after
another, the other inner circle
members rose and did the same.
The drumming and joiking
transported all of us outside of
time, and it was difficult to know
how much was passing. Once I
sensed the ritual had reached its
peak, I slowly brought it to a close.

In sacred silence we sat for
some time with the reverberations
of what had transpired. Then,

I REMINDED THEM THAT EVERYTHING HAS A SPIRIT, AND EVERY SPIRIT HAS POWER AND WISDOM TO SHARE WITH US. I ASKED EACH PERSON TO SAY THEIR NAME, INTRODUCE THE OBJECT THEY BROUGHT AND WHAT GIFT FROM THE DARK IT REPRESENTED, AND TO PLACE IT ON THE VACANT ALTAR IN THE CENTER. IN THIS WAY WE BUILT AN ALTAR TO THE SPIRIT WE WOULD BRING THROUGH
quietly, I invited those who felt
touched to speak their experience to
do so, briefly.
No one spoke for some time.
Then people began to describe
their experiences of embodying the
spirit of the Dark in various ways:
like a baby sleeping
I have been really feeling
I could physically feel
level. I could really feel it leave.
I have been sleeping like a baby
every night since

I learned that the spirit of the Dark is
the most primordial and powerful of spirits.
It is of a size, consciousness and
power beyond our understanding, and
demands our utmost respect.

Even in 2003 I received such an
inquiry - six years after the last
holding of the ritual - testimony to
the healing power it imparted.
In Spring 2004 I had the
opportunity to share this ritual once
again, on a new moon night, with a
circle that had been working
together for some years. Again we
felt the indescribable power and
healing of the primordial spirit of the
Dark. It reminds me of the Torah's
honoring of the Great One with the
phrase, 'I am that I am'. Several
people approached me after the
ceremony and told me it was the
most powerful ritual they ever had
experienced.

This time I asked my fellow
circle members to write down some
of their experiences so I could have
a better idea of what transpired.
Here is some of what they shared:

Christabel: I received a
fantastic healing at the ceremony
from one of [those who embodied the Dark] who touched my
forehead and opened up a new
channel for me... I can see... in the
dark now... Also, I saw a dark being
that was so potent and primordial
that I felt as though the entire
universe were looking into my soul.

Judy: The whole ceremony...
touched my soul... I felt a definite
connection with the Darkness and
did not want the magical time to
end. It was this feeling of oneness
with the darkened space more than
any particular healing... Or maybe
that was the 'healing'.

Isabel (inner circle): Dark is
the reflection of the Light; in the
dark appeared the Goddess of the
Dark, first as light, and then like a
moon in an eclipse, dark in the
center but bright glowing out of the
sides of the dark moon. She is
happy that we visit her. A dragon
appears, it has something precious
to protect: the Goddess of the
Dark. The Dark is all-embracing.
She is the cocoon; renewal;
newness; rest and resting, like a
restful retreat; where the seeds
grow. The seed of the Light... No
ever, it is our fear of the dark, that
we make it so. Darkness is like a
white birth that wraps around me.
Darkness magnifies beauty.
Darkness is permeable. Darkness
tunes our senses, hearing, feeling,
smelling, sensing.

Dory: I loved the ritual and had a
quite profound healing experience I
did not anticipate or call out for.
One of [those bringing through] the
Dark came and embraced me very
gently and really enfolded me for
quite some time. During that time I
really felt the physical release of
fears and anxieties that have been
buried since my childhood
trauma. I'm an incest survivor
fears and anxieties that have been
buried since my childhood
night-time trauma. I'm an incest survivor
of trauma being held on a molecular
level. I could really feel it leave. I
have been sleeping like a baby
every night since... Also, I definitely
observed the physical form of two
of [those bringing through] the spirit of the Dark disappear... I kept
waking up and looking from as many
angles as I could maneuver from
my spot, and they were clearly not
there and they were not visible
moving around the room either.

Jim (inner circle): When the
drumming and joking started, I just
sat in silence and opened up as
much as possible... I began to feel
the presence of an... energy. I felt...
this energy enter my being through the spine. It was very warm and gentle, and it came in slowly. I knew it was there, but could not identify it, ‘see’ it, or communicate with it. It was much different than other experiences I have had such as merging and transfiguration: those are conscious efforts to merge with a known and familiar spirit. In this case, the unknown and unfamiliar spirit entered at will…

The energy continued to build… The sensation… was like being on too much caffeine - I could feel chills, and vibration deep inside my body. Finally, it was too uncomfortable to stay seated… I stood up slowly, and was immediately disoriented… I moved very slowly and walked… until I felt a ‘pull’ of energy from a place in the outer circle… I stopped when I felt I was at a place that I had been drawn to, and allowed energy to move through me to the person before me. Sometimes I was drawn to touch that person, and others not. I felt an energy flow like electricity emanating from my hands. I have no idea how many people I was drawn to, or who they were. I was not aware of how many times I walked around the circle, or back and forth, and I was not aware of time or place. The energy did not dissipate for a long time…

The spirit [of the Dark] was… much more powerful than I expected, and there were some feelings of anxiety… It was good from the perspective of… letting go of all outcomes and trusting that what would follow was for the good of all… I never got to know the spirit as I have in merging and transfiguration experiences. It was as though the spirit was following a pathway into this reality, and when it was finished, it disengaged much more quickly than it had engaged. There was no exchange of information, and no communication of any kind. Later… I found myself wondering what it was all about… what lesson was involved (other than trust), and why I felt uncomfortable afterward.

Hugh: What happened with the Dreaming the Dark was one of the most vivid and powerful experiences of my life. It was and is something that affected me deeply. When Jim [embodying the spirit of the Dark] laid his hands on me there was a very dark and deep void that appeared before me. Then the spirit of a feathered jaguar head appeared before me as if it were in [physical] reality. The feeling of power and might that emanated from this image is more than I can put into words. It infused me with omnipotence as it bared its fangs and stared into my face. I began to feel and act all-powerful, almost as if I were immortal. Then the spirit of my deceased Grandmother came to me and laid her gentle hands on my head. This calmed me down but I was still just radiating an aggressive ‘don’t tread on me’ type of attitude.

Nancy: This was my first experience of joiking... I knew I was in the room with the others but I knew nothing else really about myself. I was truly beside myself, in a state, a trance, in an ecstatic state deeper than any I have experienced to date… I also was visited by a spirit of the Darkness. It was large and filled the space in front of me and beyond. It was emanating wave after wave of something wonderful (which I can’t possibly describe) and sparks... black sparks which I could see… The joiking… immediately transported me... I felt nothing [of myself] for the first time in my life. In all [other] times... that I have been able to merge with a spirit or been able to step aside and experience something, I have kept an identity... sometimes just a cell, or a cellular memory. Joiking, the sound and the participation, enabled me to let all go.

Kathy: I found this ritual very beautiful and profoundly healing. I sang in the outer circle. The experience of singing the joik was quite evocative. I felt a sweet yearning... I felt I could [joik] for ever... I imagine that this might be what it feels like to be an angel singing in the divine scheme of things.

Barbara: This ritual was one of the most powerful that I have experienced in our circle. For me, there was a very deep peacefulness that accompanied the entire experience that was different from most merging or rituals that we have done. There also seemed to be a poignant beauty that I experienced that was different... I truly got out of my head and out of my body... A person merged [with the spirit of the Dark] came to me and gave me a ball of energy that I could feel when it was handed to me. For some reason I immediately took it and placed it in my heart. I was expanded to being merged, watching the healing, doing healing, joiking, and being in and out of various levels of reality. It was beautiful.

Postscript: The Dark is a profoundly powerful, loving, primordial spirit who can bring us much healing if we approach it with care and respect. Engaging it in this way also can bring profound healing to a culture that has become mired in dualities and projections, and bring us home to the truth of being at home in the great web of creation.

Last year we celebrated the first annual Dreaming the Dark in Portland, Oregon, where I now make my home. Forty people were in attendance; happily, we’ll have to make my home. Forty people were in attendance; happily, we’ll have to find a bigger space this year.

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