

Dreaming the

Celebrating our

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

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 awaking 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

DARK

Source



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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 this one had cohered into an intimate group in which people had taken significant risks and made great headway in personal and spiritual growth. At their request we extended beyond the usual eight weeks of instruction. Towards the

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 and 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 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: bed pillows representing sleep, eye pillows representing journeying, stuffed animals representing power animals or night-time friends, condoms representing sex, seeds representing germination, 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 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,

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quietly, I invited those who felt moved to speak their experience to do so, briefly.

No one spoke for some time. Then people began to describe their experiences of embodying the Dark, of receiving healing from the Dark, of visions seen, and teachings imparted.

Members of the inner circle described how, sitting with their backs to the altar during the ritual, they felt a hot pillar of fire rising from it. They were astonished that the Dark manifested as heat.

I hosted this ritual annually for three years, and always the inner circle felt a column of heat ascending from the altar. Different lessons were received each year. I remember, in particular, a teaching from the Dark about anger: that righteous anger is a power we can use to bring wholeness to our world, when it's wielded in a conscious, healing way.

One of many things I learned through birthing this ritual is that the trepidation I felt was not due solely to the cultural baggage we carry around Darkness. 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. To hold a successful ritual to work so directly with this spirit required all the years I had spent on preparation. If you feel trepidation, respect it - it's for a reason!

Following the ritual's third celebration in 1997, I moved away from the Pacific Northwest. Nevertheless, I received many inquiries in 1998 and 1999 asking whether I would be holding the Solstice ritual in Seattle that year.

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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 light 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 evil, 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 night-time trauma. I'm an incest survivor and night-time was not a safe time for me. I've done years of therapeutic work, breath work, and physical releasing work, and yet the spirit of Dark released another level 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 blinking and looking from as many angles as I could manoeuvre 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 joiking 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 emitting 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



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 find a bigger space this year.

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