

Being with the Dark

**Without darkness, we are not just incomplete ...
we fail to dream.** —Bear Guerra

We're living in a world that is perpetually bathed in artificial light. We repel the dark. And yet, we live in the midst of what is often referred to as "dark times"—the realities of environmental crisis, inequality, pandemic, offer the most apparent signs of this. How can we be present and engaged in these dark times? What are we forgoing as we trade the ancient curiosity evoked by the night sky for the ceaseless illumination of artificial light?

Photographer Bear Guerra questions our collective discomfort with darkness, both literally and metaphorically. His photo essay "Dark Skies" invites us to reconsider our fear of the dark and to welcome the night sky as a window into mystery and awe. "Given the myriad ways in which we humans have all but severed our connection to the natural world," he writes, "perhaps none will prove to be as profound as the loss of the night sky and of our connection to the dark."

In these times of lockdown and isolation, gazing upon the night sky can connect us to a greater sense of space, beauty, and possibility. We are able to come into a relationship with something infinitely bigger than ourselves.

In five steps, this practice invites you to immerse yourself in nightfall. Whether you live in the city or in a place where the outdoors is more accessible, these practices are a guide for settling into the expansive wonder of the dark.

PRACTICE ONE:

With dusk approaching, seek the quiet company of the coming dark. Be attentive to the direction of the setting sun, remembering that the light of this star has made your life possible. If you're in an urban area without a view of the horizon, you may be able to see the descent of the sun—and the accompanying shifts of light and shadow—reflected by neighboring buildings or cast onto the ground in front of you. As the sky transitions from blue to orange to black, find the darkest place you can—whether a hilltop in the countryside, a corner of your backyard, or the side of your street with the fewest lights. Whether you are outdoors or indoors looking through a window, turn off all the lights that you can, including your phone. It takes forty minutes for your eyes to adjust to darkness; give them this time. Notice what is transforming around you as night descends—sounds, colors, and textures, both in the sky above and here in your corner of the Earth.

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PRACTICE TWO:

As night spreads across the dome of the sky, turn your attention upward. Perhaps the bright shape of the moon is already climbing higher. What does it look like tonight? Depending on the time of year and your hemisphere, you may see the red face of Mars or the cold blue eye of Venus blinking at you from the relative proximity of our solar system. The very first stars will begin to appear where the sky is darkest, far above the band of light that still lines the horizon. As you see each glimmer of silver light appear above, remember that these ancient photons have traveled unfathomable distances to reach your eyes. If there is too much ambient light where you are to see any celestial bodies above you, close your eyes and summon them in your mind. Remember that, even if you cannot see them, they are there above you, always.

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PRACTICE THREE:

As the darkness progresses, the hazy band of stars, dust, and gas that make up the Milky Way—the “barred spiral” galaxy that we call home—may arc across your field of vision. Our galaxy measures 100,000 light-years across; Earth rests on but one spur of one of the Milky Way's four great arms. Every star that we are able to perceive with the naked eye is from our own galaxy. As the Milky Way rotates, our sun and solar system are traveling with it at 515,000 miles per hour. So, look up into the sky and know that—day or night, inside or outside—you are spinning in concert with the light of the 200 billion stars that make up our galaxy.

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PRACTICE FOUR:

We are often taught to fear the absence of light; to shy away from the dark as something oppressive or constrictive. But in the night sky, darkness is an invitation into expansive mystery. As the spot where you are sitting rotates further away from the sun, stay with the dark for as long as you are able. Beyond the atmosphere above you, beyond the solar system, beyond the Milky Way, there are an estimated 170 billion galaxies in the universe, some with more than a hundred trillion stars.

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PRACTICE FIVE:

The night sky has been a source of awe and wonder for human beings since time immemorial, but our species has in many ways lost its collective adjustment to the dark. Experiencing darkness that hasn't been diluted by artificial light is rare. As soon as our eyes are reintroduced to a source of light—a lamp, a phone screen, the flash of a camera—they will lose any adjustment they've made to the darkness. More than 80 percent of the world's population, and 99 percent of the population of the United States, now lives beneath light-polluted skies. In an ever more illuminated world, what do we lose access to when the lights are always on? Having spent this time immersed in the expansive night, what might you carry forward into your days? What sensations of the dark might you want to return to?

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