

Darkness Is as Light with Thee

Excerpted from
Touching the Rock:
An Experience of Blindness

John M. Hull

Occasionally I feel depressed, and this is worst when I am frustrated in playing with the children. I feel as if I have become nothing, unable to act as a father, impotent, unable to survey, to admire, or to exercise jurisdiction or discrimination. I have a strange feeling of being dead.

My response is to go even further inwards, into a deeper deadness. I sink into quietness and passivity. I might sit in a chair alone, without moving, reducing my breathing to the barest minimum, simmering down until I am aware of less and less. I try to think of nothing, and often drift in and out of sleep. I might cover myself with a blanket, cutting out any faint sounds, and by emptying myself completely, I become the cipher that my blindness tells me I am. In this state, I can continue for hours.

This technique for fighting depression is effective up to a point. It does provide a certain refuge, a kind of solace, a place to go to. I certainly find that, if the joyful games of the children throw me into one of these depressed states, and if I am unable to go into my nothingness refuge, possibly because I am responsible for the children and have to remain alert, or because of some social obligation to visitors or friends, then I seem to go to pieces. I build up inner tension. There is a tightness in my forehead, a feeling that I will not be able to go on much longer. The image of the quiet little bed in the corner of my study keeps flooding into my mind and I feel that the demands of the outside world which prevent me from retiring are rapidly becoming less and less acceptable. Each voice comes, as it were, from an increasingly remote distance, and is heard with increasing reluctance. The sounds of the outside world now strike me with a certain pain, as if they are preventing me from obtaining relief, and I will, at this stage, find it impossible to remain awake.

I must find another way of tackling this problem. I need to understand it more. It has been suggested that blindness is one of the great symbols or archetypes. In the art and mythology of many peoples, blindness is associated with ignorance, confusion and unconsciousness. Perhaps my imagination has come under the power of these associations. Perhaps my actual blindness has activated the archetype of blindness within me.

This could be why in these states of depression I feel as if I am on the borders of conscious life, not just in the literal sense that I am slipping in and out of sleep, but in a deeper and more alarming sense. I feel as if I want to stop thinking, stop experiencing. The lack of a body image makes this worse: the fact that one can't glance down and see the reassuring continuity of one's own consciousness in the outlines of one's own body, moving a distant foot which, so to speak, waves back, saying, "Yes, I hear you. I am here." There is no extension of awareness into space. So I am nothing but a pure

consciousness, and if so, I could be anywhere. I am becoming ubiquitous; it no longer matters where I am. I am dissolving. I am no longer concentrated in a particular location, which would be symbolized by the integrity of the body.

The archetype of blindness represents the power to obliterate the distinction between that which is known and that which is not known, that which is here and that which is not here, the inside and the outside, the specific and the general. It represents dissolution, the borderland between being and not-being.

The techniques which I have described for fighting panic and depression are only partly successful. In the case of the withdrawing technique, it is too similar to the object of its fear. This is why it cannot be an effective response, urgent and perhaps inevitable though it may be in the short term. As for blindness being an archetype, what do I do about it? I need to find an antidote. Could there be an opposing archetype? Could this be the idea of light? Light is certainly one of the perennial symbols. Light gives detail, drives away uncertainty, allows discrimination, dissolves ambiguity, and gives a particular place and context.

One of the most beautiful biblical passages, which expresses the power of the archetype of light, is found in Numbers 6:24-6, the Aaronic Blessing: "The Lord bless you and keep you, the Lord make his face to shine unto you and be gracious unto you, the Lord lift up the light of his countenance upon you and give you peace." This passage expresses the clarity, the radiance and the sense of identity, which is conferred by being in the presence of the lighted face of God. Another passage which expresses the archetype of light is found in I John 1:5: "God is light, and in him there is no darkness at all."

This is of limited use to me. God may be in light but I am in darkness. This alternative archetype only oppresses me by the brightness of its contrast. By obliterating the darkness, it obliterates me. The archetype of light cancels the archetype of darkness but does not transcend it. It cannot transcend the darkness/light distinction because it is one side of it. I need to find an alternative archetype of a higher order.

Beyond Light and Darkness

26 February 1984

Thomas had asked me if he could have the light on in the room where we were playing. It had not occurred to me that it had become dark. He had explained, "Thomas needs the light. Daddy doesn't need the light."

I thought of the passage in Psalm 139 verse 12: "Darkness and light are both alike to thee." There is a strange sense in which I have become like God. I may have discov-

ered not so much the opposing archetype as the alternative one, the one which transcends and unifies at a higher level.

Darkness Is as Light with Thee

27 February 1984

“O Lord, thou hast searched me and known me” (Ps. 139:1). This is a meditation about knowledge. God knows the posture of my body without having to touch me. “Thou knowest when I sit down and when I rise up” (v.2). God possesses that strange power of knowing at a distance. I am often surprised that my sighted friends know something when it is still so far off. The blind have to remember that it is just as if the sighted were touching their faces all the time. Sighted people gain knowledge of what blind people are thinking just through watching their faces. “Thou discernest my thoughts from afar” (v.2). Sighted people often call out, telling me that there is a car parked on the footpath. Friends often tell me that they saw me (from their cars) crossing the road. They honked me, but there was no way I could recognize them before the traffic moved on. I was surprised the other day to find out how far down the road I was when my children, knowing I was coming, had time to prepare something for me. “Thou searchest out my path and my lying down and art acquainted with all my ways” (v.3).

In some ways, God’s knowledge of the world is rather like the knowledge which the sighted have of the blind, but it also goes further. “Open your eyes!” one of my sighted friends said to her husband. “I can’t tell what you’re thinking when you sit there with your eyes closed.” The eyes of the blind are inscrutable. It is true that the sighted can catch the transient emotions upon the faces of the blind, but all too often I find that my friends think I am asleep, when in fact I am paying very close attention to them. I must speak if they are to know my inner thoughts. Speech becomes all-important to the blind. God, however, does not depend upon my speech to know me, even though I am blind. “Even before a word is on my tongue, lo, O Lord, thou knowest it altogether” (v.4). It is at this point that we realize that we are entering into the presence of something which transcends the distinction between blindness and sight, darkness and light.

The psalm continues with all the emotions which the blind person would have. As a sighted person, you are acknowledged by your friends with a smile, a nod, a wink or even the most fleeting exchange of glances. To be acknowledged by my friends, I must soon be spoken to or touched. I find that I have developed a little habit, which I feel sure is due to my blindness, of shaking hands with people by using both of my hands. I somehow feel the need to extend an acknowledgement of their presence which will make up for my inability to receive their smiles. When I am speaking at a meeting, it is important to go around to as many people as I can beforehand, shaking hands and literally making contact. “Thou dost beset me behind and before and layest thy hand upon me” (v.5).

I drop a teaspoon on to the floor. I lower my twelve-month-old baby, holding her by the waist. I wait a moment, moving her up and down a little like a vacuum cleaner. I lift her up again. The teaspoon is in her hand. I am full of wonder. She picked it up, so smoothly, so easily, with no need to scrape the carpet with her hand. She went straight for it. How did she know? This child has some strange sense which I can but remember. God's knowledge fills me with even greater wonder. "Such knowledge is too wonderful for me! It is high, I cannot attain it" (v.6). What does "high" mean to a blind person? How high are the buildings? How high are the clouds? I only know that things are up there; they are beyond my reach.

The knowledge which God has is inescapable. It surrounds me; it fills me. It makes every place alike, for all places are known to God. "Whither shall I go from thy spirit? Or whither shall I flee from thy presence?" (v.7). There are no degrees of the divine presence because there are no degrees of divine knowledge. "If I ascend to heaven, thou art there. If I make my bed in Sheol, thou art there" (v.8). God is Lord of all worlds. The world of heaven, of light, is his. The world of Sheol, of darkness and of the depths, is also his. It makes no difference to him where I am, or in what world I find myself. He is not enclosed within the world of heavenly light nor is he defeated by the world of impenetrable night.

Now I imagine I am flying. I imagine I am free, once again, to go where I will, and that the morning and the ocean will once again be accessible to me. "If I take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea . . ." (v.9). I may, perhaps, live beneath the sea, in that world of the unconscious depths. Even there, the One who is the Lord of all worlds will make himself known to me in the manner which suits my condition. He will not show himself to me: he will not appear to me. He will not offer me a vision or be transformed in glory. He will remember my blindness. ". . . even there thy hand shall lead me and thy right hand shall hold me" (v.10).

I feel certain that the author of this psalm was blind. Nobody else could have described so powerfully the religious experience of the blind person, or could have interpreted so perfectly the presence of a blind person before God.

We now come to the climax of the psalm. "If I say, 'Let only darkness cover me and light about me be night,' even the darkness is not dark to thee. The night is bright as the day, for darkness is as light with thee" (vv.11f). Sometimes I feel that I am being buried in blindness. I am being carried deeper and deeper in. The weight presses me down. Such knowledge as I have is disappearing, is so limited, so fragile, my hold upon it is so feeble. Should I then wish this? Should I accept it with some kind of spirit of sacrifice? Should I plunge myself in the inevitable, so that even my remaining knowledge will sink into ignorance?

Just as blindness has the effect of obliterating the distinctions, so the divine omniscience transcends them. Because I am never in the light, it is equally true that I am never in the darkness. I have no fear of the darkness because I know nothing else. Nobody can turn the lights out on me. So it is with God. He is indifferent alike to both light and darkness. He does not need the light in order to know, and the darkness cannot prevent him from knowing. In that sense, it is true that if darkness is as light, then light is as darkness. The older translation of the Authorized Version brings out the point more vividly: "Darkness and light are both alike to thee." This is not the image of a beam of light penetrating the darkness and banishing it. God does not overwhelm the darkness by his light; he represents that pure knowledge to which both light and darkness in their different ways point.

I come back to the one thing I know. There is my body, sitting here on the edge of the bed, trembling and sweating. There is the tension in my stomach, the pounding in my temples. I hear my breathing, I feel my heart pounding. I do not know what is out there; I know what is in here. "... for thou didst form my inward parts. Thou didst knit me together in my mother's womb. . . . thou knowest me right well; my frame was not hidden from thee. When I was being made in secret, intricately wrought in the depths of the earth, thy eyes beheld my unformed substance. In thy book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there was none of them" (vv.13ff).

The psalm remains remarkably faithful to the experience of blindness. Is it not strange that my knowledge of what is going on six inches inside me should be more accurate than my knowledge of what is going on six inches away from me? Whether inside or outside, however, all is alike to the divine knower.

The physical closeness of two people making love is a problem to the pornographic filmmaker, for at the point of most intimate touching, where sight becomes irrelevant, the pornographer must introduce distance in order to retain visual excitement. It is amusing for a blind man to think that there is still one thing he can do, and people often remark that you don't need speech and you don't need sight to do it. No matter how exciting and profound may be the mutual knowledge which lovers exchange, none can ever be said to know or experience the moment when the sperm joins the ovum and a new life is born. I was made in secret and I am still being made in the secrets of blindness, but all secrets are open to God. I no longer know the passage of my days by means of the alternation of day and night, light and darkness, and in this sense also, my knowledge of my days is rather like God's. The important thing about waking up is not the morning but the presence. I am restored by wakefulness to the presence of the ones I love. "When I awake I am still with thee" (v.18), so although I experience the para-

doxes of rediscovering sight in the unconscious life of dreams and of losing my sight once again every time I wake up, the paradoxes are transcended in communion with the One who knows me, whether I wake or sleep, for I am still with him.

Not Acceptance but Praise

28 February 1984

The transforming power of the alternative archetype is to be appropriated not by acceptance but by praise. “I praise thee, for thou art fearful and wonderful. Wonderful are thy works. . . . How precious to me are thy thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them! If I were to count them, they are more than the sand” (Ps. 139:14ff).

As a blind person, sitting on the beach, I have poured a fistful of sand upon the palm of my other hand, allowing it to trickle through my fingers. I have rubbed the sand between my finger and thumb, wondering at the various textures. Some of the grains are coarse and sharp, filing the skin in such a way that every little speck stands out. Some are so smooth and silky that it is almost impossible to tell the grains, the sand disappearing like water. If I stretch my hand out a little further, I can still grasp sand, and so on, further and further. I know that with sight I could tell the sweep of this beach for miles around the bay. This beach is but one of thousands of such beaches, and there are probably thousands of people like me just now, doing what I am doing, running the grains between their fingers and wondering. So are the divine thoughts. My body holds them, one by one, while I myself am held like a grain upon the hand of God.

In adoration I welcome the divine knowledge. “Search me, O God, and know my heart. Try me, and know my thoughts and see if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting” (v.23f). What matters is not that I am blind, but that I am known and that I am led by the hand, and that my life, whether sighted or blind, is full of praise.

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From *Touching the Rock* by John Hull

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THE WIDER QUAKER FELLOWSHIP
a program of the
Friends World Committee for Consultation,
Section of the Americas
1506 Race Street
Philadelphia, PA 19102 USA



Printed on recycled paper

7-93 / 2800 / GS