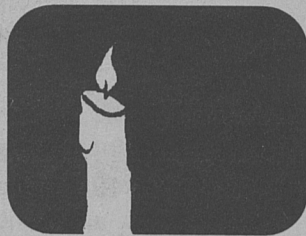


FAITH MATTERS

by the reverend christine leslie

**Faith Matters and Darkness Matters**

Come early November, we who live in Vermont, as well as most residents of these United States, will have lived through two annual fall rituals.

The first is the cultural festival known as Halloween, marked by the costuming of children in outfits that range from foolish to frightening and the giving of candy to these costumed wee-ones when they come to our front doors as dusk settles in and darkness begins to cloak the heavens.

The other ritual we all endure is not as much fun as Halloween can be. It is the annual "falling back" of the clock on the last Sunday in October, which gives us an extra daylight hour in the morning. This means, however, that we have one fewer daylight hour in the evening.

Before moving to here, I had never lived as far north as Vermont, and I was truly ignorant about how short the days do become once the last Sunday in October has us turn our clocks back one hour. This will be my fourth winter in Vermont, and I enjoy the strong contrasts we have in seasons. This includes a real love for the winter along with its short days.

But then, darkness has always enthralled me. I can remember learning in biology how important the daily exchange of light and dark is to the life of deciduous trees, and thinking to myself, "Wow—if there were no darkness, there would be no life on earth!"

Darkness has never been something I have dreaded or disliked. It just is for me. Since moving to Vermont, however, I have become aware that this is not the case for many people. It seems many folks suffer from something now called "Seasonal Affective Disorder." Apparently, we all need to absorb sunlight in order to maintain a level of brain chemicals that keeps us feeling upbeat and glad to be alive. Some of us need more sunlight than others in order to effect this process in our bodies. I think this phenomenon has been going on for thousands of years, which is why I think human beings have come to confuse the cover of darkness with that which is unpleasant, even with that which is evil, negative, and bad. This has had devastating consequences, the

most obvious being the equation of dark skinned people with the devil incarnate. I have this notion that, were more white people willing to look at just how much they have projected and do project (consciously and unconsciously) their discomfort with darkness onto dark skinned people, we might live in a less racist world.

I also think the equation of evil with darkness and goodness with light (also known as white) has gone on for too long. I go back to what I learned in biology: if there were no darkness, or not enough darkness to counterbalance the sunlight, life would not exist today on Earth as we know it. If more people really understood this, perhaps they would have less dislike of the darkness and maybe even grow to love it and embrace it for the gift that it is. Perhaps there might even be fewer cases of Seasonal Affective Disorder were more people able to befriend the darker days as a time to look inward rather than outward for that which support life's growth processes. This takes a willingness to spend time with ourselves in something less than a frenzied state, something that the shortening of our days offers us!

As we go into this next season of shorter days and longer nights, it is my prayer that we find a way to embrace the darkness while looking forward to the longer days of light that spring brings to us. I invite us to see these shorter days as something to be valued and not tolerated or just endured. Truth be known, we might even discover what is really missing from our lives. I would imagine we might discover what's missing really has little to do with sunlight and a lot to do with whether or not we are lonely, feel respected and cherished, feel a sense of accomplishment, have come to terms with being GLBT people, and on down the list of "all-time hits" we beat ourselves up with.

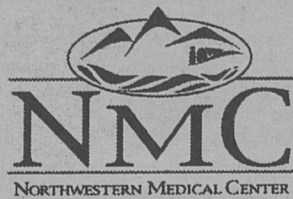
Darkness matters, all right but not in the ways many of us have made it matter. Perhaps so many of us fight the darkness or view it as a burden to be endured exactly because it provides us with a longer time to go inward. Going inward to find out why what's missing is

often not a pleasant process. It's a lot easier to obsess on the shortness of our days than look at and deal with the shortcomings in our lives. And as long as we choose to do the former rather than the latter, we just keep shortchanging ourselves and keep thinking that longer days mean a longer and happier life. Were it as easy as this.

We need not embrace the darkness by ourselves, you know. This is where faith mattering comes into the picture. Asking the Beloved Creator of All Life to go with us into the shrouded places in our souls gives us access to a source of courage and strength not otherwise available to us. She never comes unless invited. She never leaves unless we walk away. May this season of the darker days be a source of joy and delight in our lives as we accept what they offer: a time to reflect on the inward landscape that is ours that awaits our time, love and attention. Blessed Be!

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Globally, sex between men and women is by far the most common way of passing on HIV. (UNAIDS, 2000)



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