

“Vincent, A Light In The Shadows” Rev. Annie Holmes

A children’s song tells:

Peace is when the wind stops blowing
Peace is when the sun is showing
Knowing that my family’s near,
Love brings me peace.

Peace, peace
I think I understand.
Peace, Peace,
Is holding someone’s hand.

Peace is when I’m tucked in bed
With a kiss upon my head.
Peace is smiling while I sleep
Love brings me peace.

But this is often not a peaceful season. Many people fight the winter blues. The winter blues during the winter months for some people revolves around three problems that have until recently have been felt but unnamed. For victims of these disorders there has been little legitimacy of their pain by the medical world and often no understanding of their pain and fears by their families. In fact, until recently these disorders had no names at all, just symptoms that were often passed off as psychosomatic maladies that had to do with people’s inability to cope with life and pressures. But now these pressures that some people feel during the winter months have names and treatments.

SAD or Seasonal affective disorder

Depression caused by deficient amounts of sunlight and vitamin D

CCO ~ or Carbohydrate craving obesity.

Similar patterns are seen in all three of these complaints. Are they really disorders? Or are they part, of what we all suffer to a certain degree during this time when the sun leaves us for days and months until Spring? The symptoms vary of course, from person to person, but there is some similarity. People, 40% of people in the middle to northern latitudes of the United States experience some kind of doldrums. Symptoms include; feeling sad, having less energy, putting on a few pounds and having difficulty getting up in the morning and getting down to what needs to be done in the very short daylight hours. Still, many manage to function somewhat normally. But as many as 20% are knocked almost completely

out of commission, out of their more normal, active lives during the winter months. They often feel chronically depressed and fatigued and want to withdraw from the world. They may sleep an extra four or more hours a day, and for some their appetite may become voracious, sometimes accompanied by irresistible cravings for sweet and starchy foods leading to the weight gain. These disorders disorder their lives and upset their feeling of being a full, complete, active human being. Many people blame themselves for the way they feel. If they were only stronger or more self controlled, they could cope. It is a secret, often hidden and often destructive kind of predicament many people find themselves every single winter. No wonder many people feel helpless and panicked this time of year. Look what they have to look forward to.

And the bigger issue is of course, what does it do to our society in general. And too, we must realize we are all affected by the coming darkness in one form or another.

Untreated light deficient depression, SAD or CCO can and have incapacitated people for a large part of each year. But, as has been found in working with SAD patients at the New York State Psychiatric Institute, it can be treated in a number of ways. Some people actually have to move to a sunny climate for those months where there is more natural light. Others find that standard antidepressant medications can provide some relief, though it is believed patients usually do not bounce back to their normal level of well-being until spring or summer. Many patients with these symptoms find psychotherapy helpful in coping with these warning signs, even though it may not relieve the oversleeping, the overeating and the blue moods during the winter.

Increasing research evidence shows that unusual and innovative form of treatment known as light therapy can help some SAD, CCO and depression sufferers return quickly to a more normal life in the winter. The treatment is quite simple, patients are regularly exposed to intense levels of light under controlled conditions. They are told to sit with the high level vitamin D light shining directly in their faces for 15 minutes twice or three times a day. When people have begun to feel better after the light treatment, they described the sensation as feeling invincible and powerful and wonderfully uncontrolled as on a day in early Spring.

How do you tell if you are suffering from any of these disorders or depression for that matter. Do you feel down, sad, helpless? Have you lost interest in ordinary life activities? Do you have problems sleeping or do you sleep much more than usual? Have you lost interest in eating or are you eating much more? Do you have difficulty concentrating, remembering or making decisions? Do you feel panicked by the coming of winter, almost feeling trapped and unable to breathe deeply and fully?

Who is depressed? Almost everyone experiences temporary sadness at some point in their lives. There is the past to deal with, bereavement, war, divorce, bankruptcy, fires and loss of personal property, there is being blamed for something you did not do, and you know the list is endless of those things that can make us feel truly sad. And there is the unconscious loss we all feel as the sun leaves our skies for months at a time. We in the northern regions must develop ways of handling the winter blues.

But is the deck stacked against us? Because we can spend 30 consecutive days in the shadows, are we more prone to depression and bouts of fear and dread? People from all times of history have felt fear and dread around this time of year, as they feared the sun would not return.

We are in the waning moon phase this week. We are coming into the time of the Winter Solstice. The Solstices are either of two times of the year when the sun has no apparent northward or southward motion, at the most northern or most southern point of the earth's turning. Solstice is a Latin word meaning "the sun to stand." So the sun is standing in one place twice a year.

In the days of old, this time of year was marked with growing apprehension by early people's as the days grew darker and darker and the people feared the sun would never return. Elaborate ceremonies took place to coax the sun back. Huge fires were made to imitate the light and warmth of the retreating sun and lure it back by magical means. All normal business in society came to an end during the festivities, wars were suspended by common consent, dancing, feasting, singing were all part of the rituals. Kings and peasants, lords and surfs exchanged places for a day as all rejoiced in the birth of the new year.

For most of the ancient world the month of the Solstice was the greatest celebration of the year. As the sun would indeed return in the Spring they figured their magic worked so each year the feasting would last longer and longer. Hence the idea of the month of the Solstice lasted 12 days, which is how we come to the 12 days of Christmas.

But after the feasting and celebrating of our modern holiday times is over, what do we do to renew through the long winter months? "Peace is smiling while I sleep, Love brings me peace." And that thought brings me to a reflection of Vincent Van Gogh. If it is true that love brings peace, that love if not the peace is certainly seen through the works of Vincent.

Vincent Willem van Gogh, (1853-1890), Dutch postimpressionist painter, whose work represents the archetype of *expressionism*, the idea of emotional spontaneity in painting. Van Gogh was born March 30, 1853, in Groot-Zundert, son of a Dutch Protestant pastor. Early in life he displayed a moody, restless temperament that was to thwart his every pursuit. By the age of 27 he had been in turn; a salesman in an art gallery, a French tutor, a theological student, and an evangelist among the miners at Wasmes in Belgium. His experiences as a preacher are reflected in his first paintings of peasants and potato diggers; of these early works, the best known is the rough, earthy *Potato Eaters* (1885). Dark and somber, sometimes crude, these early works evidence van Gogh's intense desire to express the misery and poverty of humanity as he saw it among the miners in Belgium.

In 1886 van Gogh went to Paris to live with his brother Théo van Gogh, an art dealer, and became familiar with the new art movements developing at the time. Influenced by the work of the impressionists, and by the work of such Japanese printmakers as Hiroshige and Hokusai, van Gogh began to experiment with current techniques. Subsequently, he adopted the brilliant hues found in the paintings of the French artists Camille Pissarro and Georges Seurat.

In 1888 van Gogh left Paris for southern France, where, under the burning sun of Provence, he painted scenes of the fields, cypress trees, peasants, and rustic life characteristic of the region. During this period, living at Arles, he began to use the swirling brush strokes and intense yellows, greens, and blues associated with such typical works as *Bedroom at Arles* (1888), and *Starry Night*. For van Gogh all visible phenomena, whether he painted or drew them, seemed to be endowed with a physical and spiritual vitality. In his enthusiasm he induced the painter Paul Gauguin, whom he had met earlier in Paris, to join him. After less than two months they began to have violent disagreements, culminating in a quarrel in which van Gogh wildly threatened Gauguin with a razor; the same night, in deep remorse, van Gogh cut off part of his own ear. For a time he was in a hospital at Arles. He then spent a year in the nearby asylum of Saint-Rémy, working between repeated spells of madness. Under the care of a sympathetic doctor, whose portrait he painted (*Dr. Gachet*, 1890,) van Gogh spent three months at Auvers. Just after completing his ominous *Crows in the Wheatfield's* (1890), he shot himself on July 27, 1890, and died two days later.

The more than 700 letters that van Gogh wrote to his brother Théo (published 1911, translated 1958) constitute a remarkably illuminating record of the life of an artist and a thorough documentation of his unusually fertile output—about 750 paintings and 1600 drawings. In

1973 the Rijksmuseum Vincent van Gogh, containing over 1000 paintings, sketches, and letters, was opened in Amsterdam.

Vincent tried many different occupations in his lifetime. But that was the problem, he “tried” them. He tried too hard, tried to force them to work. They did not flow out of him in love as his paintings did. After reading much about Vincent, I have come to the conclusion that Vincent can be a light in shadows of this winter season. I feel so sorry his paintings were not a light in his own life.

Vincent wrote many letters to his brother Theo. Theo was the only constant friend and benefactor and supporter Vincent had throughout his life. I’m sure some of you are familiar with some of his paintings; Starry Night, The Potato Eaters, The Bedroom in Arles scene. But in order for you to get to know Vincent better, while reading his letters we see that Vincent suffered from various conditions some of which was I believe depression, despair and a lack of belief in himself. This puts him square in the place we are sometimes finding ourselves, the coming of winter, the possibility of a widening gulf between light and shadows.

Light was a constant theme in Vincent's life. Maybe because he himself spent so much time in turmoil and mental darkness. Living was difficult for Vincent, but painting was easy, effortless, joyful and even afforded him a little peace.

The letters between brothers reminds us once again of the importance of family and family connections. I am reminded of the importance of sharing with another person, even the hard stuff of our lives. I am opened up again to the wonderful care Theo took of his brother Vincent, even when everyone else thought he was mad and should simply be put away. And I think again of the people in my life who may need me to believe in them even when others have said their lives are throw away lives. Who in our lives could use some of our belief in them? Who could use us to put some faith in them?

Vincent did not sell one painting in his lifetime. Not one! And yet the need to paint was so strong in him, and thank the heavens it was. My life would certainly be less bright without his pictures. And another question, what creative process have we not been doing lately because we have made ourselves so busy with other things? Are we afraid of judgment? Are we afraid of failure? How would our lives and the lives of those around us be enriched if we were compelled to be as creative as we know we could be? Every person is endowed with some special creative gift. Is that gift buried, or is it treasured, used and practiced and loved?

I, often in the dark, seeming endless days of winter find myself sitting on our couch, with a cup of hot tea, letting Vincent's art do a cleansing job on me. I look at the hues of greens, yellows, oranges, and even the black and white sketches and in a deep space of my soul I feel healed from the bleak scenes of winter. I am reminded of the spring and summer and the beauty that people can produce when they listen to that still small voice within them that tells them how to find peace.

Vincent is a model for me. He suffered, he strove, he failed and yet he succeeded beautifully. He is so human, I guess that's what makes him a light for me in shadows of my life. I could summarize Vincent's gift to me in that I too could begin to see the whole world in relationship to colors. To see hues and shades, complementariness and possibilities in everyday life is truly a gift. As I look at my living room it becomes alive with the browns of the wooden furniture, the blues of the rug, the rain while I look out my window, and of course, the gray of the dust balls in the corners. In my office I begin to see colors and harmonies of colors, whispers of shades I before took for granted. Lampshades, countertops, people's eyes and sweaters, hair and clothes all take on new meaning and the satisfaction of peace in the world around me. And the shadows, the exquisite shadows of fall and winter. "Don't miss them," Vincent whispers to me.

I read once that out of chaos can come change, out of change growth, out of growth new understanding. I would add that out of understanding can come peace. An axiom from *Adult Children of Alcoholics*, goes, if each person had someone to love, something to work on and one goal to work toward, the light of peace would never go out in our inner world.

The shadows of winter are so soon upon us. Colds and flu, depression slush and nippy noses are with us for months to come. Find a light in the shadows for yourself. Seek peace in your life. Our hopes for peace revolve around our hopes for fulfillment. Think of ourselves as musical notes, we need to have a harmonious compliment. It's how we respond to change that's significant. It is a matter of knowing that as we do go through suffering we can also transform the suffering into a real understanding of life's complexities. Vincent was able to do just that, transform all that he was and felt; the pain, the struggles, the people, into generous gifts to all of us through his true genius, working successfully with color and shadows.

Sometimes we need some help to express our feelings of the world around us, if those feelings be joyful or mournful. Sometimes a poem, or a movie or a painting, helps us say it. Ordinary scenes of life are transformed into gems of understanding. Each moment in our life, each

experience can shed light on the whole, the meaning, the truth of our existence.

Out of chaos change, out of change growth, out of growth understanding, out of understanding peace. Love gives us peace. Love of life, of ourselves, love of light. In this season of shadows, light some candles, shed some light in your free time on your spiritual side and open up to colors, warmth and healing. Soon we will be blessed again with Spring, all that beauty Vincent made come alive on canvas will be part of reality. But for now, maybe Vincent can be our light in the shadows.