

## READING AND DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR

# *Learning to Walk in the Dark*

by

Barbara Brown Taylor

1. When you read the word “darkness,” what images, feelings, or thoughts come to your mind? Are they positive or negative? How do you think your upbringing affects your response to the idea of darkness?
2. “I have learned things in the dark that I could never have learned in the light, things that have saved my life over and over again, so that there is really only one logical conclusion. I need darkness as much as I need light” (p. 5). What is your response to the idea that people need darkness as much as light to learn what they need to know about life? Can you describe a time when you learned something in darkness that you could not have learned in light?

3. According to Taylor, the opposition of dark and light in Christian tradition sets up a harmful dichotomy between these two spheres of human experience (p. 7). How true do you think this is? Have you seen this dichotomy at work in your own faith tradition?
4. Think back over your childhood. What is your “personal history of darkness”? Were you taught to fear darkness and protect yourself from it, or were you taught to walk in it to encounter fear and learn from it (p. 38)? How did this affect how you face darkness today?
5. During high school, Taylor made friends with Jack and Carol, who took her to church with them. The teachings she heard made her afraid of the dark. Have you ever attended a religious service in which teachings on darkness prompted a similar response from you? How did those ideas affect you physically, emotionally, and spiritually?
6. Some religious congregations teach that darkness is to be feared, avoided, or even demonized, though many significant biblical events happen at night (p. 45). Have you ever considered this? How do you read and understand passages that deal with darkness? How have you heard them interpreted in the past?
7. “I cannot remember the last time I heard anyone use ‘dark’ to describe something good” (p. 54). Can you remember a time when you heard the word “dark” used positively? If not, why might this be? If so, explain how it was used and your reaction to it.

8. “Our inner and outer worlds are so closely related. . . . For a measure of your comfort with the dark, notice how many lights you leave on at night. Is one per room enough or do you prefer more? . . . In these ways and more, our comfort or discomfort with the outer dark is a good barometer of how we feel about the inner kind” (p. 60). How comfortable are you with the dark? Do you, as Taylor says, require only one light per room, or do you require more? How might this reflect your comfort level with inner darkness? How might you begin to engage more with inner darkness by taking steps to allow more outward darkness?
9. Taylor describes the moments when we awake and are unable to go back to sleep as times when “you come face-to-face with what really matters because it is too dark for most of your usual, shallowing distractions to work” (p. 76). When you awake at night with things on your mind, what do you do? Do you attempt to fall back to sleep as soon as you can, or do you stay with the unsettling thoughts for a while? In either case, what is your motivation for doing so?
10. People tend to lump emotions into two categories—good or bad. In her discussion of this phenomenon, Taylor references the work of Miriam Greenspan, who argues that this separation prevents us from learning what these emotions have to teach. Consider emotions that people tend to label “bad”—anger, fear, misery, sadness—and gauge your reaction to them. What makes them bad? How successful are your attempts to

avoid them? What might you gain or lose by exploring them instead?

11. Taylor's participation in a "Dialogue in the Dark" experience prompted her to wonder what it would be like to start what she called an "Opaque Church," in which people interacted without allowing identity markers (e.g., race or age) to color their opinions (p. 100). What do you think it would be like to attend an Opaque Church? How would it be different from other religious gatherings you have attended?
12. Sight is a superficial sense. Not only does it rely on outward appearances, but the speed with which we look around also causes us to miss a lot (p. 105). What might you gain from making better use of your other senses—smell, taste, touch, and hearing—rather than relying so much on sight? What more might you learn about your surroundings?
13. In the chapter titled "Entering the Stone," Taylor describes several events in her life that were the quietest she had ever experienced. She was amazed at the things she could hear that she normally doesn't notice (p. 122). Can you think of an experience so quiet that you noticed sounds you normally miss? What sounds might you be missing simply because you are always surrounded by noise? How might seeking out silence benefit you?
14. When describing fears and problems, Taylor says that they are much like caves in that "the way out is the way

- in” (p. 129). What do you think she means by this? Does this ring true in your experience?
15. Taylor says that she went looking for “celestial brightness” but almost missed it because it did not look the way she expected it would. She questions, “How many other treasures have I walked right by because they did not meet my standards?” (p. 131). Can you think of a time when high standards or expectations almost caused you to miss a treasure that was right in front of you?
  16. People often try to control dark nights of the soul by treating them like tests to be passed or punishments to be endured instead of the necessary spiritual passages they are. “One of the hardest things to decide during a dark night is whether to surrender or resist. The choice often comes down to what you believe about God and how God acts” (p. 135). When you experience a dark night of the soul, do you surrender or resist? What does your reaction reveal about your belief in who God is and how God is supposed to act? Are there opportunities for growth here?
  17. “God puts out our lights to keep us safe, John says, because we are never more in danger of stumbling than when we think we know where we are going” (p. 146). Does this ring true in your experience? Why or why not?
  18. According to Taylor, “dark” is relative (p. 156). One person’s definition of “dark” will not match another person’s. What is your definition of “dark”? Has it shifted at all through reading this book?

19. In the chapter titled “Working with Darkness,” Taylor describes a time she stayed alone in an old house and felt a presence in the dark (p. 157). What was your initial response to her experience? Did the presence feel benevolent or sinister to you? Why? After reading Taylor’s deconstruction of the event (p. 163), how did your understanding of it change?
20. In 2009, Taylor visited Notre Dame de Chartres for the first time. She describes the night she went to see Chartres en Lumières, a light show during which images were projected onto the façade of the building (p. 177). Once her eyes got tired of the lights, she looked upward and noticed the moon. At that point, she remarks, “I understand the choice I am being offered: do I want the kind of light that shines *on* things or the kind that shines *from* them?” (p. 178). If this distinction holds true for you, what do you think the difference is? What makes each kind of light attractive? What would be your choice and why?
21. At the end of her book, Taylor encourages readers to become more curious about their own darkness. Review the questions in the middle of page 185, and discuss any that you find compelling. Are your old beliefs about the dark still adequate, or do some of them need updating? What might you gain by seeking some “endarkenment” in your life along with some “enlightenment” (p. 186)?

22. After reading *Learning to Walk in the Dark*, has your view of darkness changed? If so, what are some concrete ways in which this new understanding might affect your life?