

The Dark Night Is Not a Malfunction

On what to do when the thing you were built for stops working — and why the loss of signal is often the beginning of the redirection.

People come to me convinced something has broken. Not dramatically. They are still functioning, still shipping, still respected. But the thing that used to carry them has gone flat. The work that was obviously theirs a year ago is now something they do by hand, deliberately, with effort, and they cannot tell anybody because from the outside nothing is wrong.

The first thing they usually want is a diagnosis. Is this burnout, is this depression, is this a discipline problem, do I need a sabbatical or a therapist or a harder schedule. Those are reasonable questions and sometimes they have real answers, and if the answer is clinical you should get help and I will say so plainly.

But I want to offer a different frame for the season itself, because the diagnostic frame has an assumption buried in it: that this state is an error, and the goal is to get back to how it was. Very often that assumption is the thing keeping you stuck.

There is an old name for what I am describing. The dark night of the soul. It has been written about for centuries and every tradition has some version of it, and the reason it keeps getting written about is that it is normal. People go through stages of darkness, of depression, of overwhelm, of burnout — all the different ways a person can feel like they are losing connection with their source. That is not a defect in the design. That is part of how the design works.

Here is what I think is actually happening. You were shaped for something. You did all the right things for where you were. You built the competence, the reputation, the network, the instincts, and it fit — genuinely fit, not a mistake, not wasted. And then you outgrew the container. The things that were perfectly suitable a year ago, two years ago, five years ago, are not where you belong anymore, and there is no clean mechanism for being informed of that. So you get informed by the light going out of it.

The quiet is the notice. The loss of signal *is* the signal.

“That’s how God opens our perceptions to new ways and different ways of seeing things, and breaking us away from aspects of life where we may not belong anymore.”

TIM O. DAVIS

I am not going to tell you what the new thing is. I do not know, and honestly the people who take a season like this and immediately fill it with a plan usually get the plan wrong, because they build it out of the same materials as the old life. They pick the next thing that their existing apparatus can recognize as a win. Which is precisely the container they just outgrew.

What I would do instead is treat it as a period of listening rather than a period of deciding. **When a thing is turning, that is the moment to open your perceptions rather than narrow them.** Open your heart, open your senses, breathe, and look honestly at what is actually available to you now — not what was available to the version of you that built the last decade. Where might you serve. Who might you serve. Who are you now ideally suited to serve. That last question is the one that produces surprises, because the honest answer changes over a life and most people never revisit it after the first time they answered it in their twenties.

And here is the practical part, the part that connects this to why I keep asking busy people to sit still every morning. Your intuition is a low-signal instrument. It does not shout. When your interior is loud with strategy and self-diagnosis and the noise of trying to fix yourself, the signal is there and you cannot hear it. When your heart is right and there is enough quiet, your intuition can actually pick up what is around you. That is the whole reason for the practice during a season like this. Not to feel better. To hear better.

Two cautions. The first: quiet is not passivity. I am not asking you to wait for a sign while your obligations decay. Keep your commitments, run the business, pay the people. The listening happens underneath the doing, not instead of it.

The second: do not leave your old life badly. If a season like this ends with you moving on from something — a role, a company, a practice, a place that formed you — the way you leave matters more than most people believe. Anything left hanging in your periphery, unfinished or unresolved or bitter, starts as a small seed and then grows. Go back and honor the gift that was given to you there, for no other reason than to be clean about it. That is not sentimentality. It is maintenance. You do not want to carry that seed into the next thing, because it will sprout there.

So if you are in that season now, I would resist the urge to name it a failure. Something is being reoriented. It is turning slowly, the way a hurricane turns, and from inside a slow turn it is almost impossible to tell the difference between being lost and being redirected.

Get quiet. Stay clean. Keep serving whoever is in front of you today. The direction shows up in the quiet, not in the analysis.

THE PRACTICE

If you are in a season where the old competence has gone quiet, stop diagnosing yourself and get quiet enough to hear what is available. Ask what you are ideally suited to serve now — not what you were suited to serve five years ago.