



Growing in the Dark

**Maxine Hancock reflects
on a key principle of life**

When we moved from an Alberta farm to a Vancouver apartment, our garden shrank from a large vegetable patch to a small window box. I planted it joyfully with pansies and geraniums and ivy. But my friend Julie, an expert gardener, had bigger dreams. Last year she helped me pack the box with buried layers of bulbs. Tulips and daffodils went in deepest, then hyacinth and crocus, then, with the soil just covering them, tiny snowdrop bulbs. Then we planted a few shallow-rooted surface plants to give some cover and lifted the window box, now heavy with hope, back onto its bracket.

Then came the waiting time.

In the dark moist earth, gradually

warmed by the Vancouver spring mildness, miracles happened. First, the snowdrops and crocuses pushed up and began to bloom. Then the hyacinth and miniature daffodils, and then, the tulips, yellow and red, cupping up to the sun until they twisted into wonderful grotesqueries, petals falling like pages of a loved and often read book.

All that beauty, all that power was released because something had been buried in the dark earth, undergoing the secret growth that empowered this new flowering.

It is, it seems, a principle of life: there is no growth up into the light that doesn't call for the unseen growing in

the dark, the falling into the earth and dying that was required even of Jesus (as told in John 12: 24).

The patterns of growth that we see in nature, and that we celebrate as spring comes, are lived out in cycles in our own lives. For all of us, there are times when our growth is happening in the dark, unnoticed by all but God. These may be times of illness, grief, depression, or just plain fatigue. They may be times when we move out of the spotlight to invest in others' development—and for a while, even years, we cannot see the results. They may be times when we are experiencing a necessary dormancy in preparation for new periods of flowering and fruitfulness.

The darkness in which this hidden growth occurs may be felt as prevailing sadness. It may be grief caused by bereavement or the even sharper grief of rejection. Or it may be the sense of exclusion from community caused by illness—our own or of someone for whom we care—or old age. But in all of those times of darkness, God is at work in the believer's life. He has planted us as deep as we need to be planted so that the transformation that is needed to empower new life can happen, away from all eyes but God's.

The Bible alludes to this necessary growth stage in Psalm 139, the mysterious knitting together of the babe in the womb, and in the growth of new life within them that Mary and Elizabeth spoke about on the hillside of Galilee, far away from gossip and glare. It happens in the silent years of Jesus' life: the years between two and twelve and between twelve and thirty, when he was hidden away in Nazareth, learning the disciplines and skills by which one lives for others, letting the scriptures soak and shape his mind while he deepened his understanding of his identity and mission.

For the poet John Milton and the hymn writer Fanny Crosby, the darkness was literal: they wrote their best work when they were physically blind. John Bunyan and Madame Guyon's

years in prison were the dark years out of which their writings came. Amy Carmichael's bedridden years were as important to her ministry as her years of near-frantic missionary activity in India.

The years when God shapes something new in us are hard years, hidden years. They are the years when we have little to say in our Christmas letters, and when the only Psalms that we can speak honestly are laments. (And thank God for those laments that remind us that dark times of feeling forsaken have always been part of the experience of the faithful: we are not alone. We have companions in the darkness.)

From what I have experienced and seen in others, there are some particular kinds of growth in the dark.

First, there is the potential for growth in the depth of our trust in God's goodness. The primary spiritual challenge in times of darkness is to affirm God's goodness and really believe that his purposes in our lives are always only good. We have to rely on the word of a God who speaks into our feelings of exile and abandonment as he spoke through Jeremiah to the Jewish people in Babylon: "I know the plans I have for you: plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you a hope and future" (Jeremiah 29: 11).

Then there is the growth that comes from relying solely on God's call and commission to affirm our gifts and ministries. I remember a time of deep darkness when, as a young wife and mother, I found that the gifts I had to offer were not wanted in my little country church. I had come so eager to serve; now I felt so set aside.

Had I known then what I know now about the seasonal cycles of underground growth, I would, I hope, have recognized this as a time of deep and secret growing. But then it was just misery, rejection, loneliness, frustration, and the fear that somehow all my training and all my desire to serve the Lord would come to nothing. And then I felt the Lord speak to me

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through the life-giving words of Isaiah 41:9: "You are my servant; I have chosen you and have not rejected you." I dug myself deep into that promise and, in time, new ministry opportunities opened out of my small farm home.

We learn, too, to live with a greater humility before mystery. That's what Job learned in the dark—not all the moralistic lessons his friends deduced for him, but a greater sense of humility and awe before the Creator God who owes us no explanations. Before we go into the dark, we often think we have figured things out pretty well—and often we come across to others as smugly right as Job's comforters. But in the darkness we find out that we just don't know about most things. We find ourselves with nothing left to say; sometimes even nothing left to pray. We can only wait, in silence, for the Lord.

And if we go through enough seasons, we come to know something that is wonderfully encouraging: the darkness does not last forever.



There are times that call for nothing but patient endurance. My parents have been going through that time as it is experienced in very old age—and it looks tougher than anything I have gone through so far. But I have been through enough seasonal cycles in my spirit to know that in God's grace, even in that long winter there is growth happening. There will come, finally, a time of breaking through, breaking out of the darkness into the ultimate light.

In a smaller way, but with the same vision of seasons of darkness followed by renewed life, light, and flourishing, whatever darkness we are in can be seen as a period of growth and waiting. Joy comes again. George Herbert, the reluctant parson of a small village church in England in the early 17th century, tells of this experience of renewal in his poem, "The Flower":

*Grief melts away
Like snow in May
As if there were no such cold thing.*

This has been how it has been for me: life has locked down around me in a time of hiddenness, of waiting; a time of silence and of sorrow—and then, joy finds its way to where I am, down through the darkness, and a holy desire drives me back up into the light, into flowering and fruitfulness.

I have come to value both seasons: the hard season of suffocating darkness, when all that one believes is tested; and the joyful re-emergence into light. I have learned that each season brings its own kind of growth. I am changed by the seasons in the dark; I recognize now that there is a patient quality in what God is working in me, a deepening of my very being that can only happen in the dark. But, oh, how I rejoice in each fresh resurrection.

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