WHEN DARKNESS FALLS
Rev Holly Baylies
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“In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. 2 And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters. 3 And God said, Let there be light: and there was light. 4 And God saw the light, that it was good: and God divided the light from the darkness. 5 And God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night.”

Right from the beginning of humankind, many of our fears and subsequent beliefs centered on how our lives and our survival were affected by daylight and the onset of nighttime. Through time our own religious heritage was greatly influenced by the dominant religious clerics who attached very specific meanings to the effects that darkness had on human kind based upon the first chapter of Genesis. Even prior to the writing of biblical verse, one can assume that the first primitive humans were terrified when the sun went down; specifically of being stalked and eaten by the nocturnal creatures that roamed the earth, looking for sustenance of which our relatives were considered both the entrée and the dessert!

It would stand to reason that our cave dwelling ancestors with their less developed brains, the lack of a substantial light source and inadequate housing to protect them from the elements lived in fear of their surroundings, especially when darkness fell.

However, through time as in the story of the black cat, there are still some beliefs and practices that have been incorporated into our so called “modern theologies” which have never been eliminated and it all began with a fear of the dark.

Our first evidence of this interpretation came from the teachings of early Christianity.
With the first indication that the darkness was something to be wary of, the Early Christian Church made a distinct division between day and night as darkness indicative of evil, and light, as the source of divine salvation. The complexities of the theological sparring over what constituted the evils of darkness and the blessings of light that went on for centuries is far too cumbersome for this sermon, but there was one idea, one concept that endured that has led to the evolution of the night-time demons that have become so much a part of our imaginations at this time of year.

In response to the darkness and light theme of Genesis, The early Christians fashioned the devil out of a belief that a rejected Angel who did not play well with others at all, was booted out of heaven and tossed back to earth to rule the terrors of the night. This devil’s mission was to seek out all who believed in the teachings of the Christian Church and to haunt them, with nasty unspeakable apparitions and promises of earthly pleasures, in exchange for their absolute devotion. The devil’s goal was to obliterate any ideas of the divinity of Jesus and all Christian teachings. The arguments on the humanity or divinity of Jesus became a reason for the execution or hanging of anyone who questioned the authority of the church and who must have, without question, made a pact with the devil. Many of our pre UU ancestors, through all of the condemned heresies, were considered evil compatriots of the devil and the devils work which was at its peak during the late night or ‘witching” hours.

One of the most well known beliefs in the works of the devil came in the form of the black plague that hit Europe in the summer of 1347. Church goers flocked to their parishes and eagerly shared a common cup of communion wine which made matters even worse. Pope Clement in an attempt to ‘elicit divine intervention’ invited all believers to travel to Rome for absolution. Of the 1,250,000 pilgrims that arrived in Rome only 10% of that number actually made it home.
The rest died from the plague. Oddly enough, the plague was actually carried by the fleas of rats, black rats to be specific, that moved into the warmth of homes and shelters at night to get out of the cold. Even the early nursery rhymes, actually written for adults were characteristic of the events of the time and have been carried along with many of the superstitions to modern times. One we are most familiar with, Ring Around the Rosy was written for the Great Plague of London from 1864 to 1865. The rhyme which was originally a chant was worded, “Ring O Roses” which refers to the circular rash that was one of the early symptoms of contracting the plague. “Pocket full of posies” stands for the herbs that were carried to offer protection from the disease, and the final two lines, “ah-choo, ah choo, we all fall down” tell of the final, fatal sneeze, which was followed by physical collapse and then death. The children’s literature of that time period, consisted of about 10 pages which reflected the stern moral sanctions in a printed format, containing the predominant theme that life on earth led to an eternity in hell, except for the mercy of God. These books were intended to strike fear into every child of the powers of darkness and evil. The illustrations were very explicit showing children suffering terrible consequences at the hands of the devil. The rationale behind the plague perpetuated the hunt for the cause, identified as the work of witches, who roamed the country side at night to cast spells upon the innocent. The hunt for witches, the most obvious embodiment of the devil, became a vendetta which lasted for centuries. The practice of flushing out and hanging witches followed the pilgrims right into the barbaric events the preceded the Salem witch trials. There are many examples from every religious tradition that equate nighttime as a playground for the whims of evil spirits. The stigma of black vs white, of night and day has never left our consciousness, even today we fear the night and much of that fear is human made in its origin.
If one were to delve into the complexities of theological commentary on the analogies that have followed the blessings of daylight and the evil events that are believed to have transpired at night, the yin and yang if you will of good and evil; it is no surprise that we have still attached those religious fears to a belief in the work of the devil and spirits that roam the night even today.

It is unfortunate that the entertainment industry has continued to instill those antiquated ideas through horror movies and videos that glorify the Black Arts, blood sucking vampires, devil worship and satanic cults; belief of such associations that did so much damage to so many innocent victims in our past history.

Today, we now know that it is a fact that nocturnal predators roam to forage at night, due to their biology and exceptional eyesight. It is also a fact that our vision is not suited to see in the dark so we prefer to remain in the light. Any child will tell you that when darkness falls, and the lights go down, the powers of our imagination are most vulnerable. To a child as the shadows seem to dance, there is most surely a monster lurking under the bed or hiding in the closet!

We have always been fearful of what we cannot see or touch, and that fear is most pronounced at night when all that is invisible feeds our historical and modern anxieties. Most recently as our scientific knowledge and our technology have increased, the newest professions of paranormal investigation, ghost hunting and the exorcism of demons are on the rise. I am somewhat pleased that they have come to the forefront to scientifically explore our continued fascination with the unworldly. In all truth, I find these pursuits fascinating and have watched Ghost hunters in particular with great interest in their scientific analysis with the hope of shedding some light on the unexplainable things that do seem to rattle around when the sun goes down.
Through the ages as Unitarian Universalists and proud descendants of the so called heresies, that paved the way for enlightenment, we have been the ones who first questioned the authority of religious leadership that defined and named the powers of the devil as infecting unsuspecting victims.

Even today there are those who still believe that pagans or Wiccans cast evil spells, boil up deadly poisons and the worship the devil.

From the injustices and lessons of the past we earned our status as a faith with without fear and removed from our theology any association with darkness as the devil's playground.

We are still on duty, dispelling the darkness with truth, whenever it was needed. Today it is undoubtedly needed more than ever!

I would like to conclude with these words written in 1770 by John Murray, founder of organized Universalism in America He was the first minister of the Universalist Church in Gloucester MA.

Go out into the highways and by-ways. Give the people something of your new vision.

You may possess a small light, but uncover it, let it shine, use it in order to bring more light and understanding to the hearts and minds of men and women.

Give them not hell, but hope and courage; preach the kindness and everlasting love of God.

JOHN MURRAY

So Be It
Amen
Charles Panati’s “Extraordinary Origins of Everyday Thinks” contains some interesting information regarding many practices and beliefs around Halloween. This one in particular I would like to share with you this morning, On Black Cats: He writes:

“Dread of cats, especially black cats, first arose in Europe in the Middle Ages, particularly in England. The cat's characteristic independence, willfulness, and stealth, coupled with its sudden overpopulation in major cities, contributed to its fall from grace. Alley cats were often fed by poor, lonely old ladies, and when witch hysteria struck Europe, and many of these homeless women were accused of practicing black magic, their cat companions (especially black ones) were deemed guilty of witchery by association.

One popular tale from British feline lore illustrates the thinking of the day. In Lincolnshire in the 1560s, a father and his son were frightened one moonless night when a small creature darted across their path into a crawl space. Hurling stones into the opening, they saw an injured black cat scurry out and limp into the adjacent home of a woman suspected by the town of being a witch. Next day, the father and son encountered the woman on the street. Her face was bruised, her arm bandaged. And she now walked with a limp. From that day on in Lincolnshire, all black cats were suspected of being witches in night disguise. The lore persisted. The notion of witches transforming themselves into black cats in order to prowl streets unobserved became a central belief in America during the Salem witch hunts.

Thus, an animal once looked on with approbation became a creature dreaded and despised.
Many societies in the late Middle Ages attempted to drive cats into extinction. As the witch scare mounted to paranoia, many innocent women and their harmless pets were burned at the stake. A baby born with eyes too bright, a face too canny, a personality too precocious, was sacrificed for fear that it was host to a spirit that would in time become a witch by day, a black cat by night.

In France, thousands of cats were burned monthly until King Louis XIII, in the 1630s, halted the shameful practice. Given the number of centuries in which black cats were slaughtered throughout Europe, it is surprising that the gene for the color black was not deleted from the species…unless (of course) the cat does possess 9 lives.”