

Let in the Light

Facing the
hard stuff
with
hope

“Pat Livingston opens our eyes to see the
mystery of God right where we are.”

Henri J.M. Nouwen

Patricia H. Livingston

SORIN BOOKS  Notre Dame, Indiana

Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture texts used in this work are taken from the New American Bible, copyright © 1970 by the Confraternity of Christian Doctrine, Washington, DC, and are used by permission of the copyright owner. All rights reserved.

© 2006 by Patricia Livingston

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever, except in the case of reprints in the context of reviews, without written permission from Ave Maria Press[®], Inc., P.O. Box 428, Notre Dame, IN 46556.

www.sorinbooks.com

ISBN-10 1-933495-00-6

ISBN-13 978-1-933495-00-2

Cover and text design by Katherine Robinson Coleman

Printed and bound in the United States of America.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Livingston, Patricia H.

Let in the light : facing the hard stuff with hope / Patricia H. Livingston.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN-13: 978-1-933495-00-2 (pbk.)

ISBN-10: 1-933495-00-6 (pbk.)

1. Suffering—Religious aspects—Catholic Church. 2. Consolation. I. Title.

BX2373.S5L58 2006

248.8'6—dc22

To my sisters, Peggy and Mary,
beacons of light for me
in the mystery of darkness.



I am deeply grateful to my sisters and to all the others who were willing to share the light by giving permission for their stories to appear in these pages. In some cases, names and details have been altered for privacy.

Contents

Prologue: Too Much Dark	9
1. Light and Life	11
2. The Power of Negativity	15
3. The Power of Reframing	23
4. The Mixedness of Life	31
5. Titration	39
6. Dark Night of the Soul	47
7. Sources of Light	55
8. Laughter	65
9. Light for Each Other	71
10. Meeting in Kindness	85
11. Meeting in Prayer	93
12. Light for Prayer	99
13. Photosynthesis of Trust	107
14. Offer It Up	117
15. What If We Can't?	125
16. Easter Stories	133
Conclusion: Tender Mercies	143
Notes	149
Bibliography	155

Prologue: Too Much Dark



It was from George that I heard the best expression of my reason for writing this book. It was the first day of school and, in what can only be described as cruelty to both parents and teachers, school in that county began at 7:20 a.m. This meant getting up at 5:45. I had arrived the night before to help a bit with getting the gang off that first morning. George, at four years old, was very excited about being in preschool; “real school,” he called it. Most uncharacteristically, he got right out of bed when his mom called him. He headed straight for the bathroom, but he missed the doorway and ran smack into the bedroom wall. George’s “thump” was so loud, I heard it in the kitchen where I was starting breakfast. I thought he had fallen out of the top bunk. I came on the run, calling: “George, George, are you all right?” “I’m okay, Grandma,” he replied slowly. “It’s just...I guess...I have too much dark in my eyes.” That phrase has stayed with me ever since. We live in a time when there is a great deal of dark in our eyes as a human family: terror and retaliation, war and scandal, epidemics and natural disaster. Political battles have turned venomous. Corporate immorality has left us in

shock. And for many of us, there is darkness in our private lives—darkness that others know about and darkness that they do not. I am writing this book because there is too much dark in our eyes. We are badly bruised from running into the walls of our existence, trying to find a doorway. More clearly than at any other time in my life, I am aware of how important it is to let in the light. Life is an adventure of daunting difficulty, and we need all the light we can get. I want to pass on sources of illumination for me. As always when I write, I wish this were a conversation, and that you would pass yours on to me.

Light and Life



“I think,” said Roscuro, “that the meaning of life is light.”

Kate DiCamillo,
The Tale of Despereaux

Since I have had grandchildren, I have been reconnected with the childhood fear of the dark. Many times I have heard little voices call out, “Please leave the night light on!” with a kind of desperation, as if their lives depended on it.

Why do we have such a fear of the dark? Why is light such a significant source of imagery for our sense of life?

Why are the first words of creation in Genesis “Let there be light”?

Far more than just a metaphor, light is actually the primary source of physical life itself. My eyes were opened to this by cosmologist Brian Swimme. In his writing and speaking, he reminds us how utterly dependent we are on the light of the sun.

In an interview that appeared in U.S. Catholic magazine, Swimme explains:

Our sun creates light by an amazing process where 600 million tons of hydrogen are transformed into 596 million tons of helium. The 4 million tons left over become light. Every second our sun is transforming 4 million tons of itself into light . . . the light disperses in all directions. Everything that's happened in the life of this planet is directly dependent upon that light. We're moving here and talking and thinking only because coursing through our bodies is the energy from the sun. If the sun were not there, earth's temperature would be 400 degrees below zero. The whole biosphere would shrivel up and die.¹

In other words, all of human activity is powered by the generosity of the sun. It is this light, this outpouring gift of the sun from which life comes, that is a primary metaphor for God. "Light" and "God" are used interchangeably in the familiar phrases of the Nicene Creed: "God from God, light from light, true God from true God." In the Gospel of John, Jesus says, "I am the light of the world" (8:12). In the prologue the good news is summarized: "The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it" (1:5).

In recent times the threat of darkness has become much more real. We are aware in deeper ways than ever how fragile life is. How vulnerable and permeable is our sense of safety. Our trust. Our hope.

There is a phrase that captures this for me. Years ago it was the title of a movie based on a novel by Czech author Milan Kundera. I remember it well because it was an excruciating experience for me at the time. I was teaching for a few days in a sabbatical program for priests held at St. Patrick Seminary in the Diocese of San Francisco.

At the end of my first day of teaching, an old friend invited me to see a movie. The friend is a priest on the faculty of the seminary, a highly respected scripture scholar and author, perhaps the most refined person I have ever met. He had read some good reviews of the film and was gathering a group to see it that evening.

What none of us had realized was that the film was highly erotic. It was not explicit in the way pornography is, but far too explicit for comfortable viewing for us together. The only similar experience of discomfort I can remember was when my sons took me to see *Fatal Attraction* at our local theater. It was Randy's idea—he thought I might like it because he knew I taught workshops in relationships. Boo came along.

I was sitting between them in the row, and if you ever saw that film you can imagine why Boo leaned over to Randy not long into it and said: "Sure, Randy, great movie to take MOM to, what in the world were you thinking?!!!"

I got a great chuckle out of it. All those years I tried to monitor what they watched, on TV or in the movies, and here they were telling me to close my eyes. Well, in the San Francisco art theater, sitting with this gentlest and holiest of priests, I squirmed more than my boys did in *Fatal Attraction*.

There was, however, a powerful message in the film, if I understood it. (I was never quite sure I did—a complex movie about sex and love and war.) I later told my friend that I thought somehow the message was in the title. Haunting to me, and enigmatic, it touched something very important about life.

The title of the movie is *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*.

The title poetically captures the exquisite fragility of life: the gossamer beauty held in being in this moment, in something as ephemeral as a rainbow or a soap bubble or the smile of a baby as it sleeps. In the miracle of each of us, just now, alive in the beating of our hearts.

All of it so delicate. The unbearable lightness of being.

How precious and fragile life is every moment. As we have seen in these last years, perhaps more than other times we can remember, it can be lost in a New York minute. Its innocence plundered, its trust betrayed, its hope swept away beneath tsunamis of sea or spirit.

We live on the margin in the unbearable lightness of being. Our glad lives are balanced on what novelist Reynolds Price calls “life’s windswept tightropes,”² held by grace itself and only grace. I am convinced that no skill we ever learn is more important than throwing open every door and window in our hearts and minds and souls to that grace: embracing all the ways we can find of letting in the light.