

# Testimonial of a Darkness Experience

By Andrew Durham, February 2006

I just came out of a pitch black room after two days inside. We call it a darkness retreat. I feel great.

In the small room is a bed and a small open area with a rug. The building is cob (earth and straw) with windows that have been thoroughly blacked out for this purpose. There is an electric radiant heater and a composting toilet, an infinitely more pleasant update on the chamber pot of old. There is an inversion swing for hanging upside down.

Finn, my host and guide, would come in a couple of times a day to find out how I was doing, and to bring me fruit and anything else I needed. Mostly, I lay in bed. I slept a lot, well and easily. Sometimes I would stretch or swing. I had my CD player, a U2 album, and a French language course.

From the first moment of turning off the light, I felt a wave of relief from what I had never known until then as the constant assault of light we experience in modern buildings and cities. The rumbling of the city did not go away, but the break from light calmed me significantly.

It also practically erased my appetite. Emotional disturbances were, how shall I put it... more endurable. Normally I just pop out for an ice cream bar or granola. That has long been my main emotional coping mechanism in the light. Food consumes my attention a lot of the time. In darkness, I hardly thought about it. In 54 hours, I had four apples, an orange, and two kiwis and I still feel full. I took a 30 minute break from darkness last night to make unnecessary phone calls. Within 15 seconds of being in light, I wanted to eat. For an hour afterward, I was ravaged by cravings for my usual snacks. Darkness has got to be the single greatest way to disrupt poor eating habits.

I felt disoriented in darkness because I've been very visual and mental in my life, so things I can see function as points of reference, aids in thinking and concentration. My thoughts in darkness simply swam. I felt unnerved and, at times, nauseous. But my discomfort in darkness was still nowhere near as intense as when I've fasted in light (drinking only water while resting). In fasting, my emotions, thoughts, impulses, and surroundings were like an abrasive plague, like living in a tumbling sandpaper world. Darkness is soft. It is still. It is nurturing. It is comforting at the same time that it necessitates tangling with chronic internal discomforts. As Finn says, it is a luxury. Like cool silk sheets on a hot summer's day. Like a mother standing by your bed when you are sick. Like a clear summer morning in the country with nothing but friends and adventure before you.

By this morning, I was able to maintain a train of thought for more than 10 seconds. And it all started coming together: the possibilities in my apparently stuck, dead-end life. The obvious insanity of trying to make life in a city work for long. The total irrelevance of our culture's standards and demands. I'm starting a business, or at least, that's what I've been telling myself for months now. Now I don't care. If it works, it works. No more senseless pushing. I will happily go bankrupt now. Or not. Whatever. I'm available again to the Lifeforce. Let it take me wherever, to serve it however. That's how I feel. My massive credit card debt is meaningless in the dark womb of life, which secretly surrounds us all the time.

My main job today, besides tending to a few items of business (heh heh), is to make a sleeping mask. Of a new kind that is comfortable, healthy, and effective so that I and maybe others can finally get some friggin rest in this streetlight-infected world. My designs for shelter will change. Since the whole point is rest, what

do we need windows in bedrooms for, anyway? Light feeds the eyes, it is true, but darkness allows them to rest. And with them, so many other parts of the being that it is unbelievable.

There's no way to tell you how hung up I've been lately by worry and confusion. Now it is obvious that all of it constantly perpetuated by stimulation from the visual field. This is what disappeared that first night upon unplugging the light. I felt an underlying ocean of pain—at the same moment of being relieved from it. I was unaware I had suffered this way for years. No wonder I have felt so crazy. This, at least, is part of it.

I slept deeply. It happened many times that one moment I would feel a little sleepy and the next, I had awoken from hours of deep sleep. I had no dreams or sense of passing time while asleep.

When dreams occurred, they came shortly before waking. They were so intense, they would sometimes continue after waking. After opening my eyes, I twice saw vaulted ceilings above me for some seconds or minutes. The first had a surface of tiny diamond tiles, like a rattlesnake-skin. The second was rough earth, with ancient yet simple pictograms pressed deeply into it, maybe 4cm square. Last night, I saw green light for awhile. This morning, several images of cinematic quality passed before me. I felt the power of art again.

One thing I could do that helped in difficult moments was to follow my breath. Without my visual point of reference, this was very difficult at first. I could not remember to observe my breath for more than two inhalations. But in the dark, everything good happens very quickly. By last night, I could stay with it for several minutes before falling asleep. Breathing is a good reminder of the action of Life upon us.

In following it as it automatically went in and out, I could take refuge in something stronger than my constant, low-level worry and panic. Also, these things were constantly getting undermined by the darkness, without my visual point of reference to sustain them. So they were not as strong. While the apparently positive side of my habitual patterns of awareness also got undermined, what is Real grew in my awareness in an extremely short period of time compared to wilderness sojourns and fasting. However, it would be easy to combine all these for the most amazing rejuvenation process imaginable.

My darkroom had a fresh air problem. It's important to have plenty of fresh air. To have it be warm and comfortable enough to be naked would be great, too. (It was pretty close, actually.) A shower, various furniture, etc, would be cool. Naturally, as I lay there, I was inventing air-to-air heat exchangers with no moving parts in my mind. Oh, also, I was hilariously bombarded with visions of women's breasts. Fractal boobies in three dimensions! Okay, sometimes it was a turn on. Who knew there were so many lovely breasts, sometimes attached to women, in the universe? Okay, I did have an idea about that previously. But this was ridiculous.

Again, I had several fits of emotional disturbance and confusion. They were not easy, but they were much less difficult than in other settings. Many times I also just felt calm. I studied French with excellent concentration for 90 minutes straight yesterday. Normally, 30 minutes is a lot. I listened to U2's new record.

Darkness is the ultimate renewal. It is just the beginning.