

Walk in the Dark

We sometimes lived in places where we were away from all light furnished by mankind except ours, and we could shut that off. Some nights, we walked in the dark without a flashlight and found a pleasant distance from time and man's world of busyness and constant light.

My daughters, Juniper and Amanda, and I left the house on the ranch we took care of in the Rocky Mountains of Northern Colorado. Stars shone brightly in the cold sky above us. We walked with only the natural light of the night to show us our way.

We walked down the dirt road that ran through the ranch. Elm Oak, our cat, galloped past us and veered off into brush. When Thorn, our dog, walked past the brush, Elm Oak emerged at a gallop, leaped, ran along Thorn's ribs with four paws, hit the ground at a full gallop and disappeared into darkness again. Thorn didn't break stride. He was used to it and big enough to keep his balance.

Amanda, looking at the sky and, thinking of Native American mythology that she'd been reading about, said, "When the stars were ready to be put into the sky in an orderly fashion, Coyote stole the bag and just threw them all up there, without pattern nor plan."

We walked from forest of ponderosa pine trees down into a small meadow. Light-colored grass reflected starlight. White-barked aspen along the east edge of the meadow reflected starlight. I said, "It almost looks like moonlight through here; it's so much lighter with the light colors."

Juniper said, "That bright planet ahead of us is Venus."

Amanda said, "I would like to know the names of all the stars and planets."

I said, "That book we bought would start you into it."

If she wants to learn that, I want her to learn it, but I won't be much help. I've never wanted to know what people have named the stars. I like seeing them as brilliant, uncountable, beyond names and beyond man's reach.

We heard an owl call from the forest, and up the dark mountainside, another answered. Coyotes sang. We stood silent. Then I said, "I think the coyotes are up by the spring."

"Are they singing for us?"

"I don't know. They might be."

Juniper broke loose with a coyote imitation, loud yips and high pitched howling that reached toward the stars. She'd been practicing a lot and was getting really good at it. The coyotes answered her.

"Do you think they believed me?"

"They might believe you, or maybe they're complimenting you on a better and better coyote imitation. Or maybe you said something, and they answered."

We walked across the meadow and started into darker forest, where conifer trees grew close together. I said, "Nope. Too dark up here for me. I just ran into some branches I can't even see, so I'm voting to walk where the road is open to the sky. Let's head back."

My imagination is more active at night. Unidentified shadows sometimes seem menacing, ready to break into sudden motion. Sometimes a misperception puts my heart up in my throat, and primitive parts of my mind urge me toward fear just because it's dark. I take a deep breath and reason through. There is nothing here that is more dangerous than in daylight.

I asked, "Anybody have trouble with fear on night walks?"

Juniper answered, "Sometimes, but not enough to make me want to quit."

Amanda said, "As long as we're all together, I don't have trouble with fear. I might be afraid for a minute that I don't know where I am, but we always work that out."

We cut across a turn in the road and found the natural ground difficult to walk. In the dark, we couldn't see where we put our feet, so we felt our way along and worked our way around gooseberry and Juniper bushes. Junipers are easier to avoid because they are a darker mass on the lighter ground. Gooseberries, of lighter color and growing less densely, don't show much, and we walked into them, and often received thorns, before we knew they were there. We steered by the shape of the horizon in front of us and made our way back onto the dirt road, smooth beneath our feet and easier to follow.

We walked quietly. Elm Oak galloped down the road past us. He was careful about feet in the dark. Experience taught him humans don't see as well at night as he does.

We stepped out of the darkness into light cast out from the house, walked up the stairs and into the house. Laura had stayed home and kept the house warm and light, and we were glad to be home. We warmed up by the stove and told Laura about our walk. Thorn and Elm Oak curled up close together on the rug by the stove.

We settled in for hot chocolate and our family time for reading aloud. Long after our walk was over, a thin moon rose

and shed more light on the dark mountain, but we stayed inside,
content now to be back in the world of artificial light.