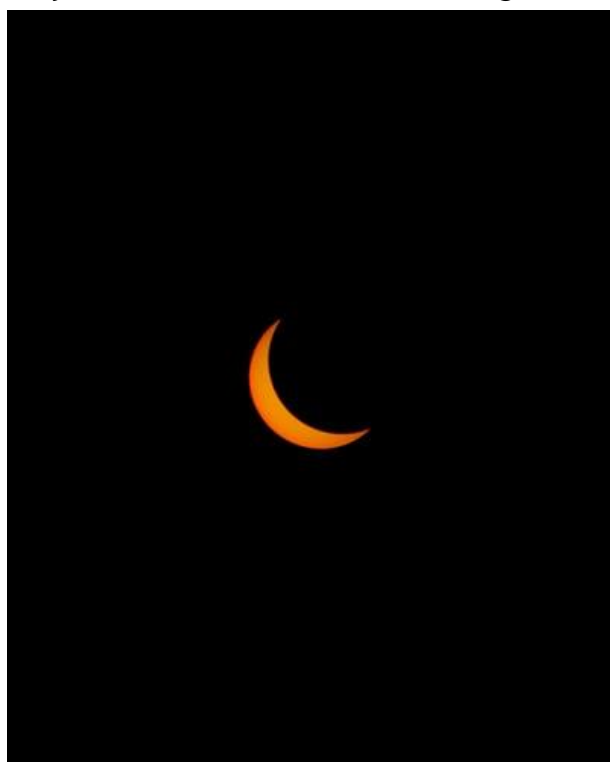


## Learning from Creation

by Terri Lynn Simpson

I closed the curtains, climbed into bed, pulled the duvet over my head, and sighed deeply. My head pounded, my stomach lurched, and although I'd spent all morning trying to write, I hadn't put one coherent thought on paper. Almost a week in the northwest of Ireland during midsummer and my body was desperate for darkness.

The long days were a novelty at first. My friend and I would wander two hundred feet down a dirt road to the rocky beach where we'd sip wine, look for sea otters, and play a game we invented the first night called, "Guess what time it is?" As the light lingered over the bay one of us would venture a guess-- 7:30? 8? It was usually well after 11 pm but with no schedules to follow and days spent focusing on art (her) and writing (me), we soon found we couldn't rely on sunrise and sunset to regulate our bodies' internal clocks.



I experienced this phenomenon again more recently while leading a group of pilgrims from Washington National Cathedral to the island of Iona, off the west coast of Scotland. In this landscape, as in Ireland, astronomical twilight—when the night sky is completely dark—is non-existent in summer months. Remembering how my body reacted previously, I made it a point to spend time each morning in the shadowy corners of the abbey building, soaking up the dark the way the day trippers to the island soaked up the sun on the tiny beaches near the ferry landing.

Thanks to my Irish and Scottish ancestors, Celtic spirituality is in my DNA. One of the great gifts I've received from studying their beliefs and practices is the idea of honoring of the seasons. Irish monk Columbanus once told a seeker who wanted to learn more about God, "If you want to know the Creator, know creation." Reading nature as the first book of revelation and noticing the cycle of the seasons that hold dark and light in balance reminds me that both are necessary components for spiritual growth and physical wellbeing. Just as the bulbs in my garden need to rest in

the ground during these winter months, so do I spend time in the nurturing darkness, pondering, praying, being still.

Once upon a time, human beings lived their lives according to these cycles of light and dark, without alarm clocks, electric lights, or the blue light of tablets and smart phones glowing at all hours. During this time in our history, many experienced what scientists and historians now call “first and second sleep.” Our ancestors would wake in the wee hours of the night and stay awake for a period of time, knowing that this rhythm wasn’t a period of insomnia to be fretted over, rather a gift of dark time in which the mind and body functioned in a liminal, holy space. It was a time to pray, to love, to create. Creation begins in dark universes—dark wombs, dark rooms, dark soil. We too are creatures created in the image of a Creator, who in the words of Isaiah, gives us the gift of darkness.

Dr. Terri Lynn Simpson is a writer and retreat leader. Since 2001 she has worked with the Center for Prayer and Pilgrimage at Washington National Cathedral. In addition to having a graduate degree in theology and a doctorate in Spirituality and Story, Terri is a long-time student of Celtic spirituality.