The Black Sun

THE ALCHEMY
AND ART OF DARKNESS

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Foreword by David H. Rosen

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FOREWORD

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As far as we can discern, the sole purpose of human existence is to kindle a light in the darkness of mere being.

—C. G. Jung

Nearly six months before Stan Marlan’s superb 2003 Fay Lecture series on the black sun, I had this dream: There was too much light and brightness everywhere. I gave a talk on the need for darkness and its healing value. I said I could always leave Star, a town at the periphery. I realized that I could break off and leave and go to the Texas hill country and write haiku.

The dream is about enantiodromia and the restorative necessity of darkness and its nurturing solitude. I became aware that I could leave Star (a constant source of light) and end up alone in the Texas hill country writing haiku. This breaking off and leaving is what I call egocide (symbolic death), which leads to transformation (rebirth) through creativity.¹

The black sun and the alchemy and art of darkness are subjects dear to my heart and soul.² When I was in a psychic black hole contemplating suicide thirty-five years ago, my own darkness went through an alchemical process involving art.³ I was able to transcend my despair and later transform my depression, healing my soul through creativity. Art is healing, and the shadow of despair is the fuel for creativity. Darkness is critically needed in our too-well-lighted world. As Stan Marlan out-
lines in this important book, the secret is to engage in the alchemy and art of darkness, which yields creative endeavors through Jung’s technique of active imagination. Usually I do this through painting and writing, most recently by completing a book on *The Healing Spirit of Haiku*.4

Given my experience with and affinity for darkness, I eagerly read Marlan’s *Black Sun*, which explores darkness in vast and deep ways. Irvin Yalom states, “Everyone—and that includes therapists as well as patients—is destined to experience not only the exhilaration of life, but also its inevitable darkness: disillusionment, aging, illness, isolation, loss, meaninglessness, painful choices, and death.”5 Yalom also states that there is an “inbuilt despair in the life of every self-conscious individual.”6

In the deep dark the person alone sees light.
—Chuang Tzu7

In the introduction, Marlan says that the black sun became a Zen koan for him. This got me thinking about the time I spent in Japan and the fact that in the Shinto religion the sun is considered a goddess. In other words, a black (yin) sun that glows and inspires creative works is *Sol niger* (black sun) functioning as a muse. Thus, in the land where darkness is praised, fear of the dark is overcome, and the black sun is a creative fire that heals.8 Most striking—and a testament of the truth of an inner shine of darkness—is that blind people see light in their dark interior.

In chapter 1 Marlan begins with a focus on the sun as the source of light and its association with the King (a divine archetype). He gives several excellent alchemical examples of how the King must die in order to be born again. Closer to home, Elvis Presley, America’s “King,” illustrates the theme of this book in that he represents a dark King. He got stuck in the *nigredo* (darkness) and was poisoned. However, after Elvis died he continued to live on, reborn as a dark or blue King with an inner spiritual glow.9

In chapter 2 we descend with Marlan into the darkness and see the necessity of experiencing one’s own “dark night of the soul.” A case of

(x)  *Series Editor’s Foreword*
a troubled woman is presented, which includes dramatic illustrations of the black sun. Her image of an “exploding black sun” is associated with “the madness of her suicidal feelings.” It may also have foretold an aneurysm in the anterior region of her brain. She survived this near-death experience but lost sight in one eye. This case underscores the danger involved in getting close to the black sun. Marlan presents another case, also of a woman in long-term analysis who creatively transforms her suicidal feelings based on contact with the black sun. This patient’s words and drawings are profound, and Marlan links the deep, dark work to powerful archetypal images from art, religion, and literature.

Chapter 3 outlines how analysis (breaking apart) is like the alchemical processes of mortificatio and putrefaction. Marlan describes brilliantly—and reveals through his alchemical psychological approach—how analyzing the ego to death opens the psyche to creative transformations involving the deep art of darkness. In essence, Marlan shows us how darkness heals by shining through.

In chapter 4 Marlan focuses on Jewish mysticism (primarily the kabbalah), Taoist alchemy, and illuminating pictures from artists and patients. Through these it becomes clear that darkness itself glows with a unique spiritual light. Marlan humbles us before a myriad of glimpses of Sol niger.

The last chapter concerns the mystery of Self and non-Self as One or Not-One. I think his position would be acceptable to both Lao Tzu and Jung, although Jung was more comfortable with the dark side of the Self rather than non-Self. For Jungian analysts who are Buddhists, such as Polly Young-Eisendrath, the paradox of Self and non-Self makes particular sense.¹⁰ Jungian analysts who are Taoist in their spiritual orientation are also content with the irony of opposites: nothingness/fullness, dark/light, and evil/good.¹¹ Why? Because it is impossible to know one without the other. Transcendence of these opposites allows for the possibility of wholeness and emptiness. And, as we often see in this book, transformation of the opposites allows for creative art and healing.

In the epilogue, Marlan distills the essence of the journey he has taken us on from light to darkness and then to the light of darkness it-
self. I wholeheartedly support Marlan's maxim of preserving the mystery of Self and non-Self as a paradox. In the end it is both/and. Like Victor Hugo's last words, we see "black light":

Seeing into darkness is clarity.
Knowing how to yield is strength.
Use your own light and return to the source of light.
This is called practicing eternity.
—Lao Tzu

This volume helps us to understand the source of archetypal darkness and its relationship to a psychic crisis involving the black sun. As we know from Chinese philosophy, crisis involves both danger and opportunity. It is noteworthy that dreams of a black sun or an archetypal abyss can be both a warning of psychic and/or physical demise as well as the beginning of a significant renewal.

In alchemy the nigredo is first, and, according to Plato, the beginning is the most important part of the work. I agree with Marlan that darkness has neither been seen as primary nor valued for its inherent healing power and creative transformation. The opportunity for healing through the art of darkness is ever present and extremely well illustrated in the text.

Another example of the alchemy and art of darkness as well as egoicide and transformation is William Styron's eloquent memoir, Darkness Visible. It is a book about his fall into a suicidal void and his struggle to climb out. Most likely he was guided by a healing glow coming from Sol niger.

On May 15, 2003, while I was editing this manuscript, there was a luna niger, a total eclipse of the moon by the sun's shadow. Marlan writes about the shadow of the sun and its darkness, and where is this more apparent than in a total eclipse of the moon? Perhaps in our time this represents the patriarchal Sun King and its shadow, which eclipses the feminine, whereas the black sun has no need to eclipse the moon because both have a soft glow, one from within and the other from outer reflection.
To conclude, this volume is extraordinary in its breadth and depth and in its objective and subjective scope. Stan Marlan’s method of illustrating the alchemy and art of darkness with clinical cases, drawings, and paintings is rare and truly phenomenal. Clearly this book will enrich us all.

I close with the poet Wendell Berry’s words, which seem connected to Sol niger:

To go in the dark with a light is to know the light. To know the dark, go dark. Go without sight, and find that the dark, too, blooms and sings, and is traveled by dark feet and dark wings.\(^{15}\)

**Notes**

2. Ibid.
3. Ibid., pp. xvii–xxii.
4. *The Healing Spirit of Haiku* is coauthored with Joel Weishaus and illustrated by Arthur Okamura.
6. Ibid., p. 7.