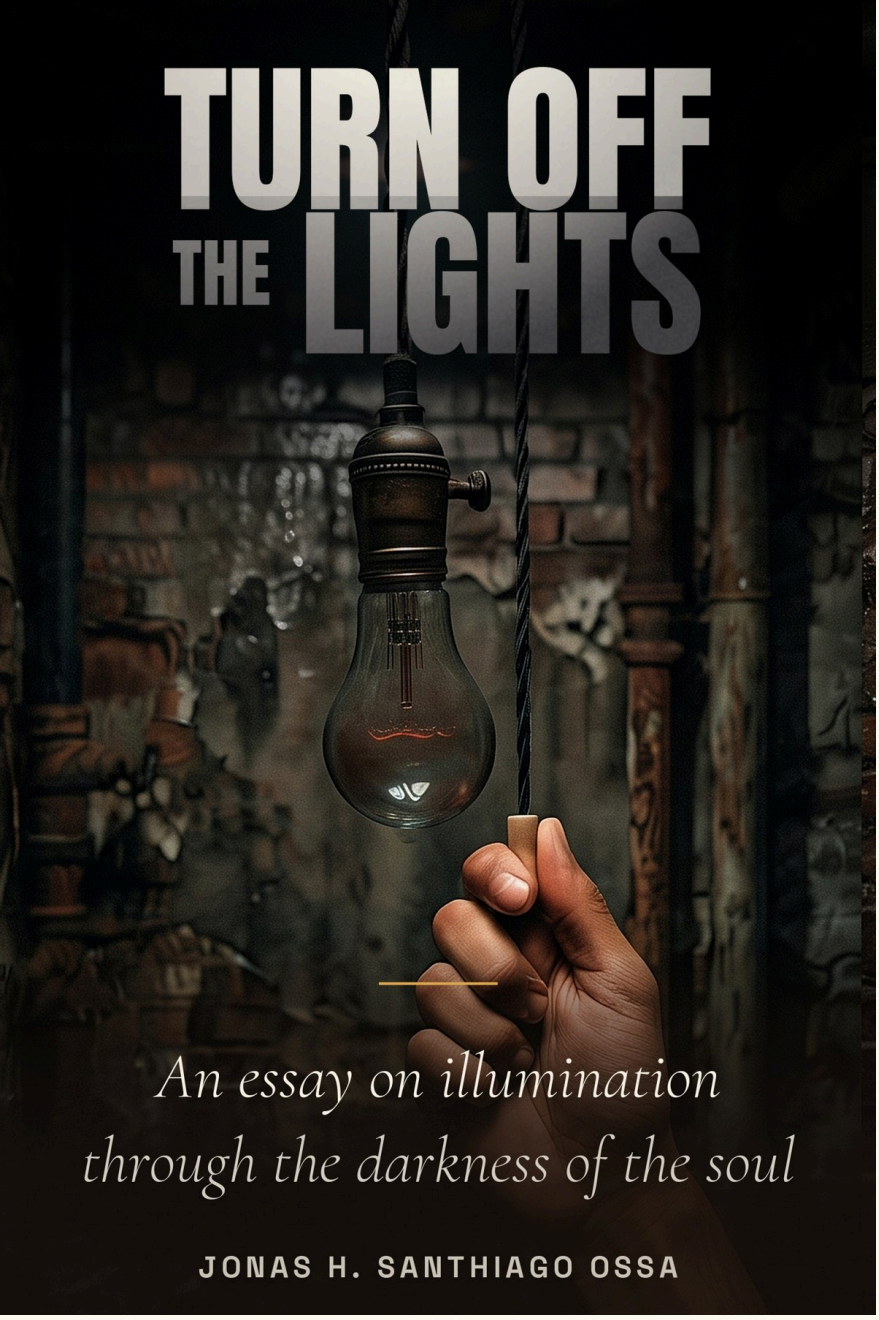

TURN OFF
THE LIGHTS
An essay on illumination
through the darkness of the soul
JONAS H. SANTHIAGO OSSA

“The one who learns to walk
in the darkness of the soul
needs no map to find the Light.”

— JONAS H. SANTHIAGO OSSA

INTRODUCTION

IN THE BEGINNING THERE WAS CHAOS AND DARKNESS

"And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep; and the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters."

GENESIS 1:2, KING JAMES VERSION

Before light there was dark. Before form there was chaos. Before anything existed at all, there was the abyss, and it was there, in formless water over a bottomless deep, that the Spirit moved and creation began. This isn't some esoteric reading of an old text. It's on the first page of the most-read book in human history – and humanity still went and built an entire spiritual civilization on the opposite idea: that light is the sacred state, that dark is the enemy, that any road toward transcendence only climbs, never descends.

The text doesn't say that. It says God was in the dark when He created. Light was the consequence. Dark was the start.

Alchemists called that first phase Nigredo[1] – the black stage, decomposition, where matter has to rot before any transmutation becomes possible. Nobody reaches gold without passing through putrefaction first. Saint John of the Cross described the same crossing in different words: the dark night of the soul,[2] the stretch where God seems to have left, precisely so faith stops depending on the comfort of feeling Him close. Two traditions, never once in contact with each other, arriving at the same demand. Dark isn't a detour from the path. It is the path.

Notice a pattern anyone recognizes looking back on their own life honestly: the solutions that mattered most rarely showed up on some calm, sunlit, easy-headed day. They showed up on the thickest day, the most chaotic one, often literally the rainiest – right in the middle of what looked like it was about to collapse, once the search for a way out had burned through every last bit of comfort standing between you and despair. It's that kind of day, not the calm one, that produces the way out – and it usually comes from some remote corner nobody thought to check.

There's real research behind that observation, and it only got a formal name in the 1990s: post-traumatic growth.[3] Psychologists Richard Tedeschi and Lawrence Calhoun documented that real positive transformation doesn't happen despite the crisis. It happens through the direct fight with it – the researchers' own language stresses process, not luck, not accident. People who've been through serious loss, serious illness, serious financial collapse report a level of personal strength, clarity of priority, and appreciation for life that the earlier version of themselves never

reached during any comfortable stretch. The crisis itself carries no value at all. The value lives entirely in what only the crisis, faced head-on, can teach — and that no amount of prolonged stability ever teaches on its own.

None of this means success and growth require suffering on purpose, or that you should go looking for chaos just to force a transformation. It means recognizing that when the turn finally comes, it probably won't arrive gift-wrapped on the brightest day of your life. And when it does arrive that way — because sometimes it does, no crisis announcing it first — the next job matters just as much: knowing how to recognize that it was the turn. People used to hunting for solutions only inside their own chaos sometimes miss the solution that shows up calm, because they never learned to call it a win when it came without any drama attached.

It's worth understanding Nigredo with more precision, because whoever uses the word today rarely read an actual alchemical treatise. The full process, in the hermetic tradition, had four stages — Nigredo, Albedo, Citrinitas, Rubedo, black to white to yellow to red — and each one represented a real phase of work on raw matter, not some vague metaphor about staying positive. Nigredo specifically described calcination, the observable chemical breakdown of a substance being reduced to its own constituent parts before any recombination became possible. The alchemist watched it happen with his own eyes, in his own lab: matter darkening, rotting, turning nearly unrecognizable, before any sign of purification showed up. Nobody skipped that stage. No tradition demanded it. Chemistry did.

Saint John of the Cross arrived at an almost identical description without having studied any alchemy at all, through the contemplative life inside the Spanish Carmel of the sixteenth century. He described two distinct nights, not one — the night of the senses, where the sensory pleasures of devotion start drying up, and the night of the spirit, deeper and rarer, where even the intellectual scaffolding of faith seems to collapse, leaving the soul with no familiar handhold left to grab. He insisted, against the religious common sense of his own era, that this second night wasn't punishment or abandonment. It was the only road available toward a union with the divine that no longer depended on sensory comfort — a faith purified precisely because it had lost every support that made it easy to feel.

The Greeks had Nyx,[4] daughter of primordial Chaos, so old that Zeus himself backed off in front of her — backed off out of seniority, not out of any wickedness on her part. The Egyptians knew Ra had to cross the Duat[5] every single night to rise renewed the next morning. The Sumerians wrote down Inanna's[6] descent into the underworld, stripped layer by layer until she stood exposed in front of a presence that accepted no fiction. Her transformation happened right there, at the bottom, exposed. Light had nothing to do with it.

Taoism calls this Yin and Yang.[7] They don't compete. One exists only because the other does, and the symbol representing them carries, inside each half, a seed of the opposite color — because neither one is pure, neither exists without carrying the other's germ inside itself.

The Tao symbol — the circle split by an S-curve, each half cradling the other — isn't some generic Eastern decoration that turned into a meaningless Western tattoo. It's a diagram of philosophical precision. Notice that the small dot of the opposite color inside each half isn't optional. It's

structural. Without it, the symbol would describe two separate opposites competing for territory. With it, the symbol describes something more radical: that the peak of any force already contains, inside itself, the exact seed of its counter-force, and that the moment of greatest Yang is precisely the instant Yin begins, inevitably, to be born within it. This isn't cheap optimism promising everything balances out on its own. It's a cold observation about how real systems behave — the longest day of the year is also the day the nights start growing again.

Notice that none of these traditions apologizes for the dark. None treats darkness as a wrong turn, a flaw in the original design that needs correcting before the real work can start. Dark gets treated as raw material. Like clay before the vase, the rest before the melody, the silence before the sentence. You can't say you love music and hate the silence between the notes. Without silence there's no rhythm. There's only continuous noise, which is about the closest thing to exhaustion a sound can produce.

The civilization we inherited chose continuous noise instead. Light all the time. Stimulus all the time. Response all the time. And called it progress, when really it's just fear of silence wearing productivity as a costume.

It's worth asking who that preference actually serves, because it's rarely just cultural accident. People who know how to sit in silence, who can tolerate not having an immediate answer, who don't need constant stimulation to feel alive, are people who are uncomfortably hard to sell anything to, hard to keep glued to a screen, hard to keep anxious enough to keep consuming the solution to a problem that anxiety itself manufactured. Continuous noise isn't just some harmless cultural habit. It's also, conveniently, the exact state in which everyone's cooperation becomes easiest to extract.

◆

People who are hard to control are the nightmare of any system that needs your cooperation to function.

That's worth holding onto, because the whole book is going to come back to it later, with a first and last name attached to who profits from it. For now, it's enough to recognize the pattern: silence and darkness aren't just spiritual experience. They're also, structurally, the two states that any attention-based system most needs to keep you from ever touching.

Science confirms what the myths always said, just with equations. Ninety-five percent of the universe is dark matter and dark energy.[8] Everything that emits or reflects light — stars, planets, rocks, people — is less than five percent of everything that exists. And even within the visible spectrum, white light, which looks pure, isn't simple at all: it's the sum of every frequency. You don't reach white light by eliminating colors. You reach it by integrating all of them.

After years of philosophical, theological, magical, alchemical, and mediumistic study, I landed on a conclusion no single system had the honesty to tell me from the start: light is only possible inside darkness. The two always coexist, and one exists before the other.

This isn't scientific romanticism. Seventy years ago, the astronomers who first noticed galaxies were spinning too fast for their visible mass weren't chasing poetry. They were chasing a calculation error. They reran the math more than once. The error wasn't there. What was there was invisible mass holding everything in place. They called it dark matter for lack of a better name, and the name stuck, and decades later we still don't know exactly what it is. We only know that without it, nothing we watch shine would still be standing.

That should change how you look at your own silence. At the stretch of your life when nothing seemed to be happening, when you had no result whatsoever to show for it, when the only visible thing was absence. Maybe it wasn't absence. Maybe it was exactly the kind of invisible mass that was holding everything that came after in place.

◇

Light doesn't shine inside light.

If physical darkness carries ninety-five percent of the universe's real weight without ever showing up in a single photograph, it's worth asking what else we go around discarding just because we can't see it right away. The closest answer to home is an uncomfortable one: discernment. There's another problem here, and it's a harder one to admit because it cuts against everything the information age promises: we have more data available than at any point in history, and less discernment about what to do with it. A nine-year-old today has access to more information than a Roman emperor had at the start of the Christian era. But probably has less discernment than he did.

This isn't laziness dressed up as wisdom. Not everything needs to become a problem to be solved, or a diagnosis to be lived with, or a light left on the whole time just to make it bearable. Sometimes the damage actually shrinks exactly when you agree to leave a few things in the shadow — not out of fear of them, just without the rush for an answer that the rest of your life isn't going to demand anyway. Knowing everything was never the requirement. Knowing how to use the little you know well always was.

A Roman emperor at the start of the Christian era made decisions affecting entire empires with a fraction of the information any news app dumps on you before breakfast. And even so, plenty of those men ruled for decades, made calls that echoed across centuries, built structures that still hold up a good chunk of Western law today. They knew less, almost always. They'd just learned to decide with what they had, instead of waiting on complete information that was never going to arrive.

A nine-year-old with the entire world in the palm of her hand hasn't learned that yet. She's learned the opposite: that every question has an instant answer, that every doubt can get resolved with one more search, one more video, one more opinion from someone she'll never meet in person. And the result isn't a wiser generation. It's a generation drowning in data and starving for the judgment to know what to do with it.

Discernment about information is missing. But there's an even deeper absence, almost always swept under the rug because it hurts worse than any disorganized data ever could: discernment about your own inner engine. About what's actually driving every major decision in your life, underneath the pretty justification you tell everyone else — and, more often than not, tell yourself.

And then there's fear.

The strong fear being weak. The rich fear going poor. The young fear growing old. Those are the fears that move them. Fear isn't the opposite of strength. It's the fuel for it.

Think about the athlete who trains until the body aches, every single day, even after winning everything there was left to win. He doesn't train out of some pure love of effort. He trains because he knows, in his bones, what it costs to lose the shape he built. That specific fear, managed well, is what gets him out of bed on days nobody's watching. Take the fear away and you don't just remove the suffering. You remove the engine too.

There's an even more precise rule behind all this, and it's worth naming clearly: everyone's shadow forms exactly where something's missing, never where there's already plenty. A rich man rarely carries money as his shadow — he already has money, so money doesn't hurt, doesn't haunt him, doesn't motivate a thing. His shadow tends to live somewhere else: the friendship money can't actually buy, the love that always suspects itself of being bought, the genuine influence no bank account guarantees on its own. And it's chasing those things, not the money he already has plenty of, that he spends the real energy of his life.

A poor man, if he was lucky enough to be born into a family that loves for real, generally doesn't feel any shortage of love. He feels a shortage of money, of recognition, of material security — and he chases that with an urgency someone who's never felt that specific lack can't understand from the inside. A woman chasing being desired, courted, admired for her own beauty probably felt, at some formative point in her life, the exact opposite of that. A man chasing relationships through money, status, purchasing power, instead of through his own charm, probably learned early that charm alone wasn't enough.

This isn't coincidence, and it isn't a character flaw. It's structure. The exact spot where life left a gap becomes, almost always, the exact spot the strongest motivation a person carries grows out of — it works almost like a managed trauma, quiet, present in every major decision that person makes without always noticing the root. Whoever was born poor fights to get rich. Whoever grew up in a broken family fights, with an intensity a stable family never truly understands, to

build their own family completely differently. Whoever was abandoned by his own father frequently becomes the most present father there is, the most dedicated, the most attentive — not despite the abandonment, but because of it.

None of this is a free pass for any behavior, and that caveat matters as much as the observation itself. Recognizing that your own shadow was born from a specific lack doesn't mean using that lack as a ready-made excuse — being born poor doesn't condemn anyone to die poor, and the shadow of scarcity doesn't justify a single unethical shortcut out of it. A shadow used well amplifies, pushes, motivates through legitimate means. A shadow used badly turns into a ready-made justification for whatever line the person decides to cross. The difference between the two was never in where the shadow came from — everyone's got one. It's entirely in how each person chooses to use it once they've finally seen it clearly.

The problem was never that people feel fear. The problem is people who pretend they don't. Who built an entire persona on top of denying their own fear, and who spend more energy keeping up the performance than they'd spend just admitting what they feel. Those people don't end up without fear. They end up with unsupervised fear, which is the most expensive version of fear there is.

Think about the kind of person who needs to make it clear, constantly, that nothing rattles them. Who answers any criticism with a smile too calculated to be spontaneous, who treats any sign of someone else's vulnerability as a weakness that needs correcting. That person isn't immune to fear. They're held hostage by it in a worse way than someone who admits feeling it. Because admitted fear can be worked with, negotiated, used as information. Denied fear can only grow in the dark, with nobody paying it any attention, until the day it decides to show up in a way nobody can ignore anymore.

That explains a pattern that repeats with almost comic regularity: the people who collapse in public, spectacularly and with no warning, are almost always the ones who spent years convincing everyone around them — and themselves first — that they were too fine to ever collapse. The breakdown never comes from the fear itself. It comes from the accumulated bill of pretending it wasn't there.

◆

The fear you admit is a tool. The fear you deny is a tyrant.

There's a specific version of that denial that deserves separate attention, because at first glance it doesn't look like denial at all. It looks like the opposite: full healing, spiritual evolution, someone who finally worked through their own demons. Let me introduce you to someone you already know.

He does yoga. Meditates, or at least pays for the app. He's vegan with the conviction of someone who discovered a truth most people still don't have the nerve to face. Does reiki. Has been in therapy for years and talks about his own patterns with a sophistication that impresses people for

the first few months and starts worrying them around month seven.

His apartment has mold on the walls.

He's reported the mold to the building super three separate times as a structural problem. It isn't. The whole building is bone dry. Only his apartment grows things on the walls, and he knows it, and keeps calling it a construction defect, because admitting the problem is domestic would mean admitting there's a problem at all, and admitting there's a problem would mean giving up the identity it took him twelve years to build. The identity of someone who's already done the work. Who's beyond all that. Who teaches other people how to heal while his own sink sits full of dirty dishes for a week straight.

This character isn't a caricature. He's the most sophisticated result the wellness market mass-produces: someone who piled up so much light on the surface that the dark underneath grew completely unsupervised.

What makes this type so common, instead of some rare exception, is that the wellness market learned to sell exactly the right vocabulary to disguise stagnation as progress. You can spend a decade in therapy and pick up the correct words to describe every pattern you have, and still never actually change a single one of them. Naming a problem with clinical precision gives you the satisfying feeling of having solved it, without demanding the real work of actually solving it. It's the difference between knowing the disease's name and taking the medicine. Most people stop at the diagnosis and call it a cure.

◇

The spirituality you use to avoid being spiritual is the most dangerous kind there is.

This whole road — the abyss before creation, the matter holding up everything that shines without ever showing up in the picture, the discernment that too much information starves out, the fear that either moves you or traps you depending on how it's handled, the surface light hiding mold growing behind it — all empties into the same place. Into a question simple to ask and hard to answer: what do you do when the light that was always just there suddenly stops being there?

◇ ◆ ◇

This book happens over one night. In a fictional city called Luma City, built in the Nevada desert with the arrogance of people who think they can light up everything with no consequence. On a night when the power grid, running past its own capacity, does what any system running at its limit eventually does.

It goes out.

In the dark of the Arclight condominium, an eight-year-old boy named Leo sits on the floor of his own bedroom, back against the wall, eyes open. He doesn't run from the dark. He doesn't wait for someone else to fix it. He's discovering, without the words for it yet, that the dark isn't where dangerous things live.

It's where things reveal what they actually are.

NOTES

1 In alchemy, Nigredo ("blackening") is the first stage of the transmutation process — the breakdown of raw matter, considered indispensable before any purification (Albedo) or perfection (Rubedo) could follow.

2 Saint John of the Cross (1542-1591), Spanish Carmelite mystic, described in "Dark Night of the Soul" the period of spiritual dryness in which God seems absent — a darkness that, for him, purifies faith of its dependence on sensory comfort.

3 Richard Tedeschi and Lawrence Calhoun coined the term post-traumatic growth in the mid-1990s, documenting significant positive psychological change — personal strength, clarity of priority, appreciation for life — as a direct result of struggling with severe crises, not despite them.

4 Nyx, in Greek mythology, is the personification of Night, daughter of primordial Chaos. Homer and Hesiod describe her as a force so ancient and feared that even Zeus hesitated to confront her directly.

5 In Egyptian mythology, Ra, the sun god, must cross the Duat — the underworld — every night in his solar barge, battling the chaos serpent Apep, in order to rise again at the horizon each morning.

6 Sumerian myth recorded on clay tablets from the third millennium BCE: Inanna, goddess of love and war, descends into the underworld ruled by her sister Ereshkigal and is stripped of her adornments at each of the seven gates, arriving naked and powerless.

7 The Tai Chi symbol, in Taoist philosophy, represents Yin (dark, receptive, feminine) and Yang (light, active, masculine) as complementary forces, not opposites — each half contains a dot of the opposite color, indicating that neither is pure.

8 Under the standard cosmological model (Lambda-CDM), roughly 68% of the universe is dark energy and 27% is dark matter — together, about 95% of the universe's total content, against less than 5% visible matter and energy.

WHAT HAPPENS NEXT

THE LIGHTS ARE OUT IN ARCLIGHT.

Leo is eight, alone in his room, and he isn't afraid of the dark. The adults in the building are a different story.

The complete book, *Turn Off the Lights*, is out now on Amazon as an eBook, paperback and hardcover.

The links are on the site:

www.jonasossa.com

© Jonas H. Santhiago Ossa. This chapter is free to read and share as long as it stays complete and unchanged.