

Power loss

by [Barbara Brown Taylor](#) in the [February 23, 2000](#) issue

I have just spent the last hour turning on and off light switches, standing in front of heater vents, and opening faucets. After four days without power in freezing weather, I do not take any of these things for granted. There should be a service in the prayer book for occasions such as these: “O God of the burning bush, we praise you for the return of heat and light. O God of streams in the wilderness, we thank you for the gift of flowing water.”

It started out as the first light, fluffy snow of the season, which even the animals seemed to enjoy. My Jack Russell terrier ran along the ground with her mouth open, making her own snow cones, while the horses pawed small, exploratory holes in the white stuff to make sure their pasture was still underneath. The llamas were as happy as pigs in mud. They come to life in cold weather, which must remind them—at least genetically—of the Andes. They were built for the cold. It is the heat they cannot stand.

Overnight the snow turned to freezing rain. By morning, the yard looked as if a small hurricane had blown through. Massive limbs littered the ground, and the trees that had not snapped in two were bent over to the ground. The loblolly pines were the hardest hit. Since they keep their needles through the winter, they have plenty of places for ice to collect. Pines should not live in the mountains. They should all move to Florida, where they can grow old in peace.

As it turned out, eight of them had fallen across my two-mile stretch of dirt road, bringing down the power lines with them. My husband, Ed, and I walked as far as we could, past cars in ditches and the fat trunks of toppled trees. The air was pungent with the smell of pinesap. When we got to the place where the black wires hung from the utility poles to coil in the snowy roadbed like snakes, we whistled up the dogs and turned around. Since we rely on an electric pump to draw water from our well, we knew that this meant the end of running water as well as heat, light, e-mail and the answering machine. “That’s what you get for living in Arcadia,” a friend consoled me over the telephone.

The rest of that first day was thrilling, with a fire in the fireplace and a dozen candles in the kitchen. My meager Y2K supplies turned out to be useful after all. I loaded AA batteries into headlamps and tried out my hand-cranked, solar-powered radio, which predicted high winds and temperatures in the teens for the next several days.

When I set out water for the animals, it turned solid within hours. The house was so cold that all the houseplants froze. After I grew dizzy reading by the light of a propane lantern, I checked the small print on the fuel can. “Danger: for outdoor use only. Fumes are known by the state of California to cause cancer.”

By day two, I did not have time to read. There were logs to split and kerosene heaters to be refilled. There was bottled water to boil, both to thaw the horse trough and to warm food for the two outside dogs. There was a refrigerator full of spoiling food to be dealt with, and an ancient generator to be poked and prodded in hopes of restoring it to service.

By day three, I had acquired a physical dread of the dark. The moment the sun went down at a little after six, everything got colder and harder to do. Even my headlamp provided no more than a small circle of light. If I did not look directly at something, it receded into shadow. I trod on things underfoot with no idea what they were. I learned to recognize the sweaters in my closet by feel instead of sight. Everywhere I turned, the darkness illuminated my helplessness. I could not watch a movie, could not work on my computer, could not do laundry, could not even walk across a room without fear of bashing my shin. I had lost power. I was without power. I had no power.

On day four, I decided that a power outage would make a good Lenten discipline. Never mind giving up meat or booze for six weeks. For a real taste of self-denial, just turn off the power for a while and see if phrases such as “the power of God” and “the light of Christ” sound any different to you. Better yet, ask someone to flip the switch for you, depriving you of the power to flip it back again.

Live as most people in the world live, preoccupied with survival. Wear the same clothes for three days because it is too cold to think about taking them off. Sleep as close to the fire as you can, welcoming the heat of another human body. Learn to shake your head at goals such as higher education, aerobic fitness, computer proficiency or self-fulfillment. Long for the light you cannot procure for yourself, and feel your heart swell with gratitude—every single morning—when the sun comes up.

Value warmth. Prize shelter. Praise the miracle of flowing water.

On the afternoon of day four, just as I had finished deodorizing the empty refrigerator, there was a loud click, followed by the sound of a dozen engines coming on. I stood up. The yellow sponge fell from my hand. "We have power!" I shouted, surprised by the tears that sprang to my eyes.

While I am reluctant to claim that my return to the grid was a gift of God, I am at least aware of how dependent I am on the power that I have no power to produce for myself. God's gift to me may well have been four days of holy darkness, from which I have emerged with a fresh love for the light.