

Dolphins and darkness

by [Gordon Atkinson](#)

December 20, 2005

Dolphins have no reason to fear darkness. When they move into deep water, they use their built-in sonar echolocation system. They see with sound waves instead of light waves. This would be like having a flashlight permanently embedded under your tongue. If the lights go out, you could just open your mouth. Of course sound waves have no color, but when you're heading into the eerie black silence of Davy Jones' s locker, you'll take whatever you can get.

I wonder if the world bursts into color when dolphins break the surface of the water and use their mammalian eyes. It must be like Dorothy opening the drab, grey door of her Kansas home and discovering Oz. Maybe that's why dolphins are so playful near the surface—someone has turned on the color. If you are old enough to remember seeing your first color television, you know that's pretty exciting stuff.

We humans, on the other hand, have no such capacity for night vision. We live in a world of stark contrast, of darkness and light. And for most of the time we've walked this planet, the darkness has been very dark indeed. There is nothing quite so black as the velvet circle of night that pressed in around the fires of our ancestors. There were eyes in this darkness and strange noises. Sometimes people went out into the night and never returned. No wonder we have nightmares.

Naked, weak, with no claws, and night-blind, we had to develop technology or perish. We stole the fur right off the backs of animals. (Thank goodness they never filed for the patent rights.) We chipped our claws from flint and made fangs of sharpened wood. And we learned to hold the fearsome darkness at bay with fire, which we carried with us everywhere we went.

We still do not trust the darkness, but we are curious about it. We are constantly opening doors and peering into crevices. Wherever you find a dark place in this world, there is usually a human trying to shine a light in there to see what's going on.

Lately, we have taken to leaving lights all over the place. We hang them from ceilings and string them along the roadside. I for one am thankful for the people who hang lights for the benefit of complete strangers. It's encouraging to think of us all working together to fight darkness, our ancient foe.

Our flashlights, electric lights, floodlights and spotlights cast a warm glow over our world, but we have discovered other kinds of darkness, such as the darkness of the psyche and the darkness of the soul. These have turned out to be more terrifying than the night and even harder to penetrate.

C.G. Jung said that everyone has a shadow side, a part of ourselves that lurks in the darkness below the conscious mind. A dream symbol for the shadow side is water, deep and dark. There are eyes in this darkness too, and sometimes people disappear there and never return.

Of all the dark and unknown regions, the darkness inside of us is the most mysterious. It is so close to home and yet so unknown. Our ancestors poked at the dark with their spears and drove it back with the light of fire. We push at the edges of our own darkness with prayers and worship and therapy. We want to shine a light into our own souls and know what is going on in there.

The evangelist John knew this darkness well. He's the one who tells us that Christ is a light shining in the darkness. But even as the light of Christ comes into the world, a part of us still prefers the dark. Like Judas, we get up from our lighted tables of communion and community and go out into the night.

"This is the judgment," says John. "That light has come into the world, but people loved darkness rather than light." Even as the light shines before us, something inside of us shrinks from it. A voice from within shouts, "No!"

What is this voice? Where does it come from? How can it finally be silenced? These are things we would like to know but do not. The best we can do is recognize our need for light and own up to our fear of it.

A small evergreen wreath sits on a table at the front of our church. It has five candles, four around the outside and a white one in the middle. This is our Advent wreath. Its light grows stronger each week until it blazes with full strength on Christmas day. It seems a pitiful weapon against a world of darkness, but there it sits, year after year, quietly persistent and patient. I save the candle stubs from

previous wreaths and hide them around the church. Occasionally, in a hard time, I find one of them and light it for myself, creating a little bit of Advent light in the middle of the year.

We are small people in this world. Small people with tiny purple and pink candles. Who would lay a wager on this motley crew of candle-carrying dreamers? And yet, here we are, year after year, telling our story and shining His light.