Learning to Walk in the Dark
Chapter Seven
The Dark Night of the Soul

This study guide is formatted for a small group gathering. If you choose to use it as a small group leader or as an individual, feel free to adapt it in whatever way seems meaningful to you. Enjoy!

Amy Fryar Kennedy

Quotes and ideas worth repeating:
Peter Rollings: God is an event, not a fact to be grasped, but an incoming to be undergone. (page 144)

God puts out our lights to keep us safe because we are never more in danger of stumbling than when we think we know where we are going. (page 146)

Related Scripture:

Centering Song: “God is a River” by Peter Mayer (Midwinter CD)

Gathering Activity:
Discuss reaction to John O’Donahue poem about a friend who has serious illness.
OR
Share comments about spending quiet time in car last week instead of listening to external stimulation of radio/music/book on CD. Were you better prepared for where you were headed or did you process where you just left more fully?

Reflection/discussion:
What are some ways to describe dark night of the soul? (pages 133-134)

If you have experienced a dark night of the soul, did you surrender or resist?

What does John of the Cross mean when he writes God is nada? (page 138)

BBT writes about how “sin” began to have less meaning for her? What words can you substitute for sin to make it meaningful to your life? (page 139)

BBT writes that for some, the old ways of being Christian are not working anymore. (page 140-141) Can you relate?

BBT writes for her, it is not necessarily a loss of faith in God, but loss of faith in system that claims to grasp God…
Implications for society:  

For individuals:

Phyllis Tickle says we are in the midst of Christianity’s “semi-millennial rummage sale of ideas.” Agree or disagree?

Look at James Fowler’s Stages of Faith. Do they sound familiar to your life experience? Where do you find yourself now? (page 142-143)

- Fantasy-filled faith of early childhood
- More literal faith of schoolchildren
- Conventional faith of adolescence
- Individuated faith of young adulthood (Do you attend the same church you grew up in?)
- The sacrament of defeat during midlife
  - Let go of certainties about themselves and the world (able to consider other world views, historical Jesus, understanding of Scripture, updating theology)
  - Strangers and strange truths are no longer frightening, but compelling
  - Ready to spend and be spent in last ditch effort to make meaning

During midlife:

**questions of faith**: on what is your heart set?  
  - On what powers do you rely?  
  - What hope gives meaning to life?  

**vs. questions of belief**:  
  - virgin birth
  - Jesus died for sins
  - Only Christians go to heaven

What are some addictive God substitutes? (page 145)

BBT writes: *the only thing the dark night requires of us is to remain conscious. If we can stay with the moment in which God seems most absent, the night will do the rest.* (page 147) Agree or disagree?

Good news: dark and light, faith and doubt, divine absence and presence do not exist in opposite poles. They exist with and within each other, like waves that roll out of same ocean. (page 148) Agree or disagree?

*Holy ignorance is a divine gift given to those who are willing to embrace all that they cannot and will never know about the Giver.* Do you have an abiding sense of God’s presence? (page 147)
Closing: Reflection by Jan Richardson

There are so many kinds of darkness.
Darkness that shelters. Darkness that stifles. Darkness that enfolds us to tend and to bless. Darkness that looms, that longs, that grieves.
Menacing dark, medicine dark, dark that blossoms, dark that bleeds.
Darkness in which the mystery begins, ends, begins again.

 Darkness requires discernment. It requires that we be aware, that we pay attention even when we cannot see the way ahead. It requires remembering to ask whether God is calling us deeper into the darkness or calling us out of it.

This day
this night
may there be light
in the house
of your heart.

Materials need to lead:
Handouts
Midwinter CD and player

Homework for next week:
Read this biographical excerpt about Sister Helen Prejean (author of Dead Man Walking) from Enduring Lives by Carol Lee Flinder. ((pages 268-269) and consider how Sister Helen deals with darkness:

Born in 1939, the second of three children, Helen Prejean grew up in a spacious, two-story home in Baton Rouge. Her father was a lawyer, her mother a nurse: to the one she traces her love of books and a good argument, to the other, her compassion. Her parents were devout Catholics, each of whom had weighed the possibility of a religious vocation before they married. Dead Man Walking is dedicated “To my mother, Gusta Mae, and my father, Louis, who loved me into life.” The tenderness of that wording could slip right past us, but in case it does, we also have her word that “I was loved more than the law allows,” and even, “They hosed up down with love.”

The mind lurches, as perhaps it is supposed to, over that last image—a reminder of the tensions that were gathering throughout the South and would explode in the 1960s—in Birmingham, Alabama, in 1963, where police chief Bull Connor set upon civil rights demonstrators with firehoses and dogs. Helen Prejean was, by her own account, entirely oblivious to these
tensions. The only black people she knew were the family servants, who ate in the kitchen and lived in a cottage out back.

She is utterly forthcoming about her childhood insensitivity. She doesn’t have to tell us about riding the segregated bus downtown with her girlfriends and running to the back on a dare to sit for a few seconds among the black people, giggling wildly the whole time. She doesn’t have to tell us, but she does. OR about the day she and her girlfriend were leaving the bus and the driver suddenly shouted an obscenity and kicked a young black worm off his bus-literally kicked her. Moments like this could have penetrated the walls of Helen’s bubble existence, but they didn’t, and in acknowledging that they didn’t she is once again extending her hand toward her readers: We’re all asleep, insensitivity is the human lot, and it’s never too late to wake up.