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The Gift of Uncertainty

Series: "Gifts of the Dark Wood" by Eric Elnes

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This Lent we're exploring what it means to be in the Dark Wood moments of our lives. We're not going to talk about how to get out of it, as if life is good only when we are not there; we're going to explore what it could mean for our lives to recognize the gifts of the Dark Wood. Gifts? What if times of uncertainty, or failure, or emptiness are opportunities for spiritual awakening?

"You have a place in this world." That's the very first sentence in the book by Eric Elnes that we're looking at this Lent. Imagine a place where awkwardness dissolves and you feel fully alive – fully human. You know this place, though you might feel like you're far away from it. You know this place. You've been there before. You might not always know how to get to it, but you recognize it immediately, every time.

Elnes describes it as brief moments of awakening when something deep inside of you cries, "Home!" when most of the time we feel very far from home. He says we're closer than we realize, but "much of the time, you feel more like Pinocchio, woodenly meandering through life, hoping to be alive one day."

Over the next six weeks, we'll talk about finding our place in this world at the very point where we feel the farthest from it. We'll try to figure out how to recognize the beauty and blessings that exist within those experiences that we fear, but just can't avoid.

Over the next six weeks we'll try seeing life through new eyes – hopefully learning to recognize that our experiences of failure, emptiness and uncertainty are as important as they are unavoidable.

Think about it for a second. When I look back at my life, all of my achievements – my most noteworthy accomplishments – have been the direct or indirect result of some failure or loss or disappointment. In hindsight I can see that I was forced to look at the situation differently and fix something – and I managed to produce a creative result.

One of my favorite Gospel stories goes something like this:

As soon as the meal was finished, Jesus insisted that the disciples get in the boat and go on ahead ... The boat was far out to sea when the wind came up against them, and they were battered by the waves. At about four o'clock in the morning, Jesus came toward them walking on the water. They were scared out of their wits. "A ghost!" they said, crying out in terror.

But Jesus was quick to comfort them. "Courage, it's me. Don't be afraid."

Peter, suddenly emboldened, said, "Master, if it's really you, call me to come to you on the water."

"Come ahead," Jesus said.

Jumping out of the boat, Peter walked on the water to Jesus. But when he looked down at the waves churning beneath his feet, he lost his nerve and started to sink. He cried, "Master, save me!"

Have you ever felt like you were sinking in stormy waters? Some of you might feel that way right now. Take a second to think about a specific instance that felt, or feels, like a "Dark Wood" moment.

Jumping out of the boat, Peter walked on the water to Jesus. But when he took his eyes off of Jesus, he started to sink. He cried, "Master, save me!"

Jesus didn't hesitate. Suddenly He was right there and He reached down and grabbed Peter's hand. Then he said, "Faint-heart, what got into you?"

The two of them climbed into the boat, and the wind died down. The disciples in the boat, having watched the whole thing, worshiped Jesus, saying, "This is it! You are God's Son for sure!"

In the book, Elnes says, "Sometimes... you need to step away from the security of your boat onto the stormy sea of your own awakening to discover that a sinking stone is a far firmer foundation than you ever have imagined."

The book's full title is "Gifts of the Dark Wood: Seven Blessings for Soulful Skeptics (and other wanderers)." That's right, blessings!

The whole point of the book is that the best circumstances for awakening and discovery are found in the most unlikely and misunderstood places. The Dark Wood.

The phrase comes from Italian poet and philosopher Dante Alighieri's most famous work, "The Divine Comedy" (in which we find his well-known *Inferno*). He writes about a dark wood that he encountered midpoint in his life where "the true way was wholly lost." It was a place of confusion, of emptiness, and stumbling.

That's one side of Christian thought. The other side of the tradition understood that struggle wasn't necessarily a place of punishment, but a place where revelation happens. The mystics had different names for the Dark wood. St John of the Cross called it the "Dark Night of the Soul." We talked about that. Teresa of Avila called it the 5th Mansion, and another, "The Cloud of Unknowing." They all insisted that the Dark Wood was a place where we receive strange and wondrous gifts -- a place where we meet God.

Over the next weeks we'll look at six of the unusual gifts found in the Dark Wood: Uncertainty, emptiness, being thunderstruck, getting lost, temptation, and becoming a misfit. Easter's chapter will be 'Where Do We Go from Here?' I already have uncertainty about what I'll be preaching that day!

From the moment we realize that there's more to life than meets the eye, we have entered the Dark Wood. We haven't gone there on purpose, mind you. As Dante wrote, we awoke there. We realize that we are as much a mystery to ourselves as we are to anyone, and the mystery that is us longs to connect with the mystery that is God. And in the dark wood we experience moments that seem to mark our path, leading us in a particular direction, inviting us to follow along.

At first we might resist. Elnes says that "this is to be expected whenever a person senses a call to inhabit their place in the world." If the call is coming from God – a power higher than yourself – then it's calling you forward based on information and awareness that you don't have yet. This is the call of the Holy Spirit and with it comes the first gift of the Dark Wood: uncertainty.

We tend to look at uncertainty as a more of a curse than a gift, though, don't we? When we can't see the end or the path isn't marked clearly enough; if we don't have a rock solid assurance that everything's going to be ok, we dig our heels in.

Sometimes we look to religion for a sense of security. But have you ever noticed, the more certainty a religion claims, the more frenzied and hysterical its followers are? Life is messy and no amount of doctrine or dogma is going to change it.

Look at the heroes of both Old and New Testaments. Look at Moses, Abraham, King David, Peter, Paul, Mary – just kidding! – even Jesus! They all had more than their fair share of uncertainty and struggle. The only people in the Bible who consider certainty and absence of struggle to be a good thing are the bad guys. From the serpent in the garden to Caiaphas and Pontius Pilate, certainty is highly overrated in the scriptures.

In today's reading, the apostle Paul seems to be saying that people who have a great need for certainty in life are being childish. You see, while certainty may come eventually, an adult faith means putting away our need – our desire for certainty.

“When I was a child,” writes Paul, “I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. ¹² For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known.”

While children do sometimes find a little uncertainty fun -- like 'peek-a-boo' or the surprise of a jack-in-the-box -- just try replacing their regular blue sippy cup with the green one. Children love predictability and certainty.

The word 'dimly' in that passage is from the Greek, *anigmati*, which is where we get our word enigma. What's an enigma? A mystery, a riddle, 'puzzling, ambiguous, and hard to understand. A mature faith is one that embraces life as a mystery.

Imagine a movie or a story that's completely predictable. Children like those movies. But 'predictable' is not a word that movie critics use to review a compelling or intriguing storyline. Too much certainty takes all the adventure out of life; it sucks the joy out of relationships. When a marriage becomes too predictable the couple individually starts looking elsewhere for adventure -- or they get counseling.

We have to stick our toes in the water or more! Like Peter, we have to step out of the safety of the boat. Look to Jesus and step out in faith -- and uncertainty.

At the age of 42, with just over a year of sobriety under my belt, I had to decide if I should go back to school for a bachelor's degree. I knew this would be uncomfortable at best; I never liked school. I wasn't looking forward to it. I just wanted the certainty of life that came with sobriety. (Ha! There's no such thing. Sobriety is far more uncertain than getting drunk every day!)

I decided to do it. And I had to fill out all the applications, and send for 25 year old transcripts, and find references, and wait... wait in uncertainty. Then I had to actually go to school and take classes that I didn't like. And the whole time I was going back and forth about being certain that this really was what I wanted or not. Some days the Holy Spirit was there to remind me and some days I just wasn't feeling it. And that, I have to admit, hasn't changed. Some days I still don't feel it.

But it's not certainty that we seek so much as trust. Trust honors the freedom of people and makes growth and intimacy possible. The professors I had in grad school had a favorite phrase they seemed to love to use: "to live in the tension." In order to continue our journey toward God and our higher selves, we have to learn to live in the tension of uncertainty and trust. Trusting that in the awkwardness of uncertainty, we are on our way, with the confidence to allow those brief moments of awakening to lead us even more deeply into the Dark Wood to find our place in the world.

Picture a swan waddling awkwardly across the grass. He doesn't cure his awkwardness by beating himself up, by moving faster, or by getting more organized.

He does it by waddling -- moving toward the water, where he belongs. It's the simple contact with the water that gives the swan his grace and presence.

"You only have to touch the elemental waters in your own life," the author writes, "and it will transform everything." But you have to allow yourself to step out into those waters from the seemingly solid ground you're standing on, and that can be hard. Especially if you think you might drown. . . . Let go of all this effort, and let yourself down, however awkwardly, into the waters."

It's that comfortable rut people talk about. Whether the Spirit comes to you through a quiet and gentle invitation or a jolt of "friendly advice," the experience can be discomfoting. In other words, if you 've been waddling around on dry land for very long, you're probably used to it. Your awkward waddling feels normal. What we really need is a good shove from the Spirit to get us swimming again.

Amen.