

I stood still and recalled not just the impact, the fire and the fall. I let things go deeper, deeper into my memory.

I recall a French artist who went back to his childhood village. As he walked along the street he could not recall his own past, could not recognize the place where he grew up. Then he stooped down, placed his fingers on a stone wall at the height where he would have stood at the age of four. All the memories came flooding back.

What do I recall when I stoop down? When I look up into that endless blue?

I see those acts of human decency, those moments of transcendence amid the debris. Why did so many go beyond themselves, beyond fear, beyond rage? Why did we sense that we were all in this together? When we discovered what the melting pot meant?

Am I embarrassed about recalling those moments, when I let myself go, when I realized that we all were so vulnerable?

Before our nation went on a five-year drunk, we had a moment when our people grew up, out of enforced adolescence. There was no time for militancy, for bravado, crusades or cowboy rhetoric. But it was a noble time.

It was a time when we got outside our little worlds, when we got dirty, caring for others. A time before politicians applied the spin cycle. I witnessed a horrible truth: the people could act on their own—without their leaders. Since then politicians have spent much to try to make sure we forget.

But I recall myself reaching out, not needing to go far to lend a hand, for whoever was beside me became delicate, became precious.

All the masks had fallen off and the world noticed, even in Teheran.

Dark matters

2007

Dickens got it right. No one wants to be at school at Christmas time. Neither the aching specter of the nineteenth-century boarding school boy nor today's My Space coed wants to be around campus. I have often mused how, despite the seasonal protestations of good will and the fabricated attempts at merriment, no one really wants to be around a university at this time of year. Of course, students are working through both the onset

of the flu and the last throes of exams, while professors regret the bulk of the assignments they must now read, and administrators lose track of time with end-of-the-year reports.

So, at this season, as the sun sharply descends, or when the afternoon moves from light gray to a harsher gun metal sky, I walk unnoticed around the campus. Already students are loading cars to make a fast getaway. They want to beat the coming ice storm that is forecast for Chicago. Others find friends to taxi them to the airport. The janitors get the floors done as quickly as they can and disappear into the night. Secretaries take off a few minutes early to get some shopping in at the malls, while a couple of the grounds crew hurriedly replace a burnt out Christmas bulb. Soon, only the basketball team will be here for the duration.

You can see it in their eyes. Everyone wants to be elsewhere.

Indeed, we are in the darkest time of the year. Long before Stonehenge, humans grappled with the loss of light, with the fear that it would slip away forever. They caught their breath as they sensed the inevitable descent into the dark. They sang and danced, hoping to wake the sun; they beat drums and made merry, desperate to believe that light would return.

On campus the lights are going out. The garlands of lights on lampposts futilely try to stave off the night. And it is only 6:00 p.m. The Library is shut down. A campus police car slowly turns away in patrol. I become a ghost as I walk about.

Where are we all going? The darkness so wonderfully concentrates the mind. We dart about like fireflies. Where are we going?

As we wait in airport security lines, or stare unthinkingly out a car window, as we lose our patience in a shopping mall, or try to find the perfect tree; where are we going? Are we not all going into the dark?

This is the terror that humans have ever faced. And now we can even see this in enormous proportions. The cosmos itself is predominantly dark matter and energy. Many try to be escape artists. But even Houdini left us in the dark.

Perhaps the universe is teaching us some wisdom. The mystics spoke of the dark night of the soul. Will we find something other than the face of fear in this dark night?