Good Morning and Good Morning, Zoomers

I'd like to begin by welcoming my very dear friend Judy Kolz, who is joining us from Colorado via Zoom. Judy is the driving force behind my talk today: she often gifts me with books that I probably wouldn't come across on my own, and as a result, she broadens my perspectives and understanding about many things. "Learning To Walk In The Dark" by Barbara Brown Taylor is one of these books, and the first time I read it I thought, this is something I'd love to talk about at KUUF. Thank you, Judy, for always being an inspiration and bright light in my life, and for being here today!

While Ms Taylor's book is about learning to walk in spiritual darkness, it seems to me that we all have dark places that we need to learn how to navigate.

How many of us are afraid, even secretly, of the dark? If so, did it begin in early childhood, when things that went bump in the night were guaranteed to raise our heart rates, simply because we couldn't see what was there? I don't remember being afraid of the dark as a child, but I do remember screaming nightmares that brought a parent running to see what was wrong, and it was only by their comforting presence and the light from the hall that I was able to go back to sleep. At that time, during the early 50's, night lights weren't a thing-I slept in darkness.

Over time, darkness and fear of the dark have permeated our subconscious and our beliefs in right and wrong, good and evil, and there are many examples of this. One of the best known, of course, is rooted in Judeo-Christian and Islamic belief: God was the Creator of light and life, and the Prince Of Darkness, who God cast out, was his adversary: the chief spirit of evil, the tempter of mankind, and the Master of Hell-wow, talk about two heavy hitters!
The battle between good and evil, dark and light, has been the theme of countless plays and books, from Shakespeare's, Othello, and Macbeth, to J.R.R. Tolkien's "The Hobbit" and "Lord of the Rings" and

J.K. Rowling's "Harry Potter" series. With Tolkien and Rowling there is no subtlety about dark and light, good and evil: Sauron is The Dark Lord of Mordor, lives in Barad-Dur, The Dark Tower, and he is doing his damnedest to destroy Middle Earth. In the Harry Potter books, evil wizard Voldemort is referred to as The Dark Lord by his followers, the Death Eaters, and is trying to subjugate all the good witches and wizards in the world to wreck the havoc of evil with him and for him. There is no question in our minds about who the good guys and the bad guys are in these books, until we get to "Harry Potter and The Order of the Phoenix". There Sirius Black is a member of The Order of the Phoenix, (the good guys) who is fighting against Voldemort, despite his family's allegiance to the Dark Lord. He gives us a bit of insight into the complexity of the subject, though: "We've all got both light and dark inside us. What matters is the part we choose to act on. That is who we really are." In other words, our choices are not irrevocable when it comes to the Dark Side, but the Dark Side can be extremely seductive to those who crave power at any cost. We would do well to acknowledge the reality of that, especially right now as our democracy hangs in the balance.

Pop culture has hammered white is good, black is evil, firmly into our belief systems. The good guys wear white hats, the bad guys wear black hats-one of the few exceptions to this was during the 50s-Walt Disney's "Zorro", a force for good and for justice who dressed in black, wore a black mask, and performed his daring deeds in the dark of night. During the heyday of Westerns, we rarely, if ever, saw a sheriff in a black hat-that was proper attire for the bad guys. A few weeks ago, Halloween inundated us with witches, attired in black, accompanied by black cats-evil entities, and only out and about in the night. Did you know that to this day black cats are considered bad luck in   many cultures, and that it takes black cats in shelters much longer, if ever, to be adopted? Some old, old beliefs persist to this day, and logic hasn't had much, if any, impact on them. The Wizard of Oz has reminded us of this for nearly as long as I can remember: there was the Wicked Witch of the West, ugly, mean, and dressed in black, (and let us not forget the creepy flying monkeys) and Glinda, the

Witch of the North, beautiful, sweetly spoken, and dressed in white, shining with sparkles and light-she was the quintessence of goodness. We see this theme over and over again. I'm betting that you're all sitting there thinking of more examples of the black/white good/evil paradigm, and they exist worldwide. Pop culture aside, let us not forget the most dangerous and destructive cultural construct of all: that white skin has always been, and some say still is, superior in every way to any other skin color-a topic so complex that it must be addressed on its own, rather than here today.

I now want to take us into the realm of darkness and night-actual night time darkness. Since the advent of artificial light, we don't spend much, if any, time in real, as in you can't see your hand in front of your face, darkness, even when we've turned the lights out and gone to bed. There are little red lights on our cordless phones to show that they are charging. There are red lights on the phone base, a red light to show that your TV is off, little lights here and little lights there, and they dilute the darkness no matter how slightly. The clock on my kitchen stove is neon blue and lights up the entire room. You probably use one or more nightlights. But we've assimilated this lack of complete darkness, and sleep anyway-until we don't. I don't think there's any one who can say they've never abruptly woken in the wee hours, perhaps from a bad dream, from anxiety, from fear of the present, fear of the future, fears for our children, fears of dying, fears of not having enough money-these days there are myriad things that cause anxiety. Do you have a system for coping with these unwelcome interruptions in the dark? Most of us do. Perhaps it's repeating a calming mantra, turning on the bedside light to self-soothe our fears, or a trip to the kitchen for a snack. We've all come up with some kind of panacea, but what we don't do is just lie there, because we've been taught to fear the dark and the frightening possibilities it contains-everything is out of proportion because we can not see. We don't lie there with our discomfort-we don't ask it it to pull up a chair and visit for a while. We're not willing to metaphorically walk in the dark even from the safety of our beds. So how do we begin to learn to walk in this sort of darkness and fear? One night, suddenly awakened

in a total panic, I decided to see what would happen if I just laid there, lights off, my heart racing, just hanging out with the anxiety and the dark. Let me tell you, it was extremely unpleasant. More than that, it took a great deal of determination not to turn the light on, to make myself just wait it out. But slowly, bit by bit, as nothing life threatening actually happened, I calmed down, my heart decided not to explode from my chest, and I thought about what was really going on. Yes, I was alone, yes, the future was uncertain, not to say scary, yes, I'd much rather be asleep, but again, slowly, bit by bit, I was able to calm down, put things into some kind of perspective, and go back to sleep. It was an extremely frightening experience but I managed it. I learned that darkness and anxiety don't have to ruin my night. And interestingly, the more times I've practiced lying there and accepting it, the less frequently it happens. Once in a while it takes a long time to go back to sleep, but this is OK, too-I've taught myself to just lie quietly and rest, to enjoy the comfort of my bed, the coziness of the cat snuggled up by my side, and use it as a time to practice gratitude-small steps to walk calmly in the dark, to embrace the dark and the fear rather than to fight it. As Victor Hugo said "Even the darkest night will end, and the sun will rise."

Not all darkness involves lack of actual light. Grief is darkness, a darkness of heart, mind, and spirit, and trying to learn how to live with it can seem impossible-a burden literally too heavy to bear. Grief, resulting from unexpected death is particularly so-our brains can not understand or accept it. This has happened to me three times, the last two within four months of each other. I have been inundated, flooded, and swamped by grief, and no good witch has come along with a magic wand, no good guy in a white hat, to help me find a way forward. Everywhere I look around my house, I see reminders of the people I've lost, and even now, two years down the road of grief I still feel devastated. The "I'm not really gone, I'm just in another room" thing doesn't comfort me even a little, despite my belief that our energy is eternal. I wonder over and over what to do with all this love that I still feel, wonder what can take the place of the physical presence of the beloved people who are gone. I do not, however,

want to be trapped in the quicksand of this deep and miry darkness. I want to be able to celebrate the beauties and wonders of this world, to enjoy it, and dare I say it, be happy. I don't want being happy to feel like disloyalty, that being happy will detract from the love and the grief. The grief does not, will not diminish, but I'm learning that I can continue to grow, to live with some measure of joy, and that it is right to do so-grief doesn't have to rule my life, doesn't have to plunge me into darkness, especially if I look it straight in the eye, spend time with it, and even in an odd way, make friends with it. It's not going anywhere, it is part of me now, and always will be. As Leonard Cohen wisely said "There is a crack in everything-that's how the light gets in." And cracks can get bigger, can let in more light, especially if we don't try to pretend that the dark isn't there, that ignoring or suppressing it will make it go away. Darkness and light need and depend on each other.

This brings me to the darkness of loneliness, which can be an offshoot of grief, or the fear of being alone, of being abandoned, of feeling that there is no one to provide help or support during a difficult time. Many years ago I read a novel called "The Power of One", and while I only remember the overall gist of the story, one sentence at the beginning of the book was so descriptive that I have never forgotten it: "The Loneliness Bird has laid stone eggs in my stomach.". I think that we have all experienced that feeling to some degree or another during our lives. I have chosen to live alone and truly enjoy it-I don't have the ability to share living space with another person, no matter how dearly loved they may be. On the very rare occasions that I feel a small nudge from The Loneliness Bird, it's almost always because I am tired or worried. I try to accept it, experience it, and let it go. As we get older, more and more friends and family members die-as the Brits so charmingly put it, they fall off the perch. We may begin to feel lonely, isolated, cut off from much that we have known, and it's a black hole that's easy to fall into. Some have learned to reach out to others with a phone call, an email, a text, a visit on Facetime, or getting together with a friend, but some seem to feel that others should do the reaching out, and expect it-I

think that this guarantees loneliness. My Mum was one of these, and she paid a bitter price for it at the end of her life-it was a dark time for her. I've learned that if I want to feel connected to people, it's up to me to make the overtures, and I do-even smiling at strangers and saying hello, because it brightens up my day, and maybe theirs as well. As a result, I have a family of friends, some very close, some less so, but all part of a circle of friendship and caring, who support me and love me; they also know that I am there for them. If you know someone who is alone, or lonely, reach out to them, take the initiative-if you're alone or lonely and you do so, you'll discover that you're only as alone as you want to be. It's not always easy-we all have some fear of rejection-but Amanda Gorman put it so beautifully at President Biden's Inauguration: "For there is always light if only we're brave enough to see it, if only we are brave enough to be it." Friendship and love are blazing lights in our lonely darkness.

A great deal can and has been said about darkness and its ramifications, countless volumes have been written with little if anything good to commend it: dark equals bad and evil, and that's all there is to it.. Perhaps, however, it is time to think about darkness, whether spiritual or emotional or actual, from a different perspective, a positive perspective: to remember that seeds germinate in the dark and burst forth into the light. Time spent in actual darkness can lead us to peace and quiet, a time to calm our souls. Without the dark, there is no starlight, no moonlight, no new life. In Italian, the translation of to "give birth" is "dare alla luce"-to give to the light.

We may learn things by being present in the dark that we will never learn in the light. If we want to flourish, we need the ever changing light of darkness as much as we need the full light of day-we need to give our hearts and trust to both. While some gifts arrive by day, some only come burnished by night.

May both the light and the dark guide you, teach you, and bring you joy as you learn to walk in the dark.