

When the Lights Went Out

By Mel Schwartz

A recent power blackout temporarily challenged our lives. The struggle was not necessarily limited to travel problems or discomfort from lack of air conditioning or spoiling food. On a deeper level the disquiet that arose came from a lack of distraction. We had no computers, telephones or television to busy ourselves with. No restaurants to dine in, nor movies to entertain us. There was little work to be accomplished. The very hurried lives that we have become so habituated with came to a screeching halt. We were left with our own thoughts and our relationships with those in proximity. The very things that we tend to de-prioritize and take for granted were all that we had. How we felt in those circumstances might reveal a lot about how we live our lives. Did we accept the time out from our chaotic lives and enjoy some quiet moments with friends and families or were we disconcerted by the lack of things to busy ourselves with?

Many people complained about boredom or an inability to feel serene without the distractions that we have come to identify with our lives. What really happens in those moments of quiet when the noise and chatter of the world turn off is that our sleepwalking condition subsides. When we are constantly on the go, rushing somewhat frenetically from one activity to the next, we tend not to be present. It's as though we're on automatic pilot. Our thoughts on the next thing and our minds not engaged in the moment. The blackout temporarily turned off the automatic pilot. The anesthesia wore off briefly. And so the sleepwalking ended somewhat abruptly and we were left with ourselves and perhaps our families and partners. Essentially, we were forced to communicate and relate on a fundamental human basis without the intervention of modern technology. If this experience felt uncomfortable or daunting, it might be informing us of how far off the path of mindful living we've come. Yet, it was not too long ago that these technological advancements didn't exist and people more naturally related, with one another. It was only a few generations ago, that as evening fell, people gathered amongst one another and communicated and related, without all the accompanying distractions. This social experience provided a support system that went a long way in promoting mental and emotional well-being.

Our society has changed at a breakneck pace in those few generations. We have come to manufacture lives that are so hurried and fragmented that we rush past one another on our way to the next stop. The culture that we've created is the same society that witnesses depression rates that are at least six times higher than they were in the 1950's. These are in part the results of a lifestyle which places such demand and emphasis on performance and achievement as they induce to lose the integrity and value of what really matters in our lives. When we live in this manner it leaves us feeling isolated and separate and results in our feeling emotionally malnourished. It is literally impossible to thrive emotionally and psychologically without honoring our relations with others. Our connectedness with others is the basis of our happiness.

The foundation for joyful living lies in part in the ability to revel in the fulfillment of intimate relationships and meaningful communication. Ironically, when the lights went

out we had the opportunity to honor those relationships. We need to reconfigure our lives to do so when the lights are on.

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