



No Flashlight

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WHEN YOU GO OUT INTO THE woods, don't take a flashlight. Walk down the trail immersed in darkness, letting it wrap around you like a softly woven shawl. Turning on a light separates you from the universe of nocturnal dwelling. Resist the urge to stay with the familiar. You need no passport; walk on without knowing the language of this world that is not yours. Trust that foreign does not mean hostile; trust that your body knows more than you understand and can guide you.

Let your feet lead the way, allowing your toes to navigate, teaching the soles of your feet to feel twig and rock, root and acorn even through the bottoms of your shoes. What is the difference in the way your foot slides over sycamore leaf and limestone, oak duff and clay? Notice the brush of vine along your ankles; you move too fast for its tendrils to grab you, but its cells still know you have been there and respond by curling long after you have passed. Each time you approach the trail's edge, branches nudge you and you stay the course.

Walk more slowly if you need to. Take the time needed to move in confidence and respect. Give your body the chance to absorb what is around you, the time for your senses to reach out and back in, to take on a life of their own. Become meditative but alert to the external, not internal. This walk will take all your attention;

let go of the day's events and bright colors.

As your pupils open wide to receive all the subtle light, let your eyesight reach out into the treespace around you, learning the difference between branch and air, between gray and gray and gray and gray. If the trail is wide, look up and see the wobbly line of sky above your path, stars sending their vectors of light through space to you. They are the same stars wherever you are in the hemisphere, signs of familiarity even in this unknown place.

Let your ears notice the spaces between quiet and silent, between foot on trail and foot straying into underbrush. What is the difference between the shuffle of sand and the scuttle of pine needle? The forest listens to you too. A snake feels the vibrations of your boots on the dirt and stays low

and still. A mouse hears the crack of twig and ducks under a slab of bark.

You are not alone; katydids remind you that they have you surrounded, and you can claim them as your companions. You may hear animals rustling in the leaves, but you don't know the language to distinguish skink from grasshopper, vole from newt. Trust that though unfamiliar, these creatures are not hostile; they are your community, respect given, honor received. Their noises remind you that you share the planet and are a visitor in their world.

That musky smell there along the trail—pause and consider. Coyote or skunk, weasel or rutting buck? If this were your world, you would know the difference as certainly as your nose distinguishes cinnamon from coffee. Instead, nod in acknowledgment to the unknown and breathe it in,

letting your cells wake up to its presence. As you approach the low places near creek or pond, your nose goes on alert, smelling the transition from moist to moister, wet to wetter. The scents of fish and duckweed, decay and fecundity creep up to your place of slight elevation.

You reach a place where so little light is coming through that you can see nothing useful for navigation. Close your eyes, then, and trust the rest of your body to guide you. Let ears and skin, toes and nose become even more awake. They will respond by expanding gratefully, stretching their underused superpowers like the wings of a butterfly emerging from chrysalis, slowly filling and taking on their potential.

Sometimes you will stumble. Years of evolution as a diurnal organism have not thoroughly prepared you

for life in darkness. You lack the whiskers that expand the sensory edges of nocturnal mammals and the retinas of owls that scoop up even the least photons of light. Let yourself stumble sometimes or wander off the trail slightly before retracing your steps. Perhaps your heart will race, ancient fear of the hunted and lost taking hold. Don't let the fear own you; accept the humility of the foreigner in a strange land. Pick yourself up, listen to the assurance of the katydids, wrap yourself in the dark moist air and continue on.

Take a child with you next time. Show her that flashlights don't belong on night walks in the woods. Open her world to the nighttime; guide her into a way without fear or mistrust. Teach her that trusting her body will give her strength and agility beyond her imagination. ✖