

Passion, darkness and spirituality: a look underneath our need for connection – an article exploring the work of songwriter/writer Leonard Cohen and psychotherapist/ writer Thomas Moore.

by Jill Kenny

Leonard Cohen has delved into many themes in his body of work, from politics and fascism, to loneliness and ageing. I will examine some of his most treasured songs and lesser-known poems from his collection, *The Book of Longing*, exploring how spirituality, sensuality, and darkness connect in his work. These elements that have been ascribed to the poet in an almost ethereal manner, yet, as always Cohen, addresses them in a tangible and palpable way. These reoccurring topics will be paralleled to those of writer/ psychotherapist Thomas Moore and his book, *Dark Nights of the Soul*. Moore discusses how periods of difficulty, what he describes as our 'dark nights' in an age-old tradition, can be transformative. He discusses how symbolism, mythology, literature, rites of passage and having a darker outlook on life can aid us through these times. I will explore how passion is a means of connectivity and how life's paradoxes can lead to a dark night of the soul; sensual imagery and psychological theory will be addressed as guides to exploring periods of chaos, which will be contemplated not as an avoidable force, but as a natural rhythmical part of life.

I have reservations about writing this article: about the use of psychological theory. Defining a title and creating my own hypothesis between these two writers feels as if I'm tampering with the ineffable. Leonard Cohen said about writing, "These are sacred mechanics and you have to be careful analysing them." I couldn't agree more. Yet, I'm drawn to write this, to somehow comprehend why Cohen's work has affected me so deeply. The songwriter said he had long given up the title of 'the master of erotic despair', which his own record company originally concocted; and in obituaries of his death he has been named the 'sonorous baritone' with a 'sardonic view of both his craft and the human condition'. I read, reread, listen, and re-listen to his collections and never find his work derogatory, nor without hope. He dares to go where few songwriters go: looking beneath our longings, to our deepest needs.

Writing and Sensuality

Much of Cohen's work is interlaced with religious references; it seems apt to presume he may write in search of some form of deeper understanding of life. He did spend intermittent periods at Mt. Baldy, a Buddhist Monastery under Japanese Zen master Kyozan Joshu Roshi, where he was ordained a monk, and finally settled there for several years in the 1990s. It was there he wrote the following poem, "Roshi":

*I never really understood
what he said
but every now and then
I find myself
barking with the dog
or bending with the irises
or helping out
in other little ways.*

Although his 'helping out' actions are mindful in themselves, he dismisses any claim of enlightenment. Reflecting on his time at the monastery, Cohen mused that the more time he spent with Roshi the less he felt like himself and subsequently the better he felt; that the Zen Master was someone, "who deeply cared, or deeply didn't care about who I was. I'm not quite sure which." I found it touching that Cohen, now a world-famous artist, wanted to detach from the self that was connected to status; with a humility in admitting that he 'never really understood'. Roshi encouraged Cohen not to categorise himself as 'Jewish, Japanese, Zen master, Zen student', but to accept that different versions of himself may arise, thus, I imagine, breaking down previous conceptions of self-identity.

Psychologist Thomas Moore encourages the reader (of *Dark Nights of the Soul*) to imagine having three parts in themselves: the eternal self, that which is interconnected and never changes; the practical self, which changes with environment and events; and the unfolding self, which is always evolving, always becoming, 'the go-between that links the eternal with the everyday'. Despite his claims of not developing spiritually, to me, Cohen's time at Mt. Baldy allowed him to unknowingly delve further into the ever-present, but at times hidden, eternal self; he would later transmute that to writing, touching on the idea of the unfolding self. Moore describes this as the optimum reality, that which combines great ideas with the day to day.

Leonard Cohen described the writing process as mysterious; I believe this is because he is examining the mysteries of life. In his piece, 'Something from the Early Seventies', he wrote: "It's a pity if someone has to console himself for the wreck of his days with the notion that somehow his voice, his work embodies the deepest, most obscure, freshest, rawest oyster of reality in the unfathomable refrigerator of the heart's ocean, but I am such a one and there you have it. It is really amazing how famous I am to those few who truly comprehend what I am about.' To me, this is an apt description of why he wants to write, for 'the rawest oyster of reality', yet there is a sense of irony in it, as with the grizzly cadence in his voice when he later sings, 'I was born with the gift of a golden voice.' He described moving to New York, witnessing how songwriters and musicians saw their potential fame, and possessed a drive to become cultural figures. In

comparison, he believed, from his experience, that Canadians were brought up to think 'more humbly'. The fame was an after-effect of the work. The fact that he would be 'famous' for his quest for meaning is a little meaningless, which is no mistake by Cohen. These are lines, like many others, that you can imagine being written with a wry smile.

Cohen was greatly influenced by the poet Irving Layton. Both would meet, along with a group of poets in Montreal, to share their work; they scrutinised every detail and Cohen's collection of poems, *Book of Longing*, was dedicated to Layton. Both wrote about deeper needs behind sexual encounters. The following is an excerpt about women from Layton's poem "The Tamed Puma", where he talks about women:

*For their ally is not beauty alone
but the scantness of sense or purpose
I find in the remotest curved niche
of the universe;
whoever framed its empty immensities
didn't reckon on a man's reason or conscience
or the unassuageable ache in my heart.
Women and poems are my sole chance here to give expelled breath shape and contour
and fable it with meaning.
I place on the brow of every women I love
a crown made from the choicest words;
I dress her like a woodland queen
in trope and metaphor.
My desperation blossoms into garlands
braceleting her wrists, my sick despair
into flowering anklets.
I plug the void with my phallus
and making love on bed or carpet
we transfigure pitchblack nothingness'
into a tamed puma whose whiskers
we stroke between enrapturing kisses.*

In both "The Tamed Puma" and "Something from the Early Seventies", there is a reference to that intangible entity that exists at the bottom of the search for meaning, described again and again as the 'heart' in Cohen's work. The same account of feeling for the depth of the universe, sought through writing and intimacy with a woman, is indicated when Layton writes, 'plug the void with my phallus'; which may imply a sensory way of counteracting the unknown, 'whose whiskers we stroke between enrapturing kisses'. In "Tamed Puma", there is an overriding sense of doom: a 'desperation', 'sick despair', or 'sole chance' to give meaning, while the woman and her 'scantness of purpose' is merely a tool in blocking out the pain. It's here, I feel Cohen's work differs. The following is his poem, "Other Writers":

*Steve Sanfield is a great haiku master.
He lives in the country with Sarah,
his beautiful wife,
and he writes about the small things
which stand for all things.
Kyozan Joshu Roshi
who has brought hundreds of monks
to a full awakening
addresses the simultaneous expansion and contradiction
of the cosmos.
I go on and on
about a noble young woman
who unfastened her jeans
in the front seat of my jeep
and let me touch
the source of life
because I was so far from it.
I've got to tell you, friends,
I prefer my stuff to theirs.*

Like Layton, Cohen writes about feeling disconnected. He was so far from what? From being in touch with his true self, that which he yearned for in Mt. Baldy? What's more, Cohen admits to a visceral way of connecting with life through sexual contact, displaying a vulnerability in a subject that is, and was even more so at the time, associated with alpha-power and pride. He insinuates a longing to touch that place from which we physically emerge: in wonder, in pleasure. To me, Layton's poem is about eradicating pain, while Cohen's is about connection, while praising women and the cyclical patterns of nature. This search for the truth in the heart's ocean is sought through sensuality. Moore describes the artist as being 'one step closer' to things – an idea that perfectly epitomises how I see Leonard Cohen - examining the desire beneath desire. While the readers, his 'friends', can relate to the tangibility of this physical connection, instead of it being limited to great artists.

Moore describes how desire plays an enormous role in creating a feeling of relatedness, with self and life. He discusses how Sendor Ferenczi, a follower of Freud, claimed that "sex is a return to the oceanic sensation of the infant in the womb", suggesting that the altered state during lovemaking allows a deeper part of our soul to come to the fore, while former ideas of actuality recedes. Cohen depicts this idea in the following poem, "Disturbed this Morning":

*Ah. That.
That's what I was so disturbed
about this morning:
my desire has come back
and I want you again.*

*I was doing fine,
I was above it all.
The boys and girls were beautiful
and I was an old man, loving everyone.
And now I want you again,
I want your absolute attention,
your underwear rolled down in a hurry
still hanging on one foot,
and nothing on my mind
but to be inside
the only place
that has no inside
and no outside.*

Practicality has disappeared as the writer is lost in the memory of the realms of pleasure. He believed he could overcome it: that it's nearly embarrassing to be 'an old man', and be preoccupied with desire: 'I was doing fine, I was above it all.' Yet the final few lines reveal that what the writer seeks is beyond words, form, even understanding. Moore adds to this idea: "Alchemists call the subtle work of love-making opus, the act of becoming a human being, making your soul". It is testing for our brains to conceptualise that which is formless, challenging the very dynamics of life as we understand it. In an explicit sense, the writer longs to be inside the woman, but as always, Cohen looks beyond the longing to a philosophical question of what it is to be inside a place without form. This is an age-old concept; here the 13th century Persian poet, Rumi muses on a similar idea in the poem, "We three":

*I am filled with you.
Skin, blood, bone, brain and soul.
There's no room for lack of trust, or trust.
Nothing in this existence, but that existence.*

This 'dream-like fog' of love-making appears transcendental – a means of accessing the unknown, as Cohen described Steve Sanfield seeking poetry, Rishi did through the examination of the expansion and contraction of the universe, Cohen did through sensuality. Moore adds that intercourse is a ritual done for deep purposes, where something mystical is at work. This combination of spirituality and sexuality is examined most famously in Cohen's most famous song and highly covered, "Hallelujah":

*There was a time
You let me know
What's really going on below
but now you never show it to me
do you?*

Do you remember when I moved in you

*and the holy ghost, she was moving too
and every breath we drew was hallelujah.*

The praise for the lover has turned outward, as the two unite which, reminiscent of Rumi's poem "We three", seems to incorporate another force. Undeniably, Cohen understands the depth of desire for this connection; it is a resemblance of the bubble of the womb, a reminder of what it is to be present, to be part of cyclical patterns of life, to move with a life source, with the self. To me, Cohen writes to understand and praise the very mysteries of life.

The Transient Nature of Longing

In Cohen's work, as there is a strong connection felt when with another person, there is also a distinct feeling of despondency: the frantic return of desire; the underwear being rolled down in a hurry in "Other Writers", touching the source of life because the poet was 'so far from it' in "Disturbed this Morning"; the rejection in the lines, 'But now you never show it to me, do you?', in Hallelujah. The writer appears unfulfilled without union and also acknowledge how the longing for that specific other can be fleeting. This idea is explored in Cohen's 'Take This Longing':

*Many men have loved the bill
You fastened to the rain,
Everyone who wanted you
Have found what they will always want again,
Your beauty lost to you yourself
just as it was lost to them.
Oh take this longing from my tongue,
Whatever useless things these hands have done.
Let me see your beauty broken down,
Like you would do for one you love.*

This struck a chord with me and how society sees beauty: that we may possibly play up and act out a preconceived idea of physical attractiveness, with everyone losing out. Cohen addresses the idea that people will desire others; the woman doesn't see the beauty in herself, neither do others. Once again, Cohen digs beneath the surface of what is beautiful, to see the 'beauty' beneath, where the labels and parts of the self are dismantled. The writer's attempt to touch that beauty is 'useless', which in turn transgresses to a frustration with self; the verse is repeated and 'useless' changes to 'lonely'. The wonder cannot be accessed sensually; it exists in a place beyond desire.

Throughout history, love has been described as all-absorbing, and Cohen draws on this idea in "I'm your man" with the lines "I'll fall at your feet". It seems, to fall entirely in love with someone means giving up a power over the self, rendering the individual in a vulnerable position. Moore

examines this idea in addressing Robert Stein's theory of the coupling/decoupling paradox: "You must realise, when you feel a strong desire for union, that an opposite desire lies in the background. The more you press for connecting, the more you may be setting yourself up for disconnection." This, I believe is a longstanding theory and much of Rumi's work centres on push/pull factors in life. In "Chelsea Hotel", Cohen delves into this idea:

*You got away
I never once heard you say
I need you, I don't need you
I need you, I don't need you
And all of that jiving around.*

The avoidance of this longing/drawing away paradox, as Cohen describes this woman enacting, may provide a safety net; a means of not jumping into the deep end; a detachment from mysterious elements at work. Anyone who has been in love, I believe, has felt that intensity, that forceful duality; as soon as we commit to another, we miss the longing for that person that is no longer present and fear abandonment. If, as according to Cohen, these passionate encounters are what make us feel connected, whole, present, the transient nature of longing can unhinge us at our very core.

Rites of Passage and the Commitment Paradox

Moore describes the different stages of transition within our lives as births and deaths within themselves. Moore added that Arnold Van Geneep claimed these passages has three phases: 'separation, limination and incorporation'. Limination occurs when one is cut off from what they had before 'just when the old (life) might have grown comfortable'. Moore describes the liminal phase, as 'living in-between two places', the known and the unknown, which, optimally, leads to re-incorporation, back into a life that will have changed. Moore discusses how this phase, interestingly, corresponds to the hero's journey: departure, initiation and return. The psychologist emphasises the importance of ritual and ceremony in guiding people through those transitions, adding that in the past people underwent gruelling acts of climbing through womb-resembling containers, often naked and at times physically maimed, at times surrounded by masked figures drumming and dancing, all as a warning of what lay ahead.

"They made high drama of the passage from one state to another, creating powerful rites that mimicked birth, teaching a person emotionally and symbolically that to change is to be born again as a person."

Wedding ceremonies are an example of one of these passages. Lighting candles together, exchanging rings and drinking from the same goblet are some initiations. It seems nowadays, there is a huge emphasis on the details of the wedding day, modern trends that may not be rooted

in mythology or tradition. In addition, most wedding cards I have seen address the actual wedding day, and not the day as a transitional period, which the couple may have difficulty adjusting to. Although it may be challenging to incorporate age-old rituals into modern life, Moore advocates adapting symbolism and little customs to feel connected to other rites of passages. The writer reflects on the symbolism of the most famous marriages throughout history: that of kings and queens. The following is an alchemical image of the royals in a pear-shaped vessel: "They are contained in a vessel and in solution. This is marriage, a sealed place where the soul ripens and a watery solution in which the two chief figures can unite, like chemicals separating and coagulating. The process is dark. You don't know what is going on and often confused the deep alchemy for surface personality issues."

According to Moore, the process is shadowy and is a means of giving more than receiving, but that if it's embraced fully, can create a unit that will allow the individual to engage with the world in a transformative way. The writer adds that, from his experience, some people marry for 'bizarre reasons', to try to give life stability, seeing a single quality in the other that they like, rather than appreciating the real 'creative linking of lives'. He describes how people take with them their past, passions and most importantly, their daimon; Ancient Greeks described the *daimon* as an unnamed Spirit, Plato called it love, Rollo May described it as an urge, like sex, or hunger, as does Moore. We do physically resemble one another, but emotionally we are each composed of a complex web of desire that the other person will now share.

Instead of feeling like a half person, reminiscent of themes Cohen explores through sensuality, in a healthy situation, Moore describes the union; as a binding of a 'fresh story in which the common motifs weave together like subtle colours in fabric'. I loved this idea: the binding together of a new material, with its shades, dedication and possible mistakes. It made me contemplate how so often people call their partner, their 'other half', which not only diminishes each of them, but likens the prospect of losing them to losing half of the self. A dependence may form, falling back into the coupling/decoupling theory and at times marriage, with the creating of something concrete, a contract, can lead to a divergence. The following is Leonard Cohen's poem "Split":

*What can I do
with this love of mine
with this hairy knob
with this poison wine*

*Who shall I take
to the edge of despair
with my knee on her heart
and my lips on her hair*

So I'll take all my love

*and I'll split it in two
and there's one part for me
and there's one part for you*

*And we'll drink the wine
and we'll hide the staff
and the lover will groan
and the other will laugh*

*And I'll go to your bed
And I'll lie by your side
and I'll bury the bones
and I'll marry the bride*

*And you'll do the same
when you come to my room
You'll dig in my dirt
and you'll bury the groom*

*And I swear by this love
which is living and dead
that we will be separate
and we will be wed.*

Cohen addresses the symbolic imagery of marriage; the staff, the wine, but the union creates between the two a divide, which we cannot help but suspect was present but never addressed and there is no indication of a satisfactory ending. That they 'bury the bones', suggests a repression of self, past, secrets, not being fully open, while 'the lover will groan and the other will laugh', is deeply distressing if we consider the significance of desire to Cohen. Moore adds that he is convinced, from years of practicing psychotherapy 'that love is the most common source of dark nights'. He describes it as having 'two sides, like the moon, a light one and a dark one... it is beyond understanding and control'. This is echoed in Cohen's description of the love as 'living and dead'. This duality encompasses a great deal of what this article is about: honouring the darkness as a natural part of ourselves, life and relationships. Relationships may go through periods of dark, light; death, life. If this is accepted and pre-empted, as a natural state and rite of passage then it may not jolt the partnership into an official or underlying 'split'; if the union is imagined as a coming together of a new fabric, with its own qualms. The following segment is from Cohen's song, "Treaty", where Cohen with incredible astuteness, discusses how a divide in a relationship, can metaphorically kill the self:

*I'm so sorry for that ghost I made you be
Only one of us was real and that was me.*

Pothos: the God of Longing

Moore discusses how the Ancient Greeks had a God for the feeling of longing, Pothos, adding that people misunderstand the deep-rooted need for a compatible partner, intuitively feeling the absence: "Sexual emptiness is a form of depression, a collapse of the fantasies and emotions that make you feel alive." Much of Cohen's work centres around the idea of Pothos; he named his most recent collection of poetry, *Book of Longing*. The extent of this desire is seen in "The Collapse of Zen", where Cohen describes attending to a woman's 'hungriness, her most private of hungers'. The writer understands the depth of her desire, and insinuates a form of sacredness in being part of that when he adds, 'why should I want to be enlightened?'

Moore reiterates that people sometimes need sex for the sake of the physical satisfaction of it, without there being love – either way, it is still transformational. Both Moore and Cohen insinuate that without passion, life can feel like it is not worth living. Moore describes how our 'moral head' feels like it should be able to look beyond this, but the urge extends to all parts of life, even crippling our intellect and creativity. This following is a stanza from the first, and title poem, in the collection, "Book of Longing":

*I followed the course
From chaos to art,
Desire the horse
Depression the cart.*

In a place without passion – a heavy cart, one is in a state of inertia. Moore ruminates further on the *daimon*, which appears frequently in his work; "The daimon is a strong drive from either you or something in the world that urges you towards some action... You live with your *daimon* when you take you innermost passions into account, even if they go against your habits and standards... It's easy to confuse the object of your desire because sex is often more about desire itself than a particular object or need." Cohen added, 'My appetite for intimacy and not just physical intimacy was so intense'. This desire, both Cohen and Moore allude to again and again, appears as a longing for more than just sexuality, but for life.

Triangulation

If the drive for passion is so significant, its loss compared to depression, it may be understandable how it can be sought in alternate means, opening the door for triangulation. Moore claims he frequently came across this in his work in psychotherapy. He adds that in modern society, people juggle many elements of their lives: politics, family, work, and that a third element inevitably inadvertently creeps in, disturbing the status quo. Nowadays, I feel this is particularly apt, as we are bombarded with information with little time for space and resonance with one idea or course of

action. With acute perceptiveness, Moore claims that triangulation can be a means of avoiding the pain of a rite of passage, adding that it may not be restricted to a person. The third element can be substances, a distinct avenue a person believes they should go down or their life work. Moore reflects on how some people can be, 'highly articulate about social problems and largely unconscious about the demands of marriage and home life.' This idea is examined in Leonard Cohen's poem "In Looking Away":

*You would look at me
and it never occurred to me
that you might be choosing the man of your life.*

*You would look at me
over the bottles and the corpses
and I thought
you must be playing with me.*

*You must think I'm crazy enough
to step behind your eyes
into the open elevator shaft
so I looked away
and I waited
Until you became a palm tree
or a crow
or the vast grey ocean of wind
or the vast grey ocean of mind.
Now look at me
married to everyone but you.*

I find this incredibly insightful. Now the longing has been achieved, it formed into a relationship, according to Stein and Moore, this longing to decouple is then achieved, 'so (he) looked away'. Maybe the relationship is taken for granted, or maybe the poet doesn't feel worthy of the love – isn't ready to 'step behind (her) eyes'. Either way, the poet shies away from facing the dark and lightness of marriage, connects deeply with the outside world, shows it in writing, the reader/listener is moved, possibly idealises that over the current situation they're in; a connection between reader and writer is established, but because of the loss of one between husband and wife. On another level, the reader, who will be a reader of poems, may identify the same traits in themselves and their own diverging attention, using their 'creative insight' as an excuse to neglect their own tangible relationships. Cohen openly admitted to not committing fully to his family, "The truth is that I tried to be a good father and husband, but I was not very good." Yet Cohen's triangulation gave the world so much.

That 'state of wonder' of the third factor may put people out of touch with that already within their possession, but for the most part, I believe, art and artists we admire can influence and ground us in our life and work. Cohen greatly admired William Butler Yeats, "It was his subject matter... the way he put his personal life on the line." Yeats was not in a straightforward love triangle, but in an impossible, highly-documented (by himself) unrequited love scenario. Cohen added that he read the poem, "When you are old", as I did, at a young age and something resonated with him, as it did with me. The following is an excerpt from Yeats' poem:

*When you are old and grey and full of sleep,
And nodding by the fire, take down this book,
And slowly read, and dream of the soft look
Your eyes had once, and of their shadows deep;*

*How many loved your moments of glad grace,
And loved your beauty with love false or true,
But one man loved the pilgrim soul in you,
And loved the sorrows of your changing face;*

Despite the impossibility of Yeats and Maud Gonne's love, the poet had a deep compassion for her pain, and, what I think we all silently long for, claimed to fully see her soul. This idea deeply touched me, as I believe it did Cohen. To me, Cohen sees the same thing in his lovers, in the compassion for their vulnerability and mutual longing for connection, with the untouchable 'pilgrim soul' underneath. Cohen touches on something similar in "Famous Blue Raincoat", addressed to the friend who was unfaithful with his wife:

*And what can I tell you my brother my killer,
what can I possibly say?
I guess that I miss you, I guess I forgive you.
I'm glad you stood in my way
if you ever come by here
for Jane or for me
While your enemy is sleeping
and his woman is free
yes, and thanks,
for the trouble you took from her eyes,
I thought it was there for good
so I never tried.*

I feel these are among the most powerful lines ever written by Cohen. Although he undoubtedly felt extreme resentment at the betrayal, in some way he understood that with the affair, passion was reignited within his wife. As a young man, Cohen read Yeats' lines, and decades later would watch a similar troubled look in his wife's eyes. What can he 'possibly say' within the depth of layers, that only by his wife's lover standing in his way, did Cohen look at his wife, in the push and pull that exists in relationships, while he himself is asleep, passionless, possibly in multiple aspects of his

life. Moore claims that triangulation offers you a new sense of individuality, making Cohen's line more poignant:

*And you treated my woman
to a flake of your life
And when she came back
she was nobody's wife.*

This may be slightly romanticising a difficult, hurtful situation, but it is a look at contributing forces of the affair's conception, with Cohen admitting a different kind of betrayal of her, that of not being fully present. Of course, the match may be incompatible and the person may be avoiding the inevitable rite of passage involved in the demise of the relationship, but Moore advises people in a relationship and encountered with another, to subsequently give more to each area of life, emphasising that the third person is often an urge, a fantasy and this third factor might not satisfy the root cause:

"Impossible love tortures the soul into a new level of awakening; before connection is possible, psyche goes through the dark night of the soul, that mortification in which it feels the paradoxical agony of a pregnant potential within itself and a sense of guilty, cut-off separateness... Part of the pain of love is that no person, however suitable and satisfying, completes the desire for love. There is always a remainder, because love takes us beyond the human sphere. It puts you in touch with the ultimate object of desire. It invites you to transcend yourself, to be more than you have ever been."

A Dark Night of the Soul

The first section of this article has been dedicated to the exploration of what lies behind our desires. It is here we delve into the subject of darkness. Moore describes periods of sadness, frustration and loss as a 'dark night of the soul', adding that it has been explored again and again throughout history. He examines how John of the Cross, the Spanish mystic and poet, wrote about the night of the senses, the spirit, that is 'used especially by those who devote themselves seriously to cultivating a spiritual life through community, meditation and various forms of service'. Nowadays, I believe, we can equate a dark night to trying, seemingly impossible, times. Moore adds that these periods are not necessarily related to clinical depression, although they can be; Cohen suffered many periods of depression and withdrawal. Often, Moore claims, it is about love, the confusion of desires, innermost needs; it can be related to a loss of spouse, an illness, a significant rite of passion, a betrayal; it stems from our darkest hours. Moore reiterates that it is something that affects you at the core of your existence, where we realise that to be sad, grieving,

lost, is a natural part of life. As there is light, there is dark. As with life, death: organic cyclical living as part of the human experience.

Moore defines chaos as a 'way in which life renews itself'. This idea resonated with me – I feel so much of our life is an attempt to maintain order and concretise our future. He describes seeing people in therapy determined to move forward in a certain direction, to work through difficult partnerships and triangles, to follow a certain career, when everything was working against them. He wondered what they were trying to avoid, if the inner urge of the *daimon* had different ideas for them. This friction is touched on in Cohen's song "The Traitor". The songwriter said the song was about the feeling you have of there being, "some mission that we were mandated to fulfil and being unable to fulfil it... and realising the deeper courage was to stand guiltless in the predicament in which you find yourself." The following is an excerpt from the song:

*The judges say you missed it by a fraction
Rise up and brace your troops for the attack.
I kissed her lips as though I thirsted still
And my falsity had stung me like a hornet
The poison sank and it paralysed my will.*

There is the idea that the 'judges' supposedly know what's best but they don't; that his falsity had stung and 'paralysed' him. Cohen is asking us to sit with ourselves in the pain, the poison, and the isolation that may in fact be our deliverance. Similarly, Moore encourages the reader through difficult times to speak about darkness in terms of imagery and symbolism, to avoid heroic language and instead have some intelligence in dealing with it, adding: "'Growth' is entirely the wrong word for what ripens and matures us into people of substance and gives us a soul." Moore claims the dark night calls for a spiritual response: that Carl Jung and James Hillman found value in sadness, how Emily Dickinson compared it to the 'refreshing' minor key in music, how darker authors like Beckett, Baudelaire and as described here, Cohen, can give you a darker luminosity in life. At Mt. Baldy, Roshi even encouraged Cohen to 'sing more sad'.

Moore compares the deep part of the self to what French psychoanalyst Julia Kristina refers as the black sun. That in us there is, "A dark sun at your core, a dark luminosity that is less innocent and more interesting than naive sunshine...the darkness doesn't exactly come from outside, but is a revelatory of something in your nature. In your black moods and dark fears, you find an essential part of yourself... However you present yourself to the world, on some level you are a dark person."

I feel each of us that are drawn to this type of material, knows this space: where there is a special place for silence, darkness, a mellow soft feeling deep within us that like in "Hallelujah", understands the need for both, 'the minor fall, the major lift'.

'Going Down' with Hekate and Cohen

Moore advocates the importance of mythology and storytelling in exploring the dark night; two prominent stories he examines being that of Hekate and Jonah and the Whale. In the first tale, the night-goddess Hekate overhears the cries of Persephone, a young naïve girl that is whisked to Hades, to live in the underworld. Hekate travels between both worlds and tells Persephone's distressed mother what has happened. Hermes, guide of souls, brings Persephone back from Hades, but the Underworld God has since given her the seed of Pomegranate that, like magic, allows her to live two thirds of her life above ground, and one third underground. The writer describes Hekate as embodying, 'both the beauty and the terrors of the night. She belongs in the dark places- alleys, corners, alcoves- and therefore is a perfect patroness for your dark night of the soul.'

What I like most about her is that she resides in both worlds. I imagine her coming up to tell Persephone's mother of her daughter's pain in the depths, then returning to stay with Persephone there. How we could all do with a Hekate in our lives! So often when we are going through a period of darkness, people talk about positivity, light, love, religion, to be grateful. It is nearly impossible to equate. One feels like Persephone in the darkness being told of a world they cannot enter. Equally, others try to bring us to a state of balance, an equilibrium; when too high, we are brought down a peg or two. In an interview Thomas Moore said, "You'll never hear the word balance in my work". He reflects on his time in psychotherapy with people, who:

"Begin in innocence, unconsciousness and shallow thinking. They accepted all the superficial ideas of mental health and emotion that the popular culture pressed on them. If they were angry they tried to overcome or control it, looking to control unwanted sexual desires, for cheer if depressed but it didn't take long for them to come to some painful realisations and give up their emotional and intellectual superficiality. They learned to be follower of the night spirit and in that change of tone they found liberation. One of the rewards of good therapy is to darken your personality and make you a child of Hekate."

Moore is offering us a gift, to which I will always be grateful to him for. We are invited to connect with the unseen rhythms of life; to connect with our sadness, giving it room with Hekate, allowing us to feel emotions that not only are permitted to exist, but which may in fact have repercussions if not brought to the fore. Moore discusses how Hekate's symbols are: the whip, representing feelings of mortification; the dagger, indicating the need to be a dark fighter; the torch, with connotations of glimpses of intuition; and the key, representing a means of entering and leaving the underworld, in case one gets overwhelmed. This way it is not seen as 'solvable' as such but

'visitable'. These keys might be writers, therapists, dream analysis, mythology, spirituality, meditation, travel, books, honouring your darkness and learning to 'speak from your darkness'. Moore adds that everyone needs a key to 'move freely between ordinary life and the depths of their soul'; that incorporating both is important, the dark periods and the ordinary. "These, too, are the yin and yang of a complete life", reminiscent of previously discussed ideas of the eternal and unfolding self.

To me, that key was Leonard Cohen; a key to dealing with the darkness, a dark sun, as Julia Kristeva says or as Cohen refers to time and time again, the dark 'heart' in me. He experienced many periods of difficulty, which I'm sure we all feel grateful to him for portraying, just as he admired W.B. Yeats in his honesty. Although Cohen was well into his eightieth year when he died, it was still a shock to us all. I almost felt that, like Hekate, he visited the darkness and the unknown but would never actually disappear, nor did he want to. The following excerpt is from Leonard's poem, "The Goal", an honest depiction of his descent to a dark space:

*I can't leave my house
or answer the phone
I'm going down again
but I'm not alone.*

Many people including myself, have found consolation in Leonard's work through challenging times; almost as if he was with us when we too were 'going down'. Yet somehow, it felt like he was there with us, like Hekate; it felt he was somehow empathising, singing from a point of our pain. His voice wasn't manicured, but raw. Sometimes when we are in that space, only truth and rawness will suffice.

Cohen reflected on his song "A thousand kisses deep" where he discusses the idea of giving up the quest for victory and is somewhat reminiscent of travelling to a different space with Hekate, "you lose your grip and then you slip into the real masterpiece... Sometimes when you don't see yourself as the hero of your own drama, expecting victory after victory and you understand deeply that this is not paradise, some of us, especially the privileged ones that we are, we somehow embrace the notion that these veil of tears are perfectible... You abandon your masterpiece and you sink into the real masterpiece."

In delving into that thought, that feeling, maybe we can live more truly and 'sink into the real masterpiece' of life, and gain solace in the idea that we have a key when we too are 'going down'.

The Night Sea Journey

One of the strongest metaphors of *Dark Night of the Soul* and one to which Moore returns to time and time again is that of Jonah and the Whale: the night sea journey. In the tale in the Bible, Jonah avoided God's command to tell the people of Niveneh to change their ways. When sailors realised Jonah was averting his mission they threw him overboard, where he was swallowed by a giant fish, that brought him to Niveneh. Here, like Leonard's description in "Going down", Jonah literally sank somewhere very deep; his hair was singed in the heat of the whale's belly, all he could see was dark. At this metaphorical point, Moore encourages us not to fight our way out, like the people in Moore's therapy room, the whale (daimon) was taking Jonah where he needed to go. Of course, blind faith is not advisable. Moore adds that Hekate's dagger is needed, an astute awareness to attack, but more than anything it's a kind of sitting with yourself and your situation or as Cohen said, "the predicament in which you find yourself". I found this a refreshing alternate to struggling out of a situation, when not at capacity to do so. Cohen's song, "The Guests" reflects on this going into the dark:

*And all go stumbling through that house
In lonely secrecy
Saying "do reveal yourself"
Or "why has thou forsaken me?"
And no one knows where the night is going
And no one knows why the wine is flowing
Oh, love I need you, I need you, I need you, I need you,
Oh I need you now.*

To me, this perfectly epitomises the night sea journey, with Cohen's hypnotic voice and the chorus of background female vocalists, resembling a soothing lullaby. The last two lines are softly repeated, without referring to anyone in particular, insinuating a universal need for connection. The similar womb-like state Moore describes in love-making, exists within the metaphorical whale, "The whale's belly is of course a kind of womb. In your withdrawal from life and your uncertainty, you are like an infant not yet born." Returning to darkness isn't a death, in the final way we envision death, but merely a cycle, a transition, a serious and vicious rite of passage of separation and limination; one that we will come out of like the different stages of the female cycle, or the moon, or the seasons. It reminds me of how a river can flood and dry up but will come back to fruition again; the idea that there is a flow: a river beneath rivers.

All this may be something that cannot be understood in the depths of despair. It is there we have a rest from our passions; our imagination is honed, our senses alive. Moore adds, "something of your, ego, your self, your creativeness, your mission comes to an end." Instead of trying to struggle out of the whale, we sit powerless, in wonder, as life mysteriously moves us along.

Similar to earlier referrals to feeling of connectivity with physical intimacy, the bubble of love-making, and times at Mt. Baldy when Cohen was becoming less of himself, in a dark night we may lose our previous-conceptions of identity and come into a deeper level of self or non-self, comparable to what Moore refers to arriving at “a level beyond and beneath your consciousness”.

The song continues:

*All at once the torches far, the inner door flies open.
One by one they enter there in every style of passion.*

Now that the person has emerged, they enter a state of passion, of life. Although the lines, ‘those who earnestly are lost, are lost and lost again’, suggest there may be more cycles, in the same way Moore reflects that we may go through many dark nights within a lifetime. Cohen also suggests that ‘the night’ implies the unknown; possibly a fear of death which most us have felt at one stage or another, ‘in lonely secrecy’, but by addressing it, living it, singing to it, we realise that it lives in us, is not so alienating and what’s more, we share it with others.

Living with ‘Heart’

The need to regress, generally from a period of chaos, sometimes in a confusion of our desires, can lead to a state of darkness. It is here a person may pass through a dark night of the soul, optimally with an aid. How is it we emerge on the other side, when the ‘inner door flies open’? Moore describes living more simply as we emerge. Raw from the dark night, one step closer to things, superfluous desires may dissolve. Cohen reiterates this idea of humility in “Tonight We’ll be Fine”, ‘The windows are small and the walls are bare’. Priorities may change. Moore adds that although you may retract from life, when you arrive at the stage of incorporation, different to who you were before, “you are not complete until your relationships have been cared for”. I find this poignant as it suggests a duty to others: using the challenging experience to connect to others in another way, as so many therapists and artists have done. Moore examines how in Jungian psychology there is a split archetype from those who heal and those who suffer and that must be brought together within the self, while, “the selfish hardness of the heart is dissolved: the heart turns to water. The ascent to the higher stages can then begin.” Cohen speaks deeply about the heart, from the heart. The following line from “Steer Your Way” resonates deeply with me:

*Steer your heart, precious heart,
past the truth you believed in yesterday.
such as fundamental goodness
and the wisdom of the way.*

This amplifies feelings I've felt and, I believe, we all have of feeling we need to explain ourselves, to live a certain way, to find the right path. Our entire lives can feel like a routine of justifying our position, rationalising the irrational, when what we need is solace. Cohen is once more sitting with us, telling us that what is most important is our heart. Social status, politics, relationships, paths, ideals and situations may change, but our heart is 'precious'.

In his eighties, "Leaving the Table" was one of the last songs Cohen recorded before his death. His ocean-deep, hypnotising voice offers insight into some of his final life conclusions: that he doesn't need to make any:

*I don't need a reason for what I became,
I've got these excuses, they're tired and lame.*

Cohen was highly influenced by the mystic Balsekar and his teachings of non-dualism, adding, "the model I finally understood is there is no fixed self". In a way, it's a relief. There is no optimum way to live, to perfect the sadness, to explain it all. With this thought, we may become less guarded and judgemental of others.

Some may perceive the world differently as they emerge from a dark night. A passion could start to grow, but more noticeably a compassion for other people's passion; Cohen and Moore believed in the importance of this, in particular towards our need for intimacy, for heart, for connection and how it can be misinterpreted by the media, the public and most noticeably, ourselves.

Subsequently, even though Cohen addresses sensual subjects, he displays empathy for his partners. There seems to be an underlying theme running through the work: although the relationships may not have lasted there is deep intimacy, understanding and connection. In the following, he describes a woman in "Tonight we'll be Fine":

*Sometimes I see her undressing for me
She's a fine naked lady love made her to be
And she's moving her body so brave and so free
If I have to remember that's a fine memory.*

He uses the same adjective 'brave' to describe his encounter with a woman in the "Chelsea Hotel":

*I remember you well
In the Chelsea hotel
You were talking so brave
and so sweet,
Giving me head
on the unmade bed,
While the limousines
wait on the street.*

Although explicit, there is a certain vulnerability and sensitivity present, especially when Cohen calls his lover, a 'fallen robin' that 'you were famous, your heart was a legend'. There doesn't seem to be any seediness or derogatoriness in the language, if anything, there is a compassion towards how they were both brave in revealing themselves to one another, that even if it wasn't overly-serious, 'I don't mean to suggest that I loved you the best', there is a solicitude for their individual passion. Cohen appreciated how important that was and once more was looking beyond the surface level of desire. Also, the fame was a sub-category, an after-effect that he knew was having repercussions on these artists, within the public-eye. The shallowness of the industry is implied, as Cohen describes the woman fixing herself, trying to sound confident with: 'we are ugly but we have the music'. The image is verging on tragic: two vulnerable people searching for something within the other, while the limousines wait like some form of predator outside. He later actively revealed in an interview that the song was about Janis Joplin and expressed remorse, adding that he didn't like the 'locker-room approach' to these matters. The poem, "Your heart", seems fitting to this type of reveal:

*I told the truth and look where it got me
I should have written about
the secret rivers
under Toronto
and the trials
of the Faculty Club
but no
I pulled the heart
out of a breast
and showed to everyone
the names of G-d
engraved upon it
I'm sorry it was your heart
and not mine
I had no heart worth the reading
but I had the knife
and the temple
O my love
don't you know that we have been killed
and that we died together.*

Cohen's is weary at being misinterpreted, as people may well be misunderstood for writing about desire! Ironically, he treasures the heart; writes from the heart, about the heart, and hurts hearts in doing so. As, centuries ago, the poet Thomas Moore was physically killed, Cohen was symbolically 'killed' for telling the truth, the same truth that he so admired Yeats for revealing before him.

Sex in Society

Moore examines how many cultures and religions have repressed sex as a means of control throughout history- in doing so creating a stigma around desire. Just as an animal loses its drive when it's castrated, when a society's sexuality is repressed, I imagine there must be repercussions. Moore goes so far to say, "if everyone could maintain a degree of innocence while fully enjoying sex, peace might become a reality on the planet. Most violence is closely related to sexual repression."

It seems somehow fitting that Cohen said, 'we have been killed and that we died together'. Such openness is feared in society. Moore describes how Ancient Greeks during the Dionysian festivals would carry enormous phallic symbols in procession, in the hope of pre-empting a good harvest. He contemplates how this would be inconceivable today, yet there is explicit imagery everywhere: "We have our own phallic images, too, in missiles and guns and tall buildings. But at the same time we have a reserve that seems to be rooted in anxiety about sex. The solution to an excessively sexualised society is not to moralise against it, which merely pushes sex further into extremes, but to be more sexual in a mature and subtle way, to acknowledge forthrightly the prominent place of sexuality in life and to allow great variation as we try to work out our sexuality throughout our lives."

I do not consider myself a prude, but am often disturbed by the over-sexualised language and imagery in music and television; particularly the few Hollywood romantic comedies I have watched where most jokes revolve around casual sex and bodily fluids. It might be understandable if there was an examination behind the desire but you get the feeling, that that will never be addressed – the next best thing will be sought after. As Cohen says, 'everyone who wanted you, will find what they will always want again.' What's more, this media is shared to millions of people, and to hormonal teenagers, who are starting to get in touch with their sexuality and view this as normal. Simultaneously there is a fear of nudity, on beaches in changing rooms; shying away from what is the most natural part of ourselves. It's here, I must refocus on the idea of not moralising against this type of sensuality, as Moore says, but instead singing a song to what I find beautiful. To me, Cohen's lyrics mix that sense of passion and vulnerability, that softening and opening of the heart. An example of this can be found in "I'm your man":

*If you want a lover,
I'll do anything you want me to
and if you want another kind of lover,
I'll wear a mask for you.
If you want a partner take my hand
Or if you want to strike me down in anger,
Oh here I stand,*

*I'm you man...
I'll crawl to you baby
and I'll fall at your feet
and I'll howl at your beauty like a dog in heat,
and I'll claw at your heart and tear at your sheet and say please
I'm your man.*

The deep masculinity and resonance of Cohen's voice, adds a vulnerability to the words. Nick Cave and his performance of 'I'm Your Man' in the Canadian Consulate concert in 2005 is similarly striking. He leaves space around words, buckles over the line 'fall at your feet' and kicks at and rouses the trumpets, which in themselves have a charged energy, after the line 'I'm your Man'. To me, this is our version of holding phallic symbols in the old processions, where they would have associated the seed and the earth regenerating itself. There is power and vulnerability in both. This is in complete contrast to pop 'sex icons' of today, where there is enormous pressure on women and increasingly men, to dress, dance and perform a certain 'sexual' way that pleases a consumer culture, that are themselves lonely in its consumption.

Com(passion)

In the same way Cohen connects with lyrics and performs them, so do the performers and audience connect through the deep desire in the music. This is particularly apt for the Canadian Consulate with performances from the likes of Rufus Wainwright, Anthony, Teddy Thompson and Beth Orton. There is an intensity when they sing; a look of love and support between them afterwards. Everyone was there because they connected with the music; in singing an ode to their individual innermost desires and fears, to Cohen, to the audience; even if their personal desires aren't fulfilled, there is a connection within one another in their plight.

What is striking is that this is not a one-way system; in terms of performer and audience, or as Moore earlier describes as healer or receiver. Cohen reflects on playing in Ireland to his fans, who he often calls his 'friends', and turning from the stage to hide his emotion at the audience's response to him. It was then he noticed the guitar player was also starting to well up. As we sing through a dark night, or through a time of great passion, we're singing it together, with the knowledge that another time will come to ourselves and others, as it does in these cyclical patterns.

Judy Collins was one of the first to cover Cohen's work. She later said this about his music, which perfectly epitomises how, I believe, so many of us feel:

“His songs carried me through dark years like mantras or stones that you hold in your hand while the sun rises or the fire burns. They were songs for the spirit when our spirits were strained to the breaking point.”

At a 1967 anti-Vietnam war benefit in New York, Cohen ran off stage in panic, and it was Collins who coaxed him back on. I found this beautiful; how they each lifted the other at different times of fear, as we try to do to one another.

The following excerpt is from “Hey, That’s no Way to Say Goodbye”:

*I loved you in the morning
Our kisses deep and warm
Your hair upon the pillow
like a sleepy golden storm
Yes, many loved before us
I know that we are not new
In city and in forest
they smiled like me and you.*

Cohen describes writing this in the Penn Terminal Hotel in a hot room after an argument: “The song is half-written in pencil but it protects us as we manoeuvre, each of us, for unconditional victory. I am in the wrong room. I am with the wrong woman.” The ‘unconditional victory’ may feel like a contradiction, to previous ideas of giving up on our individual masterpiece, but I imagine it as less of a personal victory and more of a longing to be in the flux of life. Even though he is in a state of despair, he is not only protecting himself, but protecting each of us, in what I believe is one of his most poignant verses. Sitting in that hot room, Cohen had a glimpse of Hekate’s torch, that he is shining for us all, that we can sing together for the hope of a better time.

I am struck by the far-reaching connotation of sensuality in both writers’ works. Thomas Moore said he spent most his early life adhering to strict rules of celibacy in a monastery but not did not feel he was deprived, adding:

“To be fully alive is to be sexual in some way, maybe not actually involved in a sexual relationship but living an active, engaged, sensuous and colourful life. The qualities of lovemaking spread out over the whole of life, giving it vitality and space.”

A friend once confided in me that she did not, and never had, enjoyed sex. Yet everything about her demeanour and exchanges with people is highly charged. People viscerally respond to her and that, I believe, is her way of being a sexual person, through smiles, glances, touching people’s elbows, changing the look in people’s eyes. Cohen reflects on the sensuality in environment which inspires him:

“A lot of the songs are just a response to what struck me as beauty, whatever that curious emulation from a being or an object or a situation or a landscape. That had a very powerful effect on me, as it does on everyone and I prayed to have some kind of reaction to the things that were so clearly beautiful to me and they were a lot.”

It is here, I find his comment on the writing process as mystical extremely powerful; as if it is his mission to somehow bring that beauty and appreciation of life to his work. It then might make us question what is our own place in the world, what we are to do, to be, as Moore says, ‘what does the soul want’. If the dark night is a time of fruitful emptiness, the emergence from it suggests a time of action, passion and compassion, which extends to all areas of life. Moore emphasises the need for each of us to sing our story, in a way suited to our temperament; better still, to sing from our most raw places, our soul, our darkness. This idea of your ‘song’ helping others is evident in the following excerpt from Cohen’s song, “The Sisters of Mercy”:

*Oh the sisters of mercy they are not departed or gone.
They were waiting for me when I thought that I just can't go on.
And they brought me their comfort and later they brought me this song.
Oh I hope you run into them you who've been travelling so long.*

At first it may appear he’s referring to the church or subsequently about lovers but he continues, “We weren’t lovers like that but besides, it would still be alright”. Whatever it was is not entirely relevant, possibly not even fully comprehensible to the poet, as we come to see what is most important is the energy it has given him to go on, when he felt he couldn’t:

*If your life is a leaf that the seasons tear off and condemn,
they will bind you with love
that is graceful
and green as a stem.*

This energy; tender, life-giving, passionate has brought him to make this song, which will in turn soothe us and cause us to act. We may fall apart in this cyclical pattern, compared to the ‘seasons’, but our compassion for one another will ‘bind’ us once more and is a current that runs through us all.

The following is the title poem in his collection in full, “The Book of Longing”:

*I can't make the hills
The system is shot
I'm living on pills
For which I thank G-d*

*I followed the course
From chaos to art*

*Desire the horse
Depression the cart*

*My page was too white
My ink was too thin
The day wouldn't write
What the night pencilled in.*

*For someone will use
what I couldn't be
My heart will be hers
Impersonally*

*She'll step on the path
She'll see what I mean
My will cut in half
and freedom between*

*For less than a second
Our lives will collide
The endless suspended
The door open wide*

*Then she will be born
To someone like you
What no one has done
She'll continue to do*

*I know she is coming
I know she will look
And this is the longing
And this is the book.*

Yeats is gone, Cohen is gone. For a moment, the former inspired the latter, although Cohen returned to stages of 'depression', where 'the day wouldn't write what the night pencilled in', the 'longing' to connect with it all returned and pushed him to act. That longing will be passed on through you and me, the passion, 'the heart', to another generation, in a way that is similar but hasn't been done before. This article was written through a very dark night, and in eternal gratitude to my two keys, Moore and Cohen, but it is written, and is waiting to be expressed in another way.

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Biography

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