

**Vampires, The Earth, and Our Moral Struggle.
Or Why We Love Vampires.**

Preached by Margot Adler, October 21, 2012 at All Souls
Church

Vampires: I was never interested in Vampires. If you asked me five years ago I would have said, “Are you kidding?” I’d read maybe one vampire novel, not the 250 I have now read. I’d seen one movie, *The Hunger*, probably because I knew the author. But on my way to a conference I bought some trashy novels for the plane and read the first two twilight novels. It might have ended there, but eight days later my husband was diagnosed with terminal stomach cancer.

I started obsessing on vampire novels – sitting by his bedside while he slept - because I was thinking about mortality. My husband, and partner of 33 years, was dying, and he was someone who wanted to live forever.

There was a definite tension between our views on death, a tension I didn’t understand until after he died. I realize now it’s a tension that also exists in many of the most interesting vampire novels. My husband had what I would call the ‘high tech view of death’; it was to be avoided at all costs. He was a runner; he was in perfect health; he took various supplements and anti-oxidants. He drank a glass of wine for resveratrol, never smoked, was fit, and, unlike me, he never did any drugs in his youth. He thought he would live to be 100, preferably even older. A science journalist, he followed all the discoveries and advances of aging

research. And he thought that when he did die, he might have his ashes flown up in space. His attitude was definitely, “rage, rage, rage against the dying of the light.”

I, at that same moment, had more of an Earth-centered Pagan perspective. “We are all part of the life cycle. Like a seed we are born, we sprout; we grow, mature and decay, making room for future generations who, like seedlings are reborn through us. As for the persistence of consciousness, deep down, I thought, “How can we know?” Perhaps we simply return to the elements; we become earth and air and fire and water. That seemed alright to me. In fact, I remember reading a book by the feminist author Barbara Walker, in which she said that the ancient meaning of the four elements was the way we went to die: we were left for carrion in the air, we were buried in the earth, we were burned on the pyre, and we were buried in the depths of the sea. That also seemed alright. Although, there was a part of me, deep down, that was on his wavelength and wanted to live forever.

The vampire of myth and literature embodies some of that same tension my husband and I had regarding death. They have near immortality, and yet are tragically frozen in time. They cannot grow and change like the seasons, or, in most descriptions, birth new life, and yet they have super powers and strength and often the wisdom that can come with extreme age, an often cynical, jaundiced view of life. Rosalie, who bemoans her frozen state in the *Twilight* novels, is asking the same question asked in books like *Tuck Everlasting* or Olaf Stapleton’s famous science fiction

novel, from 1930, *Last and First Men*. Humans want to be part of nature, and yet we still want to push the edge of the envelope, seeking to be more.

Vampires let us play with death and the issue of mortality. They let us ponder what it would mean to be truly long lived. They allow us to ask questions we usually bury, except in science fiction. What does one value more and what does one value less with a short human life? Is the vampire's frozen "life" sterile? Does life only mean something when it is part of a cycle of birth, growth, decay, death and the birth of new life? Is there a beauty that comes only from the cycles of the seasons which we are a part?

So in the beginning I pondered mortality, but I knew it didn't explain the millions of readers, movie viewers and television watchers who were devouring vampire stories.

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An article in the Hollywood Reporter a year or so ago said vampires brought in seven billion dollars to the Hollywood economy in the last two years, the GDP of a small nation. 117 million twilight books have been sold, the last time I looked, and this is not just a teen phenomenon. There are at least 30 thousand adult women on a Twilight mom's website. New vampire novels continue to be best sellers, for adults and teens. And on television, there's the Vampires Dairies, True Blood, and both the American and British versions of Being Human. On a recent trip to Europe, I found that my Dutch teenage relatives in Amsterdam, and the twenty year olds at the Conference I

spoke at in Edinburgh, were absolutely obsessed with the Vampire Diaries.

I wanted to understand why vampires have such pull, such popularity, such traction in our culture – both in American, and much European culture - at this very moment in time.

It's very easy to dismiss all this pop culture snidely, and to say, for example, "it's all about teens and sex," or even repressed sex. You've read the articles, how *Twilight* is all about abstinence from a Mormon point of view, and Edward's a stalker. I don't believe it for a minute.

We all now know that rape isn't about sex; it's about power. I began to wonder if maybe the interest in vampires is really a meditation on power and its abuses. One of the reasons that vampires are interesting is they, like we, are in conflict over issues of power. We want it, we distrust it, we get twisted by it, we abuse it, we love it, we hate it, and we struggle with it. Almost every recent vampire novel, film and television show confronts this issue. Amy Smith, a Quaker, who teaches courses on the literature of war and also on vampire films and fiction at the University of the Pacific, puts it this way; "The central question in so many of these films and novels is, 'if you had power over others, how would you use it?' The tension is always between 'we are at the top of the food chain, we can do what we want; humans are cattle, prey.' Versus, 'We were once human, how can we treat humans like cattle?' This is the same tension, she says, we have in life. If you earn more money than someone, if you have more power than someone, how

will you use it? Does having more power or status give you the right to use it? Does might make right? It's really the same question, she says.

Teens, who naturally feel invisible and powerless, since they are still under the thumb of the twin authorities of school and parents, find the fantasy of difference, of special powers and abilities, intoxicating. Whether these powerful creatures are the X-men, the beings of Pandora, or vampires, they identify with the struggle of wanting power, yet they often see its danger with clearer eyes than their parents because they are watching from the outside as the older generation abuses power, often wielding it over them, often seeing their rites of passage as criminal. In an extraordinary e-mail I received from Anne Rice, an author who has sold millions of vampire novels, she said "the vampire - the symbol for the outsider in all of us - is romanticized by teens because they so desperately need to find a noble path through the hideous passage that Western culture has set up for them." As I thought about that passage, I thought about the horrors of consumer culture they must navigate. I thought about high school. Think about the Cullen's in *Twilight*, doing high school over and over. Think about doing the senior prom five times. Now that's a horror story

And if we look at Buffy, the Vampire Slayer, it's all about power: women, power and leadership. In the last season of Buffy, she is forced to renounce patriarchal power and give

up her own power for the power of all women. There are hundreds of scholarly articles about this.

And of course if we look further back, Voltaire, Engels, Marx, and now the people of Occupy Wall Street - all have used the word vampire to describe issues of power, usually using the word for the powerful, the corrupt, the capitalist, the Wall Street trader.

Most of the teen vampire stories are not only about power: they are really about choice and identity. Bella, at the end of the third Twilight movie, describes herself to Edward as - an outsider who feels more at home in an inhuman world than a human one. "This is not about you," she says. "This is about me and my choices."

But that still doesn't explain what is really going on NOW.

Every age gets the vampires it needs, writes feminist author Nina Auerbach in her book, *Our Vampires, Ourselves*. Every age uses vampires to express their fears and concerns, writes Eric Nuzum, in his book, *The Dead Travel Fast*.

In 1897 when Bram Stoker wrote Dracula, England had the largest ports in the world. There was fear of incoming disease, of foreigners, of immigration. And Stoker created the perfect monster, Eastern European, bringing dirt from a foreign land. You can do this for every period that has had a wave of interest in vampires. In the 80's, with Aids,

vampires were often described in novels as parasites. You became infected by vampirism, like a disease.

The first vampire story in the English language was started in 1816, in the same chalet on the same weekend that Mary Shelly started to write *Frankenstein*. The fear at that time was science replacing God.

So what's happening now? Who are the vampires we have created and what are the fears and concerns they are expressing?

Look at our modern vampires – most of those of the last fifteen years. The Cullen's in *Twilight*, Bill Compton and Eric Northman in *True Blood*, Mick St. John in the CBS series *Moonlight*, Mitchell, the vampire in the BBC series *Being Human*, Henry Fitzroy in *Blood Ties* by Tanya Huff, Stefan and Damon in the television show, *The Vampire Diaries*, and lets not forget Angel and Spike in *Buffy*. They all have something in common that makes them different from most vampires that went before. When I put their names in a line on a piece of paper, a light bulb went off.

Unlike the vampires that went before, they are all struggling desperately to be moral despite being predators. Sometimes failing, sometimes succeeding, but always conflicted, always engaged in a profound struggle to lead a moral life, despite their need for blood.

There is a wonderful scene in the Presidential thriller *Blood Oath* by Christopher Farnsworth, which came out a couple of years ago. The idea is that President Andrew Johnson found a vampire on a ship, and imprisoned him. He managed to get Marie Laveau – the voodoo Queen of New Orleans - to bind him by a blood oath to serve every president of the United States. Nathaniel Cade, the vampire, is now in the modern world where he serves a president somewhat like Obama. In one scene he stands in the back of an AA meeting. He does this pretty regularly, because he sees himself as an addict, and while he only drinks animal blood, he still lusts for the blood of humans.

We humans are addicts - not only in the obvious ways, abusing alcohol, cigarettes, drugs, food. We are clearly in a struggle with an addictive lifestyle. Eight U.S. presidents in a row have claimed they would bring about the end of our dependence on oil, or at least foreign oil and they have meant it, just like a smoker means it when he insists he will quit. But our jobs, the economy, the way we live and commute, the way our infrastructure is set up, all compromise us. We depend, at least for now, on continuing an addictive relationship to fossil fuels. Oil is our blood, and our addiction compromises the earth.

Vampires are exactly us right now, as we wage wars, use oil, and suck the life blood out of the planet.

Whitley Strieber, author of *The Hunger*, goes further. “Our prey is our planet,” he says. If so, vampires are us and the issue before us is how we can learn to use our formidable

powers without destroying the world and future generations. Like vampires we are in a struggle with our own predation.

You may ask: when did we create this vampire that represents our moral struggle? At first I thought it started with Buffy. Then I thought it goes back to Anne Rice. But it really goes back 45 years, to Dark Shadows and the Vampire Barnabus. Dark Shadows started in 1966, but Barnabus didn't appear until well into 1967. And the word vampire was never used until 1968.

In 1966, Stewart Brand, the man who founded the Whole Earth Catalog, one of the most significant environmental journals, took an LSD trip on a rooftop in San Francisco. He was meditating on something Buckminster Fuller had once said: that the root of man's misbehavior was the notion that the earth was flat and infinite. On LSD, he suddenly felt and saw the curve of the earth. When he came down, he printed up a political button and sent a couple hundred all over the world, to NASA and Soviet and US diplomats, to members of the United Nations and members of Congress. The button had this sentence. "Why have we not yet seen a picture of the whole earth?" While there were a couple fuzzy views from satellites, it would take Apollo 8 in 1968 to give us that color picture of the earth rising. Four years later, Apollo 17 gave us the picture of the blue marble earth, which may well be the most reproduced photograph in history. Those photographs changed us. At first we saw no the earth as having no boundaries. We are all brothers and sisters, we thought. But eventually we

understood the darker vision. We saw our vulnerabilities for the first time. We saw ourselves as compromised morally, standing on this fragile planet and not doing what we needed to do to save her. 1970 was the first Earth Day, the real beginning of the environmental movement. We suddenly saw the earth's fragility, a tiny ball of brilliant color in a dark universe, a ball so small the astronauts could blot it out with their thumb. They all noted it. And we all changed.

This image changed us and our thinking. Our vampires changed at the same moment. I think the vampires so many are identifying with, allow us to look at ourselves more clearly, to see the compromises we make daily, the moral struggles we often lose or more commonly deny. Sylvia Plath wrote, "I am terrified of this dark thing that lives in me." And Steven Moore, in *The Vampire in Verse*, writes: "The reason you can't see a vampire in mirror? The vampire is a mirror reflecting our secret self." Hopefully, these morally conflicted vampires will allow us not only to see our abuses of power more clearly, but give us a few insights on how we can struggle to live more morally on this Earth. And now, when someone says to me, "how could you waste three years reading vampire novels?" I paraphrase something the late great science fiction writer Philip K. Dick said, that when the divine is exiled from much of our culture, sometimes you have to find it in the trash.

Blessed Be.