

# REVIEWS

books // music // film

## NOT AFRAID OF THE DARK

Open your mind to a different way of seeing, with these selections from *S&H*.

### The December Project

*An Extraordinary Rabbi and a Skeptical Seeker Take Aim at Our Greatest Mystery*  
By Sara Davidson

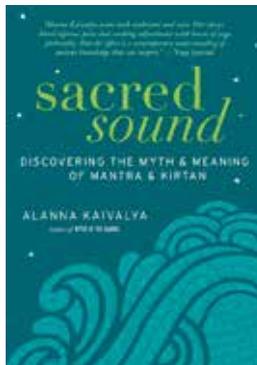
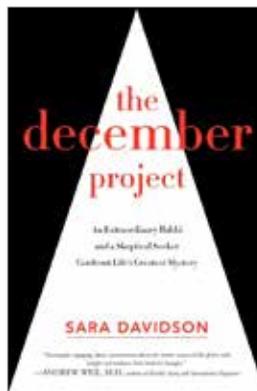
HARPER ONE

ON THE DAY that Zalman Schachter-Shalomi pretended to be dead, his 87-year-old body lay nearly naked on a massage table, swathed in a white sheet. Four men washed it with wet cloths, reciting the Song of Solomon.

It was the tahara, Judaism's pre-burial ritual. Schachter-Shalomi, celebrated founder of the progressive, mystical Jewish Renewal movement, had taken the unprecedented step of undergoing a "practice tahara" as part of his own December Project: striving to face mortality with love and fulfillment, not just sorrow and fear.

He discussed death extensively with author Sara Davidson, whose college years in 1960s Berkeley paralleled his as the Holocaust-refugee rabbi of a radical synagogue where every Shabbat was "Lovers' Night," because "if you weren't there with a loved one, you loved the one you were with." Two tales intertwine: poignantly poised early in *The December Project*, Davidson navigates her own mysterious illness while—in explicit, moving passages—watching her mother die. As our spiritual tour guide to those final days of "life in its most human, down-to-earth simplicity," Schachter-Shalomi sagely explains how to "let go" and "furnish your solitude with God."

Such bracing, brave observations should empower readers of any age, as might this book's slightly Twelve Steppish exercises. Life has only one inevitability: its end. Better to have pondered the infinite, experienced



gratitude, and made amends by the time that moment comes when, as the rabbi says, "you hear the music slowly, softly drawing to a close." —ANNELI RUFUS

### Sacred Sound

*Discovering the Myth and Meaning of Mantra and Kirtan*  
By Alanna Kaivalya  
NEW WORLD LIBRARY

RENOWNED YOGA INSTRUCTOR Alanna Kaivalya displays a playful, unpretentious writing style in *Sacred Sound*, the follow-up to her 2010 book *Myths of the Asanas*. Using familiar western tales like *Star Wars* and *The Matrix* as reference points, she presents easy-to-follow explanations of the meanings and myths behind several chants commonly used in kirtan and solo yoga practice.

Kaivalya, who is pursuing a PhD in mythology, views the Vedic myths as metaphors that can help remind us of our own divinity. "All manifestations of yogic mythology are simply reflections of one numinous source, and they provide endless avenues by which we can discover that source within ourselves," she writes.

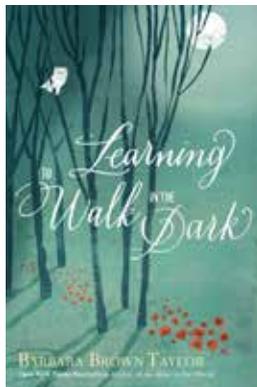
While she stresses that there is no wrong way to do mantra or kirtan, Kaivalya offers practical advice on how to milk each of *Sacred Sound's* chants for maximum benefit. In the process, she sheds light on the roles these

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mantras can play in one's daily life ("Because this chant calls to our inner king (or queen), this is a great chant for when we need a little extra 'oomph' or power to be brave and overcome a challenge").

Born with a hearing impairment that has honed her awareness of sound vibration, Kaivalya frequently ends her lectures and workshops by saying, "Don't miss the vibrations." This serves as a helpful reminder that a mantra's meaning is secondary to its sound, which, in the author's words, empowers us "to realize the harmony that is quite literally waiting to be recalibrated within us and to reconnect with the symphony of hearts that occupy a room of people chanting together."

—DAMON ORION



## Learning to Walk in the Dark

By Barbara Brown Taylor

HARPER ONE

**THEOLOGIAN** Barbara Brown Taylor, author of the best-selling *An Altar in the World*, challenges our negative associations with darkness and our attraction to light in this thought-provoking new book. She draws on her own experiences—from exploring caves and experimenting with blindness, to her questioning of her own religious training and faith—to explore what might be gained by embracing darkness. What she finds are the possibilities of emotional healing, a deeper appreciation of silence, living in the now, and peace of mind where there once was fear.

## Q&A: Barbara Brown Taylor

### What made you want to better understand the concept of darkness?

When I moved to the country, my relationship with physical darkness changed so radically that I began to make friends with other kinds of darkness as well. Over and over, I found that darkness was full of hidden treasure that I had simply been too frightened to find. Spiritual darkness was the scariest at first but also the most rewarding to explore.

### How has seeing light and dark as a continuum—instead of opposites—helped you to better understand faith?

Since I grew up in a religious tradition that taught me to fear the dark and embrace the light, I spent a lot of time feeling aberrant. I wanted to look in closets that faithful people were supposed to keep locked. My dark moods produced better poetry than sunny ones did. God felt closer under the night sky than in a well-lit church. So I figured there was something wrong with me. When I came to the understanding that light and dark exist on

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a divine continuum, I was saved. Who knew? I might be a person of faith after all.

### The chapters of this book are framed around "lunar spirituality," tracking the phases of the moon. How does light and dark in the natural world interplay with your spirituality?

My spiritual life is no different from the rest of my life—or yours either. Life has more than one brightness setting. The light lasts longer some days than it does others. A year has dark seasons as well as light ones. No one would dream of telling us to avoid December because it has more dark in it than June, yet when it comes to faith we are taught to steer clear of darkness. Why is that? Living a full life includes accepting the full human quota of light and darkness. The moon is a steady reminder of that.



### What is a gift that you discovered in the dark?

The best gift darkness has given me is the gift of slowing down. I am a quick person. But when I cannot see where I am going—physically, emotionally, spiritually, take your pick—then out of necessity I drop down into my lowest gear. All of a sudden, I can hear, smell, think, and feel things that were hidden from me while I was rushing around in the light. I know exactly where I am, even when I cannot see where I am going—and that is a great gift. —JH