

# DARKROOM RETREAT

deep rest for the self healing psyche

By Andrew Durham\*

## **Toward a Natural Hygienic psychology**

Hygienic darkroom retreating consists of resting in an absolutely dark room for days. Why do this? To restore conditions of psychological balance, giving refuge from the constant sensory malstimulation of civilized existence. This seemingly trivial contrast can lead to a remarkable and lasting restoration of your well-being, making the darkroom a powerful tool.

The book explains everything about why a retreat works, how to do it, and how to make a darkroom. It includes easy steps to attain some of these effects in your own home. Neither spiritual nor disciplined, therapeutic nor medicinal, this is the first approach to darkness—and psychology—based in *Natural Hygiene*. History's most influential approach to health, Hygiene gave the modern world appreciation for frequent bathing, fresh air, regular exercise, and pure food.

Natural Hygiene simply recognizes the self-preserving organism and provides it such normal conditions of life. In this way, it has long achieved stupendous success in caring for the self-healing body. With darkness, Hygiene now has an equally effective way of caring for the self-healing psyche.

## **Preface**

What is a Hygienic darkroom retreat and why do it?

It consists of resting in an absolutely dark room for days alone with food. At first, I just did it to rest. It worked. After 54 hours, I felt caught up on all the sleep I had ever lost, truly awake for the first time in decades. I was stunned. Two years later, the same thing happened. Except, unusually, I also felt humbled. Genuinely calm. Well in my soul. How? I wondered. From Natural Hygiene, I vaguely remembered the self-preserving nature of life, and rest as the primary condition of healing. One morning in a dream, this and many related clues fused in the conception of restful use of darkness in support of the self-healing psyche.

I began testing this idea in more darkroom retreats. As predicted, lethal psychic issues that have tortured me my whole life began resolving themselves spontaneously. In seven years and 16 retreats, I have seen no sign of an end to this process— short of full recovery of psychic integrity. The investigation has barely begun. But I have seen enough to confidently share what I have learned: what happens in darkness, why, how to retreat, and what for. This approach is ripe for more participation, resources, and velocity.

Hygienic darkroom retreating requires minimal effort and no faith. Darkness is not the absence of light, but the presence of the self. It is yours.

## **Introduction**

This is a book of natural psychology. It shows how physical darkness is to the psyche what a mother is to a child: origin, sustenance, and refuge. How psychic illness and trauma, like a scraped knee, can heal itself. Without substances, treatment, or therapists; without loads of money, knowledge, skill, effort, or time; and without discipline, rituals, or practices. Just restored normal conditions. This book offers hope

to sufferers of all kinds. It calls Natural Hygiene, a timeless system of primarily bodily health, to also serve the soul. It dispels the pall of fear around darkness and extricates it from historically esoteric use.

### **Why Retreat**

- for the great pleasure of resting deeply
- for relief from the distress and malstimulation of civilized existence
- to recover from exhaustion
- to heal from psychic trauma and illness
- to finally deal with one's own suffering

### **History**

Every civilized spiritual tradition and many indigenous ones have used darkness for thousands of years as the ultimate environment for self-discipline and to gain unusual knowledge: ancient Egyptians and Maya in their pyramids; Christians in catacombs; Sufis and Taoists in caves; Tibetan Buddhists in cells of monasteries. Western science has studied sensory destimulation since the 1950s for applications including space and health. Ayurveda, an East Indian healing tradition, uses extended periods of darkness for rejuvenation. By report, it is the fountain of youth. Amazonian shamanism uses darkness in ayahuasca ceremony. Welsh shamans and Navajo, Maya, and Kogi Indians alike hold darkness in high regard as essential to self-discovery. Hygienic darkroom retreating completely secularizes the use of darkness for the specific purpose of healing, of *self-recovery*. There is nothing mystical, disciplined, or complicated about this approach. It is rational, restful, and safe.

### **Background**

#### **Finn**

I first heard about dark retreating in 2004 from my former spiritual teacher. From a Hindu tradition, he had heard about its use in Ayurveda. "Apparently, after a few weeks of it, one comes out completely renewed," he told me. I found this very strange. I thought what people need is more light. But like a lot of things he said, the idea of darkness stayed with me.

Then in 2005, I was talking to an old Oregon hippy-from birth. Name of Finn Po. Scrawny guy, lots of energy, gently jokes about people's hang-ups, and is incredibly helpful. Drinks his own pee and lives in a tiny geodesic dome he built out of garbage 20 years ago. Naturally, Finn had a darkroom.

"Tired of enlightenment?" he asked. "Try endarkenment."

I said, "Ohmigod, Finn, really?!"

"It's the way of the future. Don't be the last to know."

"What's it like?"

Arms wrapped round himself, he said, "It's a *luxury*."

"How do you do it?"

"Just git in the room!"

A benevolent Pied Piper, all the young people around tried it. After listening to him rhapsodize about it all winter, I did, too. Wow. But as Finn likes to say, I was just getting started. It would take two more years, the massive shock of leaving my teacher, and another successful retreat for me to grasp the significance of retreating in darkness.

#### **Andrew**

How did all this begin?

At 15, I was overcome by **rapture**: sublime joy in perceiving a perfect, beautiful universe. This feeling and perspective lasted three months solid. When it faded, so did my conventional interests. I wanted more

than anything to understand the cause of rapture. Living out of a **backpack**, I independently investigated this mystery for 21 years, experimenting with philosophy, health, and design. My darkroom retreats came toward the end of that period. Soon after, in late 2008, my solution came:

*A slight increase of vital energy from adolescence had caused a temporary, partial restoration of my damaged psychic integrity, revealing an enrapturing universe. So perhaps a massive increase from darkroom retreating could cause permanent and complete restoration.*

With this breakthrough, my search ended and my work began. I and 25 clients have tried it. Over the course of my 16 retreats, noticeable restoration of my psychic integrity and function has occurred. No data contradicting the basic idea has yet emerged. Now, an internationally recognized psychology professor unqualifiedly agrees with my theory and wants to do research on my exact method. What else can go right?

## How It Works

1. The psyche is self-healing because it is a system of an organism.
2. The primary condition of healing is rest because:
  - Healing requires the extra energy accumulated in rest.
  - Full healing only occurs in faculties at rest.
3. The psyche rests profoundly in darkroom retreat because:
  - A retreat provides all conditions of profound rest: comfort, solitude, time, and silence; absolute darkness, fresh air, warmth, and natural food.
  - Darkness signals us physiologically, through our circadian system, to sleep, dream, and lose appetite. In extended total darkness, sleep gets deeper and longer; waking consciousness more placid.
  - Sensation uses significant psychic energy. Vision requires more than all other senses combined.
  - The abstract nature of vision stimulates the mind. In darkness, the mind slows down. One can stop thinking and fall asleep more easily. When awake, the thinking, feeling, and moving modes of consciousness equalize in capacity and workload. Because the process of healing is involuntary, it is foolproof.

Darkness works the same for everyone, just as air for breathing and light for seeing. If nothing happens, conditions were insufficiently met. This book describes conditions and how to meet them.

## Terminology

**Hygiene** (capitalized): Natural Hygiene

**psyche**: the faculty of consciousness (including the subconscious and unconscious). The soul.

**normal**: what is biologically *appropriate* (not merely usual or average)

**psychic**: of or relating to the psyche. For example, I refer to psychic illness rather than “mental” illness. Psychology is not just the study of the mind, but the psyche: the *entirety* of human consciousness. This includes its emotional and physical forms, not just its mental ones. Also, I am not talking about occult phenomena.

**lifeway**: way of life. It is everything that happens with a group of people in the course of living. I once used the word, culture, for this. Then I learned culture is recent: an invention of civilization. I wanted a bigger word which would include all approaches to human existence. Lifeway is a nicely compressed term common in anthropology.

**darkroom**: A dedicated Hygienic darkroom is just a small, fully functional house in a quiet location. It has minimal furnishings, like a hotel room. Like all houses should be but are not, it is perfectly and easily darkened.

- It is so dark that even after your eyes adjust to it for three days, you still cannot see your hand in front of your face.
- When you look around, you cannot see a haze or pinprick of light anywhere.
- And inside, there are no light sources like candles. Temporary darkrooms for shorter retreats can be anywhere you feel you will be comfortable enough.

## What Is Natural Hygiene?

A philosophy of health, Natural Hygiene originated in America a generation after the revolution. It became a mass movement in 1832, lasting to the current day, with the lectures of Sylvester Graham, physiologist and father of the Graham cracker. Natural Hygiene bears unswerving respect for life's self-preserving nature, and for the self's primarily autonomic, secondarily volitional nature. It observes that health naturally occurs in organisms under normal conditions of life. So it studies and provides them.

These conditions include fresh air, simple clothing, natural food, and cleanliness by regular bathing. Hygiene taught the modern world the enormous benefits of these, making Hygiene the most influential approach to health in the world. Its motto: "Health through healthful living".

Hygiene identifies disease *as* the process of healing. Disease is the normal organic activity of self-repair, cleaning, and reenergizing, but under abnormal conditions. Thus, disease is not an invading entity to be fought, but a natural process to support with healthy conditions and practices. Natural Hygiene, which could be called applied physiology, has extensive means of caring for the physical human. But it has lacked a psychology. I will show how, in darkness, a Hygienic way has emerged to care for the psyche.

The fundamentals of Natural Hygiene help us reconnect with our own common sense about healing. They guide us past incorrect assumptions and associations we may have with it. Once you have these absolute basics down, you can learn the concrete details of a darkroom retreat and approach it with confidence. After retreating, Natural Hygiene provides guidance in all aspects of healthful living.

## Audience

This book is for those who suffer in any way—spiritually, mentally, emotionally, physically, socially, or ecologically—and need hope that their suffering is not necessarily permanent. It is for self-explorers and appreciators of good arguments. Darkroom retreating is for anyone to whom it makes sense and who feels moved to do it, whether to heal from acute illness or to simply try it. Besides psychic illness, much physical illness is psychosomatic and therefore amenable to self-healing in darkness. However, darkness is no escape. Sometimes illness needs to be addressed in other obvious ways first. But just knowing about darkroom retreating can encourage us to do so. And acquaintance with Hygienic principles is invaluable to healing from any illness.

## How to Use This Book

If you find sufficient reason here to retreat, then simply decide:

1. what kind of retreat to do
  2. when to do it
  3. where to do it
- If at a center, make arrangements and go
  - If at your place
    - design, make, and test your darkroom.
    - arrange for support
    - retreat!

After retreating, make the radical changes in lifeway you have been longing for and are now able to. Do retreats of increasing length until your psychic integrity is completely restored.  
*Live.*

## Open Source

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## 1 - Hygiene

Natural Hygiene is a simple, natural, and rational approach to health and healing. It provides a comprehensive framework for the restful use of darkness in support of the self-healing psyche. Hygiene enables us to understand what darkness is and how to relate to it for the purpose of health. Which is the point. We are organisms, so our job is to live. To live fully, we need health. What is health like according to Natural Hygiene?

“Health does not consist merely of the absence of symptoms of illness. It is a state of positive wellbeing that is evidenced by a constant state of euphoria. It is rarely, if ever, experienced by humans today.”

–Herbert Shelton, Natural Hygiene’s systematizer<sup>1</sup>

Euphoria is exactly the sign of long-lost function that my adolescent rapture hinted at. Once tasted, nothing else will do. The thing is to come by it on purpose, not just by chance. What conditions would make it possible? Identifying and providing conditions is Natural Hygiene’s forte. Natural Hygiene begins with ordinary observations of nature. So we will do the same with the psyche and darkness before learning more about Natural Hygiene itself. After these **basics**, some **distinctions** further aid understanding. Then I introduce a couple **mechanics** of retreating before heading into its **depths**, the uncharted territory of Natural Hygienic psychology.

## Basics

### Psyche and Darkness

Here is Shelton’s unsentimental view of the psyche: “The conscious functions of the body serve primarily to protect and provide the needs of the subconscious functions.”<sup>2</sup> Consciousness is not an end in itself. It serves a biological function. Furthermore, the psyche is the *primary* system in the human organism because it coordinates all the others. And not just consciously, as when reading this book or running an errand. The psyche includes subconsciousness (which can be made conscious) and unconsciousness (which cannot be made conscious). These are diffuse throughout the organism, autonomically monitoring and controlling every one of its 5,000,000,000,000,000 (pentillion) processes per second. Whatever affects the psyche for good or ill affects the rest of the organism likewise. Like any other organic system, the psyche needs a period of rest and recovery. Since its sensory apparatus is reflexive—the skin feels, the nose smells, the eyes see—sensory destimulation is necessary for psychic rest.

Think back to the times you got your best sleep. Besides feeling comfortable where you slept, your shelter was probably especially dark and quiet. Darkness signals the regulator of our circadian (daily) rhythms, the [suprachiasmatic nucleus](#), to cause us to sleep. It does so by instructing other organs of the circadian system. For example, it tells the pineal gland to secrete [melatonin](#), a hormone that causes sleepiness, dreams, and loss of appetite. Human beings are diurnal creatures, naturally awake in daytime and asleep at night. This physiological cycle is critical to psychic function. Modern life replaces the natural extremes of sun and stars with the relentless grey of artificial light and sunglasses; natural sleeping patterns with

graveyard shifts and after parties. This greyness, along with a hundred other offenses, has pushed psychic illness to epidemic proportions. Simply put, our lifeway is brutal, traumatic, and damaging. Modern distress (loneliness, sensory overload, overwork, factory food, etc) requires hundreds of millions of people to consume psychoactive drugs just to function and survive. Caught in a vicious circle, they wonder helplessly how things can ever change.

While many factors contribute to distress, Hygienic darkroom retreating uniquely provides an *opening*: a simple way to begin reversing all of them at once. First, it harmlessly brings them to a halt. Second, it provides the being a chance to recover from them naturally, that is, by itself. Autonomically. No drugs, no therapy, no experts. *Self-healing unleashed*. Thus, contrary to fairy tales, religion, and light bulb advertising, darkness is a good thing. Darkness, like light, is a natural condition of life. We need nature's full provision of it—about 10 hours a day—in order to rest properly. In crisis, we need an extended period of darkness to recover. Darkroom retreating is to the psyche what fasting is to the body:

- relief from processing intake
- time to fully recover from injury, intoxication, and exhaustion
- overdue recognition of exactly who and what is doing the recovering

Instinct in extreme circumstances gives us a graphic clue to the basic need for darkness: when psychically overwhelmed, a person doubles over and covers her eyes. Depressed, hysterical, or shocked from violence, her whole being cries out, “Gimme shelter!” Darkness is good shelter. Now let us find shelter—a context—for darkness itself.

## Natural Hygiene

Here is Webster's basic definition:

**hygiene:** a condition or practice conducive to the preservation of health, *such as cleanliness*. (emphasis added) In common usage, hygiene means vigilant cleanliness and use of safety equipment to protect against a hostile world. But hygiene is more than cleanliness, and it is not fearful. It includes all healthy conditions and practices. Natural Hygiene goes even further. It benevolently identifies the conditions of health with the natural, normal conditions of life. It seeks to provide them to a self-preserving organism. This is based on Hygiene's observation of ubiquitous health in nature, where only normal conditions of life occur: pure water, sunlight, warmth, natural food, fresh air, rest, exercise, companionship, etc. Now darkness finds its place in this list, too. Shelton describes Natural Hygiene as “the employment of materials, agents, and influences that have a normal relationship to life, in the preservation and restoration of health according to well-defined laws and demonstrated principles of nature.”

Natural Hygiene is based on the fact, identity, and causality of life: that life is, that life is alive, that life lives. This means it is inherently self-preserving, i.e., self-generating, self-maintaining, and self-healing. This is true in every respect and at every scale, from the cells to the organism as a whole. This is the first part of Hygiene's *Great Law of Life*. The *Great Law* implies others. The *Law of Action* states that only the organism performs vital action, including healing. The *Law of Vitality* states that energy employed to perform this action resides only with the organism, not anything external to it.

Thus, no drug, herb, or food; no condition or practice; no treatment, person, or device heals. Attempting to make the body heal with them further damages or drains its power to heal itself, whatever benefit might appear in the short term. This is an example of the *Law of Dual Effect*. A dozen other Laws compliment these.

Whether well or ill, one's conscious (volitional) role is to discover and provide the normal conditions of life in the proper proportion. The autonomic (involuntary) processes of the omniscient, omnipotent

organism handle the rest. Hygiene systematically describes how this happens with these and other logically interrelated laws. All are derived from simple observations everyone can make.

A drug, for example, is toxic by definition (which is why drugs are legally controlled). It is a poison. An organism does not relate with poisons but rapidly neutralizes and expels them. By contrast, an organism assimilates food into its own structure. Since it manages its own healing, medicine of all kinds is superfluous.

Fasting when ill is an instinctual extension of the normal time between meals. In this break, the body can rest from most metabolic processes, repair tissues, eliminate deeply stored waste, and replenish itself with nutrients and energy to the farthest reaches of every cell. So fasting is a part of Natural Hygiene. Darkroom retreating is the twin of fasting. It enables psychic rest like fasting enables physiological rest. In the relationship between food and nerve energy lies another example. Food does not actually give energy to the body directly. Food takes nerve, chemical, and muscular energy to eat and digest. Otherwise we could just eat to restore our strength. Food provides sugar, which refuels everything from large muscle movement to thinking to cell operation. Some of this refueling can occur within seconds of eating easily digested food like fruit. But the body only transforms sugar into reserve electrical potential of the nerves during sleep. It only eliminates toxins from tissues and repairs them completely while they are unused.

So again we see that no external force, but life is the owner of the power to act for itself. Life is the doer. Hygiene helps us give the *autonomic self* some of the vast attention paid in our lifeway to the volitional self. Volition plays a critical yet small part in the whole process of life. In darkness, Hygiene finds another means of attending to the autonomic self.

The deep self will not solve all one's problems in darkroom retreat. It will have a chance to recover lost capacity. Recapacitated, one can then make the radical changes in lifeway necessary to handle remaining problems. See [protocol](#), post retreat section for more about this.

## Distinctions

### Attitude

Hygienic darkroom retreating is not primarily about hyper secretion in the brain of DMT, remembering of [dreamtime](#), accessing higher states of consciousness, or meditation (all of which can easily happen in retreat). It is about unglamorous, passive *rest* and the mostly insensible healing that occurs in rest. Thus, it is fundamentally different from the active approaches of discipline (like spiritual practice), therapy, and psychedelics. It is grounded totally in normal organic processes of the involuntary nervous system, which occur far beneath the level of conscious awareness; and in cellular self-maintenance, where the nervous system does not reach, but sub- and unconsciousness does. Civilization has taught us well: in various ways, we have all come to think that somehow, someday, we would finally *do* something about our quandary. We feel pumped up by the prospect of doing something consciously and directly. We enthusiastically sign up for workshops, submit to treatments, undertake disciplines, and experiment with exotic psychoactive substances. Meanwhile, the autonomic self, omniscient and omnipotent, sits in an unemployment line.

This is egomania. It is an act, a pretense of enthusiasm to cover the pain of psychic damage, of partial self-loss, of the suicidal urge to total selflessness. Under regular circumstances, we won't drop this act. We cannot because it would be too painful and frightening. We need a really safe place in which to do it. Darkness is such a place.

Hygiene says that we cannot do anything directly about injury anyway. We are utterly helpless in our post-traumatic fixation and denial. It is not a pleasant thought. But it is fruitful because it can elicit a

strong enough response from conscience to finally notice and support the self-healing organism. Pathologically disidentified from life, we are powerless. We who still stumble chaotically try to control life rather than serve it. So we are not going to handle our quandary. As we imagine ourselves to be—just the conscious, volitional part—we are not going to get it done or have anything to do with its getting done. We are not going to figure it out. We are fit to be tied. The best we can do is fully admit to our helplessness and to surrender to the only forces that could ever untie the knot. It is the Gordian knot. But the knot actually needs to be untied. Alexander did not properly handle it by cutting it open with his sword, and neither will we with our schemes, efforts, or skills. Only the small, silent, slow tendrils of the autonomic organism's own vast intelligence can ever untie such a tangle. But it needs our recognition, our commission to do the job. Integrity is the end, so integrity must be the means as well.

Natural Hygiene's passive emphasis on rest and healing is very important because it defines the appropriate *attitude* toward retreating. I learned in fasting that how one approaches a retreat has a great effect on what happens in it. The mind becomes extremely powerful when it is resting and purifying. If one's attitude is really to passively let the omnipotent healing forces of the organism do everything, the effect will be much greater than if one has the doer-attitude of a practitioner. Because the more competent worker is on the job. I know no one who has explicitly gone into darkness with the Hygienic perspective, with the sole purpose of simply providing the conditions of life to the self-healing organism. Since the organism is the only thing that heals the organism, this is far more powerful than any other approach can be. Attitude affects recovery.

The main effort involved is supportive: to maintain the conditions of healing. This ain't a tall order. Stay in the darkroom. Lie down as much as possible. Eat. Exercise. Bathe. Eliminate. Meditate if so moved. Lie back down. Stare at the backs of your eyelids, feel your breath and pulse, and let sleep come. It will anyway. Darkness ensures it. A bloodstream flooded with melatonin is compelled to sleep. And sleep deeply: I felt positively knocked out. Dreams are fewer or more vivid. In 48 hours it is possible to catch up on all the sleep one has ever lost. I am not speaking metaphorically. It is impossible to believe until it happens.

To me, it felt like falling through a trapdoor. At the end of my second successful retreat, I felt five or six more such trapdoors awaited me, which would take about two weeks in darkness to fall through. Then I would see the other side of my personal struggle, my lifelong dilemma. I still await my chance. There were times I felt I was crawling in my skin. So the whole thing was alternately very pleasant and very unpleasant. But it is no worse than what I go through anyway. It is just accelerated, concentrated, and without distraction. And there is a chance of never reliving the horror again.

### **Fulfillment**

A very pleasant effect of this restful attitude becomes more apparent the longer a retreat goes on: a sense of fulfillment. It is as if all one's futile efforts of the past are redeemed and their goal is finally realized. As lost parts of the self are recovered, the satisfaction of simply being alive returns.

For the exhausted, just getting up to pee can feel like a chore. In darkness, this feeling can intensify at first. But then, imperceptibly, it turns to satisfaction again. For me, for example, to exercise became fun after three days. I felt how frustrated I had been in my inactivity.

Frustration is one of many effects of psychic damage. Damage incapacitates us. We can no longer do certain normal things. The organism generates fear of the activity to prevent us from trying, failing, and hurting ourselves even worse. But we still desire these activities. Frustration is the conflict between desire and fear. It wastes a tremendous amount of energy to keep us safe. Recapacitation removes the cause of

the fear, enables the fulfillment of desire, and releases vital energy for other tasks. Self-recovery accelerates and deepens. See note on fulfillment in [protocol](#) in the section on attitude.

## **Not**

There are three things the Hygienic use of darkness is not.

1. It is not discipline. For example, spiritual practice entails super-effort to force access to subtle energy reserves for the purpose of transformation. The will is so weak and inefficient, and unconscious resistance is so great that the result can only be partial. The Hygienic approach is explicitly and exactly the opposite: rest profoundly to accumulate energy necessary for restoration. The conscious self attempts nothing to directly cause healing, only provides conditions of healing. The autonomic self is free to heal completely.

In discipline, one accepts, on faith in appearances, the idea of a basic internal conflict. One struggles “against nature”, fights habits with practices to achieve an ideal. In Hygiene, one is naturally motivated by logical argument to appreciate and fulfill the actually healthy aims of one’s habits.

2. It is not therapy. Therapy is something done *to* an organism from the outside. The therapist, therapy, and therapeutic substances are the principal actors in a therapeutic session.

Therapy lacks an explanation for how it will perform or substitute for the pentillions of organic processes necessary for healing. In fact, darkness does nothing in a retreat. Like air or water, it is merely an inert condition which the self-preserving organism uses in its ceaseless tendency toward wholeness. The principal actor is life, not its conditions.

3. It is not a psychedelic trip, an experience of unconscious psychic phenomena made conscious with chemicals, natural or artificial.

These are all consciously active approaches to suffering: willed activities to improve an inert, even resistant unconscious self, as if it were disinclined or incapable. Unfortunately, this attitude is ignorantly coercive toward the crippled conscious self and discouraging of the omnipotent autonomic self. It is internalized tyranny, with its resultant triune brain drain. In contrast, Hygienic use of darkness is essentially passive as regards the will. Neither external influences nor one’s conscious self have center stage, but only play supportive roles. The autonomic self is the principal actor.

No conflict. Maximum efficiency. Perfect result.

## **Mechanics**

### **Food**

Attention to diet and nutrition have always been part of Natural Hygiene. Due to decreased activity, stress, and appetite, darkness presents a miraculous opportunity to:

- eat well
- interrupt the malnourishing, dissociative, toxifying relationship with food from which most of us suffer
- clearly experience one’s thoughts, feelings and sensations

This is why I serve and recommend only fresh fruit and greens to retreatants. As a sampling of the frugivorous diet, common to all anthropoid primates like us, these foods only nourish. They do not overtax digestion, intoxify, or over stimulate the system, nor help us suppress feeling or memory. For more on frugivorous diet, I recommend *The 80/10/10 Diet* by [Dr Douglas Graham](#). He is a Natural Hygienist, 25-year frugivore, and Olympic trainer.

However, if the prospect of eating just fruits and vegetables stops you from retreating, then just plan to eat as simply and naturally as you know how. Feel free to write me with your limitations; I am happy to make menu suggestions. Reversing illness and suffering is a process with its own logic. Darkness is a starting point. One step at a time.

Note: just because the frugivorous diet consists of all raw food does not make it a “raw food diet”. Frugivorism has a large, multi-dimensional set of criteria about food (timing, quantity, proportion, combination, season, source, one’s *feeling*, etc). Raw foodism only has one criterion: anything goes but high-heating. It lacks depth and seriousness. It is fanaticism, not a whole relationship with food.

## **Preparation**

If nothing is to be done directly in a retreat to cause healing, how does one prepare for it? It is mostly logistics:

- understanding the Hygienic attitude of passive support
- learning how to eat frugivorously to feel satisfied
- arranging a darkroom, support, and food

Otherwise, you prepare the same way you prepare for weeks in a hospital bed in traction. I.e., it is too late. You are already prepared.

## **Depths**

### **Trauma**

In the course of days alone in a darkroom, it is inevitable that any unresolved trouble from one’s past will come to the surface. Buried thoughts, feelings, sensations, and memories of trauma become conscious as the psyche repairs itself. This is not the torment of endlessly reliving the past, but part of genuine recovery from it.

Why are these things buried? The first and strongest manifestation of trauma is unconscious denial. Denial is not a moral failure. It is subconscious success. Untended trauma easily overwhelms an infant’s fragile consciousness. Denial prevents trauma from shattering basic psychic integrity. Denial is maintained until the psyche heals. Only then can one bear witness to what has been denied.

Denial begins to lift and a traumatic event is remembered or acknowledged. Frozen feelings resurface. Insights come. The organism paces this sometimes intense process with great care. The fact that it is happening proves you can handle it. However, gaining confidence in your ability can take time. In the next chapter, I describe some ways I learned of dealing with intense memory and feeling in darkness. In a series of [reports](#), I have recorded my experiences in darkness of beginning to heal from deep trauma.

What trauma? I mean the routine brutality of our lifeway. Not just the bad things we condemn, but the bad things we accept and even believe in. I’m not going to name any of them because you’ve already been offended enough. Exactly what they are *for you*, I invite you to find out yourself in darkness, where you have a real chance to deal with them.

The bottom line is this. No one can get brutalized day in and day out for years and not be affected. We are not indestructible. We are vulnerable to injury. This vulnerability is not our fault. It is the nature of our conditional existence. Failure is not a result of weakness. It is a sign of malfunction resulting from damage.

From this damage, we need time to heal. We deserve it simply because we are hurt. Trauma is real. It is deep. It persists until it heals. It disrupts everything in the meantime. And we can heal from it. We just need basic, decent conditions in which to do so: rest in dark, quiet solitude.

Lastly, unconscious psychic trauma often expresses itself as physical illness. So if you are physically ill, you may well find psychic wounds underneath your condition, wounds of surprising intensity. These wounds are doors. On the other side of them lie unexpected paths to health.

Much of this comes straight out of modern depth psychology: Reich, Liedloff, Janov, and Miller. In describing routine civilized traumatization, they took heroic stands for humanity. They only did not imagine that the psyche could repair itself without therapy.

The human organism is resilient in some ways and vulnerable in others. Darkness provides our autonomic selves the opportunity to fully put these qualities to healthy use, and to right unfathomable wrongs.

### **Causation**

Pathology is the study of illness, including its causation: the chain of cause and effect that leads to symptoms. Natural Hygiene deals unflinchingly in first causes. It begins by observing that health is the normal state of organisms under normal conditions. Disease only occurs when something goes wrong with conditions: harmful ones are present and beneficial ones are absent or in a bad proportion.

Among other things, this gives Hygiene a rational standard for evaluating conditions proposed as beneficial. Hygiene asks, what normal relationship to life does this condition have? Did its absence cause or contribute to the disease in the first place? If not, then the proposal can be dismissed.

In the case of using the condition of darkness to heal from psychic illness, once upon a time, we *were* deprived of the shelter we instinctively sought in order to heal from whatever traumatized us. We got hurt but got no chance to heal. Resting in a darkroom finally addresses this little-noticed intermediate cause of *ongoing* suffering and illness from trauma. Why were we deprived? Parents, our source of shelter, were often the source of our trauma. They were misguided or unwitting. Possibly they were traumatized with us. Or overwhelmed. Either way, how were they to provide us proper shelter afterward?

They did not mean to hurt us. They suffered from the same illness arising from an often similar trauma with their parents. They were in denial of their need for rest, just as their parents denied them. To support our healing would have meant facing their own terrifying pain in precisely the distressing moment when their highest values—their children—were suffering most. It happens occasionally, but it's too much to expect.

So here we are. Since humanity was fine at some point, how did trauma begin? Sane people do not routinely hurt their children. So the trauma had to originate externally. I don't know exactly what, but I guess a natural super-*catastrophe* in our distant past did it. Fact is, big rocks fly around space at high speeds. Occasionally, one lands here with unhappy consequences. Maybe we are the butt of a cosmic joke. What would it mean to get the joke? Everybody is innocent. So everybody is free to heal. On Earth, trying to prevent trauma is futile. Hope lies in having a way to recover from it.

### **Psychology**

In light of the traumatic origin of disease, Hygienic principles, and restful use of darkness, a Hygienic psychology can now be outlined:

1. As organisms, we start out whole, functional, and happy.
2. Early, routine, major psychic trauma leaves us damaged, malfunctioning, and suffering.
3. The psyche, as an organic system, will heal itself.
4. Healing primarily requires *rest* due to the stillness and extra vital energy it affords.
5. Profound psychic rest occurs autonomically in absolute, physical darkness.
6. Therefore, by resting in darkness, we are restored to wholeness, function, and happiness.

Natural Hygiene upholds basic findings of psychology from several traditions. Hygiene merely shrugs at psychology's conscious over-involvement in the unconscious. We are correct in believing we have a problem and need to do something about it. We have been incorrect about which part of ourselves has to do it.

Focusing on deep psychic rest in absolute darkness is new in Natural Hygiene. Until now, it has focused on physiological rest afforded by fasting, which has been its ultimate means of dealing with serious illness. At most, Hygiene recommends keeping eyes closed during fasts because it rests the mind<sup>7</sup>. A darkroom retreat embodies this principle fully while providing the energy and, frankly, the security of food to support repair of psychic systems. It compliments fasting's more physical benefits.

As in fasting, one hardly knows in darkness what the being is doing at its deepest levels. Occasionally there is a chance to consciously participate in the process. Or to find out *why* things have gone wrong if it is important to change ideas and habits related to it. Mostly one feels normal, or discomfort, or a strange subterranean rumbling.

But one always knows the result: restoration of function. Recovery of the lost self. Usually accompanied by feelings of contentedness and euphoria. Darkroom retreating demonstrates the marvelous self-healing power of the organism under proper conditions. But for those who have suffered and failed for years with other approaches, the process is nothing less than miraculous. As with the rest of Hygiene, time in darkness shows that if one wants a miracle, one need only provide for it. And then? Healed from trauma, one will no longer be compelled to repeat it. One will absorb and redeem its consequences. As with the rest of Natural Hygiene, its bad news is much worse, and its good news is far better.

The emergence of a Hygienic psychology and identification of trauma at the root of all illness have massive implications for Hygiene's pathology and destiny. Hygiene has said illness originates with enervation (low energy) and toxemia. Trauma explains how these conditions themselves originate. And in coming to terms with trauma, Natural Hygiene can finally meet allopathy (Western medicine) in its stronghold. I have started to develop these implications in [hygiene notes](#).

I am only saying enough here to give you a theoretical basis for doing Hygienic darkroom retreats. For an introduction to the principles, practices, and intriguing history of Natural Hygiene, read Shelton's *The Science and Fine Art of Natural Hygiene*.

## 2 - Format

Darkness can be used in different formats for different reasons. Here, I describe the ones I've tried so you can immediately begin experiencing for yourself deep rest in darkness. Observe the effects in your energy level, psychic state, and general wellbeing. These are in the order I recommend you do them in.

### Sleep In Darkness Tonight

Start like this: tack dark, dense blankets over your bedroom windows and doors to get relief *tonight* from outdoor ambient light. Extend corners of the blanket as far past door on either side as possible. Turn off or cover any devices in your room that produce light. But make sure you have fresh air, even if it lets in a little light for now. Get a cheap sleeping mask from a travel store to make up some of the difference.

We all know how it is to finally get enough sleep after too many short nights: we feel tired afterward. This is not getting too much sleep (a physiological impossibility). We are just tapping into the first layer

of a backlog of lost sleep. Feeling groggy is the first phase of catching up, which can take days. Reversing sleep deprivation is like withdrawing from a drug.

Once you're "sober", you can see if you really like darkness for sleeping nightly. If so, [make](#) removable inserts and lightproof vents so your room is dark, fresh, *and* easily reopened to light during the day.

## **4-Day Retreat**

Everyone interested in a 4-day retreat can try one. Though not guaranteed, it is possible to catch up on all the sleep one ever lost in darkness in about 48 hours. The amount of deep sleep to be had in this short amount of time is hard to imagine until you experience it.

It is best to go into darkness at night and come out three mornings later, making the dark part of the retreat 2.5 days. Before or after a 48 hour period, you have to sleep the night anyway. It's good to have a whole day awake before and after a retreat. And it's good to have time to spare.

After sleeping as much as possible, eating, eliminating, and bathing, what do you do in darkness without work, people, or media? I have found exercise and meditation to be helpful in continuing to rest while awake. I explain more about this in the section on attention in the [protocol](#) chapter.

Spend a minimum of 15 minutes relighting the room by opening the window inserts bit by bit so you can slowly re-adjust to light. This is very important.

It takes time to properly readjust to light and ordinary life. So a period of unstressed transition back to it is critical. For every three days of darkness, allow at least 24 hours of continued rest, except with windows uncovered during the day.

Hormones are rebalancing and this takes time. It certainly feels like a chemical process. Strangely, the sense of balance can be affected. It takes time to take account of what just happened with yourself in darkness, to begin integrating the changes, extra energy, and value of the retreat to you.

Spend the transition quietly. Visit with no one. Take a slow walk. Take a nap (covering the windows if you like). Lie on the grass or the sofa. Then cover the windows at sunset and sleep the night again in darkness.

Uncover the windows when you awaken. Your supporter should come at 10:00 to make sure you are up. Consider your retreat finished by noon at the latest.

Ease back into your regular life, where you will likely continue to notice changes.

A regular, fully-functioning house is best for a first 4-day retreat. But rent a retreat cabin if necessary and improvise a bathroom. For this short of a period, running water is unnecessary. See the "bathroom" section of [make](#) for a short list of requirements.

## **8-Day Retreat**

This is the most beneficial retreat I have experienced myself. Most people who can retreat for four days can go eight days and benefit more than twice as much. This is because the organism's response to darkness is cumulative, so the healing process deepens over time. Many of my early clients felt like they were just beginning to get somewhere when their 4-day retreat ended. So I added 8-day retreats for first-timers, and it worked fine.

This is like the 4-day retreat except:

- a major psychic issue can arise after physical restedness is reached
- another cycle of emotional discomfort and resolution usually occurs with that
- two days of transition are needed afterward
- a bathing facility is needed for emotional as well as physical reasons. See “bathroom” section of [make](#) for how to make a portable indoor shower.
- cover and uncover the windows each evening (by 20:00) and morning (by 10:00). Also do it for naps if you like.

So only go four days if eight feels like too much, or you haven't time or the facility. Trust your feeling about this. Life and healing move slowly; so can you, now that you have found a realistic way to heal.

## Sleep In Darkness Nightly

From simply darkening his bedroom, a friend reported to me a huge difference in the quality of sleep he and his mate experienced, as well as a return of vivid dreams. I have experienced the same thing whenever I have been able to darken the room I sleep in. As a rule, the darker the room, the better the sleep. And perfect darkness is qualitatively better than near-darkness. See for yourself.

It is best to go to sleep early, 20:00 at the latest. Then one naturally awakens around 02:00. At this hour, one is freshly rested, the promise of sleep lies ahead, and the mind and its inhibitions are slightly out of commission. So sex can be especially gratifying.

It is also considered the most auspicious hour for meditating. Creative thinking, exercising, or eating fruit are all fine, too. Sometimes I turn on the light to clean, design, read, or write for an hour or two. Then I go back to bed till 08:00 (give or take a couple hours). Before widespread public lighting, this was a common sleeping pattern. It's called biphasic or [segmented sleep](#).

## Mini-Retreat

This is for maintenance of restedness while keeping to your regular schedule. It is the same as sleeping nightly in darkness (see above), except for two things: it is not just best, but **mandatory** to go to bed before 20:00 and leave darkness no more than 14 hours later. CAUTION: Do *not* start a mini-retreat late and sleep extra late. This is the one dangerous way I found to use darkness. Read my blog post, [how not to retreat](#), for an explanation. And when I awaken around 02:00, whatever else I do, I remain in darkness.

A mini-retreat is not as impressive as regular ones. But it is safe, it feels really good, and it doesn't disrupt one's schedule.

## Future

The benefit of short retreats is clearly limited. Doing a lot of them does not equal doing few long ones. It's the law of diminishing returns combined with the risk of bolstering the ego and the frustration of glimpsed but unrealized potential.

My goal is to retreat for 20 days (5 lit). In my second successful retreat I had a hunch that in two weeks of darkness my psyche will heal from trauma at the core, enabling me to put the rest of my life back together afterward.

[Stories persist](#) of astonishing physical healing occurring in Ayurvedic darkroom retreats lasting 3-12 months: growing new teeth (!); recovering lost hair and eyesight; and healing from diabetes and even

signs of old age. It seems worth looking into. I would like to find a way health, including psychic health, can be fully restored in one shot. Like healing a broken bone. To this end, I would like to see Hygienic retreat centers worldwide with facilities and support for:

- darkroom retreats
- fasts (a la [Mosseri](#))
- physical retraining
- training in healthy lifeway, including both lifestyle and livelihood
- open source research and development of the above
- a village residence for staff where all this gets applied and tested in real life

In 3-6 months, one would be:

- restored to as much function and vitality as possible
- prepared to maintain it in daily life
- prepared to deal with the residue of the past.

As a consultant, I wish to help developers of such centers as well as places just for darkroom retreats. I also wish to help operators of existing retreat centers include Hygienic darkroom retreating in their programs. Those who support it become eligible for my future network, through which I can refer clients to you. Write me for more info.

It will take generations of healthy living for our full potential as human beings to be restored to original levels, but huge strides can be made in our lifetimes.

## **Conclusion**

Now that we have examined different formats of the restful use of darkness for different purposes, let's think ahead about what to do in a Hygienic darkroom retreat.

## **3 - Protocol**

Here is how to retreat in darkness in a Hygienic way, *to the best of my knowledge*. This chapter is a guide for retreating at a retreat center or your own place.

I intend this to guide you, not lead you. Life itself is the leader, and we are all learning to listen to it. So if the best of my knowledge proves insufficient, or it clearly conflicts with you in some way, do not force it on yourself. Rather, rely on yourself, on the life within. You would not have made it this far without your own good ways of seeing difficulty through.

Hygienic darkroom retreating is new and I am new at it. I have made this up as I go based on my experience in darkness and what I have learned from Natural Hygiene and other sources. While my editors have done their best to help me remove my arbitrary influence from the text, we likely missed some. And I might have misunderstood Hygiene, mistaken my own experience, or misstated something here. So again, you must rely on yourself, whether you are following my guidelines or diverging from them.

As far as I am concerned, darkroom retreating is nothing less than recovery of the lost self. It is yourself with whom you are to be reunited. As that happens, you become your own best guide. This chapter is just for getting you started and helping you past the biggest obstacles.

Only life itself can ever be the final authority on anything in Natural Hygiene. Consider these as notes from the field and an invitation to explore an idea whose time has come.

## Mechanics

First, if you haven't already, read the [format](#) chapter, especially the 4-day retreat section. That gives a good description of the overall process.

- If retreating in your own bedroom:

- neutralize it: pack up and store everything unnecessary to the retreat

- clean it thoroughly

- pad sharp corners and protrusions

- Food

- Eat simply the day your retreat begins. If you can eat enough fruit and greens to satisfy yourself, do so.

- Eat dinner before coming

- Orientation

- Arrive at 18:00

- Your supporter will show you details of the room, find out particular things you need, and talk to you about the retreat a little bit.

- Get used to the darkroom with eyes open. Then practice moving around and finding things with your eyes closed or a blindfold.

- If you have no supporter, set an alarm for 10:00 the day you will uncover the windows and your last day.

- Lights out

- How are you going to do things in a totally darkroom?

Very slowly!

- *Important:* when crouching, bending over, and rising, hold your arms out in front of yourself with hands touching so you don't hit your head. I learned this the hard way a couple times so you don't have to.

Practice this.

- Food will be left between the doors. Put food scraps in bucket provided inside the room.

- Things slowly go out of place in the darkroom. If you would like the bed remade, lost shoes found, etc, just let your supporter know.

- Use the scratch paper and pen provided to write notes to your supporter. Put them between the doors.

- Avoid all other company and media during your retreat: text, music, photos, and video.

## Purpose

- It is better to consider any spiritual, personal developmental, or therapeutic purpose to which you might put this retreat as part of what you are retreating from. Really: feel free to let it all go here. Whatever is valid will come back. If you can't let it go, that's ok, too.

- It is quite possible to have a goal for a retreat and make progress with it. I did this several times. But it was out of desperation. My aims were security objects. This kind of purposefulness interferes with the organism's priorities, which cannot be improved upon. Life always knows what is actually most urgent. (My most effective retreat was when I felt quite hopeless that it would work. I only stayed because of its logic.)

- Likewise, the autonomic functions of the organism will deal with some of what we often regard as our moral responsibilities. Darkroom retreating is not primarily an active process (like spiritual practice). It is primarily a passive process, requiring minimal effort on your part. Like waiting in a hospital bed to heal. Thus, you do not need to make yourself meditate, pray, chant, think hard about things, etc. But if you feel moved to do so, do not stop yourself, either. Yes, you actually get to consider your feelings, impulses, thoughts, and needs in darkness.

- Again, the main purpose of the retreat is to rest. This enables the organism to accumulate the vital energy it needs to heal deep, psychic injuries way beyond the reach of the will. Your principal task is to sleep.

- This process is as foolproof as possible. Given the conditions of rest—most of which are built into the room itself— you will heal. The organism is the principal actor. Your job is to support its self-healing process by conserving energy, including the energy expended by attention (more later).

## Expectations

- What I have experienced may or may not happen for you. But you will get a distinct break from your regular life. It's best to consider anything more a bonus.
- I make no guarantees about what you will experience. Perhaps you will have an amazing experience, perhaps you won't. It is up to your whole self, 99.99% of which operates below the level of conscious awareness, beyond your direct control. I do guarantee that your being will do exactly what is most necessary and not require more of you than you can handle. Perfect, complete knowledge of everything about you and absolute power to act on this knowledge are the autonomic self's great gifts for you.
- As with everything, you have to learn how to do and not do this. I'm still learning.
- As when wandering the streets of a foreign city, keep your wits about you. Your supporter is not a doctor, just a regular person. You remain basically responsible for yourself.

## Water & Exercise!

- There are two things I make sure I do, even if I don't feel like it:
  - drink water: water coats the nerves, making time in darkness emotionally smoother. Detection of dehydration is strangely harder in darkness. Each day, drink about 1 liter for every 20 kg you weigh.
  - exercise: exercise helps me get to sleep, avoid bed soreness, feel less out-of-sorts, prevent muscle atrophy, and, interestingly, maintain the psycho-physical “space” in which healing occurs. Even five minutes a day makes the difference between a pleasant retreat and constant discomfort. After the first couple days, I want to exercise more and more, something that never happened before.

## Food

It is also important to eat. I strongly believe in fasting. It is the Hygienic twin of darkroom retreating. But so far, I am not convinced these two processes should be done at once. Healing the psyche and healing the body seem to have opposite metabolic requirements. The activity of one supports the rest of the other.

Tips:

- Eat meals rather than snacks. When you are hungry, focus and eat until you feel full and satisfied. The human alimentary tract processes food in batches. A continuous stream of food (often eaten in boredom) stresses the stomach and leads to poor digestion.
- You will probably need 25-50% less food than usual. I recommend keeping it to fresh, raw, ripe fruit and leafy greens to maximize nutrition, psychic agility, and physical elimination. Keep it in a large cooler with a block of ice. Eat as much as you like. It is likely that your appetite will be diminished due to extra [melatonin](#) in the blood (a reason we do not get hungry when we sleep). This was especially noticeable in my first retreat.
- 10% of your food, by mass, should be leafy greens: lettuce (not iceberg), celery, spinach, parsley, and cilantro. This is the equivalent of 1-2 large heads or bunches.
- 90% of your food should be fruit, sweet and non-sweet (like tomatoes, bell peppers, cucumbers). So salads can be sweet (greens mixed with sweet fruit) and savory (greens mixed with non-sweet fruit).
- Eliminate or minimize fatty fruits like avocados, olives. Forego nuts and seeds altogether. One small avocado during a 4-day retreat in a savory salad is nice.
- Most of what you consume in fruit and leafy greens is water. So you must eat five times more volume for the same sense of fullness and satisfaction. Eating so much takes getting used to. Practice it before the retreat.
- For more about food, see [hygiene](#) and [prepare](#), and *The 80/10/10 Diet* by Dr Douglas Graham.

## Attention

- One has to do something with attention. I know of four ways to place it:
  - mentally on thoughts or thought process, often above the head
  - visually on darkness, in front of the eyes or inside the head
  - palpably on breathing, in the belly
  - palpably and audibly on the pulse, in the heart

These are all good places to put attention. It just depends on what *resting* requires in any given moment. Keep this purpose in mind, and you will learn when to move your attention around.

- Conscious placement of attention on some aspect of consciousness itself is usually called meditation. Meditation is usually considered discipline. But this is because time is set aside for it. And its purpose is lofty. Here, time is set aside for rest, meditation helps that, and there's nothing else to do. Meditation can serve the retreat. The retreat is not for meditation.
- Obviously, thinking can be good. When you have presence of mind, you can profit greatly by proceeding logically through clear problems to solutions, steadily making rational connections between thoughts and experience. Yet it's nice to know it's not your only option.
- You can also look directly at darkness itself, making it an object of attention. We are usually taught to think of darkness as nothing or as a background for something lit. Focusing externally on darkness, eyes open or closed, helps calm the mind and it can be unexpectedly absorbing. You can try this right now. Put your palms over your eyes. Slightly overlapping your fingers above the nose helps seal out light. Look at the backs of your eyelids like you are looking into a wide open space. Do this for a few minutes. Shapes and colors and spots might move around for awhile, then slowly clear away. Focus on the still, dark patches. It is like retracting all one's senses back inside the head. This can be helpful in the middle of a busy day to feel centered and in the body again. It is also restful for the eyes.
- Darkness seems to be a portal to the dream world, also called dreamtime or timespace. Many have reported occasionally seeing unusual lights and images. These moments have a highly real, objective quality and are intensely absorbing and bracing.
- Images of a more subjective nature can also play on the "screen" of darkness. In other words, the images are coming from the mind. At first I found this fascinating. Then it became torturous and nightmarish. For awhile I thought it was meaningless. Eventually, I decided it reflects what I am repressing or denying about myself: nothing to indulge or dismiss.

My [reports](#) describe my long struggle with this. Here is what I learned: when the imagery becomes too much, look for a patch of plain darkness. It is sometimes behind, sometimes in front of the imagery. Concentrate on it a moment to steady yourself, then put your attention on your breathing.

- Moving my attention into my gut to feel my breathing is always safe, a shelter from a storm raging in my head. I can calmly hang out there for hours while lying down, palpating the motion of breathing. Just the in-and-out of my belly where natural breathing occurs (not in the chest).
- From there I put my attention on my heart and palpate for a pulse. From sensation to feeling can't be very far. I heard from a genuine meditation teacher that eventually one can put attention in the heart as pure feeling. Which sounds really nice. I look forward to that.

## Conservation

- Talk only if necessary. Chatting drains energy.
- Do a silent retreat for a more concentrated experience:
  - Learn to write in darkness so you can take notes on your experience and still communicate with a supporter. Use a notebook. Turn the page after writing or whenever you are in doubt about having turned it. Use your non-writing hand to guide your pen.

– If you usually talk to yourself, catch yourself and stop.

- Commonly, retreatants want to leave the facility quickly upon exiting the darkroom. This is due to an unaccustomed increase in energy level and well-being. They have a sharpened sense of anticipation about their lives and feel more in their bodies: ready to go. But rather than immediately re-enter regular life and probably end up blowing off this extra energy, it is better to recirculate it, absorb it, stabilize it. So the retreat continues after darkness with windows uncovered and the door opened for one day for every 2 - 3 darkened days. This gives you time to re-orient to light and gravity. Take a walk, look at nature, and reflect on what has happened. See [format](#) and [post-retreat protocol](#) for more about this.

## **Discomfort**

- There is usually an uncomfortable period somewhere in the middle of the retreat, lasting minutes to hours. It's like a bout of pain while convalescing in a hospital. But now it is the soul that heals. Crying is natural.
- Getting some outside air is refreshing. Have a reliable blindfold so you can stick your head outside to take some breaths. This is easier at night when there is no bright light to get behind the blindfold.
- Lack of movement can cause bad feeling. Exercise can instantly reverse it.
- The ways described in the phobia section below might be useful.
- In a small number of cases, one can feel the retreat is unbearably difficult. Like one is about to burst. This happened to me my first time. It happened with a client, also. As a last resort before quitting the retreat, call your supporter if a little company would help.

If you can't stand it anymore, you can use light like a brake on the process. Apply it by slowly opening the door as much and long as needed. Start with your eyes closed. Turn away from the door. Open your eyes, but do not look into the light directly. Once you feel calm, close the door again.

## **Phobias**

Here are some ways those with phobias related to darkness (e.g., superstition, claustrophobia, fear of the dark) can still retreat.

- red light: Keep a red LED light next to your bed (pure red light gives no signal to the pineal gland wake you up). If anxiety or panic become too great, turn on the light till you feel better. If this is insufficient, turn on a regular light or step outside till you feel calm. Then go back into darkness again.
- microretreat: retreat for five seconds, then take a break in (red) light till you feel ready for the next microretreat. Gradually increase the length of the micro-retreats. Do this for 15 minutes. The next night, go 30 minutes, etc.
- companion: retreat with another person inside or near the darkroom till you feel ok alone.
- reason: go over the facts of your situation in your mind. What evidence do you have for what you fear? You can learn to recognize and dismiss arbitrary (baseless) ideas. I had a client from a superstitious culture who was raised to fear the dark. But the idea of resting in darkness appealed to her common sense. She stayed in darkness for a whole night for the first time in her life at my darkroom. Afterward, she said that when her fear of monsters or ghosts came, she simply reasoned her way through it like this: She remembered closing and locking the door, then checking under the bed and table and finding nothing before blowing out the candle. The door had not opened since then, so nothing could have gotten in. She deduced there could be no threat, calmed down, and went back to sleep. That night, her fantastic fear yielded to reason four times. Then she awoke in the morning, she felt ecstatic from staying all night in absolute darkness and overcoming her fear of it. Her rationality strengthened, and she used it to strengthen her feeling of safety and her relationship to reality. Finally allied with her autonomic self, the tide gently turned on her phobia. In any case, try. If these methods fail, perhaps you will come up with your own in the moment of crisis. An idea will occur to you. You will feel something or have an impulse.

Act on it. Darkroom retreating isn't all just lying around. These brief calls for heroism are part of the minimal effort the retreat requires of everyone at some point.

## Support

- A supporter supplies food and checks in with a retreatant according to their agreed schedule. The retreatant has a way to contact the supporter at any time while maintaining darkness. The supporter has completed at least one retreat as long as the retreatant's; knows this book, including the basic ideas of Natural Hygiene; is reliable; and has a modicum of common sense. A professional level of expertise is *not* required.
- The supporter must be able to deliver food and talk to the retreatant in a normal voice without opening the door. A supporter must be able to enter the room to maintain it without letting in light. See [design](#) chapter about double doors.
- Checking in can happen once or twice a day, or once in the middle of the retreat or not at all. It's up to the retreatant. Prepared food like salads or smoothies can be delivered daily without talking. My presence as a supporter has diminished greatly since I started. I did my last two 4-day retreats without a supporter and liked it a lot.

## Post-Retreat

The effects of a retreat continue afterward, sometimes with an intensity equal to the retreat's. So I call it the aftermath. This is a further period of possibility, breakthrough, and exploration. It can last from a few days to several weeks (!). How it goes depends on one's personality. I'm not the stablest oil rig in the Gulf, so it fairly tosses me around. It usually begins with a calm, solid feeling of deep restedness from the retreat. Then a tension builds to a crisis over days. I can feel as bad as the worst moments of my retreat. Then an insight or discovery comes that shows the way to the next small period of my life. I know less about this part of my clients' retreats than the dark part. From what I saw and heard, their aftermaths varied greatly in character. Sometimes they matched the drama of mine, sometimes they were smooth sailing. Just remember where you just were and keep your eyes peeled.

We all know better about our lives: things we should do for ourselves which, strangely, we cannot do. Darkroom retreating enables the organism to restore one's normal ability to take care of oneself. This is permanent recapacitation. The intensity and highs of the experience fade, but restored capacity remains, just as a broken leg, once healed, doesn't become broken again without another major mishap.

Therefore, the full application of the *idea* behind Hygienic darkroom retreating means doing retreats of increasing length alternated with periods of radical lifeway change until health is fully restored. "Health through healthful living."

Some changes you already know. Those you do not, you become able to learn and apply. Resources and opportunities right under your nose for years suddenly become visible and interesting. Having restored part of your being, *how* you are is different. So you attract different things. When you see you can walk through the front door of a bakery and get whatever you like, you stop begging crumbs out its back door.

## Summary

While I have said you are not the main actor in darkness, in truth, a part of you is. It is the part we are taught to ignore, deny, and disown: the autonomic self. In darkness, the conscious self we are taught to fully identify with is servant to the autonomic self. This corrects the conventional relationship, in which the unflinching processes of life are harnessed to the agenda of a crippled will. In life, you must arrange certain conditions to live. You must keep your wits about you. You are accountable for your own experience. These basic facts not only do not change in the darkroom, they become especially clear. In darkness, it is your job to maintain certain conditions of the retreat.

Your supporter—a non-expert, non-mind-reading non-therapist— will be on the outside helping you do that. She will be maintaining the darkroom, bringing food, perhaps finding your lost shoes. Like any decent person would, she will talk to you for a few minutes if you need. It's your retreat. If something is not working, say so.

If you would, please write a description of what happened before you go, while it is fresh in your memory, and share it with your supporter. I have found reading these reports (which should not be shared) very useful in improving the darkroom, understanding the process, and learning to explain it to people.

## 4 - Prepare

This is the registration form I have used with clients, followed by the menu and list of things to bring. Even if not retreating at a center, I suggest you read it and fill out the questionnaire to help you prepare mentally for the retreat. Likewise, pass it on to those you ever facilitate retreats for.

Register for your retreat here. Follow instructions carefully.

### General

- Read this book. Quiz later.
- Select dates for your retreat. Retreats begin at 18:00 and end at 12:00 four or eight mornings later. For example, a 4-day retreat that begins on Monday evening would end on Friday morning. And a retreat can begin the same day another ends.
- Respond [by email](#) to the questionnaire below. Responses of one or two sentences are sufficient.
- Bring things listed below that.

### Terms

- Prices:
  - 4 days (3 dark days, 1 lit), e360 / \$480
  - 8 days (6 dark days, 2 lit), e670 / \$900
- Discounts:
  - Local or student: 25%
  - Local and student: 50%
  - Offers of 35% + remainder in trade gladly considered
  - No one serious turned away for lack of funds.
- Reserve dates with a 50% deposit. Balance due on arrival.
- Cancellation fees (% of *total* price):
  - 30+ days before retreat: 5%
  - 7+ days before retreat: 25% (half the deposit)
  - 1-29 days if someone else can take your spot: 10%

### Questionnaire

1. Name:
2. Email address:
3. Phone:
4. Address:
5. Age:
6. Emergency contact name, email, and phone:
7. Retreat length: \_\_\_ days

8. Retreat starting date \_\_\_\_\_ +/- \_\_\_\_ days (for absolute date, put 0) alternate: \_\_\_\_\_ +/- \_\_\_\_ days
9. How did you first hear about darkroom retreating?
10. How did you first hear about this darkroom?
11. Why would you like to retreat?
12. What will you be doing the week before the retreat? (It should not be especially exhausting or intense for you)
13. How does the menu sound to you?
14. Quiz: What heals you in darkness?
15. Quiz: Where is a good place to put your attention if you feel crazy or tormented?
16. Would you like to maintain silence during your retreat?
17. What fears or concerns do you have that might interfere with your retreat? (fear of the dark, claustrophobia, superstition, etc)? How will you handle them? What support might you need?
18. Assuming I am correct that practically everyone is **psychotic** do you feel darkness might significantly affect you for the worse? If so, how?
19. Is there anything else you would like to add?

## Menu

Here is a Hygienic food plan:

- pure water on tap
- frugivorous menu
  - fresh fruit and leafy green vegetables (lettuce, celery, spinach, culinary herbs)
  - whole, raw, ripe, well-washed, and amply provided for eating anytime
  - green salad: sweet or savory, large, properly combined, served at midday
  - not served: oil, spices, salt, onions, garlic, ginger, or ferments (like vinegar).
- if you would like to know more about this menu before trying it, read the food sections in [hygiene](#) and [protocol](#) and Dr Douglas Graham's *The 80/10/10 Diet*
- if this menu is unacceptable, eat as simply and naturally as you know how. For suggestions, write me with your limitations.

## Location

If you are thinking of turning a space into a darkroom, sleep there 2-3 nights beforehand. Is there anything about it that might disturb you and which you cannot practically change about it? Search your feelings. Will you feel comfortable there? If so, great. If not, keep looking. See introduction and notes of [design](#) chapter for more comments about this.

## Things to bring

- Yes:
  - bed sheets and pillow (let center know ahead of time if you need these provided)
  - pajamas/lounging clothes
  - sweater
  - slippers
  - enough water bottles to hold 3 liters
  - personal items
  - prescription medication
- No:
  - cigarettes
  - electronic devices that make sound or light: computers, audio players, watches, clocks, etc
  - If you must bring any of these things, unless critical for your health, turn them off and store them during the retreat or ask to store them with your supporter.

- contraband and alcohol: disallowed on the premises
- Optional
- cellphone for emergency use
- special food or medicine
- exercise equipment (yoga mat, weights, etc)

## 7 - FAQ

### Mechanics

- *Do you eat in a retreat?*

Yes. And food is always available.

- *How many people retreat at once?*

One. The point of this retreat is to rest, heal, and recover oneself.

- *How do you do things in darkness?*

Very slowly. And by getting familiar with the room and making memorable places for your belongings before it is darkened.

- *Could you retreat with a sleeping mask?*

No. Masks are uncomfortable for a long period of time and eventually leak light. The skin has light receptors, so it would have to be covered all the time as well, even when eating, bathing, eliminating, etc. And a minimally furnished room is still required to eliminate dangers, distractions, and associations. So sleeping masks don't work for entire retreats. But they are good for travel, naps, and sleeping until your bedroom can be darkened.

- *Is it like meditation?*

Yes and no.

Yes, you go inside yourself. But not by trying. Because that is not the point. It just happens as a result of having so little going on outside yourself. Your attention, when awake and holding still, is generally on yourself, not on the world, your senses, or your thoughts. In darkness, you keep it there with much greater ease and for a different purpose than in spiritual meditation. It is easier in darkness because of the intellect-calming physiological response to darkness. In a meditation retreat, the point of maintaining certain conditions is to meditate, to practice. In darkness, the point of the conditions, including meditation and exercise (!), is to rest. Sometimes you can't rest. Hold on.

### Concerns

- *Wouldn't you go crazy staying in darkness that long?*

No. You would only go crazy in darkness from being *forced* to be there, as in prison. A retreat is a choice based on reason, and the door is always unlocked.

- *Do you get bored?*

Yes, and it is a very good sign. Sometimes your autonomic self works on something so damaged, painful, and draining that the psyche has had to completely shut off feeling to it. It becomes an internal black hole. Boredom means you are approaching it and that recovery of a lost part of yourself is imminent.

- *Three or four weeks are a long time to sit around doing nothing.*

It is a long time compared to the moment in which you realized you had a problem, yes. But it is mercifully short compared to the lifetime you spent developing your problem.

## Objections

- *I could never do a darkroom retreat.*

At the moment, your doing a retreat is out of the question. You cannot do it if you don't want to, and you cannot want to if you don't know about it. So all that matters right now is whether you feel drawn to learn more about it.

- *Isn't total darkness unnatural? Wouldn't we normally be exposed to stars and moon at night?*

Is shelter unnatural? Large uncovered windows are very recent in popular architecture. Most traditional shelter, civilized and indigenous, is dark or darkenable. Even if shelter is unnatural, the amount of light from stars and even the moon is negligible compared to artificial light. The eyelids are sufficient to block natural night light. And caves are everywhere. When people are in shock, exhausted, or emotionally overwhelmed, they instinctively seek shelter in solitude and cover their eyes with their hands. A darkroom retreat is merely an extended expression of this instinct in extreme cases. Which are epidemic.

- *Darkness could be good for some people, but there are many ways people can heal their pain. Nothing works for everyone.*

This would mean that:

- light does not interfere with deep sleep in some ill people
- deep healing can occur without deep sleep
- the human organism has no specific needs for healing from psychic trauma, despite its specific—and universal—need of rest for healing in all other cases (as well as its specific needs of air for breathing, light for seeing, food for eating, etc). Naturally, I disagree. Relativism makes fashionable philosophy but poor physiology.

## Bibliography

- *The Science and Fine Art of Natural Hygiene*, Herbert Shelton
- *The 80/10/10 Diet*, Dr Douglas Graham
- *Introduction to Human Technology* and *Human Technology*, William Arthur Evans (thanks to friend, A. Sterling Voss, for finding this rare work)

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\* [full book available at: [at http://leanpub.com/darkroomretreat](http://leanpub.com/darkroomretreat)]