

Imagine a vast hall in Anglo-Saxon England, not long after the death of King Arthur. It is the dead of winter and a fierce snowstorm rages outside, but a great fire fills the space within the hall with warmth and light. Now and then, a sparrow darts in for refuge from the weather. It appears as if from nowhere, flits about joyfully in the light, and then disappears. Yet where it comes from and where it goes in that stormy darkness, we do not know.

Our lives are like that, suggests an old story in Bede's medieval history of England. We spend our days in the familiar world of our five senses, but what lies beyond that, if anything, we have no idea. Those sparrows are hints of something more outside – a vast world, perhaps, waiting to be explored. But most of us are happy to stay where we are. We may even be a bit afraid to venture into the unknown. What would be the point, we ask. Why should we leave the world we know? Yet there are always a few who are not content to spend their lives indoors. Simply knowing there is something unknown beyond their reach makes them acutely restless. They have to see what lies outside – if only, as George Mallory said of Everest, “because it's there.”

This is true of adventurers of every kind, but especially of those who seek to explore not mountains or jungles, but the depth of God's very self: whose real drive, we might say, is not so much to know the unknown as to know the Knower. We call such adventurers ‘mystics’ and their knowledge ‘mysticism.’¹

The word *mysticism* derives the Greek word *mysterion*, meaning secret or hidden, a word whose origins are to be found in the Hellenistic mystery religions and cults of the pre-Christian and early Christian era. The *mystic* was a person who had been initiated into the secret rites of these mystery religions and cults. The great Jewish philosopher, Philo of Alexandria (20 BC - 50 AD) took this understanding and merged it with Jewish beliefs and spirituality, and thus highlighted the mystical, or allegorical, interpretation of scripture. For him, ‘mystical’ referred to the secret and hidden meaning of God's word. Christians later appropriated this when they employed the word ‘mystical’ to denote the hidden presence of Christ in the scriptures, the liturgy, and the sacraments.

The word *mysticism* definitively entered into Christian vocabulary through the influential writings of an unknown 6th-century Syrian monk, who wrote under the pen-name ‘Dionysius’ and claimed to be the person converted by St. Paul in Athens (Acts 17:34). According to this Pseudo-Dionysius, the human intellect and senses can open a person to God, but the person ultimately can do nothing to truly ‘know’ God. In his treatise, *Mystica Theologia*, Pseudo-Dionysius described a form of prayer that led a person to know God by what he called ‘unknowing’: “By the diligent exercise of mystical contemplation, leave behind the senses and intellectual operations, all things sensed and understood, and all things concerning being and non-being, so that you may rise by unknowing towards union, as far as humanly attainable, with Him who transcends all being and all knowledge.” Pseudo-Dionysius influenced many through his cosmic sense and insights into the dark, silent, non-discursive knowledge of God that lies utterly beyond words and thoughts and images.

In the Christian tradition, the term *mystical theology* gradually came to mean knowledge of God attained by direct, immediate, and ineffable contemplation.² It differed from both ‘dogmatic theology’ (by which one could attain knowledge of God from creation) and ‘systematic theology’ (by which one could attain this knowledge from revelation). It must be emphasized, however, that in spite of apparent similarities, Christian tradition never reduced mysticism to the psychological, nor disassociated it from its biblical, liturgical, and sacramental roots.

1 adapted from Eknath Easwaren's introduction to *The Bhagavad Gita* (Tomales, CA: Nilgiri Press, 2007)

2 The word ‘ineffable’ means that the subject matter is too profound to be adequately expressed or described in words.

In the Christian tradition, mysticism has been described as:

- “the raising of the mind to God through the desire of love” (Bonaventure, 1217-1274)
- “the experiential knowledge of God through the embrace of unitive love” (Jean Gerson, 1363-1428)
- the state in which “the soul seems to be completely outside itself. The will loves; the memory ... is almost lost; the intellect ... does not work, but is amazed at the extent of all it can understand because God desires that it understand” (Teresa of Avila, 1515-1582)
- “the secret knowledge of God that spiritual persons call contemplation, knowledge that is very delightful because it is knowledge through love” (John of the Cross, 1542-1591)

These classical definitions underscore a loving experience of God that is direct, immediate, and utterly beyond the normal workings of the intellect and senses. It can occur as a transitory ‘peak’ experience – such as Paul’s life-changing experience of the risen Christ on the road to Damascus – or an ongoing but heightened state of awareness: an entirely new way of seeing, thinking, and – most significantly – being. The recipient of this experience, the mystic, understands that she is now united with God, and from this loving union flows a ‘secret wisdom’ – a ‘loving knowledge’ transcending all abstract and conceptual knowledge – that is wholly a gift of God and utterly beyond human capability.

In her classic work *Mysticism: The Nature and Development of Spiritual Consciousness*, Evelyn Underhill identifies four characteristics of Christian mysticism:

- it is a journey or quest that engages the entire person (not merely the emotions or intellect);
- it results in a total surrender of oneself to God;
- it impels a response of total love to the personal and infinitely loving God, and
- it is a vibrant union with God that redirects or destroys all lesser relationships, and thus transforms the recipient.

One final point merits attention: It is not uncommon to speak of the felt-awareness of God’s presence in the depths of a person as ‘union with God.’ Yet it is important to recognize that through God’s grace – God’s presence and action within a person – whether she be the greatest saint or the worst sinner – she is already, as an image of God, actively participating in the divine life and thus already in union with God. From this perspective, then, a person’s spiritual journey is more correctly a process of an ever-deepening realization and assimilation of something that is already true for her: her union with God. It thus follows that union with God is not something a person acquires or achieves; it is something she realizes.

The Cloud of Unknowing

The Cloud of Unknowing, one of the great gems of Christian mystical literature, was written in England during the late 14th century by an anonymous writer. A serious study of this work reveals that its author was a mystic, a theologian, a scholar of the mystical tradition, a highly competent spiritual director, a master of English prose, and a person of great common sense. He was probably a monk (a Carthusian?) and a priest, yet he seems to have understood people and the frailties of human nature very well.

He impresses the reader again and again with his perceptive insights into the human person’s psychological limitations. His writings reveal him to have been a person who was unsentimental, matter-of-fact, and down-to-earth, and he regarded this habit of mind as a prerequisite for the contemplation which he proposed. He proceeded upon the belief that when a person seeks to bring her life into relation with God, she is embarking upon a serious and demanding task, a task that leaves no room for self-deception or illusion. It requires, rather, the most rigorous dedication and self-knowledge.

He stresses again and again that our heart is never satisfied simply with the grace of God or the gifts of God. Our heart, he attests, is content only with God – which he speaks of as ‘naked,’ just as he is – and it is this taste of God ‘naked,’ just as he is, to which the blind stirring of love continually directs us. The

whole of his book is written to offer guidance and encouragement to those wishing to be child-like and open and vulnerable and receptive and obedient to this blind stirring of love.

He tells us that we are to lift up our hearts to the Lord with a gentle stirring of love. We are to center all our attention and desire solely on God, forgetting everything else. He tells us that in the beginning it is normal to feel nothing but a kind of darkness in our mind or, as it were, “a cloud of unknowing.” We will seem to know nothing and to feel nothing, except a naked intent toward God in the depths of our being. Moreover, in spite of all our efforts, this darkness and this cloud will remain between us and God. But as we enter more deeply into the cloud, love comes to guide us, teaching us to choose God, who cannot be thought or understood or found by any rational activity. As this love grows stronger, it comes to take possession of us in such a way that it dominates our every action – because it is God, and God alone, who can fully satisfy the hunger and longing of our spirit.

But he goes on to say that just as this “cloud of unknowing” lies above us, preventing us from knowing God, so we must put a “cloud of forgetting” below us by which we divest our prayer of everything – of words, thoughts, images, memories – so that in our utter self-forgetfulness we allow our “naked love” (our love divested of everything) to rise to God. The author thus directs us “to beat upon the cloud of unknowing with the hammer of love.”

All prayer is an encounter with God. Yet God, who is incomprehensible and inexpressible Mystery, is closer to us than our inmost being, because this God of infinite Love dwells within us. The 14th-century theologian and mystic, Meister Eckhart, observed that “there is in the soul a ‘something’ in which God dwells, and there is in the soul a ‘something’ in which the soul dwells in God.” In a passage of great clarity and beauty, Thomas Merton took this insight a step further when he spoke of what this ‘something’ is:

“At the center of our being is a point of nothingness which is untouched by sin and illusion, a point of pure truth, a point or spark which belongs entirely to God, which is never at our disposal, from which God disposes of our lives, which is inaccessible to the fancies of our mind or the brutalities of our will. This little point of nothingness and of absolute poverty is the pure glory of God written in us... It is like a pure diamond blazing with the invisible light of heaven.”

Merton claims that at the center of our being is an innermost point of truth which shares not only the likeness, but perhaps even the substance of God’s very being. And yet, following Christian tradition, he stresses that access to this center is not at our command. Rather, we can enter it only through the gateway of our complete poverty and nothingness. This divine indwelling is the focal point of the prayer of *The Cloud of Unknowing*. It reveals the not only the Source of our being – God’s love from which our life flows – but also the direction in which our hearts must travel for a constantly renewed intimacy with this Source. The prayer described in *The Cloud of Unknowing* draws us into the wellspring from which our very being flows.

Centering Prayer: In the early 1970s, Fr. William Meninger, a Trappist monk at St. Josephs Abbey in Spencer, Mass., recognized that *The Cloud of Unknowing* described a teachable form of contemplative prayer. Within months, the monks began teaching this prayer at the abbey’s retreat house. They called it ‘Centering Prayer,’ in reference to Thomas Merton’s above-quoted passage. In Centering Prayer the person responds to the Holy Spirit by consenting to God’s presence and action within her. It facilitates the movement from a more active form of prayer – verbal and mental prayer – into a receptive prayer of resting in God. It is a response to God’s invitation to ‘be still and know that I am God’ (Ps. 46:10).

Centering Prayer, which was first described in the *The Cloud of Unknowing*, follows four basic ‘rules’:

1. Choose a simple sacred word such as *God*, *love*, or *Abba* that is symbolic of your total directedness toward God.

2. Lift your heart to the Lord with a gentle stirring of love and then silently introduce the sacred word into your consciousness as symbolic of your total directedness toward God.
3. Whenever you become aware of a thought, return ever so gently to your sacred word.
4. At the conclusion of the prayer, remain in silence with your eyes closed for a minute or two.

Centering Prayer is a journey in darkness and faith into the unfathomable mystery of God. Yet it is a journey in which we lay aside all the props that typically support us in prayer – words, thoughts, images, memories – to seek God in the quiet depths of our being. But it is important that we understand that putting aside these props is simply the means directed toward our goal: our naked intention toward God. As we enter more deeply into our prayer, we will discover that we are being guided by love, and that, as this love grows stronger, it will take hold of us in a way that dominates our every action. Thus the blind stirring of love with which we began our prayer eventually grows into a bright flame, which guides our every action. John of the Cross captures the sense of this when he speaks of being led out “on a dark night, kindled in love with yearnings ... without light or guide except that which burned in my heart.”

Centering Prayer is unique to each and every person, but it is possible to make a few comments about the experience of Centering Prayer. As we become quieter and grow deeper in prayer, we reach a place where thoughts of any kind simply disappear – and we find ourselves, in darkness and silence – simply ‘resting in God.’ The experience is one in which our fears and anxieties gradually vanish and we find, rather, a deepening openness and availability to God that reaches to the depths of our being: deeper than our thinking, our feeling, our memories and our desires. Like all true prayer, Centering Prayer gradually draws us out of ourselves so that we gradually come to see, feel, and understand all reality with the same love with which God sees, feels, and understands it. Ultimately, what happens in this prayer happens in a manner that is hidden even from ourselves, in the innermost sanctuary of our being, where, as St. Paul so beautifully expressed it, our life is “hidden with Christ in God” (Colossians 3:3).

Teresa of Avila (1515-1582)

- 1515: was born into a wealthy family of textile merchants in Avila: an intelligent young woman who, unlike most women of that time, learned to read and write.
- 1535: at the age of 20, she entered the Carmelite Monastery of the Incarnation in Avila. Although all convents of religious women at this time were cloistered, the Carmelite ideal – a life devoted to poverty and prayer – was not being lived at the Incarnation (nuns from wealthy families lived very comfortable lives, whereas others lived in poverty; there were many visitors to the parlors).
- 1554: at the age of 39, she experienced a radical conversion while praying before a statue of Jesus being scourged; it marked the beginning of her mystical life.
- 1558: at the age of 43, she began to formulate plans for the reform of the Carmelite Order.
- 1562: at the age of 47, she received permission to establish a reformed Carmelite convent, the Monastery of St. Joseph, in Avila; she began to write her *Life*.
- 1567: at the age of 52, the Carmelite reform was approved by the (male) Carmelite Prior General; she met 25-year-old just-ordained fellow-Carmelite John of the Cross; she began to establish other convents.
- 1571: at the age of 56, she reluctantly accepted nomination as Prioress at the Monastery of the Incarnation in Avila; two years later she wrote *The Book of Foundations*.
- 1577: at the age of 62, she wrote *The Interior Castle*.
- 1582: at the age of 67, she died in Salamanca.

Writings:

- *The Life* (1562-1565): not only the story of her spiritual journey to that point, but also a treatise on prayer

- *Way of Perfection* (1565): a masterpiece on the practice of prayer and spiritual perfection
- *Foundations* (1573): the story of how she established the reform throughout Spain amid so many practical concerns, while, in the midst of this, she grew in holiness
- *Interior Castle* (1577): a classic description of the entire spiritual journey

It is important to understand the meaning Teresa gives to the words ‘meditation’ and ‘contemplation’:

- **Meditation:** prayer using one’s memory, intellect, will, and imagination to reflect upon Scripture and the life of Christ. Although its form may vary, it always demands some effort of a person. It requires her to focus her attention on something – a Scripture passage, a thought, an image, etc. – and normally includes some struggle against distractions.
- **Contemplation:** a sheer gift of God, given in God’s own way and in God’s good time. A person may desire it and pray for it, yet she can neither understand it nor make it happen. The person’s attention is open, all-embracing, and all-loving. She is simply present to what is: nothing is shut out and nothing excluded (thus, distractions no longer exist for the contemplative). She resides in the present moment, the eternal Now. (This does not mean, however, that memories of the past or thoughts about the future are absent. Such memories and thoughts can occur, but they cannot remove her loving attention from the present.) Teresa stresses that the person should relinquish all attempts to achieve more advanced states of prayer: “The important thing is not to think much, but to love much. Therefore, do whatever most arouses you to love.”

The Interior Castle:

The Interior Castle is an overview of the entire spiritual journey accompanied by a careful explanation of the dynamics of each stage. Although it might seem to indicate where a spiritual pilgrim is on her spiritual journey – like a ‘you are here’ sign at the mall – the progression from one mansion to the next is not so orderly. In fact, it is not uncommon that a pilgrim may find herself residing in several mansions at the same time. *The Interior Castle* is meant to help her get her bearings and understand the ways in which she may get stuck and how to get unstuck in her journey of spiritual transformation.

The soul, which is ultimately the focus of *The Interior Castle*, is not something a person has, but rather who she most profoundly is and is ultimately meant to be. Teresa depicts the soul as a great castle with many rooms or mansions: the outermost room (the first mansion) nearest the moat with the foul reptiles of sin, and the innermost (the seventh mansion) where God resides. Although it seems to be arranged in concentric circles in which the inner circles would get progressively smaller, in reality the mansions get progressively more expansive until the innermost (or seventh) mansion is infinitely expansive.

First Mansion: spiritual awakening: first faltering steps

Teresa stresses that we are meant for God and have a capacity for God. God resides at our center, and all our beauty is because of God. Yet God is not simply with us; God is within us. The spiritual journey is thus depicted as a journey inward. God, the God of infinite love, is to be sought within – in our soul, i.e., in that deepest part of ourselves.

Teresa tells us that good desires bring us to begin our spiritual journey. As we begin this journey, we may pray and take stock of our lives, but at this stage we easily find ourselves distracted by honors, possessions, business, and things of the world. We are well-intentioned but scattered: focused almost entirely on ourselves and on what others say about us. We need the self-knowledge of humility, a condition in which we come to know ourselves by looking at God, because in contemplating the abundance and beauty of God we come to see the neediness or the wretchedness of our state. And seeing the neediness or the wretchedness of our state in this light is to be given the impetus to move.

Second Mansion: newly converted but many attachments

At this stage, we have made an earnest start in giving ourselves to God, but this presupposes the need for prayer. Yet prayer is not simply something we do; it is ultimately who we are in relation to God. God always calls, always summons us into being, but our capacity to respond to God varies greatly. At this stage, our capacity is small, but it will increase by loving much. At every moment, we can harvest abundant motives for surrendering ourselves to life's whole meaning: God – and we must earnestly resist the temptations to give up the struggle.

Third Mansion: a perfect, well-mannered lady or gentleman

At this stage we find within ourselves a strong desire not to offend God. Prayer and penance delights us; we comport ourselves in speech and dress, and manifest charity toward all. But we have become complacent at having grown psychologically and spiritually; we are tempted to settle down and make this our home. We may find ourselves unwilling to let go of the older, well tried, but worn out forms of prayer to enter the still waters of contemplation. We need to put aside our agenda and trust God.

Fourth Mansion: the beginning of mystical prayer: some observations

Teresa was graced, not only with great 'spiritual favors,' but also with an understanding of them. Yet experiencing great spiritual favors is simply an effect of God's grace; it is not the grace itself nor is it in any way essential to it. Because Teresa understood what God was doing in her prayer (a rare gift), she was able to analyze it and communicate it to others – and it seems that she was meant to do this.

The relationship between the mystical grace and its possible 'overflow' in 'spiritual favors' is not unlike that between 'goodness' and that mysterious and difficult to define quality we call 'charm.' Some people are richly endowed with charm. Some have it; some do not. But quite ordinary goodness, accompanied by charm, often seems to glow. The goodness is thus easily overestimated. We are dazzled, but it is simply the charm, not the goodness that dazzles us. Similarly, holiness without charm is rarely recognized, but a person can have great charm (and the popularity that goes with it) with very little goodness.

Fourth Mansion: Prayer of Quiet

As we enter the fourth mansion, we enter a place of spiritual transformation, a place where the inner landscape of our soul is beginning to qualitatively change. We begin the transition from meditative prayer to contemplative prayer. Here the distinction between what we do in our prayer and what God does in us begins to blur. Our prayer becomes more and more passive and becomes, in fact, 'infused prayer,' prayer that is infused by God into the depths of our soul at a level below our consciousness: it is completely hidden from our mind. This is often preceded by a spiritual darkness and a profound absence of sensible consolation. God seems to be cleansing our over-stimulated senses and preparing us for the subtle sensations of contemplative prayer.

This stage is characterized by the prayer of quiet, a prayer of a simple, loving gaze upon the divine. Our will (desires) is now absorbed in God, but in being drawn into the unimaginable, our imagination is now useless. We must consent with all our heart to be drawn beyond ourselves into the sphere of God, which, although it is our total beatitude and sole fulfillment, is alien, frightening and painful to our limited humanity. We must banish from our hearts everything except the naked desire for God alone. It is important to recognize, however, that the result of this naked desire for God alone is that our prayer has been stripped of all that we can understand. We simply cannot think useful thoughts. It is not that we have forsaken meditation; it has forsaken us. Faith, we are brought to understand, is not something we feel, nor is it clarity of mind or a sense of firmness of will in assent. It is a 'being held' by God, which makes us hold on in darkness and bewilderment, and when everything that we know or feel draws a blank. This gradual purging of the 'old self' will demand of us great humility.

Fifth Mansion: Prayer of Simple Union

This stage is characterized by the prayer of simple union. During this time of prayer, God suspends all our interior faculties – intellect, memory, will, and imagination – so that they seem dead or asleep. This is not, however, a ‘dreamy’ state; rather, our ordinary consciousness simply goes underground. For a brief period of time, our soul is, as it were, divorced from our body. Love alone remains awake and vibrant during this sleep of the faculties. There is greater union in this state than in the prayer of quiet, but it is still transient and far from complete. If the fourth stage increases our inner confusion, this stage is a time of enormous restlessness and unhappiness. We find the day-to-day demands of ordinary human life terribly distasteful, and we find ourselves tortured that so many reject God. We want only to die, yet we know that God desires us to live and to serve him. Teresa explicitly links this stage with the sentiments Paul expressed: “You have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God” (Colossians 3:3). Our hiddenness is central here. Teresa underscores this with her celebrated image of the cocoon and the butterfly. In the objectless stillness which characterizes our prayer, we are, as it were, spinning a cocoon around ourselves: by emptying the self we are gradually forming Christ around us. When we are reduced to emptiness and silence, dead to all external stimuli and all internal prompting, all that is left is the presence of Christ around us. And out of this emerges the butterfly, the transformed soul: vulnerable, restless and confused, yet beautiful beyond all that we were before. This transformation, however, takes place not in our feelings, but in our will. This stage ultimately entails a surrender of our will.

Sixth Mansion: Spiritual Betrothal (or Conforming Union)

There is an inherent unity between the fifth, sixth, and seventh mansions. The fifth ushers us into the contemplative life, the life of passionate love; the sixth is the living out of that love, the living of the surrendered heart; and the seventh is the perfection of that love. The grace of the fifth mansion is the dynamism driving us forward; the sixth is the actual journey; and the seventh is the goal reached.

In its highest expression, human marriage is the image of what takes place between God and us when we radically choose to belong to him. We have labored and knocked persistently, and now the door is opening to us. Yet God’s action in us takes place in deepest darkness and secrecy.

Teresa chose to devote almost a third of her entire work to this stage. This was probably because this stage often entails the greatest disorientation and thus requires the most discernment. The ‘butterfly’ that came to birth in the fifth stage is, as we have seen, vulnerable, restless, and confused. Thus this stage is often a place of great trial and suffering. We may experience what seems to be the intimate communication of God’s love (visions, ecstasies and interior locutions [words perceived in the depths of our person]), but all is not what it seems. The possibility of being deceived here is great. Teresa’s criteria for the authenticity of exceptional experiences have to do with the presence or absence of two features: (1) the sense that what the experiences convey is entirely a gift and (2) the sense that what is conveyed lies beyond the realm of what can be easily described or spoken about. Finally, this stage highlights the importance of meditation on the sacred humanity of Jesus Christ. Teresa took issue with those who suggested that imaginative prayer impeded the higher stages of mystical prayer.

Seventh Mansion: Mystical Marriage

This stage is characterized by a description of mystical marriage or spiritual transformation in which the soul is now totally absorbed in God. The distinction between Creator and creature remains, yet the person experiences herself as completely identified with divine love. The transformation of the soul into the Beloved is permanent and involves complete surrender of self. The soul “is brought into this mansion by means of an intellectual vision, in which, by a representation of the truth in a specific way, the most Holy Trinity reveals itself, in all Three Persons. First of all, the spirit is enkindled and is illumined, as it were, by a cloud of the greatest brightness. It sees the Three Persons individually, and yet, by a wonderful kind of knowledge which is given to it, the soul realizes that most certainly

and truly these Three Persons are one substance and one power and one knowledge and one God alone...” (*Interior Castle*, VII,1).

John of the Cross (1542-1591)

- 1542: born in the village of Fontiveros, near Avila; his father died when he was young; the family moved to nearby Arévalo as his widowed mother struggled to support the family
- 1551: at the age of 9, the family settled in Medina del Campo, a busy center of international trade, where he was educated by the Jesuits
- 1563: at the age of 20, he entered the Carmelite Order.
- 1567: at the age of 25, he was ordained a priest; he was seeking a more contemplative life when he met Teresa of Avila; she invited him to join the reform; he agreed, saying “Yes, so long as I do not have to wait long.”
- 1569: at the age of 26, he began the reform of the Carmelite Order.
- 1574: at the age of 32, first attempts by the non-reformed Carmelites to suppress the reform.
- 1577: at the age of 35, in December, he was captured by the non-reformed Carmelites, taken to Toledo and imprisoned; while in prison he began to formulate some of his greatest poetry and to lay the foundations of some of his greatest writings; in August 1578 (nine months later) he managed to escape. He began *The Dark Night*, possibly his greatest poem, with the story of his escape.
- 1591: at the age of 49, he died in Ubeda.

John of the Cross: Writings

- *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*: spiritual growth (the book is not easily understood, and John warns us against isolating passages or thinking that we understand his thought until we’ve read the entire work several times. It has been observed that John needed a good editor. There are redundancies, repetitions, and misplaced material that would never be found in a well-planned book. Moreover, John’s style is difficult for a modern reader. Whereas we seek unity and coherence in our writing, John, who was trained in scholastic philosophy, employed seemingly endless divisions and sub-divisions that are alien to our way of thinking.)
- *The Dark Night*: spiritual growth at its most painful
- *The Spiritual Canticle*: spiritual growth as a lovers’ journey of search and encounter
- *The Living Flame of Love*: John’s most personal work, his ‘Magnificat’ (Luke 1:46-55)

John’s poetry speaks eloquently of God and of his own deep hunger for God. In his prose, however, he makes it clear that each and every one of us is made for union with God. It is our very nature. Each and every one of us has the potential for union with God, yet this potential will remain unrealized unless we choose to develop it and allow God to develop it. For John, it is not things that hinder us on our journey to God; it is the desires for those things that hinder us. Consequently, John seeks to free us of any desire that is not a desire for God alone. Perhaps no aspect of John’s teaching is as well-known as his demand for self-denial:

To reach satisfaction in everything
desire satisfaction in nothing.

To come to possess everything
desire to possess nothing.

To arrive at being everything
desire to be nothing.

To come to know everything
desire to know nothing.

– *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, I, 13, 11

John calls this purification, this shedding of all desire, ‘night,’ – but this night is of God and, in fact, is God. God’s very presence purifies us:

“The dark night is an inflow of God into the soul, which purges it of its ignorances and imperfections, natural and spiritual. It is identified with infused contemplation or mystical knowledge of God. It is by means of this that God teaches the soul secretly, educating it in the perfection of love without its doing anything or understanding how this happens.” (*Dark Night*, II, 5)

The dark night involves both what we do (active night) and what God does in us (passive night). During the dark night of the senses the person is freed from her attachments to particular sensory gratifications, whereas during the dark night of the spirit she is freed from her attachments to rigid beliefs and ways of thinking, frozen memories and expectations, and compulsive choices. John describes the nights of the senses and of the spirit in a linear fashion, one following the other. In reality, however, they are intertwined; they overlap and often happen simultaneously. Even the terms ‘active’ and ‘passive’ are relative and reflect the person’s sense of whether something seems to be the result of her efforts or God’s. The real process is much more intimate and mysterious. Moreover, it has been observed that the dark night is not primarily some thing, an impersonal darkness like a distressful psychological condition, but rather some One, a personal presence leaving an indelible imprint on the human spirit and consequently on her entire life.

It is not uncommon to think of darkness as something sinister or evil, but this is not what John means by the ‘dark’ night – *la noche oscura*. Rather, he is speaking of something obscure or mysterious, something that is hidden, even from ourselves. For John, the dark night is not only sacred and precious; it is profoundly “happy.” John says that God darkens our understanding of our spiritual journey in order to keep us safe. When we can no longer chart our own course, we are able to open ourselves to God’s protection. Thus the darkness becomes a “guiding night,” a “night more lovely than the dawn.” We cannot liberate ourselves; our defenses and resistances will not permit it, and we can hurt ourselves trying. To guide us toward the love that we most desire, we must be taken where we could not and would not go on our own. The journey to union with God is a dark journey because it is primarily a journey in faith, not in human understanding.

The Dark Night

On a dark night
Kindled in love with yearnings –
Oh, happy chance! –
I went forth unobserved,
My house being now at rest.

In darkness and secure,
By the secret ladder disguised –
Oh, happy chance! –
In darkness and in concealment,
My house being now at rest.

It is helpful to understand how this poem developed. In December 1577, John was captured by some non-reformed Carmelites, taken to Toledo and imprisoned. For nine months, he was confined in a very small cell that had little access to air.³ He suffered severely from the winter cold and the summer heat and, subsisting on an extremely meager diet, was wasting away. However, on the night of August 16, 1578, after weeks of planning, he loosened the screws in the hinges in the door, opened it, left his cell, made his way along a corridor, climbed out a window and made his way down to the ground on a rope he had improvised by tying together strips of his bed sheet. He quickly made his way to the convent of the Discalced Carmelite nuns, who sheltered him until he could be moved to a better location and eventual escape.

Listen to his poem: “on a dark night... in darkness and secure... by the secret ladder disguised... in darkness and concealment... Oh, happy chance!” The poem describes not only a person’s mystical

3 It is important to recognize that in 16th-century Spain, there was little separation of church and state as we understand it today. It would be more correct to say that the two were interwoven. In this atmosphere, religious orders handled most of their own judicial matters. They had their own legal and penal systems, and it was not uncommon for monasteries to maintain men-at-arms and prisons.

transformation; it describes his own escape from his prison in Toledo. But like all poetry, we have to respect it for what it is, a poem; it suffers if we try to dissect it. John was a poet, and poets function in a world of symbols. If the symbol 'flame' (in *The Living Flame of Love*) tells us something about God, the symbol 'night' tell us something about the journey. Although 'night' speaks of darkness, loneliness, fear, the obscure, and more, as the journey of faith, it also speaks of mystery, beauty, transformation, and a new birth.

In the happy night,
In secret, when none saw me,
Nor I beheld aught,
Without light or guide,
Save that which burned in my heart...

Oh, night that guided me,
Oh, night more lovely than the dawn,
Oh, night that joined Beloved with lover,
Lover transformed in the Beloved.

Gerald May, in his excellent book *The Dark Night of the Soul: A Psychiatrist Explores the Connection Between Darkness and Spiritual Growth*, suggests that the dark night of the soul can happen to anyone and seems, in some ways, to happen to everyone. Moreover, rather than a one-time experience, it seems to appear in various ways throughout our lives. And in this regard, we don't need to look too far afield to find the dark night. Bereavement, disappointment, failure, and the debilitation of old age are simply a few of the common human experiences which engulf us in night. Gerald May goes on to say that...

"As far as I can see, the dark night of the soul is endless. This is, for me, the most hopeful thing about it; *the dark night is nothing other than our ongoing relationship with the Divine*. As such, it must always remain mysterious, dark to our understanding and comprehension, illuminated only by brief moments of dawning light. And as such it never ends; it just keeps deepening, revealing more and more intimate layers of freedom for love."

Thomas Merton described John of the Cross as the patron and father of those whose prayer falls beyond the boundary of what is called 'spirituality.' He observed that John speaks eloquently to those who, in one way or another, have been brought face to face with God in a way that methods cannot account for and books do not explain. John, Merton said, is "in Christ the model and the maker of contemplatives wherever they may be found."

Concluding Thoughts

Theologian Karl Rahner, S.J. (1904-1984), observed that "the Christian of the future will be a mystic or he will be nothing at all." He meant that if a person did not have a deep personal experience of God's love, there would be little left to hold her to a conventional practice of the faith. Rahner believed that God's self-communication lay at the heart of human experience. It was of no concern to him whether this experience was called "mystical" or not. What was critical was that the experience of grace – that is, the felt-sense of God's presence – was truly open to all.

It is important to recognize that the mystic is actually Every Person who has learned the truth of God's invitation to "be still and know that I am God" (Psalm 46:10). To learn this truth requires not strenuous effort, but simply humility and perseverance. Whenever we sense the real presence of God in our hearts, whenever we are made to feel that, as St. Augustine phrased It, God is closer to us than our very selves, we are on the threshold of true Christian mysticism.

The Mystical Tradition: Some Recommended Books

Cynthia Bourgeault, *Centering Prayer and Inner Awakening* (Chicago: Cowley, 1994): possibly the best book available on centering prayer; this book seems “best” for a person new to centering prayer

Ruth Burrows, *Interior Castle Explored* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 1981): an excellent introduction written by a very engaging writer

The Cloud of Unknowing and The Book of Privy Counseling, William Johnston, ed. (New York: Image, 1996): from my perspective, the best translation and commentary

David Frenette, *The Path of Centering Prayer: Deepening Your Experience of God* (Boulder, CO: Sounds True, 2012): probably the best, most comprehensive, and most practical book on centering prayer; Part II on “contemplative attitudes” is excellent; this book seems more appropriate for a person more advanced in centering prayer

Martin Laird, *Into the Silent Land: A Guide to the Christian Practice of Contemplation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006): an excellent introduction to the deeper realms of prayer and contemplation; the sections on dealing with distractions and developing interior quiet are particularly good

Iain Matthew, *The Impact of God: Soundings from St. John of the Cross* (London: Hodder, 1995): an excellent introduction to St. John of the Cross

Gerald G. May, *The Dark Night of the Soul: A Psychiatrist Explores the Connections Between Darkness and Spiritual Growth* (San Francisco: Harper, 2003): an excellent and very readable book that explains many aspects of the spiritual journey

Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism: The Nature and Development of Spiritual Consciousness* (Oxford: Oneworld, 1993): not easy reading, but one of the best books on the topic