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*The Dark Night of the Soul:  
The Painful Purification of  
God's Infused Presence*



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Not every unpleasant or difficult experience is a sign of God's displeasure. On the contrary, sometimes our most painful feelings and distressing circumstances are the very means through which God deeply transforms us. The great Spanish mystic, St. John of the Cross, gave this experience a name: "the dark night of the soul."

The dark night of the soul has become a popular way to describe any painful experience. But not all painful experiences qualify as a dark night of the soul. The dark night "is much more significant than simple misfortune. It is a deep transformation, a movement toward indescribable freedom and joy."<sup>1</sup> Through the dark night, the "soul is strengthened and confirmed in the virtues, and made ready for the inestimable delights of the love of God."<sup>2</sup> Only by means of the dark night—and the heartache that accompanies it—can one's deepest desire be satisfied in spiritual union with God.

"[T]he dark night of the soul is a totally loving, healing, and liberating process. Whether it *feels* that way is another question entirely."<sup>3</sup> The reason the dark night is difficult and disturbing is not because God is absent or inactive in a person's life. The reason that the dark night is distressing is precisely because God is working—in a powerful, deep, and transformative way.

The dark night is a profoundly good thing. It is an ongoing spiritual process in which we are liberated from attachments and compulsions and empowered to live and love more freely. Sometimes this letting go of old ways is painful, occasionally even devastating. But this is not why the night is called "dark." The darkness of the night implies nothing sinister, only that the liberation takes place in hidden ways, beneath our knowledge and understanding. It happens mysteriously, in secret, and beyond our conscious control. For that reason it can be disturbing or even scary, but in the end it always works to our benefit.<sup>4</sup>

John illustrates this with the metaphor of a mother weaning a child. Through the process of the dark night the soul "lose[s] the habits of a child and betake[s] itself to more important and substantial occupations" (38). This is necessary, for "without such turnings away [one] would not learn to reach God" (90).

In the dark night the believer comes to the end of his or her self and directly experiences authentic spiritual transformation through the infusion of God's presence. "For, however assiduously the beginner practises the mortification in himself of all these actions and passions of his, he can never completely succeed—very far from it—until God shall work it in him passively by means of the purgation of the said night" (60). Understandably, the experience of the dark night is not an easy process to endure.

In the dark night, the familiar spiritual practices that once brought great joy instead bring great grief. Though once reliable, they now seem ineffective to bring comfort and relief. Consequently, they only bring frustration. Unbeknownst to the believer, these practices, though intrinsically good, are wrought with personal impurities and imperfections that demand God's immediate action to correct (38). The dark night "cleanses the soul and purifies it from all these imperfections" (39). Through the dark night God acts deeply within the soul, cleansing both branches *and* roots, in order to make the soul a proper dwelling place for God's glory (93).

Though the process is painful and difficult, it is also a cause

for great happiness and joy. If the believer realized what God is actually doing in the dark night he or she would not feel so miserable. God's intentions in the dark night are for the believer's good. "For it will be a matter of great pleasure and great consolation, to one that journeys on this road, to see how that which seems to the soul so severe and adverse, and so contrary to spiritual pleasure, works in it so many blessings" (75).

The feeling that God is not at work in the dark night is the source of the believer's greatest grief.

And it is evident that the greatest suffering which it feels in these trials is this misgiving; for, if it could be certified at that time that all is not lost and over, but that what is happening to it is for the best—as it is—and that God is not wroth, it would care naught for all these afflictions, but would rejoice to know that God is making use of them for His good pleasure (142).

John therefore encourages the believer to endure the dark night. The spiritual fruit that will be borne by it far surpasses anything the believer could produce through his or her own feeble efforts.

Therefore, O spiritual soul, when thou seest thy desire obscured, thy affections arid and constrained, and thy faculties bereft of their capacity for any interior exercise, be not afflicted by this, but rather consider it a great happiness, since God is freeing thee from thyself and taking the matter from thy hands. For with those hands, howsoever well they may serve thee, thou wouldst never labour so effectively, so perfectly and so securely (because of their clumsiness and uncleanness) as now, when God takes thy hand and guides thee in the darkness, as though thou wert blind, to an end and by a way which thou knowest not (153-154).

#### ENTERING THE DARK NIGHT: TWO MOVEMENTS

The dark night of the soul consists of two movements: the dark night of the senses and the dark night of the spirit. John

distinguishes between the two in order to better describe God's inner workings in the believer.

This night . . . produces in spiritual persons two kinds of darkness or purgation, corresponding to the two parts of man's nature—namely, the sensual and the spiritual. And thus the one night or purgation will be sensual, wherein the soul is purged according to sense, which is subdued to the spirit; and the other is a night or purgation which is spiritual, wherein the soul is purged and stripped according to the spirit, and subdued and made ready for the union of love with God. The night of sense is common and comes to many; these are the beginners. . . . The night of the spirit is the portion of very few, and these are they that are already practised and proficient (61).

These two nights are distinct yet intimately related. The dark night of the senses is the proper preparation for the dark night of the spirit. In this night, the senses are purified for the spirit's sake: "for, inasmuch as the sense is now purer, it can more easily feel the pleasures of the spirit after its manner" (92). John describes this order in greater detail: "The darkness . . . relates . . . to the desires and faculties, sensual, interior and spiritual, for all these are darkened in this night as to their natural light, so that, being purged in this respect, they may be illumined with respect to the supernatural" (150).

The second night is far more devastating to the believer than the first. "The first purgation or night is bitter and terrible to sense. . . . The second bears no comparison with it, for it is horrible and awful to the spirit" (61). Ultimately, "there is no comparison between this night of sense and that other [night of spirit], in its darkness and trials" (76).

John is not a gnostic. Creation is good, but the senses must be purified and prepared "in such a way as to be able to receive, feel and taste that which is Divine and supernatural after a sublime and lofty manner, which is impossible if the old man die not first of all" (152). This occurs through God's direct purification of the senses and spirit in the dark night. "It suffices for us here to know that, in order that the interior

motions and acts of the soul may come to be moved by God divinely, they must first be darkened and put to sleep and hushed to rest naturally as touching all their capacity and operation, until they have no more strength" (153). Starr helps us to see the distinction: "In the night of sense, the soul is stripped of all *perceptions* of God. In the night of spirit, all *ideas* of God fall away."<sup>5</sup> Through the dark night of the senses the "actual imperfections"—the exposed branches—are stripped. Through the dark night of the spirit the "habitual imperfections"—the buried roots—are purified by God alone (93).

### THE DARK NIGHT OF THE SENSES

In the dark night the senses are purified by an unsettling and disruptive experience of spiritual distress. John describes this experience:

When they are going about these spiritual exercises with the greatest delight and pleasure, and when they believe that the sun of Divine favor is shining most brightly upon them, God turns all this light of theirs into darkness, and shuts against them the door and the source of the sweet spiritual water which they were tasting in God whensoever and for as long as they desired. (For, as they were weak and tender, there was no door closed to them, as Saint John says in the Apocalypse, iii, 8). And thus He leaves them so completely in the dark that they know not whither to go with their sensible imagination and meditation; for they cannot advance a step in meditation, as they were wont to do afore time, their inward senses being submerged in this night, and left with such dryness that not only do they experience no pleasure and consolation in the spiritual things and good exercises wherein they were wont to find their delights and pleasures, but instead, on the contrary, they find insipidity and bitterness in the said things. For, as I have said, God now sees that they have grown a little, and are becoming strong enough to lay aside their swaddling clothes and be taken from the gentle breast; so He sets them down from His arms and teaches them to walk on their own feet; which they feel to

be very strange, for everything seems to be going wrong with them (62-63).

The experience of this dark night of the senses is difficult and frustrating. The believer feels lost—abandoned by God. He or she feels alone; no one seems to understand their plight (69). The believer's desperate attempts to alleviate his or her frustrations through familiar spiritual practices are unsuccessful, leading only to spiritual fatigue. "Thus they fatigue and overwork their nature, imagining that they are failing through negligence or sin. But this trouble that they are taking is quite useless, for God is now leading them by another road" (70).

John distinguishes this experience from depression by prompting the believer to search for three signs that indicate the authenticity of the dark night. The first is a dryness and impotence in one's prayer life and familiar spiritual practices. These bring no pleasure or consolation in the things of God or in creatures (64). Psychiatrist Gerald May puts words to this feeling: "Experiencing the impoverishment of their customary consolations, people usually try to renew their efforts and invest more energy, but it is to no avail. As the old pop song goes, 'I can't get no satisfaction—and I try and I try. . .'"<sup>6</sup>

Because of the inadequacy of one's former practices to bring about change, the believer feels like he or she is backsliding (64). This would not be the case if the believer truly desired to abandon God. The believer's desire to love God remains the same even though his or her desire for the "old ways" diminishes (67). Again, May's words are helpful: "I don't know what it means or how to do it, but what I really want is just to be with God, just to be in love with God."<sup>7</sup>

Though John does his best to keep people from confusing the dark night with depression, it is very likely that the two are often related. Psychiatrist Gerald May writes, "My experience is that people often experience depression and the dark night at the same time. To say the least, the dark night can be depressing" (156).

John offers advice for those who experience these three signs which, though painful and distressing, are clear indica-

tions that God is at work. He encourages the believer to take comfort and patiently persevere and "content themselves with merely a peaceful and loving attentiveness toward God" (70).

The way in which they are to conduct themselves in this night of sense is to devote themselves not at all to reasoning and meditation, since this is not the time for it, but to allow the soul to remain in peace and quietness, although it may seem clear to them that they are doing nothing and are wasting their time, and although it may appear to them that it is because of their weakness that they have no desire in that state to think of anything. The truth is that they will be doing quite sufficient if they have patience and persevere in prayer without making any effort. What they must do is merely to leave the soul free and disencumbered and at rest from all knowledge and thought, troubling not themselves, in that state, about what they shall think or meditate upon, but contenting themselves with merely a peaceful and loving attentiveness toward God, and in being without anxiety, without the ability and without desire to have experience of Him or to perceive Him (70-71).

Even though it "seems that blessings are being taken away from" the soul, God is actually enriching the soul by working in it "so many blessings and benefits" (76). These blessings include a greater fear of God (78) and deep spiritual humility. "For it sees itself so dry and miserable that the idea never even occurs to it that it is making better progress than others, or outstripping them, as it believed itself to be doing before. On the contrary, it recognizes that others are making better progress than itself" (81).

A greater love for God, others, and self arises from this new humility. "And hence arises the love of its neighbours, for it esteems them, and judges them not as it was wont to do aforetime, when it saw that itself had great fervour and others not so" (81). One's patience is also increased: "when the soul endures and perseveres in its spiritual exercises without consolation and without pleasure. . . [i]t practises the charity of God, since it is not now moved by the pleasure of attraction

and sweetness which it finds in its work, but only by God" (84). A greater meekness results: the soul "becomes meek with respect to God, and to itself, and likewise with respect to its neighbour. So that it is no longer disturbed and angry with itself because of its own faults, nor with its neighbour because of his, neither is it displeased with God, nor does it utter unseemly complaints because He does not quickly make it holy" (85).

All this leads to a deeper walk with God and a greater preparation for the purification of the spirit.

These times of aridity, then, cause the soul to journey in all purity in the love of God, since it is no longer influenced in its actions by the pleasure and sweetness of the actions themselves, as perchance it was when it experienced sweetness, but only by a desire to please God. It becomes neither presumptuous nor self-satisfied, as perchance it was wont to become in the time of its prosperity, but fearful and timid with regard to itself, finding in itself no satisfaction whatsoever; and herein consists that holy fear which preserves and increases the virtues (86).

Now that the senses have been purified, the dark night of the spirit brings purification to the intellect, memory, and will.

### THE DARK NIGHT OF THE SPIRIT

Devoid of any sensual pleasure or aid, the soul is now completely reliant upon contemplation to complete the process of purification. This is "the way of the spirit, which is that of progressives and proficients, and which, by another name, is called the way of illumination or of infused contemplation, wherein God Himself feeds and refreshes the soul, without meditation, or the soul's active help" (88). John's definition of contemplation reveals its passive nature: "Herein God secretly teaches the soul and instructs it in perfection of love without its doing anything, or understanding of what manner is this infused contemplation" (100).

This contemplation leads to an "enkindling in love": "For contemplation is naught else than a secret, peaceful and loving infusion from God, which, if it be permitted, enkindles the soul with the spirit of love" (72). This occurs in the dark—in a hidden manner—because of its divine source: "This enkindling of love is not as a rule felt at the first, because it has not begun to take hold upon the soul, by reason of the impurity of human nature, or because the soul has not understood its own state, as we have said, and has therefore given it no peaceful abiding-place within itself" (72-73). But like a log being consumed and transformed by a blazing fire, this is not initially felt in a positive manner. "This love is not as a rule felt at first, but only the dryness and emptiness are felt whereof we are speaking" (74).

Why would God choose to purify the soul in this manner, especially since the experience is so painful and frustrating?

Why is the Divine light (which as we say, illumines and purges the soul from its ignorances) here called by the soul a dark night? To this the answer is that for two reasons this Divine wisdom is not only night and darkness for the soul, but is likewise affliction and torment. The first is because of the height of Divine Wisdom, which transcends the talent of the soul, and in this way is darkness to it; the second, because of its vileness and impurity, in which respect it is painful and afflictive to it, and is also dark (100).

The soul is not used to such immediate divine action. Its imperfections and impurities inhibit it from knowing divine things without divine help: "the clearer and more manifest are Divine things in themselves the darker and more hidden are they to the soul naturally" (101). God's supernatural light so surpasses one's natural faculties that one feels overwhelmed and blinded. The sheer brilliance of God's light appears to the natural eyes as darkness. The light "overwhelms it and darkens the act of its natural intelligence. For this reason Saint Dionysius and other mystical theologians call this infused contemplation a ray of darkness . . . for the

natural strength of the intellect is transcended and overwhelmed by its great supernatural light" (101).

"[S]o immense is the spiritual light of God, and so greatly does it transcend our natural understanding, that the nearer we approach it, the more it blinds and darkens us" (156). Darkness is the only word that adequately describes this experience. It is a "deep and profound darkness. As a result of this, the soul feels itself to be perishing and melting away, in the presence and sight of its miseries, in a cruel spiritual death, even as if it had been swallowed by a beast and felt itself being devoured in the darkness of its belly" (104).

In this darkness, we are "made to walk in dark and pure faith." This is necessary in order to experience full union with God: "in order to come to this union, the soul must needs enter into the second night of the spirit, wherein it must strip sense and spirit perfectly from all these apprehensions and from all sweetness, and be made to walk in dark and pure faith, which is the proper and adequate means whereby the soul is united with God" (95).

In the midst of this ray of darkness the soul simultaneously experiences two devastating feelings: it feels forsaken by God and aware of its deep poverty and wretchedness (106). The situation is so desperate one feels that there is simply no remedy for one's situation. "And to this is added the remembrance of times of prosperity now past" (108). Because the soul "has never experienced that new feeling which drives it forth" it "quite commonly believes that it is losing ground" (154). One's foundations are shaken to the core as everything one once held dear collapses. Like a blazing fire consuming a log, God's purification by fire (127) dries the wood before it gives heat (138). The vast extent of purification increases the spiritual pain, for one single corrupt affection is enough to hinder full spiritual union (12). Though there are "intervals of relief" (111), the process can last for years.

John laments that this is how growth must occur because of our debilitated state:

Oh, miserable is the fortune of our life, which is lived in such great peril and wherein it is so difficult to find the truth. For that which is most clear and true is to us most dark and doubtful; wherefore, though it is the thing that is most needful for us, we flee from it. And that which gives the greatest light and satisfaction to our eyes we embrace and pursue, though it be the worst thing for us, and make us fall at every step (156).

John describes three trials from God that accompany the transition from the dark night of the senses to the dark night of the spirit. These three trials compound the believer's frustration. First, Satan uses this transition to stir a spirit of fornication within the soul. "The experience represents a desperate flailing around of the mind in the attempt to find gratification somewhere."<sup>8</sup> This is "characterized by a lack of gratification in work, relationships, and other endeavors. It seems only natural that when the usual means of satisfaction dry up, a person would seek others to replace them."<sup>9</sup> This can lead to the second sign—blasphemy—where the believer's impulse is to rage against God. The final sign is *Spiritus Vertiginis*—a "dizzy spirit" that errs in everything (Isaiah 19:14). "This spirit darkens their senses in such a way that it fills them with numerous scruples and perplexities, so confusing that, as they judge, they can never, by any means, be satisfied concerning them, neither can they find any help for their judgment in counsel or thought. This is one of the severest goads and horrors of this night, very closely akin to that which passes in the night of the spirit" (88-89). May flesh this out:

It seems specifically designed for people like me, people who refuse to relinquish the idea that *if only I could understand things, I could make them right* . . . we desperately try to figure out where we have gone astray. "What's happening here? Where have I gone wrong? Maybe my problem is this . . . No, maybe it's that . . . Perhaps I should try this . . . Or that . . . I simply must be more diligent! Perhaps if I tried. . . ." We make countless resolutions to be more disciplined in our lives; we read self-help books, go to workshops, anything we can think of.<sup>10</sup>

The severity of this experience is not the same for everyone since God treats people individually, according to their abilities.

Those who have the disposition and greater strength to suffer, he purges with greater intensity and more quickly. But those who are very weak are kept for a long time in this night, and these he purges very gently and with slight temptations. Habitually, too, he gives them refreshments of sense so that they may not fall away, and only after a long time do they attain to purity of perfection in this life, some of them never attaining to it at all. Such are neither properly in the night nor properly out of it; for, although they make no progress, yet, in order that they may continue in humility and self-knowledge, God exercises them for certain periods and at certain times in those temptations and aridities; and at other times and seasons he assists them with consolations, lest they should grow faint and return to seek the consolations of the world (90).

#### AFTER THE DARK NIGHT

In order to prove God's good intentions in the dark night, John describes his own experience:

[M]y understanding went forth from itself, turning from the human and natural to the Divine; for, when it is united with God by means of this purgation, its understanding no longer comes through its natural light and vigour, but through the Divine Wisdom wherewith it has become united. And my will went forth from itself, becoming Divine; for, being united with Divine love, it no longer loves with its natural strength after a lowly manner, but with strength and purity from the Holy Spirit; and thus the will, which is now near to God, acts not after a human manner, and similarly the memory has become transformed into eternal apprehensions of glory. And finally, by means of this night and purgation of the old man, all the energies and affections of the soul are wholly renewed into a Divine temper and Divine delight (99).

The dark night of the spirit leads to a greater faith, hope, and love that allows the believer to overcome the devil, the world, and the flesh.

By means of the dark night, natural faith is purified to a supernatural status—"a dark and pure faith." Our spiritual enemy, the devil, cannot stand before this new purified faith: "for faith is an inward tunic of a whiteness so pure that it completely dazzles the eyes of the understanding. And thus, when the soul journeys in its vestment of faith, the devil can neither see it nor succeed in harming it, since it is well protected by faith—more so than by all the other virtues—against the devil, who is at once the strongest and the most cunning of enemies" (176).

Through this new purified hope the world is conquered: "the virtue of hope . . . God gives the soul such ardour and courage and aspiration to the things of eternal life that, by comparison with what it hopes for therein, all things of the world seem to it to be, as in truth they are, dry and faded and dead and nothing worth . . . the heart is thus lifted up above the world, not only can the world neither touch the heart nor lay hold on it, but it cannot even come within sight of it" (177-178).

Through this new purified love the flesh is conquered. One's love for God and others arises from one's awareness of being loved by God: "for where there is true love of God there enters neither love of self nor that of the things of self" (179).

We are left with an "empty faith, unattached love, and hopeless hope."<sup>11</sup> A supernatural faith that far excels our natural intellect, a supernatural love that is rooted in detachment, and a supernatural hope that hopes against all hope.

After experiencing the dark night nothing—not even the great powers of evil—can disturb the believer's peace. "[T]he more spiritual, the more interior and the more remote from the senses is the communication, the farther does the devil fall short of understanding it" (183). Though "he does what he can to disturb and disquiet the sensual part" (183) its purification through the dark night makes it impervious to his wiles.



### CONCLUSION

True faith is not without hardships—both externally and internally. Only the dark night—an experience that brings a great deal of frustrations and difficulties—can liberate us from our flesh, the world, and the devil and free us to love with God's kind of love. The dark night is not sinister or negative. It is a kind, good, and gracious act by God who knows that "authentic spiritual growth requires great and dramatic tragedy."<sup>12</sup> We should expect no less, since the practice of supernatural faith results in the death to self.

Through the dark night we are awakened from our spiritual slumber. Our misplaced love, which is attached to the spiritual delights that come from created things and our own distorted ideas of God—which are not God—must be redirected away from these superficial things and placed entirely upon God, who transcends all creatures and is greater than all human conceptions. Through the dark night we are released from our attachments to both sense and ideas. We lose control in order to be controlled by God. We lose our self in order to find our self in God.

Only the dark night allows us to fully realize our union with God. A supernatural God can only be fully known through supernatural means, indeed, only by the direct agency of God himself in the deepest regions of the soul. "God is at once too immanently at one with us and too transcendently beyond us to be fully felt or appreciated in any normal way."<sup>13</sup> The dark night purifies our senses and our spirit to supernaturally receive what we could never receive by our own natural powers due to their imperfections and impurities. Although it initially feels dreadful, it is an act of grace which is our greatest good and leads us to our greatest end—full union with God. For in the words of St. John, the dark night is "the way and manner which the soul follows upon the road of union of love with God" (34).

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#### Notes

1. Gerald G. May, *The Dark Night of the Soul: A Psychiatrist Explores the Connection Between Darkness and Spiritual Growth* (San Francisco: Harper-Collins, 2004), 4.
2. St. John of the Cross, *Dark Night of the Soul*, translated by E. Allison Peers (New York: Doubleday, 1990), 37. All page numbers in the manuscript refer to this edition.
3. May, 68.
4. May, 4-5.
5. Mirabai Starr, *Dark Night of the Soul* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2003), 18.
6. May, 139.
7. May, 141.
8. May, 143-44.
9. May, 144.
10. May, 148-49.
11. May, 194.
12. May, 8.
13. May, 56.