

O HAPPY NIGHT: THE DARK NIGHT OF THE SOUL AS A FORGOTTEN STAGE OF
SPIRITUAL FORMATION

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by

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INTRODUCTION

“With two loves I have loved You. With a love that is selfish, and a love that is worthy of You.”¹ I winced as my tired eyes lingered over these words written by eighth-century Sufi mystic Rabi’a al-Adawiya. Her words rang true to my own experience. Two years ago, in May, it felt as though all of the joy had been sucked out of my relationship with God and everything else, for that matter. The shift was subtle. Initially, I blamed a lot of things: “Well, I graduated from college this month. I must just miss my friends.” “Maybe it’s seasonal depression? Ohio isn’t nearly as sunny as Oklahoma was.” “My new job is hard. I’m sure the joy will return once I’m settled.” “I’m doing a lot of trauma work in therapy right now. I’ll feel better soon enough.” Slowly, I started to realize what was going on within me. The excitement of college ministry within the charismatic community stimulated my false self like a drug. My senses had been constantly overloaded. My new life was slower, more contemplative, and no longer marked by the praise and adoration that had characterized my previous life.

I was detoxing.

The part of me that loved God for selfish reasons was dying. Because this was the very part of me through which I had first learned to know and love Him, God began to feel like a stranger. Anxiety set in. No matter what I tried, I could not recover the spark. Eventually, I gave up on the spark and accepted my new experience. Depression followed. I didn’t want anything other than God, and missed Him terribly, but I couldn’t seem to find Him anywhere. I felt trapped in an impasse—I hated where I was, yet had nowhere else to go. I had seen too much to walk away from Jesus. It took me a year and a half to identify what was happening to me. I felt a rush of relief when I discovered Saint John of the Cross’s *The Dark Night of the Soul*. In this

¹ Elmer O’Brien, S.J., *Varieties of Mystic Experience: An Anthology and Interpretation* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1964), 103.

short treatise, he described a process in which God purges the soul of sin and leads it into maturity through the gift of darkness. John of the Cross describes the dark night as follows:

This dark night is an inflowing of God into the soul, which purges it from its ignorances and imperfections, habitual, natural, and spiritual, and which is called by contemplatives infused contemplation, or mystical theology. 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. Inasmuch as it is the loving wisdom of God, God produces striking effects in the soul, for, by purging and illumining it, He prepares it for the union of love with God.²

The dark night of the soul, far from being a sign of spiritual failure, is a necessary stage of spiritual transformation that has been largely neglected within contemporary Western Christianity. In my own dark night of the soul, I was being purged of the false self, and I didn't know it. Upon this discovery, I began to ask, "Why had no one told me about this part of the spiritual journey?"

A FORGOTTEN DARKNESS

For centuries, Christians have attempted to map the spiritual journey. Most spiritual maps developed within the historic church follow a similar pattern: recognition of God, formation in God, and eventually the painful unlearning of false ideas about both God and the self. I often wondered why these maps were never presented to me before entering graduate school—I had faithfully studied the Bible and devoured every popular evangelical and charismatic Christian book I could get my hands on from the time I was fifteen. The work of Janet O. Hagberg and Robert Guelich helped answer that question.

² St. John of the Cross, *Dark Night of the Soul*, trans. E. Allison Peers (Garden City, NY: Dover Publications, 2003), 47.

In *The Critical Journey*, Janet O. Hagberg and Robert Guelich examine the lives of Western Christians in order to construct a theory of contemporary spiritual development. Drawing from figures such as Ignatius of Loyola, Julian of Norwich, Teresa of Avila, John of the Cross, Aelred of Rievaulx, Francis of Assisi, Søren Kierkegaard, Evelyn Underhill, James Fowler, and Scott Peck, Hagberg and Guelich identify six stages culminating in a life of union with God: Recognition of God, Life of Discipleship, Productive Life, Journey Inward, Journey Outward, and Life of Love. The first stage involves an initial recognition of God, while the second centers on learning, belonging, and spiritual formation.³ Stage three becomes the “doing stage,” where individuals feel responsible to work for God and lead others toward the joy and fullness they themselves have discovered.⁴ This stage is often marked by a zealous enthusiasm that can quickly devolve into pride, self-centeredness, and self-worship.⁵ Individuals in this stage feel indispensable to their chosen group and struggle to see or accept perspectives that fall outside of the group’s framework.

Beyond stage three lies the Inward Journey and what Hagberg and Guelich call ‘the Wall.’ Their description of the Wall closely mirrors what John of the Cross described as the dark night of the soul centuries earlier. They define the Wall as an experience of profound personal and spiritual crisis that causes a person to confront their shadow side while simultaneously navigating the painful sense of God’s abandonment.⁶ Hagberg and Guelich note that spiritual guidance is often necessary when navigating the Wall. However, they observe a recurring problem: such guidance is often unavailable to those who need it most. They write, “It would be great to think that most priests, ministers, and other spiritual leaders could be our guides through

³ Janet O. Hagberg and Robert A. Guelich, *The Critical Journey: Stages in the Life of Faith*, 2nd ed. (Salem, WI: Sheffield Publishing, 2005), 33, 53.

⁴ Janet O. Hagberg and Robert A. Guelich, *The Critical Journey*, 73.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 82.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 93.

stage four and the Wall. The sad truth is that many of these leaders have not been led through this stage themselves and have not allowed themselves to question deeply or become whole.”⁷

R. Neal Gray Jr., in *The Dark Night of the Soul, Crisis of Faith, and Pastoral Leadership Implications*, conducts a study in which he traces the phenomenon of the dark night of the soul among clergy in the contemporary Western church. Gray notes that although 79% of clergy members interviewed could identify seasons resembling the dark night of the soul within their own formation journeys, none knew what the dark night of the soul was.⁸ As a result, many clergy members, unsure of how to make sense of these experiences, misattributed them to personal mental problems, spiritual failure, or the result of unknown or unacknowledged sin.⁹ This gap between experience and language helps explain why many pastors misinterpret the dark night as psychological or moral failure rather than as a stage of spiritual formation. Because clergy often struggle to interpret their own experiences, congregants are frequently left without guidance, or even ostracized by their communities, when they enter this stage. Hagberg and Guelich capture this tension, noting, “One of the most difficult aspects of this stage in the journey lies in the sense gained from ourselves and others that we really are losing our faith and being disloyal to the group, the church, the organization, the leader, ourselves and our beliefs.”¹⁰ This sense of disloyalty, combined with a lack of interpretive guidance, often leads individuals either to revert to an earlier stage of faith or to deconstruct their faith altogether. The forgotten experience of the dark night at the Wall of stage four has the potential to deepen and transform faith when navigated with patience, self-compassion, and curiosity, yet many never make it through.

⁷ Janet O. Hagberg and Robert A. Guelich, *The Critical Journey*, 94.

⁸ R. Neal Gray Jr., *Dark Night of the Soul: Crisis of Faith, and Pastoral Leadership Implications* (DMin diss., Capital Seminary and Graduate School, Lancaster Bible College, 2017), 98.

⁹ R. Neal Gray Jr., *Dark Night of the Soul: Crisis of Faith, and Pastoral Leadership Implications*, 128-129.

¹⁰ Janet O. Hagberg and Robert A. Guelich, *The Critical Journey*, 100.

Beyond the Wall, Hagberg and Guilich identify stages five and six: The Journey Outward and the Life of Love. These stages are characterized by a reawakening that gives rise to deep, untainted love for self and others, culminating in a life of union with God. The person who reaches stage six can easily say, with a heart freed from the pull of ego, “This is God’s trip. I’m just a passenger.”¹¹ In order to experience the dawn of the Life of Love, one must endure the Journey Inward, embracing the dark night of the soul.

A TRANSFORMATIVE DARKNESS

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.
This light guided me more surely than the light of noonday
To the place where he (well, I knew who!) was awaiting me—
A place where none appeared.
Oh, night that guided me, Oh, night more lovely than the dawn,
Oh, night that joined Beloved with lover, Lover transformed in the Beloved!¹²

In stanzas three through five of John of the Cross’s *Stanzas of the Soul*, he describes an experience of darkness in which God quietly unites those who love Him to Himself, though they cannot yet perceive it. Herein lies the transformative power of the dark night. In his commentary on *Dark Night of the Soul*, John H. Coe explains that the dark night transforms spiritual immaturity into maturity. He writes that in the dark night, believers “become aware of how little they really love God, how little joy they take in the spiritual disciplines. Yet they also perceive, with a kind of sadness, that the world and its pleasures cannot satisfy.”¹³ Before the dark night, “New Converts experience a new deep concern and love for God at the core of the person...however, converts or beginners often mistake this new love for characterological

¹¹ Janet O. Hagberg and Robert A. Guelich, *The Critical Journey*, 152.

¹² St. John of the Cross, *Dark Night of the Soul*, 1-2.

¹³ John H. Coe, “Musings on the Dark Night of the Soul: Insights from St. John of the Cross on a Developmental Spirituality,” *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 28, no. 4 (2000): 302.

change. They do not yet know as they will in the dark night just how much they are the same as before.”¹⁴

Coe argues that a person’s love of God prior to the dark night is often deeply intertwined with spiritual pleasure. He highlights John of the Cross’s analogy that God nurses spiritual infants with the bottle of spiritual pleasure in order to wean them away from sinful attachments. Yet in order to mature them, God eventually removes the bottle so they may learn to love Him for love’s sake rather than for the pleasure He provides.¹⁵ Thus, in the dark night, the spiritual disciplines often lose their pleasure and become a mirror, revealing the believer’s own inner darkness. This experience of encountering the mirror of spiritual disciplines brings a person face-to-face with themselves. John of the Cross highlights specific aspects of the self-life that a person comes into contact with in the dark night of the soul: pride, avarice, lust, wrath, spiritual gluttony, spiritual envy, and sloth. Upon coming face-to-face with the seven deadly sins hidden beneath the pious self, a person is typically shocked, mortified, and ashamed. God has stripped them naked, but not without cause. Those who stand naked before God, stripped of their pious garments, find that in their defenselessness and vulnerability, they can sense God’s presence and love in a new way.¹⁶ The seeming abandonment of the dark night leads to the happiest of repentances.

A HAPPY DARKNESS

Mirabai Starr, in the introduction to her translation of *The Dark Night of the Soul*, writes, “The dark night is about being fully present in the tender, wounded emptiness of our own souls. It’s about not turning away from the pain but learning how to rest in it. Rather than distracting ourselves from the simple darkness at our core, we sit with it, paying close attention and opening

¹⁴ John H. Coe, “Musings on the Dark Night of the Soul,” 297.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Janet O. Hagberg and Robert A. Guelich, *The Critical Journey*, 122.

our hearts to all that is left, which is love.”¹⁷ For this reason, John of the Cross expresses that the dark night is more desirable than dawn. Barbara Fox expands this insight, writing, “Through his own descent, he realized that surrendering to suffering could lead to a purging of attachments and an expansion of consciousness.”¹⁸ In this sense, the dark night is not only a process of loss, but also of deepened awareness and spiritual reorientation.

When the soul is freed from its attachment to the false self, it encounters God in what Meister Eckhart calls the “ground of being,” the deepest dimension of reality where God is known beyond image, concept, or performance.¹⁹ It is here, Eckhart suggests, that the soul discovers divine presence not as an external object, but as ultimate reality. This ground of being becomes the site of transformative union. Gerald May, in *The Dark Night of the Soul: A Psychiatrist Explores the Connection Between Darkness and Spiritual Growth*, similarly observes that for John of the Cross, spiritual growth is not primarily about “getting closer” to God in spatial or emotional terms, but about awakening to what is already present. He writes that the journey is “a journey of consciousness, a journey of realization that at a person’s core is wholeness.”²⁰ Peter Rollins, in *How Not to Speak of God*, describes this same dynamic as an encounter in which the self is grasped by that which exceeds it from within—a presence that cannot be fully perceived or controlled.²¹ In this sense, the person who journeys through divine darkness does not discover something new, but awakens to the light of the divine within them.

¹⁷ Mirabai Starr, introduction to *Dark Night of the Soul*, by Saint John of the Cross, trans. Mirabai Starr (New York: Riverhead Books, 2002), 23.

¹⁸ Barbara F. Fox, *The Dark Night of the Soul: Conscious Suffering, Meaning, and Transformation* (PhD diss., Pacifica Graduate Institute, 2014), 9.

¹⁹ Meister Eckhart, *The Complete Mystical Works of Meister Eckhart*, trans. and ed. Maurice O’C. Walshe, foreword by Bernard McGinn (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 2009), 42.

²⁰ Gerald G. May, *The Dark Night of the Soul: A Psychiatrist Explores the Connection Between Darkness and Spiritual Growth* (New York: HarperCollins, 2004), 47.

²¹ Peter Rollins, *How (Not) to Speak of God* (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2006), 17.

They emerge from their dark night transformed, carrying a joy, peace, and settledness found deep within them.

REIMAGINING WESTERN FORMATION

I consider it a great tragedy that I did not encounter the concept of the dark night of the soul in the spiritual community in which I was raised, nor in my undergraduate seminary training. Yet, in light of the patterns described in *The Critical Journey*, I am not entirely surprised. Many churches in the West are structured to sustain believers within the Productive Life, but lack the theological and pastoral frameworks necessary to guide them through the Journey Inward. The Western church has much to learn from its predecessors.

Mystical tradition offers a radically different vision of spiritual maturity than the one often presented in contemporary Western Christianity. John of the Cross, among others, teaches that spiritual maturity is not measured by emotional intensity, theological certainty, or ministerial productivity, but by love. The dark night strips away every lesser attachment until the soul can finally say, with honesty, that it desires God for God's sake alone. Thomas Merton writes in *No Man is an Island*: "God who is everywhere, never leaves us. Yet He seems sometimes to be present, sometimes absent. If we do not know Him well, we do not realize that He may be more present to us when He is absent than when He is present."²² Perhaps this is why the night is "more lovely than the dawn."²³ The darkness reveals what the false self could never comprehend: beneath all striving, beneath all fear, beneath every illusion of control, God has been present all along, drawing the soul from selfish love into a love worthy of Him.

²² John H. Coe, "Musings on the Dark Night of the Soul," 293.

²³ St. John of the Cross, *Dark Night of the Soul*, 2.

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