

John of the Cross and the Dark Night of the Soul – A Contemporary Interpretation

Some Necessary Focusing

When John of the Cross speaks of the dark night of the soul, he is speaking of a purifying passage that an individual undergoes which transforms one kind of life into another. Simply put, natural life becomes eschatological life, earthly life becomes eternal life, and life which draws its support from natural gratification becomes life that draws its support from the motivation of Christ. In metaphorical terms, what happens in a dark night of the soul is that the grain of wheat falls in the ground and dies so that it can give birth to new life. 1

Almost universally, this transformation, as articulated by John, is understood as something that pertains mostly to prayer. Rarely is it understood as something that has to do with our entire lives. However, what John describes in his concept of the dark night of the soul is really the paschal mystery, the movement through death to new life, the movement from Good Friday to Easter Sunday. This movement has to do with the transformation of our whole lives. Thus, John's outline can serve as a paradigm of paschal transformation. The dark night of the soul traces the pattern that love, service, and prayer must pass through to be transformed to new and eternal life.

Two common misunderstandings of John must first be dispelled before this becomes clear:

First, all too common is the idea that John was a spiritual masochist, unhealthily fixed upon suffering and the cross, preferring Good Friday to Easter Sunday. This is false. John was a natural mystic and, as such, was by temperament very single-minded (not unlike great artists and great writers who are, too, in a similar fashion focused in a way that can to an outsider appear obsessive). This single-mindedness made him impatient for the unity and consummation promised in the kingdom and impatient with everything that delays this. Hence it is understandable that he will zero-in on the mystery of how suffering and dying bring forth eternal life. He knows that Resurrection comes after suffering and death and, since he is impatient for Easter Sunday, his focus is on Good Friday.

Second, common too is the conception that John's spirituality, since it outlines the dynamics of transformation primarily by tracing out the inner dynamics of prayer, is narrow, privatized, and elitist; at best, of use and interest to monks and nuns and other such contemplatives. John speaks explicitly of the transformation of our lives through prayer (and much less directly of the transformation of our love relationships and our lives of service) and he sees the end of the process of transformation primarily as union with God (and not so much union within human community and the cosmos). The elements of community, justice, and ecology can appear to be weak in his system.

But this merits a closer look: When his system is dissected more closely, as this article will attempt to do, the dynamics for transformation which he outlines for prayer will be shown to

work identically in our love relationships and in our lives of service. John wrote his commentaries primarily with professional contemplatives in mind, people whose primary "job" it was to pray and whose primary relationship was a vertical one with God. His historical audience were contemplative nuns, whose primary duty of state (moral and practical responsibility) was formal prayer. But John submits that inside the proper evolution of prayer there will also take place a transformation in one's entire life. John knew his audience, professional contemplatives, and wrote accordingly. Had he been writing to another audience, one whose primary duty of state would have been to relate in the world, raise children, and work for justice, he would have used a different language, without, I believe, changing in any way the principles of transformation that he enunciates.

What he articulates in his concept of the dark night of the soul are the inner dynamics of paschal transformation, dynamics that apply in identical ways to the growth and transformation of our prayer, our love lives, and our lives of service in the world. His idea is that if you undergo a true dark night in any one of these, you will, in a manner of speaking, pull the others along with you. Thus, if one undergoes a true transformation in her life of prayer, her life of love and service will be similarly transformed. Conversely, to undergo a true transformation in one's love life will bring with it a true transformation of one's prayer life and life of service as well. The dynamics are the same. The paradigm is the same. A dark night is about the transformation of prayer, love, and service to others, albeit John articulates it explicitly primarily as it pertains to prayer. 2

As well, the goal that is achieved at the end of a dark night puts one into deeper union with God, as well as with one's fellow human beings and with cosmic nature. What John traces out with his concept of the dark night of the soul is a paradigm for paschal transformation vis-a-vis all aspects of our lives and is a pattern to achieve unity with God, others, and nature itself.

John's paradigm for transformation: Its stages

John's Paradigm for transformation – A Synthetic Outline

In John's view, there are *six* stages one passes through in the paschal passage from death to life. These apply in an identical way to prayer, love, and service:

1. Pre-conversion – "Indifference"

In this stage our lives are characterized by four things: lack of focus, unhealthy indifference, unfocused erotic energy, and gratification as the primary motivation for our actions.

Prior to conversion, one goes through life with an unhealthy indifference. At this stage, one's feels erotic energy very strongly, but lacks clear direction. Love can be, and often is, fairly promiscuous. One loves what he or she is attracted to at the moment, especially what brings pleasure. Choices and commitments are made, ultimately, on the basis of what gratifies the self. In this stage, there is no true commitment, no true virtue, and no real giving of the self to anything beyond oneself. However altruistically disguised an action may look, in the end, one is

still "doing one's own thing". Narcissism, egoism, and the idiosyncratic preference lie at the basis of every moral action. 3

At this stage, no genuine prayer, love, or service of others is manifest, even though the person may be under the illusion that he or she is genuinely praying or loving.

2. *Conversion – “Falling in love”*

The famed novelist, Iris Murdoch, affirmed that the world can change in 15 seconds because one can fall in love in 15 seconds. The novelist, Morris West, submits that all conversion begins with the act of falling in love. Both are right.

Indifference is overcome by falling in love and, with that, immediately our lives change. Three things then characterize our life: focus, the loss of indifference, and a new energy which fuels our motivation so that we can now act for reasons beyond our own gratification.

Conversion begins with falling in love, with either a person, God, or with some principle, ideal, or ideology. And with that "falling in love" comes the immediate loss of indifference. There is now clear focus. In fact, very often one becomes obsessed with what one loves to the point of losing one's freedom. This brings with it, at one level at least, a new motivation. There is now a movement beyond the pleasure-principle in its more adolescent form. At one level, in so far as our actions now pertain to the person or object loved, we can become quite self-sacrificing, even to the point of giving up our life for the beloved. In this is the initial act of conversion.

This stage, for John, constitutes the “active night of the senses”.

3. *First Fervor – “The Honeymoon”*

Following this initial moment of conversion, the moment of falling in love, almost invariably a person goes through a season characterized by something John calls *first fervor*.

In first fervor, one's life is coloured by six things: high levels of feeling and passion; the desire for greatness and uniqueness; excess in the area that pertains to one's love; endless energy, especially in the areas that pertain to one's love; public display to the world regarding one's love; and discursive abilities towards and regarding one's love.

In brief, during this period the person acts as someone acts when on a romantic honeymoon. One feels a passion that relativizes all other loves, past and present; one has the sense that this love is the most unique, poetic, and special love that has ever occurred in history; there is the constant tendency to excess (one cannot get enough of the beloved, nothing is too much); the feeling of love is a great energizer and long hours and excessive demands appear as nothing; there is a great desire for public display (to let the world know that one has found this love); and there is the constant desire to talk to the loved one or, barring that, to talk to others about the loved one.

For John, this is the full bloom of the “active night of the senses”.

4. *The Waning of Fervor – “The death of the honeymoon”*

Given sufficient time, all honeymoons die and all fervor wanes. With this "death", John tells us, one's life, especially as it relates to its beloved (but also in general) is then characterized by five things: disillusionment, the loss of passion and consolation; boredom; the loss of the desire to talk to and about the loved one; and (if one is being faithful) a growing solicitousness about the loved one.

That all honeymoons eventually end is a fact of experience and experience also teaches what kind of feelings will then creep into our lives. When the initial fervor in love dies, it is followed by disillusionment, a loss of passion, and a certain boredom with the one who formerly seemed the answer to one's every restless desire. With that comes a certain reticence vis-a-vis talking to or about the loved one. All of this can, and often times does, appear very confusing to the person. There is a certain disappointment, a feeling of having lost something important, coupled, almost always, with the desire to do things that can restore the fervor of the honeymoon.

And honeymoons end for various reasons: In some cases, honeymoons end because of infidelity and loss of interest, a person falls in love with someone else or simply loses interest in the one he or she formerly loved so passionately. When a honeymoon dies because of infidelity or laziness, this will produce virtually the identical symptoms that mark a genuine dark night of the soul, but they are not the same thing. For John, infidelity produces psychological depression and while some of the symptoms can look identical to what is manifest in a genuine dark night of the soul, the meaning of the two modalities of darkness are very different. When it is a case of infidelity of some sort, it is evident that this is not a genuine dark night because, then, an important characteristic that characterizes a genuine dark night of the soul will not be there, namely, a growing solicitousness (healthy anxiety) about the beloved. Instead the focus of the person who is experiencing the disillusionment, boredom, loss of passion, and loss of the discursive ability, will be more narcissistic. In such a case, the honeymoon died, not because paschal transformation was taking place, but because one has begun to backtrack on one's conversion. 4

However, in John's view, even if one remains faithful, the honeymoon will end in any case. All initial fervor eventually dies and disillusionment, loss of passion, boredom, and the loss of discursiveness towards and about one's beloved replace the passion of the honeymoon. Why?

John puts this anthropomorphically, God actively ends the honeymoon. 5 God "dries up the fervor" and God does this not because God is masochistic or unwilling to let us live in pleasure for long. Rather God ends the honeymoon because, up to this point, the one in love has not really been in love with what he perceives as his beloved (God, another person, the poor, some moral principle). Up to this point, he has been in love with the experience itself, the experience of being in love, of praying, of serving the poor. The honeymoon ends so that he can come face-to-face with the person behind the experience of prayer, love, or service. Only after a honeymoon ends does one find out whether or not he is really interested in somebody else (God, another person, the poor) or whether he is mostly interested in how that person makes him feel.

In this waning of fervor, the “passive night of the senses” in John's terminology, one is given the chance to begin to actually see and relate to his loved one, beyond the experience that love itself has generated. In the waning of fervor, one finds out whether he is actually interested in God, or only in the experience of praying; whether he is actually interested in a certain person, or only in the experience of being in love; and whether he is interested in serving the poor or whether he is only interested in the feeling he gets in being involved with the poor. Hopefully the illustrations, given in the next section, will help make this clear.

5. *Proficiency – “The growth of easefulness”*

In John's view, the movement from stage to stage within this paschal process is an organic one. Growth naturally leads to the next phase of life: Falling in love leads to a honeymoon, which leads to a deep bonding, which leads beyond the experience of falling in love to the person behind it. Given all this, there is a certain inherent logic in movement to the next stage, *proficiency*.

This stage is characterized by three things which build upon each other: decision, dryness, and ease. Proficiency is entered into when one makes a decision for something for its own sake, as opposed to deciding for it for reasons of narcissism and self-interest. ⁶ When one makes a decision for prayer, love, or service that is not dictated by self-interest but by genuine concern for the other, that decision will almost invariably be followed by dryness, a stage within which one feels little or no emotional consolation in relationship to her loved person or cause. However, if one perseveres in fidelity to that person or cause, John submits that eventually one will begin to feel a certain ease and loving attentiveness in relationship to her beloved. In the presence of the beloved, one will feel not the passion of the honeymoon but a sense of being at home.

For John, this stage, proficiency, is already a high development within one's spiritual journey, one is already through a major phase (the “dark night of the senses”) in the journey through paschal transformation. There has already been a falling in the ground and dying in order to come to eternal life. At this stage, a major blockage had been removed. One can stay at this level for many years, or one can, from it, make the final and most dramatic leap of faith.

6. *The final stage of growth towards transformation – The “dark night of the spirit”*

This stage has two major phases, each with a different feeling, John calls these two phases *the dark night of the spirit* and the experience of *the living flame*. The former phase is characterized by a raging desolation and the latter by a joyous passion and intermittent ecstasies.

For John, relatively few persons, in fact, enter this final stage in this life and even fewer complete it. To have completed this phase is to have attained all the purification necessary for the life of heaven. Full sainthood, complete with some of the ecstasy of heaven, is what lies at the end of this final stage.

This final stage begins when, after a prolonged period of proficiency, a person makes a radical

decision to live by faith alone. In essence, a person decides to live and act according to the written dictates of the Christian creeds and scriptures, even when this goes radically against what her head and heart and friends suggest as being practical and spiritual. At this stage, a person truly radicalizes regarding her discipleship in Christ and nothing that she can "see, feel, think, touch, taste, or sense" alters what she sees as being asked of her through the written dictates of Christ and the church. In a manner of speaking, at this stage, one becomes a "fundamentalist" in the best sense of that term. The written word of scripture cuts real life, without the usual nuances that come from common sense and prudence. 7

Immediately after making such a decision, the easefulness of proficiency dissolves and one enters a period of fierce disconsolate dryness. For John, this is by far the most painful part of the whole journey of purification. In this period, the person is habitually disconsolate and in interior pain. This is the fullest experience of "Good Friday" given us in this life. Strangely though, not unlike Paul's experience in 2 Corinthians 4, even as one feels one's outer world completely crumpling one's inner world is growing ever more secure. For John, during this period, the type of ease that was felt during the time of proficiency dissolves into a raging desolation. However, at the deepest level of one's person, a new kind of security is being felt.

For John, this raging dryness can last for either a long or a short time. Perhaps, too, one dies during it. However, if persevered in (and, for John, nobody turns back once he or she enters this final stage) the dryness eventually gives way to a calm, a deep peacefulness and tranquillity, which brings with it the return of passion, an overwhelming sense of the goodness of all things and of their beauty in God, a deep empathic connection with all of reality, and (for some) intermittent ecstasies. This is Easter Sunday. At this stage, the resurrection has taken place (save one has not yet physically died).

These, for John of the Cross, are the six stages of paschal transformation. They constitute a paradigm for how a grain of wheat falls in the ground and dies to come to new life. The dynamics inherent within this paradigm apply in the same way to the transformation of one's prayer life, love life, and one's life of service within the community.

Before, however, illustrating this through examples, it might be profitable, in the interests of pedagogy, to synthesize these stages succinctly in a brief chart:

A Chart of the Six Stages

1. Indifference – "Pre-Conversion"

Characteristics:

- Lack of focus.
- Unfocused erotic energies.
- Gratification as the principle of motivation.
- Unhealthy indifference.

2. Conversion – "Falling in love"

Characteristics:

- Focused erotic energies/often to point of obsession.
- Change in the pleasure principle as the principle of motivation.

-Loss of indifference.

3. First fervor – “The honeymoon”

Characteristics:

- High levels of feeling and passion/inflamed by love.
- Desire for greatness and uniqueness.
- Excessiveness in areas pertaining to the beloved.
- Endless energy.
- Public display.
- Discursive appetite and abilities towards and about the beloved.

4. The waning of fervor – “The death of the honeymoon”

Characteristics:

- Disillusionment.
- Loss of passion and consolation.
- Boredom.
- Loss of the discursive appetite and abilities towards and about the beloved.
- Growing solicitousness about the beloved.

5. Proficiency – “The growth of easefulness”

Characteristics:

- Decision for value.
- Followed by 2 phases:
 - Dryness.
 - Growing easefulness, a sense of comfortableness, a sense being at home
 - Some intermittent aridities, but habitual ease.

6. The final stage of growth toward transformation – “Dark Night of the Spirit”

Characteristics:

- Radical decision to live by faith alone.
- Followed by a raging desolation, but with a sense of security at one's deepest level.
- Eventual return to calm ... which brings with it the return of passion.
- An overwhelming sense of the goodness and beauty of all things,
- A deep empathic connection with all things.
- Intermittent ecstasies.

An illustration of these stages as they apply to transformation in love, prayer, and a life of service

1. Transformation through love

Since love is primary in everything, even in prayer and service, let us begin with an example of its transformation according to John's paradigm.

Imagine a young man named Joseph. He is 24 years of age, has just graduated from university and in terms of his love life, is in the stage of *pre-conversion*. Here's what he looks like:

He has a lot of burning erotic energy inside him, but, he lacks focus and commitment. He is unhealthily indifferent. He loves women, but is not committed to any one woman. In his relationships with women he's guided by the gratification principle; he is interested only to the extent that there is something in it for him. Moreover, at this stage, he even feels quite good about himself vis-a-vis his relationships with women. His promiscuity is, for him, not a moral issue.

One night at a party he meets a woman named Rachel. Reality can change in 15 seconds. Joseph falls in love. This is the moment of *conversion*. Immediately his indifference dies. His erotic energies focus sharply. He is no longer in love with women; now he is in love with Rachel and no longer wants freedom to play the field. Promiscuity no longer tempts him. Commitment to Rachel does. With this, comes a change in his motivation. He, who up until now had thought primarily of his own pleasure, now becomes (at least in relationship to Rachel) quite generous and able to renounce many of his own wants and pleasures for her sake.

Rachel also falls in love with him and they marry. For the first months they are caught up in *first fervor*. He feels for her a passion and an emotional bond that relativizes anything he has ever felt in relationship to anyone else. He fantasizes that their marriage will be a one-in-a-million, the most unique and deepest love two people have ever shared. Their love energizes him and he is prone to excess in it. Also, at this stage, it is important to him to display in public that he loves Rachel. They hold hands in public and through that and other gestures continually let the outside world know that they are in love. Very importantly, during this time, he has both the appetite for and the ability to talk to Rachel quite easily and when he is not talking to her he is very prone to be talking about her. He is infatuated and obsessed in a way that makes the indifferent Joseph of just a few months ago seem an entirely different person. Naively he feels that their love will continue like this forever.

But it does not. Like all honeymoons, eventually the emotional magic is over. Imperceptibly (though in some cases this can also happen quite dramatically) the fervor lessens and, at a point, he becomes disillusioned with Rachel. The disillusionment is not because he no longer sees her as a good person, but more because he begins to see her as just a person. Disillusion is, in the end, a good thing since it means the "breaking of an illusion" and the break-through of reality. After living with Rachel for a time he comes to the realization that, despite her goodness and beauty, she is just one person, one woman and not all of femininity incarnate. In his illusion of her, she was a God/dess, femininity incarnate, and, in that state, enough to fully appease his heart. She took away his loneliness. She was eternal life. Now, he is lonely, despite Rachel. Moreover, beyond this disappointment, he recognizes for the first time Rachel's faults and blemishes. His disappointment, in the end, is both in that she is just a person and that she is not a perfect person.

That double disappointment, often felt more unconsciously than consciously, brings with it something he has never before experienced in relationship to her, boredom. At this point, he begins to lose some of the fiery passion and emotional feelings he had for Rachel. Upsetting for him too (and perhaps even more so for Rachel) is the fact that he no longer has the same ready inclination to talk with her. He finds himself often without a lot to say to her.

However even as the feelings of the honeymoon are dying, paradoxically, Joseph is beginning, in the real sense, to be more genuinely caring for and solicitous about Rachel. The joyous emotions of the honeymoon are mostly over, but, despite that, he is now more deeply bonded to her than he was when they were on the honeymoon.

What has happened here? Why did the honeymoon die?

For John of the Cross, what happens when honeymoons die (providing they die for the right reason and not because of infidelity or some kind of physical or emotional illness) is that "God takes away" 8 the partially illusionary feelings to bring us more face-to-face with the person who is behind those feelings." Joseph's honeymoon with Rachel had to die because, until now, he has not been in love with her. Rather he has been in love with the experience, in love with being in love, in love with how this made him feel, in love with femininity, in love with the goddess archetype Rachel is carrying; in short, he has been in love with many things, but not exactly in love with Rachel. Now, with the honeymoon feelings gone, after they have first served to bond him more deeply with Rachel, he is left, finally, looking at her as a real person. He must now decide whether or not he actually loves her beyond the honeymoon he has had with her.

This stage of transformation, John calls the "passive night of the senses". It is a very crucial and pivotal stage within relationships. Joseph can now turn back and leave Rachel and find someone else to fall in love with and have another honeymoon. Or, he can move to the next stage and become a *proficient* in love.

And, in this story, Joseph does this. He makes a decision for Rachel. He decides that, despite the disillusionment, he will continue in the marriage and continue to work with her in building a relationship together. 9 His decision is based upon two things, the bond that has grown up between them during the period of fervor and the new sense of purpose and value this has grown in him. He senses that to continue his marriage is the right thing, the higher thing to do. He continues in the marriage.

Initially, he experiences a certain dryness in their relationship. He comes home to Rachel, even though sometimes it would be more interesting to him to go elsewhere. He struggles in the area of discursive communication with her and they both see their honeymoon as a certain past golden age in their relationship. Occasionally, though unsuccessfully, they try to have a second honeymoon within which to re-capture the old emotional magic.

Eventually, the dryness becomes ease. Joseph still misses the magic of the honeymoon, but what he now experiences with Rachel is a deepening sense of being at home. The sense of being at home somehow melts into his idea of Rachel as his wife. There is still, intermittently, a feeling of restlessness and boredom, but habitually there is the sense of being comfortable, easeful, of being at home with Rachel.

Perhaps he and Rachel live out their days in this proficient state. One dies, or they both die and their children and their friends sense that theirs' was a good marriage.

Perhaps, however, at some point they, together, make a radical decision. After years of praying together, with their children long since grown and self-sufficient, they decide, like Abraham and Sarah who were asked by God to set out in their old age without knowing where they were going, to let the written word of God guide them beyond practical wisdom, they decide, in response to the beatitudes, to do something radical, like opening their home to street people, like becoming beggars in the style of Hindu Sannyasins, like moving together to live in a religious

community, or even to retire to separate monasteries. This, for them, would be entry into the “dark night of the spirit”.

If they did this, initially they would feel a raging dryness and sense of having fallen apart. The secure sense of being at home which characterized their last years together would break down and, with it, all their securities about each other would also seemingly break down. A painful period of emotional confusion and insecurity would ensue, even as neither would turn his or her back on this new radical road they have taken.

They would live through this dryness, the most bitter either has ever experienced. Imperceptibly this would eventually begin to change and one day instead of the dryness and insecurity between them they would begin to feel again a passion stronger than they felt all those years ago when they first fell in love. Moreover, along with these deep and quasi-ecstatic feelings they have for each other, they would begin to feel that same kind of feelings about the world and all other people as well. They would be constantly overwhelmed by the goodness and beauty not just of each other but of the whole world and everyone in it. The emotional magic of their first honey would pale in comparison to what they are feeling now.

Their love would now be resurrected. It has fallen in the ground, died, come through "Good Friday", and is now the kind of love that will last and grow forever. There will be no death for this second honeymoon. There will only be passion, joy, and ecstatic union of life forever.

2. *Transformation through prayer*

Just as love must go through a certain dark night of the soul in order to come to full maturity, so too must prayer.

Let us imagine a young woman named Mary. She is 24 years of age, has just graduated from college and in terms of her prayer life, is at the stage of *pre-conversion*. She does not have much interest in prayer, has no habit of prayer, and, most times, simply does not pray. In her prayer life and in her religious life in general, she lacks focus and is unhealthily indifferent. She is guided by the gratification principle in that she prays and/or attends religious services when in some way there is something in it for her.

One evening, out of boredom she tags along with friends to a charismatic prayer meeting. Reality can change in 15 seconds. She has a religious experience and is overcome with both the desire to pray and suddenly has a wonderful facility for it. She is baptized in the spirit and, among other things, begins to speak in tongues. She has fallen in love, converted.

Immediately, not unlike the person who has fallen in love with another person, she enters *first fervor*. In prayer, she has intense emotional feelings and is spontaneously moved to tears, to deep joy, to deep feelings of empathy for the world, and to an intense desire to serve God completely to the point of giving up her life. With that come fantasies of uniqueness and greatness. Mary believes that she can be a great saint, a mystic even. In her daydreams she will pray and serve God like very few others ever have. Like the young lover, she is full of endless energy and is

prone to excess in her prayer life. She goes to prayer meeting nearly every evening and stays there too long. It is also important for her, during this time, to publicly display her new love, to let the world know that she has found Christ. Her car is covered with stickers reading: *I have found Christ! Jesus Saves! Jesus loves you!* Around her neck she wears a cross and on her lapel is pinned a dove. A pagan world is invited constantly to see that she has found Christ. At this time, too, she has both the appetite for and the ability for discursive prayer. She can pray easily and endlessly. When she is not praying she is, much to the chagrin of her friends, forever talking about praying. And, like the young lover, she naively believes that things will carry on like this forever.

But they do not. Imperceptibly, or perhaps dramatically, things change. There comes a day when the fervor is gone. Her honeymoon is over. She enters the “passive night of the senses”, the *waning of fervor*. She begins to experience disillusionment, the loss of consolation, boredom, and the loss of both the appetite for and capacity for discursive prayer. She becomes disillusioned with her prayer life and, often times, with her prayer group as well. Her bible, within which during her time of fervor she underlined in bright colors nearly every line because it was so meaningful, now bores her. She finds herself unable to pray as she did before and feels no emotion in her prayer.

However, if these symptoms are not the result of infidelity or emotional or physical illness, then, even as her fervor is waning, she will experience, at a level beyond her emotions and her understanding, a desire for prayer and a healthy anxiety about God and the things of faith. She will no longer have the magical emotional feelings about prayer she once had, nor will she have the ability to pray discursively as she used to. But she will want to pray, even as she is unsure as to what that now means.

Again, it is useful to insert a question at this point. Why did her honeymoon in prayer die? Like the lover, her honeymoon had to die because, during her period of fervor, she was not so much interested in God as she was in the experience of praying and how that made her feel. For John, in the “passive night of the senses”, God dries up the experience to give the person a chance to meet face-to-face the person behind that experience. God dried up her experience of prayer to give her the opportunity, after the honeymoon had first done its work of bonding her to God more deeply, of being interested in God and not just in the experience of praying.

Paradoxically Mary is now actually interested in God. Although she is somewhat confused and disappointed about the death of her fervor, she now decides that she will pray not because it feels good but because it is right. She makes a decision for prayer and, with that, enters *proficiency*.

Initially she experiences mostly dryness in her prayer. Unable to pray as she formerly did, she spends her prayer time just sitting quietly. Slowly the dryness gives way to a certain comfortableness. Her prayer time is not an exciting time, but it is a good time, an easeful time, a time when she feels centered, at home. She still is troubled by the aridity of her prayer, but mostly she experiences ease and a sense of being at home.

This can continue for a short time or a long time. Perhaps she dies during the months or years of

proficiency. If she does die, she will die, in John of the Cross' eyes, quite advanced, but not fully transformed, in the spiritual life. However, to take this illustration further, let us suppose that she does not die during this stage and, after some time in it, she senses inchoately that God is now asking something more radical of her. Like Abraham, she senses that God is now calling her to set out "without knowing where she is going".

She realizes that, until now, she has been partially rationalizing and not giving herself over fully to the demands of the Sermon on the Mount. She makes the decision that from now on she will no longer use her practical vision and the prudent counsel of her family and friends to smooth away the sharp edges of the demands of the Sermon on the Mount. She decides to live her life rather "fundamentalistically" in the light of those demands. She now enters the "dark night of the spirit".

What this means practically can vary from case to case. Perhaps she runs off and joins Mother Theresa's nuns, or becomes a Cistercian nun, or becomes a Christian Sannyasin, or she gives away all her money and possessions and lives off the charity of others. Like the couple, Joseph and Rachel we spoke of earlier, entry into the "dark night of the spirit" can take many practical forms. Whatever its specific form, it takes place when, after a prolonged time of preparation, a person uses the written word of God to actually guide him or her in life, beyond the dictates of common sense, practical wisdom, and the measured advice of those biblical commentators and spiritual directors who are unfamiliar with this final phase of paschal transformation.

Mary makes this radical leap of faith. Her family and friends are upset with her. They worry about her. But this is not her greatest pain and insecurity. Rather, almost immediately upon making this decision, she herself is thrown into raging desolation. She feels disconsolate and feels that God has let her down. At times she has severe faith doubts and begins to wonder whether God in fact exists. The habitual ease and sense of being at home, which she had felt in prayer, now disappears. She feels lost, beyond any hope that anyone can offer her. That is why she is not interested in the advice of concerned family and friends who suggest that what she should do to regain her "old self" and go back on her radical decision and live a normal life. At this stage, Mary is no longer interested in a normal life so nothing turns her back. She stays with the pain and confusion, knowing that, as the author of Lamentations says, there are times when one can only put one's mouth in the dust and wait! 10

She waits and one day it gets better. One day (and John says we cannot predict whether it will take a long time or a short time) there is in Mary not dryness, but passionate fervor, a fervor deeper than what she felt all those years ago at that prayer meeting where she had her religious conversion. Passionate fervor now begins to stir habitually inside of her. The fervor is so intense that, intermittently, it is ecstatic. In it, she experiences an overwhelming sense of the reality and graciousness of God, as well as a concomitant sense of the overwhelming goodness and beauty of all of creation. She has trouble containing her sense of this goodness and finds herself, occasionally, "standing outside of herself", in ek-stasis.

Mary's prayer life has now undergone the full dark night of the soul. The seed which was there at her initial conversion has fallen in the ground and died and brought forth eternal life. The

feelings she now has will never die. She has moved beyond being interested in herself and in the experience of prayer to being interested in God. Good Friday is over. She is now living Easter Sunday.

3. *Transformation through a the service of others*

The dynamics which mark the transformation of love and prayer are paralleled in the transformation of service to others. Let me illustrate this with a real-life example (stylized a bit to protect the person whose story it is):

A few years ago, I knew a young man who, upon graduating from university, had very little, if any, interest in social justice and the poor. He was interested in his own career, his own social circle, and in sex, travel, and the enjoyment of his youth. As a graduation gift, his parents gave him several thousand dollars which he was using to go on a six-month tour with some young friends. Their tour was eventually to take them to South America where their chief interest was not the poor but the beaches and the good life. However, as C.S. Lewis once said, conversion can be most surprising. While in South America he broke his tour with his friends for one week to visit with a Canadian missionary whose mother was a neighbour to his family back home. While staying for a week at this mission, he met the poor and, like the person who falls in love or the person who has a religious experience at a prayer meeting, his life radically changed. He saw the poor and something inside of him shifted irrevocably. In that moment he lost his indifference and moved beyond the pleasure principle as his simple motivation for acting. He *converted*.

Like the young man in love and like the woman at the prayer meeting, with that conversion came *first fervor*. He broke with his friends and returned home. Once there, rather than pick up what would have been his career, teaching, he began instead to work at the local food bank, lived on virtually nothing, and got involved with numerous groups who are active in social justice activities. And he had a honeymoon of fervor. As he worked with and for the poor, he was inflamed with feelings about them. He had too, like the lover and the religious neophyte, fantasies of uniqueness and greatness. In his daydreams, he was the world's greatest social worker. Like his counterparts in love and prayer, he had too, at this stage, endless energy and was prone to excess. He worked endless hours for the poor and still spent many of his evenings at meetings discussing projects, protests, and political programs. And, like the young lover and the religious novice, it was important to him at this time to make public display of his commitment. His car too was covered with stickers: "*Boycott Fossil Fuels*", "*Resist the USA in Central America*", "*Think globally, act locally!*" His designer clothes hung unworn in his closet while he wore only khakis and denims. At this time, parallel to what happens to those who have had a recent conversion in love or prayer; he had both the appetite and ability for a certain discursiveness. In his case, this took the form of an endless ability to talk to the poor and an equal ability to talk about them. At this time, too, he was under the naive impression that he would feel like that forever.

He did not. There came a time, a few years later, when the fervor was gone and the honeymoon over. Parallel to what happens when the first fervor of love and prayer die, he began to feel, in his relationship to the poor, disillusion, a loss of passion, boredom, and the loss of his former

discursive powers towards and for them. Now his words seemed, to him, to be empty and he drew little consolation in talking to the poor or in talking to others about them. He now preferred to say a lot less.

That is the stage my friend is in at present. However since, in his case, his commitment to the poor has been genuine, he is still deeply committed to the poor and genuinely solicitous for them, even in his lack of emotional consolation in serving them.

Again, an important question needs to be raised here: Why did his fervor die? Why did God dry up the experience?

Like the case of the lover and the woman in prayer, God took away all natural consolation in the experience so that this young man might be brought more face-to-face with what is behind the experience, the poor themselves. Until that stage, the *waning of fervor* (the “passive night of the senses”), he had not been in love with the poor, but in love with the experience of serving the poor and in love with how that made him feel.

I judge my friend to be, right now, in the stage of *proficiency*. He is still serving the poor, just as he did while in fervor. His decision to continue to serve is not based upon the hope that, some day, he will again regain his old fervor in serving the poor, but upon a real bond he has built up with them during his years of commitment to them. He serves them now because they are, in a real sense, his family. He loves them, not with passion of first fervor, but with the type of concern that one has for a family member. There is considerable emotional dryness in him, but, as time passes, there is too a growing sense of ease, comfortableness, he is at home with the poor.

I do not know how his story will end. Perhaps he will serve the poor in this way until he dies. If he does, he will die essentially unselfish, living out in a good fashion Christ's preferential option for the poor. Perhaps however, given a special grace, he will, at some point, make a yet more radical option for the poor and, through that, enter into the final stage of transformation, the “dark night of the spirit.”

Like his counterpart in love and prayer, he would enter this final stage on the basis of the written word of scripture. He would make a choice to serve the poor in a way that goes beyond what practical wisdom and a prudent commitment demand. What specific form that might take can vary: perhaps he will go to a poor country and work there in the style of Mother Theresa; perhaps he will live and work in a hospice for cancer or AIDS victims; or perhaps he will join some group where he can spend the rest of his life living with handicapped adults.

Whatever he does, initially, that choice will bring him raging desolation and much disorientation. Whatever psychological securities he might have built up during his years of service with and to the poor will break down. He will spend some time, either a long time or a short time, unable to give himself any practical hope. The only reassurance and hope he will have will come to him through raw faith in the word of God and the Eucharist. He will be disconsolate, but he will not turn back. A normal life will no longer interest him.

Eventually a new day will dawn one day his passion will return. He will be inflamed with a love for the poor that dwarfs anything he felt all those years ago when he first converted. With that will come an overwhelming sense of the goodness and beauty, not just of the poor, but of all creation. He will live in a state of habitual joy and will, at moments, be unable to contain the sense of how good and beautiful it all is. He will have intermittent ecstasies and the will be inflamed with a joy that no one will ever take away from him.

Some concluding notes

These examples illustrate the process of transformation that John of the Cross calls the dark night of the soul. We see, through these examples, that although John outlined the stages of this transformation primarily by articulating the dynamic movement inherent within prayer, these dynamics have a parallel within love and service.

Human life and every dimension within it must, to come to eternal life, fall in the ground and die in order to rise again. Christ illustrated this through his journey through Good Friday to Easter Sunday. What John of the Cross outlines, both descriptively and prescriptively, in his metaphor of the dark night of the soul is how this passage takes place concretely within our lives (beyond its more literal expression in our actual physical death).

The dark night of the soul is a metaphor for paschal transformation. For purposes of clarity and simplicity, this essay has broken it into clear stages with the hope that the attempt at clarity would not do too much violence to the complexity and subtlety of John's own position and that it would serve, so to speak, as a work of "translation" in making this most valuable concept of John of the Cross more accessible to a larger number of people.

Endnotes

1. John expounds this in detail in five major works: *The Ascent of Mount Carmel, Books 1, 2, 3*; and *The Dark Night, Books 1 & 2*. However, to trace out more precisely how we move from stage to stage in the spiritual journey, the books need to be read in this order: i) *The Ascent of Mount Carmel, Book 1* (for the "active dark night of the senses"); ii) *The Dark Night, Book 1* (for the "passive dark night of the senses") iii) *The Dark Night, Book II, Chapters 1-5* (for the stage of "proficiency"; iv) *The Ascent of Mount Carmel, Books 2 & 3* (for the "active dark night of the spirit"); v) *The Dark Night, Book 2* (for the "passive dark night of the spirit". John gives an overall summary of the process in each of his two other major books: *The Living Flame of Love* and *The Spiritual Canticle*. See: *The Collected Works of Saint John of the Cross*, translated by Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez, ICS Publications, Washington, D.C. c1991.
2. Hans Urs von Balthasar suggests the same thing when in writing about the importance of beauty he submits that someone who denigrates beauty will inevitably be unable to pray. Commenting on how the transcendental properties of being (oneness, truth, goodness, and beauty) are inextricably interrelated, he writes: "Our situation today shows that beauty demands for itself at least as much courage and decision as to truth and goodness, and she will not allow herself to be separated and banned from her two sisters without taking them along with herself in an act of mysterious vengeance. We can be sure that whoever sneers at her name, as if she were an ornament of bourgeois past, whether he admits it or not, can no longer pray and soon will no longer be able to love." Quoted in *America*, fall, 2018, p. 19.

3. This stage is astutely analysed by Robert Bellah, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*, Berkeley, California, University of California Press, c1985.
4. John, in a passage which is perhaps singularly the most utilized passage in all his writings, *The Dark Night of the Soul, Book I, Chapter 9*, outlines some very useful criteria to discern a true dark night from a false one. This chapter is a must for all spiritual directors. Some key commentators on these criteria for discernment in John of the Cross include Gerald May, *The Dark Night of the Soul, A Psychiatrist Explores the Connection Between Darkness and Spiritual Growth*, San Francisco, HarperCollins, 2024; and Kevin Culligan, *John of the Cross and Spiritual Direction*, Dublin, Carmelite Center for Spirituality, 1983; and Kevin Culligan, article, *The Distinction between the Dark Night and Clinical Depression*, in, *Carmelite Prayer: A Tradition for the 21st Century*, edited by Keith Egan, New Jersey, Paulist Press, c2003.
5. In both scripture and in writers like John of the Cross you will see a language which, if not properly understood, can give the impression that God actively sends certain “misfortunes” to teach us a lesson, i.e., that certain disasters like flood, plagues, illnesses, and losses in war are depicted as being actively sent by God to punish us or teach us something. Or like some fundamentalists’ view that God send us AIDS to punish us for sexual promiscuity. But this language is not to be taken literally. Biblical authors and writers like John of the Cross are making the point, and that point only, that God speaks to us through these events – and not that God causes these events. So these texts, not least in John of the Cross, are to be read only in the sense that God speaks to us through the desolation of the dark night, not that God actively causes it.
6. For John of the Cross, this constitutes the line between maturity and immaturity. For John, we are mature to the degree that the decisions we make are motivated by concern for others and we are immature to the degree that our decisions are made on the basis of what’s in it for us. In the “active night of the senses”, we fall into love; but that isn’t really a moral choice we make, we “fall into it”, even though it is in itself a movement towards value and morality. When disillusionment sets in during the “passive night of the senses” we have to choose love. *Love becomes a decision*. This is then a real moral choice that exhibits maturity.
7. How does one actively enter the “dark night of the spirit”? See: *Ascent of Mount Carmel, Book II: Chapter 4* – the praxis needed to enter the night; *Chapter 5* – the finality of this night; *Chapter 6* – the praxis for entering this night continued; and *Chapter 7* – Christ as a paradigm, an illustration of passing through this night.
8. See footnote 5.
9. See footnote 6.
10. Lamentations 3, 29.

