

**Dwelling in the Saturday Tomb:
Stepping Stones between
Forsaken Friday & Resurrected Sunday**



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SD: What's on your mind today, Heather

H: I'm confused about one of my colleagues. Joe and I have been working on a project together and we've done a lot of talking. He recently shared that he has never 'experienced' God. I couldn't understand that ...

SD: What was it you found hard to relate to?

H: Well, he said he had no sense of God at all, and he finds praying and reading scripture does nothing for him ... he basically undermined everything that is precious to me about God.

SD: What might that mean for you?

H: I thought that my experience of God was at least similar to others', but here he's saying he's never experienced God like that. It begs the question as to why he's a missionary, what's his motivation, or where's his calling?

SD: What do you think?

H: Outwardly I would say his ministry is exemplary. He ministers to all and sundry with compassion, and I would never have known that he wasn't a typical Christian! I'm not doubting his faith, I see it every day. But from what he says it doesn't seem to me to be connected to God. Joe says he listens to others speaking about God, and he feels abandoned by God, forgotten. That hasn't stopped him becoming a missionary and being effective though. I can't quite connect the dots here ...

SD: How about if we don't try to answer this now, but wait on God to reveal himself through this to you. I have some articles and books that you can borrow, and as you read these alongside scripture, ask God to lead you toward a greater understanding of Him, about this.¹

Time passes and I am a nascent Spiritual Director. I am intrigued as we examine the Dark Night of the Soul. I am both attracted to, and repelled by this experience, so I spend time digging into this topic.² I am challenged by this sentence: *'The sad truth is that many priests, ministers and spiritual leaders have not been led through this (the wall) themselves ... So many of those to whom we often look most naturally for help are inadequate guides for this part of the journey ...'*³

How am I going to be an 'adequate' guide if one of my directees is going through a Dark Night? Personally, I experience life through images, words and feelings, and much of

¹ The essence of Joe's story is real, but includes some creative licence. Spiritual Direction was not widely known in the 1980s, nor would it have been likely on the mission field at that time.

² Mother Teresa, Come be my Light; The Love that made Saint Teresa; Door Through Darkness - John of the Cross; The Intimate Merton; The Furious Longing of God; The Dark Night of the Soul; Care of Mind, Care of Spirit; When the Well Runs Dry; Seeking the God Beyond; Psalms of Lament; The Critical Journey – the Stages in the Life of Faith; SGM-SIP articles on Dark Night; articles on internet; Mother Teresa film Vimeo ...

³ Hagberg, Janet O & Guelich, Robert A. *The Critical Journey, Stages in the Life of Faith*, (Wisconsin, Sheffield Publishing Company, 2005) P 94, and Chapter 6, 'The Journey Inwards - Apparent Loss of Faith

Spiritual Direction communicates through these mediums. What is left then, that can help a directee who does not 'experience' God in the usual ways, if at all? How can the spiritual director discern whether this is a dark night, or not? It may help to look at gradations of darker experiences where it might *seem* that God is absent.

A Cove Experience: Life has washed me ashore into an isolated place. I feel completely alone and wrung out like a rag. But ... there is a horizon, and there is beauty with an invitation to explore; there is food and shelter.

A Cave Experience: Life seems to draw me deeper into an ever-darkening cave, where it is difficult to see what's right in front of me, let alone what lies ahead. There is an eventual end to the cave and I can turn and see the point of light beckoning me. I have some matches with me.

A Spelunking Experience: Life is crushing me, the endless tunnels without a map, cold, wet and dark, make no sense. I can't turn around; I have no idea what's ahead and everything is crushing me from above and below.

A Tomb Experience: Alone in a dark enclosed space, dry and dead bones for company (no sense of resurrection here), no fresh air to breathe, no horizons to gaze upon, no awareness of anything or anyone, let alone God. Where is God? Why am I here, abandoned?

I have gone through several Cove and Cave experiences, and I can name a couple of what felt like Spelunking experiences. But I have never had to dwell in a tomb, I can only imagine how devastating and potentially soul destroying this could be.

Like me, the Spiritual Director is likely to have enough appreciation of the first 3 mentioned above to identify what's happening for a directee, and help them travel through these experiences. This may include illness and depression and all that comes with such inner conflict, and the person may require other professional intervention, including medication, counselling and psychological help.

But what are the tools for the Tomb? How can I relate to someone who is 'imagineless' – '*can't see God or beauty in everything like you do*'; or has only negative words of absence – '*abandoned, forgotten, alone, everything is dark*'; or can't express any feelings about a relationship with God – '*I don't feel God's love, I don't sense his presence.*'

Going back to Joe, *he knew God existed*; he was so convinced of this that he became a very effective missionary proclaiming God's love through word and deed – this was belief in action, an expression of his faith. Joe could still say that he loved God even when he had no awareness of God's love for him. It is not then that a person living the Dark Night of the Soul doesn't believe in God, or that he doesn't obey God. He probably does. Rather it's about the apparent lack of God's presence & love in his life experiences.

Most of us would probably describe ourselves as living in the immanent (known) presence of God – Emmanuel, God with us. The mystics likely describe themselves as moving more deeply into mystery, toward the transcendent (unknown) God. Is the dark night of the soul a transcendent experience, devoid of anything imminent? For Joe, the imminent was still present through his belief that God exists and his obedience to God's mandate – even when he didn't feel it. Maybe God's desire is that we live a balance of both.⁴

Mother Teresa of Calcutta reached a powerful balance of immanent and transcendent, although not through her own desire. God brought her into a Dark Night experience that caused her deep heartache. Ultimately however, Mother Teresa came to love the darkness and she became Christ's love to the poor and suffering in this world.

This woman fascinates me. She struggled internally with what it meant to feel abandoned by the One she loves, while outwardly she served faithfully in the name of Christ. What motivated and strengthened her?

Mother Teresa's call to ministry came early, and after her training she became a missionary nun in India, where she was a teacher. Then came a second call to leave the familiarity of her order to start a new work which was to focus fully on the poor. *'I tried to persuade our Lord that I would try to become a very fervent, holy Loreto nun ... but the answer came very clear again: "I want Indian Missionary Sisters of Charity – who would be my fire of love amongst the very poor – the sick – the dying – the little street children. The poor – I want you to bring them to me – and the Sisters that would offer their lives as victims of my love*

⁴ Williams, Janet P, *Seeking the God Beyond* (Eugene OR, Cascade Books, 2019) – a discussion of the Via Positiva & Negativa, Apophatic & Kapophatic experiences

– would bring these souls to me. You are I know the most incapable person, weak and sinful, but just because you are that I want to use you for my glory! Wilt thou refuse?’⁵

It took time for her superiors to grant permission, but for Mother Teresa there was no option to the question, ‘Wilt thou refuse?’⁶

Mother Teresa loved her Lord and experienced his love in return, until, just as this work began, she was drawn into a place she could never have imagined. ... *‘In the darkness ... Lord, my God, who am I that you should forsake me? The child of your love – and now become as most hated one ... I call, I cling, I want, and there is no one to answer ... Where I try to raise my thoughts to heaven, there is such convicting emptiness that those very thoughts return like sharp knives and hurt my very soul. Love – the word – it brings nothing ... the reality of darkness and coldness and emptiness is so great that nothing touches my soul.’⁷*

Apart from a short period in 1958, Mother Teresa dwelt the rest of her life in the place of seeming abandonment. She experienced the Suffering of the Cross, its salvation, freedom and relationship with Jesus through the Friday of Forsakenness. And in daily ministry, she was transformed by the Power and Life of Resurrection Sunday. **But Mother Teresa dwelt in the hiddenness of the Saturday Tomb.** There she searched for Christ’s love, and found only death, emptiness, loneliness; there she learned to identify with Christ in His Suffering and death, and thus was able to be his resurrection hands and feet. While this was the most difficult of trials, she died to self so that Christ could live through her.⁸ *‘Imprint on my soul and life the suffering of your heart. If my separation from you brings others to you ... I am willing with all my heart to suffer all that I suffer. Your happiness is all I want ...’⁹* During her

⁵ Kolodiejchuck, Brian, M.C. *Mother Teresa Come be my Light* (New York, Random House-Ebury Publishing, 2008) P 49

⁶ Mother Teresa experienced her ‘call within a call’ on 10th September 1946. From 1948 onwards, Teresa focused on ministering to the poor, and Missionaries of Charity received Vatican permission on 7th October 1950.

⁷ Scott, David *The Love That Made Saint Teresa*’ (Manchester NH, Sophia Institute Press, 2016) P 109-110

⁸ I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. (Galatians 2: 20)

⁹ Scott, David *The Love That Made Saint Teresa*’ (Manchester NH, Sophia Institute Press, 2016) P 112

lifetime, very few knew of her Dark Night of the Soul¹⁰ ... she embodied Christ's sufferings in such a way that they were transformed into the Light Day of the Soul.

I find myself asking, what sustained Mother Teresa in this dwelling place that was a tomb? Despite God's absence, is there solid ground that provided pathways into how to live each day? Most particularly what might I learn that could be helpful to a directee?

Following are five stepping stones that I perceive, although not named by her, granted Mother Teresa movement between her inner home and the outward place of service.

1. **The Calls:** (i) Gonxha Agnes Bojaxhiu was raised in a Godly family, and she recalled that at the age of 5 ½ when she first received Jesus, the love of souls was within.¹¹ She later told Malcolm Muggeridge, *'It was when I was 12 years old that I first knew I had a vocation to the poor ...'*¹² This became a key point of reference – Christ was her Cornerstone, this call was a vocation.

(ii) As noted earlier, Mother Teresa received a second calling which she dared not refuse. *'Years back ... I bound myself under pain of mortal sin not to refuse him anything. Since then I have kept this promise – and sometimes when darkness is very dark and I am on the verge of saying "No" to God the thought of that promise pulls me up.'*¹³

Determination to follow through on a promise, cost what it may, provides solidity in the darkness.

God's call to each of us will be different, but these calls can become reference points when things get tough. And while no promise should be broken, there are promises that are so important, they become stepping stones that support us in all of life's circumstances.¹⁴

¹⁰ Even Teresa's closest companions in the Missionaries of Charity were bewildered: *'She never made any reference to the darkness.'* And, *'In the second decade of her sense of abandonment, Teresa wrote ... "If I ever become a saint – I will surely be one of darkness. I will continually be absent from heaven ... to light the light of those in darkness on earth."* <https://www.franciscanmedia.org/franciscan-spirit-blog/mother-teresa-a-saint-who-conquered-darkness>

¹¹ Mother Teresa writes to her spiritual director, Archbishop Perier, Dec 18, 1960

¹² Muggeridge, Malcolm *Something Beautiful for God* (New York, Evanston, San Francisco, London: Harper & Row, 1972) p 18; pg 14 Mother Teresa, *Come be my Light*

¹³ Kolodiejchuck, Brian, M.C. *Mother Teresa Come be my Light* (New York, Random House-Ebury Publishing, 2008) P 210-211

¹⁴ *'From this time many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him. "You do not want to leave me too, do you?" Jesus asked the twelve. Simon Peter answered him, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God."* (John 6: 66-69)

2. **Conviction** is a firmly held belief, a principle that guides, a persuasion that is unshakeable.¹⁵ Mother Teresa's conviction became a stepping stone: *'... In spite of him not wanting me, not caring as if for me ... I have made that resolution, to be at his disposal. Let Him do with me whatever he wants. If my darkness is light to some soul – even if it is nothing to nobody – I am perfectly happy to be God's flower in the field.'*¹⁶ Resolute, convinced ... In the Saturday Tomb there is a place for conviction, despite feeling forsaken.

In our darkness, do we allow doubt to overwhelm our convictions about Father, Son & Spirit, truth, faith, the Word, Church? Our previous experience of God, our trust and hope in Him – is this enough? Maybe there is ample substance in our faith to provide strength, transforming darkness into light to others ... that is, conviction.

3. The stepping stone of **Commitment** is held in the crucible of conviction ... *'Today I feel a deep joy, that Jesus wants to go through me. More than ever I surrender myself to him, yes, more than ever I will be at his disposal.'*¹⁷ Mother Teresa felt joy, and expressed the love of Christ through her daily interactions with the poor. Each day she moved from the dwelling of darkness, to be the hands and feet of Christ.

Darkness and seeming forsakenness may become our personal experience, but active commitment provides purpose for the sufferer, brings structure to daily living, and conveys life and hope to others. The benefits are experienced by both those serving and those being served.

4. While pity passes by, **Compassion** wraps itself in love and moves into the heart of pain with and for others. Compassion is a weeping of the soul in the helplessness of people, and it is love with sleeves rolled up. Jesus demonstrated compassion for the sick, hungry, lost ... Paul exhorts us to clothe ourselves in compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience.¹⁸ Mother Teresa ministered daily with compassion as her benchmark. Her feet led to the most abandoned, her hands touched the forsaken, and

¹⁵ 'Of this Gospel I was anointed a herald and a teacher and an apostle. That is why I am suffering as I am. Yet I am not ashamed, because I know in whom I have believed, and am convinced he is able to guard what I have entrusted to him for that day.' (2 Timothy 1: 11-12)

¹⁶ Kolodiejchuck, Brian, M.C. *Mother Teresa Come be my Light* (New York, Random House-Ebury Publishing, 2008) P 210-212

¹⁷ Kolodiejchuck, Brian, M.C. *Mother Teresa Come be my Light* (New York, Random House-Ebury Publishing, 2008), P 214

¹⁸ 'Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience.' (Colossians 3:12)

her smile¹⁹ communicated hope and love. *‘Three days ago, we picked up two people eaten alive with worms. The agony of the Cross was on their faces. How terrible poverty is, if unloved. After we made them comfortable, you should have seen the change.’*²⁰

What, in the midst of darkness, does it mean for us to practice compassion? Where is the smile that makes a difference? Here there is an invitation to immerse ourselves in daily compassionate ministry, thus demonstrating Christ’s love.

5. **Communion:** Though Mother Teresa no longer experienced Jesus’ presence, she did everything she could to not miss Holy Communion. *‘Mother received communion daily with tremendous devotion ...’*²¹

The Eucharist is a sure sign of God’s mysterious presence even in darkness, and it is the invitation to remember, to be identified with Christ the Rock and Foundation stone. We look inside ourselves, and so, in faith, confess our sins and know forgiveness; by faith we look above and know the ascended Christ seated at the right hand of God and that he will come again; we look around and see our people, knowing at this time, in this place for these people, we can minister as his servants of the resurrection; despite not feeling the Spirit’s presence, by faith we minister in his power ... this is solid ground.

Conclusion: Call, Conviction, Commitment, Compassion & Communion – these are stepping stones that helped Mother Teresa to eventually love the darkness. *‘I have begun to love in my darkness, for I believe it is a part, a very small part, of Jesus’ darkness and pain on earth.’*²²

The solidity of these stepping stones developed over time even while Mother Teresa dwelt in the Saturday Tomb. In the darkness she increasingly identified with Christ and his suffering and so was able to be clothed in Christ’s compassion and minister His love to the poor, pain-racked people she came across every day.

¹⁹ *‘If you don’t go to the people with a cheerful face, you only increase their miseries and sorrows.’* (Mother Teresa, *Come Be My Light*, P 254)

²⁰ Kolodiejchuck, Brian, M.C. *Mother Teresa Come be my Light* (New York, Random House-Ebury Publishing, 2008) P 254

²¹ *Ibid* P 213

²² Scott, David, *The Love That Made Saint Teresa*, (Manchester, NH, Sophia Institute Press, 2016) P 112

How might her life example help determine how my directees (or I), survive and embrace the devastating place of abandonment? God is not present, apparently, so what can I take to Spiritual Direction to bring solace and aid to others in their Saturday Tomb?

I can affirm in my directee that what is happening is legitimate, it's okay. Mother Teresa's spiritual director, Father Neuner, wrote saying of her, *'There was no indication of serious failure on her part which could explain the spiritual dryness. It was simply the dark night of which all masters of spiritual life know. There is no human remedy against it. It can only be borne in the assurance of God's hidden presence and of the union with Jesus ... The sure sign of God's hidden presence in this darkness is the thirst for God, the craving for at least a ray of his light. No one can long for God unless God is present in his or her heart. The only response to this trial is the total surrender to God and the acceptance of the darkness in union with Jesus.'*²³

To highlight the affirmation, I would repeat as many times as necessary that my directee is not at fault; that he is living an experience that spiritual giants have lived before him; that the directee's hungering for God is a sure sign of God's presence, albeit hidden; and I would encourage him to find a way of surrender to God's darkness ... for even though it is dark, Christ the Light is still present. That is his promise to us, that God will never leave or forsake us.

While prayer and bible study seemed meaningless for Mother Teresa (and Joe), she did not give up on these main places of nurture and knowledge. Mother Teresa says that much of the time her only way of expressing prayer were two words, 'My God.' *'Even that sometimes doesn't come. Yet deep down somewhere in my heart that longing for God keeps breaking through the darkness. When outside in the work or meeting people, there is a presence of somebody living very close in very me ...'*²⁴

I would be encouraging the ongoing disciplines of prayer and bible study. I would introduce the breath prayer to my directee, to breathe in a title that relates to God, such as 'My God', and to breathe out a soul prayer, like 'I love you,' or 'Love me please.'

²³ Kolodiejchuck, Brian, M.C. *Mother Teresa Come be my Light* (New York, Random House-Ebury Publishing, 2008) pg 214

²⁴ Kolodiejchuck, Brian, M.C. *Mother Teresa Come be my Light* (New York, Random House-Ebury Publishing, 2008) pg 211

One of the spiritual direction keys is to visualise where you are and who might be with you. Despite the lack of sensing God in imaginative ways, it might still be a helpful exercise to use Lectio Divina with such passages as Moses' encounter with God while his face is in the cleft of the rock; or the Gospel passages where the tomb is found empty & the disciples thought Jesus was dead; or maybe Jesus' call to Lazarus, *'Lazarus, come out.'*²⁵ Maybe these images might bring to the surface some aspects not yet considered that may illuminate for the directee how to accept the darkness surrounding him.

Continuing with the imagination might be an invitation to redecorate the directee's spiritual dwelling place. If the dwelling place is the Saturday Tomb, where the directee feels alone, abandoned and forsaken, how and with what could the directee decorate the tomb? This does not mean a denial of the reality – it is a tomb after all – but it is the directee's dwelling place. What are some things that have significance for the directee that can be moved into the space? Maybe some candles, a painting on a wall, or some significant verses? Maybe 5 named stepping stones could be displayed prominently as reminders of movement to and fro? Maybe there is room for an altar, a kneeling pad, a Bible, a baptismal font and communion table? These are all symbols of worship and maybe they become a directee's living response to Psalm 22.

I would encourage my directee to write down his thoughts. Who knows, they may become prayers or poems, or even art work? A journal can trace moods and note changes in patterns, it can ask questions again and again, and a journal can become a lifeline.

Most importantly, I would walk alongside the directee to encourage his faith and trust in God, despite the pain of abandonment. It may help to remember, and maybe visualise, that Jesus lived in the Saturday Tomb, and not only lived there, but was active ... *'He descended into Death to destroy Death by death. This is what the church fathers described as the harrowing of Hades. On Holy Saturday Death dared to swallow God, but death cannot digest divinity.'*²⁶

²⁵ Exodus 33:22; John 20: 1-18; John 11: 38-44

²⁶ Zahnd, Brian, *The Unvarnished Jesus*, (Spello Press, 2019), pg 163

It appears that God's invitation to dwell in the Saturday Tomb, to experience the Dark Night of the Soul, is both distressing and challenging. It does well to remember that God does not ask anything of us where he is not already and always present, nor indeed what he has not experienced first.

So, back to Joe, if I were his Spiritual Director now, how might I encourage him?

J: I'm still struggling, still abandoned by God. But I've been reading the book you gave me, *Come Be My Light*, and Mother Teresa expresses just how I feel. There's quite a lot to absorb ...

H: How are you processing this?

J: Well, you know I've been journaling a long time now – that helps. I've noted some recurring thoughts, some key words. Can we work with them?

.....

J: You suggested I look for particular stepping stones through the book, and that's been helpful, although not helpful that they've not been named! I've begun to identify these in my life.

H: Would you like to share something about that?

J: Yeah, my call has become clearer as I've remembered the circumstances ... Actually, remembering those key moments in my life have strengthened my convictions, and even though I don't feel God, I am sure I know who I believe in ...

.....

J: I read Lamentations for the first time in my life! And I looked at those Psalms you mentioned. I even wrote my own Psalm of Lament as you recommended – do you want to hear it?

.....

H: How is the ground underneath you? Can you feel the stepping stones?

J: Yes and no. I keep doing the daily activities, but I don't seem to be growing in compassion.

H: Maybe we can talk about that?

.....

J: Last session, you took me through an imagined prayer, with me standing in the dark place, and learning to sense where the stepping stones are. I was amazed at how much more familiar they are. I've done what you suggested, and here's a drawing of what I was imagining ...

H: What stands out to you today? Is there movement?

J: Actually, can I add something to it?

.....

J: What if this never comes to an end, what if I'm always in this dark place?

H: What is it about Mother Teresa that she can say that she loves the darkness?

J: There lies the struggle ... what if I don't come to love the darkness? I still can't see Jesus, I still can't hear anything, what's the point?

H: It's a lovely day, let's take our coffee and sit in the garden awhile ... What do you notice about light and shadow?

J: They co-exist ... so even in the dark place, there is a co-existence with the light. And they dance together ... maybe I'm in a divine dance? I wonder what that means?

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