

The Dark Night of the Soul

by

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Introduction

Out of all the topics I considered, the Dark Night of the Soul kept tugging at my interest until I opted for it. The topic itself sounds ominous, partly because of some of the language surrounding it: dark night, purgation, illumination, union, locutions, discursive meditation (and many others) are words that demand an “acquired taste” if one is not from a background where these are more frequently used. As a relative novice in my own understanding of what is involved in the experience as St John of the Cross paints it, I offer the reader a number of sources in my list of references. Those I found particularly helpful were: Gerald May’s *The Dark Night of the Soul* (2003) for its accessibility, thoroughness and positive approach to the experience; John Welch’s *When Gods Die: An Introduction to St John of the Cross* (1990) for its coverage of John and his life, plus Welch’s understanding of how Jung’s and John’s thoughts converge; and Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez’s translation of *The Collected Works of St John of the Cross* (1979) for the access it gives to John’s major works, and for their treatment of John’s life.

For this project I also decided to interview a number of people involved in spiritual direction and dream therapy who have spent time with people in a dark night, in order to learn from their experience. Because this was done anonymously, I will not be attributing thoughts specifically to any one of them, but I do want to say how grateful I am to them for the many insights they provided. I was especially interested in the role dreamwork can play at this time in someone’s life since in previous reading I had discovered that there may be reservations by some as to how effective this is. Both John of the Cross and St Teresa of Avila had strong words about spiritual directors who were ill-prepared to help directees in a dark night, John (1979) famously likening them to “a blacksmith (who) knows no more than how to hammer and pound with the faculties” (p.626)! Needless to say, I have a growing desire to be better equipped to companion some who will find themselves on this path, but I think that will come with experience.

The project first looks at the person of John of the Cross – his life, spirituality and writings; followed by an explanation of what the dark night of the soul is and its purpose. A few of the many other metaphors for the experience are then presented, and then the question of who is likely to experience it. I felt it was important to offer what I learned about the role of spiritual direction in such a situation, which is where many of the comments made by my interviewees are found, and how is one best accompanied on this journey through the night. After this I offer some understanding of how prayer can change during a dark night experience, and finally I will offer some examples given in scripture.

Introduction to St John of the Cross

His life

Juan de Yepes y Alvarez (John) was born in Fontiveros, Spain, in 1542, the youngest of three brothers. His father, although from a wealthy merchant family, was disowned when he married a poor weaver who was below his station. John was only three when his father died, and he and his brothers were left to their mother, who was forced by circumstances to raise them in poverty. One of his brothers died, possibly from malnutrition (May, 2003), and the family moved to Medina del Campo, where John attended school.

At an early age, John showed promise as a student, excelling at a Jesuit school in his city. As time passed, instead of joining the Jesuit order as they had wished, he joined the novitiate of the more contemplative Carmelite order in 1563. In 1567 John met Teresa of Avila. She was 52 at the time and he was 25. He had been on the verge of leaving the Carmelites to join the more austere Carthusian order, but was persuaded by Teresa, also a Carmelite, to join her in reforming their order. He continued in social and political reforms for the rest of his life and he suffered greatly for it. Much more has been written about the life of John of the Cross (see St John of the Cross, 1979; May, 2003; and Welch, 1990). He died in Ubeda, Spain, at the age of 49 after an unsuccessful surgery.

His spirituality

Those acquainted with John of the Cross will be aware of his focus on that part of the spiritual journey which many believers experience as “the dark night of the soul”. Welch (1990) sums up John’s spirituality when he speaks of the two basic experiences conveyed by John’s poetry: being wounded and being healed. These are both part of the transformation process which John expounds in the dark night. Because of the popularisation of the term “the dark night”, both the experience and John have largely been misunderstood. John was austere, but Welch asserts that “His spirituality is no tougher than life itself” (p.20). May (2003) furthers this by saying that John firmly believed in clarity where worldly matters were concerned, but when it came to the spiritual realm too much clarity could have an unhelpful effect. Hence, for our own protection God makes these matters obscure, the darkness becoming a better light for us. May continues:

To guide us toward the love that we most desire, we must be *taken* where we could not and would not go on our own. And lest we sabotage the journey, we must not know where we are going. Deep in the darkness, way beneath our senses, God is instilling ‘another, better love’ and ‘deeper, more urgent longings’ that empower our willingness for all necessary relinquishments along the way (2003, p.73).

John mapped the spiritual life in terms of three stages: “Purgation, Illumination and Union”. These stages originated with Evagrius Ponticus in the latter part of the 4th century and were later applied to the Christian life by Pseudo-Dionysius in the late 5th to early 6th century as three successive activities leading to mystical union (Larkin, 1967). St Bonaventura was in turn responsible for making these stages accessible to ordinary Christians for their spiritual development nearly 200 years before John’s time (Leech, 2001). In its various forms these “three spiritual ways” have been used by a number of different Catholic orders to describe the spiritual life, for example the Franciscans, Jesuits, Dominicans and Carmelites.

His writings

John is best known for his treatise *The Dark Night of the Soul*, but his complete understanding on the spiritual life is found within three major works which are written in both poetry and prose. As a poet, he is regarded as one of Spain’s finest, but in his mainly didactic prose he himself did not think highly of his own style, as it is often repetitious and in need of work on punctuation. His writing demonstrates a substantial influence by contemporary poetry, other spiritual writers such as St Augustine and St Thomas Aquinas, plus the scriptures, especially the Song of Songs.

John is credited with three treatises on the spiritual life: *The Ascent of Mt Carmel-The Dark Night* (a combined work); *The Spiritual Canticle*; and *The Living Flame of Love*. Each of these works contains a poem followed by a commentary. The purpose of the *Ascent-Dark Night* is to explain the way to union with God, John's desire being "that everyone who reads this book will in some way discover the road that he is walking along, and the one he ought to follow if he wants to reach the summit of this mount" (John of the Cross, 1979, p.59). *The Spiritual Canticle* was written to explain the love relationship between the soul of the believer and Christ, the Bridegroom, with regard to the believer's prayer life. It is similar in genre to The Song of Solomon in Scripture, but reflects the poet's personal experience with God. The poem was written in the context of a loving relationship with God, and the commentary which followed did not necessarily explain all that was in the poem as logically as John would have preferred. Finally, the subject of *The Living Flame of Love* is the state of perfect love in the life of one who has been transformed and is now living in union with God.

What is the dark night?

There comes a time in many believers' lives when it seems they have been abandoned by God. They do not experience the same joys from meditation and other prayer methods they have practised in the past. None of these measures they used before to connect with God are fruitful now. This can be especially distressing for those involved in Christian work when they find that their "well" of resource in God is simply drying up. Many of John's directees – priests, nuns, those in the novitiate – were in these circumstances. But this dark night of the soul is not only for those who are in full time Christian work. In fact, May (2003) is quite clear that it is not for a spiritual elite, but for ordinary Christians. Dunn (2000-2001) suggests that some of the causes that lead to a dark night could include burn-out, life pressures, or significant losses related to work or relationships. A transition is taking place, and this can produce a distressing effect of perceived distance from God. Previously, it may have seemed like God was "on tap", but not now.

The term "dark night" comes from the Spanish phrase "noche oscura", the English word "dark" being more literally translated "obscure" (May, 2003). There is now an obscurity in the believer's relationship with God. Dunn (2000-2001) lists some of the possible impacts on someone experiencing this spiritual "landscape": 1) loss of control of what has been familiar; 2) fear as one deals with the unknown; 3) a sense of vulnerability; 4) perceived overwhelming darkness; and 5) silence that brings to them a vivid sense of the eternal. These are not in themselves negative when seen in the context of a loving God ushering us into an experience of "presence that can't be described in words or images but which is close, enfolding in its gentleness and very, very real. Similarly, the profound silence becomes for some a deeper, clearer way of hearing" (Dunn, 2000-2003, p.3).

Gerald May (2003) also makes it clear that the experience of the dark night has its very difficult moments, but these are going to be different for each individual. He sees it as a deeply liberating invitation of God whereby we are given the opportunity to shed the attachments (idols) that hold us back from a full experience of relationship with the Divine. To this end there is the "dark night of the senses", which is represented by dusk, the first part of the night. This is when we are freed from our sensory gratifications, the rewards that come even from good and spiritual practices such as fasting, prayer and meditation, as there is still the temptation of serving God for the sake of the enjoyment we receive from the experience. Then the "dark night of the spirit", which often takes place years

later and is represented by darkest midnight, “releases attachments to rigid beliefs and ways of thinking, frozen memories and expectations, and compulsive, automatic choices” (May, 2003, p.80).

John notes that not everyone will be invited by God into the dark night of the soul, and there is sometimes the misperception that someone is beginning the experience simply because there is a dryness in their spiritual life. He says these “aridities” may be due to other causes, such as sin, imperfection, laziness, depression or a physical problem. John therefore outlines three principal signs of readiness that signal one entering a dark night: 1) there is no longer any satisfaction in meditation or any of the other spiritual practices one has had previously or in the other aspects of life; 2) the person thinks they are backsliding because there is now a distaste for the things of God; and 3) there is a sense of powerlessness in using the imagination in meditation because God is now seeking to communicate not through the senses, but through the spirit by means of contemplation (St John of the Cross, 1979). May (2003) maintains this third sign is the most important in John’s eyes, and sums up the experience: “I don’t know what it means or how to do it, but what I really want is just to be with God, just to be in love with God (p.141)”.

John talks about “purgation”, or the “purgative way”, which is characterised by the active and passive night of the senses. The active night is taking place when we perceive that we are participating in our own spiritual journey through retreats, prayer, meditation, and journaling, all of which are useful but must be done in moderation. Where there is excess, even in spiritual pursuits, it is probably that the resulting “sweetness” has become the goal itself, which is why God begins to wean us from it as an attachment. John advises us in this active night and the active night of the spirit that will come later on to take up Christ’s cross and follow him both in his behaviour externally and in his inner willingness to empty himself. This is where liberation happens and the pure love of God is able to shine from the individual (May, 2003).

The passive night of the senses comes when we have done all we can to be free of our bad habits and personality defects, finding in the end that we cannot do this ourselves. God steps in and continues to free us “from the idols we have made of possessions, relationships, feelings, and behaviours. As always in the precious process of the night, this divine liberation takes place in ways that are obscure to us” (May, 2003, p.86-87). Because of this “obscurity”, plus our proneness to believe that something is wrong in our relationship with God, John recommends during this time of the passive night of the senses to not overwork ourselves in trying to reach God through the old means of spiritual practices that worked for us before. “Any movement born out of a desire just to do something will disturb God’s work, just as the movement of a model disturbs the painter” (Welch, 1990, p.97). God’s beauty is achieved in us as we learn to rest in the arms of the all-loving One. Welch continues with a number of benefits of the first dark night: 1) a knowledge of self; 2) the renewal of a sense of Mystery and awareness of the need to approach God in reverence; 3) a new humility with an ability to esteem and love our brothers and sisters in Christ; and 4) a general softening in our attitude and openness to being led on our spiritual journey.

When God has led us through the dark night of the senses, there will usually be a time of rest. The dark night of the spirit, according to John, often follows years after the dark night of the senses has ceased. The intervening time between these nights is normally when those having been through the previous night (now called “proficients” in their prayer journey with God) exercise much greater

freedom and satisfaction in their spiritual walk. Yet, according to John, there is still much that God desires to do in their lives, as the first night compared to the second in terms of purifying a life is “like the difference between pulling up roots and cutting off a branch, or rubbing out a fresh stain and an old, deeply embedded one” (St John of the Cross, 1979, p.331). Now it is time for the second night, called the “illuminative way”, to come and give opportunity to focus on practising the three virtues of faith, hope and love, because these three are key to freeing the spirit from the attachments not yet dealt with. It is not a matter of trying one’s best to act more faithfully, hopefully and lovingly, which can only reinforce fossilised attitudes. May (2003) gives as an example the overly scrupulous person, who strives compulsively to do everything right rather than out of the freedom which the Spirit gives. John’s advice at this point of the journey is to act with moderation in the practices of the spiritual life one already has rather than to now build more religious habits. This is the time for emptying the attachments that have occupied the spiritual faculties of our intellect, memory and will. Even holy and profound thoughts, images and inspirations are filtered to allow only what is of God to remain.

The dark night of the spirit, as with the sensory night, is ushered in by three signs, indicating the beginning of contemplative prayer. These are similar to the three previous ones, and it is important to wait for all three to be present before discontinuing the spiritual practice of meditation; otherwise, as Welch (1990) notes, “the person who stops meditating will simply be doing nothing. The soul cannot force contemplative prayer” (p.122). With regard to the active night of the spirit, the one journeying, as in the active night of the senses, will intentionally participate in their own spiritual life. However, whereas previously they were making active choices with regard to the body and the material world, now the focus is on choosing to follow God with their mind, memory and will, as this is where God now wants to work. “One of the main goals of the active dark night of the spirit is to prepare the person to experience God directly. That is, by moving away from anything less than God the person opens themselves to see and hear God” (New Day Monks, 2009-2013, para. 4).

In both the active and passive nights of the spirit the principal mover in the process is God. The purpose of the passive night is to remove from us rigid beliefs, dreams and actions that are no longer helpful in our walk. It may come more gently, May (2003) says, or it may involve a painful ripping away of a long-held belief. John gives a number of reasons why this experience can be so devastating. First, a person in this state perceives being rejected by God due to an awareness of their own shortcomings. Secondly, whatever supports they once had are no longer present and they feel helpless. There is thirdly a feeling of being put to death spiritually, much like Jonah in the belly of the whale – abandoned by God and without any friends. Finally, a person experiences their own poverty and emptiness. It is a very dark time - for some, like peering into hell (Welch, 1990). In *Mother Teresa: Come Be My Light*, Kolodiejchuk (2007) devotes six chapters to the saint’s agony of soul in this stage. At one point in 1956, despairing, Mother Teresa wrote to her spiritual director and enclosed a prayer:

In the darkness...Lord, my God who am I that You should forsake me? The child of your love - and now become as the most hated one - the one You have thrown away as unwanted - unloved. I call, I cling, I want - and there is no One to answer - no One on Whom I can cling - no, No One. - Alone (Mother Teresa, in Kolodiejchuk, 2007, p.187).

Very few have been through these depths for as long as Teresa. For her there was a period of just one month when some respite came; otherwise, she was in her dark night for the last 49 years of her life. There are others who seem to have moved very quickly through the darkness, perhaps coming to the conclusion and resting in the fact that the sense of desolation was their loss of the feeling of God's presence rather than the loss of the person of God (May, 2003).

The last of the three stages in the spiritual life is "union", or the "unitive way". Interestingly, Welch (1990) puts this part of the process first in his book *When gods die*, offering us the results of the dark night found in the dawn that follows before presenting us with the map that guides us on the pilgrimage. This outcome of union is found in John's poem and commentary on *The Living Flame of Love* and describes a state of transformation and oneness with God. The Christian here is likened to a log so intensely on fire that the heat coming from it causes a constant flaring up of flames. Now the soul is so united with God through the expression of love that God's activity is its activity, because the will is completely surrendered to the Lord. May (2003) describes the experience as waking up to love. Mystery is still present as we have not yet seen the full light of day, but there is a growing realisation of what has happened during the night and of who we are in God.

In this coverage of union I will mention a few points for thought. Firstly, in an interview it was pointed out that, in evangelical theology, all believers are in union with God in Christ, so there is an understanding of being held by God in that position. Welch (1990) adds to this point but with a slightly different emphasis, saying that without their union with God all creatures would cease to exist. Finally, another interviewee explained that there are times of pain and upset that come with a purgative season, and these can open out into a refreshing time of union with God, but it is not always necessary to experience a difficult dark night to be able to experience this union. Keeping these in mind, the main focus of this section has been to address what happens in a classic dark night experience which, in John's view expressed in *The Living Flame of Love*, speaks more of a transformative work in the life of the believer who has been through a profound disturbance, or disorientation, in their relationship with God, and is now aware of a reorientation that has taken place.

I am conscious that in this project I have limited myself to speaking of the individual's journey through the dark night, but it is worthwhile considering that this experience may overlay whole societies and other groups of people. For example, in this view the dark night could be the shared experience of numbers of black American women who have suffered oppression and brutal treatment by the dominant society (Fitzgerald, 1984); or held in common by those striving for liberation in Latin America and finding themselves in a struggle that leads to a deeper level of spirituality (Welch, 1990); or, as May (2003) proposes, a group in Bosnia he visited in 1994 who had lost everything - homes, livelihoods and loved ones - yet they had hope. When asked what they hoped for, if there was an intervention they believed would make life easier, they answered, "No". Then how could they possibly hope? They could not think of exactly what there was to hope for, but there was a reason to hope which brought a smile to their faces, and that was God. What will the narrative be for the people of Syria whose lives have been destroyed, yet they go on living? And is there a way through the impasse that is Palestine which reflects the map John has given for the dark night?

The purpose of the Dark Night

The basic purpose of the dark night of the soul, as stated above, is both transformative and unitive. It is a spiritual process where God liberates us from attachments and compulsions and brings us into a place of pure love. Dunn (n.d.) lists some of the “treasures of darkness” that can emerge through this experience: 1) a signal that a time of transition is underway in our faith life and should therefore be welcomed; 2) the simple trust that comes from living when emptied of all the familiar things we have clung to; 3) a less complicated and authentic faith that offers a more transparent and valid witness; 4) a greater reliance upon grace for all of life - spiritual and otherwise; 5) the discovery that a person’s identity and worth are in who they are as a loved being rather than in what they do; and 6) a long list of benefits that come in response to painful triggers, for example, from fear to an ardent search; from horror of the void to shaken complacency; and from the demolition of safe places to journeying with God.

There will be other treasures of darkness that are personal to those emerging from a dark night experience, which can be added to this list. One of these treasures is the metamorphosis of love. May (2003) alludes to St Bernard of Clairvaux’s four types of love that reveal a transformation process: 1) “love of self for one’s own sake”; 2) “love of God for one’s own sake”; 3) “love of God for God’s sake”; and 4) “love of self for God’s sake” (p.99). C S Lewis, after the painful saga of losing his wife to cancer, published *A Grief Observed* (Lewis, 1963, as cited in Ekstrand, n.d.), where he concludes “that such experiences of Absence - not only absence of a loved one but also Absence of God - in the midst of suffering have at least potentially an educative and perhaps even sanctifying function in the life of the believer” (p.16). Finally, Constance Fitzgerald (1984) in her reprinted article “Impasse and Dark Night” adds to this a broader perspective involving societies and the possible renegotiation of relationship between members of a broken world influenced by the destructive use of power:

Only an experience like this, coming out of the soul's night, brings about the kind of solidarity and compassion that changes the "I" into a "we," enabling one to say, "we poor," "we oppressed," "we exploited." The poor are objects until we are poor, too. This kind of identification with God's people, with the "other," is the fruit of dark night.

This does not cover all the outcomes, but suggests there are many benefits that do emerge from the pressures of darkness.

Other metaphors

There are a number of different frameworks for looking at the dark night experience. Most are not explained in as much detail as what we see in John of the Cross’ treatises, but each of them has its place in adding to our understanding. The first is quite a broad-brushed approach that could paint many types of experience – not solely of the dark night. This is the idea of “orientation - disorientation – reorientation” – a concept of Paul Ricoeur’s, the French philosopher, which Walter Brueggemann popularised in his book, *The Message of the Psalms: A Theological Commentary* (1984), as he explored the psalms and fitted suitable ones into these three categories. This paradigm has been useful in mapping the spiritual journey in a very accessible way. It is one employed by some of those I interviewed to communicate the benefits of dark night experiences and how they are likely to happen multiple times in one’s life. Brueggemann’s view of the gospel as

“always a challenge to settled power” (2012) seems to have repercussions in many areas of life, and the move to a new equilibrium (or orientation) after we experience the brokenness of disorientation comes with a new interpretation of life, which is not always clearly defined for us because we are now entering uncharted territory.

A second metaphor, which is found in Hagberg and Guelich’s (2005) *The Critical Journey: Stages in the Life of Faith*, is “the Wall”, an experience of helplessness when wanting to move forward in freedom in one’s spiritual journey. Again, as in John’s dark night of the soul, and similar to James Fowler’s six stages of faith, there is normally movement in one’s spiritual life, but at the Wall we are stuck until there is surrender. Our own energy is depleted but we long to experience a new freedom. ✓ The journey through the Wall can be quick or it can take years, and it often happens at different levels, but there seems to be only one method: its dismantling; the Wall must be journeyed through by the stone by stone removal of attachments in our lives. The resistance at the Wall indicates there are attitudes God wants to deal with – strong egos, self-deprecation, guilt/shame, intellectualism, high achievement, dogmatism, spiritual power/pride (Hagberg & Guelich, 2005). May (2003) also emphasises the place of “subtraction” in John’s dark night. He says: “Both of the active nights involve disciplines of restraint, attempts to reverse usual habits of stuffing oneself with sensory, intellectual, spiritual, or any other kind of gratification. Both are movements toward subtraction rather than addition” (p. 83). The shadow side of an individual is also discussed in each of these metaphors (Hagberg & Guelich, 2005; Welch, 1990), and our need for psychological and spiritual healing. Finally, when one is through the Wall, there is greater freedom.

Thomas Green (1998) writes about the third metaphor – St Teresa’s “dry well”. The goal in our spiritual lives is to water what she calls the “flowers of virtue”. Some might call these virtues “kingdom values”, what we find in the Sermon on the Mount; or in 1 Corinthians 13: faith, hope and love; or the fruits of the Spirit found in Galatians 5. Or they could all, of course, be subsumed under the heading, “Love”. These virtues are watered through prayer, but what happens when the well we are drawing from runs dry? This is the framework Teresa brings to us; there are different methods of watering the flowers, including the active prayer methods of meditation and imaginative contemplation, likened by Teresa to the hard physical work of fetching water from the well by dropping the bucket and reeling it up. There is a better method of watering the flowers, too – using a pump instead – which increases the volume of water we can provide the virtues. Each of these methods can water the flowers, but when the well has no water for either method is it because of the prayer method used? Or perhaps this is the wrong question. The better question is whether the flowers are still growing or not, and if they are, then God is looking after them. The dry well is very much like the one going through their dark night. There is a temptation to feel despondent because there is no water to give the flowers, but if God is keeping them alive and fresh, then the final responsibility does not rest with us. Our prayer life then takes on a slower, quieter, less frantic and busy pace as God works in the garden.

Who experiences the dark night?

Who actually will experience a dark night of the soul? Is it just for special people or can it happen to anyone? May (2003) suggests that it is a much more normal experience than many would expect. It is not restricted to those perceived as holy, but involves a transformation in an individual’s life. Age seems to play a part in when most people enter a dark night, as the demographic suggests that

midlife or afterwards is a more likely time for the experience to happen. However, younger believers are not excluded. In my interviews I discovered that the majority of directees they had companioned in a dark night were in their 50s or 60s, though there were also reports of some in their 30s, 20s, and even teens. May (2003) talks about an awareness that could come at any time in life. This awareness can reappear several times during one's life as well, though particularly in midlife it is clearer that "we begin to sense our time is limited; changes need to be more radical if we're going to find what we want before we're too old to enjoy it" (p.65). Welch (1990) adds that there are issues that will be dealt with in the dark night that a very young person will probably not have encountered. The experience of a dark night presupposes that an individual has developed somewhat of a "religious persona" (the part of a person's self-understanding that intersects with society around spiritual matters according to Jung [as cited in Welch, 1990], and that regularly takes part in spiritual activities).

Spiritual direction in the dark night

Before starting this project, I was encouraged in supervision to consider the possibility that there are many Christians both inside and outside the church who wonder what has happened to God, who may be going through their own dark night of the soul. This gave rise to my interviews with several individuals experienced in giving spiritual direction and working with dreams, about how they would companion someone through the especially difficult parts of such an experience. The following are some of their responses combined with some thoughts I gleaned from the literature.

First of all, it was unanimous that the directee needs someone to be there with them, to "hold" them throughout the experience (one interviewer added, "without being uncomfortable myself"). If the directee harbours the perception of being abandoned by God, then not only is the feeling of aloneness mitigated, but the opportunity is there for the whole matter to be talked through in a safe environment. Interestingly, there was no discernible difference between how direction would unfold in this case and how it would look in another more "normal" situation, because the directors I approached opted as a first step to take the role of "naive enquirer" to ascertain where their directee is at. How is their health? Do they have a low mood? What is their level of self-care? What are their spiritual practices? What are their general circumstances? Is there a transition in their lives – perhaps a folded ministry, or a mission door that has closed, or a tragedy in the family? It was seen to be important by those I interviewed that spiritual direction comes without an agenda, that the spiritual companion not try to "fix" things, unless of course there emerges a scenario where counselling or therapy would help the directee more than a spiritual direction relationship. In that case, it is important not to "wear two hats" in order to avoid confusion.

May (2003) warns against spiritual directors meddling with what God is doing in someone's life. God's desire is to lead the soul to a place it has not been before and to do this the road remains obscure. Some useful questions can be asked of the directee who wants to go back to what is familiar to them, which reflect the second and third signs of the approaching night: 1) "Do you really want to go back to the way things were?" and 2) "What, then, do you most deeply desire?" (p.171) When there is little apparent progress in the life of the directee, it can easily be taken by the director as stagnation or lack of intention, but much may be happening that is known only to God. There may also be occasion for one's directee to decide to change directors, which must be taken graciously and the decision supported, as the soul belongs to God and not to the director. In Mother

Teresa's case, there was a time when she decided she would no longer benefit from having a spiritual director, and his services were discontinued (Kolodiejchuk, 2007).

One question that I put before my interviewees had to do with depression and how it related to the dark night in their directees. I was told that depression is something that quite normally accompanies the dark night. John calls it "melancholia or any other deficiency or sense of spirit" (St John of the Cross, 1979, p.72), and it can often be picked up in someone's demeanour. It can also express itself in one's dreams of despair, as they are often cold and lack colour (mostly browns and greys). Depression can also be part of an older person's experience, causing increased anxiety as end of life approaches. As regards clinical depression, though, it seems best not to address it in spiritual terms; the two need to be seen as distinct from each other. Further, if the directee is experiencing dysfunction which interferes with their ordinary life, then it is probably best to refer them to their general practitioner. It is also good in any case to have a list of phone numbers handy so that directees can be referred.

Gerald May in his two books, *Care of Mind, Care of Spirit* (1992) and *The Dark Night of the Soul* (2003) addresses how depression interfaces with the dark night. In the first book he gives us several indications of how they can be differentiated (see pp. 109-110 for an excellent list which has been borrowed by many). Some of these are, for example, in the dark night a person will retain their sense of humour, their ability to remain effective in life and their compassion for others, whereas when clinically depressed these are generally not present. A further sign is that, when dealing with someone who is depressed, a sense of irritability and frustration remain with the spiritual director, whereas there is grace and consolation in the wake of a session with someone in a dark night. Because the two experiences are many times so intertwined, May in his later book states quite emphatically that every effort should be taken to investigate what may seem to be depression so that if necessary it may be treated. This attitude could be life-saving for someone in a genuine depression.

I was also very interested in how dreams played a role in spiritual direction in a dark night context. In May (1992) I had read that one should exercise caution in this area lest it become a fascination, so I wanted to find out if this had been a problem in the experience of those I talked to. There were varying responses as to what extent dreams were brought into a direction session, but all saw them as useful. Several mentioned that they would not especially invite a directee to bring a dream, but would definitely work with them on one if brought. One interviewee said dreams are a "staple" in spiritual direction, especially in retreat situations where the retreatant could share the dream and then let it percolate in their own and the director's minds for one or two days, and then take it up again with further insight.

Another related several instances of how dreams had released clients who were living in emotionally difficult situations. She related an instance where one client was in a dark night brought on by an extremely painful situation. Years before, this client had left her own faith for another and now she felt as if God was abandoning her. Her dreams were despairing in nature for a period of time until in one of them a mysterious helper appeared and saved her life. This experience of hope was the turning point for her and others who are in traumatic circumstances.

Dreams can contain symbols and imagery that will give a person courage to move in a new direction (Bowater, 1997, pp. 73-74). John of the Cross on the one hand is cautious about such supernatural communications as visions, locutions (words from God) and images and warns that they may potentially diminish a Christian in their faith journey, but on the other hand he says they may have their place, especially in the life of one beginning their dark night. He does not often mention the word “dream” himself, but he clearly encourages visions and revelations to be brought to spiritual direction; in fact, much of Book 2 of *The Ascent of Mount Carmel* (St John of the Cross, 1979) addresses supernatural communications - visions, direct words or revelations – and even though he advises his directees to reject these phenomena, they are still invited to bring these to him so that they can be discussed (pp.186-187). Certainly, supernatural phenomena had their place in John’s life; he was personally inspired by a vision he saw of the crucified Christ, which he subsequently drew and then copied for many others (providing inspiration in turn for Salvador Dali, whose 1951 painting *The Crucifixion of Christ* is based on this drawing). However, not many are not as spiritually astute as John to be able to discern which voice to listen to and which to shun. He remained firm in his advocacy of contemplation as the best avenue for avoiding self-gratification and understanding God’s mind and heart (Welch, 1990).

May, whose insights are well regarded by a number of authors who write on the dark night, reminds us that experiences are not the primary goal of the spiritual life, but our being and doing as God wants. Thus, he is cautious about how dreams in particular are incorporated into spiritual direction in general, and while he does not speak directly about these in *The Dark Night of the Soul* (2003), he does elaborate on what he would see as their overuse in *Care of Mind, Care of Spirit* (1992). One of May’s greatest concerns is a directee’s risk of over-absorption in what their dreams mean to them, or for others, because of weakened ego defences, psychological decompensation as a result of too heavy a dose of symbolism from their unconscious. He does, however, believe that they are “at least as pertinent to spiritual direction as are all other forms of experience” (1992, p. 49), and welcomes directees to bring them to the direction session.

When asked what kind of prayer they would encourage for those in a dark night experience, the general feeling of those I interviewed was that quiet prayer without words was useful. If the directee is using lectio divina in their times with God, there is opportunity after reading the scripture to slip straight into contemplation without going through the other steps; centering prayer can provide an anchor point for some. Similarly, when doing the colloquy at the end of an Ignatian prayer period there is an opportunity to adopt a quiet attitude, again with no words if one desires. In any case, there was no push from any of those interviewed to move the directee on to any particular form of prayer, but to be present to them to listen to what they are going through and make suggestions if appropriate. Some mentioned the value of praying the psalms, especially psalms of lament where their feelings could mirror those of the psalmist. In almost every one of these psalms there is a place where hope can be glimpsed. This approach is echoed by Richard Foster (1992), who endorses praying these psalms in the “prayer of complaint”. I also found Brueggemann’s *Psalmist’s Cry: Scripts for Embracing Lament* (2010) to be helpful when looking at the area of disorientation. It is designed for group study and helps readers to embrace lament when they feel as though they have been abandoned in life.

To conclude this section on giving spiritual direction to someone in their dark night, I would like to recommend a few pages (pp. 180-187) in Sue Pickering’s *Spiritual Direction: A Practical Introduction* (2008). Under the heading “Listening for the dark night...” she includes a dialogue that illustrates how a conversation might go in a direction session where one is explaining his own situation. There are also some insightful questions to take the reader beyond the conversation. Finally, I would like to echo what one of my interviewees stressed: “Supervision is absolutely essential.” I was unable to find any source to further elaborate on how supervision pertains specifically to the dark night, although I suspect this may have to do with the nature of supervision pertaining more to what is happening in the spiritual director’s life. As the dark night is such a deep experience for the directee, it is in turn quite likely to have a significant effect (even if subtly so) in the director, so the self-reflection involved as a practitioner is key to the well-being of both director and directee.

Prayer: from meditation to contemplation

There has been some discussion about which form of prayer is most helpful to a person going through a dark night. John of the Cross undoubtedly sees the “beginner” who moves into the night as someone who is established to some degree in their faith. They will have had some experience with, and have been strengthened by spiritual disciplines as they know them. This may include fasts, long periods of prayer, spiritual study, conversations and other practices depending on their faith background (Woodman, 2002). These are generally grouped under “discursive meditation”, a term which may need clarification to those outside of the Catholic faith. The important thing is that there is an observable relationship with God that begins to change as the night proceeds. These spiritual practices are also vital to ensure that one continues in their pursuit of God when the dusk comes and their faith orientation is challenged. I have included an example of this type of meditation below that comes from the Carmelite tradition. It is published by the Family Life Institute (2000-2016) and provides an understanding of the format St Teresa of Avila used. Throughout the exercise one is interacting with scripture and prayer through words and the imagination, and it provides a strong foundation for growth in one’s relationship with God.

Introduction	Preparation Reading
Meditation	Imaginative representation of material Reflection or meditation properly so called Affective colloquy or conversation with God
Conclusion	Thanksgiving Oblation Petition

The difficulty comes when this kataphatic type of meditation with its discursive thought and analysis, its images and other media, has lost its appeal and becomes tedious to the soul. In fact, the other facets of the believer’s spiritual life at this point give them no satisfaction, either. Unfortunately, there has often been a clear lack of understanding and counsel as to what to do in this dark night,

especially in churches where a healthy spirituality requires an outward buoyancy. Yet in a difficult period, just when a parishioner could be suspected of losing their faith, God may instead be moving this individual into a different kind of prayer, one without any means of analysis or words, but rather lends itself to repose. John's advice is to observe the three aforementioned signs: 1) a lack of satisfaction in spiritual practices; 2) the feeling that one is backsliding; and 3) the inability to use the imagination in meditation. If all three are in operation, then now may be the time to continue the journey by means of apophatic contemplation. Belden Lane (1998) in his book, *The Solace of Fierce Landscapes*, states:

Apophatic spirituality has to start at the point where every other possibility ends. Whether we arrive there by means of a moment of stark extremity in our lives, or (metaphorically) by way of entry into a high desert landscape, the sense of naked inadequacy remains the same. Prayer without words can only begin where loss is reckoned as total (p.36).

One needs to be careful here to not completely negate the one (kataphatic) for the sake of the other (apophatic) as both types of prayer can usefully be employed. As people's experiences differ in prayer, Welch (1990) tells us, there can be no fast rule about how they pray, but the desired outcome is the stripping away of what is not of God and abiding in the Lord's presence to experience transformation.

St Teresa's approach was clear, positive and sensible. Although she had a deep regard for, and practised contemplation, she mistrusted prayer that never extended beyond silence and darkness. When speaking about rhythms of prayer, she said in *The Interior Castle* (as cited in Welch, 1990): "'Life is long', and there is no sense in just sitting there in the dark if nothing is happening. Get back to the humanity of Christ," she urged, "and the celebrations of the church"' (pp. 109-110). There was a time for dark, or contemplative, prayer, but there was also a place for reflecting on experience and putting it into words. If this were not so, then John himself would not have taken steps to put his contemplations into poetry and his poetry into prose in the form of his commentaries.

Biblical examples

Jesus' night in Gethsemane, followed by his crucifixion, was a true dark night. The scriptures (Psalm 22, Isaiah 53, and the accounts in the four Gospels) describing the event depict the sort of abandonment John of the Cross conveys to his readers, though on a scale that no one would be able to completely comprehend. Union is then clearly demonstrated in the resurrection when Jesus emerges from the tomb, completely transformed.

From what the Apostle Paul writes, it is very likely he went through his own dark night. He had been very black and white both in his pre-conversion thinking and for a while afterwards. We also know from 2 Corinthians 11 that he suffered at the hands of his enemies and fellow believers, and through extreme events in nature. Somewhere in all of this there may well have been one or more dark nights. In the next chapter he explains how on one occasion he was caught up into third heaven, and how in Paradise he heard words which could not be expressed. These certainly at least point to a unitive experience.

And finally, Job. One of my interviewees shared with me her assessment of Job's experience. The story begins with him enjoying life surrounded by his family and his wealth, enjoying his reputation for wisdom and godliness. But then a dark night is brought on through intense suffering – loss of his children and property, tortuous pain, and silence and distance from the God he has worshipped. Three friends come to Job, the equivalent of his spiritual directors. At the beginning of their stay they do the right thing, which is to stay quietly with Job in his pain, but when Job begins to question God about the unfairness of his situation, his friends begin to probe and exhort and accuse, causing Job much further discomfort and anger, and prompting him to state his case before them and God. In the end, when God has spoken, Job is silent – speechless in the face of mystery. His orientation in life, which had suddenly and painfully progressed into disorientation, was now through its process of metamorphosis, and Job had come into a new state of reorientation.

Conclusion

This project has itself been a journey for me, and at the end of it I can only say that I have written many words and understood much of what I have written, but not all. Best not to call it the end of a journey, but a personal pause to let the reader finish. The purpose of the exercise was to understand the experience of the dark night of the soul in order to more effectively accompany someone going through one, and I think that with more opportunity to practise this art, or skill, this may come about. It has been important, I believe, to start broad with John's life and a rather long definition of the dark night; to look at it from different perspectives, or frameworks; and to give expression to the great hearts and minds I have had the privilege to listen to and read for clarity in giving companionship to those who find themselves in the experience. I am not satisfied with how I covered certain aspects. There are many other examples, biblical and otherwise, that could give those who best learn from story more of an opportunity to see and understand the dark night in life situations. I would also like to have looked at several more metaphors to map the experience of the dark night, especially what happens in the process of metamorphosis and the act of transformation. That said, I finish with a desire to be transformed myself in deepening ways, which will no doubt involve the pain and healing that come with the dark night.

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