

Turning to the Mystics



St. John of the Cross

Session 1
with James Finley

Jim Finley: Greetings. I'm Jim Finley. Welcome to Turning to the Mystics. [bell] [music]

Greetings, everyone, and welcome to our time here together, turning for spiritual guidance to the Christian mystic, St. John of the Cross, based on some of the insights that were shared in the previous introductory reflections. In this session, I'd like to move directly into again reminding ourselves on what St. John of the Cross means by the dark night. This is a kind of a visual metaphor for a transformative experience that begins in the loss of the felt sense of God's sustaining presence in our life. The sense of nurturance, the sense of reassurance, the sense of insight, of aspirations and consolations that are coming to us through our faith, sustaining us day by day throughout our life and in prayer, mysteriously begins to fade away and to be replaced with a sense of an absence, a felt sense, the absence of the felt sense of God, a sense of aridity.

And in his first book, in *The Collected Works*, he set *The Ascent in of Mount Carmel*, in Book Two, Chapter 13, he gives three signs by which we can discern in prayer that we're being led into this dark night, a night in which this deprivation of our customary ways of experiencing God opens out upon and draws us into an infinitely richer, more luminous, and ultimately boundaryless way of experiencing God that, as he says in the prologue, is the way in which we begin to follow, find our way to the perfect union with God that is possible in this life through love. And so, the night then leads us into this light of this perfect union through love. And he gives us three signs by which we can discern this is starting to happen to us in prayer.

The first two signs are the signs of the deprivation, and he gives an explanatory note on each. The third sign is the beginnings of this more luminous, spacious, boundaryless light that begins to shine out of that darkness and loss. So, the three signs. The first sign, the first, and by the way, these are three signs that we should leave behind discursive meditation. That is, we should leave behind attempting to experience God in a customary way of *Lectio Divina*, like sitting in the presence of a word of God speaking to us in Scripture, whatever the spiritual source is, that we hear God's voice accessing our heart. And then in discursive meditation, engaging in a kind of process of reflection illumined by faith, or a kind of an ongoing inner dialogue with God, that then leads to the heart center of the prayer, "Help me with this." So, it's through these three signs of the dark night that we're to discern that we're to leave behind discursive meditation. And so, what are those signs, and what are the precautions of how he nuances this transition in our spiritual path?

The first sign of entrance into the dark night of leaving behind a discursive meditation: "The first is the realization that one cannot make discursive meditation or receive satisfaction from it as before. Dryness is now the outcome of fixing the senses upon subjects that formerly provided satisfaction. As long as one can, however, make discursive meditation and draw out satisfaction, one must not abandon this method."¹ "Meditation," that is, discursive meditation, using thoughts and images, "must only be discontinued when the soul is placed in that peace and quietude to be spoken of in the third sign."²

And we can call back to St. Teresa of Ávila in *The Interior Castle* on this point. She takes a

1 Kieran Kavanaugh, O.C.D., Otilio Rodriguez, O.C.D., revised ed., trans; *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross* (Washington D.C.: ICS Publications, 1991) 189.

2 Ibid. 189

somewhat different view towards it. She says that she doesn't really think it's ever not possible to engage in discursive meditation, or we just should abandon it completely. What we can discover is we're unexplainably being led beyond it. But John of the Cross, for him, puts it this way as an impossibility. We can't do it in the sense in which we can't do it and receive gratification from it. I think that's where he and Teresa kind of meet each other. We can do it, but we can't do it without feeling we're forcing the issue, like we're making ourselves try. But the underlying nurturance that makes the trying meaningful is we can't find it anymore.

He's going to say later in this Chapter 13 that the fact that you're no longer experiencing this nurturance through discursive meditation, reflective prayer, all by itself is not enough to discern you're being led into the dark night. It's not enough to discern that you're a mystic in the making. For he points out the fact that our prayer is the litmus test of our heart. And so, maybe the reason we're having difficulty in prayer is things are going on in our life. Like Jesus says you go to bring your gift to the altar, and before you present it at the altar, leave the gift and go make amends to your brother or your sister. And therefore, he says maybe this difficulty in prayer is a kind of a manifestation of unresolved issues where you're not treating yourself, your attitudes towards yourself, or the way you're treating, or your attitudes toward your spouse or your child, or your brother, or your sister, or the community as a whole, the people you work with, maybe there's certain hurtful attitudes or ways of treating yourself and others that are hindering you from being the Christ-like, loving person you were called to be. And therefore, it's a call to go tend to that, to take care of that. It's an ongoing process. But let's say you check that out. You say I don't think that's it really. I'm no more sinful than usual. I think I'm just me. I'm an infinitely loved, precious, broken, fragile person. And I try to walk my walk and be sincere and real and make amends. And so, I don't think that explains adequately, basically how to understand what this aridity is about.

The second sign, which is Article 3 of Chapter 13, "The second sign is an awareness of a disinclination to fix the imagination or sense faculties upon other particular objects, exterior or interior. I'm not affirming that the imagination will cease to come and go—even in deep recollection it usually wanders freely—but that the person is disinclined to fix it purposely on extraneous things."³ In other words, it isn't just that you're not gratified in thinking of the things of God, but you kind of light up inside, getting excited over your new flat screen TV set or to something that's happening in your life or in the workplace, or a goal that you set for yourself, or whatever it is. What it is more is that nothing does it for you. Nothing gratifies. There's something missing in the gratifications that the day-by-day has to offer, some deep grounding place and a sense of nurturance or fulfillment or satisfactoriness, that there's something there also that doesn't have that interior gratification and nurturing quality to it.

Jim Finley: But then he clarifies also that this alone is not enough to assure that you're a mystic in the making, because he says maybe this lack of being nurtured by anything, he said, maybe you have a humor in your bile or in your brain. Or as we would say today, maybe you're clinically depressed. So, what are the signs of clinical depression? One is anhedonia, that is difficulty being pleased by things. Another issue is difficulty concentrating. Other issues are feelings of worthlessness, or of low self-esteem, feelings of isolation, feelings of powerlessness. And so, this fact alone that you're experiencing these feelings, not lighting up, being nurtured or energized by anything, not that you're being drawn into the dark night, but maybe it's a sign

3 Ibid. 189

you're clinically depressed. Maybe you need a long, hot shower, and a back rub, and a walk around the block, or whatever kind of helps. You might require professional help, whatever's going on with you, insofar as that holds.

But let's say you check it out and you say I don't think that's it. I really don't think that I'm depressed. I don't think I'm clinically depressed. I don't present that way to myself. See, so I don't think that's it. That doesn't do it. By the way, as a clarification on this point, each year there was a course here at the Archdiocese of Los Angeles for the training of spiritual directors. And they had different people come in on listening skills, Scripture, and so on. And each year I would present a reflection on how to distinguish between clinical depression and the dark night of the soul. Because put it this way, if you are clinically depressed or you have a predisposition towards depression, or there is unprocessed grieving or unprocessed trauma that you're drawn to, there is this kind of depressive propensity about you, as a loss of connection, loss of nurturance, loss of happiness, loss of whatever. You could see how then the loss of the felt sense of God's presence could reawaken the depression. You could be both. Lucky you! Doubleheader, that you're kind of a depressed person being drawn into the dark night, which would require its own skill in distinguishing and discerning the clinical aspects of the depression, and the strategies for that and the working on that, distinguishing that from the spiritual transformative process of the dark night and honoring that, and understanding how these two inevitably touch each other, because we're one. We are spiritually, and emotionally, and physically woven into a single unitive mystery of ourselves.

So, it makes sense that these two would relate to each other, and it would make sense that these two might touch each other in a kind of a refinement of the practicalities of walking this path. When someone's in a major...and going through the dark night, you don't give them Prozac for the dark night of the soul, where you would pathologize it that way. Likewise, if there is pathology, if there is clinical depression, you wouldn't give them a copy to read St. John of the Cross and *The Dark Night*; they might get more depressed, depends on who they were. They might actually, as we'll see here in a minute on the third sign, find it very consoling. But there is that distinction, I think, that's always helpful to make between the psychological and the spiritual.

The third sign. So, there's the first sign, in knowing that, that alone is not enough. There's a second sign, and that alone is not enough. Article 4, Chapter 13: "The third and surest sign is that a person likes to remain alone in loving awareness of God, without particular considerations, in interior peace and quiet and repose, and without the acts and exercises (at least discursive, those in which one progresses from point to point) of the intellect, the memory and the will, and that a person prefers to remain only in the general loving awareness and knowledge we mentioned without any particular knowledge or understanding."⁴ I'm going to talk about this for a minute. You know, they say one of the things John of the Cross would do, he would sit up sometimes for hours at a time alone at night, sitting in an open window, looking at the moon pouring out over the countryside; and you're drawn to do it.

4 Ibid. 189-90.

That is, you're sitting there in a kind of a helplessness, unconsolated, and not able to comprehend or grasp what's happening to you. And in that powerlessness, at one level, you begin to be aware that if you don't panic, and you don't run away, and you just quietly stay there and surrender yourself over to the presence of God, there can begin to emerge out of that powerlessness, out of that not understanding what's happening, a qualitatively deeper understanding of what it means to understand. And in that lack of being consoled by God, of the consolations of the presence of God, in that deprivation of consolation, there can begin to emerge a much infinitely, more subtle, and delicate consolation: like too deep, too vast, too rich to feel, and so on. And you're drawn to do it. You're drawn to do it, or your own heart leads you there. It just happens and you learn to sit with it and trust it. When the ability to meditate returns, you would return to the meditation. And this is spiritual direction here. It's very personal. During the day you would reflect on this, you would think it through. Like, what's happening to me here? Like, where am I at with this? And how can I be faithful to this? And so on.

John of the Cross says in Article 6 then, he said to leave safely the state of meditation, that is to leave safely the state of discursive meditation and sense, in *Lectio* discursive meditation and prayer, and enter that of contemplation and Spirit. The spiritual person must observe within himself at least these three signs together, they'll always be together. Yes, there is the lack of pleasure and nurturance; and yes, there's also a lack of pleasure, not just in the things of God, but in anything. But in that mysterious, subtle deprivation, you begin to notice the inner inclination to abide in the helplessness, to rest in the helplessness, to kind of be present of God present to you in the intimacy of the helplessness, that there's that.

John of the Cross says Article 7. "Actually," and here's the third sign, which is the blessing then that arises out of this, paradoxically: "Actually, at the beginning of this state, the loving knowledge is almost unnoticeable. There are two reasons for this: First, ordinarily, the incipient loving knowledge initially is likely to be extremely subtle and delicate and almost imperceptible; second, a person who is habituated to the exercise of meditation," discursive meditation, "which is wholly sensible, hardly perceives or feels this new insensible, purely spiritual experience. This is especially so when through failure to understand it, he does not permit himself any quietude to rest in it, but strives after the other, more sensory experience. Although the interior peace is more abundant, the individual allows no room for its experience and enjoyment."⁵

So, this normative way in which God leads us to God on this earth is, in part, in our reflections on God and our thoughts about God, are revealed to us in Scripture, and in the teachings of the Church and the teachings of the tradition. But to understand here that our idea that God is infinite is a finite idea of the infinite. Our consolation, the felt sense of God's presence, is a finite consolation of the infinite consolations of God. Our intention to serve God or to seek God is a finite intention of God's infinite intention that we be one with God unexplainably, forever, and that infinite intention of God for oneness is beginning to emerge within our heart, transcending our finite intentions. So, we're in a very subtle place here, very delicate place, I think.

5 Ibid. 190

John of the Cross continues on there with Article 7, “But the more habituated a person becomes to this calm, the deeper their experience of the general loving of knowledge and God will grow. This knowledge is more enjoyable than all other things because without the soul’s labor, it affords peace, rest, savor, and delight.”⁶ But it’s enjoyable, paradoxically enjoyable. It’s unexplainably enjoyable, this ever so sweet, delicate, boundaryless gratitude for the transformative process that’s happening to you by the presence of God transforms you into himself, into herself, in this powerlessness.”

In Chapter 14, Article 2, the second paragraph: “What the soul, therefore, was periodically acquiring through the labor of [discursive] meditation on particular ideas has now, as we said, been converted into habitual and substantial, general and loving knowledge. This knowledge is neither distinct nor particular, as the previous. Accordingly, the moment prayer begins, the soul, as one with a store of water, drinks peaceably without the labor and the need of fetching the water through the channels of past considerations, forms, and figures. At the moment it recollects itself in the presence of God it enters upon an act of general, loving, peaceful, and tranquil knowledge, drinking wisdom and love and delight.”⁷

Article 4, Chapter 14: “Many behave similarly at the beginning of this state. They are of the opinion that the whole matter consists in understanding...” Oh, he’s talking about beginners who haven’t grasped this yet, like beginners just starting to find their way in this. “They are of the opinion that the whole matter consists in understanding particular ideas and in reasonings through images and forms. Since they do not encounter these images in that loving, substantial quietude where nothing is understood particularly and in which they like to rest, they believe they are wasting their time and straying from the right road; and they turn back to search for the rind of images and reasoning. They are unsuccessful in their search because the rind has already been removed. There is no enjoyment of the substance nor the ability to meditate, and they become disturbed with the thought of backsliding and going astray. Indeed they are getting lost, but not in the way they imagine, for they are losing the exercise of their own senses and first modes of experience. This loss indicates they are approaching the spirit being imparted to them, in which the less they understand the further they penetrate into the night of the spirit—the subject of this book. They must pass through this night to union with God beyond all knowing.”⁸

Jim Finley: I’d like to begin to draw this to a conclusion here with an image that helps me to see this or understand here what we’re looking at, what’s happening. And the image is this. Imagine, I’m thinking of this because I live here at the ocean and there’s a big yacht basin here with boats. And when you have a boat in a slip, a slip is where you bring the boat into this, along the pier. There’s like a U-shaped space cutout, and you bring your boat into that slip. And then there’s a rope where you fix the boat within the slip, by a rope on one side; you hook it up to a post on one side and you take the other open hook and up on the other, then the boat is secured in that space.

So, with that image in mind, imagine you have this little boat, this slip at the ocean there. And imagine you lie down all alone in this little boat, and that night falls, and you go sound asleep. You go sound asleep. And as you’re sleeping, God quietly tiptoes up, takes the rope

6 Ibid. 191

7 Ibid. 192

8 Ibid. 192-3

that unites you to your customary ways of experiencing God's presence in your life through thoughts, consolations, through memories, through beliefs and all that, in its own holiness, its own way on this earth of faith. And God quietly lifts up the rope and lowers it very quietly into the water. Then God quietly tiptoes around to the other side that moors you to your customary ways of experiencing yourself on this earth: your body, your mind, your memory, your family, your relationships, your work, the sum total of all of that. And then God very slowly lifts that rope up off the pillar, being very careful not to laugh and wake you up and lowers it into the water and then gives the boat a little nudge. And in the currents of the water, you're carried out, sound asleep out into the open sea.

And when you open your eyes and you sit up, no land in sight, God says, "Gotcha!" That we're ever so subtly drawn out beyond the boundaries of the familiarity of our grounding places and familiarity with God and with the earth as our base of operations. And so, what happens in the night then, is that God is weaning us off our dependency on these finite modalities of experiencing God's presence on this earth, which are efficacious unto holiness. They're efficacious unto holiness, it's the norm by which God leads us and draws us. But God is now leading you towards the union with God that we experience in passing through the veil of death, which we pass beyond these modalities and these mediations, into an infinite union with the infinite presence of God in glory. And God is deciding not to wait until you're dead to grant you this. But in order to grant it, God has to lead you out beyond your attachments to and identifying with the comfort zone of the finite modalities of the infinite as a grace or a charism, a mystery of the journey like this.

Thomas Merton once said that, in the monastery, he says, you know, he believes that there are people who are being drawn this way, but they have no one to bear witness to them and help them understand what's happening to them. St. John of the Cross says the same thing. Now, he refers to the devil. He gives a sense of the devil and the powers of the devil; he talks about this mythic dimension of evil and so on. But where he goes really on and on and on is unhelpful spiritual directors. By spiritual directors, he means spiritual directors who are not in themselves sensitized to this. So, when you come to them and say, "I can't pray, I can't reflect," they tell you to try harder. They keep telling you to go back and try harder. And they say, what they're not realizing is that you're doing violence to yourself. You're doing violence to this kind of subtle transitional point.

Jim Finley: And so, I'll end then with this final thought. You know, it might well be true that we're not, as of yet at least, being drawn to this point of the tipping point into the beginnings of mystical union and to unitive consciousness through love. But the point is, is that this transformative point of which we're speaking, the transformative energies at that point fall down through all the layers of our life. Lao Tzu in the Tao Te Ching talks about the Tao being like water that seeks the lowest place and nurtures everything. And so, these fundamentals that we're talking about, these transformative energies drop down into every area of our life. We can all see how love drew us, or our love for someone drew us into a loving relationship. And then we discovered in that love that initial fire or that initial joy starting to give way to difficulties, and struggles, and misunderstandings. And we begin to realize then that we're actually being led into kind of a dark night in which we've internalized habits of the mind and heart that are contributing to those difficulties, internalized survival strategies. And our partner, thinking of marriage, or being a parent also, where a child, as they get older into adulthood, they've internalized theirs. And then we realize, we either

despair or we go deeper. We realize we come to this powerlessness to consummate the union in love that we long for. And we enter into it at night of the powerlessness. But if we listen to the powerless to see the love shining in it, we realize we're to let go of, pass beyond, or to die to the habits and attitudes of the mind and heart that are claustrophobic, one-dimensional and hinder us from finding the love that we desire.

And by the way, then this also occurs, I think, for those who are graced with poetry, or graced with art, or graced with music, or any creativity, or graced with some form of service to the community, there is a kind of a grace of being awakened and drawn. And then we enter a dark night of the hindrance, where we don't know how to go on. But we don't know how to go on because actually we're outgrowing our initial patterns and assumptions, and that love is actually drawing us out into something qualitatively richer, something more. And if we stay the course, if we stay the course and go through this, we find our way deeper, deeper, deeper, and then we can see that at any given moment in these ways, through marital love, through parenting, through solitude, through oneness with the world, through silence, through service to community, through art, in any given moment, there can come flashing forth our unexpected proximity to this mystical dimension of union that St. John of the Cross is talking about because this grace is woven back and forth through the whole pattern. And I think we're trying to sensitize ourselves to that.

And so, with that then, we'll do a sitting. Again, here just for a few minutes, but then if on your own you're so inclined or as your schedule allows, you can extend this as long as you're inclined and able to do so. I invite you to sit straight, fold your hands in prayer, bow. Repeat after me: Be still and know I am God. Be still and know I am. Be still and know. Be still. Be. [Bell, three times, followed by a long moment of silence]

[Bell, one time] Let's slowly say the Lord's Prayer together: Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil. [music fades in] For thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory, now and forever.⁹

Jim Finley: Amen. Mary, Mother of Contemplatives, pray for us. St. Teresa of Ávila pray for us. St. John of the Cross, pray for us. Peace, blessings till next time.

[music continues]

Jim is reading from an older, out-of-print edition of *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*. An editorial decision was made to leave his verbatim recitation in the transcript while referencing the more widely available edition.