



THE SPIRITUAL JOURNEY

Formation in the Christian Contemplative Life

“Night of Sense: The Biblical Desert, Part 2”

Excerpted from

The Spiritual Journey Part 4, Contemplation: The Divine Therapy

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[Evolutionary, Existential and Philosophical Models Chart appears on page 2 of transcript.]

THE DOOR

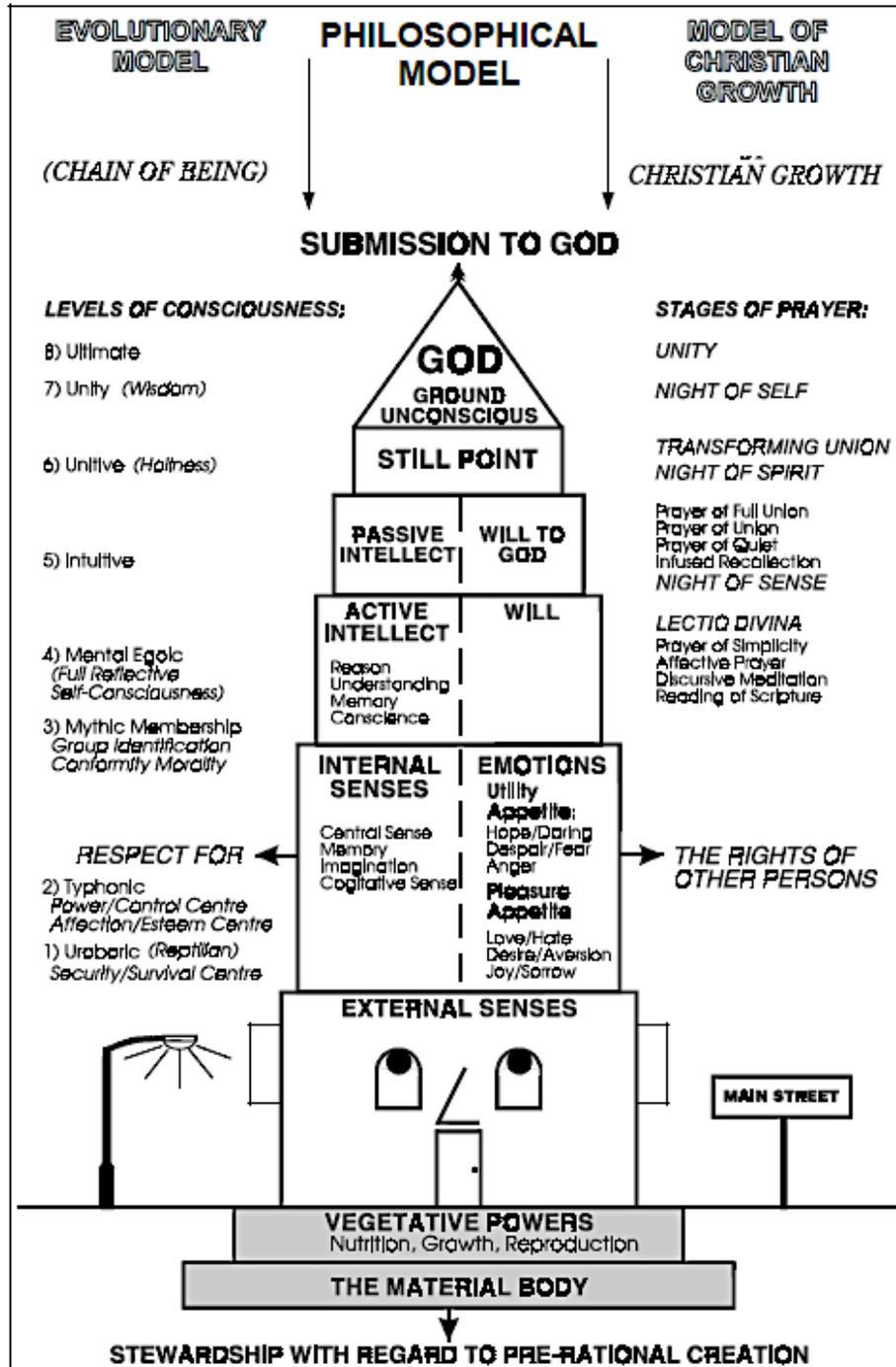
The night of sense is doing more than dismantling the false self system. Or you might say that in relaxing our compulsive activity, our fixations and our habitual routines of reacting to events in a self-centered way, it also is giving us the freedom or releasing the energy of the unconscious. We now know that the human brain has all kinds of potentialities that are still awaiting to be realized. If we can believe the experience of many mystics and sages, the present average level of human consciousness at this mental egoic, fully self-conscious period that most of us experience, is only the door into higher states of consciousness which enables our human potentialities to be fully realized in deeper states of union and unity with the Ultimate Reality and with everything that is.

AS IT HEALS IN THE DARK NIGHT

Obviously, the energy that was put into trying to keep ourselves in peace when we were constantly seeking fantastic goals that were constantly being frustrated and setting off the upsetting emotions of anger, and grief, fear, pride, lust, jealousy, and all the other capital sins. Naturally this took up a lot of time and attention and preoccupation. As the false self diminishes, and as it's healed in the dark night, and as humility grows and peace and trust in God is developing as we find God coming to our help, even in his apparent absences, then this energy begins to be available for other purposes and it may begin to arise into consciousness in various ways. One of these, of course, is through psychic powers, or spiritual consolation, feelings of exultation. If we experience positive energy from the unconscious, or psychic powers, or charismatic gifts, and profoundly negative feelings from the dark side of our personality, and this mixed motivation, starts arising into consciousness too quickly. And this is why, in all the great spiritual traditions of the world, a discipline, a devotion to God, and service of others is always part of the path of beginners. In this Christian practice of Lectio Divina, one was expected to spend half an hour or an hour every day in this encounter with Christ in Scripture, in this “heavy date,” in which one listened to his word and his example and interiorized the values of the Gospel.

PURE FAITH

As this process moved us into a deeper rest, this rest began to loosen up the material in the unconscious that our defense mechanisms had previously kept firmly in place. This is one of the fruits of the night of sense. It alerts us to the damage that the false self system is doing.



It alerts us to the presumption that we have sometimes exercised in dealing with God. It deepens our trust in him by, as we said, enduring the trials of this Night and experiencing (beginning to, at

least) the nourishment from the new food that he's giving, of pure faith, which is what we mean by Contemplative Prayer.

WITHOUT BEING PREPARED

Now we need to realize in any spiritual journey, the value of these two sides of a stream, you might say, that must be put in place so that when the energies of the unconscious emerge through the night, or through the rest of prayer, they will be transmuted rather than be an obstacle to that experience. Many folks, sometimes, have experienced a sudden upsurge of this energy without being prepared. It could be induced by some unscrupulous teachers who might share with students some powerful mantra or breathing exercise that would loosen up this energy before the person has the discipline or the banks to hold that energy in place. In other words, if it comes up too soon, it would be like a flood and would wash someone away either by self-exultation (if they experience great consolation), or an experience of enlightenment, or psychic powers, or charismatic gifts. They'd say, "Ah! I've found the magic formula." And, indeed, there are magical practices to try to develop spiritual experience. But this is why knowledge of the spiritual path is so important in an age when spiritual teaching is missing because people will go after a spiritual experience and the pleasure that it initially provides, if they're not aware of the hazards or dangers, or if they're not exposed to sound teaching.

KNOWLEDGE OF THE TWO BANKS OF THE SPIRITUAL PATH IS MOST IMPORTANT

THE TWO BANKS

Here is where the Gospel insists, as you notice, on the two banks – not just one. The one bank consists in developing devotion and dedication to God. And that's the process of Lectio supported by liturgy and ritual and all the practices that help to develop a relationship with Christ and with God. These are not useless. These are essential in the beginning as a stable and steady practice so that when the waters arise from deep within, they won't overflow that side of your interior watercourse. At the same time, if you don't put on the other side another bunch of sandbags, the continual practice and habitual development of the disposition of serving others through the duties of one's state of life, through one's other commitments, through some ministry or service – whether it be marriage, family, or some celibate ministry; it is the exercise of these two painful and sometimes boring habits that solidly prepares one for the full benefit of the night of sense and avoid the hazards of this energy exploding into consciousness before one is able to handle it.

NO MAN'S LAND

It's this discipline, then, that gradually prepares us to handle the unloading of the unconscious so that when these energies emerge, the channel transmits it or moves that energy into the higher levels of consciousness, of which the next higher is the Intuitive. In the night of sense, then, this Intuitive level of our consciousness is being developed, not only by our active practice of prayer and the prayer of simplicity, the prayer of resting in God, but also by this whole night of sense which is a state in which God places us in order that the maximum opportunity for healing and further development might be taking place. The night of sense, then, is a transitional phase, you might say, a no-man's land or a no-woman's land between our rational or our reflective and our spontaneous relationship with God (which is very good), to a new relationship (which is even better), that of communion, of being to being, face to face relationship and the knowledge of God in pure faith.

A KIND OF WORLD VIEW

As we saw in the Mythic Membership level of consciousness, which is that which we pass through from about four to seven or eight, we absorb unconsciously the values of our parents, culture, early religious education. And this unquestioning assumption of those values and truths are spontaneous and become a kind of world view in which we live; a kind of myth in the best sense of that word. And so, in the night of sense, these presuppositions begin to be questioned or challenged, not as deeply as they will be later. But at least, like the parables of our Lord in the Gospel, they kind of shake up the ground on which we felt secure in our value system and world view and open us up to other ways of seeing reality, other ways of understanding the relationship between people, then the unquestioned assumptions that we received from our culture, nation, or early religious training.

JUST AS WE ARE

And so, this means, also, that at each of those humble levels of human development that we pass through as children, God offered himself to us just as we were; in other words, according to that level of consciousness.

GOD OFFERS HIMSELF TO US AT OUR LEVEL OF CONSCIOUSNESS

He is the God of primitive people and the God that gradually developed in the slow process of the monotheistic God of the Hebrews, and the God of personal responsibility and concern for the whole of the human family that is presented to us in the Gospel. Each of us, then, has related to this higher power whom we call God out of all of these levels of earlier consciousness. And at one point, God might have been presented to us, as we saw earlier in these conferences, as the bogey man, as a tyrant, as a policeman, as an implacable judge. And these are emotional judgments deeply laid up along with our programs for happiness, in our automatic responses and what might be called the super-ego. That is to say, they're emotional judgments about what is good and bad, not true judgments.

UNDERMINING THE CERTITUDE

These also have to be healed by opening our mind little by little by one means or another. And one way is by undermining the certitude or confidence with which we held certain biases, prejudices, preconceived ideas that were communicated or imposed upon us in early childhood. But the Gospel, then, is freeing us or trying to free us, not only from the emotional programs for happiness that we concocted in early childhood to survive, but also from the cultural conditioning that was deeply laid up in us and imposed upon us as we began to develop the first stages of reason and reflection and which we absorbed without question and which are now operating in us on an unconscious level until they are faced. Part of the night of sense is to enable us to face that material and to lay aside that which was conditioned by our growing up process and the ideas of others, so that we can make our own personal response to Christ and move beyond the conformity morality, or the fitting in, or the human respect that characterizes that level of consciousness. And so, God has to deal with us, not only in our present understanding, but also, he has to deal with the residue of all the other ways we understood him or related to him earlier in life.

REDUCE IT TO SILENCE

The best way he seems to have to deal with that stuff is to reduce it to silence. And thus, the resting in God that has become more and more habitual as we moved into the prayer of simplicity and into the night of sense is profoundly healing. It enables us to dis-identify not only with our own emotional programs, but with our cultural conditioning; because, during that time on a regular basis, we're not thinking. So that this discipline is the appropriate one to add to our earlier disciplines in which we found benefit in ritual, in liturgy, in spiritual reading, in receiving the sacraments and in sensible consolation in prayer – all of this was important to heal those earlier wounds in which, without that sensible consolation, we might never, or the emotions might never, have gotten the message that there is something for them in this process of the spiritual journey; or that God might not really be as bad as we always thought but never dared say. Namely, he's not really the bogey man or some monster to keep us as far away as possible. So interior silence, then, is part of the discipline so that interior silence ...

INTERIOR SILENCE RELEASES IMMENSE ENERGY TO SERVE OTHERS AND TO RELATE TO GOD

... that carries the original foundation for the two banks of our channel. It carries it a step further so that now those energies, as they emerge, don't get stuck on the Mythic Membership level. But because of our detachment through interior silence and dis-identifying with our over-identification with cultural values—that enables us, then, to be free to relate to the God of pure faith and to the immense energy that this releases, both to relate to this God and to relate to other people in service.

A WARNING

The fact that this development of our attitude, knowledge, and understanding of God can grow is a warning to us not to get stuck on some of our Mental Egoic presumptions in which we think God is a certain way or reacts in a certain way—all of which is all mixed up with some of our super-ego or our cultural conditioning. Thus, some people are inclined to think that God always rewards the good by making them happy, giving them plenty of money—they never go bankrupt, etc. etc. In other words, success in life is a sign of God's favor. Well there's some basis for that in the Old Testament, perhaps, but it's hard to understand how that idea can be extracted from the New Testament when we see in Christ's own example—that the best human being there ever was experienced the worst possible treatment. That's a warning to us that the spiritual journey is not a magic carpet to bliss, riches or fame. On the contrary, it's a very slow and plodding journey to the truth that involves the dismantling of all of that nonsense.

COMMITMENT TO STICK TO THIS SPIRITUAL JOURNEY

The night of sense also brings out in clearer focus the nature of commitment. Commitment is very important in the Christian tradition. And, as we saw, when Jesus invites us by the words "Follow me," he's inviting us into friendship and friendship always involves commitment; that is to say, you're going to stick to this idea, this person, this community, or this cause and not walk away from it, no matter what happens.

LOVE MAKES ONE VULNERABLE

Difficulties arise whenever a commitment is succeeding. That means: love makes one vulnerable. And as soon as you are in love or feel love, whether it be God in the spiritual journey or another

person, one's defenses go down. You don't have to be so self-protected, and you begin to disclose yourself, and feel at home. And now, because the defenses are relaxing, there's nothing anymore to keep the dark side of our personality hidden, and it begins to rise significantly into not only your consciousness, but into your behavior to the full benefit or dismay of your spouse. Hopefully the spouse is experiencing the same. But the purpose of the commitment of marriage is to stick to the thing and get through the difficulties which are inevitable and to process each other's dark side so that at some point you may both emerge from the dark night, so to speak, of sense into a new place and sort of process each other's dark material. And thus, marriage becomes a real school of holiness and transformation when it's understood on that level. Now of course, it's true ... some commitments are just dead, or hopeless, or they were a mistake. People should take some care in whom they choose as a spouse and not be dominated by the romantic side alone. It's in ministering divine love to each other precisely in our failures, and in our dark sides, in our human miseries, that one manifests the love of God to each other which is the symbol of the sacrament of marriage. It's what communicates the reality of God's love to the other person by compassion and showing love when they know they don't deserve it in particular cases.

WHEN THE NIGHT TURNS TO DUST

Similarly, in religious life or in the spiritual journey, when God is absent, when the Night turns to dust, all one's previous sources of benefit and profit, then once again the temptation to give up the spiritual journey is enormous: "It can't be for me. It must be for somebody else ... those wonderful Trappists and they've got nothing else to do, and so on. But I have a family to raise, a professional life to lead. I can't put up with all this negativity that's rising up within me." And yet, if you close and walk away from your commitment to the spiritual journey, who goes with you? The false self, of course. And wherever you go, you take it and you just have to face it once again under some other circumstances, with some other community, or with some other person.

COMMITMENT IS CRUCIAL

That's why commitment is so tremendously important, especially in the night of sense; when at times, especially when those temptations are crucial, everything in you wants to get away, to have a breather, to take a vacation, to call a halt to it and hope you never start again. And yet the commitment says, "I won't go away. I'm going to stick to my commitment. My feet are firmly rooted here." And what it really is saying is that my heart is set upon God. My face, like Jesus, is set to go to Jerusalem. I'm determined to go through the desert to the promised land. And no matter what happens I'm going or I'm sticking. And this is the determination, then, that enables the night of sense, or any generous commitment, to do its work. And, as it does its work, then these stages of interior prayer and union with God begin to unfold.