



THE SPIRITUAL JOURNEY

Formation in the Christian Contemplative Life

“Night of Spirit: Towards Transformation, Part 1”

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.]

SILENCE IS GOD’S FIRST LANGUAGE

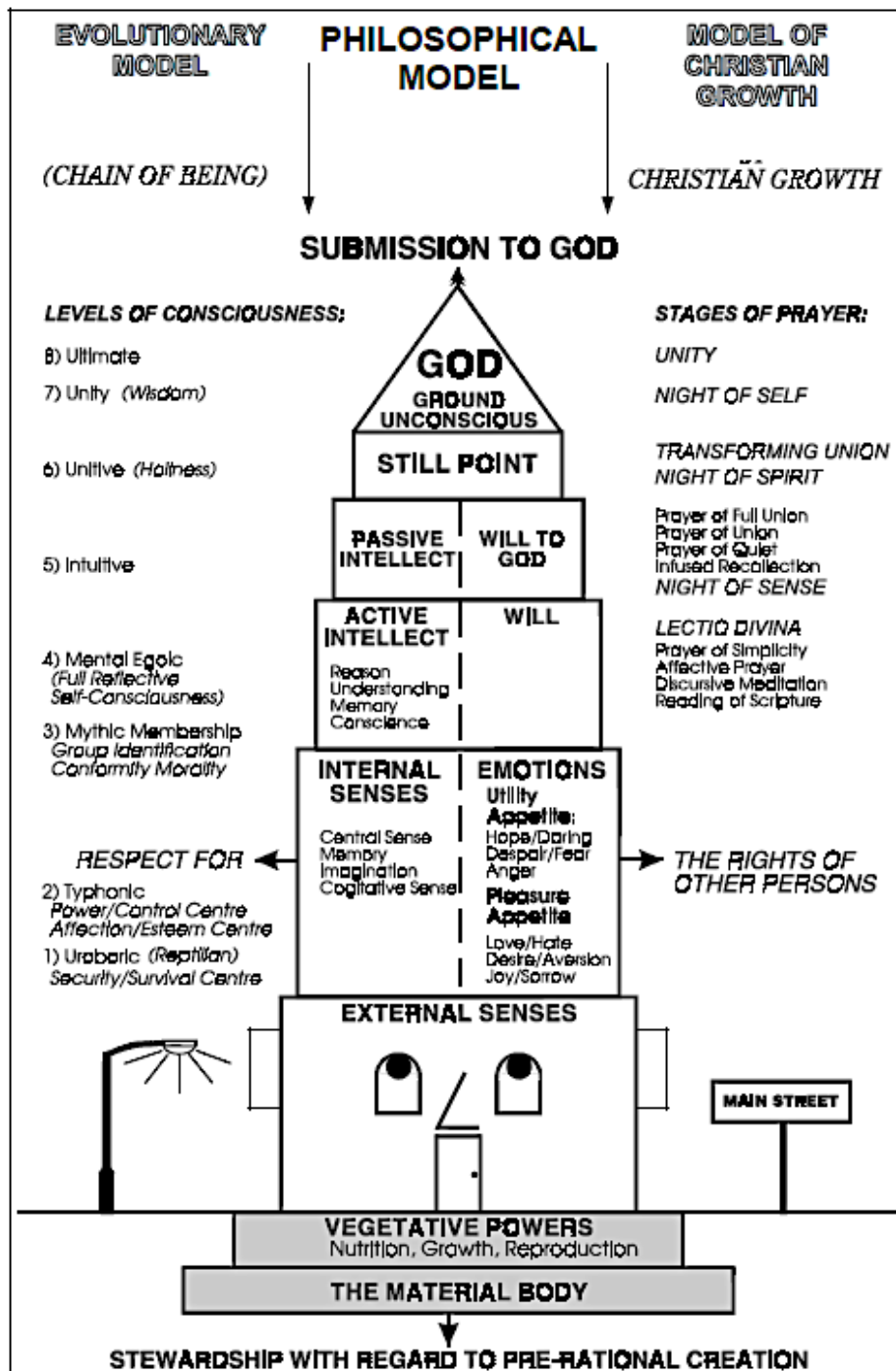
In the night of sense God is feeding us mysteriously from a place within, instead of coming to us from outside and engaging our faculties through the external senses, or even through our memory, imagination, or reflections. In Contemplative Prayer all of these faculties are quieted and at rest, and kind of turned off temporarily, so that our passive intellect and our longing or openness to God may be opened up, and we may begin to access the still point which is the place, so to speak ... to speak geographically, in which our consciousness, our identity, is re-rooted in God. And we experience divine union as an abiding Presence, a union, by the way, that has always been present, waiting for us, but which we have thought was absent. And it is that thought that is the monumental illusion of the human condition and which the spiritual journey is trying to heal. This dryness in prayer, this sense of absence, once one consents to it and perceives that God is communicating at a deeper level than ever before, that he’s whispering to us, so to speak, or speaking to us in his own language which is silence. Silence is God’s first language ...

SILENCE IS THE FIRST LANGUAGE OF GOD

... Everything else is a very poor translation. And so, in order to hear that language or to become congenial or to have an affinity for it, one needs to accept this invitation to be quiet, to be still, and to rest, that is one of the characteristic attractions or signs of the Night of Sense, especially as it takes root. One feels an inclination, no matter how much activity one is in, or can’t avoid, for moments of solitude, of silence, to spend with God, even though you can’t find any satisfaction in it when you get there.

THE GRACE OF PURE FAITH

There’s sort of a vague need for God; somewhat the way that we know it’s time for supper and that need gets more and more acute as supper gets longer and longer postponed. And it’s, sort of a spontaneous existential invitation, calling, attraction, that is springing up from within and is the



result of this marvelous food of pure faith that God is communicating, not to our senses, not to our reason, but to our intuitive faculties that vaguely perceive that this dry food is okay or strengthening. But at first, they don't know what to do with it and hence those disconcerting reactions that make us want to give up the whole process of prayer in favor of a little relaxation, so to speak, a breather. Well, as that food, that grace of pure faith deepens, and we begin to experience its wholesomeness and the fruits of the night of sense in a greater trust in God, and a greater humility, in an unwillingness to judge others because in this prayer one feels so weak, and that one's good deeds are so mixed up with selfish motivation, that one would be happy if no one would ever bring them up

again, including the Last Judgement. One is aware, in other words, of the fact that one's good deeds and motivation are filled with selfishness and one can't do much about it. So, one waits upon God, pleads upon God, and begins to depend on the infinite mercy of God; and to be satisfied with that gift as one's chief possession. And if you have that confidence, then you can let a lot of other possessions go by quite spontaneously.

A DEEPENING EXPERIENCE OF INTERIOR PRAYER

Well now, it is at this point that the spiritual journey begins to unfold, in St. Teresa's experience and in her vision, in these stages of prayer [Infused Recollection, Prayer of Quiet, Prayer of Union, Prayer of Full Union]. And the Christian growth and model of transformation has usually presented the spiritual journey, especially its growth to higher stages of faith and love, from the perspective of a deepening experience of interior prayer and union with God. And this is, indeed, one of the ways in which many people experience the spiritual journey. And let's look at that path for a few minutes.

A LITTLE BIT OF PERFUME

The first grace that emerges in the midst of this dryness and waiting upon God without satisfaction in anything, and without the former consolations of earlier times, is this mysterious awakening, or as if a breath of fresh air has entered into one's being, or a little bit of perfume has escaped from the Presence of the mystery at the deepest level of our being and has come within range of our spiritual senses. And this is manifested by the experience of the Presence of God without any preparation, that sort of arises mysteriously and without any effort on our part from this experience of dryness during prayer. And this she calls, that is St. Teresa, "infused recollection." That's not the best term, if I may say so, because all grace is infused, faith is infused, all prayer is infused. But what she means is that one feels the presence of the grace. Grace was present in that food that we haven't recognized or learned to taste, and thought was absent in the night of sense. Now the food seems to have a delicious odor of a spiritual kind, and this attracts us towards the center of our being with a certain force, its delightful sense of spiritual consolation. It doesn't come through the senses. It starts from within and it may overflow into our senses, somewhat the way a fountain fills up with water and then overflows. But the source of the stream is not from without, outside of us, or through our sense or rational faculties, but directly from the Presence of God, in the Ground Unconscious, at the deepest level of our inmost being where he's dwelling all the time and where faith is trying to bring us as it develops. Now, infused recollection is a very delicate kind of gift and it doesn't grab the person so that you can't do anything about it: you can get up and walk away; you can think, "Oh my goodness, I must have eaten something that disagreed with me." But normally the feeling is pleasant, and you want to prolong it if you can. And it's usually quite brief.

THE PRAYER OF QUIET

When this grace deepens, it moves to the "Prayer of Quiet." And the Prayer of Quiet is when the will is absorbed in God, but the other faculties: memory and imagination, are free to roam around. And since they can't find anything to do in this gift, it's not their usual way of functioning, they may wander all over the lot, creating images and memories in order to keep themselves occupied. And the will, then, feels persecuted by all this nonsense. St. Teresa says that at times the imagination and memory persecute the will, but that we should regard these movements as the ravings of a madman and simply put up with them. In other words, you can experience a bombardment of thoughts which you don't want, and at the same time be completely absorbed in this undifferentiated presence of God, the fruit of this solid food of pure faith that has become palatable on the spiritual

level for these few moments. And so, this grace is more decisive, more transforming, than the previous one. It involves a grasping of the will so that it doesn't want to leave it or go away. In fact, it easily gets attached to that feeling and wants to spend more and more time in prayer. When prayer is delightful, like anything else, we like to prolong it. And thus, we may fall into the trap of spiritual gluttony. In other words, we want as much pleasure as we can squeeze out of this God who has suddenly become so bountiful and so wonderful and has such good things to give.

PURE AWARENESS

When the Prayer of Quiet moves to a deeper level, the imagination and memory are suspended. And here God comes to one's assistance and simply shuts them up, so that they don't move. And now the will can enjoy the peace and quiet without the bombardment of external thoughts. And this is what might be called pure awareness or pure consciousness. One is aware of the presence of God so that there is something real that is present, but it's not a form; it's not an image; it's not a concept; it's not a word. It's a presence. No word can describe this presence. It can come in different forms. It can flow from within, it can come suddenly, it can overtake one gradually, it may seem to descend from above, it may seem to approach all around one, like a cloud into which one enters with glee. In any case there's a movement of ever greater quiet as the imagination and memory fall still. And when they're completely still and the will is totally resting in God, and absorbed in God, there is no self-reflection, and this is the experience of the Prayer of Full Union, where none of the faculties are moving, but all are resting. God, as it were, calls the faculties to himself. St. Teresa's example is by blowing on a little pipe: "Toot. Toot. Toot." And they hear this sound and are enchanted, and it speaks to their inmost desires; and, although they can't understand it or do anything with it, they all sort of gather together and sit down to listen. And thus, they leave you in peace while the will enjoys the Presence, and indeed moves beyond the enjoyment of the Presence into complete unknowing, which is pure consciousness. And in that place, God can communicate the maximum of his gifts because there's no resistance or commentary on our side. Such then is the evolution of the stages of prayer, of the felt experience of God's Presence as St. Teresa describes it in "The Interior Castle."

THE PATH OF PURE FAITH

St. John of the Cross also describes this process, but he also indicates that there is another way of experiencing this development or moving towards what is the goal of prayer or Christian life which is the Transforming Union, that is the abiding experience of being finally rooted in union with the divine within us. He says there is a hidden staircase that leads to divine union which he calls the path of pure faith. And this is a path that many people on the spiritual journey experience. They experience the attraction, the mysterious spiritual attraction, for interior prayer without the levels of absorption, so that at times they're aware that their will is resting in God, but most of the time they experience either dryness of the faculties, or the annoyance or bombardment of the wanderings of the imagination and the remembrances of the memory, and bright ideas and plans for tomorrow and all the usual things that most people encounter when they try to quiet and calm the mind.

THE HIDDEN PATH

Suffice it to say, that after the night of sense is well advanced or completed, it may seem to continue in some people without much new experience happening, at least as the habitual state. In other people these levels of the felt experience of God may unfold in a kind of exuberant mysticism that St. Teresa experienced and which many spiritual writers have well described. Unfortunately, many

spiritual writers, and in the popular mind, these felt experiences of God's Presence, are generally identified with Contemplative Prayer ...

FELT EXPERIENCES ARE NOT NECESSARY TO BE CONTEMPLATIVE.

... to the extent that if you don't experience them, then you're not a contemplative in their view. And this is an idea that, it seems to me, St. John of the Cross, as well as experience, disproves. And so, there is what might be called an approach to divine union that is full of light and an approach that is very dark. Or another image: we might be invited to the "front stairs" entrance of the castle, or we might be directed to the service entrance that some houses of the well-to-do used to have. In other words, we might be invited up the "back stairs," which is the hidden path.

WELL DON'T ASK ME. NOBODY KNOWS.

Now which is the better way to go? Don't ask me, because nobody knows. What is certain is that either path leads to the Transforming Union. And that is what is our objective, not experiences. In other words, the Transforming Union is the fruit of dismantling the false self completely, and as soon as that is reduced to zero, transformation occurs, gradually or instantly, because the false self is the only obstacle, with its consequences of illusion, concupiscence, and weakness.

THEY ARE NOT GOD AS HE IS HIMSELF

What we are trying to say here is that the stages of prayer, however wonderful they are (and they certainly are) are still only radiances of God, or experiences of God; hence, they are not God as he is in himself, which, as John of the Cross teaches, can only be accessed by pure faith. So, it's the purification of faith and the perseverance in this commitment to the spiritual journey, no matter what our psychological experiences or its content, that leads, unerringly, as John of the Cross describes it in his poem on the Dark Night of the Soul, to the encounter, by which he means divine union, which is experienced as a restructuring of consciousness, not as an experience or set of experiences. Hence what is most valuable, then, is the practice itself, not the psychological content. And if people could only grasp that truth, it would make the spiritual journey so much easier. Because most of the time it's our expectations of what should happen or our commentary on what is happening that is causing us most of our anxiety and distress.

THE FALSE SELF IS PRESENT

In any case, after this development in the exuberant mystical form that we described through these stages of prayer, there comes the further purification of the night of spirit. And hence that further purification warns us that even in those experiences, the self is present, in the sense of the false self now transferring its desires for satisfaction of a selfish character to the spiritual journey and the goodies that are available on the spiritual level. Now this is not to denigrate the value of these gifts. Some people need that path, especially those who may have been severely damaged emotionally in early childhood. I've been amazed, in my experience, to see how God bends over and tenderly caresses, almost makes love to people who have been severely damaged, in order to convince their emotions that it's all right to enjoy or to love whatever they felt, because of their bitter experiences was not possible to accept or face, or to enjoy. In other words, what is wonderful about the spiritual journey ... we already suggested this when we spoke of the four consents ... is that the love of God is constantly inviting us to review our childish emotional judgements and now to accept the good things of life, and ourselves, of our being, other people, and the cosmos, and to be grateful for them.

Because gratitude is, by all odds, one of the basic dispositions for growth in the spiritual journey. It's more important than penance, if you understand by penance, acts of self-affliction. Repentance, of course, is primarily changing the direction in which we're looking for happiness based on the energy centers that grew up out of our instinctual needs for security, affection, esteem, and power over others.

THE TENDENCY TO POSSESS

Let's look for a second at one other reason why these experiences of the felt Presence of God in ever deepening levels of absorption may be important. And this involves the ramifications or the residue of the emotional programs for happiness in the unconscious. As we saw, the night of sense substantially puts the false self to rest, but not completely. Its residue is still lingering in our spiritual faculties in some degree and is manifested at times by the secret satisfaction that we have, which is really pride, in being the recipient of God's favors or a special mission or vocation. It's all very well to say, "Well, I'm humble and everything I owe to God," but there's still just a little feeling of saying, "Well after all, he did give these graces to me. Heh. Heh ..." —that might indicate something. It's that tendency to possess, even on the spiritual level, that still needs further purification, and this is coming in the night of spirit that we'll speak about soon.

DEFENSE MECHANISMS

Meanwhile, the graces of affirmation and reassurance that emerge from the deep resting in God's Presence are also diminishing the fascination that grows up around the first three energy centers. In other words, these start out as instinctual needs; they become deprived; then the child overcompensates or represses certain stuff in the unconscious; builds up defense mechanisms, a whole marvelous psychological formula for holding itself together and not experiencing certain painful or frightening experiences. At this point, the energy centers form and become centers of motivation around which our feelings, reactions and behavior circulate. But now comes, as we develop the cultural conditioning, a certain interiorization of the values of the culture which reflects back on the energy centers and which tends to move them from simple needs or demands to a glorification of them. In other words, there are some archetypes that correspond to each one of the energy centers that we've been describing, and the Mythic Membership level of cultural conditioning and group identification, and the Mental Egoic period ... all of which have to be disillusioned or have to be demythologized, so to speak. In other words, the archetypes, if we buy into them, mythologize the programs for happiness and give them a basis in glory, so now they become heroic attitudes.

THE ORPHAN

So now, at this level of security and affection, my needs to be taken care of have become glorified. And I've identified, let us say, with the archetype of "The Orphan." And that means, "Take care of me, folks. Here I am. And you not only should take care of me, but you'll be amply rewarded. This is my way of life." And so being an orphan and taken care of becomes a way of life that is justified by this identification with the archetype.

THE WARRIOR

Or again one might develop this power and control center. So now I identify with the "The Warrior". I will fight my way to glory. And to dominate others is a sign of my strength and vigor and

aggressiveness. In other words, our very faults have become virtues in this view, and we develop an idealized image of ourselves that reinforces the diseased program in the first place.

THE WANDERER AND MARTYR

Or, “The Wanderer”, let us say, is an image of independence. And finally, “The Martyr” is the one ...

SELF-GLORIFIED IMAGE OF THE PSEUDO-MARTYR

... who serves everybody, who can't receive favors from anyone, who no one can help, or who joins the cause and works for the group, on and on.

TRUE VALUES

It's these glorified aspects of the image that the night of sense gradually lays to rest by undoing the very basis on which they are founded, namely the drive for security, and the drive for affection-esteem, and the drive for power and control. It is these experiences of God's love that help us to understand emotionally what true values are. And when one tastes the goodness of God and experiences the humility that arises spontaneously from that relationship or experience, then the false archetypes, or the glorified images of our false self system or our cultural conditioning, begin to come gradually down in size and no longer exercise the fascination which held them in place and which we sometimes translated into our religious observances, or into the spiritual journey itself. Notice, then, that it is interior freedom that is the call of the Gospel and the action of grace as we interiorize it, receive the food (the pure bread of faith) and experience something of its delightful taste.