



THE SPIRITUAL JOURNEY

Formation in the Christian Contemplative Life

“Night of Spirit: Towards Transformation, Part 2”

Excerpted from

The Spiritual Journey Part 4, Contemplation: The Divine Therapy

Fr. Thomas Keating

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

ALARMS

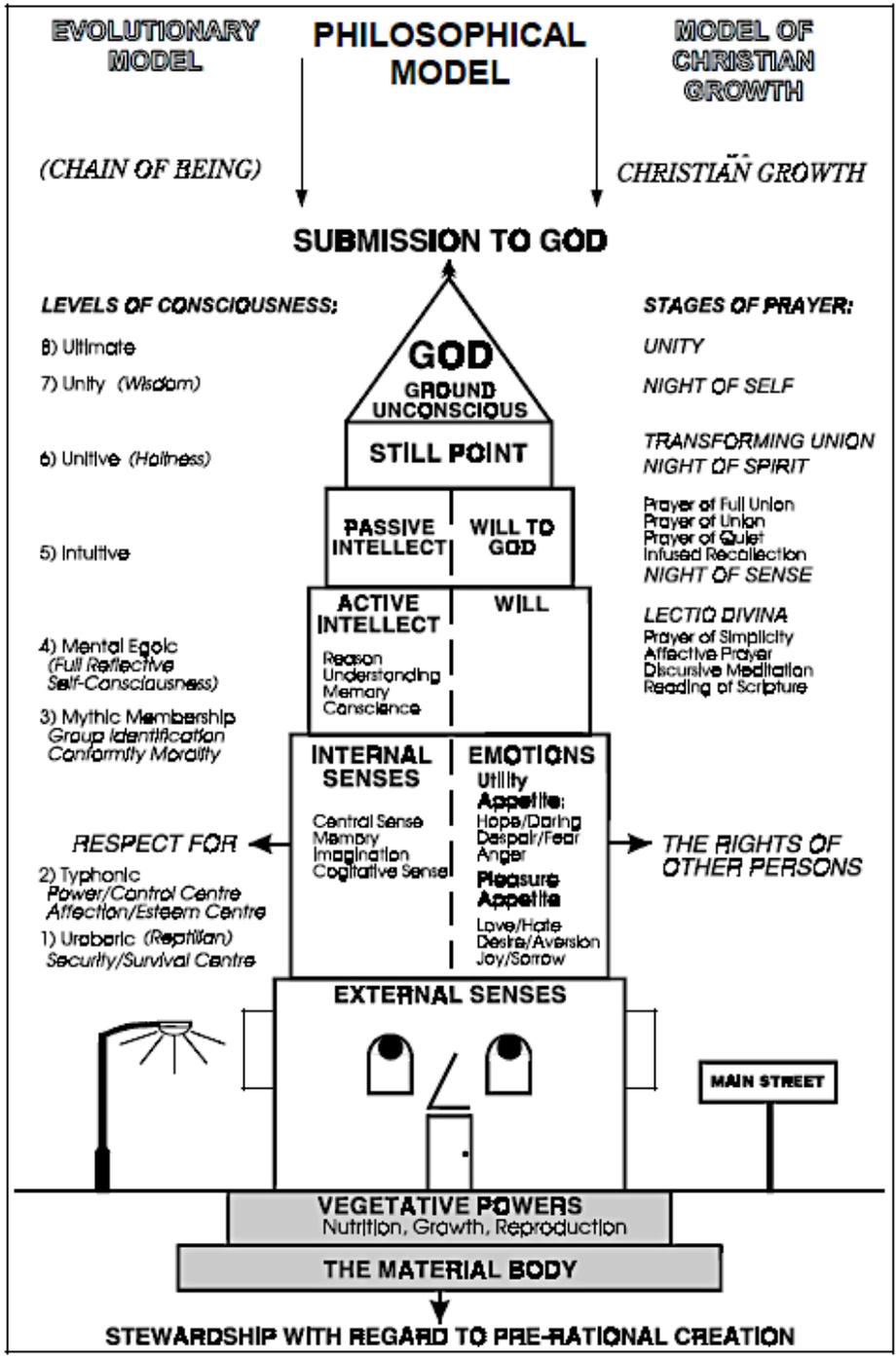
St. John of the Cross teaches that even during some of these wonderful experiences of exuberant mysticism, there are what he calls “alarms.” There’s a certain sense that there’re a few “uncooked seeds” in the unconscious that haven’t been corrected by the night of sense, a certain distractedness of mind, a certain residue of cultural conditioning and of the false self system in general. At some point, the night of spirit begins. And all of these experiences seem to subside and go away, leaving the persons who have been led by that path in a state of intense longing; because, in exact proportion ...

WHEN SPIRITUAL CONSOLATION DIMINISHES, THE PAIN OF OUR SEPARATE IDENTITY INCREASES.

... to the spiritual consolation they’ve experienced, when this is taken away, the existential pain of being a separate identity is reaching out for union with Christ and the interior Presence of God. This is painful because of that situation. Perhaps it’s less painful for those who are led by the back stairs since they never had much of that taste of God’s Presence.

THE NIGHT OF SPIRIT

In any case, it’s extremely important to realize that the night of spirit is essential for the final movement into divine union. Without that experience, the false self has not completely died; and we may fall subject to what we might call, the spiritual archetypes in the unconscious. That is to say, those who have been in this exuberant mysticism are especially susceptible. Suppose, for instance, they are experiencing charismatic gifts, psychic gifts of one kind or another, or are very gifted in teaching, or as a charismatic leader. The very gifts that they have received, which attract other people toward them, or toward their teaching, become a temptation to identify with a



role. So, the archetypes in the spiritual unconscious are the most dangerous, much more dangerous than the ones we were discussing in the last conference where they are simply the glorification of the emotional programs for happiness. In other words, the temptation arises because of one's spiritual attainment, to identify with the role of prophet, enlightened teacher, illumined professor, a martyr, a victim, a charismatic leader, God's gift to humanity.

THE NIGHT OF SPIRIT IS ESSENTIAL FOR THE FINAL MOVEMENT INTO DIVINE UNION

In other words, the night of spirit is that deep purification that reduces those temptations to zero. Because in the night of spirit one experiences oneself as capable of every evil, not that you're inclined to do it so much, but one feels completely dependent on God in order to avoid personal sin or the inconveniences of the habitual hang-ups of our past.

HERE IS A TIME OF DISEASE

The true prophet or martyr, or one who is sent by God does not dominate but serves. Service is the hallmark of someone who is sent. Notice how Jesus in the Gospel emphasizes again and again that he was sent, that he did nothing of himself. And over and over again that's his argument about every accusation about what he's doing: "I'm doing what I see the Father doing ... I have come because I was sent." And then he sends the disciples or apostles. And this is what distinguishes true ministry or true apostleship when it involves special gifts from partial enlightenment. In a partial enlightenment, the temptation to identify with a role is the characteristic trap. In a ministry that is sent by God and inspired by God, one is sent and receives the ministry, and that means that one has to exercise it on God's terms. That's the whole difference. You don't dominate it, you receive it, and you share it humbly insofar as one is sent. And what characterizes the sending of true apostleship is precisely opposition, persecution, disappointment, failure and possibly death, if you're lucky.

GOD DOESN'T SEEM TO CARE ANYMORE

This is the example that Jesus has given us. He did not invoke his psychic powers, his supernatural gifts, or his prerogatives as the Son of God, to defend either his ministry or himself, but allowed himself to experience the utmost of suffering, defeat, rejection as part of being sent, as part of manifesting the mysterious inner nature of the Ultimate Reality that is really beyond any concept of a human being. But his passion and death, as well as his Resurrection, puts an enormous question mark in front of everything we look upon as happiness or success or meaning. This is the temptation that is purified in the night of spirit by the sense of powerlessness, by the sense of being capable of all evil, and the sense of, sometimes when it's very acute, of being abandoned by God, even to the point of having what might be called an impersonal experience of God. In other words, God doesn't seem to care anymore. He's not around. He's not a person, as far as our relationship used to be. Or, if he's a person, he's someone we never knew before. In other words, now God is purifying our ideas of him from all of life up to this point, including some of our ideas that we've developed as a result of the close union experienced in certain gifts of his Presence during the period of exuberant mysticism, if that was our gift.

TO TREAT US LIKE ANYBODY ELSE

You might say, there are five great fruits of the night of the spirit. [1] The first one is this freedom from the danger of succumbing to the attraction of assuming a role because of one's special gifts or charisms that one has been freely given by God. It also purifies even that secret satisfaction in being the chosen one or the recipient of some special gifts of God. In other words, it prepares one just to belong to the human race (as the greatest vocation there is, at least as the basis), and to allow God to treat us like anybody else, and to find him in that treatment rather in any special experience that we might have that singles us out or separates us from humanity. In other words, it's not by climbing up into becoming some celebrity that one fulfils the Gospel, but by the intuition that God is coming down to the lowest possible level in order to grasp humanity even in its alienation from him and to

gradually pull it back. That's really the meaning of the Crucifixion at the deepest level: Christ represents us, the greatest of sinners, on the cross, and identifies with those consequences which is alienation, rejection, failure, the feeling of abandonment by God. And it is in that sacrifice of his divine prerogatives that he becomes the Savior, and the Glorified One, and enters into the Ascension in the fullness of his glory, not by some earthly success or by taking to himself a role that was not given to him.

HUMAN HAPPINESS

The second one [2], and perhaps one that is more frequent (fruit of the night of spirit), since most of us don't experience extraordinary gifts that would make us heir to that temptation of the collective archetypes in the unconscious, especially the more heroic ones. And that is the freedom from the domination of any emotion. That's what characterizes the false self system ... being pushed around by our feelings, either trying to get something we want or to get away from some painful emotion. And thus, the great gift of the night of the spirit is this gradual freeing us from the last traces of domination by emotional swings and moods. It's not a repression, still less a suppression by force of emotions that we don't want. It's rather the acceptance of them, and the integration of them into the spiritual part of our nature where they begin to serve the decisions of reason and will and back them up. And that integration of our emotional life with reason and faith and its subjection to God's will is what St. Thomas Aquinas regards as human happiness; that is, it's doing what is right and good and enjoying doing it. That's the way human beings were meant to be. And this is being restored, gradually, in the night of spirit, by reducing the last traces of our subjection to emotional patterns, moods, or the residue of the emotional programs for happiness on the spiritual level of our being. We already had laid them to rest in the emotional or sense level.

PURIFICATION OF OUR IDEA OF GOD

A third one [3] is the purification of our idea of God. In other words, we may have thought of God as the God of our childhood, or the God of our group, and absorbed unquestioningly some of those attitudes towards him. Now God presents himself as infinite, incomprehensible, and ineffable. We can't even describe the experience of pure faith. We can't tell somebody what we're experiencing. We only know that this immense energy is opening up inside of us that has no name. And it's not exactly personal or impersonal, although it certainly treats us in a personal way. And we feel this longing to identify with it, and to be free, to be at one, and to let go of the selfishness that sort of lingers in our emotional programs for happiness even as we experience the wonderful gifts (if we experience them) of the Prayer of Union or Full Union.

THE FOURTH FRUIT

The purification of our idea of God means ...

HUMAN PROPS ARE NOT ESSENTIAL AND OFTEN FAIL US.

... that faith and hope are purified of the human props. In other words, we might experience at this point some rejection from the group from whom we had drawn our religious and spiritual identity. There may be a break-up with our spiritual director; there may be some other breakdown in our relationships with people on whom we too greatly depended for the meaning of our life or for our spiritual development. And sometimes this can be acute. In other words, sometimes our idea of the

spiritual life is shattered by some event; or our idea of the Church, our idea of Jesus Christ, or even of God himself is turned upside down.

A GIGANTIC QUESTION MARK

And you see these experiences reflected in the great personages of Scripture; not just to mention Jesus, whose whole life was built on his personal union with the Father, and that was his message; and yet, in his last moments, we see him experiencing that relationship as a gigantic question mark: “Why are you abandoning me?” And in that quotation, he speaks of “My God ...” when all the other times he spoke of “Abba,” the personal Father. And so, Jesus, in his last hours, was faced with the ultimate shattering experience of the relationship on which he had built his life and ministry.

SHATTERING EXPERIENCE

Or again, take Job. Here’s Job, who was the model of perfection, and was admired by everybody, and all of a sudden everything: his property, his family, his reputation and even his bodily health, were all taken away in a few days. What kind of a God is this who does that to you? Well he complains, for any number of chapters, about such treatment. But the point is he would never have learned who God was, who describes himself in the last chapter through any number of enigmas, unless he had gone through that shattering experience which had brought to an end his conception of how God functions or treats his friends.

A RAY OF DARKNESS

This business of accepting God on his own terms, just as he is, is the work of the night of spirit and the purification of pure faith. Now we believe in God because of how he reveals himself to us without asking him to reveal himself in any special way. In other words, it’s to allow God to be himself, just as he is, without knowing who or what that is. Hence, it’s a total act of self-surrender and abandonment that is being developed and made available to us in the night of spirit, where the divine light is so pure that it is imperceptible to any of our faculties; hence, it’s experienced as a ray of darkness, according to John of the Cross. And since there is no personal experience or any props that we used to rely on ... they have all been gradually taken away ... this is a moment of existential doubt in the extreme for some people. Because now it’s God (let him be whatever he is) and you’re willing to accept him on that basis.

THE CONTENT IN PURE FAITH

Hence, trust also grows; trust, not based on one’s good deeds in the past, or one’s role, or one’s mission, or anything about the self, [5] but simply trust in the infinite mercy of God because he is infinite, and mercy reaches out to weakness and to need of its very nature. And so, one begins to be content with this possession in pure faith of a God who is infinitely merciful and infinitely trustworthy. The divine love is infused in that seed bed of submission, self-surrender, abandonment, and patience.

THE DAWN IS NOT FAR OFF

And this is the factor that is transforming, and which gradually brings God’s servants through the dark night, maintains their commitment. And eventually the same fire, as John of the Cross calls it, that is sometimes experienced painfully in the night of spirit begins to become soft and gentle and

loving and glorifying. And this is the sign that one is emerging through the night and the dawn is not far off, a dawn in which the false self has finally died and the big “I” of our ego diminishes to a very small “i” with its selfishness and concerns. And the great “I AM” of scripture, that is to say, the capital “I” becomes the divine life within us, the risen life of Christ, and the motivation of the Spirit suggesting what to do in every moment under the inspiration of divine love (self-giving love) rather than under the motivation of self-interest or selfishness, even in its very moderate form. Thus, the Divine Plan seems to be to transform human nature into the divine, not by creating it with some special role or giving it some kind of tremendous powers; but rather in enabling it to live ordinary life with extraordinary motivation. And the motivation is showing love, compassion, forgiveness, kindness, concern, even at great sacrifice of one’s own interests bodily, mentally, or even spiritually.

APATHEIA

What characterizes the Transforming Union is interesting because now the emotions, with their domination, have subsided. The emotional swings disappear. And one is aware that what one thought was one’s emotions really were not them, but one’s interpretation of them through the eyes or the feelings of the false self system. Now the emotions are just as strong as ever, more so, but they have no drag and they don’t stimulate one towards any kind of selfish activity. Hence, one is still aware that one could sin, but there is no reason to, no interest, no drag, no stimulation away from these movements of divine love. And hence the freedom from the false self system and the emotional domination is complete. The Fathers of the Desert had a word for this experience: they called it apatheia, which is sometimes mistranslated as indifference. It’s not at all indifference. It is a tremendous concern for everything that is... without an emotional involvement from the false self system.

OUR ENERGY TO SERVE THEM IS NOW FREE

Hence one is free to devote oneself and to be present to everyone and their needs without getting unduly involved in emotional melodrama or involvement with them, so that one remains free to reflect back to them the truth, and to be present to them without filtering their problems through the smoked glasses of our own. Hence in the Transforming Union, one is present to people at the deepest level, and perceives the Presence of God, Christ in them, and the energy to serve them is now free. And one longs to be able to share with them something of this freedom without any anxiety, or without trying to change them or force them. One simply has the divine life to offer to anybody who wants it. And one humbly offers this in submission to the Risen Life of Christ and the gifts of the Spirit which suggest what is to be done or not done in incredible detail all day long as the Transforming Union develops into a permanent state.

STEPPING STONES

Now that union, as we said, is not an experience but a restructuring of consciousness which enables a new dimension of reality to become spontaneously present to the other three-dimensional world that we are normally accustomed to. So, it’s a way of being in the world, a way of transcending everything in the world, without leaving it. And the freedom is the non-possessive attitude because there is no “I” anymore that’s interested to possess anything. Now that doesn’t mean that one doesn’t use the good things of life, but they become stepping stones, now, to the love of God and to God’s Presence which now begins to filter from this still-point, or from our inmost being, through the other faculties, purifying our senses, so that now we are sensitive to God’s Presence through

every experience including the experience of the senses, the experience of our own reasoning, imagination and will.

**SERVICE OF OTHERS IS AT THE
HEART OF REALITY; AND IS A DEEP HUMAN NEED.**

Thus, everything becomes transparent.

THEY TOO WILL BECOME SERVANTS

We often think of God as the Pantocrator dominating everybody. Well, I guess he is in charge of everything. At this same time, notice how He exercises that authority and dominion. It is by serving everybody all day long; otherwise we wouldn't be here. He's created this planet with exquisite care, which couldn't have existed with a few changes of Fahrenheit at the time of the Big Bang. He takes care of us with air, food, people, all day long. Service is who Ultimate Reality is, but service without looking for any return just because that's the way it is. That's what He is. And those in Transforming Union are beginning to find that out. Hence, they too will become servants, not dominators. It's this, then, that is the term of the first part of the Christian journey. Beyond that, which is the normal Christian life, the Transforming Union continues to transform into ourselves all the human relationships with God, ourselves, and other people.