



THE SPIRITUAL JOURNEY

Formation in the Christian Contemplative Life

“Night of Sense: The Biblical Desert, Part 1”

Excerpted from

The Spiritual Journey Part 4, Contemplation: The Divine Therapy

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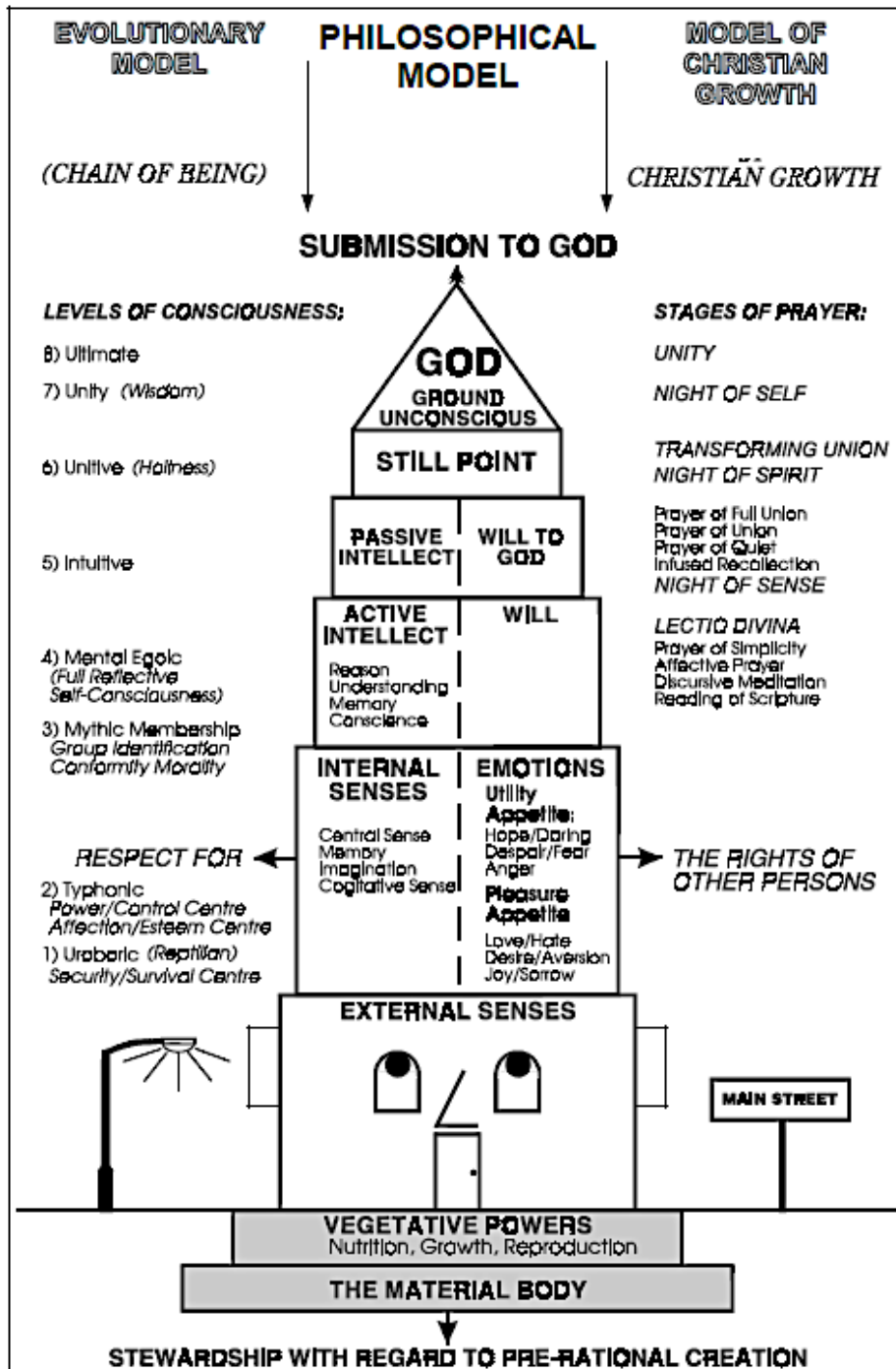
[Evolutionary, Existential and Philosophical Models Chart appears on page 2 of transcript.]

VALUES

The Philosophical Model [pointing to the middle part of the chart] is designed to show us the ideal way that human nature is expected to function, with the lower faculties of sense and emotions subject to the reason and will. The Evolutionary Model, which is on the left side of the chart, is how the human family as a whole evolved to its present state of consciousness. We saw how developmental psychology teaches that each human being recapitulates the entire experience of the human family as it gradually climbs through these lower levels of consciousness to mental egoic or rational self-reflective self-consciousness. We also saw how this development became malformed in the Existential Model. The Philosophical Model and the Evolutionary Model are really ideals of how human nature should be or how it should gradually unfold. The Existential Model is the way it actually happens. And this is the experience of what we call, in the Christian tradition, original sin. This is our experience of desiring the wrong things or the good things too much. Or, if we find out what true values are, not to have the strength or courage to pursue those values. And so, we have concupiscence, the desire for the wrong things; illusion, not knowing what true values are; and weakness of the will, which is when you know what those values are, you can't do it.

THE CHRISTIAN MODEL

We now come to a description of the Christian Model – which is on the right of our chart – of growth and transformation. And the heart of this model is precisely the Contemplative Prayer that addresses the human condition just as it is. We've laid out these different models in order to have a broad understanding of the human condition to which Contemplative Prayer and the Christian understanding of growth and transformation addresses itself. A word here about the malformation. This develops in our journey from childhood to the age of reason or early adolescence. And during this period, as we experience privation of the instinctual needs of human nature



that are experienced as needs for security, affection, esteem, and power and control, these privations gradually become demands, or needs, or shoulds, to compensate for these felt privations by various programs for happiness that develop into energy centers, and eventually into the whole program of the false self system, which is an alternate way of surviving or growing up when the normal unfolding intended by God and nature does not happen. And it doesn't ever happen, except in a few extraordinary people: The Blessed Virgin Mary and maybe St. Joseph, but certainly not us. Our experience, then, as we approach full self-reflective self-consciousness, is the experience of an uprooted identity, an identity that is experienced as alienation from ourselves, from other people,

from God. And we come to this full existential separate self-sense without the experience of union with God. And this gives rise to all the alternate or substitute or pseudo ways of finding happiness in a heart that is existentially alone and afraid.

THE INVITATION OF CHRIST TO FOLLOW HIM

The traditional way in which the Christian tradition presents the healing of this malformation of human development, begins with the sense of the invitation of Christ to follow him. And where is Jesus going? He is returning to the bosom of the Ultimate Reality whom he experienced as Abba, the Father. The Father of infinite compassion and concern for all living beings. Christ, then, is the expression or manifestation of this divine love, this concern. And in calling us into friendship and to following him through Baptism and faith, we begin the process of healing, growth and transformation that leads to divine union and the re-rooting of our isolated self-identity in its Source and in its union and unity with other people and the rest of the cosmos. This center or heart of the Christian journey, in its first phase depends on the development of the personal love of Christ.

PROGRESS IN THE CHRISTIAN JOURNEY DEPENDS ON DEVELOPING THE PERSONAL LOVE OF CHRIST

THE CALL OF FRIENDSHIP

In other words, prayer is relationship. And as relationship, it moves through stages of acquaintanceship and friendliness. The process that our tradition has hallowed, although other methods of developing the same kind of relationship with God are present in the tradition, is *Lectio Divina*, which means reading the book we believe to be inspired by God, in which God presents us with his own self disclosure as a beginning or as topics of conversation to begin our acquaintanceship. Obviously when one is getting acquainted with anyone, one needs to feel that you know who this person is. And so, through using the Gospel texts and examples of Jesus as the means of getting acquainted (as topics of conversation), the awkwardness of any relationship in its beginning gradually gives way to friendliness, at-ease-ness. And at some point, this at-ease-ness enables us to begin to disclose ourselves, our feelings, aspirations, trials, failures. And in this way acquaintanceship becomes friendliness. This in turn begins to invite us into friendship. Friendship always involves commitment. You can walk away from a casual acquaintanceship, but friendship you can't walk away from. And it involves a commitment, the failure of which brings heartbreak. And so, the moment that we are inspired or attracted to feel the call of friendship takes place when spontaneous or affective prayer has reached a certain habitual state in our daily *Lectio Divina* period. And we feel called to this commitment of friendship to follow Christ in the spiritual journey, wherever this might lead.

THE ATTRACTION TO REST IN THE FRIENDSHIP

This development in prayer of spontaneous self-disclosure through aspirations, begins to simplify, and the attraction to rest in the friendship, in the presence of God increases and thus moments of interior silence, quiet, tranquility, alternate with the effort to converse, to reflect with Christ about the topics of conversation suggested in the reading of the Gospel. As this attraction increases, this interior resting consists in waiting upon God with few words, as conversation becomes communion. It's the mature relationship that most people who are deeply in love, or growing in love, begin to experience; that is, it's the presence to one another that becomes more important than the words,

the topics of conversation, and this begins to give a deep enjoyment in sharing each other's presence together. And this resting in God, communing in God, is the traditional meaning of Contemplative Prayer.

AN EXPERIENCE OF GOD'S ABSENCE

At this point, or perhaps concomitantly with it, the enjoyment of this presence and the satisfaction in reflection in the liturgy, the benefits from a ministry or of service in the Christian community or any number of other devout exercises that are marvelously varied in the Christian tradition, begin to lose their "oomph," so to speak, or their excitement, or their satisfaction, and this is the beginning of what John of the Cross calls the Night of Sense, which is an experience of God's absence rather than his presence. So that this period, this daily period of encountering Christ in Lectio Divina and its various stages – suggested here in ascending order – [pointing to Lectio Divina on right side of chart], brings about an ever-deepening concern and love to maintain that presence and to deepen it. And it's just at this point when prayer has become simplified and resting in the presence or the embrace of God has been achieved, at least from time to time, that this mysterious and pervasive absence of God begins to occur in prayer and sometimes spreads out into the rest of one's life. This is really a marvelous grace. It's the beginning of a deeper union with Christ. But most people don't experience it that way. We're not about to let go of the practices that we found so beneficial and encouraging and consoling. And so, when this dry bread of faith, the biblical purification of the desert, begins to open up within us, most people scream, or complain, or worry that something has gone wrong. In other words, what characterizes this period of growth is the transition from a superficial kind of spiritual nourishment, what might almost be called "junk food"; the food, that is to say, that gives us a certain hopped-up feeling, either over the music in the liturgy, or some text that we like, or whatever that encourages and excites our emotional life, this might be called, at least, superficial food or bread, the divine bread of faith with butter or jam or peanut butter, if you will.

SMACKING A CHANGE OF DIET

The bread is much more nourishing, much more substantial. And so, God, who has invited us to follow him, which means to keep on growing, invites us to a change of diet, a change of nourishment. And this period, then, of transition is not unlike a baby being weaned from a mother's milk at the breast. It doesn't like this, and it takes a while for the child to adjust to more solid food. And it is this solid food that will lead to more substantial growth. Its bones need protein to become more vigorous and energetic. Similarly; here, the divine love is sort of pushing us away just a little bit so that we can have a space to evaluate the nourishment we were receiving and to perceive and adjust our taste to this new food which is more substantial, and which will carry us through the difficult parts of the journey. As the journey lengthens, it goes through different kinds of topography and one needs strong food for the biblical desert as one's purification deepens.

PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY FOR OURSELVES

Now what God is calling us to, in the Night of Sense, then, is personal responsibility for ourselves, and our response to the invitation of Christ to follow him and also our response to the people we live with, and ultimately to the whole human race and its redemption. It's a growing up process. The Night of Sense heals some of the damage or malformation that is taking place in our ordinary growing up from childhood to early adolescence. As the Night deepens, it calls forth more of a reaction from our instinctual needs and the core of selfishness that lies at the center of those instinctual needs, which, although they were good in themselves, because of the privations we felt,

have developed these over-compensatory demands which are fantastic. Thus, the security needs of someone who as a child felt or was deprived of its basic necessities of that fragile period, will lead to a program, or an energy center, in which happiness is understood, on the emotional level, to be achievable only through the maximum and ever-increasing possession of security symbols in the culture. “Fantastic” meaning that no matter how much security, it can never satisfy a felt need which is unlimited

A LACK OF SATISFACTION

All of these programs were formed in early infancy when reason was not in effect. And its reason that moderates the instinctual drives. Since that was not present at that early age, the instinctual drives build into energy centers, basically selfish, around which our thoughts, reactions, feelings, and behavior rotate like planets around the sun. The selfishness, then, is the center of gravity of the motivation. Now in the Night of Sense, when we experience dryness in our relationships with God, we also experience a lack of satisfaction in these former means by which we desperately sought for happiness or pleasure. The result is that these energy centers get terribly dried out and begin to make a kind of last stand to resist this slow death, you might say, or this shift in our value system from values that are largely fantastic to values that are truly human and substantial and which represent the proper integration of our nature as it was intended by the Creator; or, if you prefer, the gradual unfolding of each level of consciousness into the other levels of human development which happen to be more mature. And it's this integration that leads to human wholeness, not the battle to get more and more out of life in the way of security or of one of these other centers. So, when the security center is starved for what it wants most, which is the security of certitude, then this temptation that St. John of the Cross describes as “dizziness,” arises with some force. This is the inability to decide anything, to know anything for sure, doubts about faith, doubts about everything that used to be our basis or our security for our spiritual journey, especially satisfaction or the feeling of benefit in religious exercises, observances, rituals, readings, etc.

A KIND OF LAST STAND

When the divine light strikes the second energy center, that develops in early infancy, which is our pleasure, affection/esteem needs, now become programs for happiness to get bigger and better pleasures, esteem and affection out of life—what happens when this is dried out? And when there's no satisfaction coming from, no pleasure coming from either spiritual activities, or the old games that we used to play to “hop up” or to get some enjoyment or satisfaction out of life. When this desire for pleasure, which is instinctual, is dried out for a long enough period of time in this Night, then nature reaches out as a kind of last stand to feel something, anything in this desert, because it's so desperate for some satisfaction. And since sexual pleasure is close at hand, and for most people, is most pleasurable, intense temptations may arise of a sexual character which St. John of the Cross calls “the spirit of fornication.” Actually, it's the divine light simply focusing on one area of basic selfishness so that we may experience inwardly and face that particular mixed motivation or that dark side of our personality which prefers our own satisfaction, when the chips are down, to the rights and needs of others. In other words, these energy centers are the sources of personal sin. They're not sins in themselves; they're simply the human condition. And it is precisely their malformation or their unreasonable or fantastic demand that God in his great mercy is healing by this medicine of the Night of Sense.

IT PERFUMED SPANISH NIGHTS

Incidentally, the Night of Sense is not a pejorative term. In John of the Cross, it means one of those charming, fascinating, perfumed Spanish nights in which there are many stars, but also a certain amount of darkness. So, from time to time in this Night, there are moments of very deep rest in prayer in which once again one feels, but now at a deeper level, the presence of God, the presence of Christ as the Beloved, or as some insight or deeper insight into one's oneness with other people and with God.

A THE NEED FOR POWER AND CONTROL

The third energy center that gets special attention in the Night of Sense is the need for power and control over events, other people, our own lives, or even God, if you could get away with it. And so here, when one enters into this Night, one begins to realize that God is behind everything that happens in life. Faith is now strong enough so that the painful situations we experience, or difficult people, can no longer be blamed for the things that they do. We perceive that God seems to allow us to get stuck in the ordinary vicissitudes of life. And our previous deepening relation with him and our commitment of friendship tends to make us think, kind of naively, that now that we're serving God, he owes it to us to take better care of us than others, to give us a red-carpet service, to heal all our trials, to make sure nothing unfortunate happens to us, that we never fall down or break a bone, planes always leave on time, and other ridiculous expectations. But somehow, they're there in our unconscious mind. And so, we now feel, in a situation when we're no longer able to project our feelings on what others have done to us, or the situation, we now get angry at God because we realize that he is in charge of everything that's taking place in our lives.

THIS TREAT US LIKE AN ORDINARY PERSON

One of the great fruits of this Night of Sense is humility in which we begin to assume once again our place as a member of the human family, suffering all the human conditions that anybody else does. And now we allow God to treat us like an ordinary person without expecting special treatment. But now we know, as we accept that situation, that at a deeper level, God is actually giving us even greater protection, because as we go through a few impossible situations, we find that somehow God always provides us with a way out. And little by little, as we accept the disintegration of the false self system which the Night of Sense is gradually, gently, bringing to an end, then the levels of prayer [pointing to the list above Night of Sense on chart] that St. Teresa describes in "The Interior Castle" may begin to unfold. The Night of Sense, then, is designed to bring about the death of the false self, the dismantling of the energy centers, and the enormous freedom of being able to decide what to do with our lives, with everything that happens, without the compulsions, the routines, and the fixations of the false self system.