

---

# MUSINGS ON THE DARK NIGHT OF THE SOUL: INSIGHTS FROM ST. JOHN OF THE CROSS ON A DEVELOPMENTAL SPIRITUALITY

JOHN H. COE  
*Rosemead School of Psychology*  
*Biola University*

---

This article investigates the nature of the dark night of the soul from a biblical, psychological, and experiential perspective, particularly in the context of St. John of the Cross' "developmental spirituality." As there is a "developmental psychology" that provides an understanding of the dynamics at work in a person's life as they progress through life, so there is a "developmental spirituality" that investigates the various dynamics involved in the spiritual growth of the human spirit across time and the diverse manners in which the Holy Spirit works within the person at different times. Hopefully, the reader will better understand his or her own developmental spiritual life (and, if applicable, that of his or her client) since conversion with regard to what God is doing in the dark nights of the soul, and thus learn how to cooperate with the Spirit who is doing work in the depths of the human heart.

---

God who is everywhere, never leaves us. Yet He seems sometimes to be present, sometimes absent. If we do not know Him well, we do not realize that He may be more present to us when He is absent than when He is present.

Thomas Merton, *No Man is an Island*

At some point in our spiritual pilgrimage, we or our clients have cried out to God or wondered in our deep: "God, where are you? What is wrong with you? Why are you so distant? God, what is wrong with me? Why do I feel so dry inside? Why do I not seem to care the way I used to about you? What have I done wrong?" I have heard these confusing cries from my own heart as

---

Requests for reprints may be sent to John H. Coe, PhD, Rosemead School of Psychology, Biola University, 13800 Biola Avenue, La Mirada, CA 90639. Electronic mail may be sent to john\_coe@peter.biola.edu

well as from many students at the school of psychology, the seminary, and undergraduate college. The experience is typically quite confusing, particularly for struggling Christians who feel that they alone are at fault for their spiritual dryness, and their guilt feelings are often reinforced by other Christians who tell them that they are indeed responsible for their distance from God.

This article argues that these times in the believer's spiritual pilgrimage often correspond to what the ancient Christian spiritual writers called a 'dark night of the soul' in which the Spirit secretly does a deep work in the human spirit—a work that is so profound but feels so foreign to the Christian's experience that it is often interpreted as the absence of God. Thus, it is helpful for both client and therapist to be able to understand what in fact God is doing in these times.

This article investigates the nature of spiritual dark nights from a biblical, psychological, and experiential perspective, particularly in the context of St. John of the Cross' developmental spirituality. There is a developmental *psychology* that provides an understanding of the dynamics at work as a person progresses through life, encountering diverse hurdles at each stage. Along the same lines, a developmental *spirituality* provides an understanding of the various dynamics involved in the spiritual progress of the believer through the Holy Spirit across time. Understanding a developmental spirituality allows one to better (a) understand what God has been doing in one's developmental spiritual life since conversion, particularly in difficult dark nights of the soul, (b) learn how to cooperate with the Spirit and find true rest in this darkness, and (c) learn how the Holy Spirit employs the

spiritual disciplines at various developmental places and why the disciplines such as prayer, Bible reading, meditation and fellowship may have a qualitatively different feel at different stages in one's journey. The goal is to assist clients and ourselves to be more open to the Spirit as the Teacher and personal Counselor who is doing profound work in the depths of the human heart.

### THE IDEA OF A SPIRITUAL DEVELOPMENTAL HISTORY

Theologians, pastors, and devotional writers over the centuries interested in the spiritual life have been captivated with the idea that each believer has a spiritual developmental history, that the Holy Spirit is on a journey with the human spirit, working in diverse manners at different times in a person's life (Garrigou-Lagrange, 1977). They not only witnessed this in their own lives and those of their disciples, but relied on certain biblical texts for guidance.

Perhaps the most explicit scriptural text on the subject of a developmental spirituality, which has been recognized and commented on over the centuries by the Church, is in 1 John chapter 2. The text reads as follows:

I am writing to you, little children, because your sins are forgiven you for His name's sake. I am writing to you, fathers, because you know Him who has been from the beginning. I am writing to you, young men, because you have overcome the evil one. I have written to you, children, because you know the Father. I have written to you, fathers, because you know Him who has been from the beginning. I have written to you, young men, because you are strong, and the word of God abides in you, and you have overcome the evil one. (1 Jn. 2:12-14)

The book of 1 John is probably an epistle written to the church at Ephesus, of which John had been the pastor for a number of years. At the time of the writing, John had been gone for some time. In this section, he writes as if he and the readers are familiar with who and what he is talking about. For us, however, his comments appear cryptic. Who are these little children? Who are these spiritual young adults and fathers?

What does seem clear is that John had in mind at least three developmental stages: spiritual children, spiritual adolescents, and spiritual adults. Notice that the first stage (spiritual children) is characterized by a sense of forgiveness of sin and of knowing God. This points to a personal spiritual awakening in which religion has the feel of freedom and personal relationship: My sins are forgiven; I know the

Father; I have a relationship with God. The second stage (spiritual adolescence) has quite a different texture than the first. This stage appears to be characterized by a sense of struggle, a sense of wrestling with the evil one. The word of God is not merely something to which one joyfully assents; rather, it abides in or is integrated in one's person, with the result of overcoming spiritual adversity. The third stage (spiritual maturity) is the most cryptic of all. John merely says that the spiritual father (and mother) has come to know Him who is from the beginning. Most commentators say that this may have something to do with coming to know the sovereign God who rules over history from the beginning. In the case of the spiritually mature, they have seen God work His will in their lives: He has taken their spouses, friends, and children; He has worked in a way that has seemed confusing at times. In any case, these spiritual fathers and mothers have come to recognize through time that God is God of their lives, that God's will, not their own, is the central reality. He can do as he pleases, and is in fact invited to do so.

Though we do not get much from the Apostle John by way of commentary on these stages or seasons of life, the ancient Christian spiritual writers did agree that John had in mind some kind of spiritual developmental history. In particular, for our purposes, they noticed that the middle stage appeared to be a transitioning period of wrestling and struggling, which is clearly distinguished from the beginning excitement and joy and from the later sense of spiritual confidence that comes from a life of trials and walking with God. For writers over the centuries, from Augustine of the 5th century to St. Bernard of Clairvaux of the 12th century, the concept of a dark night of the soul had emerged in the literature, culminating with the thoughts of St. John of the Cross in the 16th century (Merton, 1951; Garrigou-Lagrange, 1977).

This article will focus upon the dark night of the soul in St. John of the Cross, adding illustrative comments and additions throughout. A brief outline of St. John's developmental theory of spirituality is provided, followed by a more in-depth discussion of the earlier stages (typically called Purgation) leading up to the first dark night of the senses. Other texts can be explored for a more detailed treatment of this topic (cf. Kavanaugh, 1999; Dubay, 1989; Payne, 1992; Merton, 1951).

## A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF A DEVELOPMENTAL SPIRITUALITY

In order to better understand the first dark night in its context, it is helpful to locate it within the following brief outline of the various developmental stages which, in turn, correspond to various types of love for God.

1. Purgation: The Love of God for Pleasure's Sake
  - (a) The Beginner
  - (b) The Spiritual Sins of the Beginner
  - (c) The Dark Night of the Senses
2. Illumination: The Love of God for Love's Sake
  - (a) Illumination
  - (b) The Dark Night of the Spirit
3. Union: The Love of God for God's Sake

The three developmental stages correspond to three types of love for God. The first stage (Purgation) corresponds to the love of God for pleasure's sake. According to St. John of the Cross, the person comes to God as a beginner or spiritual infant for the sake of pleasure. God condescends to the pre-conversion characterological level and meets the believer in his or her habituated need for pleasure. This love is likened to early infant-mother attachment which is object oriented, but to some degree characterized also by pleasure. As necessary as this is for spiritual development, the sins and vices of the person's former manner of life once governed by pleasure become intermingled in one's spiritual life, resulting in the sins of the beginner. As a result, God must purge the believer of these spiritual vices, particularly of spiritual autonomy and the need for spiritual pleasure as well as the habit of measuring the presence and favor of God by spiritual feelings or senses. This work of God on the believer's behalf is the first dark night of the senses.

This first dark night opens the way for the second major shift or stage of growth (Illumination) in which God is loved less for pleasure sake and more for a love in-and-of-itself. This is a love based upon a real relationship between two persons, more along the lines of a marriage than a romance, or of love between child and parent. This, in turn, leads to the second dark night of the spirit in which the soul must be cured even of wanting God for the sake of experiencing mutual love. Instead, the soul must learn to love God just for Himself in such a manner that He, and not the need to be loved, is the center of all things. This latter experience might best be likened to Jesus' experience at Gethsemane in which He ulti-

mately chose the love of God for God's sake. For Jesus, the will of the Father would be more central than His love for conscious fellowship with the Father, or the love of God for the sake of love. We will not have time to focus upon these later stages but will limit our discussion to Purgation, paying particular attention to understanding the first dark night of the senses that most believers seem to encounter.

## INTRODUCTORY COMMENTS

Prior to discussing the stage of Purgation, a brief word about how the spiritual stages develop and their relationship to psychological development is warranted. St. John of the Cross presents these stages developmentally, though not necessarily in a linear or chronological sense. The stages have to do with growth into greater love, and are only roughly linear insofar as growth in love and maturity has some chronological dimension. Interestingly, spiritual development by the Spirit begins in the midst of natural development and thus is to some degree impinged upon by the believer's psychological development up to that point in time. In the ancient's terms, grace perfects nature, meaning that the Spirit is doing the transformation upon and within the human soul. Thus, the work of the Spirit takes place within a natural, developmental psychological history already in process. This is not to be understood reductionistically by explaining spiritual development in psychological terms only. However, the psychological factors and development do, to some degree, determine the material with which the Spirit will do His transforming work, what pathology is there to work with, and what natural capacities must be transformed for the glory of God. Consequently, the Spirit's work may differ from individual to individual, depending upon the person's psychological developmental history.

Nevertheless, the ancients noticed that many of their disciples did experience to some degree a developmental spiritual history that had some linear dimensions to it. They were quick to qualify, however, that these somewhat linear stages of experience may manifest themselves as seasons in a person's life, which may work in a cyclical rather than linear fashion. In either case, their point was that the Spirit has intentions that are common for all believers, that they grow and mature in their love for God. Interestingly, I have observed in many discussions of this material that believers who convert later in life tend to relate to these stages quite literally and linearly,

while those raised in the church appear to be more split on whether these stages apply chronologically or seasonally.

Finally, it is important to keep in mind throughout this article that the goal is not for the believer to understand a developmental spirituality for its own sake, or as a tool to enable one to make the spiritual life work in the power of the self. God's specific goal in a dark night is to bring one to a deeper knowledge of one's need for Him and a deeper embracing of Jesus' statement, "Apart from Me, you can do nothing" (Jn. 15:5). What does not feel very spiritual in a dark night, in the believer's dryness and spiritual doldrums, turns out to be a profound work of the Spirit that acquaints the Christian with the truth of him- or herself. Because this is a life-long journey, the goal is for the Christian therapist and client to learn how to track the Spirit's ministry throughout the seasons in life, to learn to cooperate with His work and intentions, and to depend upon and be filled with Him.

#### PURGATION: THE LOVE OF GOD FOR PLEASURE'S SAKE

*The Beginner.* St. John of the Cross does not necessarily think of the beginner as a new convert, but as one who is going through a period in which faith comes alive. In cases such as my own, that period was rather obvious. I was converted at age nineteen, at which time my faith became personally integrated in what seemed to be a moment's time. I *felt* alive to Christ. I *felt* like a new creature. I *felt* loved by God. With respect to those raised in the church, however, the beginner stage may not refer to the initial point of conversion, but later (typically in junior high, high school, or college) at a time when the faith is personally internalized as the prized possession of the possessor. This is often a time when one experiences a certain degree of excitement or zest over the faith, when God seems so relationally present, when Christianity becomes alive and feels good. The beginner seems to be in the Apostle John's first stage (spiritual children), a time of personal awakening to *feeling* the forgiveness of one's sins, a time when Christianity does not feel like a religion but an exciting relationship.

This spiritual awakening is characterized by St. John of the Cross as a love of God for pleasure's sake, a spirituality characterized by pleasure. As St. John of the Cross states,

It must be known, then, that the soul, after it has been definitely converted to the service of God, is, as a rule, spiritually nurtured and caressed by God, even as is the tender child by

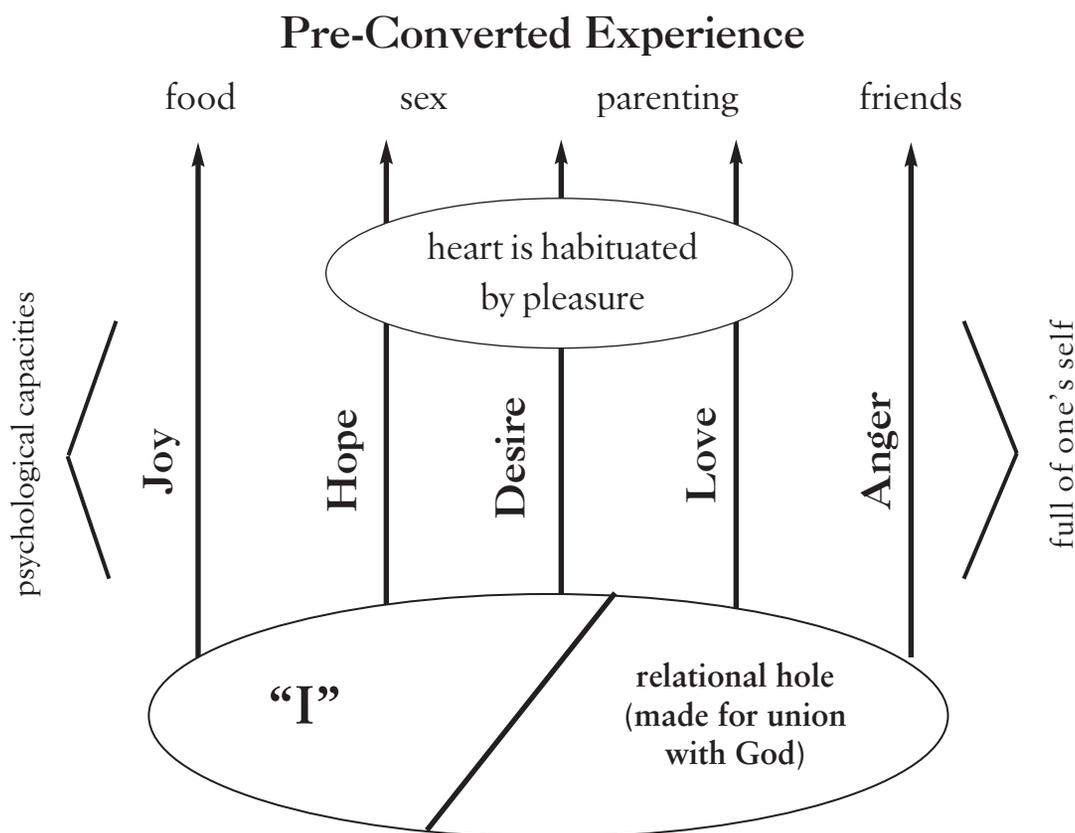
its loving mother. . . . The loving mother is like the grace of God, for, as soon as the soul is regenerated by its new warmth and fervor for the service of God, He treats it in the same way; He makes it to find spiritual milk, sweet and delectable, in all things of God, without any labor of its own, and also great pleasure in spiritual exercises, for here God is giving to it the breast of His tender love, even as to a tender child. (St. John of the Cross, 1584/1990, p. 38)

God provides spiritual infants with pleasure regarding spiritual things in accordance with their pre-converted appetite for pleasure in finite objects. This intimacy is felt as relational intimacy.

There is certainly a new affection for God as object at the core of the believer. This is what it means to be a new creature, to have the indwelling Holy Spirit at the core of human personality, bearing witness that one is a child of God, giving a new expulsive love for God from the heart (see the Apostle Paul's discussion throughout Rom. 8). Nevertheless, God must also meet the beginner at the developmental level of his character and desire for pleasure. Thus, God gives to the beginner the bottle of spiritual pleasure, without any labor on their part, in much the same way as a parent gives her child a bottle of milk to satisfy his hunger. The truth is that spiritual infants do not as yet have the characterological growth to love God with a more mature love. They *require* spiritual pleasure in their love in order to grow.

Thus, the spiritual infant's heart, from a characterological perspective, is still to a great degree habituated by the old sin habits that reside in the members of the body (Rom. 6:13). Though a new creature in Christ with a new orientation of love for God, there are still the old ways of the heart governed and habituated by pleasure and self-love that only time and submission to the Spirit will transform.

Notice the following diagram (Figure 1) representing the pre-converted person and his or her psychological structures. The core of the pre-converted self depicted at the bottom of the diagram is in a state of spiritual death, made for union with God, but in fact alienated from the life of God which is existentially felt as a deep loneliness in the human spirit (Eph. 2:1ff). In general, the unconverted are driven by a profoundly distorted love for self and of pleasure in order to fill that relational void in their deep. Even pre-converted natural virtues, object attachments, and fortitude that enable unbelievers to postpone gratification are arguably driven and formed by these inordinate loves and pleasures. The result is that all of their psychological capacities for



*Figure 1. Pre-converted experience.*

hope, love, desire, anger, kindness, etc. (the vertical lines) are to a great degree governed by this deep pleasure as they reach out for finite goods of nature such as friends, food, money, family, and education.

Notice the following diagram (Figure 2) with reference to the psychology of the convert or beginner. The new convert as a spiritual babe is still generally driven in his heart by the same motivations that governed life prior to conversion (or in the earlier days of childhood for those raised in the church). The habituated psychological dynamics of the soul have not altered nearly as much as the beginner may imagine. There is a new deep concern and love for God at the core of the person; the convert is a new creature in which the new manner of life has begun in the heart (2 Cor. 5:17).

However, converts or beginners often mistake this new love for characterological change. They do not yet know as they will in the dark night just how much they are the same as before. Therefore, God meets them where they are developmentally with

the bottle of spiritual pleasure, providing the same feelings that drove his or her pre-converted self with respect to finite objects. Thus, the spiritual disciplines are often felt as very pleasant, enriching, and zestful. The beginner enjoys going to church, reading the scriptures and praying. This is a wonderful time of beginning growth, of forming attachments to new spiritual objects of pleasure, and of making new alliances and allegiances.

However, because the heart has not had that much time to change, it is still much governed and habituated by pleasure. Even though a beginner might be a psychological adult, he is still a spiritual baby when it comes to knowing how to depend upon the spirit. True change of the heart's habits will be a slow, painful learning process that the Spirit is committed to in order to conform the believer into the image of Christ. Thus, St. John of the Cross encourages the beginners to build strong habits in the spiritual disciplines that will be a resource to draw upon for the dark night that is to come. He does this know-

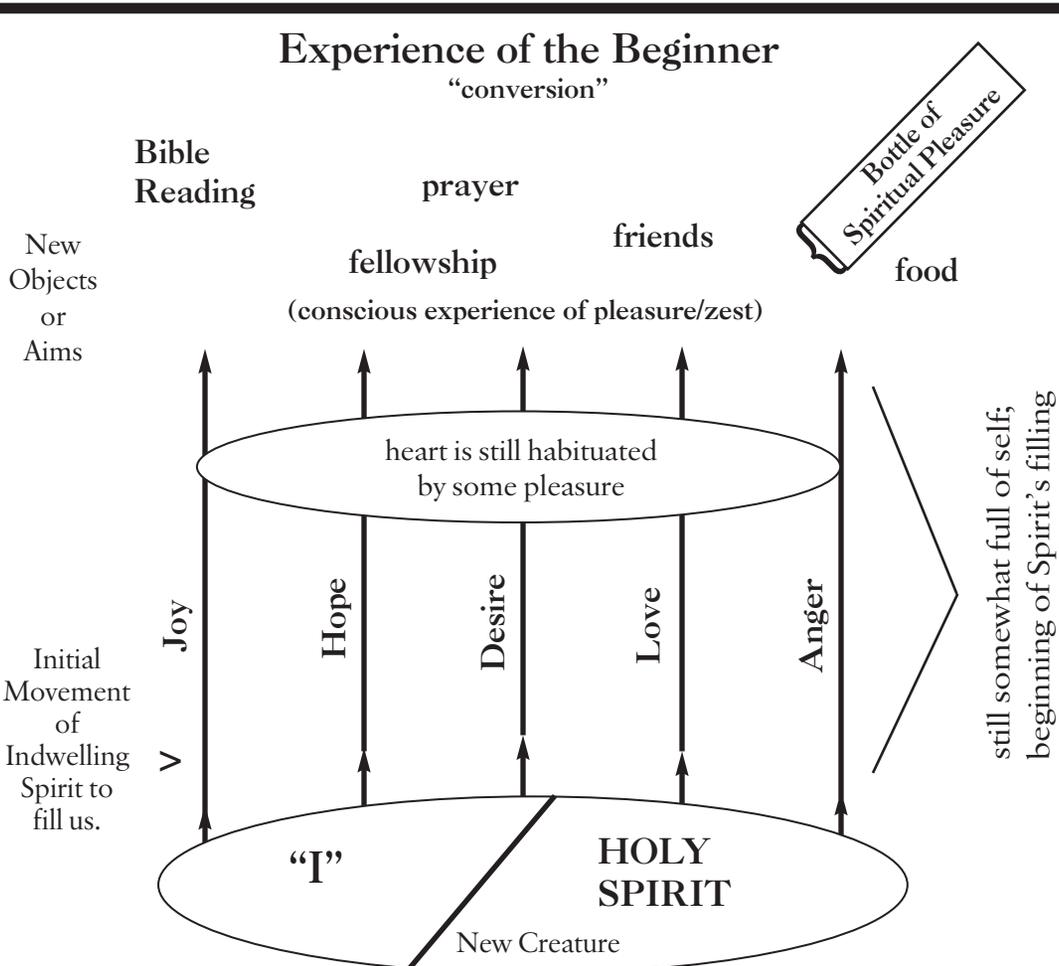


Figure 2. Experience of the Beginner.

ing that the beginner is moved to spiritual things due, in part, to the consolation of pleasure, and that this is the very thing that will work vice into the spiritual disciplines and will need to be purged in the first dark night. Though the beginner will have to be purged of this love of God for pleasure’s sake, thank God that He condescends to the beginner’s level lest those with less fortitude not go on in the faith at all. Nevertheless, this pursuit of spirituality for pleasure’s sake, along with all the other pre-converted vices, become infused into the beginner’s spirituality as the sins of the beginner.

*The Spiritual Sins of the Beginner.* According to St. John of the Cross, the beginner is still beset by characterological sins. It will require time for the Spirit to bring these to the surface for transformation, a process that involves the believer’s conscious cooperation. Though the beginner often mistakes his or

her new-found enthusiasm for character transformation, the disappointing truth is that character vices become integrated into the spiritual habits. This is inevitable, according to St. John of the Cross, given that God motivates spiritual habits in the beginner by means of the same pre-converted characterological needs for pleasure and autonomy. As he states,

For since they [beginners] are moved to these things and to these spiritual exercises by the consolation and pleasure that they find in them, and since, too, they have not been prepared for them by the practice of earnest striving in the virtues, they have many faults and imperfections with respect to these spiritual actions of theirs... (St. John of the Cross, 1584/1990, p. 19)

Thus, the spiritual sins of the beginner should not be shocking as this is all part of the growth process.

Particularly significant to understanding the sins of the beginner is that the experience of affection and

love of God for pleasure's sake will delude beginners into thinking that *they* are centrally responsible for making the changes. As they go on in the faith, they come to believe that their affection and experience of closeness to God is largely the result of their acts of obedience and energy in the spiritual disciplines. In truth, beginners have neither the maturity, self-awareness, nor insight to realize that it was always God's love and infant-grace that made the difference, that they did not have the character to really take such joy in God of their own accord. They believe that if they are doing the disciplines correctly, God will feel close. Thus, a two-fold problem ensues in their spirituality: first, they come to use their senses for pleasure (their feelings) to measure their spirituality and God's love for them; secondly, they think that their diligence made the difference.

St. John of the Cross applies the ancient's view of the seven deadly sins at work in the unbeliever to the spiritual life of the beginner. As a result, the seven deadly sins of pride, gluttony, sloth, envy, wrath, greed, and luxury become integrated into the spiritual life and disciplines which, in turn, are transformed into the seven deadly *spiritual* sins. Exploring these in depth is beyond the scope of this article; but it is worthwhile to introduce a few of these sins that typically become entangled in the beginner's efforts in spiritual growth.

The first sin of spiritual gluttony (and greed to a certain extent) is defined simply as the believer's drive to do the spiritual disciplines (prayer, Bible reading, fellowship, etc.) that is motivated more by spiritual pleasure than purity. The beginner's appetite for pleasure has at its goal to feel good in spirituality. Thus, the vices of the heart and its pursuit for pleasure now come to bear on the motivation for spirituality. As a result, one becomes a glutton for spiritual pleasure and feeling good in the spiritual disciplines, rather than desiring purity and transformation of the heart.

It is important to note here that St. John of the Cross takes into consideration the case of spiritual luke-warmness, which refers to a willful turning away from God with no interest in the spiritual life and with no uneasiness of conscience. This could be one explanation for the lack of zest in the spiritual life. The experience of the spiritual glutton, on the other hand, is one in which the person has done nothing different than before, is sinning no more than usual; yet, the spiritual disciplines no longer provide the same pleasure payoff as before. The beginner is no

longer receiving the same zest experience in prayer, Bible reading, and going to church, and cannot account for this by reference to actions alone. As a result, the beginner works harder at the spiritual disciplines in order to get back the pleasant feeling. Such spiritual gluttony is, in fact, a necessary developmental step. However, the infant must grow up, and God is going to do something else by the Spirit to reveal the true nature of his or her desire for God. This experience of dryness is actually a sign that God believes one is ready to have the bottle taken away and move into a deeper place of growth and love by means of a dark night.

One of the deadliest of the seven deadly spiritual sins is spiritual pride. This is the deep, perhaps unconscious belief of spiritual beginners that they are in some way making their spiritual life work. As St. John of the Cross observes, through their imperfections often comes a certain kind of secret pride, a hidden satisfaction with their works and with themselves (St. John of the Cross, 1584/1990, p. 39). Most would not consciously assent to the arrogant claim that they are the ones making the spiritual life work. But for many spiritual beginners, frustration sets in when the spiritual life does not work as before. Thus, they feel guilty and are thus tempted to work harder, to pray harder and attend to their quiet times with more energy. They think their efforts will make the difference. This is the essence of spiritual pride, which does not necessarily have an arrogant face. On the contrary, the essence of this vice is merely the secret belief that one's work was the difference in making the spiritual life happen.

Such a vice as spiritual pride in the beginner should not be surprising. Its presence is developmentally necessary on account of the believer's heart still having a residue of the habituated, pre-converted autonomous inclination to be filled with the self and to reach out in the power of the self to gain happiness. In fact, God gives beginners spiritual pleasure in response to their reaching out in their own power to grow spiritually. They are incapable of anything else because they are still spiritual babies in terms of learning to depend upon the Spirit. Because this process is developmentally required, believers need to be encouraged, knowing that God now thinks they are ready to face the truth of their spiritual pride. The discovery of such truth is painful but necessary for growth.

One of the seven deadly spiritual sins closely related to spiritual pride is spiritual avarice, which is

the deep discontent with the spirituality that God has given. St. John of the Cross notes,

Many of these beginners have also at times great spiritual avarice. They will be found to be discontented with the spirituality which God gives them; and they are very disconsolate and querulous because they find not in spiritual things the consolation that they would desire. Many can never have enough of listening to counsels and learning spiritual precepts, and of possessing many books which treat of this matter.... (St. John of the cross, 1684/1990)

In this experience, beginners often become bothered and disquieted in their spirit in that they no longer find the consolation of pleasure in their spirituality. They struggle with anger or frustration at God for not being as close as he once was in their prayer time or at church. As a result, they often give themselves to reading devotional books, attending conferences on spirituality by their favorite spiritual gurus, perhaps even practicing ancient spiritual practices and the spiritual disciplines, all out of spiritual greediness in an effort to get back that feeling of spiritual zest and pleasure they once knew. They want to get the monkey of guilt off their back due to the deep belief that lack of work is responsible for the lack of spiritual fervency.

In summary, spiritual pursuits manifested as sins of the beginner become a way to avoid the kind of soul work that will expose the true state of the heart. The pre-converted vices become more pronounced in the beginner's spiritual life despite the fact that some good spiritual endurance and habits have begun. What one fed upon earlier as a beginner is typically the very thing that one shall be weaned from in order to become aware of just how much these vices are at work, thus exposing one's true need for God. To accomplish this, the Spirit moves the beginner into the first dark night, which is the focus of the remainder of this article.

*The Dark Night of the Senses.* In this stage of development, God is growing spiritual beginners away from mere love of God for pleasure's sake to love of God for *love's* sake, a relationship involving the real self and not merely a love for pleasure in the relationship. St. John of the Cross elaborates,

The first purgation or night is bitter and terrible to sense, as we shall show ... Since, then, the conduct of these beginners upon the way of God is ignoble, and has much to do with their love of self and their own inclinations ... God desires to lead them farther. He seeks to bring them out of that ignoble kind of love to a higher degree of love for Him, to free them from the ignoble exercises of sense ... and to lead them to a kind of spiritual exercise wherein they can commune with

Him more abundantly.... (St. John of the Cross, 1584/1990, pp. 61-62)

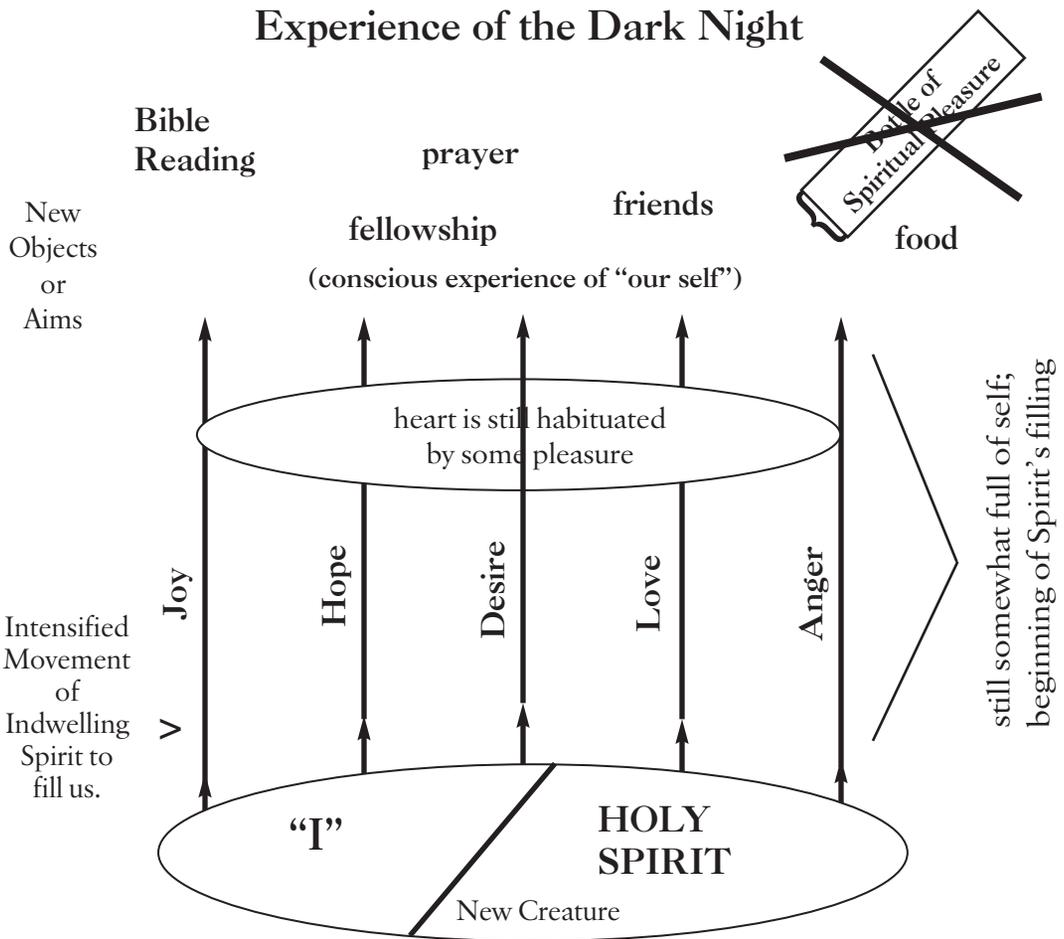
This movement into the dark night can be likened to the shift that takes place from romance to marriage, the latter being a relationship based less upon romantic feelings of love and more upon the truth about each other. In romance, one can always go home when the relationship experience starts feeling bad. In marriage, one is home with no place to go. This is why marriage can be so painful at times. In fact, every couple in marriage is eventually confronted with the truth of their love: Do they want the pleasure of the relationship, or do they want the relationship itself? Spiritual beginners are confronted with the same choice in the first dark night of the senses: Do they want the spiritual zest and feeling that they receive when God is felt as relationally close, or do they want the relationship with God even if it may not feel so good, even if it involves seeing themselves as they really are?

In general, the dark night of the senses is a special time when God intends to move spiritual beginners into a place of growth where they would not go on their own. The following two specific goals he has for believers at such a time are: (a) to assist them in letting go of something that they trust in more than him (e.g., the spiritual disciplines), and (b) to encourage them toward a deeper trust in him without any corresponding pleasurable feeling or experience. The dark night is clearly a movement of God on behalf of spiritual beginners, who typically look for something other than painful self-awareness leading to humility by which to measure spirituality and determine whether or not God is present. They were habituated as beginners in their earlier life to look to a *spiritual feeling* as the criterion for spirituality. However, God is deeply committed to helping them re-focus, to see that a feeling is not the proper measure of his presence, and to see that he has been and will be the only true difference. God takes the initiative to encourage beginners to trust him by faith, even in darkness, rather than in themselves and their senses.

The dark night for beginners is a period of wrestling with the evil one, with their own internal evil, with the need to be in control, with the need to always feel good, to *feel* that God is close (1 Jn 2:12-14). According to St. John of the Cross,

This is the first and principle benefit caused by this arid and dark night of contemplation: the knowledge of oneself and of one's miseries ... which in the time of its prosperity it was unable to see.... So we have now arrived at this, that from this arid night there first of all comes self-knowledge, whence, as

## Experience of the Dark Night



**Figure 3.** Experience of the Dark Night.

from a foundation, rises this other knowledge of God. For which cause Saint Augustine said to God: Let me know myself, Lord, and I shall know Thee. For, as the philosophers say, one extreme can be known by another. (St. John of the Cross, 1584/1990, p. 80)

Rather than provide spiritual pleasure, the first dark night aims at leading them into the painful reality that apart from God, they can do nothing (Jn. 15:5).

Central to understanding the dark night of the senses is realizing that God withdraws from the believer much of the spiritual pleasure that was initially felt by the beginner. As John of the Cross states, When they [beginners] are going about these spiritual exercises with the greatest delight and pleasure, and when they believe that the sun of Divine favor is shining most brightly upon them, God turns all this light of theirs into darkness, and shuts against them the door and the source for the sweet spiritual water which they were tasting in God whensoever

and for as long as they desired ... And thus He leaves them so completely in the dark that they know not whether to go with their ... meditation. (St. John of the Cross, 1584/1990, p. 62)

One of the central signs of being in the dark night of the senses is when, for no reason attributable to one's own efforts, one no longer receives the same pleasure in the spiritual life and in the spiritual disciplines as before. This is portrayed in the above graphic (Figure 3) that helps explain the experience of the dark night. Notice that God moves from giving the believer a sense of his presence on the basis of spiritual pleasure, and He is no longer interested in a top-down spirituality whereby the beginner feels that spirituality and God are good apart from the truth of oneself.

Again, St. John of the Cross distinguishes the experience of the dark night from the state of lukewarmness in which the believer simply turns away

from God. In a dark night, it is not the believer turning away from God. Rather, it is God turning away from merely giving infant-grace from the bottle as a sign of his presence and moving to provide the love and grace that comes from filling the believer with his very presence. This is a bottom-up spirituality in which the Spirit wants to live his life *through* and with the believer's own psychological structures and capacities. But, there is a problem: Beginners are not yet capable of experiencing this as God's presence. In fact, they are still developmentally quite filled with themselves and their desire for pleasure. Nevertheless, God thinks they are ready to know this truth of themselves, to see themselves as they really are in their character, to see the flesh at work in their members. He knows that now they are ready to begin the journey of loving him, apart from feelings, by faith alone.

#### THE EXPERIENCE OF EQUIPOISE IN THE DARK NIGHT: SPIRITUAL UNEASINESS

St. John of the Cross explicitly wants us to know that the experience of the dark night will be one of spiritual confusion and dryness. He believes that in the equipoise—the counterbalance, between the experiences of being filled with ourselves and being filled with the Spirit who works right through our psychological functioning—we will typically experience the truth of our character: spiritual dryness, distance from God, frustration, sense of moral failure, loneliness, spiritual impotence, and confusion over allegiance to the world, self, or God.

... when a soul finds no pleasure or consolation in the things of God, it also fails to find it in any thing created; for, as God sets the soul in this dark night to the end that He may quench and purge its sensual desire, He allows it not to find attraction or sweetness in anything whatsoever. (St. John of the Cross, 1584/1990)

St. John of the Cross explains the dark night as a middle state of experience in which beginners no longer know what they desire. On one hand, they are still so filled with themselves that they are unable to explicitly experience the Spirit as the Spirit. On the other hand, they are experiencing the filling of the Spirit to the developmental degree they are capable.

The result is that believers in a dark night feel trapped. They become aware of how little they really love God, how little joy they take in the spiritual disciplines. Yet they also perceive, with a kind of sadness, that the world and its pleasures cannot satisfy. In equipoise, the human spirit does not know what it

wants, feeling quite guilty and uneasy about this without knowing how to rectify the problem. The believer begins to lose his grip on the Christian life. What seemed to be easy during the beginner stage is no longer easy at all; spiritual pleasure and growth seem illusive, if not impossible to attain. This is precisely where God wishes his growing child to be.

Consequently, the experience of the dark night is no longer an experience of spiritual zest but of the truth, particularly the truth of oneself. The spiritual disciplines at this stage serve as a *mirror* to the reality of the believer's sinfulness and need for God. The measure of spirituality is not pleasure, but truth and reality, which is what God is interested in helping the beginner experience at this stage. Thus, this season of growth will seem foreign to beginners and will feel more psychological than spiritual in orientation. Beginners are used to feeling close to God, but the Spirit is interested in giving them a real experience of themselves, their pain, their psychological material, their neediness. They are now ready for real love.

This stage is called a dark night of the senses precisely because God is moving beginners away from a sensual Christianity in which they used the senses as a means of measuring God's presence. He is moving them into a deeper, more profound experience of themselves and his indwelling presence. The confusion for beginners at this stage is that they are not yet developmentally capable of experiencing this as the filling of the Spirit because they will typically feel his work through their psychological material in equipoise. Nevertheless, this spiritual dryness and confusion is exactly what it means to be filled with the Spirit at this point in the dark night, which coincides with their capabilities at this point in their development. This corresponds to the characterological filling of the Spirit (Eph. 5:18, Gal. 5:22) which has the feel of the growth process in general, in contrast to the empowering filling of the Spirit which is typically for the sake of ministry and often has a certain exhilarating feel to it regardless of character (Coe, 1999; Stott, 1964).

Typically, the dark night's characterological filling of the Spirit will feel bad and unspiritual and thus will be interpreted by beginners as the absence of God rather than his presence. This idea is captured well in Merton's thought:

God, who is everywhere, never leaves us. Yet He seems sometimes to be present, sometimes absent. If we do not know Him well, we do not realize that He may be more present to

us when He is absent than when He is present. (Merton, 1954)

Though the feel of the dark night is precisely the opposite of the truth, beginners are inclined to avoid this experience altogether and go back to the old way of experiencing God on the basis of their senses. Therefore, God must initiate this process because few would willingly go to the place of trusting in God in darkness, by faith, rather than by what can be felt. According to Merton, this is why it is so important to know God and his ways prior to the dark night, lest we despair of his felt absence. Spiritual guides and therapists can be very helpful by their love, sympathy and understanding, assisting the beginner in staying in this uncomfortable place with God.

### THE NEUROTIC TEMPTATION IN A DARK NIGHT: FIXING THE SELF

The dark night of the senses renders beginners vulnerable to temptation, which, if given into, can put them on a behavioral treadmill that can beset them for years. Therapists and spiritual guides need to be particularly aware of this defensive behavior. The cycle of temptation is:

- a. To feel guilty and believe that particular sins are responsible for God feeling distant
- b. To engage in the spiritual disciplines with more rigor in order to make religion feel good again and atone for feelings of guilt
- c. To weary of doing the spiritual disciplines insofar as they fail to provide the desired spiritual pleasure and thus avoid their guilt feelings, and
- d. To despair of the spiritual life altogether, which is not a turning away from God, but a deep resignation that God is not present in one's life as he used to be. The spiritual disciplines are either abandoned or done minimally in order to minimize neurotic guilt feelings.

Believers in the dark night often feel an incredible amount of guilt over not feeling close to God in the spiritual disciplines. As a result, they are often tempted to deal with this guilt by working harder at the spiritual life. This is typically true of those who attend more dogmatic bible-teaching churches that in healthy cases appeal to the conscience, but in worst cases often appeal instead to neurotic guilt as a motivation for godly living. The tender or neurotic conscience is often motivated, in turn, to generate a spiritual experience that certifies God's presence and one's spiritual

growth. But God is no longer interested in granting the bottle in a causal response to such behaviors.

Believers in the dark night of the senses often find themselves on a spiritual treadmill that they do not know how to stop, except to give up on experiencing God altogether. As a result, there is typically a vacillation between doing the spiritual disciplines with no joy and with failing to do them altogether. Though they certainly love God in the deep where the Spirit abides, they discover how little there is in their character that enjoys prayer and the Bible, how little they really love God *characterlogically*. As a result, they struggle back and forth between feelings of failure and a minimal obedience, their hearts filled with warring passions. However, what they often miss in the dark night is that God actually intends to bring forth these warring, sinful, passions (unhealthy hopes, desires, loves, and angers) from the depths of the heart. He then graciously lets them in on the secret that they are more filled with themselves and their desires than those of the Spirit. Unfortunately, beginners typically do not recognize the work and presence of God in this dryness.

The healthy option to this neurotic spiritual treadmill is not to bite the bullet or become a resigned spiritual minimalist. Rather, one is being called by Divine love in darkness to a new obedience of faith, to gently open oneself to God in truth, to be willing to go on a journey internally with God where the Spirit dwells in the depths of the heart. Much wisdom and guidance is required for the beginner in the dark night to avoid spiritual resignation or unhealthy despair in the dark night. But the Lord is faithful to assist his children into this new exploration of their need to depend upon the Spirit.

### THE DARK NIGHT OF THE SENSES AS PURGATIVE CONTEMPLATION

It is most important at the onset of a dark night of the senses to remember that this spiritual darkness and dryness is a new, more profound work of God in the believer's deep for the purpose of developing a true, honest relationship. The Spirit attempts to reveal the believer's true need to despair of his independent efforts to grow spiritually in order to depend more deeply on the Spirit. This work of "purgative contemplation" is in stark contrast to what westerners associate with contemplation. We tend to associate contemplation with the image of a mystic sitting on a hilltop in lotus position, experiencing joyful bliss in the presence of

nature and God. Notice how this association is more consistent with New Age spirituality, which is essentially the result of human efforts to feel better.

Contrary to New Age spirituality, the Christian tradition thinks of contemplation at this developmental level as a work of the Spirit in prayer and communion within the human spirit to purge the believer of false attachments and the false self. At this stage, the experience of contemplation is likened to a spiritual cleansing (St. John of the Cross, 1584/1990, pp. 62-63). The beginner's autonomous hopes, desires, wants, joys, hatreds, and sorrows are purged and filled with the infusing of the Spirit's hopes, desires, and loves into the believer's psychological structures, pushing the pathological material up from depths of the heart to the conscious level. The Spirit does not replace or negate the believer's inner world, but works within and through it. As a result, the spiritual disciplines within a dark night do not typically result in experiencing the bliss of God; rather, the Spirit uses them to push the psychological material up for the beginner to see and bring to the cross. Despite the negative feel of this purgative experience, this is the beginning of contemplation and the infused work of the filling of the Spirit. In medicine, when the cure is administered, often the symptoms of the disease may initially get worse before the healing takes effect. Unfortunately, it is easy for the beginner to associate the filling of the Spirit primarily with feeling healthy spiritually, and the lack thereof as disease. Unless a wise mentor is available to interpret the signs of the work of the Spirit, the beginner may reject the cure altogether.

### COOPERATION WITH THE SPIRIT IN A DARK NIGHT: THINGS TO CONSIDER

Having discussed the nature of a dark night, let us briefly discuss what to consider, what to do, and what to not do in a dark night. The Spirit of God initiates this time when one is ready for a more revealing journey into truth, even if one does not think so. But how is one to cooperate with this obscure work of the Spirit? I do not ask this question in order to help believers simply get through the dark night and on to something better. That would be self-defeating. Before going *through* the dark night, believers are first called to *enter* more deeply into what the Spirit has for them in terms of painful self-awareness, insight into relations with others and God, and gentle

attending to God by faith without the senses. The following are considerations for the believer who accepts the Spirit's invitation to stay in the dark night.

First, beginners should be open to the fact that their spiritual dryness and uneasiness about their disinterest in the spiritual disciplines may be a sign of God working inwardly in a dark night of the senses and not merely the causal result of their own sin. Certainly their sin is implicated, but it is not necessarily the direct cause of this experience, except in the case of flatly turning their back on their relationship with God. It is only neurotic grandiosity that moves them to believe that if they were a better person, that if only they did something more or sinned a little less, then that would make the spiritual difference. Instead, the Spirit wants them to be open to the possibility that it is he who is responsible for this dry time. He is purging them and inviting them into deeper fellowship with him in the truth of their character and of his love.

Second, the spiritual disciplines have changed in terms of their purpose or function in the believer's life during a dark night. For beginners, the disciplines were felt as nourishment. However, the disciplines in a dark night become a *mirror* into the reality of the heart for the purpose of character transformation in the Spirit. At this point, the disciplines do not feel good; rather, they point to the truth of oneself and one's need for God. As with all exercise and disciplines, be it mental, physical, or spiritual, beginners will experience those disciplines where they are at. For some, the spiritual disciplines may be joyful, for others agonizing, or even boring. The important thing is to cooperate with and be open to what the Spirit is doing in the disciplines.

The third and perhaps the most important thing to do in a dark night is to resist the temptation to spiritually fix oneself. Beginners in a dark night who discover their spiritual lives to be boring and dry, with a sense of deep apathy and lack of love, need to resist the temptation to rush into their souls to figure out the problem and fix themselves out of a need to assuage guilt. *This is exactly what the dark night is trying to cure them of.* The Spirit is attempting to fill them with himself; their need is to allow him to do his work by being committed in prayer to no longer doing it for him.

Fourth, believers in a dark night should expect and want nothing from God in doing spiritual disciplines except what he has to give. This is a foreshadowing of what the second dark night of the spirit will teach, to want nothing for the self other

than God's will which is the love of God for God's sake. This love, however, is confusing. The soul is made dizzy in a dark night with its own inability to make the spiritual life work. In a moment of temptation, the soul will try to generate good religious feelings. In fact, believers in a dark night often go on retreat in order to bring back pleasant spiritual feelings. But even on retreat, the darkness will come; nothing can ultimately stall the work of the Spirit in helping one to let go of natural inclinations. The believer, upon sensing this work of the Spirit, should simply pray, "God, I want nothing but what You have to give." Whether or not doing the spiritual disciplines results in joy or sorrow, exhilaration or despondency, there will invariably be an opportunity for fellowship with the Spirit. For the believer, everything is fodder for soul work, and the wise therapist and mentor can be a guide to the beginner in looking for the Spirit's presence in the dryness.

Fifth, believers in the dark night need to resist making more of their religious experience than what it actually is. Guilt will motivate beginners in a dark night to either construe their experience as more than it is, or attempt to make something happen out of fear that it is not working. Particularly, leaders in the church (those who counsel, preach, teach, and lead worship) need to resist the temptation to generate an experience for their people. Rather, leaders need to assist them in being able and willing to encounter God and the truth at their developmental level. They need to provide their congregation the space to experience what God has for them and no more, an experience that must begin as an intention in the leader's own life.

Sixth, those in a dark night need to be faithful to the spiritual disciplines despite the fact that practicing them may feel painful and lonely. This minimal obedience of presenting one's body as a spiritual sacrifice (Rom. 12:1-2) and as an instrument of righteousness (Rom. 6:13) is less an act of the will to accomplish transformation by the self and more a willingness to be open to the Spirit's transforming work as one submits and cooperates with him. To present oneself to God as open to discovering ever anew one's neediness in the mirror of the spiritual disciplines is the work of faith in the dark night of the senses. The payoff will be truth, reality, and transformation. From this vantage point, a new sense of love of God for love's sake is capable of breaking into one's horizon of experience.

Seventh, believers in a dark night need to consider that their spiritual dryness and boredom may be God's way of getting their attention inwardly in love. The focus is away from measuring the presence of God by the way it feels and towards attending inwardly to what the Spirit is doing in the soul—teaching, attending, praying for, and loving. Notice the ministry of the Spirit in the soul according to the Apostle Paul.

And in the same way the Spirit helps our weaknesses, for we do not know how to pray as we should. But the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words; and He who searches the hearts knows what the mind of the Spirit is because He intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose. For whom He foreknew, He also predestined [to become] conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the first-born among many brethren. ... (Rom. 8:26-28)

The Spirit abides in the human heart, ministering within its weaknesses and besetting characterological sins. God knows us and what is good for us, for his Spirit abides in our weaknesses, but we often do not know ourselves and perhaps do not even want to. As a result, Paul says that we do not know how to pray for ourselves. The Spirit, however, experiences those weaknesses within us and is always praying for our anxieties, worries, impatience, envy, etc. When believers become aware of these weaknesses during a dark night, this is the Spirit's invitation to fellowship with him by an inward journey into the depths of their hearts, into the truth of themselves, into the place of conviction and neediness where his presence and love are capable of transforming the heart. In the midst of this purgation and painful self-awareness, the soul comes to its own end. At this point, according to the advice of St. John of the Cross, it is best to allow the soul to remain in peace and quietness. Although it may seem clear to them that they are doing nothing and are wasting their time, it is best to content themselves with simply a peaceful and loving attentiveness toward God without the desire to have a felt experience of him or to perceive him (St. John of the Cross, 1584/1990, pp. 70-71). Everything from anxiety to guilt, fear to worry, boredom to distraction in the prayer life can open the way to love.

In summary, believers need to cease from doing the work of God in their dark night. When they pray, they need to refrain from talking to themselves in order to answer their prayers. When they read the Bible, they need to expect nothing and do nothing to

make something happen, but only expect what God has to give. In general, they need to learn to wait, to watch, to listen, to be open in all their work. No one does this well. In the bleakest periods of my own dark night, I could not endure waiting on the Lord. When seeking the will of God, I used to pray, wait a moment until I could bear no longer the painful noise of my soul and seeming silence of God, and then go on to answer for God. I now know, in part, that the Spirit is doing a profound work in these dark times. Merton is correct: Sometimes God is more present when he seems absent than when he seems present. The profound truth of this apparent riddle is made clear in the dark night. If we do not know him well, then it will be hard to think this possible of our God.

### CONCLUDING REMARKS AND IMPLICATIONS OF THE DARK NIGHT

According to St. John of the Cross, the dark night of the senses is not an end in itself or the purpose of human existence. It is an expected time or season in a Christian's life in which God grows one from one type of love to a more mature one—a love of God not merely for pleasure, but for love's sake. Movement through this dark night is punctuated by moments of spiritual pleasure to encourage the beginner, followed by moments of dryness and, as the purgative action takes effect, by illumination in the Spirit. What St. John of the Cross means by illumination is that the ministry and presence of the Spirit will be experienced in the soul more and more in love, not by the senses but by faith as an experience of person-to-Person interaction in the depths of one's soul. In this case, the believer is beginning to be filled with the Holy Spirit in the light of the purgation that has taken place, so that the degree and manner in which one experiences the filling of the Spirit is no longer overshadowed by the fear of God's absence in the darkness and dryness of purgative contemplation.

As one cooperates with the dark night, there begins to emerge a new conviction of faith by the Spirit-to-spirit, even while in darkness, that God is present. There is an almost conscious experience of the Spirit's work in our own spirit by which we cry "Abba! Father!" (Rom. 8:15-16). In this case, the purgation has done its work in effecting a deeper awakening of the heart to the conscious presence of the Spirit within, the presence of the indwelling Lover of the soul. Of course, this comes in all shades and degrees developmentally. The goal, of course, is con-

formity to Christ by means of absolute union of the human spirit with God's Spirit, but that is a discussion that is beyond the scope of this article. Suffice it to say that the goal of the dark night is not for its own sake, but for the sake of love.

Due to the great difficulty the believer has in understanding and dealing with the dark night of the senses, St. John of the Cross and the ancients attest in one accord of the importance of spiritual directors in helping beginners navigate through these difficult waters. St. John of the Cross comments, "These souls turn back at such a time if there is no one who understands them; they abandon the road or lose courage; or, at the least, they are hindered from going further by the great trouble which they take in advancing along the road of meditation and reasoning. Thus they fatigue and overwork their nature, imagining that they are failing through negligence or sin. But this trouble that they are taking is quite useless, for God is now leading them by another road, which is that of contemplation. . . ." (St. John of the Cross, 1584/1990, p. 70)

The dark night is precisely what it implies—it is an experience in the dark for the one traveling through it. That is, it is intended to set beginners along a path in which they will not know what to do on their own and in the power of their own strength and cleverness. It is supposed to bring them to their end. Thus, it is easy for beginners to become confused by the spiritual dryness, leaving them with the temptation of working out their neurotic guilt in the power of works righteousness. In moments of deeper despair, it is easy to give up on the spiritual disciplines altogether. Thus, a wise mentor, therapist, or spiritual director can be of great aid in assisting the believer to be faithful to the disciplines in a way as to assist in the soul-work God is intending at this time. Such a person can make all the difference in assisting the believer to cooperate with and not work against the ministry of the Spirit on the journey inward.

Along more clinical lines, it is particularly important to distinguish a spiritual dark night from symptoms of psychopathology such as major depression. I am not a clinician, but perhaps the following comments may help. From an objective standpoint, the dark night is a movement of the Spirit on behalf of the believer, whereas clinical depression can have a more historical or biological etiology. From a subjective viewpoint, depression may involve no particular object or focus other than a diffused sense of loss of pleasure, a difficulty in sleep, a generally depressed mood, and overall energy loss. The dark night, on the contrary, has a more refined focus, namely, upon one's relationship with God, which is particularly

brought into view in the practice of the spiritual disciplines (prayer, reading the Bible, fellowship, hearing preaching, worship). If there is a generally depressed mood while in a dark night, it can be brought into sharper focus to distinguish between feelings that emerge in relation to the spiritual life alone and those that persist in general. Interestingly, a believer in a dark night, instead of feeling depressed, may feel quite energized in life's activities in general and, as a result, repress the religious dimension in light of the fact that this is the objective focus of the internal turmoil. A skilled therapist can be particularly helpful by being alert to these issues.

In more general terms, therapy can greatly assist believers in a dark night to have the courage to journey into the depths of their deepest issues. An entire volume could be written on the differences and similarities between how therapy and spiritual direction can assist a believer in the dark night. Suffice it to say here that *both* can provide the incarnational support and love necessary for believers to explore the depths and dynamics of their heart and their relations with God and others. A loving and insightful therapist can model in therapy what God as Counselor wishes to do in the life of the believer.

Unfortunately, many believers have not been parented in such a way that they, on their own, can see the enigmatic ways in which the Spirit works in the heart as its Resident. Thus, therapy can be a good place to begin to model this work. Those who do therapy or spiritual direction must keep in mind, however, that the human counselor points to a more perfect Lover of the soul who works in the

believer from the inside out, in pleasure, through dark nights, to a richer, deeper union and love with his children.

## REFERENCES

- Coe, J. (1999). Beyond relationality: Musings on a pneumodynamic theory of personality and psychopathology. *Journal of Psychology and Christianity*, 18, xxx-xxx.
- Dubay, T. (1989). *Fire within*. San Francisco: Ignatius.
- Garrigou-Lagrange, P. (1977). *The three ways of the spiritual life*. Rockford, IL: Tan.
- Kavanaugh, K., & Rodriguez, O. (Trans.). (1991). *The collected works of Saint John of the Cross*. Washington, DC: Institute of Carmelite Studies.
- Kavanaugh, K. (1999). *John of the Cross: Doctor of light and darkness*. Washington, DC: Institute of Carmelite Studies.
- Merton, T. (1950). *No man is an island*. New York: Harcourt.
- Merton, T. (1950). *The ascent to truth*. New York: Harcourt.
- Payne, Steven. (1992). *Carmelite studies vi: St. John of the Cross*. Washington, DC: Institute of Carmelite Studies.
- Peers, E. A. (Trans.). (1990). *The dark night of the soul: A masterpiece in the literature by St. John of the Cross*. New York: Image Books, Doubleday. (Original work published 1584)
- Stott, J. R. W. (1964). *Baptism and fullness: The work of the Holy Spirit today*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity.

## AUTHOR

COE, JOHN H. *Address*: Rosemead School of Psychology, Biola University, 13800 Biola Avenue, La Mirada, CA 90639. *Titles*: Associate Professor of Theology and Philosophy; Director, Institute for Spiritual Formation. *Degree*: PhD, Philosophy, University of California, Irvine. *Specializations*: Integration of spirituality and psychology; integration of theory of psychology, philosophy, and theology.