

## John and Human Development

### "The Dark Night of the Soul ... A Contemporary Interpretation"

#### SOME NECESSARY FOCUSING

When John of the Cross speaks of the dark night of the soul, he is speaking of a purifying passage that an individual undergoes which transforms one kind of life into another. In a simplistic manner of speaking, natural life becomes eschatological life, earthly life becomes eternal life, and life which draws its support from natural gratification becomes life that draws its support from the motivation of Christ. In metaphorical terms, what happens in a dark night of the soul is that the grain of wheat falls in the ground and dies so that it can give birth to new life.

Almost universally, this transformation, as articulated by John, is understood as something that pertains mostly to prayer. Too infrequently is it understood as something that has to do with our entire lives ... relationships, work, and play. However, what John describes in his concept of the dark night of the soul is really the paschal mystery, the movement through death from Good Friday to Easter Sunday. This movement has to do with the transformation of our whole lives. John's outline of this can, therefore, serve as a paradigm of paschal transformation ("structural" transformation, in the terminology of certain current schools of psychology). The dark night of the soul traces the pattern that love, service, and prayer must move through to come to eternal life.

Two common misunderstandings of John must first be dispelled before this becomes more clear:

1) All too common is the idea that John was a spiritual masochist, unhealthily fixed upon suffering and the cross, preferring Good Friday to Easter Sunday. This is false. John was a natural mystic and, as such, was by temperament very single-minded (not unlike great artists and great writers who are, too, in a similar fashion focused in a way that can to an outsider appear obsessive). This single-mindedness made him impatient for the unity and consummation promised in the kingdom and impatient with anything that delays this. Hence, given this, it is understandable that he will, without much patience with anything else, zero-in on the mystery of how suffering and dying bring forth eternal life. He knows that Resurrection comes after suffering and death and, since he is impatient for Easter Sunday, his focus is on Good Friday.

2) Common too is the conception that John's spirituality, since it outlines the dynamics of transformation through tracing out the inner dynamics of prayer, is narrow, privatized, and elitist; at best, of use and interest to monks and nuns and other such contemplatives. John speaks explicitly of the transformation of prayer (and much less directly of the transformation of our love relationships and our lives of service) and he

sees the end of the process of transformation primarily as union with God (and not so much union within human community). The elements of community and justice appear to be quite weak in his system.

This however requires a closer look. When his system is dissected more closely, as this article will attempt to do, the dynamics for transformation that he outlines for our prayer lives can be seen to have a near perfect parallel in our love lives and in our lives of service and justice. John wrote his commentaries primarily with professional contemplatives in mind, people whose primary "job" it was to pray and whose primary relationship in this life was a mystical and vertical one to God. In the case of his historical audience, their primary duty of state (moral and practical responsibility) was formal prayer. John submits that in the proper evolution of prayer, in its transformation, there would occur a wider transformation in one's entire life. John knew his audience, professional contemplatives, and wrote accordingly. Had he been writing to another audience, one whose primary duty of state would have been to relate in the world, raise children, and work for justice, he would have used a very different language ... without however changing in any way the principles of transformation that he enunciates.

What he articulates in his concept of the dark night of the soul are the inner dynamics of paschal transformation, dynamics that apply in an identical way to the growth and transformation of our relationships, our love lives, and our lives of service in the world. His idea is that if you undergo a true dark night in any one of these, you will, in a manner of speaking, pull the others along with you. Thus, if one undergoes a true transformation in her life of prayer, her life of love and service will be similarly transformed. Conversely, to undergo a true transformation in one's love life will bring with it a true transformation of one's prayer life and life of service as well. The dynamics are the same. The paradigm is the same. A dark night is about the transformation of prayer, love, and service to others, albeit John articulates it explicitly only as it pertains to prayer.

As well, the resurrection that is achieved at the end of a dark night of the soul puts one into deeper union with God ... as well as with one's fellow human beings and with cosmic nature. Hence, what John traces out for us with his concept of the dark night of the soul is a paradigm for paschal transformation vis-a-vis all aspects of our lives and is a pattern for unity with God, human community, and nature.

What is this paradigm for transformation? What are its stages?

JOHN'S PARADIGM OF THE DARK NIGHT OF THE SOUL ... SIX STAGES IN THE TRANSFORMATION OF PRAYER, RELATIONSHIPS, AND SERVICE.

A) A Synthetic Outline of the Stages of Growth and Transformation.

In John's view, there are six stages one passes through in the paschal passage

from death to life. These apply in an identical way to prayer, love, and service:

### 1) PRE-CONVERSION - "INDIFFERENCE"

In this stage, four things are manifest in one's life: lack of focus, unhealthy indifference, unchanneled eros, and gratification as the primary motivation for one's actions.

In brief, prior to conversion, one goes through life with an unhealthy indifference (and, as contemporary psychology has rightly pointed out, indifference, not hatred, is the opposite of love).

At this stage, one's feels one's eros deeply, but one lacks clear direction. Love can be, and often is, fairly promiscuous. In a contemporary colloquialism, one "hangs loose" and loves what he or she is attracted to at the moment, especially what brings pleasure. Choices and commitments are made, ultimately, on the basis of what gratifies the self. In this stage, there is no true commitment, no true virtue, and no real giving of the self to anything beyond itself. However sophisticated and altruistically disguised an action may look, in the end, one is "doing one's own thing". Narcissism, egoism, and the idiosyncratic preference lie at the basis of every moral action.

At this stage, no real prayer, ove, or service of others is possible, even though the person may be under a powerful illusion that he or she is genuinely praying or loving.

### 2) CONVERSION - "FALLING IN LOVE" ("**The Active Night of the Senses**")

Iris Murdoch says, "the world can change in 15 seconds." The novelist, Morris West, says, "all conversion begins with the act of falling in love." Both are right.

Indifference is overcome by falling in love and, with that, immediately lives change. Three things then characterize a life: focus, the loss of indifference, and a change in what fuels motivation so that, in one way, a person can act beyond his or her own gratification.

Conversion begins with falling in love, with either a person, God, or with some principle, ideal, or ideology. With that "falling in love" comes the immediate loss of indifference. Instead there is a clear focus, one no longer "hangs loose". In fact, very often one becomes obsessed with what one loves to the point of losing one's freedom. This brings with it, at one level at least, a new motivation. There is, to a point, a movement beyond the self, beyond the pleasure-principle in its more infantile form. At one level, that which pertains to the person or object loved, one can become quite self-sacrificing, even to the point of giving up one's life for the beloved. In this is present the initial act of conversion.

### 3) FIRST FERVOR - "THE HONEYMOON" ("The Active Night of the Senses comes to full bloom")

Following the initial moment of conversion, the moment of falling in love, almost invariably a person goes through a season characterized by something John calls **first fervor**.

While in first fervor, one's life is coloured by six things: high levels of feeling, desire, and passion; the desire for greatness and uniqueness; excess in the area that pertains to one's love; endless energy, especially in the areas that pertain to one's love; public display to the world regarding one's love; and discursive abilities towards and regarding one's love.

What all this means will become clearer through the examples given later. In brief, however, during this period, the person acts exactly as one acts when one is on a honeymoon with one's ultimate love ... one feels a passion that relativizes all other loves, past and present; one has the sense that this love is the most unique, poetic, and special love that has ever occurred in history (and that he or she is now also most unique and special because of it); there is the tendency constantly to excess (one cannot get enough of the beloved, nothing is too much); the love is a great energizer and long hours and endless demands appear as nothing; there is a great desire for public display (to let the world know that one has found this love); and there is the deep and constant desire to talk to the loved one or, barring that, to talk to others about the loved one.

### 4) WANING OF FERVOR - "THE DEATH OF THE HONEYMOON" ("The Passive Night of the Senses")

All honeymoons, given sufficient time, die. All fervor, given time, wanes. With this "death", John tell us, one's life, especially as it relates to its beloved (but also in general) is characterized by five things: disillusionment, the loss of passion and consolation; boredom; the loss of the desire to talk to and about the loved one; and a growing solicitousness about the loved one.

All honeymoons eventually end. That is simply a fact of experience. What experience also teaches is what kind of feelings then characterize our lives. When the initial fervor of love dies, it is followed by a certain disillusionment, a loss of passion and desire, and a certain boredom with the one who formerly seemed the answer to one's every restless desire. With that comes a certain reticence vis-a-vis talking to or about the loved one. All of this can, and often times does, appear most confusing to the person. There is a certain disappointment, a feeling of having lost something very important, coupled, almost always, with the desire to do things that will bring back the fervor of the honeymoon.

That all honeymoons end is a fact of experience. What is less obvious is why this

must always happen.

In some cases, honeymoons end because of infidelity and lack of interest, a person falls in love with someone else or simply loses interest in the one he or she formerly loved so passionately. This, while it produces almost the identical symptoms that mark a genuine dark night of the soul, is not a dark night in John's understanding of things. For John this is then a case of psychological depression brought on by infidelity. One knows it is not a genuine dark night because, in the case of infidelity, the characteristic of a growing solicitousness about the beloved will not be present. Instead the focus of the person who is experiencing the disillusionment, boredom, loss of passion, and loss of the discursive ability, will be much more narcissistic, that is, turned in on himself or herself. In such a case, the honeymoon died, not because any paschal transformation was taking place, but because one has begun to lose his or her conversion. (John, in a passage which is perhaps the singularly most used passage in all his writings, The Dark Night of the Soul, Book I, Chapter 9, outlines some very penetrating and useful criteria to discern a true dark night from a false one.)

However, in John's view, even if one remains faithful, one's honeymoon will end in any case. All initial fervor eventually dies and a disillusionment, loss of passion, boredom, and the loss of discursiveness towards and about one's beloved replace the passion of the honeymoon. Why?

In John's view, God actively ends the honeymoon. God "dries up the fervor" and God does this not because God is masochistic or unwilling to let us live in pleasure for long. No. God ends the honeymoon because, up to this point, the one in love has not really been in love with what he perceives as his beloved (God, another person, the poor, some moral principle). He has, up to this point, been in love with the experience itself, the experience of being in love, of praying, of serving the poor, or whatever. The honeymoon ends so that he can come face-to-face with the person behind the experience of prayer, love, or service. Only after a honeymoon ends does one find out whether or not he is really interested in somebody else (God, another person, the poor) or whether he is mostly interested in how relating to that person makes him feel.

In this waning of fervor, the passive night of the senses in John's terminology, one is given the chance to begin to actually relate to his loved one, beyond the experience that love itself has generated. In the waning of fervor, one finds out whether he is actually interested in God, or only in the experience of praying; whether he is actually interested in a certain person, or only in the experience of being in love; and whether he is interested in serving the poor or in certain moral principles, or whether he is only interested in the feeling he gets in being involved with the poor and/or certain moral principles. Hopefully the illustrations, given in the next section, will help make this clear.

5) PROFICIENCY - "THE GROWTH OF EASEFULNESS"

In John's view, the movement from stage to stage within this paschal process is, ultimately, an organic one. Certain growth naturally leads to a new phase of life. Thus, falling in love leads to a honeymoon, which leads to a deep bonding, which leads beyond the experience itself to the person behind it. Given all this, there is a certain inherent logic in movement to the next stage, proficiency.

This stage is characterized by three things which build upon each other: decision, dryness, and ease. Proficiency is entered into when one makes a decision for something for its own sake, as opposed to deciding for it for some reason of narcissism and self-interest. This will be followed by dryness, a stage within which one feels little or no psychological or emotional consolation in relationship to her loved person or cause. However, if one perseveres in fidelity to that person or cause, John submits that, eventually, one begins to feel a certain ease and loving attentiveness, in relationship to her beloved. In its presence, she begins to feel not the passion of the honeymoon but a deep sense of being **at home**.

For John, proficiency is already a high development within one's spiritual journey, one is already through a major phase (the dark night of the senses) in the journey of paschal transformation. There has already been a falling in the ground and dying in order to come to eternal life. At this stage, a major blockage had been removed ... one can stay at this level for many years, or one can, from it, make the final and most dramatic leap of faith.

#### 6) THE FINAL STAGE OF GROWTH TOWARDS TRANSFORMATION - "THE PURIFICATION OF ONE'S GUIDANCE SYSTEM" ("**The dark night of the spirit**")

There are two major phases in this last stage, each with a different feeling, John calls these two phases **the active and the passive night of the spirit** and the **experience of the living flame**. The former phase is characterized by a raging desolation and the latter by a joyous passion and intermittent ecstasies.

For John, relatively few persons, in fact, enter this final stage and an even fewer number complete it. To have completed this phase is to have attained all the purification necessary for the life of heaven. Full sainthood, complete with some of the ecstasy of heaven, is what lies at the end of this final stage.

It begins when, after a certain period of proficiency, a person makes a **radical decision to live by faith alone**. In essence, a person decides to live and act according to the written dictates of the Christian creeds and scriptures, even when this goes radically against what her head and heart and friends suggest as being practical and spiritual wisdom. At this stage, a person truly radicalizes regarding her discipleship in Christ and nothing that she can "see, feel, think, touch, taste, or sense" alters what she sees as commanded of her through the written dictates of Christ and the church. In a manner of speaking, at this stage, one becomes "fundamentalistic" in the good sense.

The written word of scripture cuts real life and it, without the usual nuances that come from common sense and practical wisdom, determines what is wise and what is to be done.

Immediately after making such a decision, the easefulness of proficiency dissolves and one enters a period of fierce disconsolate dryness. For John, this is by far the most painful part of the whole journey of purification. In this period, the person is habitually disconsolate and in interior pain. This is the fullest experience of "Good Friday" given us in this life. Strangely though, not unlike Paul's experience in 2 Corinthians 4, even as one feels one's outer world completely crumbling one's inner world is growing ever more secure. For John, during this period, the type of ease that was felt during the time of proficiency dissolves into a raging desolation. However, at the deepest level of one's person, a new kind of security is dimly felt.

For John, this raging dryness can last for either a long or a short time. Perhaps, too, one dies during it. However, if persevered in (and, for John, nobody turns back once he or she enters this final stage) the dryness eventually gives way to a calm, a deep peacefulness and tranquillity, which bring with it the return of passion, an overwhelming sense of the goodness of all things and of their beauty in God, a deep empathic connection with all of reality, and (for some, at least) intermittent ecstasies. This is Easter Sunday. At this stage, the resurrection has taken place (save one has not yet physically died).

These, for John of the Cross, are the six stages of paschal transformation. They constitute a paradigm for how a grain of wheat is supposed to fall in the ground and die to come to new life. The dynamics inherent within this paradigm, as we shall see shortly, apply in the same way to the transformation of one's prayer life, love life, and one's life of service within the community.

Before, however, illustrating this through examples, it might be profitable, in the name of pedagogy, to outline these stages more succinctly in a brief chart:

## B) A Chart of the Six Stages.

### 1) INDIFFERENCE ... "Pre-conversion"

#### Characteristics:

- Lack of focus.
- Unchanneled eros.
- Gratification as the principle of motivation.
- Unhealthy indifference.

## 2) CONVERSION ... "Falling in Love"

### Characteristics:

- Focus of eros/often to point of obsession.
- Change in the pleasure principle as the principle of motivation.
- Loss of indifference.

## 3) FIRST FERVOR ... "Honeymoon"

### Characteristics:

- High levels of feeling and passion/inflamed by love.
- Desire for greatness and uniqueness.
- Excessiveness in areas pertaining to the beloved.
- Endless energy.
- Public display.
- Discursive appetite and abilities towards and about the beloved.

## 4) WANING OF FERVOR ... "Death of the Honeymoon"

### Characteristics:

- Disillusionment.
- Loss of passion and consolation.
- Boredom.
- Loss of the discursive appetite and abilities towards and about the beloved.
- Growing solicitousness about the beloved.

*(The three signs necessary to discern an authentic dark night of the soul from an inauthentic one, given by John in The Dark Night of the Soul, Book I, Chapter 9, should be used here.)*

## 5) PROFICIENCY ... "Growth of Easefulness"

### Characteristics:

- Decision for value.
- Followed by 2 phases: i) Dryness. ii) Growing easefulness, a sense of comfortableness, a sense being at home, some intermittent aridities, but habitual ease.

## 6) THE FINAL PHASE OF GROWTH TOWARDS TRANSFORMATION



Characteristics:

- Radical decision to live by faith alone.
- Followed by a raging desolation, but with a sense of security at one's deepest level.
- Eventual return to calm ... which brings with it:
  - the return of passion,
  - an overwhelming sense of the goodness and beauty of all things,
  - a deep empathic connection with all things, and
  - intermittent ecstasies.

C) AN ILLUSTRATION OF THESE STAGES AS THEY APPLY TO TRANSFORMATION IN LOVE, PRAYER, AND A LIFE OF SERVICE.

1) AN ILLUSTRATION OF THE TRANSFORMATION OF LOVE.

Since love is what is primary in everything, even in prayer and service, let us begin with an example of its transformation according to this paradigm:

Imagine a young man named Joe. He is 24 years of age, just graduated from university, and, in terms of his love life, he is in stage one, **pre-conversion**. He has a lot of fiery eros inside him, but, he lacks focus and commitment. He is unhealthily indifferent, a state he euphemistically calls, "hanging loose". He loves women, but is not committed to any one woman. He uses women in that, in his relationships with them, he is guided by the gratification principle, that is, he is interested only to the extent that there is something in it for him. Moreover, at this stage, he even feels quite moral and good about himself vis-a-vis his relationships with women. His promiscuity is, for him, not a moral issue.

One night he goes to a party and there he meets a woman named Mary. As Iris Murdoch once said, "reality can change in 15 seconds!" He falls in love. This is the moment of **conversion**. Immediately his indifference dies. His eros focuses most sharply. He is no longer in love with women ... he is now in love with Mary and no longer wants his freedom to play the field. Promiscuity no longer interests him. Commitment to Mary does. Concomitant with this, there is a change in his motivation. He, who up until now had thought only of his own pleasure, now becomes (at least in relationship to Mary) quite generous and able to renounce many of his own wants and pleasures for her sake.

Mary also falls in love with him and soon they marry. For the first months after their marriage they are in **first fervor**. He feels for her a passion and an emotional bond that relativizes anything he has ever felt in relationship to anyone else. He fantasizes that their marriage will be a one-in-a-million, the most unique and deepest love two people have ever shared. The love energizes him and he is prone to excess in it. Also, at this stage, it is important to him to display in public that he loves Mary. They hold hands in

public and, through that and other gestures, continually let the outside world know that they are in love. Very importantly, during this time, he has both the appetite for and the ability to talk with Mary quite easily and quite endlessly ... and when he is not talking to her he is very prone to be talking about her. He is infatuated and obsessed with her in a way that makes the indifferent Joe of just mere months ago seem an entirely different person. Naively he feels that their love will continue like this forever.

But it does not. Like all honeymoons, eventually the emotional magic is over. Imperceptibly (though in some cases this can also happen quite dramatically) the fervor lessens and, at a point, he becomes disillusioned with Mary. The disillusionment is not because he no longer sees her as a good person, but more because he begins to see her as **just a person**. Disillusion means the "breaking of illusion" and the coming to reality. After living with Mary for a time he comes to the realization that, despite her goodness and beauty, she is just one person, one woman ... and not all of femininity and humanity incarnate. Up to this point, he had his own version of Augustine's prayer: "You have made my heart lonely, Lord, and it was lonely until it rested in Mary!" In his illusion of her, she was God/dess, femininity, and humanity all in one. She was heaven. Now, he is still lonely, despite Mary. Moreover, beyond this disappointment, he recognizes for the first time really Mary's faults and blemishes. Thus, his disappointment, in the end, is both in that she is **just a person** and that she is not a perfect person.

That double disappointment, that Mary is just a person and that Mary, like all of us, is also partially a dysfunctional and blemished person, brings along with it something he has never before experienced in relationship to Mary, boredom. He, at this point, begins too to lose some of the extraordinary passion and emotional feelings he had for Mary. Upsetting for him too (and perhaps even more so for Mary!) is the fact that he no longer has the same ready inclination to talk with Mary. He finds himself often without a lot to say to her, despite her pleas and his memory of seemingly better times.

However, even as the feelings of the honeymoon are dying, paradoxically, Joe is beginning, in the real sense, to be more genuinely caring for and solicitous about Mary. The joyous emotions of the honeymoon are mostly over, but, despite that, he is now more deeply bonded to Mary than he was when they were on the honeymoon.

What has happened here? Why did the honeymoon die? Why do all honeymoons have to die? Is God a masochist who does not like us to have pleasure for too long?

For John of the Cross, what happens when honeymoons die (providing they die for the right reason and not because of infidelity or some kind of physical or emotional disease) is that "God takes away the passionate feelings to bring us more face-to-face with the person who is behind those feelings." Joe's honeymoon with Mary had to die because, until now, he has not been in love with Mary. Rather he has been in love with the experience ... he has been in love with being in love, in love with how this made him feel, in love with femininity, in love with the goddess archetype in Mary; in short, he has

been in love with many things, but **not in love with Mary!** Now, with the honeymoon feelings gone, after they have first served to bond him so deeply with Mary, he is left, finally, looking at Mary, at a real person. He must now decide whether or not he actually loves Mary beyond the honeymoon he has had with her.

This stage of transformation, John calls the passive night of the senses. It is a very crucial and pivotal stage within relationships. Joe can now turn back. He can leave Mary and find someone else to fall in love with and have another honeymoon. Or ... he can move to the next stage and become a **proficient** in love.

Joe does this. He makes a decision for Mary. He decides that, despite the disillusionment, he will continue in the marriage and continue to work with her in building a relationship together. His decision is based upon two things, the bond that has during the period of fervor grown up between them and his sense of values. He senses that to continue his marriage is **the right thing**, the higher thing to do. He continues in the marriage.

Initially, he experiences a certain dryness in the relationship. He comes home to Mary, even though sometimes it would be more interesting to him to go elsewhere. He still struggles in the area of discursive communication with her. They both see their honeymoon stage as a certain past golden age in their relationship. Occasionally, though unsuccessfully, they try to have a second honeymoon within which to re-capture the old emotional magic.

Eventually, the dryness becomes ease. Joe still misses the magic of the honeymoon, but what he now experiences with Mary is a deepening sense of being at home. The idea and the feeling of being at home somehow melt in with his idea of Mary, his wife. There is still, intermittently, a feeling of restlessness and boredom, but, habitually, there is the sense of being comfortable, easeful, at home with Mary.

Perhaps he and Mary live out their days in this proficient state. One dies, or they both die. Their children and their friends sense that theirs' has been a very good marriage.

Perhaps, however, given time, at some point they, together, make a most radical option. Perhaps, after years of praying together, with their children long since grown and self-sufficient, they decide, like Abraham who was asked by God to set out without knowing where he was going, to let the written word of God guide them beyond where they would go if they continued to guide themselves by practical wisdom alone. They decide, in response to the beatitudes, to do something radical; for example, to open their home to street people, to become beggars in the style of Hindu **Sannyasins**, to together live in a religious community, or even to retire to separate monasteries.

Initially, after making this decision they feel in their relationships a new and a

raging dryness. The secure sense of **being at home** which characterized their last years together breaks down and, with it, all their securities about each other also seemingly break down. A painful period of emotional and intellectual confusion and insecurity follows ... even as neither turns back on this new radical road they have taken.

They live through this dryness, the most bitter either has ever experienced. Imperceptibly it changes and one day instead of the dryness and insecurity between them they begin to feel again a passion stronger than they felt all those years ago when they first fell in love. Moreover, along with these deep and quasi-ecstatic feelings they have for each other, they begin to feel that same kind of feelings about the world and all other people as well. They are constantly overwhelmed by the goodness and beauty not just of each other but of the whole world and everyone in it. The emotional magic of their first honeymoon pales in comparison to this new way in which they are now inflamed by love.

Their love has now resurrected. It has fallen in the ground, died, come through "Good Friday", and is now the kind of love that will last and grow forever. There will be no death of this second honeymoon. There will only be passion, joy, and ecstatic union of life forever. When John of the Cross speaks of going through the dark night of the soul, it is this process he is describing.

## 2) AN ILLUSTRATION OF THE TRANSFORMATION OF PRAYER.

Just as love must go through a certain dark night of the soul in order to come to full maturity, so too must prayer. The stages of transformation and the dynamics inherent in the movement from stage to stage are identical. So too are the characteristics of each stage.

Let us imagine a young woman named Mary. She is 24 years of age, just graduated from university, and, in terms of her prayer life, is at stage one, **pre-conversion**. She does not have much interest in prayer, has no habit of prayer, and, most times, simply does not pray. In her prayer life, and in her religious life in general, she lacks focus and is unhealthily indifferent. She is guided by the gratification principle in that she prays and/or attends religious services when in some way there is something in it for her.

One evening, out of boredom and to tag along with friends, she goes to a charismatic prayer meeting. As Iris Murdoch says, "reality can change in 15 seconds!" She has a religious experience and is overcome with both the desire to pray and the facility for it. She is baptized in the spirit and, among other things, begins to speak in tongues. She has fallen in love, been **converted**.

Immediately, not unlike the person who has fallen in love with another person, she enters **first fervor**. She has, in prayer, intense emotional feelings and is spontaneously moved to tears, to deep joy, to deep feelings of empathy for the world, and to an intense

desire to serve God completely to the point of giving up her life. With that come fantasies of uniqueness and greatness. Mary believes that she can be a great saint, a mystic even. In her daydreams she will pray and serve God like very few others ever have. Like the young lover, she is full of endless energy and is prone to excess in her prayer life. She goes to prayer meeting nearly every evening and stays there too long. It is also important for her, during this time, to public display her new love, to let the world know that she has found Christ. Her car is covered with stickers reading: "I have found Christ", "Christ Saves", "God loves you", and so on. Around her neck she wears a cross and on her lapel is pinned a dove. A pagan world is invited constantly to see that she has found Christ. At this time, too, she has both the appetite for and the ability for discursive prayer. She can pray easily and endlessly. When she is not praying she is, much to the chagrin of her friends, talking about praying! And, like the young lover, she naively believes that things will carry on like this forever.

But they do not. Imperceptibly, or perhaps dramatically, things change. There comes a day when the fervor is gone. Her honeymoon in prayer is over. She enters the passive night of the senses, the **waning of fervor**. Like the lover, she begins to experience disillusionment, the loss of consolation, boredom, and the loss of both the appetite for and capacity for discursive prayer. She becomes disillusioned with her prayer life and, often times, with her prayer group as well. Her bible, within which during her time of fervor she underlined in different bright colors nearly every line because it was so meaningful, now bores her. She finds herself unable to pray as she did before and feels no passion or emotion in her prayer.

However, if these symptoms are not the result of infidelity or emotional or physical illness, then, even as her fervor is waning, she will experience, at a level beyond her emotions and even her intellect, a desire for prayer and a solicitousness about God and the things of religion. She will no longer have the magical emotional feelings about prayer she once had, nor will she have the ability to pray discursively as she used to. But she will want to pray ... even as she is unsure as to what that now means.

Again, it is useful to insert a reflection at this point. Why did her honeymoon in prayer die?

Like the lover, her honeymoon had to die because, during her period of fervor, she was not so much interested in God as she was in the experience of praying and how that made her feel. For John, in the passive night of the senses, God dries up the experience so as to give the person a chance to meet more face-to-face the person behind that experience. God dried up her experience of prayer so as to give her the opportunity, after the honeymoon had first done its work of bonding her to God more deeply, of being interested in God and not just in the experience of praying.

And Mary is now interested in God. Although she is somewhat confused and disappointed about the death of her fervor, she now decides that she will pray not

because it feels good but because she is now interested in God. She makes a decision for prayer and, with that, enters **proficiency**.

Initially she experiences mostly dryness in her prayer. Unable to pray as she formerly did, discursively, she spends her prayer time just sitting quietly. Slowly the dryness of this gives way to a certain comfortableness in it. Her prayer time is not an exciting time, but it is a good time, an easeful time, a time when she feels very centred, at home, and somehow in God's presence. She still has intermittent aridities in her prayer, but mostly she experiences ease and a sense of comfort and of being at home.

This can continue for a short time or a long time. Perhaps she dies during the months or years of **proficiency**. If she does die, she will die, in John of the Cross' eyes, quite advanced, but not fully transformed, in the spiritual life.

However, in this case she does not die during this stage and, after some time in it, she senses inchoately that God is now asking something more radical of her. Like Abraham, she senses that God is now calling her to set out "without knowing where she is going".

Her prayer life has, in effect, now become her whole life. She realizes that, until now, she has been partially rationalizing and not giving herself over fully to the demands of the Sermon on the Mount. She makes the decision that from now on she will no longer use her practical vision and the "friendly counsel" of her family and friends to smooth away the sharp edges of the demands of the Sermon on the Mount. She decides to live her life rather "fundamentalistically" in the light of those demands.

What this means practically can vary from case to case. Perhaps she runs off and joins Mother Theresa, or becomes a Trappistine nun, or becomes a Christian **Sannyasin**, or she gives almost all her money and possessions away and lives most austere. Like the couple, Joe and Mary, we spoke of earlier, entry into the dark night of the spirit can take many practical forms. Whatever its specific form, it takes place when, after a sufficient time of preparation, a person uses the written word of God to actually guide him or her in life, beyond the dictates of common sense, practical wisdom, and the measured advice of those biblical commentators and spiritual directors who are unfamiliar with this final phase of paschal transformation.

Mary makes this radical leap of faith. Her family and friends are very upset with her. They worry about her. But this is not her greatest pain and insecurity. Rather, almost immediately upon making this decision, she herself is thrown into raging desolation. She feels disconsolate and feels that God has let her down. At times she even has severe faith doubts and begins to wonder whether God in fact exists. The habitual ease and sense of being at home, which she had just recently felt in prayer, now too disappears. She feels lost ... beyond any hope that anyone can offer her. That is why she is not interested in the advice of concerned family and friends who suggest that what she should do to regain

her "old self" is to go back on her radical decision and live a "normal" life, like everyone else. At this stage, Mary knows that "a normal life" is not her hope. Nothing turns her back. She stays with the pain and confusion, knowing that, as the author of Lamentations says, there are times when one can only put one's mouth in the dust **and wait!**

She waits and one day it is better. One day (and John says we cannot predict whether it will take a long time or a short time for that day to arrive) there is in Mary not dryness, but a passionate fervor. A fervor deeper than what she felt all those years ago at that prayer meeting where she had her religious conversion. Passionate fervor now begins to stir habitually inside of her. The fervor is so intense that, intermittently, it is ecstatic. In it, she experiences an overwhelming sense of the reality and graciousness of God, as well as a concomitant sense of the overwhelming goodness and beauty of all of creation. She has trouble containing her sense of this goodness and finds herself, occasionally, "standing outside of herself", that is, in EK STASIS.

Mary's prayer life has now undergone the dark night of the soul. The seed which was there at her initial conversion has fallen in the ground and died and brought forth new and eternal life. The feelings she now feels will never die. She has moved beyond being interested in herself and in the experience of prayer to being interested in God. Good Friday is over. She is now living Easter Sunday.

### 3) AN ILLUSTRATION OF THE TRANSFORMATION OF SERVICE.

The dynamics which mark the transformation of love and prayer are paralleled in the transformation of our service within community.

Let me illustrate this with a real-life example (stylized a bit to protect the person whose story it is):

A few years ago, I knew a young man who, upon graduating from university, had very little, if any, interest in social justice and the poor. He was interested in his own career advancement, his own social circle, and in sex, travel, and the enjoyment of his youth.

As a graduation gift, his parents gave him several thousand dollars which he was using to go on a six-month tour with some friends of his. Their tour was, eventually, to take them to South America where their chief interest was not the poor but the beaches and the good life.

However, as C.S. Lewis once said, conversion can be most surprising. While in South America he broke his tour with his friends for one week to visit with a Canadian missionary whose mother was a neighbour to his family back home. He met the poor and, like the person who falls in love or the person who has a religious experience at a prayer meeting, his life radically changed in 15 seconds. He saw the poor and something inside

of him irrevocably moved. In that moment he lost his unhealthy indifference and he moved beyond the pleasure principle as his simple motivation for acting. In that moment he **converted**.

Like the young man in love and like the woman at the prayer meeting, with that conversion came **first fervor**. He broke with his friends and returned home. Once there, rather than pick up what would have been his career, teaching, he instead began to work at the local food bank, lived on virtually nothing, and got involved with numerous groups who are active in social justice activities.

And he had a honeymoon of fervor. As he worked with and for the poor, he was inflamed with feelings about them. He had too, like the lover and the religious neophyte, fantasies of uniqueness and greatness. In his daydreams, he was the world's greatest social worker. Like his counterparts in love and prayer, he had too, at this stage, endless energy and was prone to excess. He worked endless hours for the poor and still spent many of his evenings at meetings discussing projects, protests, and political programs. And, like the young lover and the religious novice, it was important to him at this time to make public display of his commitment. His car too was covered with stickers: "Boycott Shell", "Resist the USA in Central America", "God is a woman ... Listen to Her!", and so on. His designer clothes hung unworn in his closet while he wore only certain khakis and denims. At this time, parallel to what happens to those who have had a recent conversion in love or prayer, he had both the appetite and ability for a certain discursiveness. In his case, this took the form of an endless ability to talk to the poor and an equal ability to talk about them - when he was not talking to them. At this time, too, he was under the naive impression that he would feel like that forever.

He did not. There came a day, a few years later, when the fervor was gone, the honeymoon over. Perfectly parallel to what happens when the first fervor of love and prayer die, he began to feel, in his relationship to the poor, disillusion, a loss of passion, boredom, and the loss of his former discursive powers towards and for them. Now his words seem, to him, to be empty and he draws little consolation in talking to them or in talking to others about them. He prefers to say a lot less.

That is the stage my friend is in at present. However since, in his case, his commitment to the poor had been genuine, he is still deeply committed to the poor and genuinely solicitous for them, even in his lack of felt consolation in serving them.

Again, an important question needs to be raised here: Why did his fervor die? Why did God dry up the experience?

Like the case of the lover and the woman in prayer, God took away all natural consolation in the experience so that this young man might be brought more face-to-face with what is behind the experience, the poor themselves. Until that stage, the **waning of fervor** (the passive night of the senses), he had not been in love with the poor, but in



love with the experience of serving the poor and in love with how that made him feel.

I judge my friend to be, right now, in the stage of **proficiency**. He is serving the poor, just as he did while in fervor. His decision to continue to serve was based not upon the naive hope that, some day, he would again experience pleasure in serving the poor, but upon a real bond he has built up with the poor during his years of commitment to them. He serves them now because they are, in a real sense, his family. He loves them, not with passion of first fervor, but with the type of concern that one has for a family member. There is considerable emotional dryness in him, but, as time passes, there is too a growing sense of ease, comfortableness, and at-homeness with the poor.

I do not know how his story will end. Perhaps he will serve the poor in this way until he dies. If he does, he will die essentially unselfish, living out in a good, though imperfect, fashion, Christ's preferential option for the poor. Perhaps however, given a long life and much grace, he will, at some point, make a yet more radical option for the poor and, through that, enter into the final stage of transformation.

Like his counterpart in love and prayer, he would enter this final stage if, on the basis of the written word of scripture, he would make a choice to serve the poor in a way that goes beyond what practical wisdom and a qualified commitment would demand. What specific form that might take can vary; for example, perhaps he will go to a poor country and work there in the style of Mother Theresa, perhaps he will live and work in a hospice for cancer or aids victims, or perhaps he will join **L'Arche** and spend the rest of his life simply living with handicapped adults.

Whatever he does, initially, that choice will bring him some raging desolation and much disorientation. Whatever moral securities he might have built up during his previous years of service with and to the poor will totally break. He will spend some time, either a long time or a short time, totally unable to reassure himself or to give himself any practical hope. The only reassurance and hope he will have will come to him through raw faith in the word of God and the eucharist. He will be disconsolate, but he will not turn back.

Eventually, a new day will dawn and he will awake one day to find that his passion has returned. He will be inflamed with a love for the poor that dwarfs anything he felt all those years ago when he first converted. With that will come an overwhelming sense of the goodness and beauty, not just of the poor, but of all of all of creation. He will live in a state of habitual joy and will, at moments, be unable to contain the sense of how good and beautiful it all is. He will have intermittent ecstasies and the will be inflamed with a joy "that no one will ever take away from him."

#### SOME CONCLUDING NOTES

These examples illustrate the process of transformation that John of the Cross calls

the dark night of the soul. We see too, through these examples, that, although John outlined the stages of this transformation only by articulating the dynamic movement inherent within prayer, these dynamics have a perfect parallel within love and service.

Human life and every dimension within it must, if it is to come to eternal life, fall in the ground and die in order to rise again. Christ illustrated this in his person through the paschal mystery in his journey through Good Friday to Easter Sunday. What John of the Cross outlines, both descriptively and prescriptively, in his metaphor of the dark night of the soul is how this passage takes place concretely within our lives (beyond its more radical form in our actual physical death).

The dark night of the soul is, then, a metaphor for paschal transformation. For purposes of clarity and simplicity, this essay has broken it into six clear stages, with the hope that the attempt at clarity would not do too much violence to the complexity and subtlety of John's position and that it would serve, so to speak, as a work of "translation" in making this most valuable concept of John of the Cross more accessible to a larger number of people.