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“The Dark Night”  
by St. John of the Cross

### AMONG THE WHITE LILIES

We come to the end of this series of poems, but I think we have saved the best to the last. It is hard for me to imagine a love poem quite like this one in an age of secular, self-obsessed culture. The ultimate longing here is not for another person, or a kingdom of riches, or even the seductions of power. This love is for something beyond naming and yet as close as the empty space between each beat of our hearts. It is an ode to the Something More which lies on the other side of Nothing Left.

This is the essential statement of faith. Not a list of things that a person believes, as if one can sign off on eternity. But a *journey*, from seeking to finding beyond our daily chores and constant striving. This poem is an ode to the ultimate object of desire, that which made us, sustains us, and will receive us back unto itself. In fact, this is the best definition of faith I have ever read, since faith is not about finding something to hold onto, but to find oneself held onto. To be possessed, if you will, by the divine.

I remember years ago listening to an episode of *A Prairie Home Companion*, where Garrison Keillor, the preacher to the masses, told a love story and yet concluded it in a very odd way. He spoke of the love of one human being for another, which consumes a good deal of our time and energy, “as almost, practically, just about enough.” There is an object of love that is beyond time and space, beyond reciprocation, beyond conquest and comprehension.

The key for St. John of the Cross is longing. One belongs in relation to how much one longs to belong. In fact, all your other longings in life, for this or that object, for a better job, a more suitable mate, a more interesting life, all of them stem from this original longing. Plato called it the Good; countless human beings have called it God, or the Truth, or the Beloved. It is that which lies beyond the reality that is governed by the senses, or what the world tells us is real.

Everyone reaches for this in his or her own way, but it is a mistake to think that the Beloved finds you in a noisy place, full of some activity that makes you feel alive. You will find this Beloved if you go looking for it where you would least expect it to be: in utter emptiness beyond all the sensory delights of this world. This is why people meditate. They clear out their minds and they open up their hearts and then they have this mystical sense that they are not alone. That there is a Ground of Being if you will; that the horizons we see everyday are not the end of it, but merely the limit of our sight.

When people marvel at the behavior of saints like Mother Teresa, who was in the mold of her namesake St. Teresa of Avila, who was St. John's contemporary and great friend, they find it impossible to understand how they do what they do every day. We see it as an inner force driving them, but in this poem it is an accurate statement of the true nature of faith, it is closer to surrender.

St. John is willing to fall off the edge, to follow the longing down to its source. This is not an achievement, which is what Western culture in particular celebrates, but a form of dying to oneself, a kind of total self-forgetfulness. You do not find it in external things at all, but discover it in the depth of the inner life.

In a poem by Goethe called "The Holy Longing," the paradox is put succinctly: *And so long as you have not known/This: to die and so to grow,/You are only a troubled guest/On the dark earth.*

St. John of the Cross had just escaped from prison when he wrote this poem, and some of his inspiration for it came from a few bars of a Spanish-Arab love song he heard one night through his prison window. The language is unapologetically the language of the lover and the Beloved, as we heard in the ecstatic Song of Solomon from the Old Testament.

This is hardly a Judeo-Christian practice only. The Muslims have a long tradition of ardent song and poetry in praise of the divine lover. The troubadours of thirteenth-century Europe mingled with the Sufis in Moorish Spain, and from their Muslim brothers they caught the scent of spiritual devotion, which they translated into the more secular – thought nonetheless spiritual – devotional songs of the knight for his lady. As such, what we think of as contemporary romantic love is in a tiny stray spark from this original first in the heart.

Now this is the part that is of particular interest to me as the church finds itself in the midst of a shift as large as the reformation: St. John writes in the seventeenth century, and as such was one of the last voices in the Christian world to use the language of passionate love to speak about the search for God. The church did not find the body to be all redemptive, and taught instead that the purest expression of faith was to leave the desires of the body behind.

St. John of the Cross was in prison to begin with because he was unable to limit his understanding of God to the doctrine of the Church. This higher lovemaking has no need of a

priest for mediation; no need for sacraments, and one of the great heresies of that time was the practice of inner prayer. Why would the church distrust inner prayer? Because if everyone can do this on their own, what was the church's role? I have come to believe that what the church has called "heretical" has always involved a threat of one kind or another to the religion franchise that the church tries to be. If you can get to God on your own, what are all these priests for anyway?

And notice how this poem is an ode not to light, which is the principle metaphor for goodness in the Bible, but to the night. To what the poem calls "the delicious night." This is the land of emptiness, without a point of reference, without the ability to see with our eyes. Have you ever been in a cave or in a place of complete darkness, and turned out the lights? We describe it as "you can't see your hand in front of your face darkness."

When we are unable to receive any stimulus from our senses – no sight, no sound, no touch, taste or smell – when we are left alone with nothing, are we not at that moment on the threshold of the death of the conscious mind? Is it not at that moment, when we can receive nothing by our own hand that we might be handed something we can only receive?

The philosophers believed that one could reason one's way to faith; the Epicureans believed that the sensations of living were enough. But St. John associates neither reason nor sensual delight with God, but that which remains when both are set aside by complete darkness and all that remains is a fire that burns inside his chest.

All the poets have been driven to write about this: the longing of the lover for the Beloved as proof that not only does the lover exist, but also the Beloved. This a fire that never goes out – no matter how our lives go, no matter how many things we possess or how many worlds we conquer. This deep yearning for what is beyond the transactions of everyday life is the essence of faith itself.

It is what drives young men and women to enter seminary and to prepare for ministry. It is what possesses those who live their lives by a gentle ethic of service to others and seem to want nothing for themselves. It is what remains as Real when all else has been proved to be an illusion.

The way we speak of faith these days is such an insult to God. Talking about what propositions we have given intellectual assent to as if we can write a creed and capture the ultimate mystery of the divine. We tell people that the object is to answer the questions of life, but the real object is to *live the questions of life*. You find solutions not by standing back to analyze a feeling, but by falling into the feeling itself.

The Sufis have a way of putting this that will remind us of the essential wisdom of the Tao. That it is not in knowing that we know, but in knowing that we do not know. "If you seek

Him,” they write, “you shall never find Him. But if you do not seek him, He shall never reveal Himself to you.”

The German poet Rainer Maria Rilke put it this way” “Everything is blooming most recklessly; if it were voices instead of colors, there would be an unbelievable shrieking into the heart of the night.” So “Let life happen to you. Believe me: life is in the right, always.”

Which one of us cannot confess to this longing? -- to pass from the experience of separateness to that of union? We are all spiritually homesick, if you will, and it is this longing that testified to the fact that when something seems most deprived, that is when one is the closest. But you cannot just dip your toe in it. You must dive into it headlong. The Tibetans call it “Bliss-Emptiness.” “There is only love, and in love all things come to be.”

And that is my theology as I grow older. Love is all there is. The rest of it seems self-serving: Belong to my sect, adopt my system of beliefs, give your allegiance to my tribe. Nonsense. Faith is about falling into the heart of hearts. You cannot find it by hovering above yourself to remain in control of the experience and direct it. You do not meet it at the door of consciousness, but only when you leave yourself behind at the door.

This is why St. John calls the night more marvelous than the dawn. In that darkness, love and beloved become one. But the moment you try to name it, package it, or make a pilgrimage out of it so that other people can find it too, it eludes you. If you try to storm heaven’s gate, or possess the Beloved by wearing her resistance down, you will possess nothing. It is by a kind of “reciprocal tenderness” that she comes to you, not in a word, but in silence.

We have so long been taught by Hollywood that love and passion come as heated, tortuous emotions, that we might best describe ourselves in the West as addicted to sensation. But in this marvelous poem, St. John describes a state in which all the senses are at rest, and in that emptiness, Something comes to visit which fills up all the empty space and provides a deep communion. There is a Chinese poet, Do Hyun Cho who put it simply “*Stillness is what creates love.*”

We tend to think of sanctuaries as places that we go to to be filled with holy words and sacred music, but we should think of them as places where we go to be emptied. To forget who we are. To be as the poet puts it, “struck by a sober wind.”

Perhaps that’s why we tend to respond so to our singing bowl. It is not the sound, but the fading of the sound that is so compelling. How long can those vibrations last before there is nothing? And at the moment when sound ceases, what is left? What is on the other side of emptiness?

Some say nothing. Others say the white lilies. The traditional symbol of Easter. When everything is gone. When the beloved has been taken away. When words cease, when breath

stops, when blood no longer flows and hearts no longer beat – then we are done, right? It's over, right? All good things must come to an end, right?

Not if you believe in the Dark Night. Not if you are willing to fall into this poem as he falls into blessed emptiness. Then you will stand still and forget who you are. Then everything will stop, and you will feel abandoned, your worldliness gone, forgotten among the white lilies.

For some strange reason, when I read those lines I thought of a moment when I was a child at the state fair and decided to ride the Ferris wheel. As long as I was going around, past the attendant at the bottom, and then rising to the top to gaze out across the midway, I thought this was fun; this is what it means to ride a Ferris wheel.

Then for some reason, the power failed, just as I was nearing the top, the wheel stopped turning. The chair basket kept swinging, creaking and I was left alone on the top of the wheel – looking out over the fairgrounds at strangers in the dark. The power had failed, and everything was black. No one spoke, and at that moment I knew that I should have felt alone, stranded, fearful.

But I did not. For some reason, I felt cooked in that fiery silence and safe in that basket. I felt more tender than frightened, and seemed to sense that I was not alone. That on the other side of that darkness I found the One who had been looking for me.

When the power came back on, and the wheel lurched again into motion, I was almost disappointed. Swinging along in the blackness of a Kansas night, at the top of that Ferris wheel, I may have had my first intimation that there may be more to life than having fun; more than stimulus and response; more than pursuit and capture; more than longing and satisfaction. Especially at the moment when the basket stopped swinging and there was nothing but silence.

That was the moment, I am convinced, that brought me here.

#### Pastoral Prayer for Sunday, November 8, 2009

Lord of Life, we pause to consider that in the rush of our days, we may need silence as much as we need conversation. We may need solitude as much as we need the company of friends. We may need emptiness as much as we need sensation. For when sound ceases, when sight fails, when there is nothing to touch, all we can hear is the beating of our hearts. And when we are left to ponder nothing at all, sometimes that is when we experience everything that is.

If faith were a transaction, then of course everyone could have it as part of the exchange. Believe this, get that; sign on here, wait for your heavenly check in the mail. Join this chosen few and receive what only the chosen few have coming to them.

Against this jangle of falsehoods we come to worship this morning in stillness and in emptiness. Not afraid of what is not there, but in search of that which appears only when we stop searching, when we are quiet and have forgotten ourselves.

“Oh night, sweet guider,  
Oh night more marvelous than the dawn!  
Oh night which joins  
The love and the beloved  
So that the lover and beloved change bodies.”

Amen.

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## THE DARK NIGHT

By St. John of the Cross (*Excerpt, version by Robert Bly*)

*In the delicious night,  
In privacy, where no one saw me,  
Nor did I see one thing,  
I had no light or guide  
But the fire that burned inside my chest.*

*That fire showed me  
The way more clearly than the blaze of moon  
To where, waiting for me,  
Was the One I knew so well.  
In that place where no one ever is.*

*Oh night, sweet guider,*

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*Oh night more marvelous than the dawn!  
Oh night which joins  
The lover and the beloved  
So that the lover and beloved change bodies!*

*In my chest full of flowers,  
Flowering wholly and only for Him,  
There He remained sleeping:  
I cared for Him there,  
And the fan of the high cedars cooled Him.*

*The wind played with  
His hair, and that wind from the high  
Towers struck me on the neck  
With its sober hand;  
Sight, taste, touch, hearing stopped.*

*I stood still. I forgot who I was,  
My face leaning against Him,  
Everything stopped, abandoned me,  
My worldliness was gone, forgotten  
Among the white lilies.*

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