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**The Spiritual Journey**

**Formation in the Contemplative Christian Life**

**“Night of Sense: The Biblical Desert, Part 2”**

**Excerpted from**

***The Spiritual Journey Part 4, Paradigms of the Spiritual Journey***

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The Night of Sense is doing more than dismantling the false-self system. … As this process moved us into a deeper rest, this rest began to loosen up the material in the unconscious that our defense mechanisms had previously kept firmly in place. This is one of the fruits of the Night of Sense. It alerts us to the damage that the false-self system is doing. It alerts us to the presumption that we have sometimes exercised in dealing with God. It deepens our trust in him by, as we said, enduring the trials of this night and experiencing (beginning to, at least) the nourishment from the new food that he’s giving, of pure faith, which is what we mean by contemplative prayer.

Now we need to realize in any spiritual journey, the value of these two sides of a stream, you might say, that must be put in place so that when the energies of the unconscious emerge through the night, or through the rest of prayer, they will be transmuted rather than be an obstacle to that experience.

Here is where the Gospel insists, as you notice, on the two banks – not just one. The one bank consists in developing devotion and dedication to God supported by liturgy and ritual and all the practices that help to develop a relationship with Christ and with God. These are not useless. These are essential in the beginning as a stable and steady practice so that when the waters arise from deep within, they won’t overflow that side of your interior watercourse. At the same time, if you don’t put on the other side another bunch of sandbags, the continual practice and habitual development of the disposition of serving others through the duties of one’s state of life, through one’s other commitments, through some ministry or service – whether it be marriage, family, or some ministry; it is the exercise of these two painful and sometimes boring habits that solidly prepares one for the full benefit of the Night of Sense and avoid the hazards of this energy exploding into consciousness before one is able to handle it.

It’s this discipline, then, that gradually prepares us to handle the unloading of the unconscious so that when these energies emerge, the channel transmits it or moves that energy into the higher levels of consciousness, of which the next higher is the Intuitive. In the Night of Sense, then, this Intuitive level of our consciousness is being developed, not only by our active practice of prayer and the prayer of simplicity, the prayer of resting in God, but also by this whole Night of Sense which is a state in which God places us in order that the maximum opportunity for healing and further development might be taking place. The Night of Sense, then, is a transitional phase, you might say, a no-man’s land or a no-woman’s land between our rational or our reflective and our spontaneous relationship with God (which is very good), to a new relationship (which is even better), that of communion, of a being-to-being, face-to-face relationship and the knowledge of God in pure faith.

As we saw in the Mythic Membership level of consciousness, which is that which we pass through from about four to seven or eight, we absorb unconsciously the values of our parents, culture, early religious education. And this unquestioning assumption of those values and truths are spontaneous and become a kind of worldview in which we live; a kind of myth in the best sense of that word. And so, in the Night of Sense, these presuppositions begin to be questioned or challenged, not as deeply as they will be later. But at least, like the parables of our Lord in the Gospel, they kind of shake-up the ground on which we felt secure in our value system and worldview and open us up to other ways of seeing reality, other ways of understanding the relationship between people, than the unquestioned assumptions that we received from our culture, nation, or early religious training.

And so, this means, also, that at each of those humble levels of human development that we pass through as children, God offered himself to us just as we were; in other words, according to that level of consciousness…. And at one point, God might have been presented to us, as we saw earlier in these conferences, as the bogey man, as a tyrant, as a policeman, as an implacable judge. And these are emotional judgments deeply laid-up along with our programs for happiness, in our automatic responses and what might be called the super-ego. That is to say, they’re emotional judgments about what is good and bad, not true judgments.

These also have to be healed by opening our mind little by little by one means or another. And one way is by undermining the certitude or confidence with which we held certain biases, prejudices, preconceived ideas that were communicated or imposed upon us in early childhood. But the Gospel, then, is freeing us or trying to free us, not only from the emotional programs for happiness that we concocted in early childhood to survive, but also from the cultural conditioning that was deeply laid-up in us and imposed upon us as we began to develop the first stages of reason and reflection and which we absorbed without question and which are now operating in us on an unconscious level until they are faced. Part of the Night of Sense is to enable us to face that material and to lay aside that which was conditioned by our growing up process and the ideas of others, so that we can make our own personal response to Christ and move beyond the conformity morality, or the fitting in, or the human respect that characterizes that level of consciousness. And so, God has to deal with us, not only in our present understanding, but also, he has to deal with the residue of all the other ways we understood him or related to him earlier in life.

The best way he seems to have to deal with that stuff is to reduce it to silence. And thus, the resting in God that has become more and more habitual as we moved into the prayer of simplicity and into the Night of Sense is profoundly healing. It enables us to dis-identify not only with our own emotional programs, but with our cultural conditioning; because, during that time on a regular basis, we’re not thinking.

The fact that this development of our attitude, knowledge, and understanding of God can grow is a warning to us not to get stuck on some of our Mental-Egoic presumptions in which we think God is a certain way or reacts in a certain way — all of which is all mixed up with our super-ego or our cultural conditioning. Thus, some people are inclined to think that God always rewards the good by making them happy, giving them plenty of money — they never go bankrupt, etc. etc. In other words, success in life is a sign of God’s favor. Well, there’s some basis for that in the Old Testament, perhaps, but it’s hard to understand how that idea can be extracted from the New Testament when we see in Christ’s own example — that the best human being there ever was experienced the worst possible treatment. That’s a warning to us that the spiritual journey is not a magic carpet to bliss, riches or fame. On the contrary, it’s a very slow and plodding journey to the truth that involves the dismantling of all of that nonsense.

**COMMITMENT TO THE SPIRITUAL JOURNEY**

The Night of Sense also brings out in clearer focus the nature of commitment. Commitment is very important in the Christian tradition. And, as we saw, when Jesus invites us by the words “Follow me,” he’s inviting us into friendship and friendship always involves commitment; that is to say, you’re going to stick to this idea, this person, this community, or this cause and not walk away from it, no matter what happens.

Difficulties arise whenever a commitment is succeeding. That means: love makes one vulnerable. And as soon as you are in love or feel love, whether it be for God in the spiritual journey or another person, one’s defenses go down. You don’t have to be so self-protected, and you begin to disclose yourself, and feel at home. And now, because the defenses are relaxing, there’s nothing anymore to keep the dark side of our personality hidden, and it begins to rise significantly into not only your consciousness, but into your behavior to the full benefit or dismay of your spouse. Hopefully, the spouse is experiencing the same. But the purpose of the commitment of marriage is to stick to the thing and get through the difficulties which are inevitable and to process each other’s dark side so that at some point you may both emerge from the dark Night, so to speak, of Sense into a new place and sort of process each other’s dark material. And thus, marriage becomes a real school of holiness and transformation when it’s understood on that level. Now, of course, it’s true ... some commitments are just dead, or hopeless, or they were a mistake. People should take some care in whom they choose as a spouse and not be dominated by the romantic side alone. It’s in ministering divine love to each other precisely in our failures, and in our dark sides, in our human miseries, that one manifests the love of God to each other which is the symbol of the sacrament of marriage. It’s what communicates the reality of God’s love to the other person by compassion and showing love when they know they don’t deserve it in particular cases.

Similarly, in religious life or in the spiritual journey, when God is absent, when the night turns to dust, all one’s previous sources of benefit and profit, then once again the temptation to give-up the spiritual journey is enormous: “It can’t be for me. It must be for somebody else ... those wonderful Trappists and they’ve got nothing else to do, and so on. But I have a family to raise, a professional life to lead. I can’t put up with all this negativity that’s rising up within me.” And yet, if you close and walk away from your commitment to the spiritual journey, who goes with you? The false self, of course. And wherever you go, you take it and you just have to face it once again under some other circumstances, with some other community, or with some other person.

That’s why commitment is so tremendously important, especially in the Night of Sense; when at times, especially when those temptations are crucial, everything in you wants to get away, to have a breather, to take a vacation, to call a halt to it and hope you never start again. And yet the commitment says, “I won’t go away. I’m going to stick to my commitment. My feet are firmly rooted here.” And what it really is saying is that my heart is set upon God. My face, like Jesus, is set to go to Jerusalem. I’m determined to go through the desert to the promised land. And no matter what happens I’m going or I’m sticking. And this is the determination, then, that enables the Night of Sense, or any generous commitment, to do its work. And, as it does its work, then these stages of interior prayer and union with God begin to unfold.