

# **THE DARK NIGHT AND DEPRESSION**

by

**Michael Watson**

*A Research Project submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the Spiritual Directors' Training Programme of Spiritual Growth Ministries.*

*The spiritual journey is a series of diminutions of the self* -Thomas Keating

*I said to my soul, Be still, and let the dark come upon you  
which shall be the darkness of God - T S Eliot*

**Introduction**

We all go through bleak periods. In terms of spiritual direction, it is helpful if we can begin to discern what is going on for the directee when this happens.

Are they drifting away from Godde? ... losing their faith?

Is Godde taking them into the wilderness, to strip them of illusions and/or perhaps to speak tenderly to them (Hosea 2:14)?

Is this some kind of “dark night of the soul”? ... and what exactly does that mean, anyway?

Are they depressed?

How can we help a directee through times when Godde seems to be playing hide and seek, or simply to have disappeared?

These questions are the focus of what follows.

The term “dark night of the soul” is closely associated with St John of the Cross (1543 – 91), though it seems that he never actually used the expression. He wrote a poem, *The Dark Night*, and he talks of a “dark night of the senses” and a “dark night of the spirit.” In both of these, God takes away from us many things which we had previously relied on in our relationship with God. This is in order to bring us to fuller dependence on God alone. There is a “dark night through which the soul passes in order to attain to the Divine light of the perfect union of the love of God.”<sup>1</sup>

Nancy Missler has described it as a time of transition

*“from depending upon our own sight and our own selves to a total dependence upon Christ and His faithfulness. This shift brings us into a new way of knowing God. During this time God moves us from simply ‘feeling good about Him’ to a deeper awareness of Him and an intimacy never before known.”*<sup>2</sup>

She goes on to say that

*“the dark night of the soul happens to people who have **already** accepted the Lord; those who have **already** given their lives to Him; those **already** filled with the Spirit; those who have **already** dedicated their lives to Him; those who have **already** asked for intimacy; and those who have **already** been set aside for God's purposes of ministry.”*<sup>3</sup>

John of the Cross describes the dark night in three phases: there is the dark night of the senses, during which the self focuses its desire on Godde alone, and this involves the stripping away of any externals. Then there is the darkest part of the night, the night of the spirit, which is what is commonly referred to as ‘the dark night of the soul’. Here the process

---

<sup>1</sup> *Ascent of Mount Carmel, Prologue, quoted by Kenneth Leech, Soul Friend, p.160*

<sup>2</sup> *Nancy Missler, Koinonia House Online, Faith in the Night Seasons*

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*

goes further and “*the self is stripped even of any remaining spiritual gratification and of every consoling image of itself.*”<sup>4</sup> The final part of the night comes with the dawning of illumination, consummated in union with Godde. It is important to recognize that these three aspects of the night are not normally a straight forward sequence. Rather, each tends to overlap with the others and there is also interaction between them. Further, both the night of the senses and the night of the spirit have an active and a passive side which Rowan Williams describes succinctly as “*struggle and receptivity together.*”<sup>5</sup>

The dark night of the senses. This can be a disconcerting and disorienting experience, as familiar landmarks on the spiritual journey disappear or prove illusory. Thomas Merton has this to say:

*“During the ‘dark night’ of the feelings and senses, anxiety is felt in prayer, often acutely. This is necessary, because this spiritual night marks the transfer of the full, free control of our inner life into the hands of a superior power.. We begin to go out of ourselves: that is to say, we are drawn out from behind our habitual and conscious defenses.”*<sup>6</sup>

And further: *“We are entering the night in which [God] is present without any image, invisible, inscrutable, and beyond any satisfactory mental representation.”*<sup>7</sup>

A spiritual director needs to be familiar with these phenomenon of the dark night, at least in outline, if not in their own personal experience, if they are to help the directee begin to understand and come to terms with what is happening. They should be able to help them discern if there is a “night passage” of some kind, or whether what is happening is to do with depression or some other reaction.

There may be a deep sense that Godde is no longer there, perhaps accompanied by a rueful recognition that previous habitual ways of conceiving of Godde were in fact a kind of unrecognized idolatry. There may well also be a sense of vulnerability or even spiritual nakedness, which needs a sensitive and compassionate response from the director. It also needs to be remembered that not everyone experiences Godde or the absence of Godde in these ways.

*“Most seekers will undergo many ordinary human struggles and mood disorders, and at least one dark night of the senses in their lifetime. Most will not undergo a true dark night of the spirit. When these passages occur, the spiritual director becomes a sojourner of darkness with the seeker. The language, images, understanding and discernment processes merely provide helpful tools for this mysterious invitation for transformation. The rest is entirely up to the Holy Spirit.”*<sup>8</sup>

Unfortunately, the term “dark night of the soul” has entered into more general usage, and often is used to mean “having a hard time of it” or perhaps “struggling with depression”.

---

<sup>4</sup> Rowan Williams, *Darkness, Dark Night*, p.104, *A Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*, ed. Gordon S. Wakefield, SCM, 1983

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> Thomas Merton, *Contemplative Prayer*, p.96

<sup>7</sup> p.97

<sup>8</sup> *Dark Nights*, Mary Ann Woodman, *Presence*, Vol.8:no.2, June 2002

For example, Scott Fitzgerald writes,

*“At three o’clock in the morning, a forgotten package has the same importance as a death sentence, and the cure doesn’t work – and in a real dark night of the soul it is always three o’clock in the morning.”*<sup>9</sup>

Nancy Missler lists various expressions which she says refer to the same phenomenon:

- The Dark Night of the Soul
- The Dark Night of the Spirit
- Night of Confusion
- Jacob's Ladder
- A Secret Ladder
- The Night Season
- The Divine Darkness
- Journey into the Desert
- Cloud of Unknowing
- A Wall
- God's Fire of Love

Her own preference is to call the dark night a "night of love", though this also might be popularly misunderstood!

Though St John of the Cross was the first to label the phenomenon “the dark night” it is clear that others have experienced it before him.

There are Biblical precedents, eg, in Psalm 88:

- v.7: You tossed me to the bottom of the pit,  
into its murky darkness
- v.9b/10a: Trapped here with no escape,  
I cannot see beyond my pain
- vv.14-15: But I cry out to you, God,  
Each morning I plead with you.  
Why do you reject me, Lord?  
Why do you hide your face?
- v.19: You took my friends from me,  
darkness is all I have left.<sup>10</sup>

God often dwells in darkness and covers Himself with darkness. Psalm 18:11 tells us that darkness is His "secret place" and 1 Kings 8:12 Solomon says, *"The Lord said that He would dwell in the thick darkness"* Jesus' own dark night began in the Garden of Gethsemene, and ended on the Cross: *"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"* (Mark 15:34b). Further, the tradition of meeting Godde in darkness goes back at least as far as Moses (Exodus 19 and 20) where *"the people stood at a distance, while Moses drew near to the thick darkness where God was"* (Exodus 20:21, NRSV translation). This is picked up in the Christian tradition by Gregory of Nyssa, who combines the 'cloud' of Exodus with the 'night' of the Song of Songs<sup>11</sup> which is later interpreted as the night when the love of the soul for Godde is consummated.

---

<sup>9</sup> in *The Crack-Up*, quoted by Andrew Solomon in *The Noonday Demon*, p.144

<sup>10</sup> *The Psalter*, Liturgy Training Publications, 1994

<sup>11</sup> Rowan Williams, *op.cit.* p.103

Depression is a very common phenomenon, though this is not always readily acknowledged, as there is often a shame or stigma factor attached to it.

*“According to the World Health Organization, major depression is the leading cause of disability worldwide among persons aged five years and older. It is also the most common and widespread of all psychiatric disorders. Depression can range from mild to severe and takes a significant toll on individuals, families, and society.”*<sup>12</sup>

It is therefore likely that most spiritual directors will from time to time be dealing with a depressed directee. There are many forms and many causes of depression, but in most cases the symptoms are depressingly familiar. They include

- Persistent sad, anxious or "empty" mood
- Sleeping too much or too little; waking in the middle of the night or early morning
- Difficulty concentrating, remembering or making decisions
- Fatigue or loss of energy
- Feeling guilty, hopeless or worthless
- Thoughts of suicide or death

It is normal to have some feelings of depression after a bereavement or significant grief, but “*depression is grief out of proportion to circumstance*” says Andrew Solomon.<sup>13</sup> He goes on to say:

*“Saint Anthony in the desert, asked how he could differentiate between angels who came to him humble and devils who came in rich disguise, said you could tell by how you felt after they had departed. When an angel left you, you felt strengthened by his presence; when a devil left, you felt horror. Grief is a humble angel who leaves you with strong, clear thoughts and a sense of your own depth. Depression is a demon who leaves you appalled.”*<sup>14</sup>

If one suspects a directee is suffering from depression, what can be done? It is always advisable to encourage a medical check-up, and sometimes anti-depressants can be helpful, though some people are resistant to taking them, believing that they should be able to manage with their own resources and Godde’s help. Good, regular physical exercise can also help lift some depressions, and it seems more effective if it continues to the point where there is perspiration and some muscle fatigue. At a psychological level, an important question to ask, and perhaps where appropriate to encourage the directee to ask, is: “What is this person [What am I] depressing? ” This is based on an understanding that depression can be viewed as a coping mechanism, whereby strong feelings that are not ready to be faced are pushed down or de-pressed. Anger and grief are two of the most common. When the person is ready to deal with these, their energy levels will begin to increase, since less energy is now being used to de-press (hold down) such feelings. Gerald May helpfully points out that “*While many people have trouble identifying actual anger in such situations, they may be able to acknowledge milder forms of the same emotional energy.*” He goes on to say that a milder, moderated language is generally more helpful when exploring such issues: “*I guess you must feel frustrated about all this. Do you sense a little annoyance? Can you identify a little feeling of aggravation now and then? Any resentment?*”<sup>15</sup>

---

<sup>12</sup> Medscape website: Depression Resource Center

<sup>13</sup> Solomon, *op.cit.*p.16

<sup>14</sup> *ibid*

<sup>15</sup> Gerald May, *Care of Mind/Care of Spirit: Psychiatric Dimensions of Spiritual Direction*, Harper & Row, 1982, p.85

Solomon has some interesting reflections on depression and religion:

*“Religious belief is one of the primary ways that people accommodate depression. Religion provides answers to unanswerable questions. It cannot usually pull people out of depression; indeed, even the most religious people find that their faith thins or vanishes during the depths of depression. It can, however, defend against the complaint, and it can help people to survive depressive episodes. It gives reason to live.”*<sup>16</sup>

And again:

*“The discourse of faith, like that of romantic love, has the disadvantage that it carries the potential for disillusionment: depression is for many people an experience of being cast out by God or abandoned by Him, and many who have been depressed say that they are unable to believe in a God who inflicts such cruelty so uselessly on the members of His flock. For most of the faithful, however, this rage against God lifts as the depression does.”*<sup>17</sup>

Later he quotes the poet Betsy de Lotbiniere:

*“People with a degree of faith before they reach the gutting darkness of the Abyss have a route out of there. Finding your balance in the dark is the key. This is where religions can be helpful. Religious leaders have practice in giving people some stability as they tread well-worn paths out of darkness. If you can get the hang of this balance outside you, then maybe you’ll manage to achieve balance within. Then you will be free again.”*<sup>18</sup>

It has long been observed that some people have a depressive temperament or tendency. In the Middle Ages this was known as melancholia. John of the Cross has this to say:

*“When one is incapable of making discursive meditation upon the things of God and disinclined to consider subjects extraneous to God, the cause could be melancholia or some other kind of humour in the heart or brain capable of producing a certain stupefaction and suspension of the sense faculties. This anomaly would be the explanation for want of thought or of desire and inclination for thought.”*<sup>19</sup>

Melancholy, the black bile of the ancients which they thought gave birth to depression, was part of this psychological vocabulary that John of the Cross had to work with. Melancholy could not only counterfeit the dark night, but when it was a question of the unruly movements of sense during the time of prayer, it could magnify these difficulties. So both melancholy and the true contemplative night of sense could be operative in the same person, and this point is made again later in *The Dark Night*:

*“There is thus a great difference between aridity and lukewarmness, for lukewarmness consists in great weakness and remissness in the will and in the spirit, without solicitude as to serving God; whereas purgative aridity is ordinarily accompanied by solicitude, with care and grief as I say, because the soul is not serving God. And, although this may sometimes be increased by melancholy or some other humour (as it frequently is), it fails not for that reason to produce a purgative effect upon the desire, since the desire is deprived of all pleasure, and has its care centered upon God alone. For,*

---

<sup>16</sup> op.cit.p.130

<sup>17</sup> ibid.

<sup>18</sup> op.cit.p.133

<sup>19</sup> John of the Cross, Ascent of Mount Carmel

*when mere humour is the cause, it spends itself in displeasure and ruin of the physical nature, and there are none of those desires to serve God which belong to purgative aridity.”*<sup>20</sup>

So there are some important clues given here. The key question seems to be whether or not the soul is still serving God: where is the deep focus of the soul's desire? How would one determine that?

Gerald May draws on his experience in both psychiatry and spiritual direction when he tells us:

*“The critical consideration in all of this is the source of the experience. If a period of emptiness in prayer can be attributed to some psychological block or self-defeating behaviour on the part of the directee, one should, of course, try to move to correct it. On the other hand, if it can be discerned that the emptiness is a natural and graced event in the course of spiritual growth, one does well simply to let it happen”*<sup>21</sup>

Maria-Louise von Franz, a colleague of Carl Jung, is quoted as saying:

*“The experience of Self brings a feeling of standing on solid ground inside oneself, on a patch of eternity, which even physical death cannot touch.”*

The ‘Self’ here can be roughly equated with the experience of God within. Contrast this with what Alice Miller has to say:

*“What is described as depression and experienced as emptiness, futility, fear of impoverishment and loneliness can often be recognized as the tragedy of the loss of self, or alienation from the self.”*<sup>22</sup>

The ‘self’ here is more to do with deep personal identity, though clearly that is closely related to the Self in the sense mentioned above.

There is another important consideration in all this, namely, that the dark night of the soul is not so much a period in the spiritual life that one passes through, as an on-going dimension of that life. Kenneth Leech comments:

*“The dark night of St John of the Cross is not a phase, still less is it a pathological feature of the Christian life; it is a symbol of the entire process of movement towards God.”*<sup>23</sup>

This puts it into a different context: *“Those who enter the night never leave it, though the night changes.”*<sup>24</sup> In this way, it is reminiscent of the Asian proverb which tells us that a wise person is one who *un-*learns something every day.

*“To be fully accurate, one should probably not call the dark night an ‘experience’ at all. It is more a deep and ongoing process of unknowing that involves the loss of habitual experience. This includes, at different times and in different ways, loss of attachment to sensate gratification and to usual aspirations and motivations, loss of previously construed faith-*

---

<sup>20</sup> Quotes taken from *St. John of the Cross and Dr. C. G. Jung: Christian Mysticism in the Light of Jungian Psychology*, James Arraj, 1986

<sup>21</sup> *Care of Mind/Care of Spirit*, Gerald May, p.84

<sup>22</sup> Quoted in *Intimacy and Solitude*, Stephanie Dowrick, p.34

<sup>23</sup> *Soul Friend*, p.160

<sup>24</sup> *ibid.*

*understandings, and loss of God-images. Accompanying this, of course, are loss of self-image/importance and of preconceptions about one's own identity."*<sup>25</sup>

May goes on to explain that

*"one does notice or recognize this process more acutely at some times than at others, and these 'noticings' constitute what we may call experiences of the dark night."*

There is also the complication that a dark night may bring with it some reactive depression or other response, such as fear, grief or despair.

May points out that

*"both primary depression and reactions to dark night experiences may include such phenomena as feelings of hopelessness, helplessness, agitation and emptiness. Both may involve impoverishment of thoughts, absence of motivation, and loss of self-confidence."*<sup>26</sup>

But he also helpfully delineates some of the differences:

- a. *"Depression usually involves a loss of effectiveness in life or work, whereas this is not generally true of dark nights, where the person may be surprised at how well they continue to operate.*
- b. *Dark nights do not usually lead to a loss of sense of humour, whereas in depression, humour may be lost or become cynical or bitter.*
- c. *After a dark night experience, compassion for others tends to grow. Contrast this with the self-absorption of depression.*
- d. *In the dark night, there is, despite everything, an underlying sense that one is on the right path. Depression, by contrast, often involves a feeling that things are wrong, and there may be a desire for them to change.*
- e. *While passing through a dark night awareness, people may look for an explanation or evaluation of what is happening, but there is not the sense of pleading for help that goes with significant depression.*
- f. *When working with a depressed person, it is common to have feelings of frustration, annoyance or resentment, whereas feelings of grace and consolation are more likely when with someone going through a dark night.<sup>27</sup> One directee said this: "The way to go seems scary and invisible to me. I feel so inadequate, and yet I feel a blanket of grace around me."*<sup>28</sup>

---

<sup>25</sup> May, *op.cit.* p.88

<sup>26</sup> *op.cit.* p.90

<sup>27</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> Quoted in *Dark Nights*, Mary Ann Woodman, *Presence*, Vol.8:no.2, June 2002



May points out that some experiences of consolation, desolation or the dark night may in fact be the work of evil and suggests some pointers for discerning this.

- *Is there a healthy openness about the experience?*
- *Is the directee willing to have it examined from all perspectives?*
- *Does it feel honest, loving and faith-enriching to you as the director regardless of how it feels to the directee?*
- *Does it seem to be helping, or crippling, the directee's reliance upon God?*
- *Is it nurturing or impeding the directee's love for God and neighbour?*

Finally – and I think most importantly

- *How is your immediate, prayerful awareness affected as you discuss the matter with the directee?*
- *Does it lead you into a deeper sense of God's presence and grace or does it lead you into coldness, alienation, antagonism, or selfishness?*<sup>29</sup>

So all these various insights and understandings can help attune a spiritual director's awareness as to what may or may not be going on for the directee. Whether or not one can discern if a directee is going through a "dark night" or some form of depression, or perhaps a combination of the two, great sensitivity is clearly called for. And we need perhaps to recall the medical dictum that "diagnosis is not cure" – that is, it is not sufficient to think we understand what may be going on for the directee. We need a clear and compassionate response, graced by the Holy Spirit, to be a faithful companion through the darkness. And we need to encourage directees in this situation with the well-recognized insight, that for all its blackness, the "dark night" is a sign of testing and ultimately of growth. Nancy Missler reminds us

*"that we, too, in our journey inward towards intimacy and experiential oneness with Jesus can encounter darkness. For us, this 'darkness' can simply mean the absence of any understanding or knowledge as to what's happening to us or where we are going. It simply means being deprived of the light (the seeing, the feeling and the understanding) that we are so used to. In other words, we're unable to see through this kind of darkness with our own natural mind which, of course, is exactly what God intends. He is teaching us to walk by faith and not by feelings or sight. As our faith begins to grow, the light of understanding will also begin to form."*

It seems pastorally important to let directees know about this, if it is new to them. And we can take Nancy Missler's final comment as a means of reassuring and encouraging those who are experiencing a dark night:

*"One of the major purposes, then, of the dark night of the soul or a night season is to formulate an unshakable resolve in us, so that even if everything goes wrong in our lives and even if we can't see or understand a thing of what God is doing, we will still choose to cling immovably to God. He wants us to be governed only by our choice of faith - a faith that proclaims whether I live or die, I choose to trust in **You**, not in my own thoughts and emotions."<sup>30</sup>*

If we are faithful, sooner or more probably later, we begin to sense the lightening of the darkest part of the night. In Godde's good time, the first faint streaks of dawn begin to be

---

<sup>29</sup> *op.cit.p91*

<sup>30</sup> *Nancy Missler, op.cit.*

discerned... “*When love has carried us above and beyond all things,*” writes the Flemish mystic Jan van Ruysbroeck (1293 – 1381).

*“above the light, into the Divine Dark, there we are wrought and transformed by the Eternal Word Who is in the image of the Father; and as the air is penetrated by the sun, thus we receive in idleness of spirit the Incomprehensible Light, enfolding us and penetrating us. And this Light is nothing else but an infinite gazing and seeing. We behold that which we are, and we are that which we behold; because our thought, life and being are uplifted in simplicity and made one with the Truth that is God.”*<sup>31</sup>

Eve of All Saints, 31 October 2002

---

<sup>31</sup> De Calculo, chap. Ix. *Quoted in Mysticism, Evelyn Underhill, Methuen, London, 12<sup>th</sup> ed. revised, p.423*

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Arraj. James, *St. John of the Cross and Dr. C.G. Jung: Christian Mysticism in the Light of Jungian Psychology*, 1986

John of the Cross, *Ascent of Mount Carmel and Dark Night*

Leech. Kenneth, *Soul Friend*,

May. Gerald, *Care of Mind/Care of Spirit: Psychiatric Dimensions of Spiritual Direction*, Harper & Row, 1982

Merton. Thomas, *Contemplative Prayer*,

Missler. Nancy, Koinonia House Online, *Faith in the Night Seasons*

Solomon. Andrew, *The Noonday Demon - An Anatomy of Depression*, Chatto & Windus, London, 2001

Williams. Rowan, *Darkness, Dark Night*, p.104, article in *A Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*, ed.Gordon S. Wakefield, SCM, 1983

Woodman. Mary Ann, *Dark Nights*, in *Presence*, Vol.8:no.2, June 2002

## **Appendix One: Checklist for Spiritual Directors:**

### **Dark Night**

1. Is there a loss of familiar landmarks on the spiritual journey? - there may be anxiety (in prayer) related to this
2. Is there a loss of Godde images? ... or a sense that Godde is present without any mental image or representation?
3. Is there a sense of the absence of Godde? ... perhaps combined with a feeling of vulnerability or spiritual nakedness?
4. Is there a sense of becoming more dependent upon Godde? ... of learning to trust Godde, whatever the directee's thoughts and feelings?
5. Is there a sense of the directee being stripped of illusions about herself?
6. Is there a deepening awareness of and intimacy with Godde?
7. Where is the real focus of the directee's life? are they still wanting to serve Godde?

Biblical passages to reflect on: Psalm 88, Song of Songs, Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane (Matthew 26:36-46, Mark 14:32-42, Luke 22: 39-46), the death of Jesus (Matthew 27:45-46).

### **Depression**

1. Is this person depressed? Checklist of symptoms can be found at [www.cet.org/piuds.htm](http://www.cet.org/piuds.htm)
2. What is it that this person is de-pressing?
3. Is there a sense of movement towards Godde or are they self-absorbed?
4. Are they still on the right path, despite everything? ... or have they given up or lost their way?
5. What are your feelings as director as you work with them?
6. Frustration, annoyance or resentment may indicate depression.
7. Grace and consolation are more likely a sign of the dark night.
8. Is there any sense of the presence of evil? (this is rare).
9. Is directee open about what is going on? ...willing to have it looked at from any perspective?
10. How is prayerful awareness affected as you discuss with the directee? ... does it lead you into a deeper sense of God's presence and grace or does it lead you into coldness, alienation, antagonism, or selfishness?