

## **Dark Night of the Soul** (by Joe Colletti, PhD)

*"God Reveals Deep Things of Darkness and Brings Deep Shadows Into The Light"*  
(Job 12.22)

### **I. What is the Dark Night of the Soul?**

St. John of the Cross has forever etched the descriptive words "Dark Night of the Soul" into the spiritual heart of our world. The Dark Night of the Soul is an on-going experience of divine revelation. The Dark Night is a place, as St. John notes, where God "nurtures and caresses (our) soul". That place, he also notes, is "lengthy periods at prayer" or an "entire night" of awakening--experiences that we all too often avoid.

St. John of the Cross also notes that the dark night is part of an awakening journey that is filled with constant experiences of darkness and death. Encounters with darkness are experiences of spiritual purgation. St. John calls them "rays of darkness". Darkness occurs when we are blinded by a brilliant light of divine opportunity such as loving God with all your heart and with all your soul and your neighbor as yourself (Luke 10.27). Darkness also occurs when we are blinded by a brilliant light of divine illumination that reveals our own imperfections. He also explains that death can occur daily if we allow it to happen. Dying to our own avoidance and shortcomings helps us purge our own habitual ignorance and imperfections and help us to move beyond our self to the self that lives eternally in God both in time and beyond time.

The phrase dark night of the soul, nonetheless, has been used broadly by others over the centuries. Its most basic meaning has always been connected to a lengthy and profound absence of light and hope as with St. John of the Cross. Thus, in the dark night you feel profoundly alone. Recent publications, however, have described the dark night of the soul as a result and as a means to finding your way through life's ordeals such as divorces, career disappointments, illnesses, substance abuse and co-dependency, and other such life struggles.

Thus, individuals have tended to view the dark nights of the soul in more of a clinical sense as obstacles to be overcome as quickly as possible. Such experiences are threats to our well-being and we should attempt to overcome and be healed as quickly as possible. Therefore, if we are no longer distressed, distraught, or depressed we should thank God that we have been restored and do everything we can in order to not wind up in a similar state of being.

In terms of time, however, St. John of the Cross describes the dark night of the soul more as a period of incubation during which an individual should delve into the soul's deepest needs in order to achieve a deeper union with God which is further achieved through more or lengthy dark night of the soul experiences. In terms of purpose, he explains that God leads individuals into a dark night of the soul experience in order to provide opportunity to progress spiritually. It is a time during which an individual can transform their relationship with God.

## **II. Experiencing the Dark Night of the Soul**

I want to describe the dark night of the soul as an opportunity to embrace some daily urban experiences that we so often shun. Doing so, will provide a means by which we can integrate our dark night experiences into our daily life experiences through spiritual practices and our spiritual practices into our daily life experiences. As a result, we can transform our relationship with God and progress spiritually by delving into the deepest parts of our soul in order to purge and let die things that are not Christ-like.

There are many people that we encounter daily during the urban experiences of our lives that we all too often avoid. Such encounters involve homeless persons, the mentally ill, substance abusers, and victims of domestic violence. Such persons may be begging for money, flailing their arms as they are talking to themselves, drinking in public, or hurriedly seeking shelter from an abuser. Other encounters involve day laborers, recyclers, street vendors, and the seemingly unemployed. Such persons may be hanging around street corners, shifting through trash, selling various foods or goods, and loitering.

As I already stated, I want to describe the dark night of the soul as an opportunity to embrace some daily urban experiences that we so often shun. We all too often avoid many people that we encounter daily during the urban experiences of our lives out of feelings of discomfort or intolerance. Thus, to enter into a dark night of the soul is to embrace these daily experiences that we so often shun and to integrate them into our urban spiritual lives by allowing things that are not seemingly Christ-like to become Christ-like.

Thus, it is important to note that a dark night of a soul experience is not necessarily an encounter with God during which we want to overcome "negative" experiences as quickly as possible. Such experiences are not necessary threats to our well-being that should be healed as quickly as possible.

St. John of the Cross describes the dark night of the soul more as a period of incubation during which an individual should delve deep into one's soul out of a desire for a deeper union with God. He describes God as wanting to lead an individual into a dark night of the soul experience in order to provide opportunity to further develop an intimate relationship with God based upon an on-going experience of divine revelation and transformative love. The dark night of the soul is a place where God "nurtures and caresses (our) soul" an "entire night" if we so desire.

Such nurturance and affection helps us to become willing to allow our own imperfections to die. Dying to our own avoidance and shortcomings helps us purge our own habitual ignorance and imperfections and help us to move beyond our self to the self that lives eternally in God both in the present as well as the future. Thus, it is not just a matter of increased knowledge or understanding. It is incarnating the truth that we received from God's involvement in our daily world. This takes time—perhaps even years—to develop fully.

So, to enter into the dark night of the soul is not simply to embrace the daily experiences that we so often shun. It is to purposely nurture our relationship with God through spiritual practices that help us overcome any feelings of abandonment and any feelings of fear of intimacy with God who asks that an intimate relationship contain daily encounters with others--the homeless person, the victim of domestic violence, the mentally ill person, the substance abuser, and others--whom we initially want to avoid.