

PRAYING IN THE DARK

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Is it really possible to continue praying, when it becomes totally dark? Or is it rather so that then the way is cleared to come to real prayer? Behind these questions are the more fundamental questions: 'What is praying really?' 'Are we really praying, when we speak words to God and feel that we are in contact with Him?' Or 'is it rather so that praying begins *beyond* our praying, when all words and feelings fall silent? When the emptiness becomes total and there is nothing anymore to hold on to?'

A person who experienced a very dark Night, asked her spiritual accompanist: 'How long will this last, this dark Night?' The accompanist answered: 'That will not end, it will only become worse.' Indeed, the Dark Night is God who is imposing Himself on us. In this process we lose our grip of the situation. It is not a crisis that leaves us behind in confusion and powerlessness. On the contrary. Because God overwhelms us with his light, we get blinded and we experience only darkness. We really don't know anymore what we are up to. There is something wrong here, because all that is familiar disappears. Our whole way of looking, thinking and knowing falls apart. Our familiar world collapses completely. The consequence, however, is that from there on we can begin to see God Himself, because we do have no alternative than to abandon the projections of our desires, anxieties and longings. Our own human logic and common sense collapses completely.

At the end of the spiritual accompaniment the above mentioned person looked therefore back at the reaction of the spiritual accompanist: "It was terrible, when you said that this horrible dark night will not end, but will always become worse. But at an opposite reaction of yours I would have known that this is not true."

Precisely, because this person was acquainted with how God works in the midst of the terrors of the Dark Night, she knew that it couldn't be different, if you are going to meet God Himself. You really

have to lose all contact with everything that is your own and familiar to you. This person wrote in her diary the following:

I pull at the emergency brake, I am at my wit's end. I am afraid to get lost. All the ways that led me to God are blocked. To choose for Him doesn't work; to rely on Him blindly doesn't work either. I don't know anymore how these things might be practiced. To bow deeply before Him ... none of these familiar movements are still possible. It is as if I am sitting in a tomb, and I can't get out. My God is no longer my Beloved; I cannot please Him anymore, neither does He please me. He remains a stranger; it is a horrible situation. I don't want Him anymore. It is as if I am destined for ever to remain in this hole, where I don't feel anything and I am like an empty packing. I cannot anymore. Drowning people never give up, they keep on struggling, but me...

In a conversation this person stated that she didn't know anymore who is God or what the word 'God' means. Nothing familiar is left. There is only an uninhabitable no-man's land, where you feel no longer at home. It is as if you don't even remember anymore that you ever had a home. On the contrary, it looks as if you have lived all the time in a world of illusions.

When it is totally dark, you can miss a person whom you are looking for or you can run into him. We prefer to meet each other in full light. In the dark we easily get lost. In normal circumstances that is an undesirable situation, which we try to avoid or to stop as soon as possible. But this is perhaps to our advantage, when we are searching for God. To have lost your way may allow you to find Him. In full light we see mainly ourselves. We may speak with pious words about God, but actually we are standing before a mirror in which we see only our own face. Everything is a reflection of ourselves. This concerns all our social relationships, but more so our speaking and thinking about God. An other person can still contradict us and say: 'That person whom you are talking about and with whom you mean me, that is not me. You don't know me.' Because God is silent and defenseless when it comes to our speaking and thinking, He easily becomes the object of our projections. Frightening darkness is therefore the place where God himself can be born. Here we can finally contemplate God, beyond everything.

We must 'die of ourselves' in order to allow God to enter our inmost self. Because we get out from ourselves and from our fear, we are able to begin to contemplate the Countenance of God, who grants us life for free. We are always constructing an ideal 'God', who responds to our own human logic. The urge to survive and the

fundamental need to hold on to oneself locks us up in the prison of our own human identity. The Other cannot enter there. The Night compels us to abandon our projections and to step out of ourselves and thus approach Him.

I. ANYTHING HUMAN TO HOLD ON FALLS AWAY

The Night describes the encounter between two beloved. But this can only happen in the dark, where we go into unknown vistas. We are busy on the way to our destination and we stumble over God without noticing. Also in our spiritual life we are busy with ourselves for 99%. We tell our own story to God. When our praying falls in pieces, then we will be able to hear the Spirit praying in us. This is contemplation, receiving what God wants to give to us.

The encounter with God makes us step out from ourselves, out of our own familiar world in order to make room for the unconditional love of God in our life and in our thinking. In that space of God we don't know the way. We are there without a street map, like in a desert, in a night. We have nothing to go on.

Actually, we construct for ourselves an image of God. We use the word 'God', but to pronounce that word is nothing else than just indicating the direction towards a horizon we will never reach. For we don't know what we are saying. That is precisely the beauty of using the word 'God'. Every time again God upsets our images of Him. We first have to read the Scriptures and we know that all those images give us a lead, but in their absurdity and diversity they derail also our thinking every time. The Night is the process of being set free from our own images. The consequences of this are not only temporary but they always go deeper. It will go on further, there is no turning back!

We have the impression that we are in contact with the reality. And yet, all of a sudden we 'see' something that was there already for a long time. For the greater part of what is around us, we are blind, the same as that we do not hear also most of what is said. In the evaluation of a session of spiritual accompaniment we may notice that we were unable to hear or unconsciously we did not want to hear, what without doubt went into our ears? Indeed, for the greater part of the reality we are deaf and blind. Therefore, we must learn to listen carefully to the speaking of God in ourselves and in the whole of reality. God reveals himself in the silence, when we let loose of all our patterns of expectation. Silence is that what we don't expect. To have contact with the reality as we think we have, is an illusion. In no other

way can we make contact with our surrounding world than through our senses and our body. God escapes in every respect our sensual ability. We only listen to a language that we understand. Even if we listen to the Word of God in the Scriptures or in the liturgy, we hear only a language that is comprehensible for us. The reality of God escapes our construction of the reality. In the world of God all of us are strangers. We do not know his world and we shall never know it. And yet, we are carried along in it, but always unaccustomed and ill at ease. Our perception of autonomous functioning falls away. St. John of the Cross says: 'We must get out of our house...' And that is really true. We have to get out of our house, out of our familiar reality, out of ourselves, out of our created reality.

II. THE UNBEATEN TRACK

Carine Philipse wrote about her dark Night as follows:

At a critical moment there happened to be a turning point in this process. I was inclined to think that I should be able to solve my own problems. For instance how I might cope with my extreme sensitivity to penetrating sounds and with the stress experienced in this situation since it provokes whistling in my ear. I was of the opinion that I should reach psychologically the stage of ignoring and overcoming the stress by penetrating sounds, and reacting laconically to this whistling in my ear. All this was the remainder of my pursuit of autonomy and my idea that after all I should be able to steer my life in the right direction. That idea I have learned as a child. A belief that enables us to entrust ourselves completely to God and to lay down everything that occurs to us in front of Him, is completely unfamiliar to me. The decisive turning point away from this tendency to autonomy, the desire to solve my own problems and the idea that I should be able to do so, towards the willingness to surrender myself and all that occurs to me in his hands, took place during the weekend at the Trappist Abbey.

All my grief for this problem came up again by an incident with penetrating sounds. I was swamped by the sensation of my powerlessness to cope, the stress and the anxiety provoked by it, the grief that this problem of whistling in my ears unintentionally was caused by my friend. I was totally stuck in this pain and distress. All this culminated during this Saturday evening. I wanted to be by myself. Why? I secluded myself for God. Why? Even though I felt strongly how much this was hurting me. I knew that it was wrong, but

I could not tackle it differently. I was unable to break through the barrier of this enclosure, unless I had forced myself and that I did not want to do.

At that moment I made the choice to stick to this powerlessness, this despair, pain and grief. So I went to bed, in this darkness.

The next day I experienced forcefully that God himself called me. "Go out and stand before my Countenance"¹ I had chosen as a text for this weekend 1 Kings 19, and exactly this appeal to Elijah was now an appeal to me: "Go out, from your seclusion for me, and stand, just as you are, with all the pain, grief and despair which is in your heart, stand with all this before my Countenance".

This is what I did. I had no choice; I did not want to do otherwise. It was just such a relief to stand there, before Him, before Him who sees everything, who contemplates everything in me with his love.

He himself has called me. He was breaking through the barrier of my seclusion. He was breaking me open. Once for all. This was the turning point.

Ever since during prayer I always stand before Him who is seeing me as I am; who contemplates all aspects of me in his endless love; before Him who sees me, who always sees me with loving gaze, day and night, as long as I will live. He himself lighted his light in the darkness of my night.

Also at present I have all the time the experience that can just go to bed in his custody with all what is dejecting me and worrying me. It is not necessary that I am able to solve the problem, at the contrary I just let it be.

Once and again it is my experience how He takes away from my shoulders all burdens. The only thing that matters is the road which He walks with me. The importance of all other things is disappearing. All other things do not get anymore the chance to be important in my life.

O beloved,
do overtake me
every time again
in your total being-the-Other

And just if I build up
something again myself,
beat it out of my hands.

¹ 1 Kings 19:11

O Blessed,
You who are Everything.²

We adjust God into our life and we create a God who suits us. He invites us to abandon this human need and to tread the unbeaten track. He comes to meet us in our bankruptcy, our 'I can't go on anymore'. Bankruptcy is the highest we can reach, only then can God reveal Himself³. Only then can we say 'yes' to a God who manifests Himself in his own way. The manner in which God manifests Himself is actually characterized by unmannerliness, i.e. it is lacking the manner we are used to and can understand. It is without formality and far from our common sense.

Our biggest problem is our common sense. The reality of God does not fit our expectations. Our speaking of God constructs the image we have of Him, an image He fortunately disrupts every time again. The Night is getting rid of our own images. The more pious we are, the greater chance is that we lock ourselves up in our own spirituality. The Night breaks this open. In principle we always follow the logic of our reason. We are not as foolish as God is in his unconditional Love. We must learn to become as foolish as God is, while we actually think that God is as reasonable as we are. This ineradicable human logic is our problem. This logic does not concern so much our sinfulness but rather our human common sense, adapting God to us instead of surrendering ourselves to the process of transformation by God's Love.

III. WE ARE NOT GOD

When we are introduced by God into contemplating his Face, we must step out of ourselves. Although in God's space we become alive,

² Unpublished manuscript.

³ See JAN VAN RUUSBROEC, *Die Geestelike Brulocht / The Spiritual Expousals, Opera Omnia* 3, Tielt – Turnhout 1986, B 993-1003: God want to be loved by us according to His nobility; and in this all spirits fail (faelgeren); and thus their love becomes modeless and mannerless. For they know neither how to achieve it nor how to induce it, for the love of all spirits is measured. And therefore, love always begins again from the beginning, so that God may be loved according to His demand and according to their desire. And therefore all spirits gather together without cease and form one burning flame in love, so that they might accomplish the task of loving God according to His nobility. Reason clearly shows that this is impossible for creatures. But love always wants to satisfy love fully or (else) to melt away and burn up and be annihilated in its failure.

this getting out of ourselves means great darkness. When we abandon the perspective familiar to us, we begin to see God in his light and with his eyes. This is extremely strange to us and even unpleasant. But this darkness offers an opportunity that his Face might lighten up. After all, we are not God and God is not us. This darkness is the consequence of truly seeing, of finally really seeing what is there to be seen. When we as human beings understand and accept that we are not God, we begin to understand how all the created things are thoroughly alienating us from the fullness of God's existence. When we go into a relationship with God, we will therefore always come to life in the Dark Night. Indeed, when God becomes the only love in our life, our love disengages itself from everything that is not God, which means to say, from every created being. The night causes us to fall into the infinite depth of God's existence, where only the darkness of 'faith' can be our guide.

We are lifted up above our own limitations and let ourselves be carried on wings into the endless depth of God's love. The natural 'inclinations and movements' of our human existence, however, are always seeking something to hold on to and a security. That is why they inevitably resist to the loss of ourselves, something the divine love works out in us. In the night we receive the openness and the capacity to cling without any bending backwards to ourselves to the Unspeakable, who reveals his divine being to us. In this way we are liberated from any alienation in front of Him. God Himself causes this night by pouring in this contemplative look, which makes us see Him in his infinity. This 'contemplation' removes the human dynamics, which prevents us from receiving something of his infinite being.

In the midst of the cruelties of World War II a female lay mystic wrote in her diary:

My God, just as the sky during a night without any stars, so your Essence raises itself as a dome above my nothingness. You are dark and far away. Here I am standing small and lonely, immobile and powerless. The horrors of the darkness come towards me in doubtfulness and scary questions. O merciful God, Your Will may be done.⁴

A few months later the same woman wrote:

My God, this silence is a heavy cross to bear! Here I am standing with my stammering powerlessness, and I don't know the song that is present in my heart but does not break into song. Be perfect as your heavenly

⁴ Unpublished manuscript of Mrs TEN HORN†, January 30-31 1944.

Father is perfect. Growing silent, surrendered without will, without desires, staying awake and waiting. The Spirit of the Father and the Son, their mutual Love, is floating above my motionless soul. Everything should have a rest in God, any desire, no matter how holy. Set free from everything, and yet - a calm gladness remained.⁵

This woman is entering the dark night because she is encountering God. Some days before the first citation from her diary she wrote:

My God, it is You who lives in me. You are using my body as your instrument. Allow then that my tongue is speaking nothing else than your words. Do not allow me that I am interrupting you.⁶

She realizes that she does not possess a life of her own. She is simply contemplating God's operation in her powerlessness and nullity. She was not depressed nor did she have poor self-esteem. The dark night was not a passing incident or a temporary setback. At the contrary, the encounter with God provoked an utter darkness because the divine Light was overwhelming and dazzling her. Five years later no light was yet dawning at the end of the tunnel. Nevertheless, this was not disturbing her serenity.

Some days ago Jesus said to me: 'Now the night is falling, but I will stay with you'. I shuddered at the thought, although rather soon gladness was breaking through. The holy Will of God may happen. This morning I was giving thought to these words of Jesus. They may forebode all kind of horrors. My fantasy pictured several of them to myself. I have accepted them one by one. I was so much aware of my weakness and of many unpredictable possibilities that I was dismayed. Thereupon I thought that these words are also quite a comfort. I felt encouraged and repeated my unconditional surrender. Subsequently it occurred to me that these words might be considered as a whole. Then it becomes a quiet night, full of mercy, in which my self will be radiant as a star full of divine Light.⁷

These consoling insights were only the fruits of a sweeping process. Our human nature is nothing else than resistance to this thorough annihilation transforming us into divine life.

It is not easy to be a dead person. Nevertheless, serenity was taking place. For a long time I have struggled in agony in order to soothe reaction and

⁵ July 13-19 1944.

⁶ July 26 1944.

⁷ July 5-6 1949.

action. Now I am buried by Christ. My soul is alive. Nevertheless, I am far from faultless. The mortal body, inclined to wrongdoing, still to perish.⁸

Slowly this woman became aware of the real meaning of the dark night. She is experiencing that the divine Light is shining more and more in the midst of these negative impressions.

The core of the candle's flame is dark. God wants me to give light, but to stay myself in darkness.⁹

IV. ANGUISH AND UNCERTAINTY

Disappointed and disillusioned we are sometimes overpowered by feelings of negativity. These feelings may look like those of a depression. Is this the eclipse of God, which seems to be so dominant in our modern secularized culture? By placing us in the center of our being God leads us into a new relationship with Him. Finally we catch sight of Him self! In his abundant love for us He created us precisely for this purpose.

Caught in anguish and uncertainty we turn around in the delusions of our self-deception. We do not dare to leave the familiar ground of our identity, while 'God is conducting us along another road, which is contemplation and is very different from the first'.¹⁰ Our senses here cannot give information anymore about the road that is humanly speaking impassable. Now we can only 'trust in God', 'until He is getting us to the clear and pure light of love'.¹¹ It all seems to be a waste of time and useless. In ourselves we don't find motivations anymore. What remains left here is only that we 'must be content simply with a loving and peaceful attentiveness to God, and live without the concern, without the effort, and without the desire to taste or feel him'.¹² We are empty-handed. In this situation we only know that we will get inflamed with love, without knowing how this comes about in us. We can't make a step on our own anymore. Passionately

⁸ July 4 1951.

⁹ April 10 1953.

¹⁰ JOHN OF THE CROSS, *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*, tr. Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez, *The Dark Night I*, 10, 2, p. 317; San Juan de la Cruz, *Obras Completas*, Madrid 1993, *Noche Oscura*, p. 474.

¹¹ *The Dark Night I*, 10, 3, p. 317; *Noche Oscura*, p. 474.

¹² *The Dark Night I*, 10, 4, p. 317; *Noche Oscura*, p. 474.

we are carried along in the movement of God's love. 'We see ourselves only enamored, but know not how.'¹³ In this love we are more and more detached from ourselves. In naked faith we set off on the road to God. Characteristic of the Night is that— although it is experienced as deprivation – it actually doesn't take away anything from us, but that it is extremely advantageous for us in our ascent to God. Indeed, 'the soul consequently arrives at the true fulfillment of the first commandment which, neither disdaining anything human nor excluding it from this love, states: You shall love your God with your whole heart, and with your whole mind, and with your whole soul, and with all your strength'.¹⁴

The Night of John of the Cross knows not only the tragedy of a psychological or spiritual crisis, but it describes the final reality or the *telos* of human life. We are in essence beings who in our emptiness are focused on the fullness outside ourselves. By surrendering ourselves to this divine reality, we will become finally ourselves, i.e. 'who we are in the eyes of God'. It is tragic that we seclude ourselves in anguish for this reality. While we bend back to ourselves and look for something to hold on to we actually mistake this reality easily for ourselves. Only the darkness can liberate us from ourselves, which means from everything that we take wrongly for more real than the Reality. Everything becomes different because of the mystical transformation. In this we don't lose anything and we gain everything. Actually we lose only our own objects, which are not more than a mirage that always leaves us unsatisfied. Being brought to freedom we now have to 'love God intensely with all our strength and all our sensory and spiritual appetites'¹⁵. After all we are 'not desiring to make use of them or find satisfaction in anything outside of you'¹⁶.

Transformed in God, nothing of man is superfluous. Thus the way of the night ends on the perspective that makes life possible: God Himself, who through Christ leads us by the hand into the paradise of his love. In this solitude all words of the author John of the Cross fall silent, because here nothing else is more eloquent than being silent.

Persons who lived this mystical process through the ages express themselves in similar ways. They are all in search of the silence and nothingness of God in order to be born transformed in Love. Mrs Ten

¹³ The Dark Night I, 11, 1, p. 319; Noche Oscura, p. 476.

¹⁴ The Dark Night II, 11, 4. Dt. 6, 5, p. 353; Noche Oscura, p. 517.

¹⁵ The Dark Night II, 11, 3, p. 353; Noche Oscura, p. 516.

¹⁶ The Dark Night II, 11, 3, p. 353; Noche Oscura, p. 517.

Horn, mentioned already, interpreted her life as a growing disappearance in God's silence.

Be silent and disappear! When the masterpiece is finished, the chisel is thrown away. My act of prayer is actualized as a wordless getting lost in the dark nothingness. From the depths of my darkness the Light of the world surfaces again. God has me annihilated and begetted Himself.¹⁷

Motionless I am listening in the darkness of the night to an infinite Silence. I am keeping watch to a full emptiness, and formless I am getting lost. I am aware of your dwelling in my fabric. Therefore, this being-not-being may praise You, who is breaking open all earthly things and thus is speaking Your word of Life.¹⁸

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¹⁷ November 3 – December 12, 1945.

¹⁸ June 19, 1962.

