

Deeper into God

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We are, as contemporary spiritual seekers, called to Depth; called to resist the lure of the trivial and the transient in order to listen more attentively to what theologian Paul Tillich called 'the voice of ultimate concern'. But sometimes it can seem that there's little help available to us as we seek to dwell in depth. That's why this lecture by Sr Cecilia Goodman, Director of St Bede's Pastoral Centre in York, strikes such a chord. She gives us a profound insight into the meaning of dwelling in depth, drawing on her personal experience, her wide reading in the Mystics, and many years of directing and accompanying others on their spiritual journeys.

Very often the Dark Night – The Night of the Spirit explored so graphically by St John of the Cross – appears in the form of a crisis of faith. It is often precipitated by outer happenings: mid life, a bereavement, divorce, a shift in family or work patterns, major illness, retirement; all times of insecurity and upheaval, and times when perhaps we turn to God more than ever before – and find God missing. This Night is the most unsettling and hardest time in the whole spiritual journey – a time when we are in fact closer to God than we have ever been, yet feel further away and more confused and uncertain than ever.

Perhaps the one absolute statement that can be made of this spiritual stage is that is a paradox. Our head that informs us that all is loss, confusion, and emptiness, while at a deeper, far less accessible level, we are driven by a powerful longing for a God we know of but cannot name or even quite believe in at any level that makes rational sense.

The problem is that we are unused to operating at this profound level. Our educational system discourages intuitive knowledge, and our churches do not often teach much about the traditions of the spiritual journey. Our inner confusion is intensified by an outer lack of spiritual support, and while psychological helps are often invaluable at this time, they cannot deal with our spiritual hunger or blindness. Often well-meaning friends and advisors fail to realise (or are frightened of) the depths of this spiritual darkness and encourage us to distract: to cheer up or walk away from God. But at the very deepest level of our being, distractions leave us sadder and lonelier than ever.

So, what is going on? What is this crisis of faith about?

If we look back we can see that somewhere we cross a line in our spiritual journey: the earlier stages of prayer were largely activated by ourselves. To some extent at least we could feel in control and we could recognise the landscape. God was known to us in ways

that made human sense – a feeling of warmth and peace, a desire for God, a desire to live with integrity, a feeling of belonging and love within a community.

But as we cross that line, we move into what the French writer on mysticism, Garrigou Lagrange calls 'Infused Contemplation'. From this point, all is gift from God. However hard we may try we cannot achieve these deeper levels of divine encounter. Our earlier stages of prayer demanded that we applied ourselves, took the initiative (or so it felt) and moved towards God; now what we are asked to do is much more difficult. Our task is now to move into a seemingly more passive or co-operative role, while God draws us more and more deeply into this relationship. We are no longer in the driving seat – and that can feel as if we are not even in the car!

At precisely the point when we lose the plot, when we become increasingly confused by our reactions to all things spiritual and often struggle to pray at all, we may be entering into the deepest level of our relationship with God so far. But because it is a new landscape we cannot understand or feel safe in it and hence the crisis of faith.

This stage of the spiritual journey can be found in the writings of almost everyone who has chronicled their relationship with God. The language and the detail vary according to the culture and temperament of the writer but whether it is from the fourteenth century or the twentieth, we find experiences of this often sudden shift into confusion, loss, and even distaste for all things previously valued and loved for their ability to connect us to God.

This is truly a time of crisis – the Chinese characters for crisis are made up of the characters for danger and opportunity. All too often the moment is dangerous simply because there is no one who can stand beside us and encourage us to stay with the dark and the unknowing. We walk away fearing that despite our deepest longings there is no God and nothing makes sense any more spiritually.

It is opportunity because if we dare stay with it, learn to read its landscape and not to be frightened of the paradox, we will eventually come to that place of union with God that we so long for.

St John of the Cross explains this shift beautifully in a letter to a Carmelite nun: he talks of the fact that in the early stages of our spiritual journey God enters into our world in ways we understand, the things I spoke of earlier: a feeling of warmth, a sense of God's presence, the ability to do good, peace, conviction, faith. But as our relationship with God deepens we are invited into God's own self – a landscape without familiarity and seemingly even without God, though in actuality closer to God than we have ever been.

This profound shift from the familiar to the Divine is so unlooked for, so alien to our past ways of identifying the spiritual that we flounder. We assume that we have lost the way, strayed from God, yet the opposite is true. It is as if we have to throw away all our security in the known way and walk into the darkness if we are to continue to follow God at these depths.

The Night of the Spirit is the moment when we have to let go of our controlling understanding of the spiritual landscape. The familiar signposts reassuring us of our good progress have all vanished, or perhaps are still there, but the writing is illegible.

This time is very different from times of depression or despair, different too from times when we have simply lost interest in God or all things spiritual, though the nuance is subtle. But it is very difficult for us to believe in the goodness of this confusion, and the age-old teaching that it is important to have a companion on our spiritual journey is never truer than at this time. Often it is only hearing ourselves talking to another that unearths the longing deep within and reminds us that we do still want this spiritual quest. We usually need the confidence of another to keep us faithful to this bewildering relationship with God.

The Night of the Spirit will overtake each one very differently, but each time it will do so in a way that makes us feel that this is nothing whatever to do with God but rather is brought on by our own inadequacy or failure, simply because it penetrates so deeply into the areas of self that most frighten and defeat us.

I think the best way to describe both our prayer at this time and the energy that keeps us searching is that of 'longing'. This longing is strange and barely discernable to the conscious eye, but somehow compels us forward even when so much rational and emotional thought persuade us of the futility of our spiritual journey. It is as if simultaneously we are able to say "I don't know if I believe in God" – even "I don't believe in God" – yet "God is all I really live for". This may not make much sense to those that have not chosen this journeying and often makes little sense to those of us who have – and yet I think in some deep, wise place within us, we know the truth of it.

This longing is now the primary element of our response to God – yet we hardly know what is going on and seldom value the ache within us enough to call it prayer. That, perhaps, is our downfall. Simply because we do not value the longing we do not stay with it long enough to explore it or understand it. Yet if we can take the time to understand it a little more, we begin to find encouragement – literally the courage to stay – to pursue this unfamiliar form of prayer. Gradually we will begin to trust the longing a little more, to find within the ache of it and the darkness, some glimmers of hope, of peace and of light. Never enough, we feel, but enough to keep us there – and that is all that matters.

The familiar prayer of our past has little to offer us, but just as Elijah was given the cakes in the desert, so we too can find crumbs of nourishment in our desert places. All that is asked of us is to co-operate with the emptiness, to trust that even if we do not know what is going on, God does, and in God's hands, such emptiness is not only safe, but profoundly good.

An extract from the 2001 Mary Ward Lecture entitled Crisis of Faith – Danger or Opportunity. Used with kind permission.