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HarperCollins Publishers

10 East 53rd Street

New York, NY 10022

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Living with Apocalypse

Spiritual Resources for Social Compassion

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1817

Harper & Row, Publishers, San Francisco

Cambridge, Hagerstown, New York, Philadelphia

London, Mexico City, São Paulo, Singapore, Sydney

6. Impasse and Dark Night

CONSTANCE FITZGERALD, O.C.D.

A number of issues in contemporary Christian spirituality underpin and influence the theological interpretation developed in this chapter. Today our spirituality is rooted in experience and in story: the experience and story of women (poor women, black women, white women, exploited women, Asian women, Native American women, etc.); the experience of the poor and oppressed of the world; the experience of the aging; the experience of the fear of nuclear holocaust and the far-reaching evils of nuclear buildup for the sake of national security, power, and domination; the experience of the woundedness of the earth and the environment.

This experience is nourished with meaning by history. It values, therefore, the interpretation of and dialogue with classical sources, with the story of the tradition. Within this framework, Christian spirituality remains attentive to the centrality of the self—to stages of faith development, to passages, to crises of growth—in one's search for God and human wholeness. It reaches, moreover, with particular urgency in our own time for the integration of contemplation and social commitment.

Against this background, I hope to interpret John of the Cross' concept and symbolism of "dark night" (including his classical signs concerning the passage from meditation to contemplation) to show what new understanding it brings to the contemporary experience of what I would call impasse, which insinuates itself inescapably and uninvited into one's inner life and growth and into one's relationships.¹ What is even more significant today is that many of our *societal* experiences open into profound impasse, for which we are not educated, particularly as Americans.

This brings me to two assumptions. First, our experience of

God and our spirituality must emerge from our concrete, historical situation and must return to that situation to feed it and enliven it. Second, I find a great number of dark night or impasse experiences, personal and societal, that cry out for meaning. There is not only the so-called dark night of the soul but the dark night of the world. What if, by chance, our time in evolution is a dark-night time—a time of crisis and transition that must be understood if it is to be part of learning a new vision and harmony for the human species and the planet?

To discover meaning, there is value in bringing contemporary impasse into dialogue with the classical text of John.² In unfolding the mystery of dark night and unpacking its symbolism in response to the experience of impasse, I would hope to help others understand, name, and claim this experience of God and thereby direct their own creative and affective energy.

IMPASSE

By impasse, I mean that there is no way out of, no way around, no rational escape from, what imprisons one, no possibilities in the situation. In a true impasse, every normal manner of acting is brought to a standstill, and ironically, impasse is experienced not only in the problem itself but also in any solution rationally attempted. Every logical solution remains unsatisfying, at the very least. The whole life situation suffers a depletion, has the word *limits* written upon it. Dorothee Soelle describes it as "unavoidable suffering," an apt symbol of which is physical imprisonment, with its experience of being squeezed into a confined space. Any movement out, any next step, is canceled, and the most dangerous temptation is to give up, to quit, to surrender to cynicism and despair, in the face of the disappointment, disenchantment, hopelessness, and loss of meaning that encompass one.

It is not difficult to imagine how such attitudes affect self-image and sense of worth and turn back on the person or group to engender a sense of failure, to reinforce a realization—not always exact—that their own mistakes have contributed to the ambiguity.

Moreover, intrinsic to the experience of impasse is the impres-

sion and feeling of rejection and lack of assurance from those on whom one counts. At the deepest levels of impasse, one sees the support systems on which one has depended pulled out from under one and asks if anything, if anyone, is trustworthy. Powerlessness overtakes the person or group caught in impasse and opens into the awareness that no understandable defense is possible. This is how impasse looks to those who are imprisoned within it. It is the experience of disintegration, of deprivation of worth, and it has many faces, personal and societal.

There is, however, another dimension of impasse that philosophers and psychologists, sociologists and theologians, poets and mystics, have reflected upon from their particular perspectives. Belden Lane, director of historical theology at Saint Louis University, indicates it in his article, *Spirituality and Political Commitment*:

... in a genuine impasse one's accustomed way of acting and living is brought to a standstill. The left side of the brain, with its usual application of linear, analytical, conventional thinking is ground to a halt. The impasse forces us to start all over again, driving us to contemplation. On the other hand, the impasse provides a challenge and a concrete focus for contemplation. . . . It forces the right side of the brain into gear, seeking intuitive, symbolic, unconventional answers, so that action can be renewed eventually with greater purpose.³

The negative situation constitutes a reverse pressure on imagination so that imagination is the only way to move more deeply into the experience. It is this "imaginative shock," or striking awareness that our categories do not fit our experience, that throws the intuitive, unconscious self into gear in quest of what the possibilities really are.

Paradoxically, a situation of no potential is loaded with potential, and impasse becomes the place for the reconstitution of the intuitive self. This means the situation of being helpless can be efficacious, not merely self-denying and demanding of passivity. While nothing seems to be moving forward, one is, in fact, on a homeward exile—if one can yield in the right way, responding with *full consciousness* of one's suffering in the impasse yet daring to believe that new possibilities, beyond immediate vision, can be given.

It must be stressed, writes Dorothee Soelle, that insofar as the experience of impasse, or suffering, is repressed, "there is a corresponding disappearance of passion for life and of the strength and intensity of its joys" and insights.⁴ The person caught in impasse must find a way to identify, face, live with, and express this suffering. If one cannot speak about one's affliction in anguish, anger, pain, lament—at least to the God within—one will be destroyed by it or swallowed up by apathy. Every attempt to humanize impasse must begin with this phenomenon of experienced, acknowledged powerlessness, which can then activate creative forces that enable one to overcome the feeling that one is without power.⁵

A genuine impasse situation is such that the more action one applies to escape it, the worse it gets. The principles of "first order change"—reason, logic, analysis, planning—do not work, as studies by three Stanford psychiatrists try to show. Thoroughgoing impasse forces one, therefore, to end one's habitual methods of acting by a radical breaking out of the conceptual blocks that normally limit one's thinking.

Genuine change occurs through a "second order" response, "one which rethinks the solution previously tried and suggests something altogether unexpected. The quality of paradox is at the heart of 'second order change.'"⁶ It implies that the unexpected, the alternative, the new vision, is not given on demand but is beyond conscious, rational control. It is the fruit of unconscious processes in which the situation of impasse itself becomes the focus of contemplative reflection.⁷

The psychologists and the theologians, the poets and the mystics, assure us that impasse can be the condition for creative growth and transformation *if* the experience of impasse is fully appropriated within one's heart and flesh with consciousness and consent; *if* the limitations of one's humanity and human condition are squarely faced and the sorrow of finitude allowed to invade the human spirit with real, existential powerlessness; *if* the ego does not demand understanding in the name of control and predictability but is willing to admit the mystery of its own being and surrender itself to this mystery; *if* the path into the unknown, into the uncontrolled and unpredictable margins of life, is freely taken when the path of deadly clarity fades.

DARK NIGHT IN JOHN OF THE CROSS

When I am able to situate a person's experience of impasse within the interpretive framework of dark night, that person is reassured and energized to live, even though she feels she is dying. The impasse is opened to meaning precisely because it can be redescribed.

In order to understand dark night, it is important to realize that John of the Cross begins and ends with love and desire in his poems and prose writings.⁸ He is intent on showing what kind of affective education is carried on by the Holy Spirit over a lifetime. He delineates, therefore, the movement from a desire, or love, that is possessive, entangled, complex, selfish, and unfree to a desire that is fulfilled with union with Jesus Christ and others. In the process of affective redemption, desire is not suppressed or destroyed but gradually transferred, purified, transformed, set on fire. We go *through* the struggles and ambiguities of human desire to integration and personal wholeness.

This means there is a dark side to human desire, and the experience of dark night is the way that desire is purified and freed.⁹ What is important to realize is that it is *in* the very experience of darkness and joylessness, in the suffering and withdrawal of accustomed pleasure, that this transformation is taking place. Transfiguration does not happen at the end of the road; it is in the making now. If we could see the underside of this death, we would realize it is already resurrection. Since we are not educated for darkness, however, we see this experience, because of the shape it takes, as a sign of *death*. Dark night is instead a sign of *life*, of growth, of development in our relationship with God, in our best human relationships, and in our societal life. It is a sign to move on in hope to a new vision, a new experience.

Night in John of the Cross, which symbolically moves from twilight to midnight to dawn, is the progressive purification and transformation of the human person *through* what we cherish or desire and through what give us security and support.¹⁰ We are affected by darkness, therefore, where we are mostly deeply involved and committed, and in what we love and care for most. Love makes us vulnerable, and it is love itself and its development that precipitate darkness in oneself and in the "other."

Only when love has grown to a certain point of depth and commitment can its limitations be experienced. Our senses are carried to deeper perception, as it were, by exhaustion. A fullness in one way of being and relating makes one touch its limits. This is not a question of disgust, as it often appears and feels like, but of a movement through sensual pleasure and joy to deeper, stronger faithfulness and to the experience of a love and a commitment, a hope and a vision, unimagined and unexpected on this side of darkness.

We all need some satisfaction of our desire in order to begin and go on in prayer, relationship, or ministry, but it is the withdrawal of pleasure and the confrontation with limitation (our own and others') that signals the transition or growth crisis of the dark night. The test is whether we can, in the last analysis, maintain the direction or momentum of our life without either glancing off permanently into another direction to escape, or succumbing to the darkness of total despair.¹¹

Love (romance!) makes us hunger for the unambivalent situation. Yet it is in the very light of love that we encounter the opaqueness of our own humanness and experience the destructiveness within ourselves and the "other." Ambiguity arises, on the one hand, from human inadequacy; it arises, on the other hand, from the Spirit of God calling us beyond ourselves, beyond where we are, into transcendence. We are being challenged to make the passage from loving, serving, "being with," because of the pleasure and joy it gives us, to loving and serving regardless of the cost. We are being challenged to a reacceptance of the "other."¹²

Every God relationship, every significant human love, every marriage, every ministry, every relationship between a person and a community, and perhaps every human group and every nation will come to this point of impasse, with its intrinsic demands for and promise of a new vision, a new experience of God, a quieter, deeper, freer, more committed love. And it will come precisely when imagination seems paralyzed, when intimacy seems eroded, and when desire feels dead.

This brings us to John of the Cross' signs for discerning the genuineness of the dark night purification. Traditionally, they have been recognized as theological signs of the passage in prayer

from discursive meditation to contemplation and are, therefore, descriptive of one's spiritual development, one's intrapersonal life. A careful reading of John of the Cross, integrated with concrete human experience, would seem to indicate, however, that the interpretation of these signs must be extended to one's interpersonal life as well, and perhaps even to one's societal life. I submit that a societal interpretation of these signs, and dark night in general, throws considerable light on the contemporary experience of societal impasse.

Although John seems to delineate a smooth transition, his developmental model includes breakdown and failure. This is why the signs speak to us of death, even though they are in reality signs of development and growth. There are two sets of signs, one in the second book of the *Ascent of Mount Carmel* (chap. 13, nos. 2-4); the other in the first book of the *Dark Night* (chap. 9, nos. 2-8). Although the perspective is different in each (the *Ascent* signs are given from the side of the person's faith response, the *Dark Night* signs from God's side), the signs are the same and can be correlated.

The first set of signs underlines one's powerlessness to pray with one's reason or rational mind "since God does not communicate himself through the senses as he did before, by means of the discursive analysis and synthesis of ideas, but begins to communicate himself through pure spirit by an act of simple contemplation in which there is no discursive succession of thought." The senses cannot attain to this contemplation, and dryness results.¹³

Basic to the experience of disintegration or dark night is an apparent breakdown of communication and a powerlessness to do anything about it. One's usual way of functioning, or relating, provides no satisfaction and does not work. What formerly was essential for growth and fidelity (e.g., an active choice and decision for Christ in reasoned meditation) now hinders growth.¹⁴ Nothing happens in meditation. One cannot relate to the loved one as before. The system on which one depends breaks down. Certainty and pleasure give way to ambiguity, misunderstanding, and dryness or boredom.

It is difficult to realize, except by hindsight, that a new kind of love and deeper level of communication, transcending the for-

mer love, is developing and is already operative (contemplation). Accustomed to receiving love and insight in one way, one perceives this communication and situation as darkness. What is, in fact, a call to a new vision and to deeper, more genuine intimacy with God, with the "other," and with the world, is experienced as less commitment and less love, precisely because the call comes when intimacy seems to be falling apart and limitation looms large. There seems no possibility of movement backward or forward but only imprisonment, lack of vision, and failure of imagination. "Everything seems to be functioning in reverse," writes John, in this forced passage from rational, analytical, linear thinking to intuitive, metaphorical, symbolic consciousness.¹⁵

In his probing article "Atheism and Contemplation," Michael J. Buckley shows that John of the Cross, like Feuerbach, is very "sensitive to the humanization consciousness works on its God." John is acutely aware, with Freud, that the religious movement toward God can emerge either from the desire for satisfaction or from the drive for reassurance.¹⁶ In other words, John is conscious of the tendency of religion to become projection and is always subtly asking the question What is the focus of your desire, of your religious awareness and its commitment? "He takes the theological dictum, 'Whatever is received is received according to the mode of the one receiving it,' and he applies it to a person's conceptions and images of God."¹⁷

Because in the initial stages of the spiritual life, and even in the more advanced ones, the sensory part of the soul is imperfect, it frequently receives God's spirit with this very imperfection.¹⁸

We make our God, or gods, in our own image. "Our understanding and our loves are limited by what we are. What we grasp and what we long for is very much shaped and determined by our own nature and personality-set," writes Buckley. If this is not changed by the Spirit of Jesus gradually permeating individual experiences and influencing patterns of development and growth, "there is no possibility of [the] contemplation of anything but our own projections."¹⁹ John of the Cross is at pains to show how our images of God are progressively and of necessity changed and shattered by life experience. The very experience

of dark night does, in fact, critique our present images of God. As Buckley says,

The continual contemplative purification of the human person is a progressive hermeneutic of the nature of God. The self-disclosure of God . . . is finally only possible within the experience of the contradiction of finite concepts and human expectations. The darkness and its pain are here, but they are finely dialectical movements in which the human is purified from projection by a "no" which is most radically a "yes." The disclosures of God contradict the programs and expectations of human beings in order to fulfill human desire and human freedom at a much deeper level than subjectivity would have measured out its projections.²⁰

When, in the first sign, we reflect on the breakdown of communication and relationship, therefore, we are assuming also a change and a shattering of one's images. This causes confusion and a sense of loss and meaninglessness.

This is not a defense of Christian masochism, as Dorothée Soelle calls it, nor a sadistic understanding of God, but rather a recognition of the ongoing process of self-acceptance and acceptance of the "other" that is necessary for real, enduring love and progressive, mutual insight and creativity. This process presupposes that, in every significant relationship, we come to the experience of limitation, our own and others'. We come to the point where we must withdraw and reclaim our projections of God, of friend, of ministry, of community, and let the "others" be who and what they are: mystery.

The emphasis in the second set of signs is on emptiness in life experience and deadness of desire. Not only is prayer dry, but life is dry, relationship is dry, ministry is dry.

Souls do not get satisfaction or consolation from the things of God [and] they do not get any out of creatures either. Since God puts a soul in this dark night in order to dry up and purge its sensory appetite, he does not allow it to find sweetness or delight in anything.²¹

John assures us the time must come in our development when neither God, nor the "other," nor one's life project satisfy, but only disappoint, disillusion, and shatter one's naive hope.

Because desire seems dead, because there is no inclination to

do anything about the situation, because one really ceases to care, the temptation to quit, to walk away, becomes overpowering. Hopelessness and worthlessness invade one's perception and one's psyche. It is in the throes of this crisis that people abandon God and prayer, a marriage, a friend, a ministry, a community, a church, and forfeit forever the new vision, the genuine hope, the maturity of love and loyalty, dedication and mutuality, that is on the other side of darkness and hopelessness. Darkness is the place where egoism dies and true unselfish love for the "other" is set free. Moreover, it is the birthplace of a vision and a hope that cannot be imagined this side of darkness.

John can write about self-knowledge as a primary effect of the dark night for two reasons. First, the light and development of contemplative love show up one's limitations. Second, the withdrawal of accustomed pleasure in life, and the consequent frustration of desire, trigger one's seemingly destructive tendencies and move them into action on a level that is beyond conscious control.²²

What must be remembered at all costs is that desire is not destroyed. Rather, right in this situation of unassuaged emptiness and apparent deadness of desire, in the very area of life in which one is most involved and therefore most vulnerable, desire is being purified, transformed, and carried into deeper, more integrated passion. Dark night mediates the transfiguration of affectivity, and obstacles conceal within themselves untold, hidden energy.

Here we sense what powerful symbolism dark night is. It is an image of productivity and speaks of life buried in its opposite: life concealed, life invisible, life unseen in death.

Thus the third set of signs has two different moments, moving from painful anxiety about culpability to a new and deeper level of appreciation of God and/or the "other" in a quiet, loving attentiveness. John describes the suffering side of this experience when he writes,

The memory ordinarily turns to God solicitously and with painful care, and the soul thinks it is not serving God but turning back, because it is aware of this distaste for the things of God.²³

Here it is a question of being obsessed with the problem. How much easier it would be to bear the darkness were one not conscious of one's failures and mistakes. The most confusing and damnable part of the dark night is the suspicion and fear that much of the darkness is of one's own making. Since dark night is a limit experience, and since it does expose human fragility, brokenness, neurotic dependence, and lack of integration, it is understandable that it undermines a person's self-esteem and activates anxious self-analysis.

The only way to break out of this desperate circle of insoluble self-questioning is to surrender in faith and trust to the unfathomable Mystery that beckons onward and inward beyond calculation, order, self-justification, and fear. John continues, therefore:

The third and surest sign is that a person likes to remain alone in loving awareness of God, without particular considerations, in interior peace and quiet and repose. . . .

If those in whom this occurs know how to remain quiet, without care and solicitude about any interior or exterior work, they will soon in that unconcern and idleness delicately experience the interior nourishment.²⁴

It is precisely as broken, poor, and powerless that one opens oneself to the dark mystery of God in loving, peaceful waiting. When the pain of human finitude is appropriated with consciousness and consent and handed over in one's own person to the influence of Jesus' spirit in the contemplative process, the new and deeper experience gradually takes over, the new vision slowly breaks through, and the new understanding and mutuality are progressively experienced.

At the deepest levels of night, in a way one could not have imagined it could happen, one sees the withdrawal of all one has been certain of and depended upon for reassurance and affirmation. Now it is a question, not of satisfaction, but of support systems that give life meaning: concepts, systems of meaning, symbolic structures, relationships, institutions. All supports seem to fail one, and only the experience of emptiness, confusion, isolation, weakness, loneliness, and abandonment remains. In

the frantic search for reassurance, one wonders if anyone—friend or spouse or God—is really “for me,” is trustworthy. But no answer is given to the question.²⁵

The realization that there is *no* option but faith triggers a deep, silent, overpowering panic that, like a mighty underground river, threatens chaos and collapse. This “scream of suffering contains all the despair of which a person is capable, and in this sense every scream is a scream for God,” writes Soelle.²⁶ In this experience of the cross of Jesus, what the “soul feels most,” John explains, “is that God has rejected it and with abhorrence cast it into darkness.”²⁷ And Soelle continues:

All extreme suffering evokes the experience of being forsaken by God. In the depth of suffering people see themselves as abandoned and forsaken by everyone. That which gave life its meaning has become empty and void: it turned out to be an error, an illusion that is shattered, a guilt that cannot be rectified, a void. The paths that lead to this experience of nothingness are diverse, but the experience of annihilation that occurs is the same.²⁸

Yet it is the experience of this abandonment and rejection that is transforming the human person in love. This is a possession, a redemption, an actualizing and affirmation of the person that is not understood at the time. Its symbolic expression is dispossession and death.²⁹

John seems to say that one leaves the world of rejection and worthlessness by giving away one’s powerlessness and poverty to the inspiration of the Spirit and one moves into a world of self-esteem, affirmation, compassion, and solidarity. Only an experience like this, coming out of the soul’s night, brings about the kind of solidarity and compassion that changes the “I” into a “we,” enabling one to say, “we poor,” “we oppressed,” “we exploited.” The poor are objects until we are poor, too. This kind of identification with God’s people, with the “other,” is the fruit of dark night.³⁰

Some years ago it became evident to me that in our most significant human relationships we go through precisely the kind of suffering John describes concerning the soul’s journey to God. In our ministries, moreover, we inevitably come to personal impasse. John’s signs of passage and development, refashioned for

the present time, should be a valuable tool for discernment. They relate to the breakdown of marriages, to departures from priesthood and religious life, and to the contemporary phenomenon of burnout, among other things.

SOCIETAL IMPASSE

I want to bring together dark night and societal impasse because, as I said, our experience of God and our spirituality must emerge from our concrete historical situation and because our time and place in history bring us face to face with profound societal impasse. Here God makes demands for conversion, healing, justice, love, compassion, solidarity, and communion. Here the face of God appears, a God who dies in human beings and rises in human freedom and dignity.

We close off the breaking in of God into our lives if we cannot admit into consciousness the situations of profound impasse we face personally and societally. If we deal with personal impasse only in the way our society teaches us—by illusion, minimization, repression, denial, apathy—we will deal with societal impasse in the same way. The “no way out” trials of our personal lives are but a part of the far more frightening situations of national and international impasse that have been formed by the social, economic, and political forces in our time.

We are citizens of a dominant nation, and I think that as a nation we have come to an experience of deep impasse and profound limitation. On the other side of all our technology, we have come to poverty and to dark night. We can find no escape from the world we have built, where the poor and oppressed cry out, where the earth and the environment cry out, and where the specter of nuclear waste already haunts future generations. We can find no way out of the horror of nuclear stockpiles but more sophisticated and deadly weapons systems.

As Americans we are not educated for impasse, for the experience of human limitation and darkness that will not yield to hard work, studies, statistics, rational analysis, and well-planned programs. We stand helpless, confused, and guilty before the insurmountable problems of our world. We dare not let the full import of the impasse even come to complete consciousness. It is

just too painful and too destructive of national self-esteem. We cannot bear to let ourselves be totally challenged by the poor, the elderly, the unemployed, refugees, the oppressed; by the unjust, unequal situation of women in a patriarchal, sexist culture; by those tortured and imprisoned and murdered in the name of national security; by the possibility of the destruction of humanity.

We see only signs of death. Because we do not know how to read these kinds of signs in our own inner lives and interpersonal relationships, we do not understand them in our societal or national life, either. Is it possible these insoluble crises are signs of passage or transition in our national development and in the evolution of humanity? Is it possible we are going through a fundamental evolutionary change and transcendence, and crisis is the birthplace and learning process for a new consciousness and harmony?

Let us examine the signs. Our impasses do not yield to hard, generous work, to the logical solutions of the past, to the knowledge and skills acquired in our educational institutions. The most farsighted economists said some years ago that the economic solutions of past decades do not fit the present economic crisis in the world. It is argued that the whole economic, social, and political system would collapse were we to feed the poor with surplus crops and stop the wars, the exploitation, the oppression, in which we are involved. Not only God and the loved one fail us, our institutions fail us.

We are obsessed with the problem and with the need for new insight and breakthrough; we are disillusioned with a political system that contributes to international oppression, violence, and darkness. Is it any wonder we witness the effects of impasse among us—anger, confusion, violence—since real impasse or dark night highlights destructive tendencies? Frustrated desire fights back.

Recently, a Jesuit on our local Peace and Justice Commission described the stance of a prominent Roman Catholic theologian, a layman, at a meeting of theologians, bishops, and others on the nuclear question. It was the focused awareness, the incredible logic and rationality, of this man who favored nuclear superiority and denied that a nuclear freeze was a good idea that made

such a negative impression on pro-freeze participants. Reason, left to itself, moved to a basically destructive position, unrecognized and unacknowledged in the speaker.

Dark night shows up the "shadow," the dark side of desire. If we refuse to read the signs of dark night in our society and avoid appropriating the impasse, we see cold reason, devoid of imagination, heading with deadly logic toward violence, hardness in the face of misery, a sense of inevitability, war, and death. And we witness the projection of our national shadow on others, "the inevitable shadow of over-rational planning," as Irene de Castillejo calls it.³¹

Today, instead of realizing that the impasse provides a challenge and concrete focus for prayer and drives us to contemplation, we give in to a passive sense of inevitability, and imagination dies. We do not really believe that if we surrender these situations of world impasse to contemplative prayer that new solutions, new visions of peace and equality, will emerge in our world. We dare not believe that a creative re-visioning of our world is possible. Everything is just too complex, too beyond our reach. Yet it is only in the process of bringing the impasse to prayer, to the perspective of the God who loves us, that our society will be freed, healed, changed, brought to paradoxical new visions, and freed for nonviolent, selfless, liberating action, freed, therefore, for community on this planet earth. Death is involved here—a dying in order to see how to be and to act on behalf of God in the world.³²

This development suggests two questions: Do we really expect anything at all of the contemplative process of prayer in our world today? And how does the failure of imagination and creativity in our national life relate to the breakdown of the contemplative process of prayer and transformation in people's lives? With these questions concerning the intersection of impasse and contemplation, I move into my concluding reflection, on women's religious experience today.

FEMININE IMPASSE

I submit that the feminine experience of dark night, if we read it, interpret it, understand it, and live it through, is in itself a

critique of religious consciousness and, therefore, ultimately of Christianity, with its roots in a sexist, patriarchal culture. It is not my intention simply to apply a Christian theme, dark night, to a contemporary issue, women. Rather, I am probing a resource within the theological-mystical tradition in order to understand the contemporary feminist experience of God and to see if John of the Cross' dark night can function in the struggle of women for liberation and equality.³³

Behind every new spirituality and any creative re-visioning of the world—at the root of any real theology—is an experience of God. Yet every religious experience comes from a meeting with a new and challenging face of God in one's own time and social situation. I suspect that although it is imperative, for example, for feminist theologians to develop new interpretive paradigms that function to liberate people, only women's *experience* of God can alter or renew our God images and perhaps our doctrine of God. I want, therefore, to examine the feminist experience of God in impasse, because this is where many women in the Church, and in the world, find themselves. "We have only begun to experience the depth of women's alienation from Christian belief systems and from the existing Churches," writes Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza.³⁴

Today feminists struggle with the Judeo-Christian image of a male God and a male Church. Just as Marxism sees religion as the opiate of the people and Christianity's doctrine of God as a support of oppression and misery, so the feminists see a patriarchal system that visualizes God, and consequently Church, in almost exclusively patriarchal terms as basically destructive. The masculine image of God is experienced as unsatisfying and confusing because it serves to reinforce male domination, a patriarchal value system, and an entire male world view.

This is an impasse for women, since their past religious experience has come to them through these images and this inherited symbol system, which does not function for women now as it did before. There is no going back to what was—what gave comfort and clarity and brought feminists to their present stage of religious development and commitment—but there is no satisfactory going forward either. There seems to be no way out of this God-less situation because no genuine evolution of God images

has really occurred. We touch this in Alice Walker's latest novel, *The Color Purple*, a story of a black woman, Celie, who moves from being oppressed and brutalized to self-actualization and religious transformation. What is significant is that Celie's transcendence requires or coincides with a radical redefinition of God. "The author's choice of the genre of the epistolary novel, in this case composed entirely of letters for which there is no direct response," places the whole story in a prayer context.³⁵ In the first fifty-five letters Celie writes the story of her life to God, because she is ashamed to talk to him about it. Abused by the man she thought to be her father and deprived by him of the children she consequently bore, dehumanized by her husband and deprived by him of any knowledge of or communication with her sister, she is loved by one woman, Shug Avery. Aware finally, under the influence of Shug's love and affirmation, of the extent of her exploitation, Celie rebels not only against men but against God and can no longer write to *him*. She writes instead to her sister:

What God do for me? I ast. . . . He give me a lynched daddy, a crazy mama, a lowdown dog of a step pa and a sister I probably won't ever see again. Anyhow, I say, the God I been praying and writing to is a man. And act just like all the mens I know. Trifling, forgetful and lowdown. . . .

All my life I never care what people thought bout nothing I did, I say. But deep in my heart I care about God. What he going to think. And come to find out, he don't think. Just sit up there glorying in being deaf, I reckon. But it ain't easy, trying to do without God. Even if you know he ain't there, trying to do without him is a strain.

When Shug asks what her God looks like, Celie senses the incongruity of her image but replies:

He big and old and tall and graybearded and white. He wear white robes and go barefooted.

Blue eyes? she ast.

Sort of bluish gray. Cool. Big though. White lashes, I say. . . . Ain't no way to read the bible and not think God white, she say. Then she sigh. When I found out I thought God was white, and a man, I lost interest. You mad cause he don't seem to listen to your prayers. Humph! Do the mayor listen to anything the colored say? . . . Here's the thing, say Shug. The thing I believe. God is inside you and inside everybody

else. You come into the world with God. But only them that search for it inside find it. And sometimes it just manifest itself even if you not looking, or don't know what you looking for. Trouble do it for most folks, I think.

... [U]s talk and talk about God, but I'm still adrift. Trying to chase that old man out of my head. I been so busy thinking bout him I never truly notice nothing God make. Not a blade of corn (how it do that?) not the color purple (where it come from?) Not the little wild-flowers. Nothing.

Man corrupt everything, say Shug. He on your box of grits, in your head and all over your radio. He try to make you think he everywhere. Soon as you think he everywhere, you think he God. But he ain't. Whenever you trying to pray, and man plop himself on the other end of it, tell him to git lost, say Shug. Conjure up flowers, wind, water, a big rock.

But this is hard work, let me tell you. He been there so long, he don't want to budge. He threaten lightening, floods and earthquakes. Us fight. I hardly pray at all. Every time I conjure up a rock, I throw it. Amen.³⁶

Thus feminists, unable to communicate with the God of patriarchy, are imprisoned in a night of broken symbols. They ask how the idea of God undergoes transformation.

Is it by changing our religious language? By feminizing God, uncovering feminine images and attributes of God in the Scriptures? Is it by the desexualization of God and a move toward deism? Or is it by contemplation? (A step in the criticism of Marxism is implied here. Can experience really be altered simply by changing language?) What our programs to eliminate sexist language in our theological, devotional, and liturgical life have shown us is that our solutions are unsatisfactory and confusing. We find impasse not only in the problems but even in the solutions.

So-called postpatriarchal theologians and philosophers have suspected this for some time and in consequence have moved beyond Judeo-Christian religion. These radical feminist thinkers claim feminine consciousness and Christian faith are contradictions in terms. Aware, like John of the Cross, of the tendency of religion to become projection, they have rejected the Christian God that patriarchy projects. But is this the only option? Here the advance of postpatriarchy intersects with the development of

contemplation. If one admits that religious belief and desire can be analyzed into episodes of projection, does the force of this discovery indicate a movement toward the total rejection of the God of patriarchy, or can it equally indicate that faith and desire must move into contemplation, one movement of which is apophatic? Is the alternative either to deny the reality of the God of Christianity or to insist that the evolution of faith and desire must pass through the darkness and the cross, in which the meaning of the night is found? It is imperative to emphasize, as Buckley observes,

that apophatic theology is not primarily one which does or does not make statements about God. It is primarily an experiential *process*, a process of entering into the infinite mystery that is God, so that gradually one is transformed by grace and this grace moves through the intense experience of darkness [impasse] into the *vision* of the incomprehensible God [the God who transcends present images and symbols]. Apophatic theology involves both interpretation and criticism, conceptualization and theological argument. But all of these are descriptive of a *process in which one is engaged*, a process in which *one must be engaged* in order to grasp its interpretation in any depth.³⁷

If the impasse in which feminists find themselves is dark night, then a new experience of God, transformative of alienating symbols, is already breaking through even though it is not comprehensible yet, and impasse is a call to development, transcendence, new life, and understanding. Ultimately, therefore, impasse is a challenge to feminists to be mystics who, when human concepts disillusion, symbols break, and meanings fail, will let their "faith . . . relocate everything known within a new horizon in which it is radically reinterpreted and transvaluated."³⁸ Feminists need to realize that the gap that exists between human, patriarchal concepts of God and what is internalized by them in impasse is exactly what promises religious development and is the seed of a new experience of God, a new spirituality, and a new order—what Elizabeth Janeway calls the "Great Myth, as yet unborn," to which Madonna Kolbenschlag refers in her article, "Feminists, the Frog Princess, and the New Frontier of Spirituality."³⁹

I believe there is no alternative for feminists except contemplation, if they are to avoid the trivialization of their own reli-

gious experience in dark night. The experience of God in impasse is the crucible in which our God images and language will be transformed and a feminine value system and social fabric generated. All the signs (of dark night) indicate this is the next step in any positive, creative re-visioning of the future, in any genuinely feminine generativity. Theology is dependent on this experience, which cannot be created by theological reflection alone. Dark night is, as was stated before, "a progressive hermeneutic of the nature of God." If this passage is not recognized and traversed, a certain kind of atheism and permanent cynicism are inevitable.

The contemplative love experience, which is beyond conscious control and is not given on demand, is concerned not for the image of God, as political theologians are, but with God, who does in the end transcend our images and expectations. What is critical to see is that one has to *allow* the experience to take place through a love that is gradually welling up from the ground of one's being and that serves as a basis for contemplation. Only this experience can give to theology the insight it needs "to search out a new doctrine of God which is related to the intellectual, practical, and ethical concerns of the present situation of women and which suggests transformation or emancipative possibilities for the future."⁴⁰

Contemplation, and ultimately liberation, demand the handing over of one's powerlessness and "outsider-ness" to the inspiration and power of God's Spirit. How imperative it is that women take possession of their pain and confusion; actively appropriate their experience of domination, exploitation, and oppression; consent to their time in history; and hold this impasse in their bodies and their hearts before the inner God they reach for in the dark of shattered symbols. Although the God of the dark night seems silent, this God is not a mute God who silences human desire, pain, and feeling, and women need to realize that the experience of anger, rage, depression, and abandonment is a constitutive part of the transformation and purification of the dark night. This very rage and anger purify the "abused consciousness" of women in the sexism they have internalized.⁴¹

If there is, as we suggest, an incipient experience of God,

this presence of God will necessarily throw light on woman's "shadow" and reveal her to herself with all the destructive power she has and all the repressed possibilities or "lost alternatives" that cry within her for a voice. It is in the experience of this kind of night, when women put all the power of their desire, not in ideology, but here before the inner God, that the real bonding of women takes place, and purified of violence, they are readied for communion with their God, for sisterhood, equality, liberation, and mutuality.

Impasse internalizes the option for the poor and effects an identification with and compassion for all "women whose cry for liberation is so basic and unmistakable that it shouts out for all of us in our common quest for equality."⁴² In one's own womanhood, one holds every woman before God, women of the present and women of the past. This is an experience, not a theory! Though one lives in Baltimore or Atlanta or California or Washington, one's life is lived within the bleeding borders of El Salvador and Guatemala, Lebanon and South Africa, Afghanistan and Cambodia. Though one lives at the end of the twentieth century, the voiceless sorrow of women long dead is felt as one's own. One senses this in Alice Walker's essay "In Search of Our Mother's Gardens":

When Jean Toomer walked through the South in the early twenties, he discovered a curious thing: Black women whose spirituality was so intense, so deep, so *unconscious*, that they themselves were unaware of the riches they held. They stumbled blindly through their lives: creatures so abused and mutilated in body, so dimmed and confused by pain, that they considered themselves unworthy even of hope. In the selfless abstractions their bodies became to the men who used them, they became more than "sexual objects," more even than mere women: they became Saints. Instead of being perceived as whole persons, their bodies became shrines: what was thought to be their minds became temples suitable for worship. These crazy "saints" stared out at the world, wildly, like lunatics—or quietly like suicides; and the "God" that was in their gaze was as mute as a great stone. . . .

. . . [T]hese grandmothers and mothers of ours were not "saints," but Artists; driven to a numb and bleeding madness by the springs of creativity in them for which there was no release. They were Creators who lived lives of spiritual waste, because they were so rich in spirituality—which is the basis for Art—that the strain of enduring their un-

used and unwanted talent drove them insane. Throwing away this spirituality was the pathetic attempt to lighten the soul to a weight the work-worn sexually abused bodies could bear.⁴³

Such a time is past: the time of throwing away one's spirituality in order to survive.

It is regrettable that the possible liabilities of dark night theology cannot be dealt with in full here. Although some *interpretations* of dark night could reinforce passivity and women's internalized inferiority, subordination, lack of self-esteem and self-actualization, John of the Cross sings of the affirmation of the person by God within and of the redemption or transformation of affectivity that dark night effects. Dark contemplation is not a validation of things as they are or a ploy to keep women contented "outcasts of the [patriarchal] land"⁴⁴ but a constant questioning and restlessness that waits for and believes in the coming of a transformed vision of God; an affirmation of the self as woman that comes from deep inside and the consequent maturing to wholeness as a complete person; and a new and integrating spirituality capable of creating a new politics and generating new social structures.

Contemplation is what Dorothee Soelle calls revolutionary patience and is the epitome of passionate desire, activity, self-direction, autonomy, and bondedness.⁴⁵ It is a time bomb and will explode in new abilities and energy in women that cannot be conquered. Ultimately, it is the mystic, the contemplative woman, who will be reassured, affirmed, and loved, who will see and love, and for whose sake the world will be given sight, language, reassurance, and love. And she will understand Celie's final epistle, a letter to God: "Dear God. Dear stars, dear trees, dear sky, dear peoples. Dear Everything. Dear God."

NOTES

1. See David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination, Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (New York: Crossroads, 1981), chap. 3, "The Classic."
2. Not only Tracy has influenced my methodology, but also Thomas H. Groome, *Christian Religious Education* (San Francisco, Harper & Row, 1980), pp. 185-222, and John Shea, *Stories of Faith* (Chicago: Thomas More Press, 1980), pp. 76-90. These three studies are helpful in dealing with the dialogue between tradition and contemporary story or issues.
3. Belden C. Lane, "Spirituality and Political Commitment: Notes on a Liberation Theology of Nonviolence," *America*, March 14, 1981; see also Urban T.

- Holmes III, *Ministry and Imagination* (New York: Seabury, 1981), pp. 89-93, for a good treatment of right- and left-brain thinking. Holmes works out of the contributions of Jerome S. Bruner, *On Knowing: Essays for the Left Hand* (New York: Atheneum, 1971), and Robert E. Ornstein, *The Psychology of Consciousness* (New York: Viking, 1972), pp. 57-64.
4. Dorothee Soelle, *Suffering* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975), p. 36.
5. See *ibid.*, pp. 76, 11.
6. Lane, "Spirituality and Political Commitment," p. 198. Lane's discussion of the theory of Paul Witzalawick, John Weakland, and Richard Fisch in *Change: Principles of Problem Formation and Problem Resolution* (New York: Norton, 1974).
7. There are other models to explain and verify this experience: e.g., the creative process as it is described by Ralph J. Hallman, "Aesthetic Pleasure and Creative Process," *Humanitas* 4 (1968), pp. 161-68, or *Journal of Humanistic Psychology* 6 (1966), pp. 141-47; the process of individuation developed by Carl Jung and described by John Welch, O. Carm., *Spiritual Pilgrims: Carl Jung and Teresa of Avila* (New York: Paulist Press, 1982), esp. pp. 136-37, 141-43, 151-62; the model of structure and anti-structure developed by Victor W. Turner, *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1967), pp. 93-101, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Chicago: Aldine, 1969), *Dramas, Fields and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1974). See Holmes, *Ministry and Imagination*, pp. 119-36, for material on Turner's structure and anti-structure.
8. See John of the Cross, *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*, trans. Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez (Washington, D.C.: Institute of Carmelite Studies, 1973), *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, Book I, chap. 13, no. 3; chap. 14, no. 2; poem, "The Dark Night," p. 296; poem, "The Spiritual Canticle," pp. 410-15; *The Dark Night*, Book II, chap. 9, no. 1; *The Living Flame*, stanza 3, nos. 1,3,7.
9. See John of the Cross, *CW, The Dark Night*, Book I, chaps. 1-8, for a view of the dark side of human desire. John calls this dark side the faults of beginners.
10. See Michael J. Buckley, "Atheism and Contemplation," *Theological Studies* 40 (1979), p. 696; see also John of the Cross, *CW, The Spiritual Canticle*, stanzas 3-7, to grasp how one moves through that which one cherishes—the self, the world, relationships—to deeper love for God.
11. See John of the Cross, *CW, The Dark Night*, Book I, chap. 7, no. 5; chap. 8, no. 3.
12. See *ibid.*, Book I, chap. 9, no. 4.
13. For the first set of signs, see *ibid.*, Book I, chap. 9, no. 8; *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, Book II, chap. 13, no. 2.
14. John, *CW, The Dark Night*, Book I, chap. 9, no. 7.
15. *Ibid.*, Book I, chap. 8, no. 3.
16. Buckley, "Atheism and Contemplation," p. 694.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 693, see also p. 690.
18. John, *CW, The Dark Night*, Book I, chap. 16, no. 2.
19. Buckley, "Atheism and Contemplation," p. 694.
20. *Ibid.* pp. 696-97.
21. See John, *CW, The Dark Night*, Book I, chap. 9, no. 2; for correlating signs, see also *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, Book II, chap. 13, no. 3.
22. See John, *CW, The Dark Night*, Book I, chap. 14, where he speaks of the spirit of fornication, blasphemy, and confusion (*spiritus vertiginis*), or what I would

- call frustrated desire. See also Welch, *Spiritual Pilgrims*, pp. 141-46.
23. John, *CW, The Dark Night*, Book I, chap. 9, no. 3.
 24. John, *CW, Ascent of Mount Carmel*, Book II, chap. 13, no. 4; *The Dark Night*, Book I, chap. 6, no. 2.
 25. See Welch, *Spiritual Pilgrims*, p. 145.
 26. Soelle, *Suffering*, p. 85.
 27. John, *CW, Ascent of Mount Carmel*, Book II, chap. 6, no. 2.
 28. Soelle, *Suffering*, p. 85.
 29. See Buckley, "Atheism and Contemplation," p. 696.
 30. See Constance FitzGerald, "Contemplative Life as Charismatic Presence," *Contemplative Review* 11 (1978), p. 45, or *Spiritual Life* 29 (1983), p. 28.
 31. See Irene Claremont de Castillejo, *Knowing Woman: A Feminine Perspective* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), pp. 32, 39; see also pp. 17-18 for a very interesting analysis of the different levels on which people discuss nuclear weapons.
 32. See Holmes, *Ministry and Imagination*, p. 154. The entire chapter 6, "Dying to Image," pp. 137-164, is excellent supplementary reading to my development.
 33. See Anne Carr, B.V.M., "Is a Christian Feminist Theology Possible?" *Theological Studies* 43 (1982), pp. 282, 292; Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, "Toward a Feminist Biblical Hermeneutics: Biblical Interpretation and Liberation Theology," *The Challenge of Liberation Theology*, ed. Mahan, p. 109: "Theological interpretation must also critically reflect on the political presuppositions and implications of theological 'classics' and dogmatic or ethical systems. In other words, not only the content and traditioning process within the Bible, but the whole of Christian tradition should be scrutinized and judged as to whether or not it functions to oppress or liberate people."
 34. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, "Sexism and Conversion," *Network* (May-June 1981), p. 21.
 35. Sue E. Houchins, "I Found God in Myself/And I Loved Her/I Loved Her Fiercely: A Study of Suffering in the Archetypal Journey of Alice Walker's Female Heroes," a chapter of a dissertation in progress. p. 15.
 36. Alice Walker, *The Color Purple* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1982), 164-168.
 37. Buckley, "Atheism and Contemplation," p. 690. (italics mine).
 38. *Ibid.* p. 695.
 39. Quoted by Madonna Kolbenschlag, "Feminists, The Frog Princess, and the New Frontier of Spirituality," *New Catholic World*, July-August 1982.
 40. Carr, "Is a Christian Feminist Theology Possible?" p. 293.
 41. Here I am addressing the call of Fiorenza for "a spirituality that understands anger, persecution, defamation, violence and suffering in political-theological terms." See "Sexism and Conversion," pp. 20-21.
 42. Maureen Fiedler, "The Equal Rights Amendment and the Bonding of Women," *LCWR Newsletter* 8 (1980), p. 5.
 43. Alice Walker, "In Search of Our Mother's Gardens," in *Working It Out*, ed. Sara Rudick and Pamela Daniels (New York: Pantheon 1977), p. 93.
 44. Houchins, "I Found God in Myself," quoted from Anne Pratt, *Archetypal Patterns in Women's Fiction* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1981), 5.
 45. Dorothee Soelle, *Revolutionary Patience* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1977); see also Marianne Katoppo, *Compassionate and Free: An Asian Woman's Theology* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1980), p. 21.