

John of the Cross and Prayer

~ Constance FitzGerald, OCD ~

Through the years, I have looked at John of the Cross through various heuristic lenses: the transformation of desire, impasse and dark night, purification of memory in the dark night, perplexing prayer experiences, the primacy of Christ and the central function of incarnate wisdom—Sophia—in human transformation and communion with God, mutuality and equality, beauty, feminism, creation and ecology, evolution and emergence. Each manner of breaking open his teaching provides guidance in prayer because for John prayer is a life path to transformation by and in love, not simply a method, a practice, a time set aside each day for God.

John of the Cross's teaching is so rich that one single chapter can hardly capture his understanding of prayer. Whether the great Carmelite poet is singing of the wonders of union with God that he has experienced, or the quintessential spiritual guide is describing the searing purifications of the dark nights, in him one encounters magnificent passion bordering on excess. The way he guides and educates is by showing us how passion for God grows, that is, how desire matures in focus and ardor, how one's relational identity changes as intimacy with Christ takes over one's life, how transformation of consciousness and being God's partner in love—*Lover and Beloved*—comes about in our lives. John beckons us toward the frontiers of human consciousness and addresses us from the farthest edges of the human spirit. I want, therefore, to contextualize all that follows with the enticingly affective language and cosmic intensity he uses to describe this communion in his final work, the *Living Flame of Love*:

The soul feels its ardor strengthen and increase and its love becomes so refined in this ardor that seemingly there flow seas of loving fire within it, reaching to the heights and depths of all earthly and heavenly spheres, imbuing all with love. It seems to it that the entire universe is a sea of love in which it is engulfed, for conscious of the living point or center of love within itself, it is unable to catch sight of the boundaries of this love.... For the soul beholds itself converted into an immense fire of love that emanates from that enkindled point in the heart of the spirit. (2.10–11)

Inasmuch as John is one of the greatest poets in the Spanish language, one will only grasp his spirit and understand his teaching on prayer by always looking at it through the prism of his poetry. What we see in this primary expression of his own mystical

experience is divine desire coming to meet human desire and kindling in human hearts an unquenchable desire.

Where have you hidden
 Beloved, and left me to my moaning?
 You fled like the stag
 after wounding me;
 I went out calling you, but you
 were gone. (SC 1)¹

My Beloved, the mountains
 and lonely wooded valleys, strange islands,
 and resounding rivers,
 the whistling of love stirring
 breezes.

The tranquil night
 at the time of the rising dawn,
 silent music,
 sounding solitude,
 the supper that refreshes and
 deepens love. (SC 14–15)

In this interpretive environment, dense with images of human love and the beauty of creation in all its diverse, magnificent forms, three areas stand out when considering prayer in St. John of the Cross: the centrality of Jesus Christ, the experiences of dark night or purification, and what I would express in a summary way as the fullness of Christ consciousness. In the third area I will reflect on the breathtaking mutuality, equality, beauty, and transformative possibilities, marking union with God, with the Trinity, what John calls the spiritual marriage.

In view of John Welch's contribution to this volume which surveys thoroughly John's teaching in the framework of the wider Carmelite tradition, I am choosing to highlight these three key elements in hopes of complementing Welch's work. Furthermore, I am offering my contribution within the contemporary context of evolution and emergence, specifically the emergence of Christ consciousness in the life of prayer. John of the Cross is a pioneer in the evolution of Christ consciousness.

THE CENTRALITY OF JESUS CHRIST

For John, desire has a central and defining role in our lives. He assumes, first of all, that we are propelled by our insatiable desire (focus of the First Book of the Ascent); second, the desire for Jesus Christ, as *the* Beloved One, has to grow greater than all

other desires and loves that give us pleasure (A 1.14.2); third, this is not achieved by pulling us away from our deepest longings, but by educating them by the love of Christ. What is indicated here is a priority that does not exclude other loves but situates them firmly and securely within the great embrace of Christ's love. In the development, purification, and transformation of desire, the critical influence is Jesus Christ. We cannot get away from this: one begins with Jesus, he is the pattern of the dark night even when he recedes from our conscious awareness and seems hidden, and one ends with transformation in Jesus Christ, the Beloved, incarnate Wisdom.

This means only one thing: desire to know Jesus, understanding that human desire is educated, first of all, by immersion in the Jesus of the Gospels, whereby one builds up more and more conscious references to him. This is how the risen Jesus becomes the focus of meaning in one's life (A 1.13.3; LF 3.32). The accent here is on the humanity of Jesus because desire needs something—someone—concrete to motivate it (SC 1.21). If you channel your affective energy toward knowing Jesus Christ, his love and companionship will slowly claim your desire, redirect your motivation, and subvert your egoic self and life. This dynamic underlies John's whole philosophy of prayer and indicates how a conscious decision of the heart for Christ takes place (active night of sense), how a shift in the focus of desire and meaning develops in one's prayer life (A 1.14.2; A 2.7.2–3).

He delineates a movement from a possessive, entangled, confining, unfree desire for pleasure, safety, and reassurance to a love that transcends the consuming concern for one's egoic self and is fulfilled in a deep communion with Christ where God's desire becomes our desire! In this prayer process of growing intimacy with Jesus, consciousness is gradually changed by who one knows and loves. Who one is in one's autonomous selfhood gradually morphs, over a lifetime, into a new relational identity characteristic of a profoundly pervasive union with Jesus Christ and all that he loves. One's consciousness becomes so deeply aligned with the consciousness of the one who is, for John of the Cross, divine wisdom, that the Word spoken ceaselessly in the depths of Trinitarian life is heard, actually experienced, in the soul in the silence of their embrace.

INITIAL DARK NIGHT

Initially, intimacy with Christ is a consoling process: it moves one's desire, reorients one's will toward God, and in that same movement, in that sweet companionship, desire is satisfied. The deepening presence of Jesus is a strength and spiritual support motivating one toward a generous, self-giving life influenced by the Jesus of the Gospels and sensitizing one to this Christic presence in the world energizing and

connecting all reality—the presence within recognizing and catching the reflection of the presence without. In fact, this presence in human relationships, throughout the beauty and wonder of the entire cosmos, in human culture and creativity, causes desire for Christ to grow by leaps and bounds in the person of prayer. We need this expansive spiritual consolation to persevere in prayer and, for some, it may last a long time.

But insofar as individuals choose to open their lives to increasing intimacy with Christ, they will inevitably be led by God's choosing, to a prayer that is increasingly God's initiative. Evolution in Christ consciousness, or Christ union, will show itself in the experiences of the dark nights where human desire is progressively purified and transformed. Ironically, it is the withdrawal of spiritual pleasure, the advent of dryness and ambiguity in prayer, and the muting of other sources of satisfaction or consolation in our lives that signal growing depth in prayer and herald the purification of the dark night.

The dark nights have two faces: purification and union. Insofar as the dark night is about purification, it is a transition; insofar as it is about union and identity, it is a new stage of growth. Purification is always about emergence, about preparing us for something: deeper interiority, union with God, new love knowledge, closer relational identity with Christ, a new stage of Christ consciousness. Ordinarily, we are painfully aware of the forces of purification in our lives; the emerging union is far less available to our conscious awareness. However, there are signs in our prayer and in our lives to indicate both the authenticity of the purification and the emerging new stage of intimacy (A 2.13.3; DN 1.9.2; LF 3.32–42).²

Dryness in prayer and in life, the inability to pray and love as one formerly did with spiritual consolation and peace or illuminating thoughts and consoling affections, coupled with anxiety about one's faithfulness and one's inability to regain the reassuring sense of God's or Christ's presence, are all marks of a painful transition, or purification. They cry out confusion, disappointment, boredom, anger, disillusionment, even loss of meaning. John of the Cross calls them signs for the discernment of the dark night of sense. They point to egocentric dependencies and destructive limitations and neuroticisms that must be left behind if a person is to appropriate, or live into, a new stage of faithfulness and freer, stronger, more committed love. For the egoic self, there is a sense of "I" in every desire, every thought, every memory, every interpretation, opinion, viewpoint, reaction, emotion. Dark night is the place where egoism dies, where desire is gradually purified and transformed, and true unselfish love for the other is set free.

The temptation to quit prayer and a deeper, more demanding relationship, to attempt to turn back to a more consoling, familiar way of praying, to reject a path

devoid of accustomed satisfaction and thereby refuse purification of the egoic self can be overwhelming. Such an inclination to turn away from trust in God in the face of the seeming disintegration and real losses being experienced is the deepest challenge of this night. It does not come from the good spirit but from the false self and its unredeemed desire, and one must not succumb to it. The dryness and limitation of creation I am tasting, the sadness seeping from my prayer into my relationships, ministry, and work is a religious experience and is a sign of the dark night's purifying transition, according to John, but insofar as the feeling includes a temptation to move away from Christ, to resist God's deeper claim on me, and quit prayer, it is a backlash of the egoic self, "one of the most burdensome goads and horrors of this night," says John in the last, often overlooked, chapter of book 1 of *The Dark Night* (14). This is a fine distinction between an important marker of the dark night—dryness, boredom, "nothing happening" in prayer—and the often accompanying, strong temptation to turn one's back on God and seek satisfaction in the pleasures and idols of former days.³

A person has to be alert and responsive to the last and absolutely essential sign of the dark night: the inner drawing to remain alone in quiet, loving awareness and openness to a deeper kind of Christ presence that is largely hidden from our explicit consciousness. It is a sensitivity to this intuition, this deceptively quiet inner claim, that assures a newly emerging stage of Christ consciousness or union. It is imperative that spiritual directors know how to detect the still obscure, secret, divine wisdom welling up within the soul so as to validate and encourage the inner impulse toward silent attentiveness and quiet, unpretentious surrender. When the person feels herself *placed* in solitude and spiritual listening, a director dare not make the inexcusable mistake of urging her to forsake this "inner idleness" by returning to the discipline of more discursive or active prayer (LF 3.35, 42–46).

It is critical to realize that the dark night is the time in prayer development to seek not the escape of other experiences or practices but the living presence of Christ within and remain silently open to the purifying, transforming presence of this divine wisdom, who is actually experienced as *no one* and *nothing*. This soul experience is not easy to grasp because to all appearances Christ recedes from consciousness and loses significance, God seems beyond reach, belief is threatened, and even atheism seems logical (A 2.12.3–8). In an effort to control their experience and rescue their God from oblivion, it is not uncommon for individuals to turn to a kind of "cosmic presence" that transcends Christ. Such an inclination is almost understandable if one considers the hidden mystery operative in this prayer, but John cautions against such a temptation (A 2.22).

God *is* drawing the individual more and more into God's life and love so that all that is not God becomes unsatisfying and painful to stay with. Liturgy, prayer forms, ministry, community, the routines of everyday life, even our most cherished human friendships and especially the friendship with Christ we have known up until now, are drained of meaning and become sources of disappointment, disillusionment, and self-doubt. A deeper intimacy with Christ, a secret wisdom, is taking hold of the person and silently prying loose the grasp of the unfree heart from all that is not God, from all the idolatries of one's self-centered attachments—consoling and accustomed ways of praying, human achievements and ambitions, spiritual consolations, images of the loved one(s), images of self laboriously and often unconsciously fashioned from childhood, lifelong images of God and of Christ. While the heart's deepest longings are being realized at some profound level and a new relational identity, transformative of human desire, is being forged, this is beyond the reach of explicit consciousness.

John of the Cross knows by experience that purification is tailor made for each one of us. It invades our lives in diverse ways, for different durations, spasmodically or in huge doses, at different times in life. How it is experienced and understood—the shape it takes, its severity—will depend on the stage of a person's Christ consciousness or union. The dark nights are not stair steps but episodic states of purification that come to the fore as the limited boundaries of one's present level of Christ consciousness begin to show themselves, precisely because a new stage of intimacy or relational identity is emerging within us. The pain of transition and emergence to deeper love and life in God go hand in hand and the darkness we have been describing does ordinarily open into a time (or times) of peaceful contemplative prayer, committed dedication to others, and relative spiritual maturity. A person may live and grow for years imbedded in this comparatively stable God/Christ environment, only occasionally receiving hints of the more intense purifications and more profound transformations yet to come.

DEEPER EXPERIENCES OF NIGHT

In the second book of the *Dark Night*, John of the Cross does go on to describe even more acute experiences of darkness in prayer when Christ's action takes on new depth and urgency. His action, within the framework of intimate relationship, involves both the divinization and humanization of the person, and John is strikingly clear about this. Moreover, he is more astutely aware than most of the obstacles to this transformative Christic action. First of all, we are impeded by the false self, that is, all the remnants of the unredeemed self that remain even after the purifications of earlier times and that become all too evident in this more severe refining of the soul (DN

2.13.10). The second obstacle is human finitude, the familiar boundaries of the soul which are not evil, just limited. They must be stretched and stretched if one is to become more and more *capax Christi*, capable of holding within oneself as one's own inmost center, the *full* relational life of Christ. The soul must be broken wide open, must surrender more and more of the self, to contain all with which Christ stands in relationship. This stretching and opening up one experiences is both much desired and harrowing. It is both blessing and agony. It is blessing because the soul recognizes, out of a certain depth of spiritual maturity, that this is the action of the one who loves the soul exquisitely and supremely. But it is agony because of the pain involved.⁴

Now, John explains, God blinds one with divine light and oppresses and dries one up with divine fire. Always the interplay between purification and deeper union, transition and emergence. Inasmuch as the dark night of the spirit is experienced as an extreme sense of deprivation that invades the total personality—body, psyche, spirit—it seems to dispossess one of one's very selfhood (DN 2.3.3). John does not minimize the anguish of this undoing of one's sense of self which undermines the identity one has been imbedded in and strips one of what one has to leave behind in order to live into the fullness of Christ consciousness, for John the spiritual marriage and ultimate transformation.

Such a drastic subversion of all the powers of the human person—John names them intellect, memory, and will—can best be understood within the context of his anthropology. As long as the great “caverns” of the mind, heart, memory, and imagination are filled with human knowledge, loves, dreams, and memories that seem to promise absolute assurance and complete fulfillment, or at least more than they can ever deliver, a person will never realize the depths of the capacity that is there. Only when we actually experience their emptiness and darkness, in the face of the breakdown of what we have staked our lives on, do we thirst and hunger and yearn for these “caverns” to be filled with God (LF 3.18–22).

John dwells at some length on the night of blindness and emptiness in the intellect when meaning fades and reason can no longer satisfy. What steadily and stealthily moves into the empty space when meaning disappears is authentic theological faith, a grasping for God that reaches beyond the horizon of natural, human understanding. Paradoxically, faith dispossesses one of any ability to construct, from a lifetime of accumulated knowledge, a meaningful world or a meaningful God. In fact, the light of faith causes darkness in our very power to understand and is at cross purposes with our struggle to make logical sense out of life or death or eternity. Insofar as this kind of theological faith is imparted, it is nothing else than a blind surrender to a hidden,

loving knowledge, the incarnate wisdom of God, who is deeply present and is actively transforming and divinizing the intellect (DN 2.5.2–3; 8.4, 9; 13.10).

John explains, as well, the heartbreaking experience of profound abandonment, loss, and weariness that marks this deeper night. The vast recesses of selfishness and falseness in the self are overwhelming. Not only does one feel rejected by God but frequently isolated by misunderstandings and even persecutions. It is when the human soul is broken wide open that the purification of the will by theological love unfolds, first of all, in the difficult handing over of the shattered self to the never failing love of God, and second, in the courageous decision to reject violence and refuse hatred, to love faithfully and serve others—often with great effectiveness and daring—regardless of the cost and in spite of intense affective deprivation, loss, or betrayal. Such intimacy with and assimilation to the self-giving death and glorification of Jesus are all in service of a person's Christification, her becoming humanized and divinized by the human and divine Christ (DN 2.13.9).

Last and most important, John puts a refined emphasis on the purification of the memory (DN 2.8.2). Looked at through the contemporary prism of identity and emergence, dark nights are always about my memory of myself and God's future for me. I believe it is in the mysterious unravelling of the memory that we find *the key* to the deepest dimensions of the dark night transition.⁵ Our memories have made us who we are, spiritually and humanly. What we remember, what others remember with us and for us, how we remember, how we weave our memories together into a fabric of meaning, matters decisively in shaping our identities. But in this dark transition time, I find no refuge in my memory of past graces or past pleasures, past relationships, or past achievements of mind and heart. Least of all does the memory of my cherished relationship with God, with Christ, console me. The spiritual gifts that marked deeper intimacy seem like a faraway dream. Memory of all this constitutes my identity, but now I find no resting place in my accustomed sense of my self, *my* identity. There is a sense in which I do not know who I am. I become a stranger to myself—undone, silenced. I am no longer at home in my own house.

So much I have learned and achieved intellectually or treasured affectively loses its cogency, as has been said. My deeply held beliefs blow in the winds of doubt and my most cherished relationships tell of abandonment and loss. My life projects, to which I had selflessly (I thought!) committed myself, appear to fail. Everything I have done seems tainted. My goodness, my fidelity, my motivation, my story to myself, seem to be an illusion, a lie. So much that has given me assurance and meaning fades into insignificance and this is keenly felt as a loss of authenticity, of identity. On a very fundamental level, my selfhood—who I am—is radically undermined. The slide into

depression, a kind of backlash from this dark spiritual experience, can loom large in the face of such inexplicable disorientation. God is purifying me in my conscious self and even more in my unconscious, a place to which God/Christ alone has entry.

I am being thrown into the fire of God's love, but it can only be described as suffocation and destruction because of the extreme dryness I am experiencing in my prayer *and in my life*.

Still, the fire that now oppresses, wounds, and dries up my soul in its deepest center is the same flame that is wounding me with love. The Spirit is uniting me with Christ so intimately that God is taking over my selfhood. I am being drawn right into his life. I am growing into Christ's own relational identity. But none of this is occurring in my daily "daylight" consciousness, and so I derive no support, in the ordinary sense of the term, from what God is doing. On the other hand, I sense I must forfeit the identity in which I am imbedded. I must freely yield to this process that is breaking down the boundaries of my soul. There is no real alternative that promises me what I am so deeply longing for at this point. This is the darkness that is to be trusted, hoped into, in faith and surrendered to in love.⁶

I am being taught in the outpouring of a secret, inner wisdom that the memory of all I have been can hold me back from God's future for me. What God wants to do for me—me becoming Christ, his life becoming mine, his knowing and loving becoming mine—is far greater than what I have been. I need only let my life go into the memory of God. A terrifying, dispossession of identity! This is true theological hope which comes into play when I am really radically at the end, unable to find any further resources to connect the memories, feelings, and experiences of life into a meaningful pattern, an independent identity of my own.⁷ Hope then frees the memory not only of its life burdens but of all that must be left behind. Purified and emptied by such hope, freed from the snares of all calculation, memory is open to the God of infinite transformative possibilities who is always coming from the future and constantly fostering emergence to the full relational life of Christ, the deepest level of Christ consciousness.

THE FULLNESS OF CHRIST CONSCIOUSNESS

Now it is not a matter of my becoming increasingly conscious of Christ *in* my life but of my becoming conscious *with* Christ's consciousness, becoming Christ's equal, Christ's self, by graced participation. It is important to realize that Christ's identity is fashioning our graced identity. Christ, incarnate wisdom, is the fullness of humanity and divinity in one person. As we grow in Christlikeness we are being drawn into this twofold fullness. John believes that during the time of dark purification, when

limitation looms large and deadly silence envelopes the soul, Christ is bringing us to the fullness of humanity which mediates the fullness of divinity, two fullnesses as totally united, not separate but distinct, not forming a third reality. And it is not the humanity of Christ alone that is crucial for our growing union with God. We are being drawn into the human *and* divine reality of Christ so that Christ's human and divine reality are becoming our reality (SC 38.1). Whether John writes of divine wisdom or the incarnate Word or the Son, of lover or beloved or bridegroom or spouse, of secret, solitary, purifying contemplation or hidden loving knowledge, it is Jesus Christ, truly human and truly divine, as one's own inmost center, who is bringing us into his own selfhood and his relationships in a focal way. So what slowly emerges from the dark transition of purifying unknowing and surrender to become exceedingly explicit is a profound loving identification with Christ, the union of lover and beloved in the spiritual marriage, "a total transformation in the Beloved in which each surrenders the entire possession of self to the other" (SC 22.3).

O guiding night!
 O night more lovely than the dawn!
 O night that has united
 The Lover with his beloved,
 Transforming the beloved in her Lover. (DN 6)

According to Edward Howells, the union attained by the radical process of stretching and emptying the soul gives a new structure of relationality, that is, a new relational identity, to the deep level of the soul that was not there before. The transformation is a real change of selfhood, moving the soul beyond the bounds of the self that was and into God.⁸

We can only wonder at the beautifully extravagant language John uses to describe the emergence into the fullness of union in the spiritual marriage, knowing he sings of the unspeakable from his own profound experience. Sharing in Christ's own relational identity now means for him that the relationships that constitute Christ have become John's in an explicit way. Completely united with Jesus Christ in his humanity and divinity, he, like Teresa of Jesus, his companion in the reform of Carmel, is profoundly drawn into the mutual dynamic relationships of Trinitarian life. Like her, he is explicitly conscious of the Father with Jesus Christ's consciousness and is bonded to the Father by the Holy Spirit. John knows Abba as Christ knows Abba and experiences being under the influence of the Holy Spirit. He is drawn into the interflow of life and love, the communion, in the Trinity, "capable of breathing in God the same spiration of love that the Father breathes in the Son and the Son in the Father. This

spiration of love is the Holy Spirit, who in the Father and the Son breathes out to her in this transformation in order to unite her to God's self. There would not be a true and total transformation if the soul were not transformed in the three persons of the Most Holy Trinity in an open and manifest degree" (SC 39.3).

Now he understands, knows and loves *in* the Trinity, as one membered into the communion of Trinitarian life (SC 39.4; see SC 39.3–6; 37.6; LF 2.1–20; 1.6). This inclusion of the transformed self in the life of the Trinity has reached its high point where everything the soul does is itself an act of relation to God within the mutuality of the Trinity, as Howells indicates (126). This is why John can tell us with shockingly bold language the degree to which human consciousness is transformed and the human person "made like God":

Finally, all the movements, operations and inclinations the soul had previously from the principle and strength of its natural life are now in this union...changed into divine movements, and alive to God.... Accordingly, the intellect of this soul is God's intellect; its will is God's will; its memory is the eternal memory of God; and its delight is God's delight;... It has become God though participation in God, being united to and absorbed in God. (LF 2.34)

MUTUALITY, EQUALITY, BEAUTY OF UNION

Yet entry into Trinitarian life does not mean that our knowing and loving cease to be human when divinized. Rather the soul attains a relational identity in Christ that is capable of mediating the self-knowing and self-loving of the Trinity.⁹ God's intensifying presence in the transformed self always means the enhancement, not the reduction, of the human person in her or his authentic reality, as John explains:

If anything pleases God it is the exaltation of the soul. Since there is no way by which he can exalt her more than by making her equal to himself, he is pleased only with her love. For the property of love is to make the lover equal to the one loved. Since the soul in this state possesses perfect love, she is called the Bride of the Son of God, which signifies equality with him. In this equality of friendship, the possessions of both are held in common, as the Bridegroom himself said to his disciples: "I have called you my friends, because all I have heard from my Father I have made known to you." (SC 28.1)

The latter part of the *Spiritual Canticle* (as well as the poetry of John and parts of *The Living Flame*) abounds with iconic, artistic images expressive of the mutuality,

equality and shared beauty of deep communion. Dominant among them is the symbol of bride/bridegroom or lover/beloved, which allows John to unfold a plethora of soul experiences. In their plenitude and extravagance these experiences push all the boundaries of our imagination and our hope. Yet for this very reason, we cannot fail to examine for direction, encouragement and meaning the myriad, interlacing nuances of divine/human indwelling and reciprocal belongingness they reveal.

I intended reflecting at some length on these soul experiences, but no word of mine striving to break open the meaning of these passionate, mysterious texts can compare with the revelatory, transformative experience of immersing oneself in them. This kind of deep engagement with such exquisite, prodigal texts and images plunges the person of prayer right into the experiences of mutuality and equality with God and stokes, even inflames, one's desire for the depth and boundlessness of intimate communion there portrayed. I am indicating here a profound prayer process whereby one moves around in these texts, allows them to seep into one's soul until one slowly participates in some way in the total mutuality and self-gift of lover and beloved, the incredible equality God desires and gives, the breathtaking beauty and giftedness the lover and beloved share with each other, the true mutuality of desire that blossoms, the resulting partnership with God/Christ in love and service to the totality of creation the divinized person lives out.

Such surrender to John's unitive writings, in the latter part of the *Spiritual Canticle* particularly, is transformative of the self. It involves the pray-er in a powerful appropriation of her own experience and deepest desire and one understands to the extent that one has been there in some way. Most of us do not lay claim to the overwhelming, explicit experiences of loving union with Christ and the Trinity of which John of the Cross sings, but conscious immersion in the extravagant language of divine love can illuminate the hidden, tranquil, even dark, presence of Christ in one's prayer and life, the quiet often unpretentious prayer of union, the silent, mysterious working of holy mystery day by day. Living in these texts of mutuality and beauty can give meaning to the darkest night and hope when the boundaries of the soul are stretched and broken open and the self we have known seems threatened on every side. To participate in these texts as a pray-er is to be brought, at least for a short time, into Christ's own selfhood, Christ's own consciousness.

One may think that the fullness of Christ consciousness, the communication of God's own self in Trinitarian love, in such intimate relationship and fulfillment of desire, is static or self-contained. John makes clear, however, that the fruit of total mutuality and equality is availability for others in prophetic hope and loving service. God, by giving the loved one his own love, shows her how to love as she is loved by

God. God teaches her how to love purely, freely, totally, and disinterestedly, as God loves us. "As if [God] were to put an instrument in her hands and show her how it works by operating it jointly with her, [God] shows her how to love and gives her the ability to do so" (SC 38.4). She becomes, John says, "the shadow of God" in the world, rejoicing not only in the sweetness of love she possesses in a habitual union, but also in that which spills over into the effective and actual practice of love in works directed to the service of all those God loves (LF 3.78; SC 36.4). Because her experience overflows outside of herself into the world around her and others actually recognize it, she becomes a prophet of communion and mutuality, one who bears witness to the inseparable connectedness of all life and everyone (SC 17.7).

No matter where we are in our spiritual development, John's mystical descriptions of the spiritual marriage have an important role to play in our lives of prayer. They inspire us to breathe, by the energy of our desire, mutual, selfless love into our world and onto the currents of human consciousness. They impel us to live, with intentional dedication, as prophets of the mutuality and communion and equality in which God always embraces us even while we are still on the way.

CONTINUING EMERGENCE AND TRANSFORMATION

Finally, John places a significant accent on the progressive character of transformation. At the end of the *Spiritual Canticle*, he insists that such a communion of love and knowledge opens into continuous yet to be realized possibilities of emergence to new depths of consciousness, a vast and ever unfolding future. Moreover, this potential for emerging transformations is always essentially Christocentric, that is, rooted in Jesus Christ, divine wisdom, the incarnate Word of God. John's commentary on stanza 37 of the Canticle is both audacious and unequivocal testimony of this truth:

And then we will go
to the high caverns in the rock
which are so well concealed;
there we shall enter
and taste the fresh juice of the pomegranates.

The rock mentioned here is Christ.... The high caverns of this rock are the sublime, exalted, and deep mysteries of God's wisdom in Christ, in the hypostatic union of the human nature and the divine Word, and in the corresponding union of human beings with God.... As caverns are deep and have many recesses, so each of the mysteries of Christ is singularly deep in Wisdom and contains many recesses.... There is so much to fathom in

Christ, for he is like an abundant mine with many recesses of treasures so that however deep individuals may go, they never reach the end or bottom, but at every recess find new veins with new riches everywhere (SC.B 37.3–4).

There we shall enter and be transformed in the transformations of new knowledge and new acts and communications of love. For although it is true that the soul, when she says this, is already transformed...in this Wisdom... it does not therefore follow that she cannot in this estate have new enlightenments and transformations of new kinds of knowledge and divine light. Indeed, she has very frequent illuminations of new mysteries communicated to her by God in the communication that is ever made between God and the soul. And this communication God makes to her in himself, and she enters into him as it were afresh, according to the knowledge of those mysteries which she knows in him; and in that knowledge she loves him afresh, most intimately and sublimely, being transformed in him according to those new kinds of knowledge; and the sweetness and delight, which at that time, she receives once more are altogether ineffable (SC.A 37.5).

Most remarkable of all, John suggests this continuing transformation is open to us in this life. John wrote two redactions of the *Spiritual Canticle*, and in the last stanzas we find a surprising and pervasive difference between the two. In the freer, more passionate and daring first redaction, Canticle A (1584), John situates his marvelous expectations for unending transformation this side of death with only a minor gesturing to life after death. In the second, more theologically refined redaction, Canticle B, written a year or two later (1585–1586) with an eye on the Inquisition, his great hope sees these same emerging consequences taking place over the horizon of death in the environment of resurrected life. Inconsistency? I think not. John of the Cross could place his experiences in both the time and space of the present age and the time and space of the age to come, without equivocation, because he had somehow experienced their intersection in his own life. (Worthy of note, in Canticle A, is his theological witness, conscious or not, to the presence of the reign of God, here and now, in the Risen Christ.)

It makes a considerable difference in our prayer life whether we think of the deepest reaches of Christ consciousness and Trinitarian life as evolving in this earthly life or only in an afterlife, in the age to come. What these experiences of communion might mean is greatly enlarged by how this world, this age, interprets Canticle A. This is very important for our hope, our fidelity to prayer, and our sense of responsibility for the continuing evolution of higher stages of human consciousness.

On the one hand, there is little doubt that the Inquisition's suspicion of contemplative prayer influenced the changes John made in the second redaction of the *Spiritual Canticle*. On the other hand, it seems significant that at one time John can describe experiences of union and transformation as happening during this earthly life and at another time taking place in the age to come. If "what makes a person immortal is his/her relationship or communion with God," and if "our bodies, our whole materiality, our earth, and our universe, are not to be replaced but transformed in death," then mutuality, communion, and equality are on a continuum, and where the present age ends and the age to come begins is not so clear cut, nor is the movement between them strictly linear. John, the mystic, knows both the now and not-yet of the reign of God in a way we do not; he experiences a bridging or intersection of time and eternity and sees beyond the boundaries of faith and consciousness that confine most of us.

Physicist and theologian John Polkinghorne throws a contemporary light on John's prophetic intuition by offering a perspective for appreciating the relationship between the time and space of "this creation" and the time and space of the "new creation:"

Although the new creation is the transformation of the old creation, it is not necessarily the case that [our] time and "time" [of the new creation] should be in a strictly sequential relationship, with the new "time" beginning "after" the ending of the old.... [And therefore] what we would naturally think of as the spaces of the old and new creations could be "alongside" each other, with the continuity of resurrection being the result of a structure-preserving mapping (patterning) from one space into the other. From this point of view, it would be conceivable that all persons arrive at the general resurrection at the same "time," irrespective of the time of their deaths in this world. The "clock" of the world to come need not be synchronized with the clocks of the old creation. If Christ's resurrection is the seminal event from which the new creation stems, then something like this must be so. The resurrection appearances are then intersections between these two spaces.¹⁰

This would mean that the continuity of and participation in resurrection is brought about by the Christ consciousness (the structure preserving pattern or relational identity or soul) alive in each space and time. And John's marvelous experiences can be understood as intersections between the two times or spaces—an alongsidedness.

What I want to accent in John's bold testimony is that profound contemplative union—the fullness of Christ consciousness—changes individuals radically; it transforms the character and effectiveness of their presence in the world. In them humanity is opened to new possibilities, new vision, a vast unimaginable future toward which

deep theological hope must continue to reach even during life on this earth. And John is a pioneer of that hope. He has carved out a pathway and crossed a threshold for humanity.

With John we give over our bodies, our spirits, our psyches to Christ, daring to trust where the transformations and stretching of deepening Christ consciousness may lead us—not only in the deeper life of the age to come but *now* in this earthly life. Following John of the Cross, persons of prayer must sing, not only for themselves, but for the entire earth community:

Let us rejoice, Beloved,
and let us go forth to behold ourselves in your beauty
to the mountains and to the hill,
to where the pure water flows
and further, deep into the thicket (SC 36).

-
1. Abbreviations in references: A = Ascent of Mount Carmel; DN = Dark Night; SC = Spiritual Canticle; LF = Living Flame. The levels of division of a work (book, chapter, paragraph number or stanza, paragraph number) are separated by periods; succession of references on the same level are separated by commas. In most instances John of the Cross citations are from *The Collected Works of John of the Cross*, trans. Kieran Kavanaugh, OCD, and Otilio Rodriguez, OCD (Washington, DC: ICS, 1991). Where quotations are referenced as SC.A (Canticle A) I am using *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*, vol. 2, trans. E. Alison Peers (Westminster, MD: 1945). Peers translated both redactions of the Spiritual Canticle.
 2. For a more complete description of the signs and experience of the dark night, see Constance FitzGerald, *Impasse and Dark Night* in *Living with Apocalypse*, ed. Tilden Edwards (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1984), 93–115.
 3. St. Ignatius of Loyola in his teaching on discernment of spirits would call this experience spiritual desolation.
 4. I want to acknowledge the work of Brian McDermott, SJ, in this paragraph. For the fifth centenary of Teresa of Ávila's birth, we collaborated in the study of Teresa and also of John of the Cross in terms of the dark night. We developed, among other areas, the growth of Christ consciousness in Teresa, including her experience of the Trinity. I am including important insights from our research, collaboration, and writing in this chapter.
 5. For a more thorough treatment of the purification of the memory, see Constance FitzGerald, "From Impasse to Prophetic Hope," *Proceedings of the Sixty-fourth Annual Convention*, ed. Jonathan Y. Tan (n.p.: Catholic Theological Society of America, 2009), 21–42.
 6. See Brian McDermott, "Contemplativeness and Spiritual Direction," in *Presence: An International Journal of Spiritual Direction* 21, no. 4 (December 2015), 6–13.
 7. For more detailed interpretation of the purification of the memory by hope, see Constance FitzGerald, "Transformation in Wisdom," in *Carmel and Contemplation, Transforming Human Consciousness*, ed. Kevin Culligan and Regis Jordan (Washington, DC: ICS, 2000) 323; see also Karl Rahner, "On the Theology of Hope," *Theological Investigations*, vol. 10 (New York: Herder

-
- and Herder, 1973), 242–253, and “Theology of Death,” *Theological Investigations*, vol. 13 (New York: Crossroad, 1983) 169–186. Karl Rahner has helped me interpret John’s thought on theological hope.
8. See Edward Howells, *John of the Cross and Teresa of Ávila: Mystical Knowing and Selfhood* (New York: Crossroad, 2002), 127.
 9. Gillian Alhgren has developed the understanding of “a new relational identity” in her work *Entering Teresa of Ávila’s Interior Castle* (New York: Paulist, 2005).
 10. John Polkinghorne, “Eschatology: Some Questions and Some Insights from Science” in *The End of the World and the Ends of God*, eds. John Polkinghorne and Michael Welker (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity, 2000), 40.