

The book “**Dark Night of the Soul**” will be the subject of numerous encouragement email articles and pastor cluster meetings for 2009.

Musings on the Dark Night of the Soul: Insights from St. John of the Cross on a Developmental Spirituality

John H. Coe, Ph.D., Rosemead School of Psychology, Biola University

“God who is everywhere, never leaves us. Yet He seems sometimes to be present, sometimes absent. If we do not know Him well, we do not realize that He may be more present to us when He is absent than when He is present.”

Thomas Merton, *No Man is an Island*

“At some point in our spiritual pilgrimage, we or our clients have cried out to God or wondered in our deep: “God, where are you? What is wrong with you? Why are you so distant? God, what is wrong with me? Why do I feel so dry inside? Why do I not seem to care the way I used to about you? What have I done wrong?” I have heard these confusing cries from my own heart as well as from many students at the school of psychology, the seminary, and undergraduate college. The experience is typically quite confusing, particularly for struggling Christians who feel that they alone are at fault for their spiritual dryness, and their guilt feelings are often reinforced by other Christians who tell them that they are indeed responsible for their distance from God.

This article argues that these times in the believer's spiritual pilgrimage often correspond to what the ancient Christian spiritual writers called a 'dark night of the soul' in which the Spirit secretly does a deep work in the human spirit—a work that is so profound but feels so foreign to the Christian's experience that it is often interpreted as the absence of God. Thus, it is helpful for both client and therapist to be able to understand what in fact God is doing in these times.

This article investigates the nature of spiritual dark nights from a biblical, psychological, and experiential perspective, particularly in the context of St. John of the Cross' developmental spirituality. There is a developmental *psychology* that provides an understanding of the dynamics at work as a person progresses through life, encountering diverse hurdles at each stage. Along the same lines, a developmental *spirituality* provides an understanding of the various dynamics involved in the spiritual progress of the believer through the Holy Spirit across time. Understanding a developmental spirituality allows one to better (a) understand what God has been doing in one's developmental spiritual life since conversion, particularly in difficult dark nights of the soul, (b) learn how to cooperate with the Spirit and find true rest in this darkness, and (c) learn how the Holy Spirit employs the spiritual disciplines at various developmental places and why the disciplines such as prayer, Bible reading, meditation and fellowship may have a qualitatively different feel at different stages in one's journey. The goal is to assist clients and ourselves to be more open to the Spirit as the Teacher and personal Counselor who is doing profound work in the depths of the human heart....” (to be continued...)

Requests for reprints may be sent to John H. Coe, PhD, Rose-mead School of Psychology, Biola University, 13800 Biola Avenue, La Mirada, CA 90639. Electronic mail may be sent to john_coe@peter.biola.edu