



THE SPIRITUAL JOURNEY

Formation in the Christian Contemplative Life

“Night of Spirit” Audio conversation

Gail Fitzpatrick-Hopler and Mary Anne Best

Gail: Good morning, again, Mary Anne. Perhaps you can begin, and maybe just give us a few signposts or an experience of what is the night of sense.

Mary Anne: Well, thank you, Gail. It's good to be with you. There are some signposts again for this particular night. I think of it overall as a “tuning up of a higher frequency” and the inner soundings of the workings of the Holy Spirit and a further turning up of the voltage, if you will, in our consciousness, or perhaps more accurately, in our unconscious. One of them are the lingering effects of cultural conditioning, even religious conditioning, the purification of spiritual pride and secret satisfactions, if you will, because of spiritual gifts. Motivations, I think, really come to the fore in a very real way and much stronger. Yet, at the same time, I find that the night of spirit has had, for me, personally, a more-subtle unfolding than the night of sense. Maybe we can talk about that a little bit.

Gail: Okay.

Mary Anne: You want to try? Go ahead first.

Gail: Well, I was thinking that, for me, it's easy for me to think of it in terms of the levels of awareness. The night of sense really deals with the emotional programs on the psychological level of our being, which is really ordinary life. We live in a kind of external way, and the emotional programs dominate. As that particular level of our awareness is purified, we let go of or we allow the dismantling. It's not something we do, it's something God does, but we give our consent to allow God to do the dismantling and to really open up those emotional programs. At the next level, which is the spiritual level of our awareness, it's a deeper dismantling, but now it's a deeper dismantling really of our intention and consent. It's really a leap into the unknown because we always believe our motivations and our intentions are pure on some level. Really, they're not. So, the night of spirit is really designed to free the residue of the false self. Even though we think we've addressed all of that in the night of sense, it really isn't purified, or really purifying the roots of our motivations, our intention.

We look to certain qualities, I guess, of the Spirit, which would be patience and humility and various things: joy, peace and all of that. But, what happens is, in order for us to learn some of these things,

we have a series, let's say, of humiliations, and we're beginning to feel self-conscious and uncomfortable about that. But that's a way of learning humility. We think of humility as a good quality, a quality of God, being humble before God. I remember one time I was with Father Thomas and we were in the audience of a particular presentation, and I said to him, "Oh, I was so humiliated. It just seemed that this man went on and on and on." And he said, "Well, that's a good opportunity to learn humility." He said, "Always think of humiliations as an opportunity to learn humility." I really have to say, honestly, from that point on, I was never afraid of humiliations. I know they happen, and I would get up before groups to speak and so on and I thought, "Well, if I feel humiliated, it's only a feeling." It's at that level of ordinary consciousness, and it's really a deeper purification for my good and to learn humility. It was a great teaching. That was a very positive moment for me.

Mary Anne: You know I've had the exact same experience. I am not a natural presenter, and there's always some anxiety before a presentation. And then it came to me that all I have to do is to be concerned about my motivation. Am I here to do the will of God and to act for the glory of God? If I do, everything else will be taken care of. If it's God's will that I make a fool out of myself, then it must be for good because more than any altruistic or good acts or anything that I do, it was given to me to understand that this God is interested in the one. By that I mean the one, "the Shepherd who went after the lone sheep" is more interested in my transformation than all of the work that I can possibly do, and that is how God is with everyone. Humiliation or no humiliation, if done in the motivation of serving God and the will of God, then everything else will be taken care of. There is a certain freedom and fearlessness that comes from that, but it comes from a certain painful journey to come to that awareness, I would say.

Gail: You can see that distinction there, Mary Anne, at the level of psychological awareness or ordinary life, your feelings are involved and your feeling, "Oh, you have to be better and you have to prove that you're better," and all of that stuff. But then at a level of spiritual awareness, you really intellectually understand that it's a purification process, a deeper purification process. Nonetheless, you still have the feelings. But if you really let go of the feelings, or if you become detached from the feelings, then the freedom of the domination of the emotional program is released. You become freer, and you're not too concerned about what your feelings are telling you because you know they're only at the surface level, whereas the other levels are being purified as well. So, we move in and out of this, just like we move on the spiral staircase. And sometimes we hit a particular area where those emotions have not been purified and we kind of get into what we might identify as the night of sense; but it is really in the service of the night of spirit.

So, it really is a difficult thing to try to actually define every aspect of each night specifically and wait on your journey to sort of go through a checklist. "Oh, yes. I've done that, I've done this, I've done that." It's not that linear. It's an organic movement of the Spirit.

God reveals himself to us in the night of spirit in a vastly superior way than at the level of the emotions. I always like to think of Elijah on Mount Horeb when he was standing and when God passed and that tiny little whisper, and he covered his face because it was so powerful. It was just a whisper, and it was over in a second, but that's the way God reveals himself to all and each and every one of us in a particular way.

Mary Anne: Yes. You know, I share that view myself. There's something about a kind of a growing sense of emptiness in my being, if you will. That's not emptiness in the sense of void but a

spaciousness that is alive. It's hard to articulate it in words ... less identifications with the self and its needs.

Gail: It's almost like if you can tolerate what is the emptiness or the kenosis of the process, there's a space that's interior that can be experienced as a void, or it could be experienced as an opening for growth, an opening for purification and a pathway, so to speak, for the theological virtues of faith, hope and charity to emerge. You know, we have everything we need. We have all the virtues. We have everything we need for this journey, it's already inside of us. It's inside the Indwelling Spirit that lives and breathes us, but we don't have any awareness of that because of all of the overlay of what we call the false self or the emotional programs and all our doubts and all of those things that we kind of build a layer that covers over these things. As this opening happens, that you explained, it really could have the feeling sense of being emptiness or a void. But on the next level, it's a pathway for those, the faith, hope and charity, to really arise in us and then allow those theological virtues to grow within us and for them to take over our inner motivations. And it is almost as if those emotional programs transform by the process into these virtues. The virtues are already there, and they're just waiting to emerge because they are of God.

Mary Anne: Yes. I think that is a very important point to share with our friends, is that everything is already there. What we are doing is allowing the obstacles to be removed. This also brings to mind the involvement with the body. You know, is the body itself involved in this purification process? You know, a few weeks ago, in our writings, we talked about the Scripture passage to love the Lord our God with our whole heart and soul and mind and strength, which are all of the basic elements of a human being. That must necessitate in some way the physical body because that's what we live in, and it's a store house of energy. All of the emotions and perceptions and thoughts and events and happenings of our entire lifetime is in the body. The Divine Therapist, I find, works on this level as well, because we have habitual movements and gestures and postures that are reflections of a lifetime of experience. Once this process really begins in earnest and we are able to engage our bodies too and some movement practice, be that yoga or tai chi or simply walking, walking in the sunshine or going outside, these tightening places in us also get released. From there can come a very deep rest, a rest that transcends anything that we get, even from a good night's sleep, and more energy and a lightness of being, a relaxation of tensions. So, I get that this whole process is a purification and illumination of all aspects of our human being-ness, if you will, in order to move towards the Christ Self, or the Christ as "I," which is there waiting for us always.

Gail: Meditative movements are designed to settle the body, to loosen up those blocks of energy and release them. We don't have to identify them, we just have to let them go, and then there is more space to sort of settle in to the inner room, to our practice of Centering Prayer, to settle in at kind of a deeper level where there's already been some movement of release.

Even the different practices, the practice of Visio Divina that we're doing and ... in the course, it's really a practice of what? Seeing with the eyes of the heart, purifying the way we see things, seeing God in all things. It's really opening the eyes in a way that releases the blocks because we see through our emotional programs if you think about it. We see the world through our already way of experiencing the world, so everything becomes of us. Rather, if you let go of looking at our self, and we move into a wider vision of opening our eyes to see God beyond the literal physical level of sight and move into that eye of the heart, where there is no barrier, you know, and it opens that area up.

All of the practices, Visio Divina, Lectio Divina, The Welcoming Prayer, the practice of yoga, mindful walking, attention to what we're doing moment by moment, that kind of thing, all of that keeps us, you know, in the presence, and the presence of God then is able to manifest.

Mary Anne: Yes. I would say that, you know, the fruit of this, and specifically the night of spirit, since we're here to converse about that today, is the awareness of the abiding presence of God in and through all aspects and seeing with the eye of the heart as we enter and interact in our ordinary lives.

I might say one other thing too, is I have found at some point along the way, this becomes a one-way street. We are being carried by the will of God, and what unfolds now is the will of God. There's really no turning back, if you will. No turning back.

Gail: That's what we're consenting to, to allow God to live our life for us, to live out of God's love and to not really have all the conditions of love. This idea of detachment from our own self and our own way of looking at things, it opens us up to live ordinary life with that extraordinary love, where the love is not of our own and we don't feel ... it's not limited. It's not a little bit of love, it's a *massive amount of love* and we just allow that to flow through us.

Mary Anne: Yes. Yes, yes.