

Being in the Dark: Explorations in Purification and Renewal

Fiona Gardner

*O darkness full of warning and abandon,
(Disarming every enemy,
Slaying the meaning of the mind's alarms)*

....

*O night of admiration, full of choirs,
O night of deepest praise,
And darkness full of sweet delight.¹*

Being in the dark in silent contemplation can be both a process of purification from the night spirit—and renewal from the dawn air. In spiritual writings the metaphorical concepts of dark and light each contains the potential for the other: light shines in the darkness and what was light is now dark and the darkness turns out to be the pure light. Spiritual darkness is most commonly used as a metaphor for deprivation, for the absence of God and the loss of certainty. Yet the darkness of night can be paradoxical: an emptiness where God is present. The darkness of God can be the darkness of an excess of light, a metaphor for the incomprehensible and a place of intimate communication.

This essay focuses on the idea of being rather than doing and takes three metaphorical experiences of being spiritually in the dark: the practice of contemplative prayer; night time dreaming; and when darkness happens to us in actual events or within ourselves. All three experiences involve surrender to uncertainty, can be

times of 'warning and abandon', may lead to 'sweet delight' and act as a 'guiding night' in a process of purification and renewal.

As well as reflecting on Merton's experiences, primarily taken from *The Journals Volume 2*, I shall draw on those of William Johnston. Johnston, a Jesuit priest and Zen practitioner, was in communication with Merton in the mid to late sixties. Their correspondence, dated from 1964-67, is focussed on Zen practice within a Christian framework with Merton writing in his last letter in July 1967, 'I do think it is probably best to simply take what Zen can offer us in the way of inner purification and freedom from systems and concepts and not worry too much precisely where we get'.² Johnston also asked Merton to write a preface for Johnston's work, *The Mysticism of The Cloud of Unknowing*, which was published in 1967. He writes of visiting Merton at Gethsemani and comments on their discussion on Buddhism and Christianity.

**Being in the Dark:
Experience I, Contemplative Prayer**
From *The Dark Encounter*.

O silence full of exclamation!
It is the time of the attack.
Our eyes are wider than the word:
"Aware".

Contemplative prayer was the subject that Merton wrote most about—and his thinking deepened over time, although he sees it throughout as a process of purification (by which he means a stripping away of the false self) and renewal. In *Volume 2* we read of contemplative prayer as a 'clear penetration into the heart of darkness where God is found'.³

Listen to this description by Merton of that process:

'I suddenly found myself completely recollected and sunk in Him and protected on all sides by His Presence so that my imagination became incapable of going anywhere and doing anything and my memory was completely sated by darkness'.⁴

Merton muses on the apophatic way when he writes, 'for we only go to Him in darkness of self-denial by the way we do not know', and to live for love is to live in darkness of the intellect, memory and will.⁵ Later, 'Love will be my beatitude—in darkness, on the Cross'.⁶ Into this description Merton brings his understanding of inner darkness when he writes, 'For if contemplation depends on our poverty, it seems to me we can all infallibly be contemplatives... To descend into the depths of our own poverty and helplessness:

how can we help finding God when we get there?'⁷ In the darkness of contemplative prayer lies liberty and experiential, or as Merton quotes St Thomas, 'experimental' knowledge of God.

The liberty found in the darkness is one of awakening and discovery of union with God, and Merton draws attention to the discovery of relationship: that we are children of God, and can have some experience of who He is and His love for us. In Merton's musings on Shrove Tuesday he writes of the different levels of depth in the mind when in prayer. Here Merton equates the surface mind with the restless tossing of the sea; the darkness from closing the eyes is the second level—a place of natural prayer and

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peace. The third level is one of rich darkness, of spirit and vigilance, 'Moonlight is in this prayer, stillness, waiting for the Redeemer... all is positive night'.⁸

At the end of *Volume 2* is a section known as 'The fire watch' (also found in *The Sign of Jonas*). This can be read as a hymn of praise to darkness and symbolic of the night journey undertaken in contemplative prayer to the final destination of paradise. The words used are again positive: night as a time of 'luxury', 'a rich darkness', 'the eloquent night', 'the night opening infinite distances to charity'. Being in the heart of darkness is also the

time for examination of conscience, a time of warning and abandon—"the God whom I meet in darkness", 'the God who searches us', 'the values of the night are different from those in the day, 'I am alone, Thou art alone. The Father and I are one'"⁹

Merton understood that being in the dark in silence and emptiness was both a mystery and a mystic experience, where in the stripping away of the false self, the losing of the self, the true self could be found in the revelation of God. There is the darkness that is the pure light, to quote Merton: 'darkness that is the infinite Light of God Himself. And the mere fact that His Light is infinite means that there is darkness in our finite minds'.¹⁰

It is implicit that purification, realising and letting go of the false self, is painful, that suffering is part of prayer life and renewal may be disguised and not as we had wanted or hoped. However it is in Johnston's writings that this more desolate side of contemplative prayer life is dealt with more explicitly: abandonment, desolation. Johnston is heavily influenced by St John of the Cross and his poem *The Dark Night*.

I abandoned and forgot myself. . .
all things ceased; I went out from
myself.¹¹

Johnston understands, as does Merton, that in contemplative prayer, as the senses are suspended and the egoic mind stilled, the shadow self raises to consciousness. In this he includes past painful memories and the seven deadly sins. For Johnston this is the night of the senses. As in psychotherapy, contemplation brings us face to face with inner darkness, but for the

mystic, God is present and nearer 'in time of desolation than in time of consolation'.¹² Quoting again from *The Dark Night*,

O guiding night!
O night more lovely than the
dawn!

The night of the spirit concerns loss of meaning when only one symbol remains: emptiness, darkness, absence—the cloud of unknowing. This is also called the night of faith, where everything becomes doubtful and yet where faith commitment is strongest—the time of suffering and yet the highest wisdom, where Johnston like Merton sees that God is light in himself, but darkness to us, 'the road of every human being who approaches a God of inaccessible light or darkness'.¹³

Being in the Dark:
Experience 2, Dreaming
From *The Dark Encounter*.

O darkness full of vision,
vivid night,
Defying the frontier.

Whilst dreaming takes place literally in the dark it may also leave us symbolically in the dark in that it is not always clear what a dream might mean. In psychotherapy, how you interpret dreams is partly dependent on whichever psychoanalytic school of thought is followed, though both Freud and Jung agreed that dreams were 'the royal road to the unconscious'. In 1951 Merton records his interest in Jung's approach and dreamt a number of what Jung calls 'big dreams'. These are dreams that lead to changes in the psyche

and in lives—a way of purification and renewal.

One example of this would be Merton's dream of Proverb which Merton records on February 28 1958 in *Volume 3*. The dream context is usually important and Merton records a day of differing sorts of frustrations and deprivations adding, 'But after all these things, I had a dream. It may have had no connection with them whatever'.

He dreams: 'On the porch at Douglaston I am embraced with determined and virginal passion by a young Jewish girl. She clings to me and will not let go, and I

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get to like the idea. I see that she is a nice kid in a plain, sincere sort of way. I reflect "She belongs to the same race as St Anne". I ask her her name and she says her name is Proverb. I tell her that is a beautiful and significant name, but she does not appear to like it—perhaps the others have mocked her for it'.

Merton's analysis goes as follows: 'When I am awake, I rationalize it complacently. "I loved wisdom and sought to make her my wife"—Sophia (it is the sofa on the back porch...etc, etc). No need to explain. It was a charming dream.'¹⁴ Merton follows this with a love

letter to Proverb and two weeks later sees Proverb in the 'womanness' of those women he sees at Fourth and Walnut. He writes of her to Pasternak and to Jacques Maritain, whose wife Raissa he sees as an embodiment of Proverb.

One might say, using a Jungian approach to the dream that the symbolic compensatory appearance of Proverb gives Merton as a man an experience of his anima—the female complex present in him, the 'eternal image of woman'. As Jung explains, this image is fundamentally unconscious. Previous images of women within Merton's psyche were contaminated with the shadow (again to use a Jungian term), but in this dream Proverb, emerging into consciousness, acts as a mediator and allows Merton to adapt towards 'wholeness' both within and in his view of real women. Proverb, in allowing Merton to develop, is indeed Sophia—wisdom. Here is a dream in darkness which is full of sweet delight.

In *Volume 2* there are a number of dreams recounted, but usually without any interpretation. For example, in the dream on Christmas Day 1947 Merton is sent to a convention in Finland by the Reverend Father who is listening to jazz in the company of many old ladies dressed in white. The convention is in memory of the scientist Pasteur and because Merton goes there he is late for his meal and gets no food. This could be analysed as an anxious dream where there is uncertainty, and Merton's infantile needs for security, warmth and feeding are not being met. In therapy, the dreamer would be invited to associate to certain words in the dream. Finland and Pasteur would be obvious ones—perhaps these are links to old anxieties from far away

(Finland—the end place) and long ago in the ‘past’, that have been stirred by associations to Christmas. Interestingly, before sleeping Merton records his thoughts about, ‘He who does not permit the smallest bird to go hungry/Was Himself nourished with a little milk’.¹⁵ I think here is the unconscious link to the inner small and dependent baby.

Johnston’s dreams left him very much in the dark when he describes a psychological and spiritual crisis that lasted on and off for a five year period and included a series of recurring terrifying nightmares. A constant theme was repeated knocking on the door. In the dream it felt to Johnston as if he were awake: ‘I slept but my heart was awake’, but he could not get out of bed to open the door, ‘Behold, my beloved is knocking’. At last, in the dreams he opens the door but the one who had knocked was gone: ‘I opened to my beloved, but my beloved had turned and was gone’. In other dreams a German with a crew-cut smashed down the door and drove him out. In another the loud knocking stopped and the man left. In another dream Johnston writes that he was jogging around the mountain and he fell into a deep hole. In the night the sound of any bell began to terrify him. Following the nightmares he more or less stopped sleeping, and I cover the outcome of this in the third and next section.

Asking later whom did he find in the darkness—was it his true self or was it Jesus, Johnston responds that Jesus ‘did not want to come in because he wanted me to go out into the cold night where I would be stripped naked and beaten until I fell in the dust. Only then could I find him and not let him go’.¹⁶

Being in the Dark: Experience 3, When the darkness descends uninvited

This is darkness that is not wanted, perhaps brought on by awareness about mistakes made, foolish things said or done, realisation of collective culpability and the certainty of judgement because of it. There is also the darkness of uninvited suffering, the darkness of pain, illness, loss and abandonment, where renewal may not always be apparent.

For example, on 5 May 1947 Merton, caught up again in his recurring suffering about the desire to become a Carthusian, is reminded by his confessor that this will not happen. He describes the process of acceptance of this decision followed by, ‘And I am sorry and ashamed at the way I trust my own darkness more than His own infinite light’. Merton sees himself ‘boiled in oil’ as he once again is reminded of surrender to God.

I will put myself in the arms of His will and rest forever in His light, in the darkness of faith which is true light, and not in the light of human judgement which is darkness’.¹⁷

On retreat later that month Merton writes of living through trials and exterior disturbances, needing to let go of the distraction as he does so: ‘I am not so much in darkness this week’.¹⁸ There is a daily struggle to free the mind and in July 1947 he is plunged once more into ‘another big interior struggle’ and ‘complete darkness and confusion about the whole purpose of my life’.¹⁹ Suffering is followed by the realisation, ‘God wants me to be purified. He wants ... to get my

self-love out of the picture’.²⁰ And further on ‘make me strong enough to take the purification’.²¹ ‘How God works on your soul by these obscure and unremarkable sufferings that cleanse and drain your wounds’.²²

‘A wave of darkness’ that comes uninvited for Merton is his neurosis linked to the memory of passing out in the middle of singing the Gospel. From this and earlier experiences Merton understands the interior darkness of mental conflict only too well, though it is implicitly rather than explicitly explored. When another monk is taken away following a psychotic breakdown Merton comments, ‘and I think of myself waking up some fine day with a pair of handcuffs on me....’²³ and as he comments, interior darkness where Christ cannot be found is entry to the gate of hell.

Johnston writes explicitly of his experience of the ‘guiding night’ from St John of the Cross, which he sees as the purification of the unconscious. He writes, ‘And I, like Jesus, though in my own little way had to face up to purification through painful prayer in which my unconscious came to the surface and the trauma of my past claimed to be accepted’.²⁴ Johnston’s time of deep inner upheaval beginning with the dreams outlined above included an experience when a column of smoke descended from the ceiling and hit him hard on the chest. This he understood as a breaking open of his inner self. Night after night he could not sleep and found he could not take sleeping pills. ‘I lay in utter and deep silence. It was an experience of nothingness, a dark nothingness at the depths of my being. I was terrified at the thought of getting no sleep’.²⁵ A new level of con-

sciousness seemed to awaken with a new energy and in time he realised that something very deep was going on and he had to let it happen.

Twenty years later Johnston felt he had a glimpse of what God was doing in the darkness of those sleepless nights. It was part of the mystical journey found in all religions. He writes, quoting *The Dark Night* by St John of the Cross, ‘And so I can cry “O Guiding Night! O Night more lovely than the dawn!” This was the night that guided me more surely than the noonday sun to where he waited for me, him whom I knew so well, in a place where no one else appeared’.²⁶

And so to finish

The Ox Mountain Parable reminds us of what we already know: the purification of experiences of the night brings renewal with the dawn. Darkness correctly discerned is the communication of God. Our dreams, our developing subjective awareness of our spiritual poverty and times of spiritual suffering can all awaken us to a paradoxical presence of God in what may feel like abandonment. In the dark of the night air is the possible ‘union of the nothing with the Nothing’ (to quote Augustine Baker) where we are ‘alone with the Alone’ (to quote Bede Griffiths). Warning and abandon are interwoven with sweet delight in the dark encounter.

O night of admiration, full of
choirs,

O night of deepest praise,
And darkness full of sweet
delight!

What secret and intrepid Visitor
Has come to raise us from
the dead?²⁷

Notes

1. *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, (New York, New Directions, 1977) p.112.
2. Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love*, Ed. William Shannon, (London, Collins, 1985) p.443.
3. Merton, *Entering the Silence, The Journals of Thomas Merton*, (New York, HarperCollins, 1997) p.377.
4. *ibid.* p.370.
5. *ibid.* p.11 and 10.
6. *ibid.* p.73.
7. *ibid.* p.205.
8. *ibid.* p.468.
9. *ibid.* pp.471-88.
10. Merton, *The Ascent to Truth*, (London, Hollis and Carter, 1951) p.38.
11. *The Collected Works of St John of the Cross*, (Washington D.C. ICS Publications, 1991) p.51.
12. William Johnston, *The Wounded Stag*, (San Francisco, Harper and Row, 1993) p.252.
13. William Johnston, *Being in Love* (San Francisco, Harper and Row, 1989,) p.120.
14. Merton, *A Search for Solitude The Journals of Thomas Merton*, (New York, HarperCollins, 1997) p.175 and p.176.
15. *Entering the Silence*, p.150
16. William Johnston, *Mystical Journey*, (Maryknoll, New York, Orbis Books, 2006) p.179.
17. *Entering the Silence*, p.72.
18. *ibid.* p.79.
19. *ibid.* p.89.
20. *ibid.* p.99.
21. *ibid.* p.104.
22. *ibid.* p.254.
23. *ibid.* p.173.
24. *Mystical Journey*, p.188.
25. *ibid.* p.190.

26. *ibid.* p.193.

27. *The Dark Encounter* in CP, p.112.

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