

THE OBSCURITY OF GOD IN SPIRITUAL DIRECTION

THE DARK NIGHT OF THE SOUL

Richard Herman

“When people speak of going through a dark night of the soul, they usually mean they’re experiencing bad things.” That’s how Gerald May begins his reflection on *The Dark Night of the Soul* (p.1 ... it’s also the book title). I admit, that’s how for years I’ve thought of a “dark night” experience. Thus, what I’ve called my own “dark night” was a season when I walked in the dark valley of depression, as revealed by prayers in my journal:

“It’s getting hard to see around me. I don’t even feel like I can hear You anymore. Oh, the deafening silence! The hopelessness of wondering—will it change for me? When? How? I look around and all I am now capable of seeing is the negative, the bleak.

“Father, God – although I am not sure You are listening ... yet I *know* you are there ... I need Your help, Your intervention. Restore hope. Re-ignite joy – joy which has died.

“Fill me, Lord. I’m so empty and drained. Fill me. Meet me in my emptiness with Your fullness. I can’t – You must. ...” (11/30/01).

What May helped me see is that the “darkness of the night implies nothing sinister, only that the liberation takes place in hidden ways, beneath our knowledge and understanding. It happens mysteriously, in secret, and beyond our conscious control” (p. 5). He indicates that, “there is an active life of the soul that goes on beneath our awareness. It is to this unconscious dimension of the spiritual life that Teresa [of Avila] and John [of the Cross] refer when they use the term ‘dark’” for which the Spanish word is *oscura*. “For them, it simply means ‘obscure.’ In the same way that things are difficult to see at night, the deepest relationship between God and person is hidden from our conscious awareness” (p. 66-67).

So, like the Gulf Stream moves unseen beneath the surface of the ocean, the Spirit of the Lord moves not just “*over* the waters” of chaos to creatively act (as in Genesis 1) but also He moves *beneath* the turmoil (*and* the quiet, too)—invisible, undetected, yet real, imaginative and active.

So, a little phrase I ran across years ago in Isaiah 45:15, one that has troubled me since then, begins to make sense. “Truly you are *a God who hides Himself*, O God and Savior of Israel” (*NIV—italics mine, rhh*) says the prophet, using a Hebrew verb meaning “to conceal oneself” as when David hid himself from Saul or when Jehoshabeath hid young Joash from those who sought to murder him.

As much as God reveals Himself to us (through Scripture, creation, in Jesus and more) moving visibly: He also moves secretly, mysteriously, unseen and unknown in the “dark night” of obscurity. What has taken me by surprise is that He does so not just in *some* particular season but in *all* seasons.

Job’s young friend Elihu hints at this when he says, “if [God] remains silent, who can condemn Him? If He hides His face, who can see Him?” (*Job 34:29*). It’s also inferred in the repeated call to “seek the Lord” as in an exciting game of “hide and seek.” Were He not hidden, there would be no need to seek Him. So, aspects of God’s reign and working are as silent as a tomb, as hidden as valuables in a bank vault or a treasure buried in a cornfield (cf. *Mt. 13:44*). God works obscurely in secret places and mysterious ways all the time.

There's no greater image for this aspect of God's creative activity than pregnancy. The psalmist rolls back the cover on this mysterious work of God when he says:

“...You knitted me together in my mother's womb. ...
“My frame was not hidden from You
when I was made in the secret place.
“When I was woven together in the depths of the earth,
Your eyes saw my unformed body.” (Psa. 139:13, 15)

In his comments, Gerald May either inadvertently or intentionally alludes to Biblical truth about God's penchant for secrecy as He moves in and upon us. As cited above, he notes that God's liberating work “takes place in hidden ways, beneath our knowledge and understanding ... *mysteriously*, in *secret*, and beyond our conscious control.”

Who has not said more than once that, “God moves in *mysterious* ways His wonders to perform”? Who has not struggled to grasp the why of “the messianic *secret*” when Jesus, God revealed in humanity, willfully conceals Himself, not wanting His identity made known but kept hidden for a while?

It's also clear in Scripture that what God calls his holy “mysteries” are things once hidden now revealed and that Jesus' Messianic identity did not stay hidden forever. I.e., we could say the night is darkest just before the dawn—and *dawn always comes*. But, there *is* a time when all's hidden.

Think of Joseph and his dilemma—sold into slavery by jealous brothers, wrongly accused and imprisoned, forgotten by one he helped to set free. As a friend of mine used to ask: *I wonder what Joseph scrawled on the inside of the cistern where his brothers threw him or on the walls of his cell in Egypt?* It may well have been more akin to subway graffiti than

a church bulletin board. After all, it's only *in retrospect* that he discerns God's hidden hand in events that took him to Egypt. And, likewise, were it not for the retrospective of an empty tomb, we'd never see God's gracious, yet invisible, hand behind the events of Holy Week that lead to what we now call "Good Friday." Even Jesus cried out "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"— something echoed in saints of any era

So, what do we do with "the dark nights" for our own souls and of those of directees or friends who seek spiritual direction?

I think, whether it's for ourselves or others, we're called to be alert for the tell-tale signs of God's hidden hand moving; to be ready and able to point out the sometimes small, almost imperceptible signs of His stirring beneath the surface of our lives.

It's like having the eye of a seasoned fisherman sensing a fish's presence in the slightest ripple on the water's surface or the smallest hint of sunlight refracted by movement in the eddies and pools near a stream's bank. We're to listen, notice, and stay alert to ways the Hidden One shows Himself to be *present* even if hardly visible in the moment.

One way we can cast a line into the steam of the soul and catch hold of God's hidden workings can be through *dreams*. Paying attention to dreams may reveal what otherwise is hidden to us. Until I'd gone back to my journal from the dark-depths, I did not remember that a Christian counselor had me keep a dream diary to capture movements otherwise hidden within me.

Another way to sense the hidden movements of God might be through *visions* He graciously gives to His people; for, sometimes, God gives a vision when His way for us feels clouded over and not clear to us; as in Paul's *vision* of a Macedonian man calling him to come there with the Gospel.

But, in our milieu, I believe we've greatly misunderstood "vision."

I'm intrigued by how "leadership guru's" abuse a verse in Proverbs sometimes rendered as "where there is no vision, the people perish" (Prov. 29:18) making it into a call to create an objective, goal, target or aspiration to reach by our own efforts. However, the word "vision" is more accurately rendered as "revelation", "a redemptive revelation of God" or "a prophetic vision" of what's otherwise hidden; which when absent, makes people "perish"— "cast off restraint," "be uncontrolled" and "run wild." Or, as Eugene Peterson translates is in *The Message*: "If people can't see what God is doing, they stumble all over themselves ..." (*The Message*). Vision is always given as a gift, not created or constructed by us. It's being allowed to see what God is doing in obscurity. It's a glimpse beyond one plane of life onto another plane to see what's otherwise hidden; without it, sometimes we get lost in the darkness.

So, when God gives them, we pay attention to visions—like Paul in The Acts, or like Joseph in the gospels or even Old Testament Balaam, for that matter! For visions can enable us to sense what God is doing in the obscurity of a dark night.

I also believe a “new set of eyes” is needed to see through the darkness (or the “darkened glass” (1 Cor. 13:12)) ... even vaguely. “Spiritual eyes” have a different kind of world-view that takes seriously the reality of spirit and soul, of God as Spirit, and all of which is hidden by a perception of reality colored by linear, one-dimensional thinking. I believe this is one reason Jesus said, “no one can [even] *see the kingdom of God* without being born again” (Jn. 3:3); or that Paul concludes that without the Spirit no-one accepts things that come from the Spirit of God for they seem as foolishness and cannot be understood, because they’re spiritually discerned (see:1 Cor. 3:14). The new birth brings with it the ability *to see differently*, to discern the God’s movements in the world by His Spirit.

A “new set of eyes” is what I think Elisha prayed for when his servant only saw the encircling enemy army. Because his servant was blind to a greater spiritual – though hidden – reality, the prophet prayed: “O Lord, open his eyes so he may see.” Then, the Lord enabled him to see “the hills full of horses and chariots all around Elisha” (2 Kings 6:17).

So, I believe it’s appropriate to pray for those (self or others) who are in a particularly difficult season of the “dark night” – “O, Lord: open their eyes that they may see.” Apparently, Elisha either saw God’s hidden hand or at least trusted it was there (whether he saw it or not) and so prayed for him who had neither the eyes nor the faith.

HOWEVER – and here’s the caveat: *there’s no guarantee that either I as a director or any directee will necessarily be able to see anything through the darkness.* God is still God—and if He determines to remain hidden to work His good and loving purposes, then He

will be hidden to us. And, maybe more than any other time, this is when we most desperately need others to walk with us.

A friend once reminded me, as best I can, to trust in the darkness what I've seen in the light. That's when *we trust* God's good providence for, as the apostle says, "we walk/live by faith, not by sight" (2 Cor. 5:17). But, we can be sure of this: one day, the dawn *will come*, like, after three days in the darkness, came the rising of the sun in the morning and the raising of the Son on Easter day. To paraphrase a philosophical question—If God acts in darkness and we cannot see Him, is He still moving and working? Of course!

Let me conclude with a piece of dialogue from my favorite story among the Narnia chronicles by C. S. Lewis, *The Horse and His Boy*. It's a tale about God's providence moving in obscurity, His working even when we don't perceive it. Interestingly enough, this part of the story occurs *in the darkness*, as a young boy named Shasta, is alone at *night* in a high mountain pass—feeling exhausted, forlorn, discouraged.

And being very tired and having nothing inside him, he felt so sorry for himself that the tears rolled down his cheeks.

What put a stop to all this was a sudden fright. Shasta discovered that someone or somebody was walking beside him. It was pitch dark and he could see nothing. And the Thing (or Person) was going so quietly that he could hardly hear the footfalls. What he could hear was breathing. His invisible companion seemed to breathe on a very large scale, and Shasta got the impression that it was very large creature. And he had come to notice this breathing so gradually that he had really no idea how long it had been there. It was a horrible shock. ...

The Thing (unless it was a Person) went on beside him so very quietly that Shasta began to hope he had only imagined it. But just as he was becoming quite sure of it, there suddenly came a deep, rich sigh out of the darkness beside him. That couldn't be imagination! Anyway, he had felt the hot breath of that sigh on his chilly left hand.

... So he went on at a walking pace and the unseen companion walked and breathed beside him. At last he could bear it no longer.

“Who are you?” he said, scarcely above a whisper.

“One who has waited long for you to speak,” said the Thing. Its voice was not loud, but very large and deep.

“Are you—are you a giant?” asked Shasta.

“You might call me a giant,” said the Large Voice. “But I am not like the creatures you call giants.”

“I can’t see you at all,” said Shasta, after staring very hard. Then (for an even more terrible idea had come into his head) he said, almost in a scream, “You’re not—something *dead*, are you? Oh please—please do go away. What harm have I ever done to you? Oh, I am the unluckiest person in the whole world.”

Once more he felt the warm breath of the Thing on his hand and face, “There,” it said, “that is not the breath of a ghost. Tell me your sorrows.”

Shasta was a little reassured by the breath: so he told how he had never known his real father or mother and had been brought up sternly by the fisherman. And then he told the story of his escape and how they were chased by lions and forced to swim for their lives; and of all the dangers in Tashbaan and about his night among the Tombs and how the beasts howled at him out of the desert and how they were almost at their goal when another lion chased them and wounded Aravis. And also, how very long it was since he had had anything to eat.

“I do not call you unfortunate,” said the Large Voice.

“Don’t you think it was bad luck to meet so many lions?” said Shasta.

“There was only one lion,” said the Voice.

“What on earth do you mean? I’ve just told you there were at least two the first night, and—”

“There was only one: but he was swift of foot.”

“How do you know?”

“I was the lion.” And as Shasta gaped with open mouth and said nothing, the Voice continued. “I was the lion who forced you to join with Aravis. I was the cat that comforted you among the houses of the dead. I was the lion who drove the jackals from you while you slept. I was the lion who gave the Horses the new strength of fear for the last mile so that you should reach King Lune in time. And I was the lion you do not remember who pushed the boat in which you lay, a child near death, so that it came to shore where a man sat, wakeful at midnight to receive you.” ...

“Who *are* you?” asked Shasta.

“Myself,” said the Voice, very deep and low so that the earth shook: and again, “Myself,” loud and clear and gay; and then the third time “Myself,” whispered so softly you could hardly hear it, and yet it seemed to come from all round you as if the leaves rustled with it.

Shasta was no longer afraid that the Voice belonged to something that would eat him, nor that it was the voice of a ghost. But a new and different sort of trembling came over him. Yet he felt glad, too. (pp. 137-139)