When the Well Runs Dry

Difficulties and failures are realities in the cultivation of any relationship – including the Christian's friendship with God. We Christians still possess the old nature, which occasionally raises its ugly head to oppose Christ's values. In this section, I will suggest how mentors might address two problems that disciples are likely to encounter on the spiritual journey.

Spiritual Dryness

The first is the common problem of dryness in our relationship with God. By spiritual dryness I mean a lack of joy in the Lord, loss of spiritual enthusiasm, and disinterest in prayer. Thomas Green has written two popular books entitled *When the Well Runs Dry* (1979) and *Drinking from the Dry Well* (1991). Notice that the title of the first book contains the word *When*, not *If*. Every Christian experiences dry periods in his or her life. The spiritual director helps the disciple understand that we will have good days and bad days, peaks and troughs. Every relationship experiences the ebb and flow of closeness and distance.

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Having said this, spiritual dryness also may be due to physical or mental fatigue. Because we are integrated beings, a depleted body or mind dulls our emotional responses and depresses our spirits. The wise mentor counsels the disciple to cease striving and seek rest and refreshment. Introducing variety into one's life also helps rejuvenate the soul. So take a walk, listen to music, visit with friends, or play a sport. Francis Houdek offers this helpful counsel. "When someone's prayer is characterized by aridity, the most helpful thing to do is to encourage the person . . . to observe the livelier sense of God in the larger fabric of life, for God's presence can generally be found in leisure, nature, and relationships. . . . Prayer does not change, but a newfound amazement and delight in all the other ways in which God enters the person's actual lived experience arises."

Dryness also may come from spiritual neglect. Personal distance form God grows when our spirits are jaded by some besetting sin (see Proverbs 1:28-29, Hosea 5:6), when we suffer a strained or broken human relationship (see 1 John 4:20-21), or when we neglect constructive spiritual disciplines (see 1 Timothy 4:7). Getting our hearts right with the Lord is a major step toward solving the problem of spiritual dryness.

Spiritual Desolation

This second problem is related to the condition known as the "dark night of the soul." John of the Cross's writings actually describe a collection of four dark nights. (I will comment only on John's passive dark night of the soul, which is commonly understood as the soul's dark night.)

The "dark night" may be caused by painful trauma, such as death of a loved one. Or it may involve the absence of God without any attending life crisis. In the dark night, we may feel that we have fallen into a black hole with no light to dispel the abandonment and emptiness.

Evangelicals speak little about the dark night, perhaps because we've been trained to think that when we become Christians all our spiritual struggles are over. The dark night, however, is a major theme in Christian spirituality. John of the Cross wrestled with the divine desertion when he wrote his famous work *Dark Night of the Soul.* John called it "night" to distinguish it from the Christian's normal condition of

spiritual sight. And he called it "dark" to underscore God's withdrawal of comforting grace. John explained the dark night as a time when we recognize our inner powerlessness and are purified from worldly attachments.

Teresa of Avila experienced the dark night in a period of intense opposition and suffering. She prayed to the Lord, "Why do you treat me so harshly?" God responded, "This is how I treat my friends." Teresa replied, "I understand now why you have so few!"

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In 1944 C. S. Lewis wrote his famous book *The Problem of Pain.* Most agree that this book went a long way toward solving the classic problem of how a good and all-powerful God could permit terrible suffering. But in 1961, when his own wife was dying from cancer, the answers Lewis proposed seventeen years earlier no longer made sense. God seemed to have abandoned him, and Lewis became frustrated and angry. The quintessential Christian apologist called God a "Cosmic Sadist" and questioned many of his beliefs. Then one morning, when Lewis awoke, both the grief and doubt had vanished. Lewis wrote about his new perspective in *A Grief Observed.* From this bewildering experience, Lewis learned a great lesson: "You can't see anything properly while your eyes are blurred with tears."

In his challenging book *The Return of the Prodigal Son,* Henri Nouwen describes his own agonizing dark night.

"In the months following the celebration of the thirtieth anniversary of my ordination to the priesthood, I gradually entered into very dark interior places and began to experience immense inner anguish. I came to a point where I could no longer feel safe in my own community and had to leave to seek help in my struggle and to work directly on my inner healing."

Seeking spiritual wholeness, Nouwen meditated on the biblical parable of the prodigal son and Rembrandt's painting of this gospel story. The masterpiece was stimulated by the great artist's own experience of spiritual desolation. Through prolonged meditation on the prodigal, Nouwen was brought into the brightness of renewed relationship with God.

The dark night experience is well supported in Scripture. We have only to consider Job to recognize this is so.

Jesus Himself experienced the dark night—a terrible desolation that fell over Him as He hung in agony on the cross. At Golgotha, the Father turned His back on His own beloved Son and became for Him an absent God. And so Jesus cried out in deep distress, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matthew 27:46).

What an awesome mystery this is that God the Father hid His face from His beloved Son.

The dark night is the result of God's mysterious withdrawal. For a season, God providentially distances Himself, causing the light to become darkness. Spiritually God's absence creates a vacuum that can show us the emptiness of our fleshly attachments, such as our dependence on people and things for a security they cannot give and our reliance on position and money for power that is weak indeed. When we let go of these attachments, then we are propelled toward Christlikeness. And so, through the anguish of the dark night, God performs something like "spiritual surgery" on deeply rooted self-sufficiency, sensuality, and pride. In this light, the dark night is an

event the spiritual Christian sees as God-induced—or permitted by God—for his or her ultimate good. It is God's work—painful, but unerringly powerful—in our purification.

How do you minister to a person passing through spiritual desolation? Here are some general directives.

First, assure him of the value of suffering, in the divine economy. To become like Christ, the Christian must be purified by pain. The dark night we find so distressing is a necessary part of our union with Jesus, who experienced the Father's absence and who "learned obedience from the things he suffered" (Hebrews 5:8). In his life, suffering is inevitable, but for the Christian it is always purposeful.

Second, encourage the disciple to cling tenaciously to the Lord in faith. In his dark night, David waited for God's deliverance, even though He seemed worlds away. "I keep right on praying to you, LORD, hoping this is the time you will show me favor" (Psalm 69:13). When the shadows blot out the warmth of the Father's love, remember Job, who confidently exclaimed, "Though he slay me, yet will I hope in him" (Job 13:15, NIV).

Third, help the struggler to emulate the confidence of Jesus, who says, "The one who sent me is with me—he has not deserted me" (John 8:29). The dark night serves notice that God is doing a new work of grace in our lives. In God's good time, the darkness will yield to the brightness and warmth of God's felt love.

Tammy is a talented young woman who came to Christ in her early teens. The church she joined taught that if you believe and do the right things, all will be well. She must read the Bible, pray, memorize Bible verses, and show up for all the church services. Seeking to be faithful for God, she found herself on a treadmill of activity. When she was stricken with a chronic disease, Tammy entered a period of spiritual confusion and desolation. The sense of God's presence and satisfaction in prayer vanished. She experienced great disappointment with God and considered tossing the Christian faith.

Tammy hit rock bottom when some of her Christian friends told her, "You're not trusting God enough!" and "You're not praying the right way!" But in the darkest moments of the night, Tammy clung to the memory of former days when God was real. In faith, she kept her daily appointment with God and remained in fellowship with His people—even though the Lord remained distant and the Word failed to speak to her.

Finally the darkness dissipated and Christ became real again. She joined a Christian renewal community, read many of the spiritual classics, and explored new prayer forms. Realizing that spirit and body are good creations of God, she began to worship with her entire being. Today Tammy has a contagious relationship with the Lord. She understands that what she experienced was a dark night of the soul, lovingly permitted by God to lead her into a deeper love relationship with Himself.

from Dr. Bruce Demarest in Satisfy your Soul: Restoring the Heart of Christian Spirituality