

Dark night of the church: Relearning the essentials

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This article appears in the [December 26, 2012](#) issue.



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Frederick Buechner wrote that “dreams of fame and fortune die hard if they ever die at all.” Sometimes it takes a long, dark night of the soul before those dreams die, before they are wrenched from imaginations that cling to them. And sometimes it’s God who does this work in us.

Is there also, as Elaine Heath asks in her book *The Mystic Way of Evangelism*, a dark night of the church? Are we experiencing it? Is God at work wrenching our alluring memories of social prominence and significance from our minds, ripping dreams of fame and fortune from our imaginations? Recently a church member mentioned the “good old days” when we had to put up folding chairs in the aisles on Easter Sunday. Is God inviting us to let go of those days and the accompanying dreams and memories?

If there is a dark night of the church, we’ll need to rethink the sociological narrative of mainline Christianity that’s been part of our identity for the past 40 years. It’s a narrative we all know well, but it doesn’t tell the whole story. In the *Century* article [“Crunching the numbers” \(April 2, 2012\)](#) William McKinney summarized the main findings of five sociological accounts of religion in America over the past several

decades. Says McKinney, “Protestantism continues to lose market share and will soon be a minority religious tradition.”

David A. Roozen reports that the past decade has shown “a slow, overall erosion of the strength of America’s congregations.” The report documents a steep drop in the financial health of congregations, as well as continuing high levels of conflict and high numbers of aging members. One report underscores the absence of young adults.

Loss of market share. Conflict. Absence of young adults. Financial crisis. These are phrases from a lexicon of decline. They provide a sobering but honest narrative. But while they reveal some things, they hide others.

It was St. John of the Cross who gave us the story of God’s work to free a person from attachments in order to realize his or her fundamental union with God in love. If we apply the metaphor of the dark night of the soul to the church, we might be better equipped to shift from the sociological narrative of decline to a theological narrative that accounts for the church’s nature as united to the Son and drawn into the life of the triune God, with its existence shaped by that life.

Of course, the church is as subject to sociological description as any other organization or institution, and that description helps explain what it means for the church to be the church. But sociological description does not wholly define the church. And while, as such descriptions remind us, the essence of church is not some invisible interiority, St. John of the Cross gives us other language, theological language that can help us reconceive the mainline church experience over the past few decades. His description of the dark night of the soul can prove both illuminating and liberating for churches and their leaders.

For John of the Cross, the dark night of the soul was an experience—or absence of an experience—that God initiates and works in human persons in order to help them realize their fundamental union with God and liberate them for the perfect love of God and neighbor.

Three aspects of St. John’s response to the dark night are helpful to the church. First, this dark is not evil, nor does it indicate pain and suffering. It is not the kind of darkness emphasized in the Gospel of John. This darkness instead is a kind of light because if God has brought it, it’s a darkness not of evil, pain or suffering; rather, it is an obscurity. As a dark night begins, those of us experiencing it may not know

what is going on. Someone has pulled the rug out from under us; everything has changed. Things are confusing. The obscurity may feel like a kind of suffering, and it may be painful.

We react with a great hunger for explanation. We are ravenous for the kind of books reviewed in “Crunching the numbers,” or for the interpretations of religious experience offered by Phyllis Tickle and Diana Butler Bass. We want someone to tell us what is going on. We know something has changed, but not exactly how or why. We want answers and solutions.

Second, in the midst of that obscurity, God is doing something. God is bringing detachment. When talking about prayer, John says that God is detaching us from feelings of consolation, from the warm fuzzies and any sense of peace and security. God can get to us only by detaching us from things—like a beloved church building that we’ve come to love for its own sake rather than for God’s sake.

No one articulated this with greater clarity or urgency than Thomas Merton: “Everything you love for its own sake, outside of God alone, blinds your intellect and destroys your judgment of moral values. It vitiates your choices so that you cannot clearly distinguish good from evil and you do not truly know God’s will.” As John says, “This night frees the soul from all [its] vices by quenching all its earthly and heavenly satisfactions.”

During the process of detachment, which John likens to purgatory, the methods and techniques that used to work no longer work, and the things that used to satisfy no longer satisfy. If the church is in a dark night, what kinds of detachment are we experiencing?

In Roger’s church there is a case in the back of the history room filled with trophies won by the church’s youth basketball team and softball team. Most of these trophies are 40, 50 or 60 years old. Members are proud of them, especially of the softball team trophies, because many of the players sit in the pews on a Sunday morning.

These trophies can be symbols of significance, prominence, market share, bulging membership and Sunday school rolls. But what if they tie us too tightly to the memory of mattering more in the civic sphere, of being consulted by the city council and of church members having influence as city council members? Some trappings of church are enticing, but if we look carefully and think about them, we realize that they are external to who we are. They are not the necessary goods, and pursuing

them has blinded us to our true identity and purpose.

In *After Virtue*, Alasdair MacIntyre describes a practice that can help us distinguish between external trappings and this true identity. Taking the game of chess as an example, MacIntyre distinguishes between goods that are internal to a practice and those that are external to it. You might teach a child to play chess by telling him he can have candy when the match is over. But that is an external to the practice of chess—the child hasn't learned to play chess well as long as he plays only with the promise of candy. He must become detached from the candy in order to learn to appreciate and even become fond of the game.

Maybe the American mainline church had too much candy for too long. Maybe what the statisticians and sociologists call decline is God's sometimes gentle, sometimes forceful way of pulling us from the candy—the externals we have allowed to define us, the experiences and accolades and positions of prominence that we remember—so we can rediscover our union with God in love, a union embodied and made visible in our common life.

In the dark night, we learn that God brings light and that God is working in us. A third important element of the dark night of the soul is that it leads us to discover who we truly are with God alone. John writes, "Now that the soul is clothed in these other garments of labor, dryness, and desolation, and its former lights have been darkened, it possesses more authentic lights in this most excellent and necessary virtue of self-knowledge."

What is the church learning or relearning about itself in its dark night? The church is relearning that its essence lies not in its programs and accomplishments, its activities and accolades, but in the truth that "she on earth hath union with God the Three in One," and that God is enough. Coming to this knowledge means being weaned from the glamorous results-oriented American culture of production, measurement and unlimited growth. We have to abandon the idea that we are a means to an end, whether that end is the renewal of a nation, the conversion of individuals or the keeper of traditional cultural mores.

To put it somewhat differently, the purpose or end of the church is not something we choose or achieve. God gives us our purpose; it's something we receive. It's what we have been created for. In the dark night we may discover or rediscover the end for which God has created the church. That means that our primary mission is to be the

church: a community that worships the God of Jesus Christ in a culture that worships other gods.

“Dreams of fame and fortune die hard if they ever die at all,” says Buechner. Maybe God is helping those dreams to die. Maybe retelling the story of decline as the story of the dark night of the church will help us see that God is inviting us to throw out our boxes of trophies and live as Teresa of Ávila said, “[as if] God alone is enough.”

This raises another question: What kind of leadership does the church need during a dark night of the church?

In his 1990 *Harvard Business Review* article “What Leaders Really Do,” John Kotter described leadership this way: First, leaders set direction. They look to the future and say, “Here’s where we are going.” Then they set strategies for getting there and prepare people and systems to communicate the new “vision of an alternative future.” Then leaders motivate the people.

But in a dark night of the soul, other leadership traits are required. A church may not need a leader who casts a vision, sets a direction and rallies everyone around it. A church that’s in a dark night of the soul needs a spiritual director. A good one.

In the dark night the number one temptation is to *get out*. To flee. We want things back the way they were, and we want out. But if it’s a true dark night, that’s not what we need.

In her memoir *Still*, Lauren Winner tells how the death of her mother and the end of her marriage led her to a crisis in her faith. She no longer knew how to pray, she doubted the God she had loved and trusted for so long, and she suffered extraordinary loneliness. She says she wanted to die and would do anything to avoid being alone: “Call a friend, go shopping, pedal endless, frantic miles on my stationary bike; pour another drink; take another sleeping pill.”

But Winner had a friend named Ruth who suggested that Winner try to stay in the loneliness—just for five minutes, just for ten minutes. Maybe the loneliness had something for her, said Ruth. Maybe she should see what that something was.

Ruth served as a kind of spiritual director for Winner, or to use the old Celtic phrase, an *anam cara*, a soul friend who says that instead of taking the bypass, one should go through it.

John says that in the dark night one needs a spiritual director, a soul friend, who will help by keeping one company and offering the reminder that although one may be confused and even in pain, this darkness is not a sickness that leads to death; it leads to life. Psychiatrist Gerald May writes, “When the spiritual life feels so uprooted, it can be almost impossible to believe—or even to consider—that what’s really going on is a graceful process of liberation—a letting go of old limiting habits to make room for fresh openness to love.”

How countercultural it would be for a church in a narrative of decline, with a need for visionary leaders to lead it out of confusion, pain and decline, to have a leader who would be a friend for its soul. That leader would encourage the church to consider what May says might be impossible to believe—that what is really going on is a graceful process of liberation and that instead of fleeing our anxiety we should sit with it and let the process unfold. What kind of leader would that be?

A good spiritual director—an *anam cara*—has three characteristics that are relevant for a church in the dark night of the soul.

First, the soul-friend leader creates a safe space—a kind of holding environment—where the community can sit with its experience of the dark night, where people can name their experience, fear and confusion without being afraid. The soul-friend leader who does this avoids fear and anxiety by being, as Edwin Friedman says, a nonanxious presence.

The second characteristic of the soul-friend leader is a willingness to relinquish his or her own agenda. At least for a time, this kind of leader will need to forget what they know about key characteristics of vital congregations or healthy congregations or comeback churches. These ideas may prove useful again at some point, but for now the leader must avoid the temptation to steer a congregation in a certain direction, to form the people in this predetermined image.

The soul-friend leader is able to relinquish agendas in part because he or she has gone through the dark night and so has become somewhat free of the lure of “markers of success.” Only then can the community really trust that leader when she or he says: I’m not here to fashion you in my image but to allow you to experience in freedom the work of God’s sanctifying Spirit.

Finally, the soul-friend leader possesses the capacity to say, “I’m with you in this.” Sam Wells said that *with* is the most important word in theology. It is the word that

captures God's incarnation in Christ—Jesus being the name of God's "withness." The word *withness* captures the church's stance in relationship to the world—the sacrament of God's continued withness in the world. And it speaks of the heart of the soul-friend leader. "I am with you in this dark night; I will be with you when the dawn begins to break; with you in the obscurity; with you in the gratitude."

The other word for this, of course, is *companion*—one who breaks bread with another. John of the Cross says the dark night is the process of God's weaning the soul from the sweet milk of consolation and pleasant experiences in prayer so that the soul can begin to eat the nourishing, more difficult-to-swallow bread—bread, he adds, with crust. The soul friend breaks the bread and shares it, just as we do with Christ and one another at the communion table.

In a way we've been talking about two different churches. One church identifies itself with those things external to itself, mistakenly thinking of them as essential. The second church is the one we discover as we let go of social power, position and prominence.