

The sound of silence

by [Suzanne Guthrie](#) in the [December 28, 2010](#) issue



St. John of the Cross

The course title was "Negative Theology: Lamentations, *The Cloud of Unknowing*, and *The Dark Night of the Soul*." Before class started at 9 a.m. I had to have the house cleaned to my military officer husband's specifications, cook a hot breakfast and do the dishes, wash and dress my preschool boys, drive to the south side of San Antonio, drop off my youngest child at day care, pick up and strap eight other children into seat belts in the Chevy Suburban and drive them to a nursery school, then drive to the seminary.

I noticed that the resident seminarians needed only to roll out of bed, walk downstairs with their cup of coffee and shuffle into class. It was the 1970s. I was the only woman in the class, and I sat in the back as far out of sight as possible.

The teacher came from a house of prayer in the desert to teach an "intensive" once a semester. The material he presented—from scripture, Teilhard de Chardin, John of

the Cross, the anonymous author of *The Cloud*—turned my soul inside out: how I perceived reality, how the Divine seemed most present to me in solitude, silence and loving darkness. I was so moved that I was grateful he taught in a monotone—I thought that if he used gestures or extravagant modulations in his voice, I'd fall off my chair.

One day, one of the young men attending the course raised his hand. "This life of prayer you're talking about? It's fine for priests and religious—monks and nuns—but what about an ordinary housewife? How could a person like *that* live this life of prayer?" The teacher stood still for perhaps a minute without changing his expression. It seemed as if a shadow of anger flickered across his face. I couldn't breathe. My life, the foundation of my sacrifices, my own version of tilting at windmills, the pursuit of the Sacred-I-Know-Not-What, perhaps my very sanity depended upon his response.

"They cannot help it," he said finally. "Prayer is not something that you do. Prayer is something God does to you."

Not only did I go home that day justified like the publican in the temple; I also realized that the teacher was probably not as scary or remote as I had made him out to be. Eventually we became good friends. I realize now how extraordinarily lucky I was to have learned about apophatic theology in my mid-twenties. How many Episcopalian housewives in the 1970s found their way into Roman Catholic seminaries to encounter desert-dwelling theologians explaining the dark nights of the soul?

Apophatic theology is the in-the-gut knowledge that God transcends images, names and definitions; that words limit both the experience and description of the Divine. It acknowledges the restraints of human perceptions of space and time. Rather than saying, "God is this or that," negative theology begins by saying, "God is not this or that." (Junior high-age theologians love this stuff!) Moreover, this way of the unknowing of God paradoxically unfolds as a way toward union with God.

Why are some of us wired to perceive the Divine most acutely in darkness, solitude and silence? Is it brain chemistry? Temperament? Some necessary evolutionary balance? It isn't that we don't experience the Divine Presence in other people, or nature or great liturgy or service to others. But connecting first with this primary Nothingness makes Presence possible for us within all those other things.

It wouldn't hurt pastors to learn about apophatic mysticism and to be better able to respond when a faithful parishioner comes to the office dumbfounded because "God has abandoned me." Rather than offering some platitude ("If God seems distant, who's done the walking?") the pastor might say, "Hmm, well, that sounds about right! This probably means you're being drawn into a deeper, more profound and integrated consciousness of God. Sit with it, trust it, wait, like you do in Advent or Lent. God has not abandoned you, but more likely, as John of the Cross says, God is flooding your soul with light and you can't quite apprehend it yet. So it is 'dark' in the way the light blinds you when you switch it on in the middle of the night."

The pastor might add, "Look up the story of Elijah in the cave on the holy mountain. God was not in the wind or the earthquake or the fire, but in the 'sound of sheer silence.'"

Divine Love draws some of us solely through darkness in prayer. Look at the Christian mystical canon! Who could ask for better teachers? Meister Eckhart, Thomas Merton, Evelyn Underhill, John of the Cross, Walter Hilton and the author of *The Cloud* guide us in the way of prayer and are accessible in paperback and online sources even to housewives.