



Taking Off Into the Dark Night

Many of you will have had the experience of preparing for an overseas holiday. As the time for departure grows closer, there's often a feeling of anxiety mixed with the excitement of anticipation as you try to tidy the house and garden, make sure the newspaper and other deliveries are cancelled, organise accommodation for the pets, pay the bills, purchase travel insurance, renew the passport and so on. On the day of departure, as you're leaving for the airport, you probably run around checking that all the appliances are turned off, all the doors and windows are secured and the perishables are thrown out of the fridge and pantry. Even as you board your flight you may have a sudden thought that you've left the iron on; but once that plane accelerates down the runway and then lifts its nose skyward and you feel yourself leave the ground, you know there's nothing else you can do about any unfinished tasks at home. You're lifted into a "between" state of being – not at home, yet not at your destination, detached from a clear sense of place, and completely "ungrounded". Yet, there is an accompanying feeling of freedom, of leaving the mundane behind and of going towards the exciting unknown.

In some ways, this physical experience of being "betwixt and between" is comparable to the spiritual idea of detachment. The great 16th century Spanish mystic, St John of the Cross, opens his beautiful account of the soul's journey towards union with God with the following lines:

On a dark night,
Kindled in love with yearnings
Oh happy chance!
I went forth without being observed,
My house being now at rest.

Here, the "house" is the body with all its senses that bristle and alert us and keep us connected to worldly concerns and emotions. In bringing the house to rest, in detaching from its concerns, the soul is liberated to soar into that dark night which St John of the Cross describes as "submitting totally to the guidance of faith [and] assenting to live in total darkness with regard to all created things."¹ Two centuries earlier the anonymous author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* described the detachment experienced during contemplation and meditation in a similar way: an intermediate state between two clouds – a cloud of "forgetting" below and a "cloud of unknowing" above, between the contemplative and God. The *Cloud* author further explains that darkness is not an absence of sunlight but, rather, an absence of knowing [of God] and as, in his view, God cannot be known but only loved, darkness and detachment are desirable states in which to find oneself. Such detachment is not exclusive to Christian practice and I have heard the Dalai Lama, for example, explain the concept

¹ St. John of the Cross. *The Ascent of Mount Carmel and The Dark Night*. Fr John Venard, ed. Darlington, 1981. p.41.

of detachment very clearly and simply as being in a state of “nothingness: no-thingness”.

Some recent scholars have described the “dark night” in psychological terms as the detachment of the ego, a letting go of the self and all its props. Letting go of illusions about ourselves can be confronting enough to plunge us into our own version of a “dark night” and, in reality, is not a practical path for most people to follow. Perhaps, then, we might usefully consider St John’s reference to the “happy chance”. That is, when those rare opportunities of bringing our “house to rest” present themselves, we should take them – in prayer, meditation or a walk in the garden, thus allowing ourselves to be more open to spiritual possibilities, more open to an unplanned journey into a dark night.

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