



# Dark Night of the Soul: St John of the Cross

New translation and introduction by Mirabai Starr

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BY ELAINE SUTTON

*On a dark night,  
Inflamed by love-longing—  
O exquisite risk!—  
Undetected slipped away.  
My house, at last, grown still.\**

It often seems that our art or life's work reflects the inner journey that we make. In the case of Mirabai Starr's new book, *Dark Night of the Soul*, a translation of the work of St. John of the Cross, these parallels could not be more uncanny. On the very day that the galley proofs of her book arrived, her 14-year-old daughter Jenny died in a car accident. This terrible coincidence of events rendered even more poignant Starr's commentary on her process in the preface to the book: "This has become not only a project of literary translation, but a journey of personal transformation as well. I see now that any notion of engaging such powerful teachings without surrendering myself to them is naïve. The

deeper I stepped into the landscape of the text, the more powerful was the inexplicable sadness to which I woke each morning, and yet the more profound the stillness that seemed to spread itself inside me."

Starr has been moved and fascinated by the words of John of the Cross for the last 20 years. Currently an adjunct professor of Spanish, religious studies, and philosophy at the University of New Mexico, she teaches *Dark Night* to her students. Finding that the stilted language of the traditional translation was off-putting to many, Starr decided to try her hand at a new translation that would reach a wider audience.

Born into a non-religious, but intellectually and spiritually open family, Mirabai spent many years pursuing various

spiritual paths. She writes, "I spent my teens and twenties in ashrams chanting to Hindu Goddesses, watching my breath in Buddhist zendos and stupas, prostrating to Allah with the Sufis, and purifying myself in Native American sweat lodges. But eventually, the juice drained out of my practices and the fireworks faded. By the time I reached my thirties, nothing remained but a quiet connection to emptiness." And from deep within the well of emptiness, she encountered the words of John of the Cross.

John was a 16th century Spanish Carmelite monk who, with his friend and spiritual mentor, Teresa of Avila, attempted to reform the Catholic Church by urging a return to a simple lifestyle and meditative practices. For this he was imprisoned and tortured. During the nine months of his captivity, he kept himself sane by writing love poems to God in his mind and committing them to memory. However, during this bleak period, John experienced a growing sense of abandonment by God, and an attendant loss of faith. After his somewhat miraculous escape and subsequent safety in a friendly monastery, his faith re-flowered with a burning intensity, and in gratitude and wonder, he composed his most famous poem "One Dark Night: Songs of the Soul." His Carmelite friends encouraged him to write commentaries on these mystical verses as a way to explain his visions and his spiritual journey through revelation, despair, transcendence and union with the Divine. That treatise was to become *Dark Night of the Soul*.

Many of us today are familiar with the term, "dark night of the soul," but often we are simply referring to some momentary difficulty in our lives. John meant something much deeper: a time of *utter darkness*, when all our spiritual practices come to naught, when there is no glimmer of hope emanating from our prayers, and not only do they

appear to fall on deaf ears, but we can barely muster the will to utter them at all. "Prayer starts to dry up on your tongue," Mirabai explains. "Sacred literature becomes fallen leaves, blows away. Meditation brings no serenity anymore. Devotion grows brittle, cracks. The God you bow down to no longer draws you." But John points out that even this desolate bleakness is a gift from God, a preparation for the complete surrender that is necessary in order to truly enter a state of union with the Beloved.

"The dark night is about being fully present in the tender, wounded emptiness of our own souls," Starr writes. "It's not about turning away from the pain but learning to rest in it. Rather than distracting ourselves from the simple darkness at our core, we sit with it, paying close attention. And opening our hearts to all that is left, which is love."

In this new translation, Mirabai Starr breathes a quiet, ecstatic wildness into this starkly beautiful body of work. Her voice is lyrical and articulate, using language as tenderly as a lover might wrap a gift for her beloved. She has painted a poignant picture of the passion of mystical union in language easily recognized by the contemporary spiritual seeker.

Yet even if her language is easily accessible, the path she describes is not. "The road to the divine encounter is not for the weekend adventurer," she writes. "It will quickly disappoint the spiritually curious. If you crave ecstatic visions and spiritual comforts, do not bother to walk this way. The dark night of the soul is for the seeker so on fire with love for God that she will get to him by any means necessary. This includes being willing to plunge into the abyss of the Unknown, the Unknowable. It is a path for the spiritually desperate."

During a recent reading in Taos, New Mexico, Mirabai spoke movingly to a packed room of people. Both her sadness and her deep stillness were apparent. She thanked her community for their support, and shared that the death of her daughter was her deepest teaching yet. She stated that she had written this book as a way to help any one struggling on "the path of suffering." Clearly, that path includes herself.

*I lost myself. Forgot myself.  
I lay my face against the Beloved's face.  
Everything fell away and I left myself behind,  
Abandoning my cares  
Among the lilies, forgotten.\*\**

\* First verse of *Songs of the Soul* by St. John of the Cross, translated by Mirabai Starr.

\*\* Last verse.

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