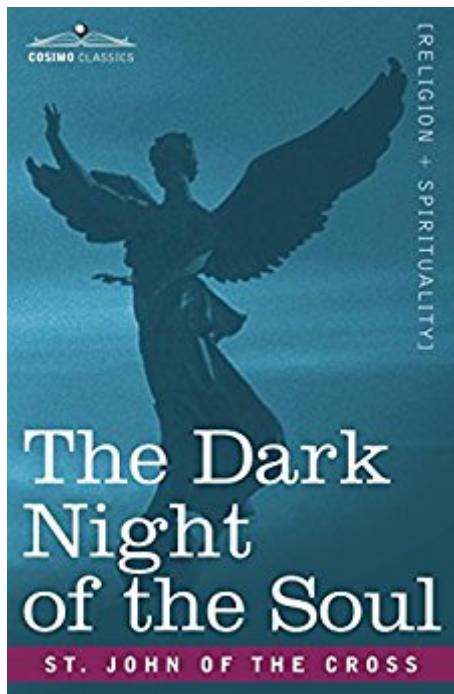


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The Dark Night Of The Soul



Synopsis

In the Big Thicket on the Trail of the Wild Man: Exploring Nature's Mysterious Dimension

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Customer Reviews

In this book, profound but obscure like the material with which it deals, psychiatrist Gerald May describes a process of spiritual growth that is operational in the difficult seasons of life. Drawing from the experiences of Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross, he explores a journey of consciousness that leads us into the recognition of "our deep and irrevocable communion with the Divine". It is a path through darkness, a path of letting go, a path of abandoning oneself, losing oneself, and in so doing ultimately finding what is real. The following quotes reveal something of this journey:^{*} The darkness of the night implies nothing sinister, only that the liberation takes place in hidden ways, beneath our knowledge and understanding.^{*} Although not knowing may itself seem like a bad thing, I am convinced it is one of the great gifts of the dark night of the soul.^{*} The spiritual life for Theresa and John has nothing to do with actually getting closer to God. Union with God is neither acquired nor received; it is realized, and in that sense it is something that can be yearned for, sought after,

and - with God's grace - found.* The dark night helps us to become what we are created to be: lovers of God and one another.* ...we are not only born with God at our center, but we are born with a heart full of desire for God. This yearning is our fundamental motive force; it is the human spirit. It is the energy behind everything we seek and aspire to.* Liberation, whether experienced pleasurable or painfully, always involves relinquishment, some kind of loss.* Sometimes the only way we can enter the deeper dimensions of the journey is by being unable to see where we are going.* ...in worldly matters it is good to have light so we know where to go without stumbling. But in spiritual matters it is precisely when we do think we know where to go that we are most likely to stumble.* When we cannot chart our own course, we become vulnerable to God's protection, and the darkness becomes a "guiding night," a "night more kindly than the dawn."** We cannot achieve our own liberation or fulfillment; we would not even know where to begin. But neither does God reach down from the sky and manipulate us like puppets. ...the process of the dark night is neither accomplished on our own nor worked within us by God alone.* Though we don't realize it at the time, when habitual senses of God do disappear in the process of the dark night, it is surely because it is time for us to relinquish our attachment to them. We have made an idol of our images and feelings of God, giving them more importance than the true God that they represent.* The darkness, the holy unknowing that characterizes this freedom, is the opposite of confusion and ignorance. Confusion happens when mystery is an enemy and we feel we must solve it to master our destinies. And ignorance is not knowing that we do not know. In the liberation of the night we are freed from having to figure things out, and we find delight in knowing that we do not know. It is comforting to come to understand that what we may experience as painful, dry, and difficult periods of life are often seasons of deep becoming. It is another way by which we learn that, as the Lord said it to St. Paul, "My grace is sufficient; my power is made perfect in weakness".

This is the most difficult book I have read. I gained much from reading it, but there's no doubt that I missed much too, both on its face and in its depth. That's not too surprising or disturbing, for as John of the Cross says of the soul that "can free itself from the house of its sensuality:" "None can understand it, unless as it seems to me, it be the soul who has experienced it." St. John of the Cross (1542-1591) was a Spanish mystic, canonized in 1675 and named a doctor of the Catholic Church in 1926. A Carmelite priest, he embraced poverty and, working with Teresa of Avila, attempted to reform the order. His fellow Carmelites imprisoned, starved, and tortured him. While imprisoned he wrote a brief poem, *Dark Night of the Soul*. He then wrote two books, *Ascent of Mount Carmel* and *Dark Night of the Soul*, explaining and interpreting the poem. Or he wrote one book doing that: the

translator of this edition views Dark Night as a continuation of the Ascent rather than a separate treatise. Or perhaps he wrote no book: it isn't clear to me that he intended the manuscript for publication; it may have been his personal reflections to aid himself. It was published posthumously, nearly twenty years after his death. In the Ascent, John wrote of the "active" night; the Dark Night addresses the "passive" night of purification of the sense and spirit to prepare the soul for union with God. By himself even with ordinary grace, man cannot be transformed totally in God. God must act on passive man. The poem is obscure metaphor. In Dark Night, John often uses more metaphor to explain the metaphors, sometimes obscurely. He is often repetitive. Words seem to change meanings. And the book is incomplete; St. John apparently abandoned it before explicating the entire poem. (This edition contains in translation the complete text of what St. John wrote: it is the Dark Night itself that was unfinished.) I found many passages and metaphors brilliant, but was lost in others. St. John sometimes seems to struggle to explain or describe the inexplicable and indescribable, which may be the reason for the many repetitions and metaphors. The early passages on "imperfections" relating to the seven deadly sins are a brilliant demonstration that the person free of sin still needs purgation and growth. Also very helpful are the passages in which St. John delineates tests to show whether difficulties flow from the Night and thus God or instead are from the self or the devil or the world. The Dark Night is a difficult book. The reader will wrestle with it. Most will gain much from the book but also miss much that it tries to offer.

In this day and age most people do not want to read about their Dark Nights of the Soul. We have a medical industry that does not want you to read this book. We have politicians who want to keep you in a constant state of fear who do not want you to read this book. And we have an entertainment and media industry which does not want you to read this book. For to read it is to know that the fear that they generate, the messages they try to stick us with, and the palliatives that they offer to assuage it don't work. Desperately wanting us to believe that life falls into their three act framework they do what they can to have us accept this soulless narrative as our map to happiness, health and good fortune. But a few aberrations slip through. Dark Nights of the Soul is one. This is a significant work. A primer for life and dealing with its natural ebb and flow. If you don't acknowledge the foundation of the book then you can't understand that the dark nights that we think are there to tear us down are really there to transform us. This book will change how to think and how you embrace life. It will challenge your ideas about disease, anger, aging, and even happiness. It makes connections between your body, mind and soul that you previously might have believed only lightly touch each other. It will or should help you to understand that a textured life is not about constantly

walking around with an insipid smile on your face and saying 'feeling great' when someone asks. If there is a fault with the book it is that it is too honest and refuses to sugar coat its message. And in that alone it will be missed by a significant majority that absolutely needs to read this. Dark Nights should be on everyone's list. Read it.

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