

02-03-25 Daily Meditation

Deepening Our Spiritual Warriorhood with John of the Cross & Others

Good morning.

We're continuing to explore the various practices that deepen the spiritual warrior in us, and that nurture the spiritual warrior in us. And in today's meditation, I extend many examples of this: musicians and artists, and how the Four Paths help us to draw out from these souls and their work, the deepest elements of their spiritual teaching and their own spiritual journeys. The Via Positiva, the Via Negativa, Creativa and Transformativa, because they name the circle of life, what the spiritual journey is about. These are intrinsic to the Spiritual Warrior, the Prophet, sustaining himself or herself, and to the community itself, working in solidarity.

Now I talk in particular, in the second part of my essay about how Saint John of the Cross was a great poet. Many call him the greatest Spanish poet, and there's a lot of great poetry in the Spanish language. Certainly he was one of the greatest, if not the greatest. But I think his own commentaries convey struggle. For example, his commentary on his greatest poem on "The Dark Night of the Soul," he himself quit writing it after 100 pages. He only got into the third stanza out of eight. So he only commented on three-eighths of his poem. And I think it is because of the "three paths" that he had to stick to in his day. And remember, he was being haunted and hunted by the Inquisition his whole life, as was his sister, Saint Teresa of Avila. They had to be very discreet, prudent, careful and clever.

Now here's a story behind John of the Cross's poetry that has not been promulgated nearly enough. It shows his cleverness, and his prophetic consciousness for sure, that how he wrapped it into his creativity and thus the Via Creativa, as poetry.

When John was in the seminary in his 20s, one of his favorite teachers taught a course on, or at least lectured, on the Song of Songs, which is, of course, a book in the Bible. Just as sacred as any other book in the Bible. And it is a celebration of love, human love, and also divine love. In fact, John of the Cross's favorite name for God is "Beloved." His poetry is all about seeking the Beloved.

But the Church at the time, and at that time the Inquisition was very fierce and strong, 16th century, the Church at the time forbade the teaching of the Song of Songs, so much so that his professor, who dared to lecture on it, was put in prison for five years. Nobody

would think that a young man like John of the Cross, who had studied with this fellow, would be super cautious about the Song of Songs.

But instead, what John did with tremendous imagination, he wrote his own Song of Songs. It's in the title itself, "The Canticle," because Song of Songs is often called "the canticle, the Song of Songs." He wrote his own! because he was forbidden to lecture on the book in the Bible. He got away with it because, hey, they didn't imagine!

That's what fascism, the yearning to control others, is very weak at. One weakness is a lack of a sense of humor, and another is a lack of imagination. So John showed a tremendous political imagination and courage in creating his own Song of Songs, "The Canticle."

And this was his first major poem, and he wrote it, 95% of it, in prison, a prison being run by his own Carmelite brothers who would beat him daily, starve him, not allow him baths, so he had lice and all the rest, for nine months. Until he chose, he took that big leap, to escape. And if he had failed in his escape, he would have been beaten to death.

And in his "Dark Night" poem, some of which he wrote while still in prison, but most of it was a short poem he wrote after succeeding in his liberation and his escape. In that poem, he celebrates, he honors the darkness, because it was a moonless night, that allowed him to escape in the dark. So darkness became his friend.

And again, he doesn't comment on all this, even though the poem itself is clearly a description of his escape. Instead, he puts lots and lots of time into the poem about dealing with purgation. The poem itself doesn't talk about that. The poem is another love poem like "The Canticle" was, and it ends happily, with his having found his Beloved in the darkness, and thanks to the darkness: "O lucky spirit," he says, "O lucky chance," that the night was dark, and that he succeeded in escaping without being caught.

So there are many layers to this poetry, and some of them you need the Four Paths to really draw out the joy that's there, the creativity that's there, and the courage that's there. And of course, back to his understanding of God as "my Beloved" in his Canticle, not unlike the original Song of Songs. It is about, it begins with how he's cut off from his Beloved. And of course, he was cut off from society, from his brothers, and his friend, Sister Teresa, Saint Teresa, who also being beat up and abused in prison. In fact, they told him that Teresa herself had abandoned the reform movement. It was a lie, but it was intended to get him to forsake his commitment to reform, which he refused to do, which is why they kept beating him. They said, if you'd leave that group and join us, we'd let you go. He refused.

So, in the middle of this Canticum, poem, song, he writes, as I share in the meditation, “My beloved is the mountains and lonely, wooded valleys.” Now this is creation spirituality, isn’t it? The Divine is found, the sacred is found in nature. “Strange islands and resounding rivers, the whistling of love stirring breezes.”

I think, the “strange Islands” phrase comes from stories he picked up from Spanish missionaries who had gone to the New World (so called), and come back again. That there are these strange places with new stories about new people and so forth, on these far away islands. “The tranquil night at the time of the rising Dawn, silent music, sounding solitude.” The paradox built into those poetic phrases. You see, the mystic always speaks in paradox, because words are not big enough, accurate enough, to speak one’s spiritual experiences. “Silent music, sounding solitude, the supper that refreshes and deepens love.” And of course, that refers to the archetype of dining together, eating together. And also, of course, to the Passover, and to the Last Supper that Jesus celebrated, and that Christians renew themselves by participating in.

There are so many layers in these poems, especially when you put it in the context for everything that was going on: how he was being beaten and losing weight and close to death and all the rest, when he made that leap, to take a real risk. And in his poem, in the “Dark Night,” this beautiful stanza that summarizes his courage: “There in the lucky dark, none to observe me, darkness far and wide, no sign for me to mark, nor the light, no guide except for my heart, the fire, fire inside.”

To me, that’s the bottom line of his poem, and it’s interesting, but it’s after that last line that he puts down his pen doesn’t comment anymore on that poem. I think he was so moved by recalling his own experience, and by doing it through this poetry, that he didn’t want to talk anymore about purgation. What comes next is all about finding his Beloved. It’s certainly not a poem about self-pity. It is a poem about finding one’s Beloved, and God as beloved, and the risk it takes. The only fire, the only light, is a fire inside.

Thank you. We’ll see you next week.