

RON ROLHEISER, OMI
DARK NIGHTS AND DOUBTS:
A Failure of Faith - or Imagination?

Leader's Guide

- Part One -

Introduction:

- John of the Cross - Ascent Book 1 Chapter 13 - the paradox
- Karl Rahner - "Have you ever kept silent?"

Four Things:

- The problem - The absence of God within our felt experience
- Dark Nights - A failure of faith or imagination?
- What is faith?
- Why do we need faith?

I. The Problem: Dark Nights and Doubt: A Failure of Faith - or Imagination?

- The misunderstandings around Mother Teresa.

II. Dark Nights - A failure in faith or in the imagination

- Two very different "feelings" about God's existence

III. What is Faith?

1) Biblically

- The opposite of faith is not doubt, but anxiety
- Paul and 2 Corinthians - Our outer nature breaks down, even as our inner nature firms up.
- Merton - turbulence on the surface, but steadiness underneath, the center holds.

2) How to define that

- John 6 - Peter before Jesus
- C.S. Lewis - God's compulsion - *"The harshness of God is kinder than the softness of man and God's compulsion is our liberation."*
- Daniel Berrigan - where our faith is at?

IV. Why Faith?

- 1) Why not a direct experience of God? Why "mediate" why not "immediate?"
- 2) Answer: double reason - "metaphysical" and "moral" - "Obscure and blind"

□ Metaphysical - God's "obscurity"

- o Isaiah 55 - God's ways are not our ways! God is ineffable, beyond language, thought, concepts, imagination, grasp.
- o The impossibility of conceptualizing the infinite - What is the highest conceivable number?
- o The difference between having a weak faith and having a weak imagination.
- o Some fertile images - Carlo Carretto (*In Search of the Beyond*)
 - ❖ Child in its mother's womb
 - ❖ Two orders - stork analogy
 - ❖ John of the Cross - excessive light
 - ❖ God cannot be possessed - but only participated in, like breathing air

□ Moral - "Our Blindness"

- o "Blessed are the pure of heart, they shall see God."
- o Sin as blocking vision - not just of God but of others and the world.
 - ❖ E.g., John of the Cross - Dark Night of the Senses - "Inordinate affectivity" as blocking our eyesight.
 - ❖ John of the Cross - Our own metaphysics as blocking our vision.
- o Rationalization as "hardening of the heart" and blocking visions.
- o Original sin as "opening our eyes" but "darkening the mind"

End of Part One

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- Part Two -

Introduction

- ❖ Jill Essbaum - Easter
- ❖ Rainer Marie Rilke - Sonnets to Orpheus IV
- ❖ Anne Michaels - The Winter Vault

Three Things to Look At:

- What is a Dark Night of the Soul?
- Why does God give us Dark Nights of the Soul?
- Some practical principles by which to guide our lives in terms of faith and doubt.

I. What is a Dark Night of the Soul?

- 1) Biblically
 - Jesus on the Cross - "Why have you forsaken me?"
 - The "test"
 - Lamentations - Loss of "land," "king," and "temple."
- 2) Definition
 - Our felt sense of God disappears, and we feel agnostic, atheistic even.
 - We can no longer imagine the existence of god.
 - We feel no "affective" relationship to God.
 - We lose our concept of and sense of possession of God, as we once had it Mary Magdala on Easter Sunday - "Don't cling to me!" God doesn't disappear but we can no longer sense, feel, or imagine God and God's existence as we once did. God, as we knew him, disappears.
- 3) Example - Mother Teresa's crisis happened just after her deepest possessive experience of God.
- 4) Analogy - TV signal can no longer be picked up, the switch from analog to digital

- 5) Characteristics of this
- Surprising, confusing, disconcerting, deeply painful.
 - Hits when and where you least expect
 - Therese of Liseaux
 - Sexual abuse crisis
 - Mother Teresa

II. Why does God give us Dark Nights of the Soul?

- 1) *Lamentations - "loss of land, king, and temple."*
- 2) Always a purification, a needed deepening
- 3) It smashes the false idols, golden calves in our lives
- 4) Why?
 - We are always creating God in our own image and likeness and trying to possess God.
 - God never comes to us on those terms, cannot come to us on those terms, because God is beyond our faculties, imaginations, images.
 - Example: Moltmann - The Crucified God
- 5) It is always purification.

Nicholas Lash, in a deeply insightful essay on God and belief, suggests the God that atheists reject is very often precisely an idol of our imaginations: *We need do no more than notice that most of our contemporaries still find it "obvious" that atheism is not only possible, but widespread and that, both intellectually and ethically, it has much to commend it. This might be plausible if being an atheist were a matter of not believing that there exists "a person without a body" who is "eternal, free, able to do anything, knows everything" and is "the proper object of human worship and obedience, the creator and sustainer of the universe." If, however, by "God" we mean the mystery, announced in Christ, breathing all things out of nothing into peace, then all things have to do with God in every move and fragment of their being, whether they notice this and suppose it to be so or not. Atheism, if it means deciding not to have anything to do with God, is thus self-contradictory and, if successful, self-destructive.*

End of Part Two

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- Part Three -

Introduction

- ❖ Henri Nouwen on "taking our problems to the heart"
- ❖ John Shea - Halos
- ❖ A Prayer from Karl Rahner

Two Things to Look At:

- Some practical principles by which to guide ourselves in terms of faith and doubt.
- Some guidelines for the long-haul.

1.) Expect Dark Nights of faith in life

- Like Jesus
- Example of Nouwen's mother
- Mother Teresa - you should expect she would receive this

2) Understand dark nights as a normal part of our faith and life's journey

- Consolation - desolation
- Galilee - Jerusalem
- Norm of Day - Norm of Night
- Fervor - agony

3) Dark Nights of the soul are failure within our imagination, not in our faith.

4) Dark Nights of faith always call us to something deeper, to shed some false prop - *"You will find me again when you search for me with your whole heart, whole mind, whole soul."*

5) Know that all genuine revelation, faith, experience of God, stretches us and will come to us paradoxically, as a surprise, in the stranger, in what is foreign.

6) Be mystically-driven- In matters of faith, follow the deepest moral center inside of yourself; get in touch with God's compulsion: "What do I have to do?" "What will bring me life long range?"

- 7) **Be humble in the ways of God** - humble in judgement, humble in language, humble in attitude. Faith is more about surrender and trust than about knowing, clarity, and certainty.
- 8) **Our dark nights ultimately serve the world** - atheism is always a parasite off of bad theism. E.g., the sexual abuse crisis.

II. Commandments for the long haul - Understanding and responding to Doubt and Darkness.

- 1. An understanding of faith beyond feelings and imagination - quote Lash.
- 2. An understanding of love beyond feelings and imagination.
- 3. Fidelity in prayer.
- 4. Fidelity to "contemplative" prayer and love, where the deep things happen under the surface.
- 5. Fidelity in action.
- 6. Living in hope.
- 7. Living in love.
- 8. Fidelity in fidelity

End of Part Three
