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## THE SPIRAL PATH AND THE THREE WAYS OF THE SPIRITUAL LIFE

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If you were to do an Internet search on the terms *spiritual* and *Spiral Path* you would find that a large number of religious traditions find the metaphor of the Spiral Path helpful; Christianity is no exception.

In spiritual theology, the Spiral Path is the chief sequential model of the spiritual journey. Anytime you find the same symbol in so many different places, it is easy to conclude that the symbol is universal. A universal symbol is sometimes referred to as an *archetype*. The great Swiss psychiatrist, Dr. Carl Jung, alerted Western civilization to the fact that an archetype that is present in the outer world must also have an inner, psychological presence, as well. In fact, the inner psychological archetype precedes the outer one. We would not see recurring symbols among human endeavors if those symbols were not present in the psyche beforehand to generate the literature, architecture, sculpture, etc. Biblical scripture also uses archetypal imagery and symbols. When Paul discusses the First Adam, comparing him to the Second Adam, we can appreciate how *Adam* is acting as a universal symbol for all mankind. Paul is saying the first archetypal symbol system is surpassed by the second Adam symbol system. These symbol sets act as programming for our soul—creating different ways of being and acting inside and outside. These are psycho-spiritual archetypes.

Thus it is written, “The first man, Adam, became a living being;” the last Adam became a life-giving spirit. But it is not the spiritual which is first but the physical, and then the spiritual. The first man was from the earth, a man of dust; the second man is from heaven. As was the man of dust, so are those who are of the dust; and as is the man of heaven, so are those who are of heaven. (1 Corinthians 15:45-48, RSV)

Archetypes (universal symbols) have a special function in the soul that we will discuss in some detail later. For now, just know that the Spiral Path is a pattern recognized by spiritual seekers the world over. What follows is how the Spiral Path metaphor is appreciated in Christianity.

### **The Spiral Path Metaphor in Christianity**

The ascending spiral is a shape often used to depict our pathway of growth toward God. It answers the question, “What the hell is God up to?”

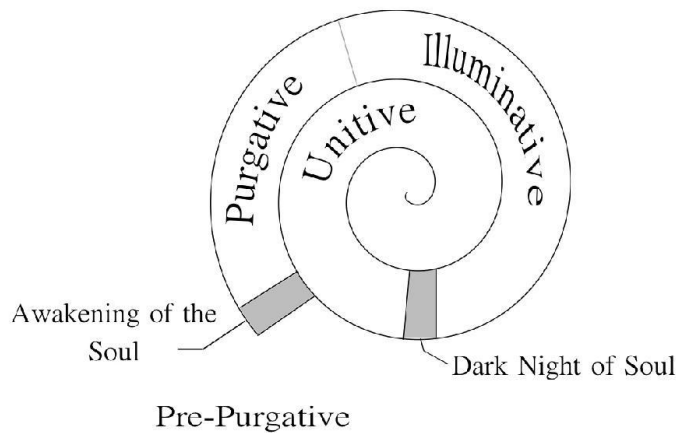
According to ancient tradition, the spiral is the central image of a mystical journey. The mystical journey can be thought of as those sequences of growth stages that lead you closer to the full experience of God and the likeness of Christ. These patterns are not hypothetical constructs;

they are lived realities. People long to experience God, not just learn about God—especially in the present post-modern generation. This is the path that will take them there.

Progress along the path of the spiral occurs from a combination of a spiritual calling and empowerment, our instinctual urges toward God and wholeness, and individual will. A Spiral Path involves three patterns of motion: cyclic, hierarchical, and linear. The cyclic element suggests there is a repetition and return to a parallel experience but at a progressively higher level. In Christianity, each circuit of the spiral might be thought of as a death, burial, and resurrection reenactment. The linear aspect of the spiral represents the narrative history of an individual's journey through time. It also suggests there is a purposeful growth occurring in the journey.

The spiral is also the universal symbol of a life force, both cosmic and microcosmic. Spiral forms are seen in nature in the great galaxies of outer space, in whirlwinds and whirlpools,

## The Spiral Path



in coiled serpents and conical seashells. This pattern is even seen in our fingerprints. Science also describes a very important spiral underlying all of life, the double helix structure of our DNA. In the *Wizard of Oz* movie, you see the spiral in the tornado and the yellow brick road Dorothy follows to the Emerald City and eventually home. We often see such tornadoes and other spirals in dreams. When the dream is analyzed, the tornado frequently foreshadows a move to some higher level of understanding or being. The introductory story of this book illustrates the circular movement of the peddler away from his house only

to return and find the treasure at his very own home. His later state was better than his former. This, too, is a spiral--a narrative spiral. See also the image on the front cover.

### The Three Ways

*Within each loop* of the spiral, spiritual theology describes a pattern called the Three Ways. The Three Ways are the *Purgative Way*, the *Illuminative Way*, and the *Unitive Way*. Each of these Ways is *also* a long phase during the course of a lifetime.

For example, during the first phase of the mystic path, the pilgrim is primarily in a purgative mode. The middle phase of the path is dominated by illuminative experiences. Finally, the experience of union with God dominates the last phase of a pilgrim's journey. Nevertheless, we experience lesser purgations, illuminations, and unions recurrently all along the journey, as well. The shorter Three Ways are a single loop on the spiral. The life-long Three Ways occur over the entire spiral of a lifetime.

Underscoring the Three Ways' universality, Evelyn Underhill explains,

The existence and succession of these states—sometimes broken and confused, sometimes crisply defined—can be traced, to a greater or less degree, in almost every case of which we possess anything like a

detailed record. The soul, as it treads the ascending spiral of its road towards reality, experiences alternately the sunshine and the shade. (Underhill 1911, 140)

### **The Pre-Purgative State**

The beginning stage of life in our fallen world is the pre-purgative state. We enter it in the womb. During this time, we receive the emotional, intellectual, and spiritual maturity that one day may lead us to our call to the *mystic way*. If we accept the call, we must follow it into the Purgative Way. Conversion and church confirmation already may have been completed. Advanced theological degrees already may have been earned. Yet still, a soul might not be on this path to the more complete spiritual consciousness. The mystic way is something considerably different than all of these. The mystic way and the Three Ways begin with an “awakening of the soul.”

On December 6, 1273, Thomas Aquinas was celebrating mass when he heard Christ speak to him. Jesus asked him what he desired, and Thomas was heard to reply, “Only you, Lord. Only you.” After this exchange, something happened about which Thomas never spoke or wrote. Because of what he saw, however, he abandoned his routine and refused to dictate his *Summa* any further. When his scribe begged him to get back to work, Thomas replied: “Reginald, I cannot, because all that I have written seems like straw to me.” (Graves n.d.)

I do not mean to imply that before this famous experience of Thomas that he was pre-purgative. Likely, he was not, for this was near the end of his life. However, the story highlights the profound difference between theological understanding and the direct experience of God. In spite of Thomas’ high intelligence and theological study, coming face to face with the living God caused everything else to pale in comparison. The awakening of the soul is just such an experience.

### **The Awakening of the Soul**

There are many parallels between Christian spirituality and the psychology of Carl Jung. Upon the awakening of the soul, we see the first of these parallels. Evelyn Underhill, recognized expert and grand dame of mystical theology, speaks on this important phase.

First in the sequence of the mystic states, we must consider that decisive event, *the awakening of the transcendental consciousness*.

This awakening, from the psychological point of view, appears to be an intense form of the phenomenon of “conversion” and closely akin to those deep and permanent conversions of the adult type... It is a disturbance of the equilibrium of the self, which results in the shifting of the field of consciousness from lower to higher levels, with a consequent removal of the centre of interest from the subject to an object now brought into view. It must not, however, be confused or identified with religious conversion as ordinarily understood: the sudden and emotional acceptance of theological beliefs which the self had previously either rejected or treated as conventions dwelling upon the margin of consciousness and having no meaning for her actual life. The mechanical process may be much the same; but the material involved, the results attained, belong to a higher order of reality.

“Conversion,” says Starbuck, in words which are really far more descriptive of mystical awakening than of the revivalist phenomena encouraged by American Protestantism, “is primarily an un-selfing. The

first birth of the individual is into his own little world. He is controlled by the deep-seated instincts of self-preservation and self-enlargement—instincts which are, doubtless, a direct inheritance from his brute ancestry. The universe is organized around his own personality as a centre.” Conversion, then, is “the larger world-consciousness now pressing in on the individual consciousness. Often it breaks in suddenly and becomes a great new revelation... His life becomes swallowed up in a larger whole.”

All conversion entails the abrupt or gradual emergence of intuitions from below the threshold, the consequent remaking of the field of consciousness, an alteration in the self’s attitude to the world. “It is,” says Pratt, “a change of taste—the most momentous one that ever occurs in human experience.” But in the mystic this process is raised to the n<sup>th</sup> degree of intensity, for in him it means the first emergence of that passion for the Absolute which is to constitute his distinctive character: an emergence crucial in its effect on every department of his life. Those to whom it happens, often enough, are already “religious”: sometimes deeply and earnestly so. St. Catherine of Genoa, George Fox [and others]—all these had been bred up in piety, and accepted in its entirety the Christian tradition. They were none-the-less conscious of an utter change in their world when this opening of the soul’s eye took place. (Underhill 1911, 164-165)

Underhill was an English Anglican of the first half of the twentieth century. She likely had not heard the terminology used in today’s Protestant America for such an experience—being “filled with the Holy Spirit.” Often the devoted seeker after God will find that deeper into their journey they have a second touch. For a person from the charismatic tradition, it may be a first experience of glossolalia (speaking in tongues). Yet, it need not take that form. For Debbie, it was a dream and a synchronistic<sup>5</sup> discovery of spiritual direction. In my case, it was a profound intuitive voice (locution)<sup>6</sup> challenging me to give over my entire life to Christ’s surpassing lordship. When I said, “I will,” an energy rushed over my consciousness like a flood. I was swept up instantly into a fullness of all of the fruits of the Holy Spirit from Galatians 4.

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such there is no law.

This was made even more meaningful to me because it was in such stark contrast to the previous three days, during which it seemed that God had departed. I experienced a strange and

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<sup>5</sup> *Synchronicity* is a word coined by Carl Jung denoting a psychologically meaningful coincidence that has no apparent three-dimensional cause. Often it is accompanied by the sense that the coincidence is uncanny.

<sup>6</sup> In an interior locution, a person receives a set of (usually auditory) ideas, thoughts, or imaginations from a spiritual source. Interior locutions are most often reported during prayers. An interior locution is a form of private revelation. The voice of one’s intuition can be intensified by God to contain numinous impact. The intuitive inner voice with such an intensification would be considered a locution.

total dryness of spirit as if the light within my inmost being had gone out. There was no discernable psychological or spiritual cause. The contrast between emptiness and the fullness of glory was completely arranged by Sovereignty—it was a synchronicity—and the synchronicity highlighted the hand of God. Another synchronicity was that the dryness lasted three days—a reminder of Jesus in the tomb. In symbology, the number “3” indicates that a transformative “process” is occurring, another synchronicity.

Through this experience, *my* field of consciousness was definitely *remade*, as Underhill describes above. I underwent an archetypal shift, a second-order change. My sense of identity transformed. Forever after, my identity has been as the man who gave himself totally to Christ’s lordship. It is true that I happen to be a psychiatrist, a spiritual director, and a husband and father, but at my inmost core and before all of these lesser identities, I am the man who was recreated by God to follow Christ completely. It was the awakening of my soul that did this for me.

Underhill leaves room for the possibility that a soul’s awakening might be more gradual in some people, but she insists that the second-touch way is more common.

### A Secular Call to Awakening

Carl Jung and his followers have not given a name to the experience of a secular person’s call to open their consciousness to the greater reality inside themselves. However, their description closely parallels Underhill’s.

The actual process of individuation—the conscious coming-to-terms with one’s own inner center or [Archetypal] Self—generally begins with a wounding of the personality and the suffering that accompanies it. This initial shock amounts to a sort of “call” although it is not often recognized as such. On the contrary, the ego feels hampered in its will or its desire and usually projects the obstruction onto something external. That is, the ego accuses God, or the economic situation, or the boss, or the marriage partner of being responsible for whatever is obstructing it.

Or perhaps everything seems outwardly all right, but beneath the surface a person is suffering from a deadly boredom that makes everything seem meaningless and empty. (Jung 1964, 166-7)

### Following Awakening

At first look, the transcendent experience of the spiritual person appears nothing like the wounding described above by von Franz. Fullness of glory and existential emptiness are not at all the same thing. Yet what follows this awakening in the spiritual person as well as in the secular soul goes hand-in-glove with the calling. For after the blush of new love and fullness wear off following the peak experience of mystical awakening, the pilgrim is cast, like Jesus, into a wilderness-of-wounding phase called the Purgative Way.

Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form, as a dove, and a voice came from heaven, “Thou art my beloved Son; with thee I am well pleased.

And Jesus, *full of the Holy Spirit*, returned from the Jordan, and was led by the Spirit for forty days in the wilderness, tempted by the

devil. And he ate nothing in those days; and when they were ended, he was hungry. (Luke 3:21-22; 4:1-2)

In a parallel manner, the secular person enters their purgative way, as well. The troubling of their soul cannot be denied, and they enter a difficult period in which struggles outside of their control disturb their inner tranquility, making them hard to ignore. In this entry into a time of struggle, the parallelism between the secular soul and the saint is most vividly appreciated.

### **The Purgative Way**

In Luke's description above, we see the mystical awakening as it appears in Jesus—a major transcendence followed close on the heels by an extended ordeal in the wilderness. Hunger for God, wounding, unmet longings, intensely felt needs, suffering—all of these are tools of the desert path we call the Purgative Way. Just like Jesus, after we encounter the Spirit in a transcendent moment, that same Spirit will lead us into a time of testing and growth that is often painful and long. More complete details of the Purgative Way will be saved for later, but let me confirm that my personal bliss of transcendent awakening lasted a mere two weeks before I was plunged into my wilderness of purgation.

My awakening of soul was in the birth month of my eighteenth year, just about a week following the first moon landing. The next twelve years constituted my professional training—undergraduate, medical school, and psychiatric residency. It was a time of struggle. Many wonderful spiritual experiences occurred during that time, but also a great deal of hard work and dryness. The dryness was especially intense during the first two years after my awakening. Having felt such glory followed by the contrasting dryness was a strong motivator to continue seeking and to find out what was happening to prevent my access to the glory I had briefly known. Gradually, I found certain teachings and practices that brought water and nourishment to my heart.

The first two years of the Purgative Way for me rated about three in intensity of joy on a ten-point scale. Ten would represent strong well-being and joy, while a zero would signify utter spiritual dryness. The remainder of my years of training rocked along between four and six on the ten-point scale. There were a few darker moments, as well. Through all the darkness and aridity, however, the hope of glory was ahead. I had experienced glory in the awakening of my soul. In addition, we are told that there is a “mystery hidden for ages and generations” that is “now made manifest to the saints,” “which is *Christ in you, the hope of glory.*”<sup>7</sup> The promise of glory lay ahead, for I had no doubt that the glorious Christ was definitely *in me*.

Here is Underhill's description of the Purgative Way.

The Self, aware for the first time of Divine Beauty (i.e. because of the Awakening of the Soul), realizes by contrast its own finiteness and imperfection, the manifold illusions in which it is immersed, the immense distance which separates it from the One. Its attempts to eliminate by discipline and mortification<sup>8</sup> all that stands in the way of its progress towards union with God constitute *Purgation*: a state of pain and effort. (Underhill 1911, 141)

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<sup>7</sup> Colossians 1:26, 27, RSV

<sup>8</sup> The term *mortification* sounds odd to 21st century ears. It means, *to put to death*. Specifically, it means putting to death the excessive worldly attachments that would keep us from union with God.

The pain and effort for the existentially and personally frustrated secular person is also quite real. They may not have the stories of the Bible as their guide, but other stories often tell their tale.

Many myths and fairy tales symbolically describe this initial stage in the process of individuation by telling of a king who has fallen ill or grown old. Other familiar story patterns are that a royal couple is barren; or that a monster steals all the women, children, horses, and wealth of the kingdom; or that a demon keeps the king's army or his ship from proceeding on its course; or that darkness hangs over the lands, wells dry up, and flood, drought, and frost afflict the country. Thus it seems as if the initial encounter with the Self casts a dark shadow ahead of time, or as if the "inner friend" comes at first like a trapper to catch the helplessly struggling ego in his snare.

In myths one finds that the magic or talisman that can cure the misfortune of the king or his country always proves to be something very special. In one tale "a white blackbird" or "a fish that carries a golden ring in its gills" is needed to restore the king's health. In another, the king wants "the water of life" or "three golden hairs from the head of the devil" or "a woman's golden plait" (and afterward, naturally, the owner of the plait). Whatever it is, the thing that can drive away the evil is always unique and hard to find.

It is exactly the same in the initial crisis in the life of an individual. One is seeking something that is impossible to find or about which nothing is known. In such moments all well meant, sensible advice is completely useless—advice that urges one to try to be responsible, to take a holiday, not to work so hard (or to work harder), to have more (or less) human contact, or to take up a hobby. None of that helps, or at best only rarely. There is only one thing that seems to work; that is to turn directly toward the approaching darkness without prejudice and totally naively, and to try to find out what its secret aim is and what it wants from you.

The hidden purpose of the oncoming darkness is generally something so unusual, so unique and unexpected that as a rule one can find out what it is only by means of dreams and fantasies welling up from the unconscious.

If one focuses attention on the unconscious without rash assumptions or emotional rejection, it often breaks through in a flow of helpful symbolic images. But not always; sometimes it first offers a series of painful realizations of what is wrong with oneself and one's conscious attitudes. Then one must begin the process by swallowing all sorts of bitter truths. (Jung 1964, 167)

The bitter truths often have to do with our egocentrism.

## The Wilderness Path and Four Styles of Egocentrism

You may legitimately wonder why there is a difference in those who embrace the spiritual path and those who are merely secular. I think the answer lies in what one defines and senses as the center of the world, cosmos, and personality.

Those upon a genuine spiritual path, as opposed to just a cultural one, have already yielded up their first bit of egocentrism. They acknowledge that their perspective is not the most important one in the cosmos, and they have transcended the mental reservations and distrust of authority inherent in this acknowledgment. They have put themselves under higher authority and power. Having yielded this degree of narcissism, they look to a source greater than their ego-self to provide guidance and hope. We all suffer an initial egocentrism through the natural process of growing up. Some of us have an easier time of yielding it to a higher power than do others.

Fritz Kunkel (Kunkel 1984), a Jungian analyst, details the egocentric patterns which we all must transcend in order to progress upon the spiritual journey in a committed manner. He describes four styles of ego-centrism into which our *untranscended* instincts lead us.

***The Star*** absolutely has to be the center of attention. We have all seen folks at parties, classes, and meetings who maintain their egocentricity by demanding the limelight, adulation, and glory. Stars have to shine. One comedian called party folks like these, “the Me Monster.”

***The Clinging Vine*** seems to strike a humble pose. These folks become overly dependent and cling to others. It is an egocentric attempt to avoid a responsible life. At the extreme, their life adaptation is parasitical.

***The Turtle*** has tremendous difficulty relating to people. Turtles live inside shells so no one can reach them. Their selfishness takes the form of hiding from life and relationships, living encased in psychological armor.

***The Nero*** wants to dominate. Nero egocentricity takes the form of lust for direct power and control. We know that underneath the mask of superiority lie considerable feelings of inadequacy and inferiority.

## Tools for Surrendering Egocentrism

The ways that the soul and God use for calling egos to yield up their egocentrism are sometimes not to our liking. But Jesus went through these also, and this can encourage Christians during the more difficult parts of the path. Those who have not submitted to the spiritual path lack such comfort.

Kunkle shows us four primary ways in which the ego is called into yielding its sense of centrality.

***Meaningful suffering.*** Many people, especially in mid-life, go through a “night-sea” journey--that is, a journey through the wilderness. Depression, anxiety, and physical symptoms set in. Suffering by itself is no cure; it only cures when you have the right attitude towards it. Psychological symptoms like depression are messages you need to understand, and you can do this only by being courageous and looking inward. At that point, the journey into the wilderness becomes a journey deeper into the soul. As you realize you have brought some of your suffering upon yourself, you make changes and live a much more soulful life.

***Breakthrough of the transcendent.*** This is an experience that breaks down your egocentricity. I, as well as great saints like Paul the Apostle, have had our status quos challenged in this way. Realization that something bigger is going on in the universe than your ego is an easier step to take for those already on a spiritual path. Sometimes when your conscious point of view is severely shaken (divorce, illness, and other catastrophes), contact with the spiritual side of



the unconscious is possible. When people travel through the wilderness and truly face themselves, a nighttime dream, a vision, or an intuitive insight can begin to change their egocentricity.

***Caring for someone other than yourself.*** A third way to change egocentricity is through service. This may come in the form of unexpectedly falling in love and caring for the beloved more than yourself. It may come when you must compassionately deal with a sick child or parent. You may do it by giving back to your communities, to your professions, and to nature without selfish motives.

***Hard work.*** You can purge your egocentricity through plain hard work. Having to earn a living has humbled many a person's sense of entitlement.

Circumstances and feelings often surprise the one called to give up egocentrism in one of these ways. The cosmos and God seem to uncannily conspire to provide just the challenge we need at just the right teachable moment. Several teachings of Jesus relate to this purgative process and the death of egocentrism.

Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me, cannot be my disciple. For which of you, desiring to build a tower, does not first sit down and count the cost, whether he has enough to complete it? Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation, and is not able to finish, all who see it begin to mock him, saying, 'This man began to build, and was not able to finish.'

Or what king, going to encounter another king in war, will not sit down first and take counsel whether he is able with ten thousand to meet him who comes against him with twenty thousand? And if not, while the other is yet a great way off, he sends an embassy and asks terms of peace.

So therefore, whoever of you does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple. (Luke 14:28-33)

Then Jesus told his disciples, "If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. (Matthew 17: 24-25)

Jesus said to him, "No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God." (Luke 9:62)

The suffering of a wilderness experience can challenge a person to move out of their comfortable sense of self-centeredness. Giving up egocentrism often feels like a death. The ego *likes* to live in the illusion that it is the center.

During this wilderness, St. Bonaventure tells us it will help us to meditate upon creation. I did that a great deal as a biology major and medical student, even though at the time I was unaware that it was an important spiritual task. God leads us whether we know the path or not.

We will come back to the wilderness later. However, for now, let us continue our overview of the journey as a whole.

## **The Illuminative Way**

When purgation is more advanced and our reflections are ready to shift away from creation and toward the nature of the soul, we move into the next stage of the mystic path, the Illuminative Way. Quoting once again from Evelyn Underhill,

When by Purgation, the Self has become detached from the “things of sense,” (i.e., things of the sensual world) and acquired those virtues which are the “ornaments of the spiritual marriage,” its joyful consciousness of the Transcendent Order returns in an enhanced form. Like the prisoners in Plato’s “Cave of Illusion,” it has awakened to knowledge of Reality, has struggled up the harsh and difficult path to the mouth of the cave. Now it looks upon the sun. This is *Illumination*: a state which includes in itself many of the stages of contemplation...visions and adventures of the soul described by St. Teresa and other mystical writers. The Way proper represents organic growth. Illumination is the “contemplative state” *par excellence*. It forms, with the two preceding states, the “first mystic life.” Many mystics never go beyond it. (Underhill 1911, 141)

Recall the dreams Debbie and I related in the second chapter. I described them as initiation dreams. The initiation introduced by both of our dreams was that of the Illuminative Way. Though our institutions had no transition ceremony, God Himself provided one for us through the symbolic experience of the dream.

During my first year of private practice in 1981, I felt something changing in my soul. I was enjoying the professional freedom to explore my patients’ lives and souls. I felt free to think outside the limits of my residency’s more Freudian psychoanalytic categories. I discovered more satisfying models of mind than I had been taught. The learning was stimulating and heady.

In addition to these outer changes, my inner life was taking off, as well. Suddenly, I experienced an overabundance of dreams—so many that I could not possibly analyze them all in my journal. Free from my residency program’s schedule, I reinstated quiet times with God with more regularity.

I recall one vivid moment at about that time. I saw my living room bookshelves in a dream, and I went up to them to examine them closely. While I was journaling about the dream, an image suddenly sprang to my mind. I saw the horizontal lines of the shelves change to the lines on the page of my schedule book. I then I heard a clear, intuitive voice tell me, “Make time in your schedule for this.”

It was clear that the dream meant it was time for a strong devotional life, journaling, and continued dream analysis. The voice had a gentle authority and numinosity associated with it. I felt God in an inward way that I had not experienced for many years. When my soul was first awakened at age eighteen, I committed my life fully to God’s lordship, so there was no choice required due to this prompting to times of devotion. I did it. I made more time in my schedule. Shortly thereafter, I had the castle dream I related in the previous chapter. My time of illumination lasted from the early 1980s until the year 2000. It was heady and joyful, but there were trying times of purgation as well. I was called to and trained for spiritual direction. Then I was shoved through the next initiatory door. It was an intense Dark Night of Soul. Before I entered it, however, I had enjoyed nearly two decades of illumination. Much of this book is its fruit. I certainly hope you will find the material as illuminating as I did.

### Debbie’s Illumination

Here, now, is Pastor Debbie’s description of her time of illumination.

When I began to meet with Troy as my spiritual director, we spent time in prayer using sacred imagination. We would ask the Holy Spirit

to create a sacred space where we could listen for the voice God and experience the presence of Christ. Every time we prayed together, I imagined a path that led to a very large, intricately designed door. Because of its size and weight, it was futile for me to even try to open it. The frustrating part was that I was certain God was waiting for me on the other side of the door. For three months, Troy and I met and prayed, and for three months, every prayer led to that place on the path where I sat and admired the beauty and craftsmanship of the door.

By the fourth month, I was surprised to find the door open; and as I crossed the threshold, I found myself in a very familiar room. It was a room in my grandmother's home, the home in which I spent the first seven years of my life. I played quietly in that room, alone with a few pull-toys and a set of wooden blocks. My parents were busy working two jobs, and my grandmother was caring for sick and dying family members, so I was often left to play alone. When I walked into that room, memories flooded my heart, and I suddenly realized that I had never been alone in that room. God was there. God had been there with me in many different and divine forms, telling me stories, singing songs with me, building castles, and playing make-believe.

In the dream was when I discovered I had a room inside me, a holy of holies, where the Lord, the lover of my soul, was waiting to commune with me. "Behold I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door I will come and sup with him and he with me." (Revelations 3:21)

During the coming years, I encountered God through prayer, scripture, nature, and silence in many different settings. These times had one characteristic in common: I encountered God and I left changed. My understanding of me, of God, and of others was constantly transforming. "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind (Romans 12:2)." It was a period when God was always around, always talking, teaching, sharing, and transforming me, inside and out!

## **The Dark Night of Soul**

The mystical literature has much to say about the Dark Night of Soul or the Dark Night of Spirit—so much, in fact, that it is confusing. Some use the term casually to represent any period of suffering or spiritual aridity that we go through. The Purgative Way is filled with arid times, but these are not the Dark Night of Soul in the strictest sense.

With her typical incisiveness, Evelyn Underhill beautifully describes what I refer to here as the Dark Night of Soul.

[The Dark Night of Soul] is a name for the painful and negative state which normally intervenes between the Illuminative and the Unitive life. Different types of contemplatives have interpreted it to themselves and to us in different ways; each type of illumination being in fact balanced by its own appropriate type of "dark."

In some temperaments it is...the anguish of the lover who has suddenly lost the Beloved—which predominates: in others, the intellectual darkness and confusion overwhelms everything else. Some have felt it, with St. John of the Cross, as a “passive purification,” a state of helpless misery, in which the self does nothing, but lets Life have its way with her. Others, with Suso and the virile mysticism of the German school, have experienced it rather as a period of strenuous activity and moral conflict directed to that “total self-abandonment” which is the essential preparation of the Unitive life. *Those elements of character which were unaffected by the first purification of the self—left as it were in a corner when the consciousness moved to the level of the illuminated life—are here roused from their sleep, purged of illusion, and forced to join the grooving stream.* (Underhill 1911, 319-320)

In other words, the transition between Illuminative consciousness and Unitive consciousness occurs in many different ways depending on the individual person. My Dark Night was more like what Suso suffered. Underhill continues:

So, too, Suso, when he had entered the “upper school” of the spiritual life, was tormented not only by temptations and desolations, but also by outward trials and disabilities of every kind: calumnies<sup>9</sup>, misunderstandings, difficulties, pains. “It seemed at this time as if God had given permission both to men and demons to torment the Servitor,” he says. This sense of a generally inimical atmosphere, and of the dimness and helplessness of the Ego oppressed by circumstances, is like the vague distress and nervous sensibility of adolescence, and comes in part from the same cause: the intervening period of chaos between the break-up of an old state of equilibrium and the establishment of the new. The self, in its necessary movement towards higher levels of reality, loses and leaves behind certain elements of its world, long loved but now outgrown: as children must make the hard transition from nursery to school. Destruction and construction here go together. (Underhill 1911, 318)

Debbie’s dark night story is a perfect illustration of Underhill’s statement: “Those elements of character which were unaffected by the first purification of the self—left as it were in a corner when the consciousness moved to the level of the illuminated life—are here roused from their sleep, purged of illusion, and forced to join the grooving stream.”

### Debbie’s Dark Night: The Bad Seed

At this time in her journey, Debbie acted as associate pastor and youth director at one of the more liberal-minded churches of her denomination. We were six years into our spiritual direction relationship. She enjoyed seven years of her illuminative phase before her Dark Night of Soul hit.

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<sup>9</sup> *Calumnies*: The making of false and defamatory statements in order to damage someone's reputation; slander.

Debbie loved her church and the young people she worked with, but a subgroup of adults took a disliking to her for reasons never made clear. She suspects it had something to do with her taking to task the music minister about drinking too much on a youth trip.

This particular church had an extremely powerful personnel committee that could hire and fire without consulting the congregation. The disaffected subgroup worked behind the scenes, and through their influence, Debbie—without warning—was brought before the committee and summarily dismissed with no explanation or chance to say goodbye. As you might imagine, this was a severe trauma.

As often occurs after the death of a family member, so much of the practical was required during the months following this crisis that Debbie had little opportunity to emotionally process the grief and hurt that these events caused. She considered leaving the ministry, but eventually she chose to join a denomination that allowed more female leadership.

She was welcomed into the senior pastor position at a church of her new denomination. Yet, she noticed a troublesome emotional numbing when she tried to get to know this new congregation. The numbing was a sign that she had not resolved the trauma of her abrupt firing.

The numbing she experienced was not unpleasant. It was like a protective cocoon. She did not feel abandoned by God, and outer circumstances were actually moving in a positive direction. Then, one night, the church held a bonfire supper on some country land outside of town. The wind was blowing, and it was not clear that the bonfire could be lit. Eventually the wind died down, and a successful ignition was achieved. While standing across the fire from three elders of her new church, one man commented that he had doubted they could start the fire. A second elder commented, “Nah. I knew that Debbie could stop the wind.”

Suddenly her numbing barrier broke. She thought, “Oh, no. They’re expecting me to do miracles, and when I can’t, they are going to fire me again.” This began a high-intensity period of weekly visits with me to help her through the crisis.

While working with her reactions, we explored the causes of the numbing, using an active imagination technique.<sup>10</sup> We followed the numbed feeling back to its source and found the following psychological entity.

I’m really scared.

In a cave behind the destroyed garden (a symbol of her place of prayer) is a woman, old with exaggerated features. She is all my fantasies of being purposely cruel to hurt someone. I realize that my emotional deadness is from taking all of her energy and killing myself with it.

The woman is called *Bad Seed*. This is a name given to someone with no good in them at all, bad from birth, born with the desire to do evil. Debbie was bad; she was always bad. When she was a baby, she cried all the time. She wouldn’t eat or sleep. You couldn’t hold her or walk her or make her shut up. She did it because she was bad. She was

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<sup>10</sup> It would be a digression to explain the technique of active imagination here. However, it is a technique that can be quite valuable. Should you wish to understand how it is done and its use in psychology and spirituality, you may start with this website (March 14, 2015): <http://dreamhawk.com/dream-encyclopedia/active-imagination-and-dreams/>. Then, for further study, I recommend Robert Johnson’s book, *Inner Work: Using Dreams and Creative Imagination for Personal Growth and Integration*. (Johnson 1989)

born sick with pneumonia and colic. She couldn't breathe or eat. She constantly wanted attention. She threw up all the time. Her parents went to work. The grandmother and grandfather were there to care for her. The grandfather was dying and had lost both of his legs. He died a slow death on the bed in the back room. There was a great aunt dying in the front room. Grandmother had to take care of five cousins, two dying old people, and now a crying baby. The baby decided that she was bad because she wouldn't shut up. She was constantly wet, messy, colicky, and tired.

The baby was scared because someone was going to come and get her, a Bogey Man. She feared no one would stop the Bogey Man—because the baby was bad. The baby could look through slats in her crib to a screen door and see the Bogey Man standing at the screen door. In her dreams, the Bogey came in different forms. He was a tall, dark shadow. Once he was an animal or a bear. When I feel Bad Seed's closeness, it's the same feeling. She wants to get me. It's the same evil. She wants to get me because I belong to Her.

I'm confronted with the reality that maybe that's who I really am—I'm the Bad Seed. I feel like I've fought against being the Bad Seed my whole life, but Bad Seed wants me to be the bad seed.

Bad Seed has created nightmares, fear, and shame.

Words do not convey the intensity of this experience for Debbie. Infants have few memories and personal experiences. There is, therefore, very little *personal* memory to form a buffer between their very small egos and the instinctual power with which Debbie was confronted. She experienced the overwhelming, sense of rejection of infancy reawakened in her adult-self. Her identity as a decent, lovable person was under assault.

Bad Seed was the leftover residue of some of Debbie's first memories of life. It would likely never have been resurrected like this had she not just experienced the same kind of perplexing rejection at her church. As an infant, Debbie sensed her caregivers' frustration over the difficulties her illnesses and care were causing them. This was layered upon the primitive thought form of Bad Seed within her. All of this was pre-verbal. She put this into words for the first time in our sessions. That sense of being unwanted reawakened when it was triggered by the experience of being unwanted by her church. If God thought these infancy memories were important to purge, he picked an excellent trigger to bring them back to consciousness. It took us several weeks just to recover from the emotional onslaught.

Finally, after those weeks, we first imagined putting on the armor of God. It felt too heavy. We then consulted the higher unconscious and Christ who dwells there.

I stand at the door of the cave where Bad Seed lives, and I let Jesus go in and tell me what he sees. He stops at the opening of the cave. He places his hand on the back of my head. He pulls my forehead toward him and kisses me. He walks in. The darkness fades to soft light. Bad Seed knows him and is not afraid of him. The me that's inside of Bad Seed is so glad he's there. Jesus sees a lot of different faces within Bad Seed. He recalls walking the earth and encountering her in various people he knew. Bad Seed has a right to exist. Jesus can't take that

away. But he says she's not as old as I think she is. Jesus invites me inside. I can look at her, but I'm warned, "Don't touch."

We stand looking. Jesus holds my hand. He prays and asks the Father to let me see what he sees. Bad Seed puts on makeup so people won't know she's crying. It gives her a look of control. Her hands are clenched in fists, but not anger or hatred. It's pain. The pain is so bad she has to clench the clothes she's wearing in her fists. She's crazy-mad, not hateful. Her mind is like Niagara Falls.

He wants me to know what she's made of, what formed her. Jesus didn't make her, so he doesn't transform her.

I have been known by Jesus. He wants to know me and wants me to know that I've been known. That's what a creator does with his creation. It's like Jesus is saying, "Look at your creation. Know her. Restore her. Be to her what I have been to you."

This session provided much relief from the energy of the unbridled Bad Seed, and Debbie eventually lost her psychological numbing. Her dark night lasted from the time of her firing until the time of this bit of inner soul work, a period of three months. Throughout this time, Debbie was still able to work and tend to her family. This speaks well for the strength of her personality. Someone with less fortitude would have been disabled from such an experience. From the time of our discovering Bad Seed to her integration and healing took *another* three months.

### Amber's Dark Night

Amber was a psychological associate of mine who blessed me with many spiritual discussions as well as a time of spiritual direction together. Her story is less dramatic but equally poignant. She describes her four-year Dark Night of Soul.

[My dark night] was marked in the beginning by a period of great personal turmoil. In classic spiritual terminology, I found myself submerged in a true 'dark night of the senses.' On the brink of this period, I was given an image of entering a desert holding the hand of Christ, after which the darkness descended. I later learned that I was transitioning from the *kataphatic* way of perceiving to the imageless *apophatic* kind of knowing. Just as it was written of by John of the Cross and others, I could no longer pray as I had before nor feel the presence of Jesus in the way I had known it. I experienced bouts of tearfulness in the initial years, yet was able to work as well or better than I ever had. What I began to perceive was that I had known very little of the real God prior to this experience; that in fact, God was much larger than I had thought. I could sense something unprecedented occurring within me at the deepest level possible and knew that it was not I who was causing it. [Numerous spiritual writers] spoke to me out of their unique selves and circumstances of the way of God being the way of mystery and un-knowing yet the path of true love.

Perhaps the most significant influence on me of those I read during this time was Thomas Merton. I, like many, could readily relate to his thoughts and experiences of life and the Absolute. His ideas about the "true self" put words to what I was beginning to experience and had

somehow “known” all along but had not yet “thought.” It was truly a turning point for me as I read this statement of his:

Ultimately the only way that I can be myself is to become identified with Him in whom is hidden the reason and fulfillment of my existence... Therefore, there is only one problem on which all my existence, my peace and my happiness depend: to discover myself in discovering God. If I find Him I will find myself, and if I find my true self I will find Him. (Merton 1933)

The strong intellectual drive that I had known all of my life was greatly waning. I learned that this was a part of my spiritual process of detachment from ego desires, which occurs in purgation. I was beginning to experience the dulling of my senses and felt increasingly bereft of the self I had known. Silence and solitude were drawing me, and it was in these that I felt the most at home. I knew that I greatly desired that life and could do nothing but wait on God for it.

As I practiced spiritual direction, I began to trust in a new way that, indeed, God does “show up,” and all that is required of me is to stay open to the Spirit. The contemplative awareness was already being fashioned in me. Gerald May (psychiatrist/author/spiritual director) defines contemplation as “a simple, open presence to things just the way they are,” and that definition was beginning to feel more comfortable.

Undoubtedly, the greatest gift I received from Gerald May besides his friendship was that the purpose of becoming psychically healthy is to be better able to love. Certainly, this was Jesus’ central message through his life. I was finding that this ability to love does not come through the ego’s wish or through efforts to be more loving. Rather, love is infused over time as we open ourselves to it. In those moments as a therapist when I lose sight of what I am doing with others and simply pray to know what is needed, Love comes to me as the answer. Simply put, union with the Holy manifests itself in love.

## **The Unitive Way**

So, what is the Unitive Way toward which disciples on their mystical paths hope for and strive to attain? Once again, I turn to the master voice in these matters, Evelyn Underhill.

The Self [by the end of the Dark Night of Soul] now surrenders itself, its individuality, and its will, completely. It desires nothing, asks nothing, is utterly passive, and is thus prepared for...

*Union:* the true goal of the mystic quest. In this state the Absolute Life is not merely perceived and enjoyed by the Self, as in Illumination: but is *one* with it. This is the end towards which all the previous oscillations of consciousness have tended. It is a state of equilibrium, of purely spiritual life; *characterized by peaceful joy, by enhanced powers, by intense certitude.* (Underhill 1911, 142)



Spiritual directors and teachers warned me that the Unitive soul is not as exciting as the Illuminative soul. It is more a rest. As the book of Hebrews teaches us,

So then, there remains a sabbath rest for the people of God; for whoever enters God's rest also ceases from his labors as God did from his. Let us therefore strive to enter that rest. (Hebrews 4:9-12, RSV)

Paul Brunton says it this way:

The banishment of thoughts [through contemplation] reveals the inner self whereas the reinstatement of thoughts without losing the newly gained consciousness reveals the All-inclusive universal self.

The fitful flashes of enlightenment pertaining to the mystic [i.e. Illuminative] stage are replaced by a steady light only when the philosophic [i.e. Unitive] stage is reached and passed through. (Brunton 2014, 136,134)

In the years since my own dark night, I have found great contentment. One reason for this is that my ambition has been transcended. Men and women aspiring to be physicians or other professionals must have ambition. Ambition is necessary during certain times of life, but there comes a time when we are called to let it go. Just as we must let go of all things less than God, we are called to hold ambition loosely. For our life is not our own; it was bought with a price (1 Corinthians 6: 19-20).

Having let go of ambition, I find great contentment. It is not a matter of lacking desire. It is more that the *instinct* of ambition is no longer present in the same way. In the past, it drove me to have an excessive desire for recognition and respect. In most cases, now, I simply desire to express love and service to others in whatever I do.

Underhill continues:

In the mystics of the West, the highest forms of Divine Union impel the self to some sort of active, rather than passive life: and this is now recognized by the best authorities as the true distinction between Christian and non-Christian mysticism. "The Christian mystics," says Delacroix, "move from the Infinite to the Definite; they aspire to infinitize life and to define Infinity; they go from the conscious to the subconscious, and from the subconscious to the conscious. The obstacle in their path is not consciousness in general, but *self*-consciousness, the consciousness of the Ego [i.e. ego-centrism]. The Ego is the limitation, that which opposes itself to the Infinite: the states of consciousness free from self, lost in a vaster consciousness, may become modes of the Infinite, and states of the Divine Consciousness." So Starbuck: "The individual learns to transfer himself from a centre of self-activity into an organ of revelation of universal being, and to live a life of affection for and one-ness with, the larger life outside."

Hence, the ideal of the great contemplatives, the end of their long education, is to become "modes of the Infinite." Filled with an abounding sense of the Divine Life, of ultimate and adorable reality, sustaining and urging them on, they wish to communicate the revelation, the more abundant life, which they have received. (Underhill 1911, 143)

I find, now, that God's perceived presence is "right here." During illumination, I received messages and felt the love of God. But now, though I still feel the love, I feel little need for messages. I look at my dreams, but they seldom offer the profundities of those in the illuminative phase. With God "right here," there is little need for things that were useful on the pathway *to* God.

In addition to noticing less ambition, being more content, and perceiving God presence as "right here," I notice that my awareness has shifted. More often, I feel I am living somewhere behind my eyes, but farther back than before. I discern it as a diminishment of ego self, and a coming forward of higher self. Higher self is actually living my life outside, and my ego self is more often a backseat observer. This will perhaps make more sense once we explore psychological structure in the next chapters.

Finally, I sense very few "opposites" left to transcend in my life. I have always taken a non-harsh approach to good and evil. However, now it seems that everyone in my life has had an appropriate part to play in our little cosmic drama. I begrudge no experience of my life. I feel no animosity toward anyone who has "wronged" me. It was all part of the dance of life, played by the orchestra of angels and human souls and conducted by Omnipotence. Who am I to judge His music and dance?

However, I am not naïve. When I work at a prison, the prisoners still come to me in handcuffs. I also see through their manipulations and respond accordingly; yet I feel no frustration that they are not somehow better people. I feel a bit of wry humor that shakes its head at their foolishness, but there is no anger. They, too, are Christ in their own way. Who am I to be their judge? I would not trust most of them very far if I saw them on the street, it is true. However, I honor the role they have decided to play in the cosmic drama of life. I will protect my body and my interests if I am around them, but should I die or experience some unpleasantness at their hands, the Sovereign One is in control, and I am His.

I am sure that everyone's experience of Unitive life is different. Let us look for similarities and differences between my experience and Debbie's.

### Debbie's Unitive Life

I slipped into the Unitive life almost unaware, like slipping into a warm bath. My first realization came during a retreat I was leading. As I prepared for the retreat, I noticed that God didn't seem to be interrupting my train of thought and initiating conversations. My preparation flowed smoothly, and everything fell into place. I was confident that I was sharing what God had intended for the retreat, even though God had not communicated it through any direct means. At the retreat, I was leading a session on prayer when I became extremely aware of the presence of God. God was there. God was present and pleased, but also silent and invisible. I noticed in the coming months and years that this became our new normal. The days of vivid dreams, sacred encounters, and animated conversations grew fewer and were replaced with a quiet presence. Sometimes I miss those Illuminative days, but the contentment of this constant company brings healing and peace to the ordinary days of my life. I love the seasons of Advent, Christmas, Lent, and Easter...but I live in the ordinary Sundays. The Unitive path moves me through the ordinary days of the year, and I journey quietly in the company of Christ.

## Daniel's Unitive Life

Daniel is a gifted natural mystic of an orthodox tradition. From a young age, he had awareness of the light of God that led him to minister to his friends. In his description of his unitive life we can see very clearly the ascending spiral path leading him there.

As early as I can remember, I have always felt connected to God. I actually believe that I was born in union with Him. I believe this is true for everyone else, too. As Paul states, "In Him we live and breathe and have our being." (Acts 17:28) People usually do not consciously remember this original blessedness, and we spend the rest of our lives simply becoming aware of what was always and everywhere true—the Father and we are one. However, in my case, for mysterious reasons, I possess a little more conscious recollection of my union with God at a very early age.

Still, just like everyone else, I left the Garden; I began my own prodigal journey away from my home, to explore my identity, to stumble and fall, and to be lovingly held and led by God along my way. It took thirty more years of living life before I returned back to conscious awareness of my union with God, but what was gained in the journey was the pearl of great price—the wisdom and deep felt knowledge that since God is infinite, all is God. All is one, and all is grace, including the stumbles and crawls in the darkness. God is *Reality Itself*, and that has a two-fold manifestation--God in Oneness and God in Multiplicity.

The multiplicity part of God is the part that grows, expands, explores the creation, begets sons and daughters like you and me, and returns. It is like the ocean begetting waves and wavelets. You and I co-inhere mysteriously with the Multiplicity of God in a great dance. I sense it. It is like when Jesus prayed for us on the Mount of Olives, "The glory which thou hast given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and thou in me." (John 17)

Several dark periods preceded my coming to this consciousness. The most recent happened when I was 38. One evening, I was sitting at my computer finishing up notes from my counseling clients, and I felt a nudge to listen to holy music online. I had never before been prompted in this particular way, but I typed in "chant" to Google. I was led to listen to a beautiful intonation on Youtube. As I let the tune flow through me, I felt and "saw" a golden dew descend upon me and fill me with a new kind of lightness of being. I felt a stirring of soul and a desire for mystical knowledge and experience of God. I also realized I needed a guide.

Shortly after, I met Dr. Caldwell through a colleague who was seeing him for spiritual direction. As I worked with Dr. Caldwell, I was opened to a new world of the spirit through dreams, numinous moments, and reading. It was becoming clear to me that separateness from God was an illusion, and I could receive this more and more in my heart. Yet when my mind tried to grasp this initially, it began to feel riddled with

contradictions. I could sense the mystical reality that all is one. Trees, other people, my piano, and even so-called evil people, were all made of a unified energy that vibrated in just such a way as to seem “real” to our senses. Yet my rational mind felt overwhelmed by it. I entered into a time of serious confusion. I questioned everything. What was real? Who am I? Can I really trust my journey so far? A host of voices in my life was offering me competing and contradictory truths. The tension of these opposites was almost too great to bear.

Yet I remembered that this period of darkness was heralded by a reassuring dream. I was in an elevator in a building that was about a mile high. I suddenly started to descend, and then the brakes blew out. It was a free fall all the way down. I started to float, and I felt that this was *it*; I was going to die. Rather than panic, I started to pray the Lord’s Prayer. Just before crashing into the ground, I slowed and landed softly. The door opened, and outside was a beautiful garden with a golden sun overhead and birds and butterflies flying all around. I walked out, semi-naked and, somehow, new.

Still, in waking life, the pain of the existential confusion remained very intense. Thankfully, God was leading me just as strongly as ever. I found a great book by Cynthia Bourgeault called, *The Trinity and the Law of Three*. She described for me some of the extremes I was feeling. I saw how the pieces of my recent life fell into that pattern before my eyes. I looked with amazement at how my spiritual journey, including this transitional confusion, was culminating in the piercing of a veil. The view beyond the veil was causing me to recoil in confusion and some fear.

God and Cynthia next introduced me to Centering Prayer. Through Centering Prayer, I learned how to hone the skills and lessons gained from previous difficult times. I recalled I knew that I was worthy to be in God’s presence from my first time of similar darkness. I remembered learning surrender and the power of powerlessness from my second time of confusion. Now, through this third dark time and the practice of Centering Prayer, I found myself entering into an apophatic stage where I experienced God’s fullness in emptiness, God’s light in darkness. I learned to rest in God and felt a new peace even while “not knowing.” I was able to let go and not *have* to know. It was the blessed “obscurity” that St. John of the Cross sang of in his poem. I waited.

Then when the time was right, I picked up where I had left off before the confusion and fear. Now poised at a higher consciousness, I could better understand that God is at once One and Multiple. I realized in addition that I had returned to the place of union which I had experienced in innocence as a young child. I had come full circle, and I began to appreciate, moreover, that the journey of union in the unitive state is endless.

For those who have not experienced union with God, my descriptions will seem hard to hear and possibly blasphemous. But

knowledge of theology, doctrines, and a even a robust intellectual faith is not the same as mystical knowing. I have had those three things, and the Unitive Way is very different. A mystic does not only read about God, does not only learn about God, does not only hope for God, but they directly experience God in the present moment. A mystic who has passed into the unitive state of spiritual awareness knows himself/herself as a God-spark having a human experience.

My experience of union with God allows me to walk around this world with the affective and intellectual knowledge of participating in the inner life of God with a desire to bless all of creation with the love and light of the Holy Spirit. The energy of this light ministers to all those around me. I rarely use words in this blessing. It is like the city on the hill that cannot hide its light. When I bless others through this radiance, whether human, animal, or object, I experience myself as Christ blessing the creation with the power of the Holy Spirit. This is an experience that I cannot express in words, but it is a simple, direct awareness carrying with it the sense of ultimate Truth.

## **Conclusion**

In its article on *Theosis*, an Eastern Orthodox term for the Unitive Way, which is sometimes called “deification”, the Antiochian Orthodox Church points out,

Many Protestants, and even some Roman Catholics, might find the Orthodox concept of *theosis* unnerving. Especially when they read a quote such as this one from St. Athanasius: “God became man so that men might become gods,” they immediately fear an influence of Eastern mysticism from Hinduism or pantheism.

But such an influence could not be further from the Orthodox understanding. The human person does not merge with some sort of impersonal divine force, losing individual identity or consciousness. Intrinsic divinity is never ascribed to humankind or any part of the creation, and no created thing is confused with the being of God. Most certainly, humans are not accorded ontological equality with God, nor are they considered to merge or co-mingle with the being of God as He is in His essence.

In fact, to [avoid] misunderstanding of this kind, Orthodox theologians have been careful to distinguish between God’s essence and His energies. God is incomprehensible in His essence. But God, who is love, allows us to know Him through His divine energies, those actions whereby He reveals Himself to us in creation, providence, and redemption. It is through the divine energies, therefore, that we achieve union with God.

I hope, therefore, that the reader will not be unnerved by Daniel’s descriptions. Instead, I pray that you will open yourself to your full heritage as a Christian, more fully believing in all you can become if you will courageously follow the spiral path with the risen Christ who is alive within you. Fear *not* becoming partakers of the divine nature.

*His divine power has given us everything needed for life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness.*

*Thus he has given us... his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may escape from the corruption that is in the world because of lust, and may become participants of the divine nature.*  
(2 Peter 1:3-4, NRSV)

We have explored the Purgative Way, the Illuminative Way, and the Unitive Way as the three major phases of the mystical path—the path to union with God. Sometimes, these Ways are known as the Three Ways and sometimes as the Spiral Path. May this knowledge be as beneficial for you as it has been for me, and may you find joy in the journey.

I encourage you take a moment now and meditate as you listen to Michael Card's song, "Joy in the Journey." You will be glad you did. (Accessed October 20, 2015)

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9fIP\\_bKxjLs](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9fIP_bKxjLs)

