

## Not to Know Knowing An Introduction to *San Juan de la Cruz*

By  
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Before discussing the great Christian mystic, Saint John of the Cross, it seems best to say a few words about mysticism in general. For *mysticism* is, as I often say, one of the most underused and misused words in the English language. We underuse it because we don't understand what it actually means, and substitute inadequate words like *spiritual*, *deep*, *curious*, or, *awesome*, when *mystical* would be more accurate; and we misuse it to refer to things that seem otherworldly, fantastic, and magical, even though mysticism actually grounds us and connects us more deeply to this world and to reality. A scientist, or a homicide detective, or a football fan watching instant replay, groping to understand the meaning of physical evidence, are more mystical than any spiritual guru who speaks to us of grand ideals and profound visions. Spiritualities often encourage us to transcend this world or leave it all together, along with the trappings of our bodies and minds. But mysticism is more like a telescope or microscope, driving us to look further and more deeply into what already is. "In looking for the mystical," writes philosopher James Carse says, "...we need go no further than the most ordinary of our ordinary experiences."<sup>1</sup>

I personally think its etymology summarizes its meaning best; to be a mystic is to dwell in the mystery, in the mist. A mystic is simply one who has learned to live happily with "not knowing." The classic definition of mysticism, however, describes a threefold experience of *illumination*, *purgation*, and *unification*. The first of these experiences, illumination, describes one's awakening to the awe and wonder of life and all things. It is the realization that the Divine, indescribable and unobtainable as it might be, is somehow present and made manifest in all things. As Meister Eckhart said, "Every creature is a word of God and a book about God."<sup>2</sup> Or, as Hildegard of Bingen put it, "This Word manifests itself in every creature,"<sup>3</sup> and Mechtild of Magdeburg who said, "The truly wise person kneels at the feet of all creatures."<sup>4</sup> This is not unlike the Rabbinic saying, "Creation is the infinite in the garb of the finite. To attend to Creation is to attend to God."<sup>5</sup>

It is, perhaps, out of this recognition of the mystery in all things that the mystic eventually comes to commune with everything, in recognizing that all things are really one. Rumi seems to have felt this experience of mystical unification when he said, "I am all orders of being, the circling galaxy, the evolutionary intelligence,

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<sup>1</sup> Carse, James, P., *Breakfast at the Victory*, Harper Collins, New York, NY, 1994, p. 15.

<sup>2</sup> Fox, Matthew, *Original Blessing*, Bear & Company, Santa Fe, NM, 1983, p. 35.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. p. 69.

<sup>5</sup> Fox, Matthew, *One River, Many Wells*, Jeremy P. Tarcher/Putnam, New York, NY, 2000p. 36.

the lift, and the falling away,”<sup>6</sup> as did Meister Eckhart who said, “...in the innermost and deepest aspect of the soul God creates the whole cosmos,”<sup>7</sup> and even the physicist, David Bohm, in writing, “we say that inseparable quantum interconnectedness of the whole universe is the fundamental reality, and that relatively independently behaving parts are merely particular and contingent forms of the whole.”<sup>8</sup>

But it is the middle, perhaps central, stage of the mystical experience, purgation, that San Juan de la Cruz helps us consider most. Purgation, sometimes called purification or the *via negativa*, the negative path, is the experience of surrender, of letting go and letting be. Sometimes it’s even called *The Dark Night of the Soul*, a phrase based on one of San Juan’s own poems, “O night! O guide! O night more loving than the dawn!”<sup>9</sup> He exclaims. It is for this very reason that mysticism is sometimes described as *apophatic*, a word that means negation or reduction. The idea is that we come to comprehend truth, wisdom, even God, if you will, by getting rid of all our ideas about these very things, by letting the dark be our guide, by achieving what San Juan called, “Not to know knowing,” *toda ciencia trascendiendo*, beyond all knowing.

I did not know where I entered,  
But when I saw myself there,  
Not knowing where I entered,  
Many things I suddenly learned;  
I will know say what these things were,  
For I remained not knowing,  
*Toda ciencia trascendiendo*<sup>10</sup>  
(Beyond all knowing)

The mystic, St. Denis said similarly, “The most divine knowledge of God is that which is known by not-knowing.”<sup>11</sup> And the unknown author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* said there must be a “cloud of unknowing between you and your God.”<sup>12</sup> He also said, “When I speak of darkness, I mean the absence of knowledge<sup>13</sup>... [you must] learn to be at home in this darkness.”<sup>14</sup> And the Kabbalah says, “With every increase in the negations regarding God, you come nearer to the apprehension of

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<sup>6</sup> Barks, Coleman, *The Essential Rumi*, Quality Paper Back Book Club, Harper Collins, New York, NY, 1998, p.276.

<sup>7</sup> Fox, *One River, Many Wells*, *ibid.*, p. 32.

<sup>8</sup> Capra, Fritjof, *The Tao of Physics*, Shambhala, Boston, 2000, p. 130

<sup>9</sup> de Nicolas, *ibid.*, p. 103.

<sup>10</sup> de Nicolas, *ibid.*, p. 135.

<sup>11</sup> Johnston, *ibid.*, p. 127.

<sup>12</sup> Johnston, *ibid.* p. 45.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.* p. 44.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.* p. 41.

God.”<sup>15</sup> Or, again, as contemporary mystic James Carse puts it, “...not knowing *is* the path. Knowing that we don’t know is not only a higher ignorance, it is the basis of all our hope.”<sup>16</sup> But it is, without little doubt, San Juan de la Cruz who has helped us come to best understand mystical purgation through both his life and poetry:

It was peace, it was love,  
It was the perfect knowledge,  
In deep loneliness  
I saw with wisdom;  
It was a thing so secret  
I was left babbling and trembling,  
*Toda ciencia trascendiendo*  
(Beyond all knowing)

At his birth in 1542 he was given the name Juan de Yepes y Álvarez, which he changed to Juan de Santo Matía upon joining the Carmelite convent of Medina at age 21. But it wasn’t until his ordination at age 25 that the man who would become Spain’s most celebrated mystic and favored poet to this day, would take the name for which he was surely most suited—*San Juan de la Cruz*. If the cross is a symbol of human suffering, then for San Juan it serves appropriately as both a name and epitaph.

Indeed, it seems his difficult life began even before his birth, when his father, Gonzalo de Yepes fell in love with a woman his family considered beneath his class, a poor orphan by the name of Catalina Álvarez. When he married her against his family’s wishes, Gonzalo was disinherited, losing all rights to a lucrative silk business. For the next twelve years Gonzalo and Catalina would eke out a humble living as weavers, while struggling to raise their three sons. But Juan, the youngest of the three, would never know his father, who died a few months after his birth, leaving the family in abject poverty. As Gerald Brenan explains, “like the bulk of the Spanish laboring classes at the time, they suffered great privations. Their only food was barley and lentils: through icy winters, when snow often lay on the ground, they had no means of warming themselves and their clothes were thin because they could only afford the poorest materials.”<sup>17</sup> He goes on to suggest this life may have been “good training for Juan’s future life of asceticism,”<sup>18</sup> but it was harsh enough to kill his second brother Luis, who “fell sick and died” when Juan was only six.

Afterward, Catalina moved in with her eldest son, Francisco and his wife to pool the meager earnings they gained from weaving silk. Still, she was too poor to provide for Juan and was forced to board him at an orphanage, the Colegio de la

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<sup>15</sup> Matt, Daniel C., *The Essential Kabbalah*, HarperCollins Publishers, New York, NY, 1995, p. 7.

<sup>16</sup> Carse., *ibid.*, p. 185.

<sup>17</sup> Brenan, Gerald, *St. John of the Cross: His Life and Poetry*, Cambridge University Press, London, 1973, p. 5.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

Doctrina. As difficult as this separation must have been, it proved to be a pivotal experience in Juan's life. Like the other orphans, he was given adequate food and clothing, and was taught to read, write and learn a trade. He first became a carpenter's apprentice, but it soon became apparent that this boy, of unusually feeble stature, perhaps even a dwarf, was unsuited for manual labor. So Juan, at age 17, was sent to work in a convent where it became apparent the quiet young man was better suited for the devotional life. It was while working at a nearby hospital for the poor that an administrator took a liking to Juan and helped him enroll in a Jesuit grammar school where he learned Latin, history, literature and likely "got a good grounding in the humanities."<sup>19</sup>

It was also about this time, still early in his life, that Juan began demonstrating an inkling of his intimate connection and dependence upon darkness. After a lifetime of darkness, of not knowing, not knowing his father Gonzalo, his brother Luis, let alone where, at times, his next meal might come from, Juan had become accustomed to uncertainty and chaos. But rather than fleeing from reality through what we might today call a "dissociative disorder," or else becoming unbearably depressed, darkness became Juan's friend, his guide, his shield, his cloak and comforter, if not his lover. And, at key moments in his life, it was darkness that became Juan's savior, helping him slip away unnoticed by his adversaries. "I left in the darkness, covered..." he would eventually write, "On that joyous night, in secret seen by no one."<sup>20</sup>

I was so far beyond,  
So lost and absorbed,  
I lost all my senses,  
I was of all sensing disposed;  
And my spirit was filled,  
With not to know knowing  
*Toda ciencia trascendiendo*

So, at age 21, he stole away from the hospital at night, *a oscuras y en celada*, to avoid the disapproval of the hospital administrator. He went to a Carmelite priory in Santa Ana where he joined the Order of the Blessed Virgin. It was here, because of his proficiency in Latin, that he was accepted into a Carmelite college where he could finish his education and become ordained. But even here, according to the accounts of his fellow students, Juan felt more at peace in the dark, in contemplation and prayer. "When not attending lectures," they said, "he would sit at his desk in the dark, bare cell pouring over his books, while he spent a large part of every night in prayer."<sup>21</sup> He also fasted a great deal, whipped his shoulders until they bled, refused

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid. p. 6.

<sup>20</sup> From "Dark Night," see, de Nicolas, Antonio T., *St John of the Cross: Alchemist of the Soul*, Paragon House, New York, NY, 1989, p. 103.

<sup>21</sup> Brenan, *ibid.* p. 8.

to engage in light-hearted conversation, and was such a stickler for the rules that his fellows use to say upon his approach, "Let's be off—that devil is coming."<sup>22</sup>

Shortly after he was ordained in 1567, Juan came under the influence of another great Spanish mystic, Teresa de Avila, and ended up joining her reform movement, along with Father Heridia, Prior of the Media Carmelites. According to Antonio de Nicolás, "The two men, or the 'one and one-half men,' as Teresa affectionately called them, "were entrusted with returning the Carmelite order to its original spirituality, austerity, and detachment from things of this world, its exercise of the soul toward total nakedness."<sup>23</sup> But the reform was not met without adversity from the other Carmelites who wanted to keep things as they were. So, while he was sleeping on the night of December 2, 1577, Juan was pulled from his bed and taken prisoner by his Carmelite brethren who had him twice flogged and eventually locked him away in a lavatory for nine months at the priory in Toledo.

Whoever truly reaches there,  
To himself he is lost;  
All he knew before  
Now appears very base;  
But his knowledge grows,  
And he remains not knowing,  
*Toda ciencia trascendiendo*

It was here, in this six-by-ten-foot closet, lighted only by a tiny hole in the wall, that Juan de la Cruz would experience one of his darkest nights. He could only read by standing on a bench and holding his book in front of the hole, and then, only at midday. His bed was a board on the floor and his blankets, two old rugs, which were inadequate against the subfreezing Toledo winters and his cell's damp stone-cold walls. In the blazing summer, the cell, conversely, became a sweltering oven. The few scraps of bread and occasional sardines he was given to eat caused dysentery, and, with no change of clothes, his body became devoured with lice. On Fridays he was made to kneel at the table of his keepers who forced him to eat his bread and water like a dog. "Look at him, brothers," the prior mocked, "this miserable wretched little friar, scarcely good enough to be a convent porter! He seeks to reform others when what he needs is to reform himself. Now bare your shoulders: it is on them that we will write the rules of the new reform."<sup>24</sup> Each of the friars would then take turns flogging him with a cane, scarring him for the rest of his short life. His blood soaked clothes matted into his broken flesh and the flies infested his untreated wounds with their larva.

Some of the younger friars felt sorry for him and wished he would be put out of his misery entirely. Eventually he was given a jailer, however, who was kind

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> de Nicolás, *ibid.* p. 25f.

<sup>24</sup> Brennan, *ibid.* p. 31.

enough to give him a change of clothes and a pen and paper to write down his devotions, which Juan used to compose poetry. Just as it seemed he couldn't last any longer, Juan claims to have had a vision of the Virgin who filled his cell with light and told him his trial would soon be over. This was not the first time he had seen the Virgin. Once, when he was a boy, he claims to have been drowning near the edge of a muddy bank when a well-dressed woman appeared and pulled him out. Later, at age 12, he fell into a well and also began drowning. He prayed for the lady to rescue him again and afterward found a piece of wood that kept him from sinking. Even then, as de Nicolás puts it, "The child experienced his early years as both a spiritual and physical sinking, a journey into the pit."<sup>25</sup>

The higher he climbs,  
The less he understands,  
For this is the dark cloud  
That brings light to the night;  
And whoever has this light  
Always remains not knowing  
*Toda ciencia trascendiendo*

After his vision, Juan was inspired to begin preparing his escape. Whenever his kindly jailer opened his door to allow him a little air, he used the opportunity to loosen the hinge screws a little at a time. He also fashioned a rope from strips of the old carpet. On the night of his escape it happened that two guest friars were asleep in the room adjacent his cell, but Juan had no choice but to make his escape before someone discovered the loosened hinges and homemade rope. After they had fallen asleep he gave the door a shove, only to have it fall and slam into the ground, awakening the two friars. Fortunately they ignored the noise and soon fell back asleep. Juan then went to a window and used the homemade rope to make his escape by climbing several stories to a lower balcony, where he, again, found himself trapped with no way out. But upon praying to the Virgin, even in his feeble state, he found the strength to actually scale the priory walls, finding foot-holes in broken plaster, eventually making his way to freedom.

On a dark night,  
Anxious, by love inflamed,  
—O joyous chance!—  
I left not seen or discovered,  
My house at last completely quiet.

In the darkness, with light,  
By the secret ladder, disguised,  
—O joyous chance!—  
I left in the darkness, covered,  
My house at last completely quiet.

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<sup>25</sup> de Nicolás, *ibid.* p. 20.

On that joyous night,  
In secret, seen by no one,  
Nor with anything in sight,  
I had no other light or mark,  
Than the one burning in my heart.<sup>26</sup>

Having made his escape at age 36, Juan spent months recovering before, once again, he began working in the reform movement, ironically finding solace now and again by retreating into small cramped quarters similar to those of his prison; like caves and grottos, But he also retreated at times into boundless nature in search of his Beloved:

O forests and woods  
Seeded by the hand of the Beloved;  
O green meadows  
Framed with flowers;  
Did he pass through you?<sup>27</sup>

Although he said, “no amount of human knowledge is sufficient”<sup>28</sup> to explain his poems, he tried to explain this one, his *Spiritual Canticle*, by saying, “Mountains are high, wide, beautiful, graceful, flowery, and give out beautiful smells. These mountains are my Beloved to me... Solitary valleys are quiet, pleasant, cool, shady, full of sweet waters; a variety of groves and the pleasant song of birds provide recreation and delight to the senses; they provide freshness and rest in their solitude and silence. These valleys are my Beloved to me.”<sup>29</sup> So, as a mystic, his experience included illumination and unification too, but his was mostly a life “of the cross.”

This knowing by not knowing,  
Is of such high power,  
That the arguments of the wise  
Are unable to grasp it;  
For their knowledge does not explain  
Not to know knowing,  
*Toda ciencia transcendiendo*

Eventually the reform movement gained some support from the Church hierarchy and Juan a growing reputation as a saint. Still, his political enemies tried to discredit him with false accusations of improper relations with one of the nuns in his charge—a charge that all who knew him recognized immediately as a lie. After this attempt at character assassination failed, as did complaints to the Inquisition about his theology, Juan, who became sick, retired to a priory in Ubeda. Its Prior was

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid. p. 103ff.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 117f.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, p. 158.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 205

hostile toward Juan, and provided him the smallest room available in which to recover, harshly reprimanded him for failing to perform his duties even though he was deathly ill, and refused to give him the kind of nourishment his doctors recommended. He also refused to let other friars visit Juan or allow him an attendant.

After surgery on his swollen foot and leg, his blood soaked swabs were collected as relics and were rumored to smell sweet and fragrant as flowers. As his conditioned worsened, however, his death became immanent. The prior, having become ashamed of his mistreatment of Juan, asked his forgiveness, to which he responded, "Father, I have been treated far better than I deserve. But do not let yourself be distressed by the poverty of this house for if you have faith in the Lord it will soon be relieved."<sup>30</sup> The prior left weeping. Finally, after hearing a few verses read from *Song of Songs* San Juan de la Cruz died, December 14, 1591, at age 49.

And this exalted wisdom  
Is of such excellence,  
That no faculty or science  
Can hope to reach it;  
But he who learns to conquer himself  
With this knowledge of not knowing,  
Will always go beyond all knowing.  
*Toda ciencia trascendiendo*

If it weren't for the rich legacy of literature St. John of the Cross left us, we might never have known of his remarkable response to a lifetime of suffering. Perhaps de Nicolás sums it up best in explaining, "His path was the path to '*nada*' (nothing). [His poems] 'Dark Night,' 'Spiritual Canticle,' and 'Love's Living Flame' are all testaments of his dedication to absolute negation: '*nada, nada, nada, y aun en la montana nada*' (nothing, nothing, nothing, and even on the mountain nothing."<sup>31</sup> The poverty he experienced in childhood and the depravation he experienced as a prisoner were among those formative experiences that led Juan to appreciate a life with virtually nothing. In addition to owning nothing and seeking nothing for himself, he developed a theology based on nothing. "The soul must go to God through a Dark Night,"<sup>32</sup> he said, adding that he does not write for the "person who likes to reach God by tasting sweet and pleasing things."<sup>33</sup>

In experiencing the Divine in the Dark Night, as a Hades, a god of the Underworld, guide of souls, San Juan de la Cruz, understood the Divine, as many mystics have, as inconceivable and indefinable; "it is like air," he said, "it escapes as soon as we try to grasp it within our hand."<sup>34</sup> "Thus," he continued, "the more the

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<sup>30</sup> Brenan, *ibid.* p. 80.

<sup>31</sup> De Nicolás, *ibid.* p. 60f.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.* p. 160.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.* p. 161.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.* p. 169.

soul advances, the more she walks in the dark of not knowing... Even after enlightenment, when this wisdom is clearly known, it is still so secret to the soul that it is unable to speak about it or give it names..."<sup>35</sup>

And if you want to hear it,  
This highest knowing consists  
In a most sublime sensing  
Of the Divine Essence;  
It is an act of clemency  
Which leaves us not knowing,  
*Toda ciencia transcendiendo*

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid. p. 178.