Spiritual Development

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INTRODUCTION: SPIRITUAL ‘PROGRESS’

The Christian tradition has given birth to quite a few models for spiritual development. One thinks immediately of Teresa of Avila’s ‘mansions’, a seemingly linear progression through the various mansions to the spiritual marriage of the seventh. Or Thomas Merton’s ‘7 storey mountain’. Or, more contemporarily, James Fowler’s ‘seven stages of faith’. My own experience is that the spiritual journey does not much feel like a neat linear progression, to a final stage: it’s rather more like a constant re-visiting to the same place I’ve been before. However, as T S Eliot observed, as though for the first time! I am in the same person; and I am somehow different.

Perhaps, like me, you may wonder whether you have made any ‘progress’ in the spiritual life? In spite of all the years of effort, the ascetic disciplines, perhaps it sometimes seems as though there’s ‘nothing new under the sun’? These reflections explore this strange phenomena; and its circuitous path.

Two principles underlie what follows. ONE: My intention is to encourage a thoroughly practical approach to the spiritual path, to foster reflection on your own experience. TWO: In what follows, Sacred Scripture is envisaged as a means by which we may reflect on life, on our own experience, rather than containing abstract, timeless, external information to be merely swallowed.

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1 This material was originally presented as a retreat, in September 2016.
So this is an invitation to make *our own experience* – whatever that may be – the starting point and the centre of reflection and prayer. To reflect on all the detail of our lives; in the light of Scripture.

But even before setting out, some important caveats. Whatever ‘spiritual progress’ might be – and any claims should be taken lightly – it’s important that we are gentle with ourselves, that we take whatever time is needed, and that there is enough silence and space for our spirit to flourish.

Silence, indeed, is the most important thing of all; that in silence we might encounter The Silence who is simultaneously the Creator within the depths of our souls, and in the all the detail of our lives.

A: DANCE

Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of the household who brings out of the treasure what is new and what is old. (Matthew 13:52)

There appears to be an insoluble tension between the external teachings of religious tradition, and the internal realities of individual experience. Anglicans are proud of what we call our ‘tripod’: Scripture plus tradition plus reason, where ‘reason’ is intended to include experience. However institutions have always had some difficulty with peoples’ experiences.

So it’s as well to remember that the logical consequence of the doctrine of Incarnation is that the spiritual life only makes any sense at all if we take our experience with the utmost
seriousness. In what follows I encourage us to do just that: to really take our experience seriously. Perhaps we might reflect on what is happening in our lives at this very time; or perhaps we might find ourselves reviewing events and movements from an earlier stage; or perhaps both.

Here’s a question to ponder: Is a synthesis possible between the collective wisdom of our religious tradition and our own experience? Or, to ask the same question but from another angle: what happens when they interact – or perhaps collide?

The biblical text I cited above indicates something of my response to the question: Yes, the ‘scribe who is being trained for the kingdom’ does indeed require what is both old, and new. Much of what I will reflect on here will explore what happens when they collide. Having originally trained in chemistry, I tend to approach everything in the mode of experiment!

It’s helpful to state clearly that of course no person invents the whole of their knowledge. All of us have vision because we ‘stand on the shoulders of giants’. Our faith has been handed down to us by the ‘great cloud of witnesses’. We are born into a tradition. Or perhaps we adopt a tradition as an enthusiastic young adult – but even then, all we are really doing is ‘clipping on’ to the tradition inherited from birth an additional layer.

For the purposes of what is set out here, leaving aside more technical definitions ‘tradition’ is that collective knowledge and wisdom which is handed down by successive generations. It stands the test of time. It provides the necessary resistance to idiosyncrasies to which the individual

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5 Reputedly a remark of Isaac Newton's.
6 Hebrews 12:1
is prone – sometimes with dangerous or violent consequences. When an individual is unable to stand against the blasts of fate, tradition provides a safe containment. All this is good.

However, tradition also tends towards stasis. Every era of the Judeo-Christian tradition – and indeed every religion – reveals this awkward fact. As the encounter between Jesus and Nicodemus so magnificently illumines, tradition gets stuck. Tradition resists evolution. Tradition readily becomes concrete. In the ‘Sermon on the Mount’ we can see in Matthew’s Jesus the teaching that law always requires further fulfilment. John’s gospel gives us the well-known story of an individual who steps outside the comfort and certainty of tradition, to venture into the ‘night’, in order to see where life is going.

I am suggesting here that this relationship between the individual and the collective, between experience and tradition, need not be an impasse, but a dance. I am reminded that the early church ‘Fathers’ turned to the image of dance when searching for a metaphor for the relationship between the persons of the Trinity.

I will now reflect upon the possibility of such a dance, in four steps:

1. Tradition – being held in the spirit of the collective
2. Disruption - experience of the individual path
3. Separation – sacred task of descent
4. Return – return to the collective with revitalised tradition & revitalised identity

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7 John 3:1-21
8 Matthew 5:17
9 John 3:2
10 περιχωρήσις perichōrēsis
Here is a question which you might find helpful for reflection:

1. What do you value most about the spiritual tradition which contains you?

I: TRADITION

Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house? (Luke 2:49)

A spirituality begins somewhere. Of course, at its deepest level it begins like life itself: as pure gift; from one’s parents and their heritage; as a deposit of the beliefs and practices of a religious tradition of some kind. In the Christian framework, this means Sacred Scripture and the teaching Tradition of the church. This is the necessary foundation: the adolescent Jesus is found to be at the feet of the great teachers of the tradition, ‘in the Father’s house’.

At the communal level, the churches have placed great emphasis on a ‘Sunday School’ methodology for imparting ‘the truth’ of the tradition. This method extends well into adulthood, as many church teaching programmes sadly illustrate. In this transaction, ‘truth’ is conceived quite literally as a deposit. The task for the individual is to believe in this externally determined truth. The traffic runs one-way: ‘truth’ flows from the collective to the individual, whose task is to ‘believe’ it. The task of the individual is to learn the received truths and submit to the collective interpretation. Religion from this viewpoint is primarily about the accumulation of ‘religious facts’, Law, ethics, being ‘good’, proving oneself ‘worthy’ of the ‘reward’.

11 Luke 2:49
Such a stage is necessary. Persons who have not learned to submit to collective wisdom tend to lack the necessary empathy for the needs of others and the community. However, a person cannot afford to get stuck at this stage. The spiritual worldview which calls this ‘deposit’ of correct facts ‘answers to life’s questions’ tends to be static; everything is fixed and ordered.

What happens when a person’s spirituality does not develop beyond this static and external data? One form or other of schizophrenia – that is, becoming split. Here is one schema for summarising three readily recognisable forms of the split:  

1. Distorted. An adult imposing a Sunday School level of faith on an adult world, an otherwise intelligent and well-educated person illegitimately forcing answers out of the Bible on contemporary issues about which the Bible is in fact silent. This makes a person’s religion distorted, typically imposing rigidity on others.

2. Disgusted. An adult rejecting entirely one half of reality (the soul), based on the mistaken belief that Sunday School teachings which no longer cohere with what we know are to be believed in literally as essential to Christian faith. This is a person disgusted with religion, who typically leaves the church.

3. Divided. An adult person with a painful sense of mismatch between their faith development (which seems to require them to believe in things that contradict reason) and their social, psychological, and scientific development in all other respects. This makes a person’s religion deeply divided, typically living very uncomfortably within the churches.

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Why does something fundamentally good – our religious tradition – foster these three forms of dividedness? I think the flaw in tradition is that it forgets where it comes from: which is always out of experience. Encounter with God comes first: words, doctrines follow, in an attempt to explain the encounter. And when tradition presents itself as though it was dropped out of heaven as a complete package in full and final form, it has lost contact with the living Spirit who gave it birth in the first place. But tradition is the fruit of the Spirit’s mediation via living images. When the images are no longer living we are left with the dry dust of mere formalism and repetition, a thing both external and terminal.

So eventually we will be confronted with the conflict between our spiritual experience and the tradition of the group with which we have identified. Sooner or later, the group’s ideas, or group belonging, will thwart our spiritual development. “Entrance into the kingdom [of God] requires the disidentification with the group and the assumption of the burden of being a person. This is often painful when we can no longer identify with outer collectives.”

Time and again Jesus teaches that this disidentification with the group is necessary, in so many images and metaphors: that a person must “enter via the narrow gate... [that] the road is hard that leads to life”; that “those who lose their life for my sake will find it”; that “whoever comes to me and does not hate mother and father, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple... Whoever does not carry the cross of themselves... is not able to be my disciple”. If the Kingdom is to come, the personality identified with the group must die. His own ‘face

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14 Matthew 7:13-14.
15 Matthew 10:39
16 Luke 14:26-27. The Greek is very explicit in stating that the cross a person must carry is not Jesus’ cross, but their own: τὸν σταυρὸν εαυτοῦ
turned toward Jerusalem’¹⁷ - a symbol of the necessity of his complete separation from the group identity – Jesus’ counsel to would-be followers sounds harsh to our modern ears: "Foxes and have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Human One has nowhere to lay his head."

“Separating ourselves from the group identification is indeed a painful process, for as long as we remain submerged in the group, we find a certain security.”¹⁹ But for a person to enter the kingdom of God, it is necessary to leave the familiarity and the apparent securities of the group, to ‘let the dead bury their own dead’.²⁰

Moreover, such separation is generally not welcomed by the group. Indeed, Jesus warns the would-be follower to expect the group – family, friends, co-religionists – to react violently. ²¹ This is because the group is always threatened by anything that questions the supposed unanimity upon which its apparent solidarity is based, and to which it demands all else be sacrificed. The church’s long history of violent dealings with those it regards to be ‘heretic’ is part of its dark and largely denied shadow in this regard.

Nevertheless, Jesus promises that what we seek is in fact to be found not in the group - but inside, within.²² And he assures us, again and again, that we need not be afraid,²³ that it is the Father’s good pleasure to give us the Kingdom.²⁴

Here are some further questions for reflection:

¹⁷ Luke 9:51  
¹⁸ Luke 9:58  
¹⁹ John A Sanford, p80.  
²⁰ Luke 9:60  
²¹ Mark 13:9-14  
²² Luke 17:21  
²³ e.g. Matthew 10:31, 14:27, 17:7; Luke 5:10, 12:32; John 6:20  
²⁴ Luke 12:32
1. Are there way/s in which you feel an inner tension, torn perhaps between what the tradition seems to have mandated, and what you have experienced?

2. What does it feel like to be separated from the group that has given you identity, belonging, and meaning?

3. What is ‘prayer’ in this situation?

II: DISRUPTION

The spirit/wind blows where she wishes and her sound you do not hear, but you do not know where she comes from or where she goes away. (John 3:8)

As the Bible itself repeatedly demonstrates, static-state law-oriented religious structure is always interrupted and overthrown by the Spirit.

The Law was a protection against a direct experience of the kingdom of God. By fulfilling the Law, men hoped to achieve their proper relationship with God without having to relate to the inner world. But it was... an ethic of obedience, not of creativity. The kingdom, however, is dynamically creative, and the ethic of the kingdom is a creative ethic based on consciousness and love, not on legalism.\(^\text{25}\)

The lives of all the great prophets reveal this shocking fact. For Christians, the life of Jesus is the archetypal model for the Spirit’s disruption, with St Paul a close second. Jesus himself is driven out, quite vigorously, by the Spirit.\(^\text{26}\)

\(^\text{25}\) John A Sanford, p67.  
\(^\text{26}\) Mark 1:12
Life breaks through, in spite of us: because life is creative; the Kingdom is always midwife to ongoing creation. There is not a single person who is exempt from this universal law. Life’s breakthroughs are as many and as varied as are we. Life’s breakthroughs can disrupt in the physical, the moral, the intellectual, or the psychological domain.

• **Physical Disruption**

Perhaps the most readily recognisable experiences are the physical disruptions, life’s myriad of unwanted, unsought experiences, those events which happen to us: accident, illness, the sudden death, the ‘natural disaster’, social-political upheaval, the loss of a job, or a relationship, or a home, or a land. Something we relied upon for our physical wellbeing is suddenly and mercilessly stripped from us. Like Job, we find that such happenings prompt profound questions of our received images and ideas, the religious traditions into which we have been formed. Like Job, these disruptions are experienced as a kind of ‘enemy’, a malevolent factor against us, whether we ascribe to it a personal name or not.

• **Moral ‘Failure’**

The moral disruption is the unintentional violation of our own self-imposed moral code, the breaking of the ethic which our religious tradition instilled in us, and which we have imposed on both ourselves and others. That is why we experience it as a ‘failure’. As St Paul observed, in a myriad of ways ‘I do not understand my own actions. For I do not what I want; but I do the very thing I hate’.  

> Romans 7:15,19

27 We can be profoundly shocked that we ourselves have broken our own law: an affair, a theft, an assault, a lie, a deception, envy, greed, lust, jealousy, rivalry, slander. ‘Moral failure’ need not be spectacular, but
may rather be very ordinary; the myriad of small ways which give expression to the gap between the kind of person I want the world to believe about me, and the truth of me that I cannot face, and about which I may be unaware. The way I drive my car, talk to my employees, relate to the lowly-paid staff at the café or supermarket, or the person issuing me with a parking ticket: even the most mundane detail of my daily life is capable of revealing me to myself.

The Christian tradition shorthand for all this is the ‘seven deadly sins’. But we need to get beyond Christianity’s moralising overtone in order to see how valuable this ‘failure’ can be for us.

This is the painful but absolutely necessary confrontation with what Jung called ‘the shadow’. Jung spoke in terms of the shadow as the rejected aspect unacceptable to the ego-persona, without which a person remains incomplete, not whole. If you prefer the bluntness of Jesus: “Why do you see the speck in your neighbour’s eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye?”

This is obviously a description of an inner reality. The ‘log’, the shadow, the ‘enemy’, is the unacknowledged, repressed aspect of ourselves, without whom we in fact remain one-sided, but who needs to be loved, integrated into a fuller and more comprehensive self. “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.”

Yet how can we ‘love the enemy who is within us’ when this enemy has caused us to violate the moral code? If we only see ‘moral failure’ in terms of law, rules, regulations and so

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28 Matthew 7:3
29 Matthew 5:43-44
on, it will be very difficult, if not impossible. The adjustment required is to be able to distinguish between the legitimate censure against acting out inappropriately, and the equally legitimate inner task of consciously integrating the very energies which were unconsciously acted out because repressed or despised. Had these energies been conscious, they would not have taken over the one-sided ego resulting in the acting out. But when this adjustment is made, then any external moral failure can be the occasion for astounding inner development: ‘O happy fault!’

Such a confrontation with one's shadow, one's inner ‘enemy’, is a great crisis; a crisis precipitated by the Holy Spirit. Like Paul on the Damascus road, we come to the same realisation as that zealous law-abider: we too come to hear the voice of Christ “Why do you persecute me?” 30 Like Jesus in the wilderness for forty days, we too come to the awareness that the ‘tempter’ is our own will to power; which must be safely integrated by being set in its proper place. 31 The Spirit is always the instigator!

• Intellectual Crisis

The intellectual crisis is the overthrowing – the smashing if necessary – of the pictures and ideas and dogmas of our inherited religious tradition. Nicolaus Copernicus was a faithful member the church and a third order Dominican. Realising the serious theological implications caused by his heliocentric model of the universe – and not wanting to attract the ire of ecclesiastical authorities - he withheld the publication of his magnum opus De Revolutionibus for more than two decades. He was presented with an advance copy as he lay on his death bed! 32 It has been suggested that Isaac

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30 Acts 9:4
31 Matthew 4:1-10
Newton may well have slipped into depression as a consequence of publishing his *Principia Mathematica*, realising how his new physics would be used against religion.\(^\text{33}\) The disruption, and certainly the collapse, of our dogmas is a real crisis – not to be underestimated.

- **Psychological eruption**

The psychological eruption is perhaps the most difficult to get to, if only because the psyche is the least known and most feared reality in our time. Mental health is the ‘Cinderella’ of medical systems everywhere. Much of science still denies the reality of the psyche, in spite of the mounting evidence from science itself.\(^\text{34}\) The worlds of commerce and marketing admit the psyche only insofar as it can be manipulated and commodified so as to improve ‘KPI’s and sales figures.

It is perhaps strange that we tend to overlook, or dismiss as ‘nonsense’, the universal, ‘democratic’ access we all have to the psyche; via the nightly drama of our dreams. Episcopal priest John Sanford called them ‘God’s forgotten language’.\(^\text{35}\) Carl Jung’s dreams exemplify the profound disruption the psyche works against religious tradition – perhaps best illustrated by the dream in which a giant turd smashes the great cathedral!\(^\text{36}\) But every person dreams, and every person can observe – if we are willing to be open to the data – the ways in which the symbols of dreams disrupt their inherited religious tradition.

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All of these disruptions are by definition unsought, and unwanted. They can be quite shocking. It may even feel as though everything we have previously held to be sacrosanct is threatened. It is a real crisis: both painful and disorienting. Nevertheless, I am suggesting that the crisis is meaning-full, and therefore creative.

But there are two common reactions to perceived threat which threaten spiritual growth: projection; and denial. In the first case, the accident, for instance, is simply regarded as someone else’s ‘fault’. Typically, a scapegoat is found to blame for illness, death, our own moral failure, or even the natural disaster. In the second case, perhaps worse, the disruption is dismissed as meaningless: the dream is belittled as a ‘mere nonsense’; the accident as ‘mere chance’, the intellectual crisis is avoided by partitioning the mind, accompanied by a hardening of dogma and a widening of the chasm between tradition and experience.

All the major Biblical figures experienced some profound disruption to the religious law they had inherited; and what made them great was their willingness to be transformed by the encounter, in spite of the scandal against their previously static position and the Sacred texts they had used to bolster their position. The transformation may even be somatised: Jacob’s hip is permanently disfigured; the risen Christ bears the wounds of crucifixion.

Crucially, where there is no disruption to tradition there is stagnation. Only the disrupted tradition evolves, develops, is capable of creativity. This was Jesus’ contribution to his inherited religion. The unwelcome disruption is not a problem to be solved; rather, it is a creative act, an evolutionary

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37 Genesis 32:25,31
38 Luke 24:40; John 20:20,27
development, demanding adaptation, mutation, transfiguration.

So in pondering the ways in which the Spirit disrupts, some further questions:

1. What disruption/s are occurring in your life, at this time, or perhaps at some earlier time?

2. Can you recognise in such disruptions purpose, direction, a goal?

III: SEPARATION

I have been suggesting that our spiritual undertaking must be founded upon a received tradition; but that this tradition always tends towards stasis, concrete; and that the same Spirit who gave birth to the tradition is always disrupting it for the sake of evolution, development, transformation. I’ve invited us to reflect on four common ways in which the Spirit disrupts us. Now I turn to what the disruption requires of us: separation from the tradition which has formed and contained us.

It is perfectly normal to resist the uncomfortable, possibly even shocking, disruptions which Life presents to us; and to resist separation from the containment of our spiritual tradition. Only a masochist would actually seek such discomfort. But if we can accept what has been given, against our wishes, in spite of ourselves, and pay full attention to it, then we may enter into the sacred task of transformation, ongoing creation. This phase of the spiritual path delineates the critical difference between a true spirituality and a pseudo-spirituality which is in fact ego-centric:
The desire to be in God’s image without attaining Christ’s image is a desire for immediacy, which wants everything without detour and without self-actualization, a narcissistic desire of the ego to settle down in God, immortal and almighty, that doesn’t find it necessary “to let its life be crucified” and to experience the night of pain.39

We see this writ large in Peter’s response to Jesus’ prediction of his suffering and passion; and in Jesus’ stern rebuke of Peter.40 I painfully recognise my own desire for the short-cut of ‘immediacy’!

Separation from the collective is the path of descent. Mythology has for millennia explored this motif of course. Christian tradition draws on this deep well of wisdom; and adds its own unique insights. It’s one thing to give intellectual assent to the fact of the disruption; but quite another to trust the disruption, to be prepared to be taken on the way of descent.

The path of descent is very well known in the Christian tradition, and indeed all religious traditions: “When you were younger you used to fasten your own belt and go wherever you wished. But when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go.”41 Peter has to descend – in order to truly follow his Lord. The sacred task of healthy religion necessitates the path of descent: a ‘falling into the ground and dying’;42 being driven into the wilderness by the Spirit to face one’s inner landscape;43 a ‘self-

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40 Mark 8:31-33
41 John 21:18
42 John 12:24
43 Mark 1:12-13
emptying’; 44 a ‘dark night of the soul’. 45 In passing, it’s astonishing and exciting that in our time the physical sciences have begun to articulate descriptions of the physical order which so resonate with spiritual reality. 46

Sooner or later every person must face descent. The matter can be put off, of course, even until the last breath it would seem. Yet no person is exempt from the final stripping. Descent comes to us all. The only question is this: will we attempt to avoid the path of descent; or will we embrace it in order to be taken to the transformed humanity the Spirit seeks to accomplish in us?

The choice is between consciously suffering our secret, hidden interior, our ‘log’, our own inner ‘enemy’, or suffering unconsciously as a consequence of trying to avoid it. The spiritual masters have always argued for conscious suffering over its alternative. “Whoever does not carry their cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.” 47

The disruptions given to every person are unique, particular, according to place and time and personal story. Disruption is not chosen; it is given to us. Likewise, no person gets to tailor-make their path of descent – the attempt to do so being nothing other than the grasping of the ego-centric personality of course. The path is given, by Life. There is nothing ‘fair’ about it.

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44 Philippians 2:7
45 St John of the Cross
47 Luke 14:27
The healthy spiritual question is not, ‘Why did God visit this upon me?’ even though it’s a perfectly normal response to suffering by the child within all of us. The healthy adult spiritual question is, rather: What is the meaning of this? As Carl Jung famously declared, a person can endure any amount of suffering, so long as they can find it to be meaningful.\textsuperscript{48} In a luminous description of his experience of descent, Teilhard de Chardin wrote: “And when I had to stop my exploration because the path faded from beneath my steps, I found a bottomless abyss at my feet, and out of it came – Arising I know not from where – the current which I dare to call my life.”\textsuperscript{49}

A person who embraces this path, rather than attempting to run away from it, soon discovers that everything previously regarded as certain falls apart. The deepest expression of this, for Christians, would be the Markan Jesus’ cry of dereliction from the cross.\textsuperscript{50} The ‘answers’ which their religious tradition provided to them as children dissolve: they make no sense at all in light of the new information. This is just as true in the case of an intellectual or a moral crisis as it is in a physical crisis. The person whose mind is open to the immensity and complexity revealed to us by the physical sciences can no longer read their sacred texts in the same way. The person who unconsciously acts out the breaking of their own moral-religious law can no longer see themselves or read their sacred scriptures in the same way again. The person who has come to see the dilemma in the doctrine previously unquestioned can no longer interpret or apply it in the same way.

\textsuperscript{50} Mark 15:34
The very purpose of this path is the complete collapse of ‘answers’, certainties; of all that was in fact very good in the religious tradition which formed us. It is necessary: “the Human One must undergo great suffering... and be killed, and after three days rise again.”

Death is the prerequisite to new life. We recognise the ‘Paschal Mystery’.

Ultimately, even image of God must die; because it is only an image, not God in God’s Godness. Only when our images of God die can we be taken to the deeper truths about God. Only when our images of ourselves die can we be taken to deeper truths about ourselves. This is John of the Cross’ Dark Night:

“God desires to [lead the person] to a higher degree of divine love... in which they become capable of a communion with God which is both richer and freer... It is then that God darkens all... light... Inevitably they find this new phase in their spiritual journey bewildering, since everything has been turned back-to-front.”

What is happening? In the midst of the darkness and the felt sense of loss of certainty it may seem that nothing good is happening! But in fact this is another moment of ongoing creation. The Virgin Mary and Joseph her spouse may well have endured a seemingly endless depth of suffering, in which the very tenets of their received religious tradition were collapsing. But in fact the Holy Spirit who ‘overshadowed’ Mary, who confronted Joseph in dreams, was preparing a new creation! During Holy Saturday

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51  Mark 8:31
53  Luke 1:35
54  Matthew 1:20; 2:13,19,22
everything is being refashioned, remade, renewed, reimagined, reconstructed – in darkness!

And here is the key to this spiritual phase: everything in the received tradition is being reinterpreted by the reality of the experience – which is always animated by Spirit, or ‘Life’, if we prefer.

We could say that in this phase experience trumps tradition. But that does not mean tradition is obsolete. It only means that for tradition to be renewed it must apparently be overthrown by the disrupting experience; which is the work of the Spirit who blows where she will.\textsuperscript{55} The apostle Peter underwent this crisis on the roof top at Joppa.\textsuperscript{56} Martin Luther experienced precisely this disrupting in his monk’s cell: and so have countless other famous and less well known spiritual pilgrims down the Christian centuries.

No one knows how long the path of descent might last; and no one can orchestrate or strategise themselves either into it or out of it. Depending on a great many factors, many years may be spent in this deep and dark place. It is an unfathomable mystery that there are some individuals who live much of their lives in this space.

When one is in the midst of this shocking and stripping phase of spiritual development it does appear as though everything previously assumed to be true is in fact false. But ‘objective’ truth or falsehood are not the point at this time: it is enough to feel and to trust the feeling of disorientation and unknowing. It is a profoundly disturbing, searing, and lonely experience. It’s impossible to share what’s happening. Indeed, it may well be dangerous and destructive to attempt to externalise what is in fact an interior reality. The shock of

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{55} John 3:8
\textsuperscript{56} Acts 10
\end{footnotesize}
the conflict must simply be held, contained: we might even say ‘believed in’ at the secret interior level. ‘Go into your hidden room and shut the door; and there, your Father who sees in secret will reward you.’\textsuperscript{57} “It is necessary...”\textsuperscript{58} And, in spite of how we feel, we are not abandoned:

When the darkness engulfs us, none of us knows how we shall respond. Whether we are called to face terminal illness, the death of one we love more than life itself, the breakdown of a marriage or the desolation of an unrequited love, a parent with Alzheimer’s or the loss of a job, dancing in the dark is the hardest dance, and many are defeated by it. Yet I have learned many times that suffering, when permeated by love, can have creative power. There is an anonymous first-century saying: ‘When I light a candle at midnight, I say to the darkness: I beg to differ.’ \textsuperscript{59}

This is the key: the received religious tradition is not in fact thrown out – as it might have shockingly seemed at a certain stage of the process – but re-created, reimagined, renewed, transformed, trans-figured. The fruit of the descent is a truly creative and life-giving new understanding of the sacred texts and the teaching tradition. The tradition, which is perennially at risk of stagnating, is miraculously renewed: it’s a ‘miracle’ because the author is neither the tradition nor the suffering and isolated individual, but the same Spirit who hovered over the initial chaos.\textsuperscript{60} The ‘law’ is not being rejected, after all, but brought to \textit{completion}.\textsuperscript{61} An individual undergoing the path of descent given to them by the Spirit

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{57} Matthew 6:6
\item \textsuperscript{58} Luke 24:26
\item \textsuperscript{59} Michael Mayne, \textit{Learning to Dance}, London: Darton Longman & Todd, 2001, p158.
\item \textsuperscript{60} Genesis 1:2
\item \textsuperscript{61} “Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill.” Matthew 5:17
\end{itemize}
has accomplished what no business plan or mission strategy can ever accomplish.

The path of descent is an intensely individual experience, as the revelation in Jesus amply illustrates. It cannot be accomplished while one is still identified with the collective. It must be undergone alone. In this place there is only the single individual’s cry of desolation.62

Questions for reflection on this dark path:

1. In what way/s have you experienced the Spirit’s call to separation from the collective/group?

2. What assists/supports you in the path of separation/descent?

IV: RETURN

I have been sketching out the steps of a mystical dance: in which the Creator Spirit – who, I am assuming, fashioned not only our tradition but all spiritual tradition – disrupts this same tradition in the service of ongoing incarnation; and who calls us away from the securities and certainties of our tradition and group belonging. To make that clear: the same Spirit who created tradition must surely be capable of transcending it, still creating. This would only not be so if we assumed that revelation was closed, say 2000 years ago – as Christianity has tended to claim. But even if that was ever a legitimate claim, then certainly in an evolutionary cosmos this cherished dogma has been rendered meaningless.

The fourth step in this dance reveals the purpose of the descent and separation. I am assuming that there is a

62 Mark 15:34
purpose, a direction, a telos, to employ the gospel’s key term: and that this constitutes the renewed individual’s return to the collective, to the group, for the purpose of its renewal.

Both religion and psychology suffer from the criticism – sometimes justified - that they foster self-centred individualism. In the case of religion, the criticism extends to its perceived other-worldliness. The caricature of Christians would be that the purpose of ‘believing’ is merely for the sake of individual ‘eternal reward’; an astonishingly widespread preoccupation, reinforced in so much doctrine, prayer, and especially in hymnody. This idea of ‘reward’ is founded on a static-state three-decker cosmology, which makes no sense in light of the reality of an evolutionary-expanding cosmos, and which is bound to be rejected by thinking people in our time.

The spiritual path outlined here envisages that suffering the full impact of descent and isolation is not so as to ‘win’ the promised the individualised other-worldly reward, as envisaged in static three-decker cosmology. Rather, the purpose is return to the collective, the group – so as to foster ongoing incarnation, renewal of the group here and now, in this time and place.

To make this clear, the purpose, the goal – of the disruption, the separation from the collective, the descent – is precisely in order to return to the collective with the precious insight that alone can renew the tradition.

We recall that Jesus emerges from the forty days in the wilderness with an authority ‘unlike any of the teachers of the Law’. So not only does the individual return with creative new truths which revitalise the tradition, something even more extraordinary takes place. This return

63 Matthew 7:29; Mark 1:22,27
simultaneously saves both the collective from its tendency to turn to concrete; and the individual from ego-centred individualism, through a reinterpretation of the individual’s experience itself. That is, my perhaps shocking experience – which has brought about a re-interpretation of the tradition – must now itself be re-examined in light of the renewed and expanded tradition.

This dynamic can be observed in the experience of Paul. In Luke’s account of Paul’s Damascus road encounter everything happens immediately.\(^{64}\) Paul appears to have instant ‘answers’ to everything, and talks non-stop. The unhelpful impression is given that Paul suddenly possesses new information and immediately blurts it out upon all and sundry. But in his own account of the experience, Paul says that he spoke to no one, and disappeared to Egypt for three years.\(^{65}\) Indeed, even after his return from Egypt he spoke only with a few, then disappeared for no less than fourteen years into Syria and Cilicia. By the time Paul writes explicitly about his experience he is deliberately silent about it.\(^{66}\)

The initial shock of the experience must have completely destabilised Paul; and could have easily resulted in his complete rejection of the tradition in which he had been formed, and merely turned him into a self-styled cult celebrity of an entirely new religion. The decisive factor here is that we have in the corpus of his letters an unshakeable determination to synthesise his experience with his tradition that it seemed to contradict. His experience has itself been reinterpreted in the light of the newly reimagined tradition, which prompts him to boast not in himself, but in Christ crucified.\(^{67}\)

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\(^{64}\) Acts 9:20
\(^{65}\) Galatians 1:16-18
\(^{66}\) 2 Corinthians 12:2-5
\(^{67}\) 2 Corinthians 11:30, 12:9
I’m inviting us to reflect on this: A person suffering the shock and terror and isolation of a direct experience of the Numinous is bound initially to imagine themselves right out of their tradition – possibly even into what they perceive to be a new tradition altogether. A vast and seemingly unbridgeable chasm seems to have opened up between the tradition in which I have been formed, and the reality of my experience. The history of religions is littered with such happenings. Yes, the wilderness experience is needed in order to be able even to reimagine the inherited sacred texts and tradition’s teachings. But then we find that the experience itself must be reenvisaged in the light of the renewed tradition.

Jesus could have easily identified with the projection of ‘Messiah’. He could well have emerged from the forty days in the wilderness with the conviction that the law and prophets had all been superseded by himself. That Christians do sometimes characterise Jesus in this way is highly problematic; and may well say a great deal more about the church-collective than about Jesus. But when Jesus returns from this searing individual experience, to the crowds, his personal experience of divine sonship is itself interrogated and reimagined by the renewed tradition: the numinous experience of Divine Sonship must be reinterpreted in light of the renewed understanding of the Law and Prophets. The newly reimagined tradition works to recast his experience of ‘sonship’ and his understanding of ‘Messiah’. ‘Divine Sonship’ is completely transformed, transfigured – as non-violent, non-triumphalistic; as self-emptying forgiving victim!

Only a person who has undergone the path of descent and return is able to declare that the prohibitions of the law are not merely external things, but inner realities, who can

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68 Mark 1:11  
69 John 8:58
resist the projection onto himself of the popular image of Messiah,\(^{70}\) who is sufficiently free so as to be open to correction by an outsider, unclean, Samaritan woman at the well;\(^{71}\) and who can face both the religious and political powers with such equanimity.\(^{72}\)

This is a deep mystery: that the tradition can only be renewed, can only live, by this process of transformation, by what our tradition calls the way of the Cross; and that this transformation must be undergone by willing individuals who seem to transgress the tradition, and who may even, in extreme cases, be sacrificed ‘for the sake of the nation’,\(^{73}\) but who in fact turn out to be the ‘saviour’ of the collective.

Amazingly, ongoing incarnation requires that all are called to do ‘greater works than Jesus’.\(^{74}\)

1. Are there person/heroes of the faith for you who have sponsored such transformation of your tradition?

2. In what way/s might the Spirit be calling you to do ‘even greater works’ than Christ?

**CONCLUSION: SPIRAL**

I have been suggesting a dance in the spiritual life, by four steps:

1. Tradition – being held in the spirit of the collective
2. Disruption - experience of the individual path
3. Separation – sacred task of descent

\(^{70}\) Mark 8:27-37  
\(^{71}\) Matthew 15:27, Mark 7:28  
\(^{72}\) Mark 14:60-62, 15:2-5  
\(^{73}\) John 18:14  
\(^{74}\) John 14:12
4. Return – return to the collective with revitalised tradition & revitalised identity

In my own experience, I was plunged, against my wishes, into a place in which everything the tradition held for me about nature of God went up in the air. God’s official one-sidedness as ‘Love only’ became an impossible straitjacket. Experience erupted which radically displaced this with a perception of God as pure darkness. All the darkness, my own and that which Christian tradition has denied, indeed expelled, came bursting up with a vengeance. It felt overwhelming. This forced a shocking revaluation of Scripture and tradition. But then, just as unexpectedly, in the light of this newly reenvisaged Scripture and tradition my experience itself was gradually re-evaluated. The movement can be described as from almost gagging at the thought ‘God is Love’; to a completely reimagined God of Love, in the light of experience and reflection. I can now see that for me, the break with this aspect of collective tradition was ‘necessary’, the darkness was necessary - though that doesn't alter the fact that it was a wilderness time, a dark time of isolation and unknowing.

I mentioned at the outset that spiritual paths are often presented with the appearance of being a linear progression, an even trajectory of ascent. But surely the life of the psyche is like all life – for there is no distinction, ultimately, between physis and psyche, matter and spirit, two aspects of the one undivided reality.

We know from the physical sciences that all life is cyclic, at every level: that we are composed of the same elements created in the stars; that everything we are is returned to the great cosmic becoming; that matter and energy are interchangeable; that in the microcosm is contained the
whole of reality.\textsuperscript{75} And as everyone knows, the best dances involve a great deal of repetition!

Whereas archaeological religion and metaphysical materialist science alike envisage only an endlessly repeating cycle, without transformation; both post-Classical physical sciences and the Abrahamic sense of ‘salvation history’ envisage a trajectory, a direction – a \textit{τέλος} telos! We can now see that it’s simply that the ancient view and the materialistic view of ‘progress’ are incomplete; both only half the equation. Life proceeds in cycles, yes; \textit{and} on a trajectory. The synthesis of cycle and trajectory looks more like a spiral, found everywhere in the natural world. For me, at least, all this constitutes a synthesis of those viewpoints so commonly pitted as alternatives.

These phases of spiritual undergoing are obviously life-long. The experience of movement from being settled within tradition, disrupted by experience, into a time of separation and descent, followed by the return to the tradition in order to serve it - all this may well be repeated a great many times, and yet has a trajectory. Each cycle takes us deeper into both the tradition and ourselves – and of course, ultimately, into the Divine Ground of All Being, the \textit{Mysterium Tremendum}.

We also know from the physical sciences that not only is there no such thing as a static-state cosmos - assumed by those who wrote the Scriptures and framed the doctrines of our tradition – but that life is ‘self-organising’. “The striking emergence of new structures and new forms of behaviour, which is the hallmark of self-organization, occurs only when the system is far from equilibrium.”\textsuperscript{76} What is true about life in its totality must also true of spiritual development.

\textsuperscript{75} See Judy Cannato, \textit{Radical Amazement}, p95ff.
Thus, each cycle-spiral of spiritual evolution requires a disruption, a system far from equilibrium, in order to bring to the tradition an enrichment, an enlarging, an expansion, evolution. One has found a new foundation, based upon scripture and tradition; but in which one will eventually again become stuck due to the tendency to concretise, preserve, and settle, requiring disruption, descent, and return all over again – the final term of which is the Divine future who calls forward all things to completion.\(^{77}\)

The pattern can be observed at every level of structure. The dynamics of the macro scale are the same as the dynamics of the micro scale. The pattern is true of the Christian tradition as a whole, over the course of two millennia. It is true within the more limited Christian community, in the form of ‘denomination’; as within the more localised Christian community expressed as dioceses and parishes. Above all, it can be observed within the lifetime of an individual, as an expression of spiritual development, within the unfolding daily challenges and drama of life.

Finally, and crucially, it needs to be said that none of this can be claimed as something that we do or orchestrate. Spiritual development, by definition, is driven by the Spirit who blows where she chooses.\(^{78}\) I do not choose to have my understanding of Scripture and tradition overthrown; in fact I am deeply resistant! Rather, there is Another who chooses me;\(^{79}\) Who invites me to complete Christ’s sufferings;\(^{80}\) Who desires that I should do even greater works than Christ;\(^{81}\) Who takes me where I do not choose to go.\(^{82}\)

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\(^{77}\) Ephesians 1:10,23  
\(^{78}\) John 3:7-8  
\(^{79}\) John 15:16  
\(^{80}\) Colossians 1:24  
\(^{81}\) John 14:12  
\(^{82}\) John 21:18
“No slave can serve two masters.”\textsuperscript{83} Our ‘wealth’ is all that we hold onto – including the apparent security of our religious tradition. But we cannot serve that kind of ‘wealth’ and God; for even the finest tradition is not God. We are called to choose; and to be shrewd.\textsuperscript{84}

Our task, then, is to consent to what God is doing – to cooperate, to participate, to be co-creators - willingly, consciously, joyfully, hopefully, to ‘drink the cup’.\textsuperscript{85} No small task! But, in fact, it is enough!

Thankfully, we do this remembering we have a Companion who invites us to his banquet, who has gone this human way before us;\textsuperscript{86} whose Spirit guides us into all the truth,\textsuperscript{87} into life in all its abundance.\textsuperscript{88}

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\textsuperscript{83} Luke 16:13
\textsuperscript{84} Luke 16:8
\textsuperscript{85} Matthew 20:22
\textsuperscript{86} Hebrews 3:18
\textsuperscript{87} John 16:13
\textsuperscript{88} John 10:10