Dr. Clendenen explores some of the signs of the times that suggest that our cultural situation of postmodern fragmentation, disorientation and, at times, near despair might also contain the developing seeds of human spiritual maturing happening in the midst of a collective dark night of the soul.

A few years ago I listened to pastoral theologian James Whitehead speak in Chicago at Catholic Theological Union’s graduation. Addressing those with freshly minted ministerial degrees, he charged the graduates to bring their learning and gifts to a world where integrity and hope are in short supply. He went on to say:

For many, hope has been diminished by our nation’s bold experiment in Iraq. For many, hope has been jeopardized by the recent scandals and malpractice in the church we love and serve. We have too many friends and colleagues—mature, holy people—and the young among whom you work and teach—whose hope no longer runs through the religious institution where they long to be nourished. They have taken their hope elsewhere. Perhaps this depletion of hope makes sense in a time like ours. If our emotions are meant to tune us to the world, we should feel some of the disappointment that churns through our society. To put

Avis Clendenen, D.Min., Ph.D., is professor of Religious Studies at St. Xavier University in Chicago. She is also an adjunct professor of Pastoral Ministry at Catholic Theological Union in Chicago. Her latest book is Love Is All Around In Disguise: Meditations For Spiritual Seekers (with Irene Dugan) (Chiron Publications, 2004).
it more starkly: with all that is taking place in our land and our church, if you
are not depressed once in a while, your medication is too strong! You might try
to dial back the dosage a bit, so you can experience what the rest of us are
feeling.

The assembly chuckled at his remark about dialing back the dosage, yet there was
a felt communal resonance in the audience about the pervasive sense of depression
in a time such as ours. The postmodern experience in North America is character-
ized as a period of breakdown. A while back that’s what we used to name what
happened when someone’s depression really became crippling. They had a “break-
down.” Spiritually speaking, however, the traditions of mystical theology suggest
that some depressions and breakdowns are actually about something more in
disguise.

In this essay, I explore some of the signs that suggest that our cultural situation
of postmodern fragmentation, disorientation and, at times, near despair might
also contain the developing seeds of human spiritual maturing happening in the
midst of a collective dark night of the soul. There is hopeful direction, therefore,
in revisiting the processes of the dark night in order to let the wisdom of the
mystics assist us in addressing and redressing our postmodern crisis. My words
are directed to pastoral ministers who are called to be the diagnosticians of the
Spirit’s saving work in the midst of the raw of daily life. It is my contention that
in North America we are, as developmental psychologist Robert Kegan says, “in
over our heads.”

An Unprecedented Time

Not long before his death in 2001 at the age of 85, the eminent Roman Catholic
moral theologian Bernard Haring said, “I believe we have arrived at the
present point where it can no longer be disputed that we are in a pathological
situation.” Most probably this could be said at some point in every era; it just
seems the stakes are higher these days. The term “unprecedented” is used more
frequently to describe the happenings of these early years of the new millennium.
Recent examples include 9/11, Abu Ghraib, Enron, the sexual abuse scandal in the
Catholic Church, Katrina—all described using the term unprecedented. Of course
the same descriptor could be used with respect to the many astonishing creative
developments in science, technology, and the arts that have cured many bodies
and nourished human souls.

The problem lies in lining each up side by side and allowing the exploration of
the painful to be canceled out. In using a zero sum balance approach we avoid
investigating the patterns and staying long enough with the disquieting in order
to interpret its messages and draw some gold out of the furnace of our affliction
Simply said: we are easily distracted and prone to look away from the perplexing and painful. We sooner discount the disorientation than probe it. We insist that the dysfunctions within our present experience are a result of the individual’s problems and not systemic indicators. The problems in people get inside society and vice versa. Individually and communally, we simply don’t stay long enough in the exploration of the problems to feel them and take them to the deeper, more lasting resolutions that actually bring us to a new stage of growth. While this kind of fear and emotional flight are understandable, we may be sabotaging the growth that flows and follows from staying with the inward groaning, of which Paul so poignantly speaks in Romans 8.

We live in trying times. Tillich’s mid-twentieth century reference to living in an “age of anxiety” morphed into our current golden age of lying (Bok 1978). Recent literature in psychology claims that the narcissistic personality has become the most prominent personality type in Western culture (Sperry and Ansbacker 1996, 349). The national furor over James Frey’s deceptively fabricated best-selling purported “memoir” about drug addiction and recovery, A Million Little Pieces (2003), is an apt crystallization of what happens when pathological grandiosity becomes endemic and lucratively marketable.

Grandiosity refers to holding fantasies or embracing desires that are greater than real life can support. Unconscious as it might have been, it appears that grandiosity, not rigorous honesty, prompted James Frey to write the “memoir” that duped Oprah and 3.5 million readers. In discussing Frey’s license with fact, Newsweek essayist Anna Quindlen writes, “Truth is like a rock; if you chip away at it enough, you wind up with gravel, then sand” (2006). Those who claim to be disciples of Jesus know metaphorically, and literally, what happens to the house built on sand: the rains fall, the floods come and the winds blow buffeting the house and it collapses, completely ruined (Matt 7:24-28). Whatever we consistently repress inevitably winds up one day running and sometimes ruining our lives.

Psychopathology in Theological Perspective: The Grip of Tremendous Forces

As a Christian pastoral theologian I suggest that the grip of the two ever-present primal forces: (1) the lure to narcissism and (2) the intrinsic press toward individuation—the striving toward wholeness—has brought us collectively to an inner crossroads, which feels like the crisis of midlife in human psychospiritual maturation. The midlife transition and crisis involves making a crucial shift from an ego/persona orientation to a more genuine self/God-centered orientation. Midlife can function as a metaphor for the dawning awareness of the change in perspective when life is no longer experienced as a series of endless beginnings, expansion, and invincibility, but rather from the perspective of ends, limits, and
vulnerabilities. In midlife all that remains unattended from the first half of life returns and needs to be dealt with in new ways.

Theologically speaking, we are faced all over again with the polarities posed by the reality of original sin: the universal fact of our corporate fall from innocence and the consequent inherited experience of being born into wondrous life wounded with anxiety and estrangement from which no one escapes. In the second half of life the ego is faced with coming to terms with its defensive self-gratifying denials. St. Paul vividly captures the dynamics of the pull of the opposites in Romans 7:15-17. He laments that what he desires to do, he fails to do, and what he wants to resist, he succumbs to, as we all do.

Refusal to consciously engage new psycho-spiritual challenges (or to repress) is, again, wholly understandable. Letting go of former ways of being and the persona always involves significant loss and the changes it portends. Persons and communities imbued with a spiritual theology big enough to hold these purging and purifying processes know, in the biblical sense, that life-directing and life-giving energies arise from the ever-present gift of the Divine life, grace, that abounds “in spite of” human limitations (Tillich 1948, 153–63).

Psychologically speaking, Jung describes the inner depth dimension of the personal and collective personality as the shadow: the psychic dumping ground for all the characteristics of the personal or collective unconscious we repress, dislike, disown, and deny. Neither evil nor sinful, the shadow’s mischief, like original sin, activates destructively when we fail to notice its claim upon our lives. Choosing to remain in unconsciousness about what is happening within and about us will only deepen, in Tillich words, our “existential estrangement.” The shadow is essential to human wholeness. The seeds of psycho-spiritual renewal and future vitality lie hidden within it. In the face-off between the ego and shadow, according to John Sanford, God favors the shadow over the ego precisely because it is closer to the center and more genuine (Sanford 1993, 44–45). When we repress the contents of the shadow for the superficial sake of maintaining the ego ideal, pretending it does not exist, it does not evaporate, but collects in the dark corners of the personal and collective psyche waiting to pay itself out destructively in unregulated grandiosity, evasion of truth, intolerance, scapegoating, vengeance, and violence of all stripes.

It is not the time to flee from the rumblings of the shadow but to muster the courage to observe the diagnostic indicators in the midst of this postmodern
transition. We need to take a personal and collective step back and reflect; examine our own habits of mind and preconceived ideas; ponder the meaning of the principles and beliefs that we say we live by; and engage one another in thoughtful, prayerful conversation where, without forfeiting one's personal truth, we remain open to change. Pastoral leaders who are ministers are needed in a time such as ours to animate the disciplining of the direction of our energies and not permit our essential goodness, disposition toward relationality, mutuality, empathy, and stewardship to be hijacked by an unattended collective underdevelopment and suppression of consciousness.

I am thinking here of how often I have been present at and hear others speak of parish staff, liturgy committee, or faculty meetings where the unhealed functional narcissist commandeers the conversation, sabotaging the focus, flow, and creative productivity of the group. How many families have become spectators in each other's presence, fearful to broach what is most painful between and among them? Are we conscious any more of how we have silently normalized to the elephant in the living room? The danger we fear in looking together at our situation is that it will overwhelm and depress us; on the other hand, the consequences of refusing to take ownership can ultimately exact a far greater cost. I believe this is happening in our present now in too many circumstances and that we might consider, as Whitehead recommended, dialing back the dosage on what dulls our awareness of painful feelings and distracts our attention from what simply no longer works.

Again, I recommend that such a treacherous journey begins with the courage of staying long enough with the painfully unprecedented happenings in our time to plumb the depths of the symptoms paining our personal and collective sense of well-being. Make the connections. Put the dots together. While diagnosis determines treatment, an accurate diagnosis and effective psychotherapeutic treatment alone will not reconcile and heal the depreciating energy of these competing forces. There is no coming to consciousness without suffering the transformative process. We ask ourselves, upon what resources can we draw to respond to our predicament and rebalance the capacity to hold these tensions creatively? We are in search of a spiritual theology big enough to contain the increasing psychopathology and painfully unprecedented operative within human communities today. Retrieving the wisdom of the ages is a natural pursuit for people of faith. For Christian ministers the depth art form of discernment is more needed than ever to help individuals and communities balance the fierceness of our present moment. Paul Tillich said it masterfully in *The Shaking of the Foundations*:

> The wisdom of all the ages and of all the continents speaks about the road to our depth. It has been described in innumerable different ways. But all those who have been concerned—mystics and priests, poets and philosophers, simple people and educated people—with that road through confession, lonely self-scrutiny,
internal and external catastrophes, prayer, contemplation, have witnessed to the same experience. They have found that they were not what they believed themselves to be, even after a deeper level had appeared to them below the vanishing surface. That deeper level itself became surface, when a still deeper level was discovered, this happening again and again, as long as their very lives, as long as they kept on the road to their depth. (Tillich 1948, 56–57)

The Nighttime Road to Our Depth

It is my contention that the disquiet and difficulties, denials and deceptions, illusions and disillusionments—in extremis—experienced in our present time can be interpreted as symptoms of the spiritual dark night of the soul. The writings of sixteenth century Spanish Carmelite reformers and mystics John of the Cross and Teresa of Avila illumine the spiritual tradition of la noche oscura, the painfully mysterious dark night that brings spiritual transformation.

Discerning an authentic dark night of the soul from psychological depression and other emotional/spiritual dryness is no easy task. It is important to differentiate and determine a dark night from complicity in patterns of estrangement we call sin or in simple laziness and lack of responsibility for the challenges of living life on life’s terms. Not all psychic distress or emotional disorder is a signal or sign of the aching conversion of heart, soul, and mind that is the night of the senses and the spirit, the two interior processes of la noche oscura. The Spanish word for dark is oscura, literally meaning obscured. According to this mystical tradition, it is not uncommon for those who live the examined life to find themselves in seasons of life where the path to well-being is obscured.

The dark night of the senses is the shadowy experience where the Spirit is indeed active and working in tandem with our desire, together striving to liberate us from the idol making of grandiosity and willfulness. The stress here is on desire. Grace builds on nature. There is no coercion in God. We choose to dispose ourselves in freedom to cooperate with the One whom we believe will get us through the night. As the biblical Jacob wrestled through the night with the angel of God (Gen 32:24-32) so we are offered the invitation to yield to the mystery of, in Ezekiel’s words, God’s desire to put a new spirit within us, transforming hearts of stone to hearts of flesh (Ezek 36:26-27).

During the dark night of the senses, so many self-indulgent delusions are gradually relinquished. We come to know in the mirror dimly that it’s not all about us. A humbled heart widens. This is the via affirmativa of the dark night of the senses since we come to daybreak in this dark night via a realization of God’s goodness and grandeur through the senses, like the visceral-ness of Jacob wrestling with the angel. Yet, this is but a station in the longer darker night of the spirit (see May
2004). While there are many who experience the dark night of the senses (in mysticism called the kataphatic approach) there are fewer who respond to the even deeper invitations of the dark night of the spirit, the *via negativa* (in mysticism called the apophatic approach).

**Night Visits**

I believe that Tillich was pointing to the challenges of the dark night of the spirit when he said that those who truly yielded to the life of the Spirit “found that they were not what they believed themselves to be, even after a deeper level had appeared to them below the vanishing surface. That deeper level itself became surface, when a still deeper level was discovered, this happening again and again, as long as their very lives, as long as they kept on the road to their depth” (emphasis mine, Tillich 1948, 56–57). In John of the Cross’s poem *The Dark Night* he identifies three spirits that “visit” people in the night of their struggling from obscurity to illumination (in May 2006, 135–51).

The first spirit, technically called the spirit of fornication, is not about sexual activity but about idolatry. The lure to self-absorption confronted during the dark night of the senses emerges again now at a deeper level below the surface of the initial wrestling with the mythic Narcissus who embeds in our ego. So tenacious is our resistance to letting God be God and embracing our creaturehood relationship with the Divine that we must do the sacred wrestle all over again. The soul is freed of self-delusion and awakens to a level of life beyond ego’s defeat.

The second visit brings the spirit of blasphemy, which prompts our rage against the sovereignty and incomprehensibility of God. In the midst of allowing ourselves to come face-to-face with the raw of moral evil and the suffering of the innocent, like Job and Jeremiah, the soul cries out for justice to a seemingly silent God, a bystander to the misery abounding in God’s own creation and the horrors inflicted by God’s sons and daughters upon each other. This is the descent into hell, the midnight of the dark night. This is the agonizing wail in the Gethsemanes of our lives and our empathic solidarity with the world not yet redeemed. Nothing is more difficult than surrendering to incomprehensibility, yielding to the utterly mysterious.

Do not expect to recognize such abandonment in others if you have not crossed its threshold and begged that the cup might be taken from you. It is difficult to accompany another on the *via negativa* if you have yet to make the passage. This is not an indictment but a necessary insight in spiritual discernment. The reluctance, recalcitrance, and lack of empathy evidenced by some of our leaders in the institutional church in this unprecedented time are signs that more emotional and spiritual homework needs to be done.
Is John’s Third Spirit Among Us?

It is John’s third spirit that intrigues me most with respect to a time such as ours. In an odd focus on an obscure verse in the Book of Isaiah, John identifies the *spiritus vertiginis* as a manifestation of God acting in provocative ways. The passage records that God “infused into them” “a spirit of confusion,” “a spirit that distorts,” “a dizzying spirit”—*spiritus vertiginis*—that makes Egypt stagger in all it does, like a vomiting drunkard who misses his footing (Isa 19:14). The graphic visualization makes the point: vertigo. Everything seems to be spinning around us; the center feels as if it is not holding. Haven’t we wondered why some of our ecclesial and corporate leaders seem to make one misstep after another? So much seems just so off center. Why was it necessary for James Frey to so distort the facts of his own story of his descent into addiction and thus leave so many feeling dismayed and betrayed? Is it our perpetual sad lot to invest our allegiance in people time and time again only to discover their clay feet? Are we too deeply mired in being shaped by the art form of fabrication that we no longer can discern the trustable truth?

The prophet Isaiah’s words are an intervention of sorts directed at leaders that have become self-indulgent and arrogant. The prophetic utterance is directed at those whose vision has become blurred and whose judgments totter in error like a drunk stumbling around dizzy and confused. John describes this “vertigo” dimension of the dark night of the spirit as riddling the person with perplexing and confounding anguish that nothing satisfies or clarifies. This is precisely the purpose of this dizzying spirit. It is a paradoxical gift of God. More humbling than the dark night of the senses, the dark night of the spirit brings one to one’s knees, like an alcoholic finally reaching bottom and admitting powerlessness.

This surrender is, of course, an ultimate victory because the stripped bare soul gives herself or himself over to the Power greater than themselves. This is a radical kind of yielding to God that affects all the exterior and interior senses—it is the disposing of the whole self in right relationship with the Spirit of God. One fundamentally accepts not being who one believed oneself to be, and in that chink in egoism the dark spirit of critical self-examination of conscience and consciousness is illumined; the road to the depth opens. Way opens. The soul is recalibrated to *new time*. The possibility of living as a sacrament of the New Creation is at hand. We recognize the validity of such spiritual transformation by the freedom that is made manifest in renewed energy for truth, repentance, forgiveness, and empathy. These are the spiritual antidotes that heal the grip of so many self-indulgent
pathologies. This is the stuff of a spiritual theology big enough to contain the psychopathologies that mark and mar our Western, North American, postmodern human condition today.

Could it be that we are collectively being visited by spiritus vertiginis? The spiritual tradition of the dark night suggests that the bedeviling, disorienting, and depressing grip upon us these days just might be signals of an impending kairos. It would seem almost unprecedented to take this seriously, yet so much more of a hopeful way to journey together through and beyond this dark night.

James Whitehead concluded his graduation address reminding the collection of newly degreed ministers that:

> hope is a gift; there is a gracefulness to hope. We cannot summon or manufacture hope, nor can we guarantee it. It arrives by way of real people and actual institutions. God’s grace is not magical but springs from a center that is incarnational; hope touches us by way of fragile lives and all too faulty institutions. While we cannot generate or guarantee our hope, we can foster it. We do that by hanging out with the hopeful—hopeful people, hopeful texts. . . .

We begin by taking seriously the texts of the great legacy of spiritual mystics laying on our nightstands and in our libraries that we always intend to read and study but never quite get to. Then we stop long enough to dial back our fears and feel; to enter the disquiet of this time while holding in check the impulse to mentally do the zero-sum balance act that cancels deeper reflection and results in our failure to see the spiritual accountability of living the adult, mature life in a complex and conflicted time.

As Paul said, the spiritual gifts are always given for the “upbuilding” of the Christian community. These gifts come to us by way of fragile lives and our all too faulty institutions. The charisms of the Spirit are always among us. Of this we can be sure.

It is a time to consciously search out the spiritually wise among us to whom we can entrust our souls to guide the discernment toward the spiritual remedies for our contemporary ills. Who are these people of night vision? The second-century C.E. Indian Buddhist sage Nagarjuna suggested the presence of twelve identifying qualities: (1) much learning and (2) great wisdom, (3) not aspiring for material goods or possessions, (4) possessing the Spirit of Awakening and (5) great compassion, (6) enduring hardships and (7) having little depression or fatigue, (8) having great practical advice, (9) liberated from the mundane path, and (10) possessing knowledge and (11) erudition, and (12) comprehension of the signs of warmth [an indication of success in spiritual practice] (quoted in Walker 2000, 40). These are the holy ones to whom we can pledge our allegiance and devotion. They are the hopeful people unafraid to name the spirits visiting us in this dark
night. Gradually, over time, it will be the aggregate of the spiritually mature who will, with the grace of God, turn the night into day.

References


