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DARK NIGHT: HUMILIATION

The journey of being sucked in towards the center, willy-nilly, is what we are referring to as the Dark Night. Our journey from the center back to the world we call the Long March. Those are not two distinct journeys; they are one and the same. A man never goes to the center and then comes back to the world. He is always going both ways at exactly the same time. That is to say that the Dark Night is the Long March. The Long March is the Dark Night. And when they cross, there is white hot intensity.

John of the Cross helped us immensely with some basic images when we were studying The Dark Night of the Soul. He says that four basic things happen in this journey to the center. One begins to experience profound humiliation. He becomes aware of his own depth weakness, over which he begins to experience a very heavy kind of resentment. He then discovers that his life is always a Dark Night, always one of suffering. John says that experience is God's love in our journey to the center.

He relates the first two experiences to our intellect. One experiences that he is being invaded with a series of dark images. It is like going ice skating. One goes out and the ice begins to crack under his feet. And one is profoundly humiliated. Every image that one has of himself as a skater begins to collapse as he begins to fall through the cracking ice. Then he begins to sense that his old images of himself as a strong skater are beginning to collapse. He experiences himself as an extremely weak human being. And as he is sucked down deeper into the depth and the darkness, something happens to the will. The decisions that he has made become very dark. That is, he thinks at that point, as he is falling through the ice, "Why in God's name did I ever decide to be an ice skater? It was the biggest mistake I ever made in my life." There is profound resentment toward whatever decisions he has made up to that point in history. And as he falls through the ice, he senses that is always the way it is. No matter what decision he makes about life, whether he has on roller skates or a swimming suit, the depths of life have got him. Every image, every decision he ever made turns into profound and deep darkness.

Below that cracking ice something is attracting him and it is "no images." Every image that he ever had about life is totally collapsed and there is nothing to hang onto. There is no image of whatever he is falling toward.

What grabs us in relationship to our whole decision making process, calling into question every decision we have ever made, is the depth of no decisions. We see that every decision that we have made is for absolute naught. That is the way God loves us, and this experience never goes away. A lot of people

are very fearful of ice skating at the beginning, but they are fascinated with doing it and seeing themselves doing it. Then, when they fall through that ice, the fear of the unknown, of the no images and no decisions, is so profound that it enlarges to unbelievably proportions. But at the same time the fascination of being drawn towards that center is so great that it overcomes the more horrendous fears.

Sometimes colleagues are not very helpful in talking about humiliation. We were discussing this the other day and one of my colleagues said, "Well, that's easy. Humiliation is when you turn to your wife in Daily Office to pass her the peace, and forget her name."

Some years ago in the last few years of seminary before ordination, upper class students had the chance to get on stage at least once a year, and do a great sermon at the Sunday worship. All the years I sat in our chapel on Sunday and listened to my colleagues do sermons before me, I kept thinking how much better I would be when I got the chance. Finally my turn came. I knew the date a few months in advance. I also knew exactly who my colleagues were who had done a good job, and I was going to be better. I was going to be magnificent. I would make the great golden-mouthed orator look like Mr. Peepers when I was finished. I knew I was going to do a great job.

I had gotten through many years of seminary economically with one pair of khaki pants because I was always wearing an old beat up black cassock. I religiously dipped the bottom of the khaki pants into a vat of black dye once a year. That is all that shewed under the cassock. When my turn to speak came around, I did my religious ritual again with the pants. I even sent my cassock to the cleaners. I got my hair all slicked up, and still had the soap on my cheeks; they were just shining. I was perfect. And I kept imaging exactly how I was going to get on stage with great entrance.

When it came that part of the service for me to go up forward, I was very conscious of the whole sea of faces on me, that this was my great opportunity to show what a magnificent job could be done by a real pro.

I assumed my stance in front of the group, and stood tall. And stood there and stood there and nothing came. I had rehearsed at least three thousand times, but nothing came. I looked at the wall, but there was nothing written there. I looked at my colleagues and their eyes were staring at me. I said, "Say something. Give me a word to get me started." Nothing. Nothing would come. I looked at the windows but they were too far away to help in making a sophisticated exit. The only thing I could think of was, "My God if it were only Lent and they were covering statues with those purple cloths. If only somebody would come and drop something over me."

It seemed a tremendous silence came over me, where I could not find any words to say. It seemed like it lasted a half hour. I could not move. The thoughts would not come. I looked out at the sea of faces all of whom I was going to beat. They were embarrassed. Their eyes were cast down. They were shuffling their feet.

The words finally came after about five minutes of staring there with sweat all over me, my good clean cassock getting wet. I got through it all right, but I was not the same. I went on from sheer memory. I forgot all my gestures and just wanted to get off stage as rapidly as I could.

We always met outside afterwards, relaxed and joked and kidded around. I walked out with a Charlton Heston smile pretending, "Let's make believe

nothing happened." But something had happened. I was profoundly humiliated. Every image I had of myself at that time was completely wiped out. My colleagues were not too helpful to me, even when they were being kind. Some would say, "Well, I know you had a little trouble getting started, but that was just really great." Some were just very silent and too embarrassed to say anything. There is always a clown in the group, and he said, "Didn't recognize the voice, Alerding, but I'd know that breath anywhere."

I became profoundly aware through that experience that if I had been a success the way I wanted to, I would never have seen that my own images, my own success, and my own importance had collapsed. Finally, my relationships to my colleagues were not what life was all about. Something else was calling me, something deeper. I did not know what, but I knew that whatever was sustaining me in history--and it certainly was sustaining me because I was not sustaining myself--loved me. I do not know how else to articulate it.

The other day, a Friday morning, I walked up to the worship hall. I have always got this image that I have a great significant role to play in history. I always do the job that is given to me, take care of all the details and make sure that everything runs smoothly. I bear responsibility at all times. That is my significance. This world could not possibly do without me. So I walked into Daily Office and there was a little shuffling around. I looked around very nonchalantly and saw people scuffling over in the corner, putting on robes. Then it dawned on me: my congregation was assigned for the liturgy, but they did not know it because I did not tell them, and I was supposed to. I rushed over, but it was too late. One of my colleagues had put a group together and they were rehearsing as rapidly as they could. I sat back there in a deep silence. When your image is that you are a man who cares for the world, you take responsibility. Here I was with somebody else picking up my responsibility.

Did you ever see the end of the movie, Bonnie and Clyde, when the police caught them, brought out their submachine guns and started to shoot them? Every bullet painfully flew through the air and hit them and the car, and hit them and the car. That last scene went on it seemed for a half hour, all in slow motion. That is the way I experienced silence. I was in a slow motion movie, falling to the ground.

My whole self-image, that the world really needs me, began to fragment. I watched it fall before my very eyes. I began to fall into a deep, deep darkness. That image of my own importance was no longer freighting my relationship to the world's need. I say that the only thing we ever know about life is still held in the image of a nice, white, cold, stiff body on a cold, marble slab. Finally, all of us are the same. We are all equal in the fact of death.

In the worship service, people did not even notice. I realized life could go on with me or without me. Every image that I had at that point of my own importance, of the world's need for me, or of my need for the world, was totally fragmented. I was not needed. There was no image of why I would ever be needed in life.

It was only then, in that profound darkness where there are no images, that I saw a light bleep periodically. I realized that there was something,

even in my experience of no acceptance that kept reminding me that something in life, which I cannot grasp but which is certainly there, accepts me. I never would have realized that that fact is always true, and that humiliation is always the way it is, save through the experience of profound humiliation.

Some years ago, I was serving a small parish in Pritchard, Alabama, a black community just outside of Mobile. I had a boyhood friend in Houston I had not seen for years. He was becoming a big-time lawyer in Houston and he invited me down for Easter vacation. After the Easter liturgies I drove to New Orleans to take the shuttle plane to Houston. I was happy with the world. I was dressed in black with my collar and beautiful, phosphorescent red socks on-- just a spark of individuality that showed how much I loved and cared for the world.

I had a little carry-on bag, and since it did not fit under my seat or on the overhead rack, I was directed to a space at the end of the plane. As I put the bag in place I said, just to be humorous, "I'll just put my little bomb down here." The next thing I knew, the stewardess had communicated to the pilot that I was very intentionally carrying a bomb on the plane. So I slunk back to my seat after getting that straightened out, and the journey became a little less than a joyous one. I was saying little innocent things to myself like, "Alerding, how could you be so stupid?"

All the way down to Houston, I was replaying the scene. I said, "I think what I'll do to get out of this embarrassing situation is to tell my friend John about it. We'll laugh about it. My image of myself will be recreated and we'll go on in history." But I had forgotten what a rough and ready Irishman John was. When he thinks somebody is a horse's behind, he very nonchalantly and sophisticatedly says, "I think you're a horse's behind." So I kiddingly told John the story and he very nonchalantly and sophisticatedly said, "Why that's stupid, Alerding! Haven't you been reading the papers about all these bomb scares?" There went the image of my own importance I was trying to hold together.

Have you ever watched these western movies where these men are chasing after the bad man? They chase him over hills, up valleys, into trees. It seems to go on forever. The same experience is in those dreams in which somebody is chasing you, and you cannot get through the quicksand fast enough. That was the way I experienced profound silence then.

It was a nightmare. I was thrown into darkness and I was trying to chase the fragments of my own image of myself after being profoundly humiliated. Remember how something falls off your lap and hits the ground, and you keep thinking how you could have caught it if you had moved faster? As I watched the fragments of my own self image start to fall, I reached out for one but was not fast enough. And it slid down the drain. I chased another and another. They slid away, down the drain.

All I had was profound silence and darkness. There was no image left of myself. When I had nothing significant to hang onto about myself, then in darkness the Word came through to me, "Go on, Alerding. Go on." I listened closely and it kept saying, "Come on, Alerding. Come on." I had no image of whatever it was that was saying come on, but I knew it cared for me.

The other day, we were recreating that movie, Requiem for a Heavyweight, from RS-1. Take a look at Mountain Rivera. His image was that he was fated for the rest of his life to be a boxer, even though life itself was telling him he could not box anymore. He could not give up that image. He was fated to be a wrestler, and he did not understand that fact. He was always talking about his great seventeen years of boxing and when he was ranked number five. Near the end of the movie, his manager finally got so exasperated with the fact that Mountain did not want to go out into the ring as a wrestler, that he broke the news that he had bet against Mountain. All of a sudden, Mountain's images of his seventeen years as a boxer were shattered. He turned to his manager and said, "You know in all those seventeen crummy years, I've never been ashamed...Now you make me ashamed."

Whatever images he had of his fate were collapsing and he did not know what to do. Anger at watching his own images collapse brought into his being such passion to hold onto them that he was just angry with anything that came in sight. That is when the unfortunate thugs came into the room to try to stop him from leaving. He pummeled them almost to death on the spot. For when one's images start to collapse and darkness comes, one's first response usually is "No, I won't move!" One tries everything he can to hold onto those images.

Only then could the reality of the situation breathe in on Mountain. For he began to see, as clear as a bell, that his manager's life and his life were going down the drain unless he decided something about his life. But he had no images. Wrestling was not for him. He saw then that whatever was driving him and beckoning him was a lot bigger than his images about being a boxer. Those images had collapsed. At the end of the movie, he walked out of that locker room dressed as a clowning Indian. He had no images left, no support from his colleagues, no understanding of the world, and no place in which to hide. Everything had collapsed. He walked out amongst a jeering crowd which did not disturb him in the least. When he walked out, he walked with glory.

There is an illustration of a man who was totally humiliated. Humiliation is consciousness, or consciousness itself is humiliation. Humiliation is glory, and that is the way Mountain walked out into the ring. That profound humiliation is the glory. This profound glory and humiliation comes during those periods of silence.

I am not talking about time or space because I do not know when silence occurs. It can occur in the middle of the desert. It can occur in the middle of a great deal of hustle and bustle. It occurs when every image we have of others, of our relationship to them, of our importance in the world, of ourselves is fragmented and totally collapsed because something else has grabbed hold of us.

We are swirled into a world of darkness. We do not know the name of it, but we are so fascinated by what is drawing us onward that every image that we have had up to that point is for naught. For there is a voice that we can hear only at this point. It is always there, but the only time we hear it is in that silence. It cuts through the silence and it says, "This man, who is a nobody, a failure, whom the world cannot stand and colleagues laugh at, this profoundly humiliated human being is my son in whom I am well pleased." Then we see that the Dark Night is the only way that God loves us.

