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*We wove a web in childhood,
A web of sunny air.*

—Charlotte Bronte, *Retrospection*

TRUMAN CAPOTE ONCE WROTE, by way of opening a story, that he got the idea at a time in his life when he was living in a tree.¹ I got the idea for writing this book when I was living in another world. It was the world of silence. The world of silence, of course, occupies the same space as the world of noise. One does not have to be launched from Cape Kennedy to get there, yet its landscape is just as rare as the landscape of the moon. We live in a very noisy society here in twentieth century America; this is the land of stereophonic sound, Muzak, and screeching brakes. We are the anthill people. We swarm together in the streets of great cities; we drive fast cars to work, our eyes forever fixed on our watches, to be sure we are on time . . . and we are used to it! An old professor of mine once said that if the average American is in a quiet woods for as long as five minutes, he starts looking for a bar for company. And that is as true for the “shes” as it is for the “hes.”

I was living apart from that normal, American world when I first ran into Teresa of Avila. I was staying at the mother-house of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Nazareth in Kalamazoo, Michigan when the voice of Teresa reached out to me across four centuries and helped me to see just how noisy and shallow my own world had become. I was reading Teresa’s autobiographical *Book of Her Life*.² Teresa first told the world of her world of silence in this book about her own experiences with God in sixteenth-century Spain. In this book of mine about St. Teresa, I am going to follow Teresa’s lead and begin with the story of her life. I am going to tell that story from the perspective of a twentieth-century American, and with the tools of contemporary developmental psychol-

ogy, my own area of expertise. It is my hope that my perspective as a psychologist will enable the voice of Teresa to speak with greater clarity to this ferociously busy world in which I live. It is my further hope that you who read this book will be tempted to slip over to your library or bookstore to get a copy of her works for yourself. My aim is to act as a clarifier and tempter in writing this book. So let us get, right now, to the matter at hand.

Teresa of Avila was not born into a world of silence. She was born into a world as noisy and adventuresome as our own, the world of sixteenth-century Spain, the Spain of the century of gold. This was the Spain of the Armada and the conquistadors, the Spain which shortly before Teresa's birth sent Christopher Columbus over the seas to become the most celebrated of America's discoverers and be the first of a long string of adventurers seeking to explore and subdue the new world of the Americas. It was the Spain of Cervantes and El Greco, the Spain of Isabella and Ferdinand. It was the Spain of the Inquisition and the Counter-Reformation. In this Spain in the province of Castile, the town of Avila, Teresa de Ahumada was born on the twenty-eighth of March, fifteen hundred and fifteen.³

Teresa was the third child of her mother and the first daughter. Her father had two children by a previous marriage and was to father five boys and a girl after Teresa. She grew up in a large family of mostly male children.⁴

We know too that her mother, Doña Beatriz, was not yet twenty years of age when Teresa was born.⁵ Teresa herself indicates that she was the darling of her father and a companion as well as a daughter to her mother.⁶ She says it bluntly, "I was the most loved of my father." And a little later in her own story she tells of reading books of romantic chivalry with her mother behind her father's back. Her Spanish biographer indicates that her schooling was most likely done with her mother as teacher.⁷

Erik Erikson would have us believe that the first year of life is the year par excellence when one establishes, or not, a basic sense of trust. This trust is seen by Erikson as the most basic of all human strengths and the foundation of all religious sentiment.⁸ One can only infer that this favored child was treated as someone special from infancy. Her young mother's sweetness of character is well attested to.⁹ Transfer this gentleness to the infant; remember that the mother is very young herself, possessed of all the joy of her first female child and still early in her own childbearing years. Teresa's own great prayer of trust, written in her mature years, casts the student of her life back to an infancy that was surely a secure and pampered one. Listen to her words:

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Let nothing trouble you,
Let nothing scare you,
All is fleeting,
God alone is unchanging.
Patience
Everything obtains.
Who possesses God
Nothing wants.
God alone suffices.¹⁰

This is the most quoted of all Teresa's poems; it contains something of her essence. Furthermore, as we look at the earliest years of a woman who learned the meaning of solitude and silence as prime dimensions of spirituality, it seems here worthwhile to note that a desire to surrender one's self is the psychological hallmark of the religious person.¹¹ Trust and surrender are both words very basic in a religious person. A developmentalist seeks to anchor the great trust of a contemplative in infancy.

I should like to add that Teresa's sex is of significance in this rooting of her lifelong attitude of trust. Nancy Chodorow, Carol Gilligan, and the Jungian analyst, Irene Claremont de Castillejo, have all contributed to a contemporary psychology of woman by noting that at birth "the girl baby emerges from a being which is like herself. Being born, traumatic as that must be for any baby, is for a girl nonetheless a continuation of her identification with her mother. Physical separateness goes along with a psychological identification which lasts for years."¹²

All three of the authors cited above are comparing women with men. Boy children, as well as the men they become, define themselves as separate from their mothers. Men generally prize autonomy, the ability to stand on one's own feet. Male infants know very early that they are *not* the same as their mothers and that they must fight to maintain and develop this difference.

Teresa, as a tiny infant girl, knew that her young mother was a being basically like herself, as every female baby does. How maddening that we have only the barest sketch of Teresa's mother, so vital for the understanding of our subject. It is still significant for an understanding of Teresa that her mother seems to have been a very sweet person, much loved and loving. That the two read the romances of chivalry together in secret during the years of Teresa's later childhood shows that Teresa's mother had a streak of the romantic. None of these quali-

ties of her mother were lost on the young girl who was her first daughter. Their close relationship has a great deal to do with engendering in Teresa an attitude of basic trust and surrender that is at the heart of any mystic.

What can be said of Teresa the toddler? What do we know of her in the stage in life known by parents as "the terrible twos?" Again, we have only shadows to guide us. Erikson tells us that the crisis of the two year old is a battle between autonomy and shame or doubt. We have already indicated from Teresa of Avila's own writings that she was her father's favorite and her mother's darling. If willfulness is the hoped for outcome of the twos in any child, a willfulness tempered by a certain necessary shaming, then we have hit upon another key to this woman who was one of the great reformers of sixteenth-century Europe. Next to Queen Elizabeth of England she was probably the most powerful single woman in all of Europe when she was in her prime.

At the age of seven, by her own witness, she and her brother Rodrigo ran away from home to be martyred by the Moors. She tells us this story in the context of wanting to go to heaven. As she puts it:

I did not want this on account of the love I felt for God but to get to enjoy very quickly the wonderful things I read there were in heaven. And my brother and I discussed together the means we should take to achieve this. We agreed to go off to the land of the Moors and beg them, out of the love of God, to cut off our heads there. It seemed to me the Lord had given us courage at so tender an age, but we couldn't discover any means. *Having parents seemed to us the greatest obstacle.*¹³

If Erikson has defined the "terrible twos" as a time when one not only learns to stand up for the first time and take those first hesitant steps, he has said as well that this is the time when a child starts "standing up to" the adult world. There is a sense of initial autonomy and independence which is the basis of a healthy sense of will and self in later life. What parent does not remember the defiance of a two-year-old son or daughter? Parents know the child must somehow be tamed, but in my own father's terms, "You don't want to break the spirit" of these willful small folk.

It is clear that Teresa's family did not break her spirit. Granted, she was a few years beyond her twos when she and her brother ran away for their adventure with the Moors, but the sense of a willful child is

there loud and clear. Teresa was a willful child. I might add for the sake of a reader who might not know, that Teresa and her brother Rodrigo were apprehended by their anxious parents shortly after they had escaped on their adventure. Biographers ever since have pointed to this adventure of the young Teresa, told to us herself, as a kind of pre-figuration of her willfulness and determination so prominent in her later life.

Sigmund Freud once said in tribute to his Jewishness that it enabled him to stand up in his mature years against what he called "the compact majority."¹⁴ There is no question in my mind that a doting Spanish family had a lot to do with the amazing determination with which Teresa charted new paths in a life of silence and contemplation. Teresa was not only a willful inner adventurer; she was a great organizer as well. She began a new and stricter order of contemplatives for both men and women against intense opposition and she succeeded in making her reform last. Great reformers come from willful children.

The Spanish word *determinación* occurs again and again in her autobiographical writings. In the context of the life of the spirit she bluntly says:

It should be carefully noted—and I say this because I know it through experience—that the soul that begins to walk along this path of mental prayer *with determination* and that can succeed in paying little attention to whether this delight and tenderness is lacking or whether the Lord gives it . . . has travelled a great part of the way.

Another example:

How does one acquire this love? By being *determined* to work and to suffer, and to do so when the occasion arises. It is indeed true that by thinking of what we owe the Lord, of who He is, and what we are, a soul's *determination* grows, and that this thinking is very meritorious and appropriate for beginners.¹⁶

And so, we see the seeds of Teresa's later trust in God and the seeds of her later *determinación* in the shadows of her childhood that have come down to us. There remain two more stages in Erikson's description of the unfolding of childhood. The first of these is the crisis of what we Americans call preschoolers. Erikson sees the years of four, five, and six-year-olds as marked by a crisis of initiative ver-

sus guilt.¹⁷ These are the intrusive years when kids poke their noses into every nook and cranny of their worlds. They not only stand up to the world of grownups, they can run away from them. This is the age of exploration in both mind and body. The age when a sense of exploration is born or is forever hampered by too great a sense of guilt.

It was at this age that Teresa and Rodrigo ran away on their celebrated adventure among the Moors. I used this story as an example of willfulness on Teresa's part, but there is more than independence here; there is ACTION; there is imagination.

If the reader wants a parallel in the world of literature, I would suggest the character of Max in Maurice Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are*.¹⁸ Max, the bad boy of the story, is sent to his room without any supper, because he had made a sizeable amount of mischief of one kind and another. In the illustration accompanying the text, we see a boy, perhaps six years of age, dressed in a wolf suit and brandishing a fork, while chasing a terrified dog down the stairs of Max's house. When Max is sent to his room as a punishment for his mischief making, it turns magically into a jungle, another world, from which Max embarks in a magic boat to sail off through the nights and days and weeks to where the wild things had their abode. There, in the land of the wild things, hideous but interesting monsters, surely not too different from the Moors Teresa and her brother imagined, Max becomes the "wildest thing of all."

My point here is that the seven-year-old Teresa was possessed of traits as wild and bold as Sendak's Max, and that the initiative and imagination she showed in running away to the nearly mythical land of the Moors is not all that different from the youthful Max's journey to the land of the wild things. If anything, Teresa was even wilder than Max, because she not only imagined her journey to the land of the wild things, she actually tried to go there. She would have spent eternity in the land of the wild things, had she and Rodrigo managed to become martyrs, as was their intent. It would not be stretching the truth to say that the land of the wild things is a pretty good child's description of heaven.

The fact that she did not go alone, but with her brother Rodrigo, gives us another hint as to the character of the adult Teresa, which I hope to enlarge upon in a later chapter.

It should come as no surprise then for the reader to learn that the adult Teresa of Avila was a woman of action as well as being a contemplative of vigorous imagination. At the age of twenty, she

joined the Carmelite convent of La Encarnación against her father's will, slipping off to become a nun without his knowledge, and in effect, taking action where other means of persuasion for his permission had failed.¹⁹

Later, as a mature nun of forty-seven years, she began the reform of the Carmelite Order in a way startlingly like her escapade "to the Moors" at seven and her equally stealthy and bold entrance into the convent at twenty. After repeated failures to obtain all the proper, local permissions to found a new and stricter convent of Carmelite nuns, she arranged in secret for the purchase of a house suitable for a convent, obtained permission to do so from Rome, thus outflanking the troublesome bishop of Avila. She then quietly raised money for refurbishing the house, and, with the help of an influential, old Franciscan friar, convinced the bishop to let her and her half dozen companions occupy the first convent of the reform.²⁰

The model of stealth and audacity was to become her standard way of founding the new houses of the reform of the Carmel. It goes without saying that had not Teresa been possessed of great personal charm with which to pacify the local ecclesiastical authorities after the fact, as it were, her method would not have worked. She herself has left a meticulous account of the founding of all seventeen of the houses of the reform which took place in her lifetime. The account was written in pieces during the last ten years of her life, including a description of houses founded in the year of her own death! It is written²¹ by the mature Teresa, well established as "fundadora" of the new Carmel.²² Here are her own words on strategy:

I had learned that it was better to rent a house and take possession first and then look for one to buy. This was so for many reasons, the principal one being that I didn't have a cent to buy one with. Once the monastery was founded, the Lord would then provide; also, a more appropriate site could be chosen. . . . As for me, I was never much bothered by what happened once possession of the foundation had taken place; all my fears came before.²³

Her childhood definitely prefigured what was to come later in her life.

The last stage of childhood as described by Erikson encloses the years which are normally spent by American children in primary school. Freud termed these years, the time of latency.²⁴ These are the years, according to Erikson, when one learns the basic skills needed for

adulthood, symbolized in our society by reading, writing, and arithmetic. These are the years preceding puberty; their crisis is a crisis of work. Either the child learns those basic skills and in the process learns a sense of industry or she feels inferior to her fellow students.²⁵

Teresa of Avila certainly did not attend a primary school as the modern Western world knows such schools. Our Spanish biographer tells us that in all likelihood her primary education was given to her by her mother,²⁶ although there is evidence that she had other teachers as well. It is quite clear that Doña Beatriz, Teresa's mother, knew how to read, both from what we know of the cultural reforms stemming from Queen Isabella²⁷ and from Teresa's own witness.²⁸ Teresa was an avid reader as a child, reading pious works as well as tales of chivalric romance with her mother. She clearly learned sufficient arithmetical skills to become in later life a skilled manager of money. She wrote her brother Lorenzo in the Indies about her skill in monetary affairs:

... my experiences with these houses of God and the Order have made me so good at bargains and business deals that I am well up in everything, so I can handle your affairs as though they were the affairs of the Order. . . .²⁹

It is true that as a woman she had no higher education. She did not know Latin, the learned language of the day.³⁰ She had no university degrees, yet she was one of the first great prose stylists of the Spanish language, whose writings are still popular in Spain and read by students of Spanish literature all over the world.³¹ She was not apologetic about what she knew as we have seen in the quote above about her financial ability. Another tart remark, made in the context of advising one of the learned men who was to pass judgment on her writing about the life of the spirit:

As for the rest, he shouldn't kill himself or think he understands what he doesn't. . . . Let him not be surprised . . . that the Lord makes a little old woman wiser, perhaps, in the science than he is, even though he is a very learned man.³²

This is a woman, given the limited education afforded to the women of her age and class, who was not given to wondering about what she might have had. She is a woman whose formal education ended in her own childhood, learning the three Rs from her gentle

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mother and possibly another teacher. A woman whose earlier childhood years were marked by a venturesome spirit, a willful disposition, and a proclivity to trusting the God of her world. In our next chapter we will move from her childhood to her adolescence, the time in life which Erik Erikson terms the *crisis of identity*.³³