



PHASES OF THE UNITIVE LIFE

I

By a conviction born of experience, I mark the definitive entrance into the Dark Night of the Spirit as the first phase of the unitive life. Here begins the cauterizing, the burning-through to the deepest center of being, which is painful and shattering to all aspects of the self. The deep, deterministic reins of self-control have been taken away and the will power that glued together this fragile unity has dissolved. From here on, the reins of our destiny are in the hands of a greater power, a higher Will, and though we may unconsciously kick against the goad in painful rebellion, it is all to no avail. The only way out is to be submissive, to accept our helplessness and to recognize that peace of soul—the day it can be found—is our greatest ally. With no place else to go, nowhere else to turn, we have no choice but to go down into the depths of our nothingness where, at rock bottom, God eventually re-

veals Himself and discloses to us the rootedness of our existence in Him. Thus having traveled through the bottomless void of our being, we eventually come to rest in a deep union with God—the abiding stillpoint at the center of being.

II

The second phase begins with the discovery that, where there was pain, now there is peace: from here on, the work of the soul is to maintain this peace against all movements to the contrary. This is done by remaining passive to the peaceful, still center and by submitting everything to it, for we now begin to glimpse that, at bottom, this peace is the silence and stillness of God Himself. From this point on, we have continuous access to this stillpoint of our existence to which all aspects of being must now conform, so that no movement of mind or emotion can rob us of its silence or move us from this center. One learns how to do this through the process of an active passivity that ultimately brings about the self's new form of unification. Around this center will come together all the shattered, fragmented pieces of self that had been displaced and unhinged when the center opened up. This process of re-formation is the making of the whole person—the new man—an integration not made or maintained by human hands, but by the power and magnetism of the center drawing all parts to itself, reordering them in a way hitherto unsuspected by the soul. After this, all parts will function as a unit, all acts will derive from the center, and when this unifying process is completed, the Night of the Spirit is over.

III

This third phase represents the peak of the unitive life, ushering in the fullness of the contemplative experience.

In this unified state, the continuous interior silence is much like the habitual prayer-of-quiet that, because it is habitual, appears quite natural and, of itself, constitutes the backbone of the unitive life. Apart from this, either at times of prayer or when otherwise not occupied, all the faculties enter into this silence and remain for long periods lost in God. Here too, due to the silencing of the memory, we become familiar with a certain sense of loss-of-self which is unspectacular and impermanent. From the depths of this interior union is born a great strength, an accumulation of the power and energy of love that, after drawing us inward, would now move us outward because it cannot be contained within. This love is the burning flame that would suffer every trial and forfeit its life and experiences to be able to give as it has received. The strength of this generosity will constitute the turning point of the unitive life, acting as the preparation for all that follows. It is as if we had arrived on top a mountain and asked, Where do we go from here? What is left to be realized? Until now, the movement of life had been one of interiorization and unification but, once completed, this movement turns around and, with a thrust of inexhaustible energy, moves us out beyond ourselves to a life of selfless giving. Thus arriving at the peak, we have no place to go but down, a coming-down, however, that is a going-out—a more complete going-out of self.

IV

The fourth phase of the unitive life is the active phase that follows the same path and comes to the same end as Christ's active life. In other words, it is the way to Calvary and the crucifixion, the final death of the self. This phase is marked by the continuous flow of exterior trials, tests, and every type of suffering wherein the soul finds its sole refuge hidden deep in God—deep in the center that lies below the joys and sorrows of earthly existence. Those

who meet with success, renown, or any form of personal glory or satisfaction in this phase must forfeit Calvary because they will not be ready, will not have undergone the necessary preparation to come to Christ's own ending. By the very nature of the unitive state, the man of God moves contrary to the flow of this world's thinking and behaviors—so much so that his very existence in the world is antagonistic to it. And because he sees differently, he is forever destined to walk alone, totally alone. Thus, the way forward is to be rejected, misunderstood, and subjected to every conceivable tribulation—in a word, it means to live fully. In time, it is realized that the great desire to return measure for measure, to give as we have received, to do or die, has all been a subtle form of self-seeking. Where we had thought the inexhaustible flame belonged equally to God and self, we now see it was never for the self to use either for God or for neighbor, since the result would have been some form of self-expression or self-gratification. Now, we see there never was and never can be any adequate earthly form of expressing this unitive love, because from beginning to end the flame never had any other purpose than to burn us out, wear us down, and thrust us out of ourselves without any accompanying sense of personal satisfaction: in truth, this flame is not our own. But by the time we see this, selfless giving has become a habit, a way of life. We cannot live otherwise, we cannot turn back. Thus we must go forward to the final consummation: to the final death of self.

V

Although it falls within the active phase, this fifth step of the unitive life—which I call “the open mind”—is so vital and important that it justifies a separate treatment. This step leads to the finest blossoming of the unitive life, which is charity—a movement of further growth and

unmasking of the self. The day comes when we realize great limitations have been created and imposed on us by our personal frames of reference, mental constructs, judgments, and patterned ways of thinking, all of which have virtually closed us in upon ourselves. To step outside our patterned constructs—which have an easy answer for everything and therefore prevent us from learning anything new—is difficult to do because it means stepping outside ourselves. This process may take years of insightful effort and practice. The final key to this going-out seems to be the cessation of judgments, which are based on how things should be rather than on how things are, and therefore shroud the reality of the here and now with wishful thinking. When these judgments come to an end, however, the mind is opened to a depth of caring and understanding wherein there is nothing reserved for the self, and until we come this far, all relationships and good works are but masked self-seeking. But to come to this point takes insight, courage, and even risk-taking, because it means leaving behind all personal securities and intellectual crutches. Yet this opening-up is urged and abetted by the unitive grace: it is part of the outward thrust in the search for what lies beyond the self—true charity, which is the ability to give selflessly without the subtle, unconscious need for self-satisfaction. In this way, the open mind is the key to going beyond the self, the key to true charity, the key to the silent mind, and the key to the very purpose of the unitive life.

VI

The final phase of the unitive life coincides with the final demise of the self. Over the years, the deepest roots of self have been subtly dying—a dying largely hidden from consciousness because the deepest self lies hidden in God, and only gradually and imperceptibly is consumed by Him. Unknowingly, we have been stripped to the bare

roots of personal existence, and are now prepared, poised on all levels of being for the final emptying. Initially, for myself, this phase was marked by a disturbance at the center. The interior flame rose up to become a burning torch, a great love wherein the last vestige of self-awareness was but a flickering match. But when the flame rose up, other unknown powers and energies rose with it, which gave rise to certain extraordinary experiences—as if I were about to be used as a medium. Because this role of medium was unfamiliar, incongruous with past and personality, it was judged unacceptable, but I finally knew it was worthless because it was obviously mixed with self—a self that could no longer deceive or entice. The denial of these energies was the unwitting denial of the deepest roots of selfhood—the same self which is one with God. This denial is difficult, but once done, the energies disappear and in their place is a blessed, divine stillness. At this point, there seems to be a return to the middle of the third phase, in which the faculties are continuously absorbed in silence, but unlike the third phase, the major feature of this silence, is the imminent loss of self-awareness. Also, this silence no longer gives rise to any flame—energy or interior strength—because all is immovably still. Thus, after years of an inward, unifying movement, and more years of an outward, selfless movement, here, at the end, there is no movement at all; and here too, ends the unitive life. It seems that perfect interior silence, with the final cessation of self-awareness, is the necessary vehicle to span the gap between self and no-self, after which a new life opens up, a life that remains inconceivable until it is lived.



DICHOTOMY OF EXPERIENCE

To preface a book concerned with contemplative experiences, it may be of interest to point out that they can be divided into two major types: experiences "above the neck" and experiences "below the neck." What these terms lack in sophistication, they make up for, I think, with their accuracy.

It is often misleading to try to pinpoint the mysterious aspect of our experiences by attaching them to some known faculty—will, memory, intellect, consciousness, or other aspects of mind and feeling. While these terms may be useful in certain areas of investigation, they become inadequate when applied to the contemplative dimension, in which it is obvious that man has other, unknown faculties for communicating with God—faculties which cannot be activated on any other level of knowing or experiencing, but are perhaps reserved for God alone. In describing areas of origin and concentration, the terms "above" and "below" adequately account for the dichot-

omy of experiences; it is unnecessary to use more academic terms, which do not foster any more accuracy or any better understanding.

I first became aware of this dichotomy at an early age, and thereafter followed this phenomenon throughout my contemplative life. Over the years I made numerous discoveries, but none as relevant or as clarifying as those I made after the falling-away of the self. What I discovered is that the self—or that which may justly be defined as self—is made up of two distinct experiences: one is the experience of self-consciousness made possible by the reflexive mechanism of the mind; the other is a gut-level feeling of personal energy or power. I believe these two aspects of the self constitute the core of all personal experience, and correspond accurately to the dichotomy of contemplative experience as well—types I refer to as “above” and “below.” The drama of the interior life centers largely on these two aspects of the self, because these are the aspects that will undergo alteration, change, and transformation, and act as mediums through which grace is experienced—as long as self remains. Thus, as we move through the contemplative life, it is interesting to notice how these particular aspects are continually being affected either separately or together, and how, in the end, they will be totally silenced, stilled—put to their eternal rest.

Examples of experiences “below the neck” are the sense of presence, infusion of love, prayer-of-quiet, will-to-God, and living flame of love. Here, too, we encounter the true center of being, the stillpoint, and realize our union with God, along with varying levels and degrees of interior silence. From the center arises the peculiar pain of God’s absence, the wound of love, and the peace which surpasses understanding. There are other delicate movements in this region, but, altogether, these experiences are responsible for a sense of deep interiority and spiri-

tuality, and because of these experiences we say God is "personal."

Although feelings of sentiment and emotionality also arise "below the neck," I exclude these as authentic receptors of the supernatural; in every case, they denote spiritual immaturity and give evidence of a grasping self. Not only are the emotions the antithesis of pure spirit but, if clung to and not relinquished, they will abort the contemplative journey altogether. Supernatural infusions we call "love," "peace," and "joy" do not arise from the emotions, but bypass them as inadequate receptors of grace. If the emotions try to enter into an experience, they will only dissipate it, because they try to drag down to a lower plane that which can be received only on a higher plane. The nature of grace is to lift us out and above these lower levels of being, and since emotionality, by its very nature, is self-centered and not God-centered, it has no place in the unitive life. But then, St. John of the Cross brings this out quite clearly in Book II of *Dark Night of the Soul*, as well as in numerous passages in the *Spiritual Canticle*.*

In the following pages, the terms "love," "joy," and "peace" must not be understood in their usual emotional context. It is unfortunate that we do not have a language specific to the contemplative experience, because using equivalent terms to describe two different levels of experience invariably leads to erroneous interpretations. This happens not only with emotional terminology, but worse, in the conceptual area as well. The description of a non-conceptual way of knowing, of experiencing reality and truth, is a hazardous employment that never sits well with the dogmatic, academic, or even ascetic mentality. But what are the choices? Either the contemplative takes

* Saint John of The Cross, *Collected Works*, translated by Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez (Garden City, N.Y. Doubleday, 1964).

his risks and speaks out, or remains silent for fear of being misunderstood. History tells us that contemplatives have always accepted the challenge, and have become outspoken witnesses of God's ways with man. If this were not the case, the deepest, most divine dimension of human experience would remain locked within—an enclosure which is contrary to the contemplative movement itself.

Experiences I call "above the neck" have to do with consciousness and the mental faculties. This would include certain forms of enlightenment, one of which is the impression of a sudden light in the mind, whereby some truth of God is revealed or invisibly "seen." The mind is also the seat of the contemplative gaze—the silent fixed look upon the Unknown—which I believe is due to the suspension of the reflexive mechanism of the mind. Since the intellect has numerous functions, or movements, any one of these, or all of them together, can be suspended, held in silence, or plunged into a darkness which can be painful or peaceful. Here we encounter the cloud of unknowing, self-forgetfulness, and the true origin of ecstasy. Once the doors have been closed on our ordinary way-of-knowing, we come upon a nonconceptual way-of-knowing that, because it is not filtered through any known faculty, is virtually impossible to account for. This way-of-knowing has no true counterpart in concepts, ideas, images, or even in our vocabulary.

The coming-together of these two types of experience—above and below—gives rise to a more wholistic form of experience—the prayer-of-union, or various degrees of union and ecstasy, ranging in intensity. It seems that the nature of the wholistic experience is to take us out and beyond our self, beyond all sense of personal interiority, in order to impress upon us the All, the Everywhere, and the unity of God. But whether above, below, or in combination, the most noteworthy aspect of these experiences is the ultimate silencing of the self, because

this is the way that leads to pure experience, which is nonrelative, or outside the self.

Although the experiences I have listed are few in number, the fact that they are well known to most contemplatives suggests that the great variety of descriptions we encounter may be due to the various receptive states within a single individual, rather than to the variety of individuals involved. Take, for example, the same grace given to an individual in three different stages of his development. As a beginner, the contemplative may feel himself seized and overpowered by a great force; as a proficient, he may only notice a subtle change or alteration in his ordinary state; later yet, he may realize this same grace as his habitual, quite natural state of being. In between, of course, we may expect a variety of responses, impressions, and descriptions. This does not mean, necessarily, that God's grace is the same for all—or even for one—but it does suggest a commonality of experiences that cuts through sheer numbers and lays stress instead on the various receptive states of the individual. At the same time, this implies that the most common bond, or shared grace, between contemplatives is the silencing of the individual self, and that this silencing defines the most basic character of the contemplative movement.

Apart from this silencing, other types of religious experience, no matter how lofty, mystical, or supernatural, would not, in my opinion, define the true contemplative. I have always held that St. Teresa was a mystic who had a few contemplative experiences, and that St. John of the Cross was a contemplative who had a few mystical experiences, because the difference between these two saints is so great that, without a shared doctrinal basis, their paths might never have crossed. Though any experience of grace may be called "mystical," the mystics of history were largely noted for the phenomenal character of their experiences, i.e., visions, voices, etc., which are not com-

mon among ordinary contemplatives. It is the shared grace of silence that tells us we are all headed in the same direction and that, being drawn by the same force, we will ultimately come to rest in the same end—the same God.

In retrospect, it would seem that the predominant experiences in the unitive stage are centered “below the neck,” because it is this aspect of self which is most in need of immediate transformation, unification, and silencing; without this, we cannot move to the next step, the step beyond union. This next step occurs when we come to the point where there is no longer any movement within, or “below,” and the emphasis shifts to a radical change of consciousness* and a consequent shift in the region of experience from “below” to “above.” When this change is complete, however, there still remains a certain dichotomy of experience, for even without a “within,” the diffusion of love (God) becomes like air without boundaries, while, at the same time, the Eye seeing Itself is the overriding habitual state. I regard the Eye seeing Itself as the greatest of great realities, but one that has its beginnings early in the contemplative life as the fixed gaze upon the Unknown. This gaze is not only the meaning of the word “contemplative,” but the essence of its experience and, in the end, the contemplative’s habitual state.

There is at least one experience I know that does not fit into the duality of experiences I have been discussing. This experience is the simple, matter-of-fact seeing of God as transcendent—that is, God outside, beyond creation, “impersonal,” and therefore nonexperiential. This is a kind of nonexperience because it neither touches nor affects us in any way, but is as simple as a cloud passing

* The phrase “change of consciousness” is not found in older, traditional texts; nevertheless, it is the psychological reality of the dark night of the spirit, or first major change of consciousness.

by, about which nothing more can be said. This type of experience is puzzling because it seems to have nothing to do with the interior life, and does not tie in with our other experiences. For myself, I took it as God's way of reminding me not to get bogged down or caught up in my personal little world of experiences because, in the long run, He was beyond them all. At the same time, I knew that, on my own, I could not reach the transcendent: only the indwelling Spirit could bridge this gap, and, if the transcendent and I were destined to meet, it could only be through this Medium.

Little did I realize that one day these transcendent experiences would become the whole of it. With the falling-away of the self—and consequently the falling-away of the personal indwelling Spirit—all that remained was the transcendent God, God beyond all personal experience. It was then possible to look back and see how these simple experiences had been a clue, a preparation, and an intuition of what lay ahead.

It would appear that God has three paths of communicating with man, paths that correspond to the three aspects of Himself as Trinity. First, the indwelling Spirit, our true center, seems to be God's most obvious, universal manifestation to man, or man's most immediate experience of God. Second, but less obvious and not as often experienced, is the unmanifest aspect of God as first cause, transcendent to creation, the seeing of which would have nothing to do with a personal self. The third is by far the most difficult manifestation of God to get hold of. This is the experience of Christ, who is too subjective to be objectified, for in Christ we realize the saying: God is closer to us than we are to ourselves. As Christ is the very life of the soul, how can we get an objective look unless we stand outside ourselves as objective observers? Thus, Christ is our most subjective experience of God. We are not transformed into the Spirit; rather, it

is the Spirit who transforms us into Christ, and while the Spirit continues to remain objective to us, Christ does not—in truth, he cannot.

The true nature, then, of our nondual experience of Christ lies in our identity with Christ, for whom the Spirit remains as object of consciousness. Thus, in the unitive state, we are one with Father and Spirit, but identical with Christ in a type of dual/nondual realization of the Trinity. It is only later, when all self-consciousness—Christ-consciousness—falls away, that God-as-object gives way to God-as-subject, or when the Oneness of the Godhead is realized beyond the Trinitarian God known to human consciousness. It is this transition from God to Godhead that I have tried to describe in *The Experience of No-Self*.

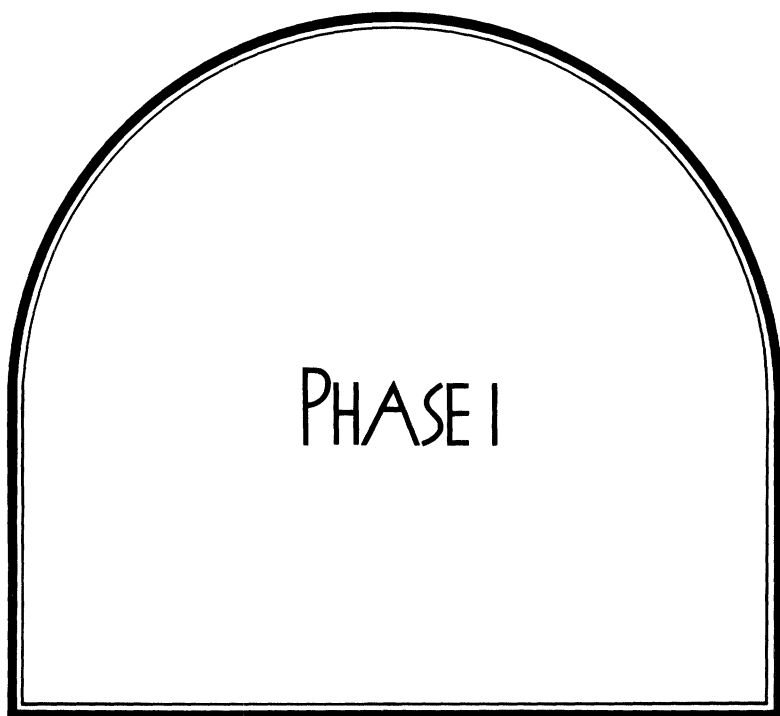
Nothing, perhaps, so attests to the subjectivity of Christ in ourselves as does the Eucharist, the bread of life which must be consumed to be fully realized. Here, Christ is flesh of our flesh and soul of our soul. Meister Eckhart went so far as to say that “We are totally transformed into God as in the Sacrament the bread is changed into the body of Christ”^{*}—thus comparing our identity with Christ to transubstantiation. Christ is not in his proper place in our lives as an object of veneration; rather, he is the subjective one in us who recognizes and obeys the indwelling Spirit, knows Him as an object of love, and ultimately lifts us up and out of our self to know the transcendent Father. There is nothing about a man’s self that can do any of this. The self can do nothing: it is utterly helpless in this matter.

As I see it, when Christ said he must go to his Father in order to come to us, he meant that as long as he remained exterior, as an object to be seen, he could not be fully realized within us, and, therefore, his mission re-

^{*} Raymond Blakney, *Meister Eckhart: A Modern Translation* (New York: Harper and Row, 1941).

mained incomplete. To complete his mission, Christ must subjectively transform and perfect humanity through the invisible work of grace from within, and impart to man his vision of Spirit and Father. Thus, Christ is the most subjective and mystical of all contemplative experiences; gradually, imperceptibly, he replaces the subjective self until, in the end, without a self, he is all that remains.

A final note on the dichotomy of experience has to do with the notion of God as personal or impersonal. As long as self remains, this dichotomy persists, because the nature of self-consciousness is a subject-object, dualistic way of knowing and experiencing, and matters will remain this way until we go beyond the self to encounter a totally nondualistic type of knowing. When this dichotomy falls away, God is realized as pure subjectivity, closer than close, the Eye seeing Itself without reflection, a type of "seeing" indescribable and inconceivable. Nevertheless, God turns out to be more intimate and "personal" than even the relative term implies—although not personal relative to "you" or "I," or relative to any "thing" at all. What this means is that, beyond self, God-as-impersonal has no ultimate validity or truth; whereas God-as-personal takes on a whole new meaning and experience. Thus, God is personal in that He is all that exists—all, that is, but the self.



Like every milestone in the contemplative life, the entrance into the Dark Night of the Spirit is heralded by a definitive stroke of the supernatural, which means that, in a single moment, we are cut off from all that went before, and placed in a new dimension, with no possibility of going back. Where nature's acts are groping and vacillating, supernatural acts appear decisive and irreversible. It is this particular character of the milestone that makes the contemplative life a continuous, forward movement, for, even if we go no further, neither can we go backward. Thus, a stroke of the supernatural appears to be a permanent, irreversible alteration of nature itself. From this point on, all we can do is acclimate to a new dimension, state, or, simply, to the inevitable.

Because of the irreversible character of such a milestone, I have often pondered the endless warnings of contemplative writers against backsliding, infidelities, sin, and all the rest—as if one could merit this forward thrust,

or, thereafter, alter it in any way. If, say, a man without a parachute is suddenly hurled from a plane, he is given no choice as to the path he must take. Even if he abandons his will to God the fact remains: he has no say; his destiny is no longer in his control. He can panic, curse his fate, or cling to a passing bird, but he cannot alter a thing, he cannot go against the flow. Such, at least, is how I view the contemplative milestone, and define the experiential reality of a supernatural act.

The milestones that mark the contemplative path are well-known to me and, on occasion, were as benign as if the man hurled into space suddenly discovered he could walk on air; yet, for the most part, these acts struck me with the terrible seriousness and mercilessness of an almighty God. Although, now and then, a divine sense of humor relieves the continuous tension between God and soul, the frightening truth is that God is not playing games with man: He is in dead earnest, and He intends to hold man to his true destiny, come what may.

These milestones, or forward thrusts, seem to be a stretching of man's nature, a continuous stretching for an expanded knowledge of God—what He is and how He works. Every act of God is a creative act: it is His revelation and manifestation, the very essence of what He is; therefore, a supernatural act is God's business, a business that He takes most seriously, because this is His life! But what of the man in the plane who has been so rudely shoved from his position of security? Surely he is the victim of an irrational and unmerciful act? Since only the Creator knows the true nature and destiny of His creature, only He knows the way forward, for, in this respect, man does not know himself, and therefore does not know his proper direction. Thus, the man falling through space is in good hands. Though he does not know it, in the end he will not so much as stub his toe.

For myself, the entrance into the Night of the Spirit

was just such a merciless milestone, a thrust beyond personal security. It happened as follows: I had been reading in the garden when I felt an invisible film, or thin veil, come down over my head, and shroud my mind. Instantly, I knew something had happened, but no idea came to mind, nor was there any other response. Swiftly and decisively, all had been done in silence; yet, however simple and innocent its quiet descent, this act was in effect, terrible and awful—the Almighty had simply lowered the boom.

The first thing I noticed was that I could no longer see the words on the page; suddenly, they had become characters without meaning. It was several days before I could read again, and then it was totally without meaning. For years afterward, I could only derive meaning when and where God permitted some understanding to break through; these breakthroughs would shed light on the mystery of God's ways in my soul, in creation, or in his great plan for man. Because the contemplative state is always changing, this special light is also changing, always either leading the way or keeping pace, I do not know which. Apart from the practical knowledge necessary for daily living (horse sense), my mind was plunged into darkness, wherein the only way of knowing was by this special light; I had to trust it implicitly, because there was no other way of seeing.

An example of how this light works occurred in this initial stage of the night when, through dim eyes, I could suddenly identify with the anguish expressed in the Psalms, which now seemed a perfect echo of my state of soul. Years later, however, I no longer found any personal meaning in the Psalms because, by then, the state had changed. Thus, no insight or enlightenment lasts forever; rather, it comes and goes, shedding light on our present state, ever assuaging the human need to know. In this way, what strikes us as inspiring at one time will, at another,

leave us quite empty—which tells us we must cling to nothing, because all is a passing gift, and not the end of the light.

Although the mind is now left in a painful, empty void, this symptom is actually the lesser of two that mark this phase of the dark night. If it is dark and empty “above” (in the mind), so, too, it is dark and empty “below” (in our interior). After the descent of the veil, I looked inward to encounter not the usual, obscure presence of God, but a gaping black hole where He had been, and on seeing this, there arose from this center a pain so terrible, so enormous, that I wondered how it could be contained. It was the feeling of being cauterized, branded by God in the depths of my being—depths I never knew I had till then. The pain was beyond control, verging on the limits of human endurance with no escape or cooperation possible; in a word, the pain was all!

For the next nine months, this pain came and went as it pleased, in daily bouts, several times a day. My understanding was that God had some merciless work to do here, and would not relent until His mysterious job was done. In time, I toughened enough to be able to take the pain with a modicum of stillness—without buckling interiorly, that is—and was therefore able to watch this burning-out process more objectively. I discovered that the nature of the pain, at this point at least, was an unconscious (unintelligible), unwilled rebellion, but a rebellion I found puzzling. Since, on the surface, or conscious, level, I was willing to bear the pain, how was it still possible to have this deep inner rebellion? It has been said that a house divided against itself will fall, and this, I believe, is what happened. With the eventual disappearance of this pain, there was never again any such disunity of will, or disparity between the wee, small voice that helplessly affirms: I will endure; and that deep, fighting spirit that says: I cannot endure! I have noticed that, de-