

Night Wisdom for Our Time Insights from Nicodemus

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"Nicodemus" by Henry Ossawa Tanner, 1899, Wikipedia Commons

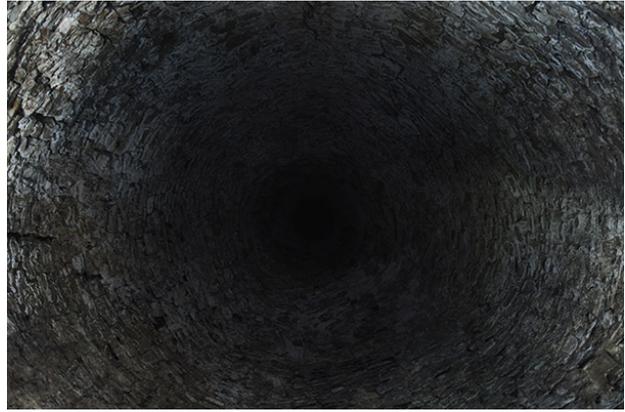
Sometimes at night, I head out onto the little lane where I live, which opens up under the night sky in unimaginably beautiful ways. In the soft light, nocturnal birds, crickets, little mammals and frogs sing, croak, whistle and hum, and the sounds they make as they cleverly navigate long grass, tall trees, and each other enchant me. I sense the clarity of human boundaries, so carefully measured and staked out in daylight – fences, gates and buildings – blurring and dissolving, and the sky, which seems vaster at night, glistens like velvet, inviting night vision. Recently, my thoughts turn to Nicodemus, who we are told "came to Jesus by night" (Jn 3:2). Night was the time when Jesus would spend long hours beholding his Beloved *Abba*, as he "continued in prayer to God." (Lk 6:12) It is also by night, as we know so well, that Jesus chooses to counsel Nicodemus on the mystery of birth, the "fire of awakened consciousness,"¹ illuminating what feels dark to Nicodemus. (Jn 3:1-15) At a time in our evolution that is increasingly described as a global dark night, Nicodemus invites us to *come* by night to Jesus, that we might *become* the night. Here, our night vision is clear and transparent, for at its depthless depths lies its foundation, the divine oneness, the ever-shimmering joyfully silent words, I AM!

While the night is a deeply powerful word in mystical literature, this reflection seeks to disclose little fragments of the wisdom of Nicodemus, wisdom through four meanings of the word night. The first, "darkness" is the root meaning of night, derived from late Old English *niht*. Night evokes the first words of Genesis where the original state of creation, the "formless void" and the "darkness over the deep" that existed before God the Creator speaks, is named "night". (Gen 1:2) Night is thus an archetypal symbol used by St John at the very beginning of the Gospel story to point to the uncreated, unmanifest, primordial reality of the Divine hidden in the night. Swami Abhishiktananda describes this primordial night as "the incomparable darkness"² where, in secret, we become "a lover

¹ David Applebaum, "Foreword" in *Wandering Joy: Meister Eckhart's Mystical Philosophy* (Great Barrington: Lindisfarne Books, 2001) ix.

² Abhishiktananda, Swami, *In the Bosom of the Father: The Collected Poems of a Benedictine Mystic* (Oregon: Resource Publications, 2018), 119.

of the fathomless abyss of the godhead."³ Kerrie Hide gives depth to our experience of this incomparable darkness, which she calls the "primordial oneness... the pointless, depthless abyss of divine within-ness," that awakens when we come to prayer in the inner depths of our heart and touch "the energy-less energy of the shimmering stillness of pure Silence."⁴ Here in primordial oneness she inspires, "We are lost in nada, nothing, the absolute...the most inner, pointless, point where all dualisms dissolve in pure consciousness."⁵ The primordial meaning of night thus helps us touch the metaphysical foundations of this amazing wisdom story. Night is both the transformation Nicodemus seeks, and it is the place of transformation. In the night, Nicodemus is transformed into his beloved Rabbi, into the primordial oneness vibrating in the luminous silence that is the heart of darkness. In the primordial night, Nicodemus is "born from above" (Jn 3:7). Let us pause for a moment to contemplate the essence of these exquisite words from Abhishiktananda and Kerrie, allowing them to vibrate in the depths of our hearts:



the incomparable darkness...

lovers of the fathomless abyss of the godhead..

primordial oneness...

energiless energy of the shimmering stillness of pure Silence....

nada...

nothing...

the absolute...

the most inner pointless point...

where all dualisms dissolve...

in pure consciousness.

That the night becomes the "point where all dualisms dissolve in pure consciousness" brings us to the second meaning of the word night, that is, "absence of spiritual illumination, ignorance" from the Germanic *nahts*. The word thus tells us then something about the interior life of Nicodemus, that is, he comes to Jesus in a state of darkness and ignorance, a state which Jesus affirms, "you do not know" (Jn 3:10). However, as Beatrice Bruteau writes, Nicodemus is not an idiot, and his ignorance might better be described as a "knowing ignorance", which she says:

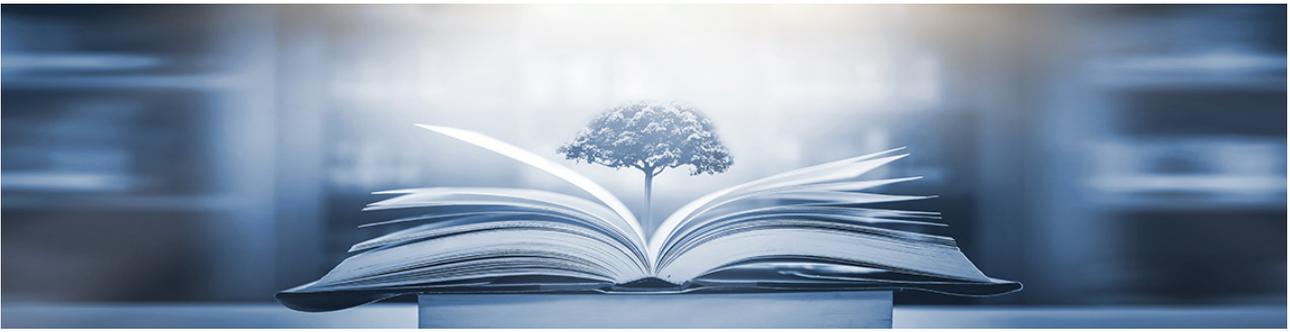
...is a preparation for a deeper "knowing ignorance" which comes to 'know' in ignorance, that is 'by not knowing'.⁶

³ Ibid, xviii.

⁴ Kerrie Hide, *Oneness within the Absolute: Wisdom from Beatrice Bruteau*, in "Oneness in Luminous Presence: Five Day Silent Retreat", www.contemplatio.com.au.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Beatrice Bruteau, *Nicodemus by Night*, Sisters Today, 1995, 3.



Nicodemus was a learned man, a "teacher of Israel" (Jn, 3:9), so learned that he knew he must darken his knowing and dissolve all dualisms in order to prepare for an encounter with Jesus. In her writings about the wisdom of the Cloud of Unknowing Seer, Kerrie Hide captures this same sense of "knowing ignorance" that is itself an awakened state and becomes so important in this radical, and at times painful, shift from dual to unitive seeing:

...the cloud of unknowing points to the lack of knowing felt by our conceptual mind as we shift our attention from thoughts to our heart-mind, that is the ground of awareness itself, the unknowing creating the necessary atmosphere for the awakening of the spiritual eyes of our heart that we might behold blindly and nakedly feel the luminous traces of divine presence.⁷

Here Kerrie affirms how in the cloud of unknowing, as in the night, the mind perceives a lack of knowing, while a yet-deeper knowing is shifting our attention from conceptual to 'heart-mind' knowing. In the same way, Nicodemus is unaware of the unchanged, eternal, primordial indwelling essence of his innermost being, but he is aware that he is unaware. Like the "bride of the Canticles" after she has been brought into the inner wine cellar, Nicodemus is able to say, "'Nescivi.' I no longer knew anything."⁸ What a beautiful gift this is, inviting us to imagine the welling up of Love that would pour forth through each one of us, without restraint, if such an awakened state of "knowing ignorance" were to spread like wildfire through our deepest collective psyche.



As the story unfolds, we could say Nicodemus begins to embody the very teachings he is receiving. As Nicodemus beholds Jesus in the night, he becomes the Night, becoming pure Silence. All dualisms dissolve, as he is born "from above" (Jn 3:3). This brings us to a third meaning of the word, which in his book *The Great Mother*, Eric Neumann suggests is a symbol of childbearing motherhood.⁹ In embodying the night, Nicodemus becomes childbearing motherhood, the night-womb, that fecund place where the Word is conceived, gestates and is birthed in darkness and which eternally renews within itself. Abhishiktananda captures the depths of Nicodemus' embodiment:

⁷ Kerrie Hide, *Loves Oneing: A Book about Contemplation* (London: Austen Macauley) Forthcoming, 38.

⁸ Elizabeth of the Trinity. "Last Retreat, First Day", in *Elizabeth of the Trinity: The Complete Works Volume One*, trans Alethia Kane (Washington, ICS Publications, 2014), 141.

⁹ Eric Neumann, *The Great Mother: An Analysis of the Archetype*, trans Ralph Manheim (New York: Princeton University Press, 1963), 427. Here Neumann is especially interested in night as a recurring symbol especially in the story of the Shekinah which renews by night.

Yet Jesus said to Nicodemus: "You must be reborn in Spirit." The Kingdom of God can only be reached by returning to your mother's womb, in the baptism in the great waters of the beginning.

mama yonih apsvantah samudre
ya evam veda sa devīpadam āpnoti
aham suve pitaram asya mūrdhan

*My womb is in the waters, in the ocean: the one who knows this reaches the place of the goddess. I have given birth to the Father on the summit (Sanskrit trans).*¹⁰



Of this secret birthing of the "I am", Abhishiktananda asks, "Have even they known how to hear it, who dare to mumble it, who dare to repeat and attempt to express what they hear within?"¹¹

The next time we hear of Nicodemus, it is clear by his actions that Jesus' teachings have deeply penetrated his mind, and that he is truly a man who "has given birth to the Father on the summit."¹² For as Meister Eckart says: "whoever has been touched but for a single moment by truth, by justice, and by goodness can no longer turn away from them, even for an instant and even if they entailed all the pains of hell."¹³ From within the touch of the depths of his consummation in love and in a moment of truth, justice, and goodness, Nicodemus leans with his formidable gifts as a Pharisee, politician and judge, into the pains of hell. When the Pharisees first talk of arresting Jesus, it is Nicodemus who advocates for procedural fairness and justice for Jesus. (Jn 7:45-51) When Jesus has wailed his final words and taken his last breath, Nicodemus is one of a small group who takes him down "from the cross with tears,"¹⁴ anoints his broken body with a mixture of myrrh and aloes, binds his body with linen cloths and places him in a new tomb.¹⁵ The man who has been born of flesh and of Spirit now enters into the sorrow, horror and grief of Jesus' death "without a why" (*sunder warumbe*).¹⁶ Interestingly, in Hebrew, the word for night is *Lila* (sounds like lie-la) which is masculine. At a time where we are experiencing the collective dark night, including within the Church, Nicodemus offers a healthy model of masculinity of "knowing ignorance" that is able to enter into the pain and suffering of the dying Jesus and to participate in anointing his body for burial. His deliberate self-giving and intensity of attention are deeply moving. Yet, the darkness of what is

¹⁰ Swami Abhishiktananda, *In the Bosom of the Father, The Collected Poems of a Benedictine Monk* (Eugene: Resource Publications, 2018), 132.

¹¹ Ibid, 26

¹² Ibid, 132

¹³ Reiner Schürmann, *Wandering Joy* (Lindisfarne Books. Kindle Edition), pp. 62-63.

¹⁴ *The Gospel of Nicodemus*, Ch 8, 14-15.

¹⁵ *The Gospel of St John*, 19:38-42

¹⁶ Reiner Schürmann, *Wandering Joy* (Lindisfarne Books. Kindle Edition), 188.

happening is not devoid of divine eros. Nicodemus is able to hold within his "heart-womb"¹⁷ the darkest of nights, the cry of all around him and from within himself as his heart becomes inflamed by love. He participates in the eternal birthing of the Word in that evolutionary moment.

I would like to offer two concluding points for further pondering. First, it is evident that Nicodemus is part of a large community who will benefit tremendously from his conversation with Jesus. As Beatrice writes, "The victory of the common people was about to be fulfilled by birth into a new kind of life. This was, therefore, a very important conversation..."¹⁸ Teilhard de Chardin would agree: "The outcome of the world, the gates of the future, the entry into the superhuman—these are not thrown open to a few of the privileged nor to chosen people to the exclusion of all others. They will open only to an advance of *all together*, in a direction in which *all together* can join and find completion in a spiritual renovation of the earth."¹⁹ Yet, Nicodemus does not come *all together* with his community. He comes alone. Further, one can hardly feel optimistic about the possibility of an advance of *all together* birthing of unitive consciousness at a time when we are witnessing the entrenched impact of duality contributing to ecological devastation and undeterred by the myriad of scientific evidence pointing to the collapse of human life as we know it. It is important then to notice the footnote Teilhard includes for this text where he acknowledges that this *all together* change may need to come under the influence of a few. Likewise, Beatrice observes that fundamental paradigm shifts in frameworks of understanding are often led by small groups at first who demonstrate what it would be like in practice to live under that new understanding.²⁰ A friend recently suggested that the small, organic, localised energy field of CEN is like the beginning of the use of the computer. At first, small groups of dedicated users made the foray into this new knowledge and energy field. And in doing so, they not only demonstrated the incredible power and creativity of the field, they also made the entry into the knowledge field easier for others. So while an unenlightened ethics and morality might reel at the thought of yet another paradigm of elitism, a oneing consciousness is incapable of separating the world in such ways. This suggests we must listen carefully to these words of wisdom from Teilhard and Beatrice encouraging us as a small contemplative group at this time of evolution.



Finally, I invite you to return to the engaging painting by Henry Ossawa Tanner which is found at the beginning of this reflection. Against the vast and beautiful night sky, Nicodemus and Jesus are transfixed by each other and the depths of attentiveness and presence to each is captivating. Jesus knows just how difficult it is to bear the deep truth of what he is saying, and while it appears Nicodemus is still in the dark, Jesus' heart-womb is radiant, aglow with Love. May we in the *Contemplative Evolution Network* who are already so deeply and delicately sensitised to the night, continue to come to Jesus like Nicodemus, by night, into the gaze of Jesus as we are drawn into each other, into the divine essence, into the Omega point of union, as we learn to bear the burden of a greater consciousness being birthed at this time in our evolution.

¹⁷ In her book, *Love's Oneing: A Book about Contemplation (forthcoming)*, Kerrie Hide invites us to empty into the consciousness that awakens in the silent heart-womb of Christ, "the womb-like placeless-place of divine contemplation, the fertile divine consciousness, the archetypal point of revelation, holding all things, within all things and yet beyond all things, that is infinitely creative, evolutionary", 156.

¹⁸ Bruteau, *Nicodemus by Night*, 3 – 4.

¹⁹ Teilhard de Chardin, *The Phenomenon of Man*, 244-245

²⁰ Beatrice Bruteau, *The Grand Option: Personal Transformation and a New Creation*, (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 2001), 99.