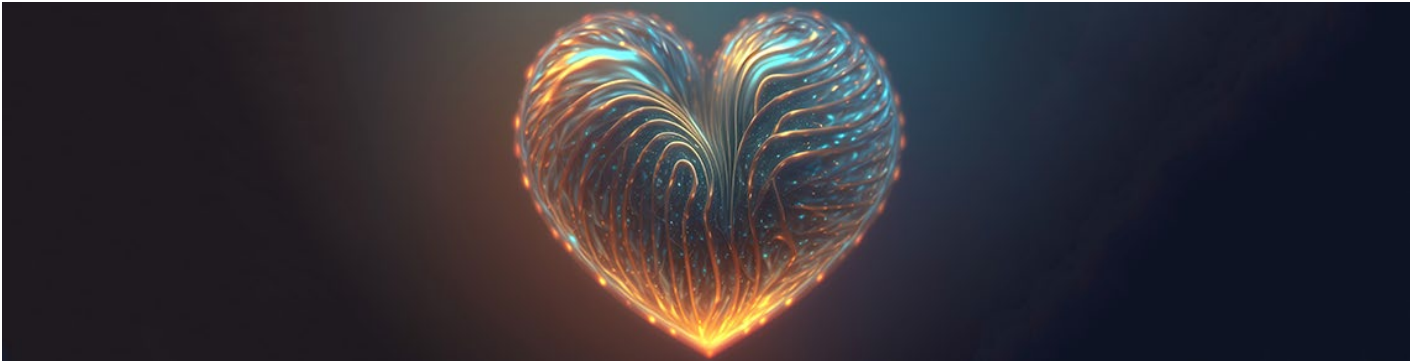


Unblocking the Heart to Allow Love to Flow

Roland Ashby



(Roland Ashby, Contributing Editor of Living Water and long-time meditator, reflects on his own recent experience of confronting his mortality, and how this relates to what Spanish mystic St John of the Cross termed the "dark night of the soul". Through this "dark night" God is encountered as passionate, intimate lover who seeks to liberate us to live in true freedom, in the fullness of love, which John Main described as a liberty of spirit that is the goal of mantra meditation.)*

2022 was the most challenging of my life. In May I experienced a bout of vertigo at 3 am in the morning, my wife Ros called an ambulance and I was taken to hospital. I thought I was having a stroke (my brother had one at my age) but after all the tests it was decided it was probably an inner ear infection.

After going home the dizziness persisted; and when, a couple of weeks later, the dizziness was accompanied by chest pain, clammy hands and numbness down my left leg, the long-suffering Ros drove me back to hospital. An angiogram revealed an 80% blockage in my Right Coronary Artery. The cardiologist inserted a stent to clear the blockage, and was happy with the result.

After sharing a room for the night with a very sick man, who was struggling to breathe, I returned home, but after a few days, didn't feel much better. It turned out I had contracted COVID, most likely while in hospital.

A week later I was still getting dizziness and chest pain, returned to hospital for several days, and had another angiogram, which showed all was OK with the stent and the heart. Nobody seems to know what was causing the chest pain and dizziness this time, but it may related to COVID.



Why am I telling this story? Because for me, it has been something of a dark night of the soul, a phrase used by 16th century Spanish mystic and Carmelite St John of the Cross, to describe his own dark night, to which I will turn in a moment.

I was confronted by my own vulnerability and mortality, was anxious about what sort of future, if any, I might have, and was plagued by negative thoughts about the past – my mistakes and failures, and hurts, both given and received. A tsunami of regrets, doubts and fears did its best to sweep away my hope and faith. I had been stripped back to what Afro-American mystic Howard Thurman, and mentor to Martin Luther King, called our naked being, "our literal substance before God".

St John of the Cross's dark night came when he was thrown into solitary confinement by his Carmelite order because he wanted to reform the order, along the same lines as his friend and fellow Carmelite and Spaniard, St Teresa of Avila. For nine months, he was confined to a small, dark cell with little light and food. He was also flogged repeatedly in an attempt to persuade him to give up his ideas of reform.



However, contrary to all rational expectations that the darkness, sensory deprivation, isolation, pain, betrayal and abandonment he endured would crush him, it was actually the making of him. He fell in love with God with such a passionate intensity that he was able to produce the most exquisite love poetry.

In his poem *The Ascent of Mt Carmel*, evocative of the Old Testament's passionate and erotic *Song of Songs*, he describes how in darkness and stillness, "fired by love's urgent longings", he is united with his lover, in whom he is transformed. He speaks, in psychiatrist Gerald May's words, of "soaring passion, sensual yearning and delight", without using "a single religious word".¹

And in the ecstatic stage of union with his lover, he abandons and forgets himself: "All things ceased; I went out from myself/Leaving my cares/Forgotten among the lilies."

It is a love so intoxicating that in his poem *The Spiritual Canticle*, he compares it to being in a wine cellar where "I drank of my beloved", and:

*There he gave me his breast;
There he taught me a sweet and living knowledge;
And I gave myself to him,
Keeping nothing back;
There I promised to be his bride.*

Franciscan priest Richard Rohr says, "People who know God well—mystics, hermits, those who risk everything to find God—always meet a lover, not a dictator. God is never found as an abusive father or a tyrannical mother; God is always a lover greater than we dared hope for."²

Here is a falling in love so complete that John of the Cross can say:

"Now I occupy my soul/And all my energy in his service" and "my every act is love".



In his poem *Living Flame of Love*, he writes that the warmth and light from such a love is so intense that he can describe it as a *Living flame of love/That tenderly wounds my soul/In its deepest centre.*

¹ Gerald G. May, *The Dark Night of the Soul: A Psychiatrist Explores the Connection Between Darkness and Spiritual Growth* (HarperCollins, New York, 2004) 7

² As cited in Richard Rohr's Daily Meditation for 17 July 2022. See: cac.org

Such profound depth of love as this can only be known via a Way of Unknowing, John of the Cross says. This is the way of experiencing a love "which surpasses knowledge", in the words of Ephesians 3:19. It transcends the intellect, thought and imagination, and takes us into the cave of the heart. He writes:

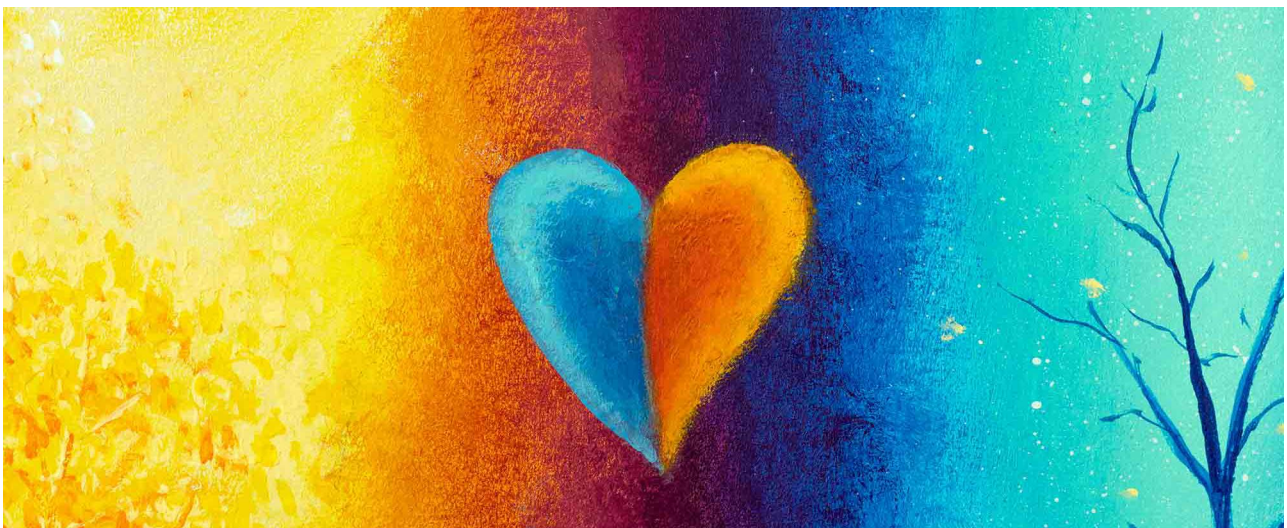
*"To come to the knowledge you have not
You must go by a way in which you know not."*

It is a love beyond knowledge and understanding, in which we find true freedom, Gerald May says. "The dark night is a profoundly good thing," because "we are liberated from attachments and compulsions, and empowered to live and love more freely".³

He writes: "For [John of the Cross and Teresa of Avila], the dark night – indeed all of life – is nothing other than the story of a love affair: a romance between God and the human soul that liberates us to love one another."⁴

May continues: "The meaning revealed in the dark night is ... there is something wonderful at the heart of our existence, and it is about nothing other than love: love for God, love for one another, love for creation, love for life itself."⁵

Contrary to popular understanding, the dark night is not, he says, about a life-denying asceticism that "saves us from sin", but about being *freed for the fullness of love*.⁶



So, how does this make sense of my own experience of the dark night?

While in hospital, both following the vertigo, and also prior to heart surgery, I experienced a sense of overwhelming loss; that my life had now entered a period of decline eventually resulting in death. My sense of control over my own life, and any sense of a bright or meaningful future, evaporated. God felt absent, and so I also found myself under siege by doubts about faith, and the trust I had placed in it to give life purpose and meaning. It was a place of darkness and despair.

³ Gerald G. May, *The Dark Night of the Soul: A Psychiatrist Explores the Connection Between Darkness and Spiritual Growth* (HarperCollins, New York, 2004) 4

⁴ Ibid., 12

⁵ Ibid., 6

⁶ Ibid., 73,74

With Job, I wanted to cry out "Why?" Why do I have to suffer like this? May expresses this well: "Job's 'why?' is the timeless question that surfaces in a million hearts today. Why do children die through warfare? Why do innocent people perish through 'natural disaster'? Why am I suffering with this illness right now? Where's the sense in it?"⁷

When I was in hospital, and also in a mood of quiet despair, I had completely lost my ability to pray. I felt spiritually numb. My faith seemed useless in the face of such difficulties. I hit 'rock bottom and came face-to-face with the possibility that my faith was a sham. Yet, just as Job's, and St John of the Cross's faith, had been strengthened and renewed after being tested and purified in the crucible of suffering, so would my faith re-emerge.

I eventually found myself returning to morning and evening prayer, including Scripture reading, and also an attempt at silent meditation using the mantra *Maranatha*, recommended by Benedictine monk John Main. This was despite the fact that constant interruptions, beeping machines and artificial light, makes this well-nigh impossible.



However, I found that the words of morning and evening prayer, and Scripture, came alive for me, and even the attempt to silently recite the mantra had a calming effect. My mood shifted from one of alarm and anxiety, to one of peaceful acceptance. The heaviness lifted.

But more than this, I began to see other people differently. I began to see the nurses as loving human beings, doing their best to provide care, rather than just employees doing their job with varying degrees of efficiency; and I noticed too that my attitude to the men I was sharing rooms with softened

and became more compassionate, as I became aware of their own suffering, and our shared humanity.

I came to feel a closeness to them, and companionship with them, that I would never previously have dreamed possible.

I became intensely aware of the love and care shown to me by others, particularly my wife Ros, but also friends and family, and became deeply grateful for their prayers.

I felt gratitude too for all the spiritual teachers whose profound faith and dedication have carried me on my spiritual journey, like the paralytic in Mark 2: 1-2, whose friends found a way to bring him, strapped to a mat, through the roof, to be healed by Jesus.

⁷ Ibid., 40

I began to see that I needed to learn to be grateful too for the dark night experiences, because, through experiencing my frailty and woundedness, and also coming face to face with my shadow side, I was being broken open to receive God's love, and see God in others, and indeed *every* circumstance of life.

The doctor found a blockage in my heart and inserted a stent to remove the blockage. But this wasn't all that was happening to my heart.

This brings me back to John Main. "Saying the mantra", he says, "is like unlocking the door of our heart. The mantra is like the key unlocking the door to allow the pure light of love to flood in."⁸



The stent unblocks the heart to allow the blood to flow. The mantra unlocks the heart, and *unblocks* it, to allow *the love* to flow.

In the dark night, John of the Cross says, God works to unblock our hearts of all that prevents the love from flowing, including the ego's fears, anxieties, prejudices, judgementalism, and desire for power and control; and the self-centred pursuit of pleasure, wealth and possessions; all our addictions and compulsions, and seeking God, seeking love, in

the wrong places.

Through mantra meditation, John Main offers us an utterly simple and practical way to clear the blockages.

In this pilgrimage to the heart, a way of unknowing, transcending all thoughts and images, in darkness, silence and stillness, the mantra acts like a homing device, leading us to the door of the heart, *unlocking* it, and *unblocking* it.

And most importantly, it is a way to liberty of spirit. "Now what Jesus came to proclaim was precisely this liberty", Main says. "The liberty to be ourselves and the liberty to find ourselves in him, through him, and with him. Meditation is simply the way to that liberty. It is the way to your own heart. It is the way to the depth of your own being where you can simply be ... [and] simply rejoice in the gift of your own being."⁹

And in an echo of John of the Cross, he adds: "Freedom is not just freedom *from* things. Christian liberty is not just freedom from desire, from sin. We are free *for* intimate union with God, which is another way of saying we are free *for* infinite expansion of Spirit in God.

"Meditation is entering into that experience of *being free for God*, transcending desire, sin, leaving it behind; transcending ego, leaving it behind, so that the whole of our being is utterly available to God."¹⁰

⁸ As cited in *Silence and Stillness in Every Season: Daily Readings with John Main*, Edited by Paul T Harris (Medio Media, Singapore, 2010) 213

⁹ John Main, *Essential Writings: Selected with an Introduction by Laurence Freeman* (Orbis Books, Maryknoll, NY, 2002) 126

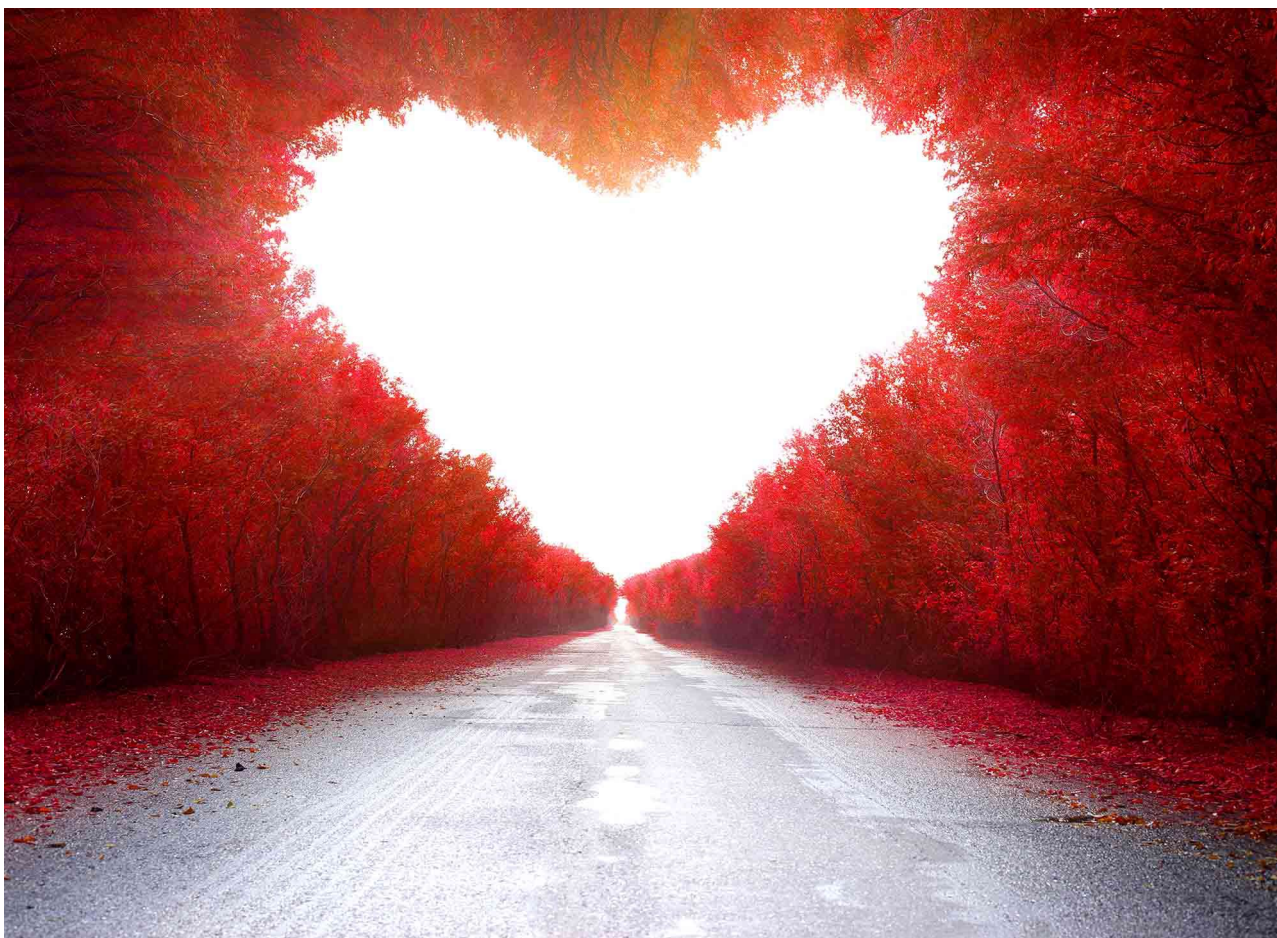
¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 126

And when we do that, he says, we are “swept out of ourselves, beyond ourselves” into a “great cosmic river of love”, the love that flows constantly between Jesus and his Father, the love that is the Holy Spirit.¹¹

Thus we are led into what Br Roger of Taizé calls a “springtime of the heart”, when, having complete freedom in God, we are now also “utterly available” to care for others and to live a life of loving service.

And part of this, in our times of contemplation as members of the Contemplative Evolution Network, is to show our solidarity with all those throughout the world who are undergoing their own “dark night” – whether as a result of war, violence, disease or natural disaster.

Let our hearts be broken open to their suffering too, and may we hold them in our hearts as we enter the great cosmic river of love that is the Holy Spirit, the Living Water that can transform the world.



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¹¹ Ibid., 83