

FROM IMPASSE TO PROPHETIC HOPE: CRISIS OF MEMORY

INTRODUCTION

I am both honored and humbled that your leadership would ask me to address you. And I am deeply grateful for this affirmation of the contemplative contribution to theology.¹

In my earlier work I looked at John of the Cross' teaching on the dark night, including the traditional signs marking the passage from meditation to contemplation, through the lens of impasse and applied it to personal spiritual growth as well as to one's relational life, the development of society and culture, and the feminist experience of God.² That insight provided a hermeneutical key for many, particularly theologians and members of religious communities, and began changing the perception of the multiple impasses - relational, ecclesial, societal, political, ethical, scientific, economic, environmental and cultural - which engage people today.³ That it continues to elucidate contemporary experience, prompt new

¹I am grateful to Sue Houchins, Brian McDermott and Mary Catherine Hilkert for their generosity in reading my essay and offering valuable criticism and suggestions, to Leah Hargis for her help with endnotes, to Frances Horner who worked with me on an earlier text, and to Shawn Copeland for her generous response.

²Constance FitzGerald, "Impasse and Dark Night," in *Living With Apocalypse*, ed. Tilden H. Edwards (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1984), 93-116. Article can also be found in *Women's Spirituality: Resources for Christian Development*, ed. Joann Wolski Conn (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1986), 287-311. Belden Lane first introduced me to "impasse situations" in his essay "Spirituality and Political Commitment, Notes on a Liberation Theology of Nonviolence" which appeared in *America*, March 14, 1981.

³See, for example, Sandra Schneiders, *Finding the Treasure: Locating Catholic Religious Life in a New Ecclesial and Cultural Context* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2000), 153-183; Nancy Sylvester, IHM, and Mary Jo Click, *Crucible For Change, Engaging Impasse Through Communal Contemplation and Dialogue* (San Antonio: Sor Juana Press, 2004); Beverly Lanzetta, *Radical Wisdom, A Feminist Mystical Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2005); Kristine M. Rankka, *Women And The Value of Suffering* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1998), 218-222; Bruce H. Lescher, "Spiritual Direction: Stalking the Boundaries" in *Handbook of Spirituality For Ministers*, Volume 2, ed. Robert J. Wicks, (New York and Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2000), 324; Mary Catherine Hilkert, *Naming Grace, Preaching and the Sacramental Imagination* (New York: Continuum, 1997); M. Shawn Copeland, *The Subversive Power of Love, The Vision of Henriette Delille* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press 2009).

questions, raise radical challenges, and open up fresh avenues of investigation underlines how much the great apophatic mystical traditions of Christianity are a promising source of wisdom and guidance for theology and for the theologian's spiritual life.

Now I want to open before you a deeper experience of dark night, what the Carmelite mystical Doctor, John of the Cross, calls the purification of memory,⁴ because currently impasse seems centered in great part in memory and imagination, in the conflict between the past and the future. In the first and longest section, I want to reflect on the central importance of memory as well as the limiting and destructive power that memories hold. In that context, I hope to interpret what John of the Cross means by "purification of memory" and then draw briefly on the works of Miroslav Volf and Beverly Lanzetta to illustrate it. Second, I want to point to the goal of this process of purification of memory for John: prophetic hope which expresses itself in what I call "the prayer-of-no-experience" which I will attempt to describe. Finally, I want to suggest that in this utterly silent *prayer*, a radically new "self" is being worked on and shaped, a dispossessed "self" truly capable of living and loving in a way that realizes more fully our relational evolution and synergistic existence in the universe. My treatment of the self and the evolution of consciousness may be the most perplexing aspect of this study - one where more theological reflection in dialogue with the experience of others is needed.

This presentation of an experience of more profound impasse and deeper contemplative growth is integrally connected to my earlier interpretation. Although my exploration raises its own disturbing questions, I hope it will offer a significant contribution to theological reflection at a time when polarization, suspicion, denouncement, investigation, silencing, alienation, anger, cynicism and sadness divide our Church, and when our country is rocked with economic meltdown precipitated by years of wrong-doing and greed, our earth menaced with global warming and ecological distress that threaten all planetary life with eventual extinction, the religions of the world plagued with extremism and age-old distrust that fuel war and terrorism, the people of the world abused with violence, slavery, and deprivation too great to measure. We are encumbered by old assumptions, burdened by memories that limit our horizons, and, therefore, unfree to see God coming to us from the future. Slow to deal with different levels of complexity of consciousness⁵ or to tolerate ambiguity before the Holy Mystery of our lives, the

⁴John of the Cross, *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, Book 3, in *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*, rev. ed., trans. Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez (Washington, DC: Institute of Carmelite Studies, 1991), 2.2-3. Unless otherwise noted, all references to the writings of John of the Cross are taken from this volume and refer to the works of John of the Cross given as follows: Ascent = *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, Dark Night = *The Dark Night*, Canticle = *The Spiritual Canticle*, Living Flame = *The Living Flame of Love*.

⁵See Robert Kegan, *In Over Our Heads: The Mental Demands of Modern Life* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), 312-316.

institutional Church, it seems to me, is immersed in an impasse, a crisis of memory, which only a continuing openness to contemplative grace and purification can transform.

PURIFICATION OF MEMORY

We are a people of memory. Central to our Christian identity is the memory of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus; as Church we understand our authenticity as historically derived and see ourselves as guardians of a sacred tradition we dare not forget. Nonetheless, it is no naive accident that John of the Cross writes at such length on the *purification* of memory in the third book of the *Ascent of Mount Carmel* (1-15) and throughout the second book of the *Dark Night*. Nor is it any wonder that this is such a misunderstood and even dangerous part of his teaching considering his counsel both to draw the memory away from its “props and boundaries” and to “forget” both wrongs suffered and good experienced.⁶

Let me sketch in my own words the basic dynamics in this process of purification. In the deeper reaches of a contemplative life, a kind of unraveling or loss of memory occurs which can be more or less conscious. Then one’s usual way of harboring memories is incapacitated.⁷ A person’s past becomes inaccessible as a basis for finding meaning. The experience seems to be not so much an *emptying* of memory, as John describes it, as an unraveling or de-linking of it. A person continues to have memories of the past, she may be bombarded with them, but they are somehow uncoupled from the self. Their significance is altered. Memories do not mean what one thought they did. In a mysterious way there is a cutting off of both past and memory that is inimical to one’s personhood. The capacity one loses is the ability to “re-member”; that is, to “member” again, bringing past elements together, forward to the present, reconstructed into a newly relevant whole. When memory is “de-constructed” in the dark night, the past can no longer weave its thread of meaning through the person’s lived experience into the future. Past, present and future do not fit together. What one remembers, how one remembers, how long one remembers is called into question. The past can seem a mockery or an illusion; the psychological and intellectual structures that have supported or held us together over a lifetime, “the beacons by which we have set our course,”⁸ the certainties on which we have built our lives are seriously undermined or taken away – not only in prayer, but also in and by life, and a profound disorientation results. This is keenly felt as a loss of authenticity, truthfulness and even identity.

⁶“It must strip and empty itself of all this knowledge and these forms and strive to lose the imaginative apprehension of them” (*Ascent* 3.2.4). See also *Ascent* 3.2.2-4; 3.3.2-6.

⁷See *Dark Night* 2.3.3; 8.1-2.

⁸Hein Blommestijn, Jos Huls, Kees Waaijman, *Footprints of Love: John of the Cross as Guide in the Wilderness* (Leuven: Peeters, 2000), 74.

On a very fundamental level our selfhood - who we are - is threatened.⁹ While I have attempted to describe this experience, it has many different faces and is a frightening and seriously destabilizing, liminal experience, leaving a person undone, silenced. How long this turmoil in the memory will last depends on the extent to which one's past encumbers God's approach.

So much that fills our memory blocks this coming of God in love toward us. For John of the Cross the human person is seen as an infinite capacity for God.¹⁰ As long as one is preoccupied with filling the great *caverns* of the mind, heart, memory and imagination with human knowledge, loves, memories and dreams that seem to promise complete satisfaction, or at least more than they can ever deliver, the person is unable to feel or even imagine the vast hollowness one is. Only when one becomes aware of the illusory and limiting character of this fullness in the face of the breakdown of what/whom we have staked our lives on, the limitations of our life project and relationships, the irruption of our unclaimed memories, and the shattering of our dreams and meanings, can the depths of hunger and thirst that exist in the human person, the infinite capacity, really be experienced.¹¹ Therefore, only when the great cavern of the memory is enfeebled by its obsession with the past - past pleasure and past pain - debilitated by its unforgettable suffering over losses and evil inflicted, limited by its inability to come to terms with a complex world, constricted by its need to organize images or to understand and unsay inherited constructs, can the great void of yearning for God really be admitted. Although triggered by the intimately close presence of the divine,¹² the meaning of this profound pain is hidden from our rational understanding, initially even our spiritual intuition. But for John of the Cross this experience signals that the memory is being deconstructed or dispossessed in a redemptive movement whereby the incredibly slow appropriation of theological hope gradually displaces all that impedes new vision, new possibility, the evolution of a transformed self that is freed from bondage to its confining or destructive past. Crucial to any personal appropriation of hope is the ability to read the signs of what is going on so as to remain with the unfolding process.

⁹Dark Night 2.9.5; 2.9.7.

¹⁰Living Flame 3.18-22; consult note 46 in Constance FitzGerald, "Transformation in Wisdom," in *Carmel and Contemplation*, Carmelite Studies 8, eds. Kevin Culligan, OCD, and Regis Jordan, OCD (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 2000), 351.

¹¹For a more extensive interpretation of the process of purification in John of the Cross, see FitzGerald, "Transformation in Wisdom," 303-325.

¹²This intimately close presence of the divine John of the Cross calls infused contemplation, dark night, an inflow of God, secret Wisdom, mystical theology and loving knowledge. See Dark Night 2.5.1-2; 2.17, and Ascent 2.8.6. Another relevant text is Dark Night 1.10.6 where infused contemplation is, according to Kieran Kavanaugh, mentioned for the first time and equated with "dark and secret contemplation" and "secret and peaceful and loving inflow of God."

The Ambiguity of Memory

Why is this so difficult? Memory is a complex and ambiguous power. Multiple distinctions need to be made. Consider, for example, the distinction between the personal healing of memories and corporate processes of reconciliation, the distinction between memory as dangerous in the sense that liberation theologians speak of the dangerous memory of Jesus Christ, and memory as dangerous in the destructive sense; the distinction between history and memory; or the biblical and liturgical meaning of memory where past, present and future come together. Here I will focus on only one aspect of the ambiguity of memory in light of John of the Cross' treatment of purification of the memory.

Our memories have made us who we are, spiritually and humanly. No-memory makes authentic human relationship virtually impossible and robs us of our identity. I cannot forget the pain of the husband of an Alzheimer's patient, who in despair said of his wife, "she has only the present. To have only the present - that is hell." As Yale theologian Miroslav Volf suggests, however, in *The End of Memory, Remembering Rightly in a Violent World*, what we remember, what others including our culture remember with us and for us, how we remember, how we weave these memories together into the fabric of our lives matters decisively in shaping our identities.¹³

The difficulty is that memories can lead us to either healing and empathy or hostility and destruction. On the one hand, the human community is saturated with the injunction to remember: not only its triumphs of courage, but especially the unspeakable horrors of the holocaust, genocide, slavery, rape, ethnic cleansing, torture, and abuse precisely so that they never occur again. On the other hand, "the human race as individuals and tribes, at this very moment, is in huge measure bound to the past, to memory, in debilitating and destructive ways."¹⁴ Remembering wrongs suffered seems indispensable to healing, we are told, and is often a means of constructing and consolidating a community that tells the same narrative of anguish; and the memory of past injustices can certainly engender empathy, solidarity and justice for others who are oppressed. However, some victims of such evil, precisely because they remember their own victimization in the past, personally or as members of a persecuted, marginalized group, can feel justified in perpetrating violence, hatred, oppression and even ethnic cleansing in the present. "So easily does the protective shield morph into a sword of violence" that can last for generations, as Volf reminds us.¹⁵

¹³Miroslav Volf, *The End of Memory: Remembering Rightly in a Violent World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006), 25. See also Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Friends of God and Prophets, a Feminist Theological Reading of the Communion of Saints* (New York: Continuum, 1998), 164-65.

¹⁴Brian McDermott, unpublished homily given at Baltimore Carmel, January 18, 2009.

¹⁵Volf, *End of Memory*, 27-33.

Conscious of the horrendous evil inflicted upon him and the Jewish people, Elie Wiesel, that eloquent survivor of the holocaust, is well aware of the ambiguity of remembering. As deeply as anyone, he knows the pain of memory and the desperate “need of many victims to wipe from their memories all traces of days that are blacker than nights,”¹⁶ just as he realizes how clinging to the dead can diminish our capacity to live and to love in the present and for the future. He reflects on the effect of the negative use of memory throughout history - as illustrated in Bosnia: “that tormented land,” where, he writes, “it is memory that is a problem. It’s because they remember what happened to their parents or their sister or their grandparents that they hate each other.”¹⁷ While acknowledging the need to redeem memories, still “this passionate prophet of memory” can only continue crying out with glaring, powerful consistency one message: *Remember!*¹⁸ He can go no further.

The litany of experiences which cultural critics and survivors, psychologists and historians, theologians and novelists, do not want us to forget has given birth to trauma theory, mimetic theory, non-violent theory, feminist theory and theology, theologies of healing aimed at redeeming memory.¹⁹ All of this (including current neurological research on editing memory) has clouded the lens through which I look at John of the Cross’ teaching. Suspended in an intellectual impasse, I struggle to hold in tension both the power of memory and the importance of history in giving us context, on the one hand, *and*, on the other hand, the need to forget and be open to the radical transformation of the self and the memory. I ask how we can remember and forget at the same time. I wrestle with remembering anew so that we can tell the narrative differently, and I wrestle with forgetting when forgetfulness and silence are dangerous; for example, for women who are lower in the social hierarchy, or for those who come out of a heritage of slavery whose potential for being forgotten has been greater than for most. I strive to be faithful to and in

¹⁶Elie Wiesel, *Forgotten* (New York: Schocken 1992), 297.

¹⁷Elie Wiesel and Richard D. Heffner, *Conversations with Elie Wiesel*, ed. Thomas J. Viincigoerra (New York: Schocken, 2001), 144-45.

¹⁸Volf, *End of Memory*, 34; see 24-34. Volk reminds us that fifty years after the terrible Kristallnacht, Elie Wiesel spoke these words in the German Reichstag: “We remember Auschwitz and all that it symbolizes because we believe that, in spite of the past and its horrors, the world is worthy of salvation and salvation, like redemption, can be found in memory” (ibid 19).

¹⁹See, for example, Rene Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, trans. Patrick Gregory (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1979); Rene Girard, *The Scapegoat*, trans. Yvonne Freccero (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1986); Flora Keshgegian, *Redeeming Memories: A Theology of Healing and Transformation* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2000); Judith Lewis Herman, *Trauma and Recovery* (New York: Basic Books, 1992); Jon G. Allen, *Coping With Trauma*, 2nd ed. (Arlington, VA: American Psychiatric Publishing, 2005). See also Johnson, *Friends of God*, 141-170, for the importance of memory in reclaiming women’s lost history and rectifying their distorted and silent history.

solidarity with those who continue to remember indescribable violation and at the same time I am receptive to the transforming power of hope that deconstructs memory and to the fathomless Mystery coming to us from the future. I suggest that in this impasse psychology and the social sciences do not take us far enough. We need the insights of theologians and mystics.

*Interpretations of John of the Cross in
the Contemporary Context*

I turn to the example of John of the Cross' life and his mystical texts on dis-possession in the memory to understand how they function for personal and communal transformation. Abused for months in a cold, dark prison cell, humiliated, starved, beaten regularly in the refectory by the other friars, *brainwashed* to persuade him to repudiate Teresa of Avila and the Carmelite Reform, he was saved from certain death only by a daring escape. Clearly John could have been embittered or destroyed by the experience and never moved beyond it. Instead this sixteenth century Carmelite offers us a mystical inheritance and a provocative challenge.

Almost five centuries later, in his masterful study, *The End of Memory*, Miroslav Volf describes a similar process. He delineates the complex, poignant process whereby he passed from the destructive, confining memory of his intense, dehumanizing interrogation and severe psychic battering in communist Yugoslavia to a realization that the ability to let go of the memories of the evil inflicted by Captain G., his tormentor, would come about only as "a gift of God to the transformed self," a proleptic experience of the new "world of love" to come.²⁰ Volf's genius lies in his psychological, theological, cultural and spiritual analysis of the deliberate steps involved in his own concrete embodiment of exactly what John of the Cross calls the purification and transformation of memory and Volf's conviction that he would "squander his own soul" if he failed to follow the path toward which Christ called him, if he did not surrender to the redeeming process in all its pain and ambiguity. As he works meticulously through issues of memory and identity, probing the obligation to remember truthfully as a prerequisite for achieving justice for the wronged, the need to remember therapeutically so that wrongs suffered can be integrated into a new narrative and the grip of the past on one's identity broken; as he wonders repeatedly how long one must remember and when, if ever, one can forget, he exposes the severe displacement and the impasse this purifying experience causes.

While it is impossible to synthesize here Volf's careful theological development, he concludes that through the memory of the Passion of Jesus, God will purify his memory of wrongs suffered since his identity as a Christian stems not from the evil done to him, nor from his own false innocence whereby he might

²⁰Volf, *End of Memory*, 146-47.

justify himself, but from his being beloved of God notwithstanding any sin. So his overriding spiritual intuition anticipates a time when evil suffered will “not come to mind,” will be “forgotten,” because both wronged and wrongdoer will be forgiven, reconciled, transformed and immersed in the love God.

If we turn to the night of memory in women’s spiritual experience for other examples, we see a multifaceted picture. First, when the purifying touch of secret Wisdom²¹ awakens out of numbness a woman’s deeply abused humanity, she, first of all, *remembers*. Here again multiple distinctions are needed. Women’s experience of chattel slavery or sexual and physical abuse cannot be compared to privileged women’s experience of social or ecclesial marginalization. But in any form of systemic injustice, the woman, like Volf, *remembers*: with extraordinary poignancy she remembers all the acts of inequality, dismissal, inferiority, subordination, violence, subjugation and silencing, all the disfiguring assumptions that the dominant culture of patriarchy or the majority race or class has projected and continues to inflict on her. Even more, she becomes painfully aware of all the past emotion, passion and feelings associated with these acts that have left her so intensely wounded. Because so many women forget on purpose, or for unconscious reasons fail to see, the initial step of purification is *remembering* and this remembering is a miracle of contemplative grace. Failing to understand the *spiritual* process underway, many go no further.²²

Only very gradually, under the influence of hidden Sophia drawing a woman deep into herself and her own body memory, does the painful unraveling of her social constructedness, previous spiritual experience, past dependencies and loves, successes and failures, yield to the dark, mysterious, hidden, purifying embrace of intimate divine love effecting woman’s radical unsaying of “all the images, understandings and memories that do not name her” or her God.²³ At its nadir this is the experience of the empty tomb, “where the ‘follow me’ of Jesus

²¹See Living Flame 2 for “purifying touch” and FitzGerald “Transformation in Wisdom,” 308-318, 326-27.

²²I suggest that without an understanding of spiritual development, psychotherapy will have limited and inconclusive results.

²³Beverly Lanzetta, *Radical Wisdom*, 132-35. I appreciate Lanzetta’s insights which I have integrated with my own in the preceding section. I believe woman’s experience, “via femina,” she describes *is* the dark night purification of memory John of the Cross develops even though Lanzetta appears to think “via femina” is something beyond John’s (male) descriptions. She seems to suggest, however, that it is Teresa’s experience. When Teresa says a specific experience of loneliness and suffering is “beyond” everything she has written, she is referring to her “Life” but not to the “Interior Castle” which she wrote about 15 years later. When she wrote the “Life,” she had not experienced the spiritual marriage or the darkness preceding it. See Constance FitzGerald, “Discipleship of Equals,” in *A Discipleship of Equals, Towards a Christian Feminist Spirituality*, ed. Francis A. Eigo (Villanova, PA: Villanova University Press, 1988), 63-97.

comes from a voice which has been effaced,"²⁴ and from where woman will rise to see herself affirmed in the beauty of divine Wisdom.²⁵ With powerful intensity and considerable clarity, Beverly Lanzetta is, I believe, describing this night of memory in her work, *Radical Wisdom, A Feminine Mystical Theology*, on which I have drawn here, when she discusses the *via femina* of contemporary woman related to the contemplative prayer development of Teresa of Avila. Because this radical emptying out²⁶ of woman's constructed selfhood is so profoundly united with the kenosis of Jesus,²⁷ this dispossession in the feminine memory effects a solidarity that reaches far beyond the personal into the communal, into the souls of all women; then deep into the human spirit.²⁸

Although I have dwelt on traumatic memories at some length, it is equally important to recall that John extends memory's forfeitures particularly to spiritual gifts and consolation, human achievements and natural endowments and to one's carefully achieved selfhood. The most critical remnant of one's former experience/knowledge of God as well as one's perceived wholeness to which one had been clinging without realizing it, is taken away. One successful, contemporary, American woman's poignant description of her experience of purification of

²⁴See Natalie Zeman Davis, "The Quest of Michel de Certeau," *The New York Review of Books* (March 15, 2008), 57-60.

²⁵In the *Spiritual Canticle*, John of the Cross describes the movement from purification of the memory to its transformation when he writes, "[God] fills her memory with divine knowledge, because it is now alone and empty of all images and fantasies"(35.5). Such transformative self-donation on the part of God embraces the loved one in the beauty of divine Wisdom, in whom the person beholds, as in a mirror her own beauty. Subverted definitively is the confining, hoarding, colonizing power of memory and past assumptions in an affirmation that spirals to seemingly endless degrees of mutual appreciation singularly determined not by the self-possession of the loved person, but by the beauty of Wisdom whose depth and breadth of feeling can gather every absurdity and contradiction into an ever expanding pattern of beauty. John sings: "Let us rejoice, Beloved, and let us go forth to behold ourselves in your beauty ... that I be so transformed in your beauty and we be alike in beauty possessing then your very beauty ... in such a way that each looking at the other may see in each other their own beauty, since both are your beauty alone" (36.5).

²⁶Although I have largely avoided John's language of "emptying" the memory, this experience really is an *emptying* out of memory.

²⁷For John of the Cross, Jesus Christ is the pattern of the Dark Night: see Ascent 2.7.2-8.

²⁸In *The Subversive Power of Love*, 49-67, M. Shawn Copeland shows exemplified in Henriette Delille what I am describing. For further explication of solidarity in difference see also Johnson, *Friends of God*, 175-180, who also references M. Shawn Copeland, "Toward a Critical Christian Feminist Theology of Solidarity," in *Women and Theology*, 3, eds. Mary Ann Hinsdale and Phyllis Kaminski (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis) and "Difference as a Category in Critical Theologies for the Liberation of Women," in *Feminist Theology in Different Contexts*, eds. Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza and M. Shawn Copeland (London, UK: SCM Press and Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1996), 143.

memory witnesses to this. Largely unencumbered by projections of inferiority and subordination, she writes in her journal:²⁹

It is as if I have been robbed profoundly, precisely of the comforting, assuring memory of presence, which is so vital to my self-identity, as it is informed by my past. I no longer own or possess my interior memories of my past (even in some exterior ways). If, like a person with amnesia, I were a complete blank, I would not suffer so. In this way, memory is not exactly "lost." Instead, it is numbed. I remember just enough to be in pain. I still know that I once knew (or thought I knew) God. I still know that I once found meaning and mission in the sense of God's presence and love. I know this but I can no longer connect it with myself. Everything has been de-linked. When I sit for a time of purported prayer, I only feel loss. What I thought I had, now seems like a lie, an illusion. I have been emptied of all claims to authenticity for all that I have lived. I search for a word meaning *to take away the essence of, radically*. The hollowing out is so deep that by its essence it highlights that there are deeper and deeper levels that have not been touched. The only light that is given by this experience shines on the seemingly infinite levels of emptying that are waiting to happen. I find myself wondering how the little acorn of a person I am can possibly have these infinite levels to be emptied. With such a radical process underway within me, how is it possible that something of me remains? I feel like a shell of a person.³⁰

And I am dispossessed in other ways too. My health has been taken away. My considerable financial resources are seriously threatened - this is part of the loss of my past. All that I have accumulated, all the tangible signs of the life I once led are being ground into dust. This vanishing of the product of my work and life removes another layer of evidence for the successful life I once lived. There is no proof, even exterior, of what once was. For years I have known that my intellectual strength has been an ability to use memory to make associations between concepts, to piece things together to reach good and sometimes insightful conclusions. This part of me seems dead at the moment. Still it is curious to me that throughout this time I have been able to be productive, to work effectively and to concentrate. In my everyday life, I have energy and ability. And so I know at least that this experience is not depression.

The journal concludes:

As I continue living through this, I have been shown the possibility that this memory unraveling is perhaps a necessary step to true hope. Because the experience denies my past, I have nothing to project on to God for the future or even the present. I experience a poverty that could lead me to hopelessness - to expect nothing of the future because the thread of my past has unraveled, and I no longer have a context for my life.³¹ Here the competing directions are despair or a true hope, a hope that is independent of me and my accomplishments, spiritual or otherwise.

²⁹From a private spiritual journal shared with me.

³⁰Dark Night 2.5-6.

³¹Ibid., 2.9.7.

BIRTH OF THEOLOGICAL HOPE

Many would see only destruction or psychological illness at work in this woman's life, and the experience of contemplative purification can resemble dark psychological states like depression, so destructive of the self. But Denys Turner, reflecting on depression and dark night, makes an important distinction. While both are malaise of the self, the prognosis is different. The final outcome the depressed person hopes for in therapy or treatment is the restoration of the self which has been lost, albeit a more mature one. But "the dark nights on the other hand are entered into as loss of that same self, for in that consists their pain, but the hope it [the self] acquires is of the non-recovery of that selfhood in any form for what is lost in the passive nights was never the self at all, but only an illusion all along."³² The selfhood that is lost will never be regained and therein lies its hope. In this purification, the annulling of the memories, we are being dispossessed of the autonomous self, our achieved selfhood put together over a lifetime.

John of the Cross does, in fact, make sense of the experience, the purification of the memory, by linking it to theological hope, and this is what I want to emphasize. The cavern of the memory is filled and cluttered with the past - its graces and achievements, its experiences too many and varied to recount. The impotence or muting of this past, authored by the hidden inpouring of God, is precisely the condition that makes hope in the strictly theological sense even possible.³³ As memory slowly becomes a silent space, what very gradually takes over is true theological hope.³⁴ Activated by divine presence, hope is essential to purification. Without it there is no purification, but only suffering. When the emptiness of the memory on the level of affectivity and imagination becomes a deep void of yearning, it is hope that opens up the possibility of being possessed by the infinite,

³²Denys Turner, "John of the Cross: the dark nights and depression," in *The Darkness of God: Negativity in Western Mysticism* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 244. See 226-251.

³³For a clearer understanding of the meaning of theological hope in John of the Cross, consult Karl Rahner "On the Theology of Hope" in *Theological Investigations, Volume X: Writings of 1965-67 2*, trans. David Bourke (New York: Seabury, 1977), 242-259.

³⁴Focusing on hope, John of the Cross explains in Ascent 2.6.3: "Hope puts the memory in darkness and emptiness as regards all earthly and heavenly objects. Hope always pertains to the unpossessed object. If something were possessed there could no longer be any hope for it. St. Paul says to the Romans: 'Hope that is seen is not hope, for how does a person hope for what is seen - that is, what is possessed?' As a result this virtue also occasions emptiness, since it is concerned with unpossessed things and not with the possessed object." See Blommestijn, Huls and Waaijman, *Footprints of Love*, 71-73. I am indebted to the authors' treatment of the purification of memory and specifically here to hope. These Dutch Carmelite scholars have been working with the purification of memory in John as I have.

unimaginable, incomprehensible Mystery of love that is so close. John describes it this way:

Hope empties and withdraws the memory from all creature possessions, for as St. Paul says, hope is for what is not possessed. It withdraws the memory from what can be possessed and fixes it on what it hopes for. Hence only hope in God prepares the memory perfectly for union with [God].³⁵

I believe we can clarify the relationship between memory's deconstruction and theological hope by drawing new insights from the developing theology of evolution, which has been notably synthesized by Templeton scholar John Haught. Building on the work of Karl Rahner, Paul Tillich, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, and others, Haught speaks compellingly of a "metaphysics of the future." He explains:

A metaphysics of the future is rooted in the intuition, expressed primordially in the biblical experience, ... that the abode of ultimate reality is not limited to the causal past nor to a fixed and timeless present "up above." Rather it is to be found most characteristically in the constantly arriving and renewing future. We need a vision of reality that makes sense of the most obvious aspects of life's evolution, in particular the fact that it brings about new forms of being ... [This] alternative view of reality ... is a metaphysics that gives priority to the future rather than to the past or the present and is rooted deeply in the experience that people have of something that to them is overwhelming and incontestably real, namely, what might be called metaphorically the "power of the future." Of course, it is perhaps only by adopting the religious posture of hope that they have been opened to the experience of this power.³⁶

Haught would say that this "power of the future," which grasps us and makes us new, might be called "God" who is always alluring us forward from a future that comes to meet us.³⁷

Before memory is purified, we can thwart our encounter with the future, without even realizing it, by relying on the images which memory has saved for us – images of our past, joyful or sad, pleasant or unpleasant, fulfilling or detrimental. We project these images onto our vision of the future, we block the limitless possibilities of God by living according to an expectation shaped, not by hope, but by our own desires, needs and past experiences.³⁸ Dutch Carmelite theologian Kees

³⁵Dark Night 2.21.11.

³⁶John F. Haught, *God After Darwin: A Theology of Evolution* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2000), 88-89.

³⁷*Ibid.*, 90.

³⁸John writes: "The spiritual person must continually bear in mind the following precaution; he [sic] must not build up an archive of impressions in his memory of all the things he hears, sees, smells, and touches. On the contrary, he must immediately forget them and, if necessary, apply as much energy to forgetting them as others do to remembering them. He must do this in such a way that no communication or idea of these things remains in his

Waaijman and his colleagues remind us that we have the mistaken notion that we are completely open to the reality around us, whereas we necessarily trim back any new impressions to the images we already carry within ourselves and which provide us with something secure to hold onto. “However much we may open ourselves in self-forgetfulness to the other reality that reveals itself to us, in fact, we do not get beyond the reduction of the other to that which is ours.”³⁹ Bringing a pre-understanding to every dream, we are condemned, without memory’s purification, to a predictable and even violent world.⁴⁰

Miroslav Volf’s experience led him to the conclusion that if he continued to let the stored impressions of wrongdoing define him, he would take on a distorted identity that would be frozen in time and closed to future growth.⁴¹ Given that the memory of his abuse kept metastasizing itself into his anticipated future, he realized he could not permit his communist interrogator to define the boundary of his expectations forever. Grasped by hope in “Jesus Christ [who] promises to every person a new horizon of possibility, a new world freed from all enmity, a world of love,” and believing that those new possibilities for the Christian are defined by that promise and not by past experience or worn out assumptions, Volf was able to open himself to the flame of God’s presence; he was able to receive a new identity defined by God’s love. Now, as a consequence of God’s gift to him of

memory. He must act as if these things did not exist in the world. Thus he leaves the memory free and unencumbered and unattached to any earthly or heavenly consideration. He then arrives at a state such that it would appear as though he had no memory. He must freely let it sink into oblivion as a hindrance” (Ascent 3.2.14). John further explains: “God displays no form or image that can be encompassed by the memory. Hence also the memory, when it is united with God, is without form or image ... Our everyday experience in fact also teaches us this. The memory is devoid of all images and imbued with the supreme good. It has completely forgotten everything and no longer remembers anything. For union with God empties the imagination and sweeps out all forms and communications, and elevates it to the supernatural” (Ascent 3.2.4). The translations of these two texts are taken from *Footprints of Love*. I am grateful to Blommestijn, Huls and Waaijman for their articulation of this experience. Their thought is so close to my own. See 71-73.

³⁹*Ibid.*, 90.

⁴⁰Coming from another tradition, Christopher Bamford articulates even more explicitly how the archives of our images block an authentic encounter with the Other, or any vision for the future. Commenting on Meister Eckhart’s instruction on detachment, he says: “By images Eckhart means the contents of consciousness: the finished fixed forms – past thoughts and memories – which we take to be the world but which in fact are not the world in its immediacy and present-ness, but only our own past, our own habits and fixed tendencies. Immured within these images, we feed upon ourselves and take our self-feeling for the world. These images interpose themselves between us and the world, breaking the continuum of being, and making any true meeting or knowledge impossible.” *Parabola* 10, no. 3 (1985), 67.

⁴¹See Volf, 12. According to Volf, whether memories multiply pleasure or replicate pain they cut us off from the future (21).

self-transcendence, evil suffered would “not-come-to-mind.” In Christ he would live into a future beyond imagining.⁴² With his memories undone and absorbed by the fire of contemplative love, he would find the way past the limits of his experience to the truth that has no borders; the meeting that exists beyond his perceptions.

This dynamic of being able to yield unconditionally to God’s future is what John of the Cross calls *hope*, a hope that exists without the signature of our life and works, a hope independent of us and our accomplishments (spiritual gifts or ordinary human achievements), a hope that can even embrace and work for a future without us. This theological hope is completely free from the past, fully liberated from our need to recognize ourselves in the future, to survive, to be someone. When we are laid flat by the deconstruction/silencing of our memory, it is hope that is very gradually taking over the operation of the memory/imagination, hollowing out a place for the “power of the future,” for the coming of the Impossible.⁴³ For hope to extend itself this far by perpetual expectation into the realm of the Invisible and Incomprehensible, its movement will have to be purified of all forms of self-preservation, all efforts to preserve one’s selfhood as it is. John T. Ford clarifies this further: “Hope does not desire anything for itself. It does not return to itself but rather remains with that which is hoped for.”⁴⁴ The key insight here is that it is the limited self constituted by the past that needs to yield to the transforming power of God’s call into the future.

If this freeing process of purification or forfeiture were up to us we would not, could not, accomplish it. To attempt to unravel one’s memory outside of this understanding, unprecipitated by the burning presence of the divine, is absolutely destructive and unhealthy, but this purification overtakes us in the events of our lives and God works with us in the depths of these occurrences. When, for example, a theologian is placed under suspicion or silenced, when his/her work is rejected, when his/her identity as a Catholic theologian is threatened, questioned or denied, she/he undoubtedly experiences such dispossession. But

⁴²Ibid., 81-83, 145-147.

⁴³John explains: “... none of the supernatural forms and ideas that can be received by the memory is God, and the soul must empty itself of all that is not God in order to go to God. Consequently, the memory must likewise dismiss all these forms and ideas in order to reach union with God in hope. Every possession is against hope.. As St. Paul says, hope is for that which is not possessed (Heb. 2.1). In the measure in which the soul becomes dispossessed of things, in that measure will it have hope, and the more hope it has the greater will be its union with God, for in relation to God, the more a soul hopes the more it attains hope” (Ascent 3.7.2). See Blommestijn, Huls, Waaijman, *Footprints of Love*, 71-73, 79-82.

⁴⁴David F. Ford, *Self and Salvation, Being Transformed* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 64. In *Darkness of God* Denys Turner writes in similar fashion: “As memory we are dispossessed by hope of any power to construct for ourselves an identity of our own” (246).

however this undoing occurs, it is inevitably accompanied by forfeiture in our spiritual lives and prayer, in all that concerns God. (John calls this the “supernatural memory.”) The memory of all our spiritual experiences, above all, creates a pattern of expectation that must yield to the unknown Mystery. And so we experience a draining off of any spiritual meaning in prayer, in our feelings about God, in our experience of liturgy and Church. The inadequacy of theology looms large or even worse seems like an empty shell and all this seems irreversible.

You can see what a radical call this is. Those who answer it must be prepared to leave so much behind, to stop clinging to a security that has been taken away. Perhaps those who finally understand and give their lives over to the dismantling of the archives of memory by accepting the gift of hope eschew keeping a death grip on what has given them assurance of their value and place in the Church.

PROPHECY AND PRAYER OF NO EXPERIENCE

The profound and painful purification I have been outlining really does change a person’s memory. This dark passage does have an arrival point: prophecy. Obsession with the past gives way to a new undefinable sense of relatedness or intimacy, an experience of ultimate assurance, and this conversion releases creativity and most importantly freedom for the limitless possibilities of God, for hope. This freedom, this posture of hope, is really prophecy, for it enables a person to reveal the vision of a different kind of future than the one we want to construct from our limited capacities. Such a person becomes a prophet when she shows the way; when she is willing to stand on the horizon so that all can see this future, God’s future.

It is tempting to envision this emergence from the dark night, this dawn, as a time of wondrous consolation and light, marked by the constant sense of God’s presence and highlighted with ecstatic experiences of delight in union with God. But while John of the Cross acknowledges that there may be ecstatic delight, he hints, and I believe, that the actual day-to-day experience in dark night’s dawn may be quite different. Perhaps we need to consider anew what we mean by spiritual ecstasy. Perhaps a spiritual ecstasy, in our day, might be defined as any moment when we fully and truly step out of, or are impelled beyond, ourselves.⁴⁵

In fact, from what I have witnessed in spiritual direction and other conversations, openness and freedom in the liberated memory is experienced not so much as consolation but as a profound peace in the silent unknowing and in the dark empty space of encounter with God, the truly Other, an emptiness that is content not to seek fulfillment in its own time. I call this prophetic hope, which “expresses”

⁴⁵I am not alone in this interpretation: “[I]n the state of ecstasy,” Kees Waaijman and his colleagues suggest, “we are beside ourselves and become strangers and pilgrims who no longer feel at home anywhere and lose our footing” (*Footprints of Love*, 127).

itself in what I have named the *prayer of no experience*. The depth and prevalence of such prayer begs for interpretation and meaning.

Very often after years of trying to pray and live faithfully, after receiving precious graces, consolations and insight, persons experience not presence, but *nothing*, silence, in their prayer. Many mature, dedicated, seasoned religious people who pray steadfastly and work courageously in the Church describe this phenomenon. They report that there is absolutely nothing discernible going on when they pray and yet they do need prayer; they are faithful to it and actually spend considerable time in silent *there-ness*. But the only experience is *no experience*, the silent place. This is not, I am convinced, the normal season of dryness which earnest people pass through in early prayer development. It is not the loss of enjoyment, pleasure, contentment, sensitivity in life and prayer and ministry, that transitional purification that “dismantle[s] the whole apparatus of sensory ego-compensation.”⁴⁶

Though we would probably see these individuals, *pray-ers of no experience*, as remarkably self-possessed and loving, ministerially effective and at the height of their scholarly achievements, they realize, without dramatization, that they do not quite know who they are anymore. This is not an identity crisis of the young, or not so young adult, or of those who have never discovered themselves, authored their own lives, and borne their own responsibility. It is not even a mid-life crisis with its bid for freedom in sometimes irresponsible escape or heedless self-realization. It is far deeper than these. On one level these persons no longer know what they believe. But on a more profound level, they walk in faith, accustomed to doubt and inner questioning, yet possessed by a hope that is wordless and imageless in its expectation of “what eye has not seen nor ear heard”.... They are marked by a certain serenity of spirit indicative of the degree to which this dark theological faith has gripped the intellect and pure theological hope has filled the memory obscuring and emptying them and guiding the person toward the “high goal of union with God.”⁴⁷ While they theoretically, academically and responsibly maintain a hold on their theological underpinnings and remain faithful to their religious tradition and liturgical life, they realize experientially that none of us is meant to know who God is, but only who/what God is not. These people have perhaps made the conclusive passage from extreme desolation of spirit where they felt abandoned by or distant from God to the love opened to them by fathomless Mystery and this is why I think they are on the dawn side of the dark night of the spirit, perhaps the first stage of a truly transformed consciousness. I suggest these prophets of hope are *being worked on*, transformed by love, in profound silence.⁴⁸

⁴⁶Denys Turner, *Darkness of God*, 236.

⁴⁷Ascent 1.4.1.

⁴⁸Commenting on “... in solitude he guides her, he alone,” John explains “that [t]he meaning of [this line of the *Spiritual Canticle* poem] is not only that he [sic] guides her in her solitude, but it is *he alone who works in her* without any means. This is a characteristic

Looking through this lens of silence/emptiness, we see that, in fact, these prophets of hope have been able to move beyond the “self of experience” that blocked any true encounter with the Other. Such an encounter requires an “empty space from which the self has withdrawn” - and this is true in the most radical degree if we are to encounter God, who is the most absolute Other to us.⁴⁹ To have “no experience of selfhood” may in fact be the singular hallmark of a transformed self. *No experience pray-ers* are exhibiting in themselves the presence of a purely passive power, a capacity to be attracted by the Future,⁵⁰ a movement toward God in love-filled hope no longer grounded in the need to possess, to enjoy or to dominate by words or memory or understanding. This is the ultimate silence, the ultimate empty space and may very well be one kind of ecstatic experience of union. Karl Rahner understood this:

There is no such thing either in the world or in the heart, as literal vacancy, as a vacuum. And whenever space is really left - by death, by renunciation, by parting, by apparent emptiness, provided the emptiness that cannot remain empty is not filled by the world, or activity, or chatter, or the deadly grief of the world - there is God.⁵¹

DISPOSSESSION OF SELF

I believe a dispossession of selfhood is being actualized in this silent *prayer of no experience*⁵² and I suspect it has a specific prophetic purpose. This is in keeping with my years of sitting with John of the Cross and hints at what I have learned in the intervening time between the writing of *Impasse and Dark Night* and today’s presentation. It is my strong suspicion that the *prayer of no experience*, effecting an essential change in selfhood, may be emerging with such frequency as a response to a world driven by selfishness and self-concern. Any hope for new consciousness and a self-forfeiture driven by love stands opposed by a harsh reality: we humans serve our own interests, we hoard resources, we ravage the earth and other species, we scapegoat, we make war, we kill, we torture, we turn a blind eye to the desperation and needs of others, and we allow

of the union of the soul with God in the spiritual marriage: *God works in and communicates himself to her through himself alone*, without using as means the angels or natural ability, for the exterior and interior senses, and all creatures, and even the soul herself do very little toward the reception of the remarkable supernatural favors that God grants in this state” (35.6).

⁴⁹Blommestijn, Huls, Waaijman, *Footprints of Love*, 122.

⁵⁰“And the memory, which by itself perceived only the figures and phantasms of creatures, is changed through this union so as to have in its mind the eternal years” (Living Flame 2.34.4); and “its memory is the eternal memory of God” (Living Flame 2.34.7).

⁵¹Quoted in *The Tablet* by Daniel O’Leary, “Space for Grace” (November 18, 2006).

⁵²“... the soul is dead to all that it was in itself ...” (Living Flame 2.34.7).

others to die. We simply are not evolved enough to move into a different future from which God comes to us. Our ability to embody our communion with every human person on the earth and our unassailable connectedness with everything living is limited because we have not yet become these symbiotic "selves." We continue to privilege our personal autonomy and are unable to make the transition from radical individualism to a genuine synergistic community even though we know intellectually we are inseparably and physically connected to every living being in the universe. Yet the future of the entire earth community is riding on whether we can find a way beyond the limits of our present evolutionary trajectory.

I am aware of the discomfort my insistence on dispossession of self might evoke in many of you who rightly ascribe to the principle of personal autonomy and the value of the individual. I am not denying the necessity of growing to healthy autonomy nor of the danger of a selflessness that is unwilling or unable to achieve a strong agency. I value the life's work of very fine scholars, many of them women, who, at the end of modernity, have tried so hard and so successfully through their scholarship and advocacy to claim agency for all women and for disenfranchised groups. But our *present* situation in the world does not allow us to stop at the call for or to cling unreflectively to the idea of such individual autonomy. For if there is any insight that we have gained from postmodernity, it is that radical interdependence can, must, and indeed does co-exist with individuals' power to act. Then, what I am suggesting in this essay speaks of a useful and necessary dispossession that does not deny or stand as obstacle to mutual relationship of persons and community.

The transformation taking place in the *prayer of no experience* opens into a profoundly different realm for which we do not have adequate words: the deconstruction of even healthy forms of autonomy that no longer represent the deepest possibilities of the person herself and the human with God nor the radical need of the human community for a deeper synergy. What this prayer predicts as possibility for what the human person and the human community are to become is far beyond what a coalition of strong willed, autonomous, right thinking, ethical people can ever achieve on their own. I know that with this formulation I have gone into a dangerous space where language fails me and impasse confronts me.

If the process underway in the *prayer of no experience* is silently dispossessing us of our possessive selfhood, might this forfeiture amount to an evolutionary leap toward selflessness? Though we are inclined first to understand John Haught's observation that evolutionary reality brings about "new forms of being" as pertaining just to physical forms, surely we are aware on further consideration that evolution is not so confined. This we know from the emergence of consciousness, our latest evolutionary leap. And analogously if our consciousness develops, then Edith Stein's assertion as early as the 1930s that the human *spirit* evolves too must be true, as must Pierre Teilhard de Chardin's speculation that the next evolutionary stage would be concentrated precisely in the realm of spirit

(mind) or consciousness, his “noosphere.” His understanding of this next phase reflects his awareness of the interdependence of the spirit and the body for mutual development. Thus, the hypotheses of these great thinkers make me bold to contend that this prayer, expressive of a prophetic hope, is an important contemplative bridge to a new future, to the transformation or evolution of consciousness, and through these *pray-ers of no experience* the human person is being changed radically.⁵³

Reaching beyond the horizon of present expectation and imagination, willing to go beyond the boundaries of their lives/selves to make an irrevocable passage into a new place, a new way of “being” in the universe, these prophets of hope stand open to receive the unimaginable future to which God is alluring us, and more: they actually serve as the doorway to it. Emmanuel Levinas, the twentieth century philosopher and, like Edith Stein, an early disciple of Husserl, understood this kind of transformative dedication. Levinas ultimately moved beyond ontological philosophy to emphasize the primacy of the ethical relationship with the Other. In this passage he appropriates radical self-dispossession and locates prophecy precisely in the silent eschatology of profound theological hope:

What comes to mind is the statement of Leon Blum who, imprisoned in a Nazi camp, wrote: “We work *in* the present, not *for* the present.” Genuine dedication in working does not seek the applause of one’s own time. It devotes itself in dark trust to “a time which lies past the horizon of my time.” Surfacing here is

⁵³What is remarkable in the final section of *The Spiritual Canticle* is the progressive character of transformation and, even more surprising, the differing meanings John ascribes to these almost infinite *transformative* possibilities. The history of these stanzas reveals that in the freer, more passionate and daring first redaction of the Canticle commentary (1584) John situates his marvelous expectations for *continuing transformation* this side of death with only minor gesturing to eternity. In the second, more theologically refined redaction written a year or two later (1585-1586), probably with an eye on the Inquisition, his great hope sees these same transformative consequences taking place largely over the horizon of death. My intuition favors John’s first, more spontaneous and “dangerous” explanation in what is known as Canticle A. What I want to note in these mystical texts is John’s testimony that silent contemplative union, the *prayer of no experience*, radically changes a person and opens into truly new possibilities, new vision, a vast, bottomless and incomprehensible Future toward which hope reaches and love gives. John writes: “This thicket of wisdom and knowledge of God is so profound and vast that, for all the soul may know thereof, she can ever enter farther still, so vast is it, and so uncomprehensible are its riches (A 35.5-6) There we shall enter and be transformed in the transformation of new knowledge and new acts and communications of love. For although it is true that the soul, when she says this, is already transformed ... in this wisdom ... it does not therefore follow that she cannot in this estate have new enlightenments and transformations of new kinds of knowledge and divine light” (A 37.5).

the eschatological meaning of “some work.” Our work in this age is fragmentary, part of a whole we cannot take in from where we sit. It is only a completely naked faith which knows that this “some” is bound up with a body of the Messiah I can neither conceive nor organize. By disinterestedly stepping outside of myself in work I exercise myself in darkly trusting the End. As worker I abandon the prospect of “personally experiencing the outcome” of my work. This work is essentially prophetic: it works “without entering the Promised Land.” This prophetic eschatology is free: delivered from the snares of calculation, delivered from the nihilism of uncommitted game-playing and waste. And stronger: in dark trust discerning a triumph “in a time without me....” The prophetism of this work is located precisely in this eschatology without hope for myself....” Really working exceeds the boundaries of one’s own time. It is action for a world that is coming, action which surpasses this time, action in which I surpass myself, and in which the yearning for an epiphany of the Other is included.⁵⁴

I want to leave before you who are theologians in our sad, conflicted Church this image of the self-dispossessed prophet whose face is turned in radical hope toward the God coming from the future. When such prophets overstep the horizon of their own time, their own life, in work, in words, in scholarship, in teaching, in who they are as people of silent prayer, not only are they, themselves, reborn on the other side of the boundary, but they are also carriers of the evolution of consciousness for the rest of humanity. We can hope that as more and more people make this dark passage to prophecy, this movement of the human spirit will “activate different genetic potentials” surpassing those operative in our present selfhood.⁵⁵ As a result, a critical mass

⁵⁴Adriaan Peperzak, *Het Menselijk Gelaat* (The Human Face), Bilthoven 1971, 172-173. This is a collection of articles on Emmanuel Levinas. The Levinas text may be found in English in Kees Waaijman *The Mystical Space of Carmel* (Leuven: Peeters 1999) 209-10. Although Waaijman seems to give this as a direct quote, the quotation marks within the text make it ambiguous. Certainly Levinas discusses *these thoughts* in “Meaning and Sense” in *Emmanuel Levinas, Basic Philosophical Writings*, ed. Adriaan T. Peperzak, Simon Critchley, Robert Bernasconi (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1996) 33-64.

⁵⁵In an editorial, “Human Nature Today” in the *New York Times* for June 26, 2009, columnist David Brooks, paraphrasing the thought of Sharon Begley, writes: “The first problem is that far from being preprogrammed with a series of hardwired mental modules, as evolutionary psychologist types assert, our brains are fluid and plastic. We’re learning that evolution can be a more rapid process than we thought. It doesn’t take hundreds of thousands of years to produce genetic alterations. Moreover, we’ve evolved to adapt to diverse environments. Different circumstances can *selectively activate different genetic potentials*.... Human nature adapts to the continual flow of information—adjusting to the ancient information contained in genes and the current information contained in today’s news [even more the spiritual process of transformation] in a continuous, idiosyncratic blend.” See Sharon Begley, “Don’t Blame the Caveman,” *Newsweek* (June 30, 2009).

will be generated which will lead all humanity across the frontier into the new epoch that is trying to be born. Only our unpurified memories prevent us from imagining a future in which our descendants are not like the human beings we know ourselves to be.

Like another Carmelite, Edith Stein, whom I mentioned earlier and who died with her people in the extermination camp at Auschwitz, betrayed by the state to which she had vowed a total commitment in her youth, I am suggesting to you who are theologians the powerful influence of a *spiritual* generativity. The evolution of spirit or consciousness of which Stein speaks happens not just or mainly through a physical propagation but through a spiritual one in which people “bear fruit by virtue of the atmosphere which radiates from them on their environment and ... also by means of the works which they produce in common and through which they propagate their spirit.”⁵⁶ This idea of spiritual generativity may sound far-fetched or ungrounded, until we consider what scientists are discovering and speculating about the true nature of our world. For example, as long ago as 1982 it was reported that “under certain circumstances sub-atomic particles such as electrons are able to instantaneously communicate with each other regardless of the distance separating them, whether an inch, 100 feet, or 10 billion miles apart.” Scientist David Bohm’s explanation: there is a deeper and more complex level of reality than we experience, an “implicate order or unbroken wholeness” from which all our perceived reality derives. If such a fabric of interconnectedness exists in nature, it is no stretch of the imagination to apply it to consciousness. Genuine contemplatives have testified to this long before scientists.⁵⁷

In a time of unraveling in the Church, when past, present and future do not seem to hold together in a promising continuity, when we stand perhaps at the cusp of an evolutionary breakthrough, you do not know how your work will be used or if it will be accepted or appreciated, nor can you ascertain what benefit it will bring to the Church, religion, American society, or the earth community, now or in a farther future. But I am sure, from my years of keeping company with John of the Cross, that in the personal and communal crisis of memory going on, you are being offered, you are being given, hope for yourselves and our people - a

⁵⁶Edith Stein, *Finite and Eternal Being*, trans. Kurt F. Reinhardt (Washington, DC: Institute of Carmelite Studies, 2002), 266.

⁵⁷See, for example, John of the Cross’ Living Flame: “The soul feels its ardor strengthen and increase and its love become so refined in this ardor that seemingly there flow seas of loving fire within it, reaching to the heights and depths of the earthly and heavenly spheres, imbuing all with love. It seems to it that the entire universe is a sea of love in which it is engulfed, for conscious of the living point or center of love within itself, it is unable to catch sight of the boundaries of this love (2.10); see also Teresa of Avila, *The Book of her Life*, Volume One, rev. ed., in *The Collected Works of St. Teresa of Avila*, trans. Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez (Washington, DC: Institute of Carmelite Studies, 1987) chap.40.10.

profound, radical theological hope - in a God who is coming anew and calling us forward. You must witness to this in your lives, your work, your scholarship; even in betrayal and suffering.⁵⁸ From within the mystical tradition, you are being challenged to be contemplative theologians willing to be stretched beyond yourselves toward a new epiphany of the Holy, incomprehensible Mystery. Be prophets of hope!

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⁵⁸Building on Walter Brueggemann's work on the prophetic imagination, Mary Catherine Hilkert in *Naming Grace* (81-84) describes the task of the prophetic preacher and the prophetic community [and, by extension, the prophetic theologian] as that of not only giving language to people's pain and grief in a time of impasse like ours, but also of focusing on the coming of God, the reign of God, and the rekindling of hope.