

# The *New Self* of John of the Cross

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## *Abstract*

This essay outlines the journey of transformation and conversion in God as reflected in the writings of Saint John of the Cross (1542-1591). Recognized as a mystic and Doctor of the Church John speaks to us of an "old self" (largely characterized by a pre-occupation with self-interest) who is slowly transformed into the "new self" (largely characterized by a life focused on generous self-giving, even to the point of extreme suffering and death). John of the Cross, well known for his description of the "Dark Night of the Soul" and the "Spiritual Marriage," is often overlooked as a model of personal-spiritual transformation because "The Dark Night" and the "Spiritual Marriage" seem so unattainable by the ordinary pilgrim. However, this article suggests John's journey is a journey possible in every individual and is characteristic of the call to holiness reflected in the Christian journey for all. Although few may receive the fullness of the graces of the "Dark Night" and the "Spiritual Marriage," transformation into the "new self" is the journey to which we are all called and is more common than we might first assume.

## Introduction

The theme of the old and the new self<sup>1</sup> has a long history among authors reflecting on their experience of transcendence that stretches all the way

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1 This essay was first given at a conference organized by the *Society for the Study of Christian Spirituality* held at Notre Dame University, IN, U.S.A. June 29-July 2, 2013. The conference was entitled "Wondrous Fear and Holy Awe." I am grateful for the comments and questions during the conference that helped shape the current essay. The essay draws largely on a previously published book: David B. Perrin, *For Love of the World: The Old and New Self of John of the Cross* (1997). The title is now held by The Rowan & Littlefield Publishing Group. In order not to be encumbered by numerous notes, excerpts, paraphrased text, or ideas developed by the author in *For Love of the World* are not specifically referenced in this essay.

back to the Hebrew Bible and Christian Scriptures. Hebrew prophetic imagery uses this theme:

[Thus says the Lord Yahweh:]

“I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you.  
I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart  
of flesh.  
I will put my own Spirit in you.” (Ex 36:26-27)<sup>2</sup>

Paul of Tarsus speaks of the old and new self in his letters:

You have shed the old self with its practices,  
and you have put on a new self which is renewed ...  
in the image of its Creator. (Col 3:9-10)

You were taught regarding your former way of life  
To let go of your old self... and to be renewed...  
So that you can put on a new self which is created in the likeness  
of God (Eph 4:22-24).

This essay will characterize the old self and the new self of John of the Cross and describe how the new self, who emerges through a process of transformation, is directed to live fully in this world, *the world*, loving it with deep passion and intense love.<sup>3</sup> It is not to some future and distant world that human transformation and conversion is directed. Exceptionally, the new self experiences the “dark night of the soul” and the “spiritual marriage,” (C 22, 3; Kav 560-561) that is, an intense union of love with God. Love then becomes wondrous and exceptional in nature: the wondrous new self loves with the passion of God – an all-consuming love which, at times, reaches a feverish pitch in noble living and self-giving.

As such, this essay distinguishes between the *new self*, which describes a mature level of personal transformation, and the *wondrous new self*, who has reached the depths of mystical union with God described as “spiritual marriage.” However, both the new self and the wondrous

2 Scripture citations are translations by Francis Kelly Nemeck, OMI, Ph.D., in Perrin (1997) *For Love of the World*, Foreword, vii–ix.

3 All references to the writings of John of the Cross are to the translation of the commentaries by Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez (1991), *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*, henceforth: Kav. References use the following format: F = *The Living Flame of Love* (second redaction), followed by the stanza number and paragraph number; A = *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, followed by the book in Roman numerals, chapter number, and paragraph number; DN = *The Dark Night*, followed by the book in Roman numerals, chapter number and paragraph number; C = *The Spiritual Canticle* (second redaction), followed by the stanza number and paragraph number.

new self quietly radiate splendorous awe as he or she goes about daily living in the marketplace of life.

### **John's Focus on This World – *the One and Only World***

John of the Cross adopts the language of the old and new self from the Pauline text (F 2, 33; Kav 670) to describe the journey of human transformation of the self within the daily activities and preoccupations of life. Furthermore, the journey of human transformation from the old self to the new self is characterized by a turning away from a preoccupation with self-interest to embrace a life focused on generous self-giving, even to the point of extreme suffering and death, which, according to Paul, is a life “created in the likeness of God.”

Regrettably, John of the Cross has frequently been characterized as a mystic who longed to escape this world to live in the mystical world of union with God – a world that existed elsewhere. William James, in his classic and widely read *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1929:299), suggests that John of the Cross held a “doom and gloom” attitude toward life. James describes John as “a Spanish mystic who flourished – or rather who existed, for there was little that suggested flourishing about him – in the sixteenth century [sic].” More recently, Susan Muto, in *Words of Wisdom for Our World: The Precautions and Counsel of St. John of the Cross* (1996: 37-38; 71-71), characterizes John's world as a world to be overcome in order to embrace love of God. According to Muto, love of others is not an end in itself; others are merely stepping stones trod upon in order to embrace authentic love, which rests in one's relationship with God alone.

To be fair, there has been some recent and excellent scholarship that has profiled a positive appreciation of John's perspective on the world. For example, Ronald Rolheiser's *A Fresh Approach to St. John of the Cross* (1993) takes a holistic approach to John's writings. Likewise John Welch in *When God's Die* (1990); Constance Fitzgerald in “Impasse and Dark Night,” (1984); and Richard Hardy in *Search for Nothing* (1982) all work to present a balanced and in-depth picture of John of the Cross' sage writings. But we still encounter, at the popular level, a morbid and loud gasp when John of the Cross is mentioned! Why “the doctor” is so badly misunderstood after over 400 years of scholarship that stretches around the world in numerous languages and cultural settings? Who really is “the doctor”?

We cannot blame those authors who have portrayed John as having a negative perspective on the world and human life as stand-alone critics of John of the Cross. A pessimistic and suspicious attitude toward the

body and the world has been a dominant theme throughout the history of Christianity and continues to be dominant in many areas of ecclesial life in our own time. Christian faith-culture still tends to feed the impression that the body is deprived of spiritual value, while the spirit is to be exalted with the same.<sup>4</sup> As Christians, we are still recovering from the negative influence of Neo-platonic dualism and Jansenism that just will not go away. It is in the “air we breathe.”

The attitude of *de contemptu mundi* often appears unconsciously in our daily lives because we have been steeped for so long in a world that violently and radically separates matter and spirit, soul and body, natural and supernatural, heaven and earth. Once the physical world is devoid of spiritual meaning, those who aspire to “holiness” must first escape from the body and the world in order to reach their “true” transcendent spiritual goal.

Such perspectives would hardly result in the new self being delighted and charmed by this world in the way that John, when we look closer at his writings, indeed was delighted and charmed. There is no such dualism in John of the Cross: the wonder of the new self is not enjoyed in the escape to mystical other-worldliness, but rather is found in the delights and pleasures of this world. For John states that God “... wherever there is room – always showing himself gladly along the highways and byways – does not hesitate or consider it of little import to find his delights with the children of the earth at a common table in the world [Prv. 8:31]” (F 1, 15; Kav 646).

Upon a close reading of John’s corpus, the journey of human transformation takes place in this world, *for this world*, with all of its joys and successes, challenges and failures, the one world that both God and humans share. It is the world of the Incarnation that most concerns John of the Cross. According to John God’s loving presence inserts us more deeply in this life rather than drawing us away from it, as is still too often assumed. There is no world, other than this one, in which to live and grow and to explore and celebrate one’s relationship with God, others, self and, indeed, the entire cosmos.

John also follows this holistic approach in his theological anthropology – the body is one. John does not develop his thinking based on a dualism that cuts soul from body. John, following Thomas Aquinas, refers to the

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4 Carolyn Walker Bynum has carefully documented asceticism as a subjugation of the body in order to achieve spiritual holiness. See: Carolyn Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Woman* (1987) and *Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* (1992).

totality of the human person as the *suppositum* (DN II, 1,1; Kav 395-396). John speaks of the individual as one fundamental reality that can be viewed from different perspectives or capacities that revolve around sense life and spirit life. More about these two areas of human living shortly.

An analysis of the old self and the new self will show that John's notorious *nada* is not bemoaning the imprisonment of the soul in the body, but rather is a reverberating cry to re-evaluate the role that material and spiritual reality play in the pursuit of the awe-filled and wondrous love of the new self of John of the Cross.

### The Old Self

As mentioned above, John speaks of two perspectives: spirit life and sense life (not to be equated with a body/spirit opposition), which is evident especially at the beginning of the journey of transformation in God (A I, 1, 1; Kav 118-119). These two perspectives of looking at the human person form the basic anthropological structure for John's reflections on the old and the new self. The old self is characterized as an individual largely preoccupied with the senses as the exclusive gateway to happiness and fulfillment in life. Human affectivity (sense life, in John's terminology), although central and important in achieving happiness and joy, cannot on its own achieve the lofty goals to which humans aspire and are called.

John indicates that at the beginning of the journey, the senses are nearly totally in command, with little or no regard for other capacities of the self – the *suppositum*, as mentioned above. The domination of the passions, not the passions in themselves, impede the project of love because such domination diminishes human freedom. John says: "... wherever one of these passions goes the entire soul [that is, the entire self] ... will also go, and they will live as prisoners of this passion ..." (A III, 16, 6; Kav 293).

John does speak of "things of the world" (F 2, 33; Kav 670) as impediments to growth and maturation. But this does not contradict what was said above regarding John's positive appreciation of the world. "Things of the world" for John, for example, are the objects, attitudes, values, knowledge or dispositions that take the place of God and become God in our life. The old self has not yet figured this out. The old self must examine what is being asked to be God in life. Even poverty can take on such a role: a radical commitment to poverty, in itself, can become an inordinate attachment and can lead to self-righteousness or an exaggerated self-inflation. The enticement to control divine power by

one's personal magic is very attractive – an attraction that John warns us strongly about.

John's asceticism, especially that which he speaks about in the *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, strives to integrate all capacities of the individual in harmonious fashion to further the project of the loving encounter with God, others, self and creation. Fragmentation and division characterize the capacities of the old self. The asceticism of the old self, therefore, is not an asceticism of bodily persecution in order to liberate the imprisoned spirit. Rather, it is an asceticism of integration aimed at bringing all capacities of human life into a united whole.

The old self has no solid centre from which it can be directed, and therefore it becomes easily distracted. The old self is a victim of its own compulsions and becomes consumed by objects. This results in a loss of a sense of interiority and a loss of being centred in oneself. The centre of the old self is located in something exterior to its own life and desires; thus, it is easily swayed to move in one direction and then another. The point is not to denigrate the body and the affections. The asceticism of the old self is not directed against corporeality *per se*, but against a fragmented affectivity whose desire for fullness of life is dissipated and frustrated by too large a focus on finite gratifications, to the exclusion of a growing relationship with the transcendent dimensions of life.

The experience of pleasure, whether physical or intellectual, is always a partial fulfilment of human potentiality, but in the moment of pleasure we experience it as a gratifying form of the absolute success of human life. Pleasure can be mistaken for the totality of happiness and thus can halt the dynamic search for the totality which the human subject ultimately seeks.

### **The New Self**

The transformation of the old self gives birth to the new self, that is, the birth of a reflection of God's vision of life for the world *in the life* of the human subject (F 2, 34; Kav 671). However, transformation is not an all or nothing event; nor is the journey of transformation linear in its progression. God gradually moves each individual along; sometimes there are steps forward, and sometimes backwards.

John uses the images of courtship and betrothal (F 3, 25; Kav 683) to describe how God prepares each individual for an intensification of life with God.<sup>5</sup> The preparation is in itself already indicative of God's

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5 The "betrothal" takes place within the "illuminative" phase of the threefold spiritual itinerary. See Perrin, 2007:248-57.

immanent and abiding presence in our life – we are, even now, a *being-centred-in-God*.

No two people follow the same course (C 14&15, 2; Kav 525-526; F 3, 59; Kav 697). God journeys with each individual according to his or her unique capabilities. Love, by its very nature, is particular and unique. For example, in the journey of transformation, some individual may be invited to let go of deceitful and debilitating habits; others may be invited to actively nurture primary commitments. The invitation to transformation is intended to help the individual adopt attitudes and activities that unerringly direct the self toward deeper insertion into the life of God in the here and now.

As indicated, the transition from the old to the new self is gradual – it is not like stepping from one room into another;<sup>6</sup> there is much shared territory that the two states of being must negotiate through dynamic tension and hard work. Furthermore, not all individuals will attain the gift of “spiritual marriage” that John uses to describe a particular grace received by the new self. Not all individuals are called into the intensity of the “dark night of the soul,” (DN I, 1,1; Kav 361) but that does not mean that God has not journeyed with the individual into the joys and wonders of the new self. Again, transformation is not an all or nothing affair; each individual journeys according to his or her capacity in the ebb and flow of life.<sup>7</sup> For this reason I reserve the use of *wondrous new self* to refer to the new self that has received the less common gift of “spiritual marriage.”

Whether within the “spiritual marriage” or not, the new self has obtained an incredible capacity to view the world through the harmonious and integrated capacities of the entire self. At this point, to some degree at least, as Kieran Kavanaugh (1987:37) rightly observes “it is the spirit that looks at things through the senses, and not the senses independently of the spirit.” John suggests it takes some time and hard work to reach this point, but the text indicates a harmonious working together of all human capacities characterized in the two groups: sense and spirit. Here we see, in bold relief, how John values human affectivity and materiality: human sense life and materiality is central to achieve the desires of the heart as shaped and formed by the entire complex of human desire rooted in spirit.

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6 The imagery of “room” is adapted from Francis Kelly Nemeck, OMI, Ph.D. See Perrin, 1997: ix.

7 John speaks of “centers of the soul.” “For the soul to be in its center – which is God, ... it is sufficient for it to possess one degree of love ...” (F 1, 13; Kav 645) A person can be in the center, united with God, but not yet in the deepest center possible, not yet in the deepest state of love with God.

What has been accomplished in the new self is a way to embody love amidst the ambiguities and the paradoxes of daily life. John's poetic output – the collection of shorter poems called the *Romances*, and the longer poems *Spiritual Canticle* and *The Living Flame of Love* – describes a world of light and freedom, peace and tranquility, joy and peace, nature and erotic wonder. This is the world of the new self.

The appreciation of the new self is reflected, for example, in John's practical approach to spiritual accompaniment: it is based on human experience, in contrast to the rigidity of spiritual development reflected in the dominance of doctrinal scholastic theology prominent during John's time. John used the language and systems of his day only as principles of organization to help explain the dynamics of the manner in which humanity journeys with God; he did not hold himself, or those with whom he journeyed, in slavery to them.

The key, therefore, to understanding the new self of John of the Cross is not a duality of the human self and of the world, but rather the dynamic exchange of loving and being loved in the world as we know and experience it with each other and with God.

The new self *glows love* everywhere. John loved the metaphor of fire to describe this dissemination of love: "... love is never idle, but in continual motion, it is always emitting flames everywhere like a blazing fire" (F 1,8; Kav 643). The new self is the individual who has crossed oceans of doubt and fear, experienced moments of great sweetness and delight, to realize that at each moment one's life is ultimately lived *within* the mysterious Other we call God.

For those gifted with the "spiritual marriage," as John refers to the substantial union with God, an extraordinary further transformation of the new self occurs. In this event, the individual "has become God."

... the intellect of this soul is God's intellect; it's will is God's will; its memory is the memory of God; and its delight is God's delight; and although the substance of this soul is not the substance of God, since it cannot undergo a substantial conversion into him, it has become God through participation in God .... (F 2,34; Kav 671)

It is this state that I refer to as the *wondrous new self* of John of the Cross.

### **The Wondrous New Self of John of the Cross**

The first movements of the powers of the wondrous new self are spontaneous movements that naturally and without effort reflect and accomplish God's divine action in the world (DN II; 24, 3; Kav 455). They

exercise a pure and chaste love for the world, and just as God delights in the world, so the movements enjoy its pleasures fully. Because of these movements, the wondrous new self is born of God's flesh, God incarnate in the world.<sup>8</sup>

The wondrous new self is the Incarnation happening over and over again. The wondrous new self experiences God's presence so powerfully at all levels of its being that the person experiences knowing in the intellect as God knows; loving by the will as God loves; and hoping through memory as God hopes for the world. The wondrous new self is the humanization of God, that is, God takes on flesh again, God becomes human again. John notes that in this way, God crowns the human person with the loftiest of vocations: to be God in the world. "The soul thereby becomes divine, God through participation, insofar as it is possible in this life." (C 22, 3; Kav 560-561).

This gratuitous outpouring of the Incarnation radically dislodges any discontinuity that may have existed between the created and the uncreated orders. The sensual and erotic love of God is experienced and shared in creation through the life of the wondrous new self. John says that the new self "tastes all things, does all it wishes, and prospers; ... This is love's trait: to examine all the goods of the Beloved" (F 2, 4; Kav 659).

John describes further this state of the human soul:

Now I am so fortified in love that not only do my sense and spirit no longer faint in you, but my heart and my flesh, reinforced in you, rejoice in the living God (Ps. 84:2) with great conformity between the sensory and spiritual parts. What you desire me to ask for, I ask for; and what you do not desire, I do not desire, nor can I, nor does it even enter my mind to desire it. (F 1, 36; Kav 657)

Why is this so? Why is the wondrous new self not even tempted to err? John responds with an extraordinary insight: the wondrous new self enjoys an awakening to the awareness of the presence of the Divine Word within *that has been present all along*:

For this awakening is a movement of the Word in the substance of the soul, containing such grandeur, dominion, glory, and intimate sweetness that it seems to the soul that all the balsams and fragrant spices and flowers of the world are commingled, stirred, and shaken so as to yield their sweet odour, and all the

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8 John speaks of "degrees of love" and God "wounding the soul in its ultimate and deepest centre" when the spiritual marriage reaches its climax and the individual "appears to be God" (F 1, 13; Kav 645).

kingdoms and dominions of the world and all the powers and virtues of heaven are moved; not only this, but it also seems that all the virtues and substance and perfections and graces of every created thing glow and make the same movement all at once. (F 4, 4; Kav 709)

But it also brings great joy to God, which is the deep happiness and satisfaction of the wondrous new self. John remarks:

This is the soul's deep satisfaction and happiness: To see that it [the individual] gives God more than it is worth in itself, the very divine light and divine heat that are given to it. It does this in heaven by means of the light of glory and in this life by means of a highly illumined faith. (F 3, 80; Kav 707)

And here lies the remarkable delight of this awakening: The soul knows creatures through God and not God through creatures. (F 4, 5; Kav 710)

### Concluding Remarks

The new self understands that the relationship with God has become the source of the dignity and worth of all elements of the created order. It is not even something God created, that is, the human person, which gives the world dignity, but rather the very presence of God, "discovered" by the new self, residing deep in the world that anoints it with value and worth.

A correct understanding of John of the Cross would suggest that he knew it was not a *flight from the world* that would make God's transforming power available to the pilgrim, but rather a *flight into the world*. John knew this personally. He involved himself intimately in other people's lives and continually gave of himself in the service of others. John was a contemplative, a mystic, it is true, but for John this meant being fully involved in life in all of its dimensions.

Far from living out his contemplative life walled-up in a monastery, he travelled extensively (mostly on foot); took on major leadership positions within the Carmelite community; worked with Teresa of Avila to reform the Carmelites; founded a college in Baeza; cared for his brother's family and their mother; and undertook spiritual accompaniment with numerous individuals throughout Spain.

The contemplative world of the mature Christian is a world that is noisy with the cry of the downtrodden and the afflicted in the world. The contemplative world of the mature Christian is full of rage because of its sensitivity to the unjust practices inflicted on underprivileged single

parents, youth or street people – many of which practices have been institutionalized in political and social structures. But John knows we never quite get there – not fully – even within the state of the new self. John never alludes to the fact that we give up being human. There are always cells, little pockets of life that need attention.

John knew that we never quite leave behind all that prevents us from being completely free. Perhaps we could say that we never quite have the right garment to wear to the wedding feast. But we wear what we have. Mysticism precedes asceticism. *Now is the moment of encounter*: to suggest that we will encounter God when we are more spiritually “dressed up” is to miss the point that God is with us now, helping us to sew our beautiful garment. We keep going, keep sewing, rejoicing in the garment we now have to wear, all the while aware that it has yet to be completed.

The new self encounters God in the embrace of this moment – an ongoing cocktail of pain, misfortune, disobedience, sinfulness, joy, success, happiness, merrymaking and frivolity. We weave the beautiful garment with all the events of our life. Sometimes the garment may be patchy, or look a little worn, or it doesn’t seem to quite fit, but we are called to trust in the potentiality of the *now* that God has provided for us.

In the “spiritual marriage,” life for the wondrous new self is lived in contemplative awe of God’s Divine presence mysteriously and deeply pervading the daily moments of life. One is entirely surrendered over to God’s loving care and becomes that loving care in the world – score another one for the Incarnation!

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