

**SMALL  
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THE DARK NIGHT  
OF THE SOUL

*A Psychiatrist Explores the  
Connection Between Darkness  
and Spiritual Growth*

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1. At the beginning of his book, Gerald G. May states that he is no longer adept at distinguishing between good things and bad things because some events start out well and end badly, while other events begin badly and turn out to be good experiences (p. 1). What is your reaction to this statement? Think about events in your life that are difficult to label as wholly “good” or “bad” experiences. How do you feel about them?
2. “I don’t have to look for spiritual lessons in every trouble that comes along. There have been many spiritual lessons to be sure, but they’ve been *given* to me in the course of life; I haven’t had to figure out a single one” (p. 2). How might spiritual lessons be given instead of learned or figured out? What has been your experience?
3. May describes the dark night of the soul as “nothing sinister.” Instead, he says that it is “only that the liberation takes place in hidden ways, beneath our knowledge and understanding” (p. 5). Before you read this book, what was your understanding of the phrase “the dark night of the soul”? How does May’s description change your understanding, if at all?
4. How can preoccupation with finding relief from suffering prevent a person from looking for meaning in the experience (p. 6)?

5. In chapter 1, May describes a time when people of different faiths lived together in harmony (p. 15). Is it surprising to you that people from different religious backgrounds did live peacefully together? Do you think it is possible for people with different religious beliefs to live peacefully together today?
6. May often refers to the writings of Teresa of Avila, a Carmelite nun and Spanish mystic who lived in the 1500s. In her writings, Teresa describes hearing God speak to her (p. 23). Do you believe that God speaks to people, as Teresa described? Have you ever heard God speak to you? How did you know it was indeed God speaking?
7. Teresa, who regretted her lack of formal theological training, valued the intellect of her contemporary, St. John of the Cross. John was a Carmelite friar and Spanish mystic, much like Teresa. Unlike Teresa, John deemphasized his training in favor of spiritual experience such as Teresa's (p. 32). Do you tend to value intellect or spiritual experience? What benefits might one experience by exploring both?
8. "When Teresa and John speak of the soul, they are not talking about something a person *has*, but who a person most deeply *is*: the essential spiritual nature of a human being" (p. 42). How does this definition fit with your understanding of the concept of the soul? Does it change your understanding? Why or why not?

9. “The spiritual life for Teresa and John has nothing to do with actually getting closer to God. It is instead a journey of *consciousness*. Union with God is neither acquired nor received; it is *realized*” (p. 46). How is this different from religious teachings on closeness with God that you have heard? Do you think Teresa and John are correct?
10. Before reading this book, had you ever considered how compulsions affected your life? Do you believe now that they rob you of freedom? How might this be true or false in your life?
11. According to May, liberation from compulsions can be experienced pleurably or painfully (p. 70). When have you experienced liberation? Was it pleasurable, painful, or both?
12. “In spiritual matters it is precisely when we *do* think we know where to go that we are most likely to stumble” (p. 72). Do you agree with this statement? Why or why not?
13. There are three gifts for the soul that result from a dark-night experience: (1) the satisfaction of the soul’s deepest desire, (2) removal of the belief that one is separated from God, and (3) freedom of love and realization of union, which lead to participation in God (p. 74). How might experiencing these gifts change how a person lives?

14. May says that people naturally strive to achieve satisfaction in things and will not give up until they are exhausted and out of options (p. 86). Can you think of a time when you tried to achieve something, only to exhaust your efforts without succeeding? What happened once you admitted that you could not do it?
15. On page 94, May describes being able to feel God's immediate presence in his life, then after a time losing that feeling. How might a person who no longer feels God's presence continue to trust God despite his seeming absence?
16. Teresa used the metaphor of a garden to illustrate a person's work in his or her own soul (p. 114). How is this metaphor effective? How might it fall short?
17. How is the idea of relinquishing control in prayer counter to what our culture teaches us (p. 132)?
18. In an effort to help people identify authentic dark-night experiences in their lives, John detailed three "signs" of a dark night of the soul (p. 137). It is often difficult for people to connect these signs to their own experiences because doing so would make them feel arrogant. Why might a person feel arrogant for claiming to recognize God's work in his or her life? Is this truly arrogance?
19. John also details three spirits that one experiences during a dark night of the soul (p. 138). John describes

- the three spirits as psychological reactions a person will have or encounter during a dark night of the soul (p. 142). Can you identify any of these in your own life? How can you be confident that they are in fact indicators of a dark night of the soul?
20. Some people avoid medication because they believe it can interfere with God's work in a person's life (p. 158). Do you believe this is true?
  21. In 1991, the Dalai Lama said, "Although attempting to bring about world peace through the internal transformation of individuals is difficult, it is the only way" (p. 175). Do you agree with this statement? Why or why not?
  22. After a dark-night experience, "dawn is an awakening to a deepening realization of who we really are in and with God and the world, and of what has been going on within us in the night" (p. 182). Have you ever experienced a dawn like the one May describes? How did it change the way you lived and thought of the world?