

BREAKDOWN

By MORTON KELSEY

MANY CHRISTIANS, even those who are seriously pursuing the way, come to a place where life grinds to a halt. It seems like the end of everything, a dead-end. They are oppressed by darkness, by hopelessness. Sometimes it is as if they had fallen into hell itself. And worst of all are those who have not passed through this kind of darkness, do not understand and tell them to snap out of it. Then these sufferers even fear to share the depth and pain of their broken, fragmented psyches.

If we do not get help at such times, the result could be disaster. However, these times of utter despair, even the breakdown itself, if through it we discover the risen Christ, can be the beginning of new, creative life. Some thirty years ago I faced such a chaotic time. I was a young priest and a voice within seemed to tell me that in spite of outer 'success' I was a fraud and there was no hope. I looked around the Church for someone who knew the depth of the human soul and I could find no one to help. Some followers of Dr C. G. Jung, however, could hear me and introduced me to Jung's method of dealing with the dark night of the soul through imagination. Later I realized that Jung was offering a secular version of much of the wisdom which is found in the Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius Loyola. I applied Jung's method using the christian belief system. It worked. It was real. Christ could lift me out of the darkness, help me deal with my inner evil and set me upon the road once again.

It was after his break with Freud, along with a raging inner spiritual world, that Jung discovered a method of dealing with this darkness and breakdown. He found that he could allow his emotions, moods, affects to express themselves in images, and then he could begin to deal with them. The greatest difficulty about our moods and emotions is that they are amorphous and uncontrollable. In his penetrating study of human affect, *Emotions*, James Hillman has shown how deeply related our emotions are to our inner images. As we are able to allow the mood of emotion to express itself in an image or story, we can sometimes get a handle on our emotional situations. We can then gently lead the imaginative situation towards a more positive outcome. When this occurs, often the worst

of the mood of anger, fear or depression is dissipated. One friend discovered that only as the novels that he was writing could be brought to a non-tragic conclusion did his own inner emotional situation begin to heal. We can seldom become what we have not first of all conceived as a possibility. Jung found that he frequently needed an inner wisdom figure to help him through the darkness. Often we realize that we cannot handle the darkness by ourselves. We learn to invoke a saving power imaginatively.

Dante's *Divine comedy* is a magnificent example of such imaginative work, written in superb poetry. Dante moves from the dark wood of his inner turmoil and confusion to the white rose of paradise, as Helen Luke shows in her study *Dark wood to white rose*. Goethe makes the same transition in *Faust*, and John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's progress* is a magnificent working through of religious and psychological problems, as Esther Harding has shown in her study *Journey into self*. St John of the Cross portrays the same experience in poetic images in his incomparable poem *The dark night*.

We do not have to be John of the Cross to express such experiences in poetry. At a conference some years ago Dorothy Foesten handed me a poem that she had written, which expressed the same kind of experience in a modern and feminine idiom. She called it 'St Brigit talks about courtship'. Here it is:

I do not trust myself alone with God.
 He is so quick to garner me
 I do but glance his way and faith
 He swatches off my clothes —
 Those garments which I need
 To cover up my soul.
 And there I stand before him — naked to the core.
 Ashamed and blushing — horrified.
 Would that I could — some fair and favoured day
 Find courage to approach him — utterly,
 Dropping each loosened figment of disguise
 And there in swift surrender to his gaze
 Know love — and offer simply what I am

'Tis not for sham — he keeps on wooing me

'Tis me — myself — my Lover-God would have.

Here is an example of actualizing the reality of one's inner experience of God, integrating the experience into the fabric of our being.

When darkness overcomes us there is no better method for dealing with it than allowing it to be expressed in images and then calling for the help of the Risen Christ. And we must realize our helplessness and let go of our pride if we are to call out sincerely. The beginning of wisdom is to realize that we cannot encounter the deeper darkness alone. Repressed parts of ourselves can cause anxiety and pain. There is also the darkness, not only of an aching void, but also of an assailant, such as the one who tempted Jesus in the temptation narrative, and which William James describes in so many conversion experiences. Only the one who has defeated death through love can help us in that ultimate struggle.

Many of the most experienced in the spiritual struggle have told us that the same darkness attacks again and again, and the further we go upon the path, the more subject we become to attack. The victory is not something that occurs once and for all. We need to appropriate the victory of Christ and pass through the confrontation again and again. We are not meant to remain in darkness. The christian way is indeed a journey with many perils. It is not a safe refuge. I have given several examples in previous books of passing through darkness, but two recent examples will clarify my meaning for those who have not read them.¹ We can encourage others to do this work and let them share it with us.

The first was written by a very gifted young man who was opened to the dark side of the unconscious through many factors. When he was a senior in college we came to know each other, and he discovered that he could use the imagination creatively to invoke a saving power. He wrote me the following letter when I was out of the country, and another friend in whom he could usually confide was in Europe. He had an ugly dream, and the darkness attacked again:

I awoke and quickly felt panic seize me. Deep dread and the worst fears grabbed me — I would go insane . . . I would find out all the progress I had made was a mockery. All signs of the presence of that hellish destructive force. As I said in my last letter, I think that it has its big guns out after me!

I want to put in writing that I know I can't face that destructive force alone, and that I need my friends to help me. I'm sure that the dream presents a legitimate challenge for new understanding on my part; but the weight of the destructive force I feel is all out of perspective. That force just wants to smash me, and it will lie, cheat, twist the truth, and play on my weaknesses to do so. And it's much stronger than I. It looms before me, pure malevolence. And now in

imagination I see the Christ between it and me — he turns to me and smiles, and in his smile is the hope I had thought was lost. Around me he places a ring of light — it sparkles with angelic energy — the love that moves the sun and other stars. The light sings — even in the face of the malevolence it sings a song of joy; I know I am surrounded with an energy that can defeat death — protected by the very energy that coursed through Christ in the tomb and raised him. ‘For such is my love for you’, says Christ, laughing; ‘when you hear that voice whispering in your ear, call me. The thief comes to destroy. I come to protect my flock; by these words I first entered your heart six years ago. Remember them and call me. I will come — and I am with you always. . . . Now share your dream with Morton — and if the darkness threatens, feel the ring of light around you. You are not required to deflect the evil one! Only to face your tasks honestly and try your best! Leave the evil one to me’.

This restored his equilibrium and put his life back into perspective and he sat down and wrote to me.

On our recent freighter trip to south-east Asia we visited several countries where the poverty and misery and overpopulation were staggering. In one country we visited an orphanage where children were taken in and nurtured. They had been abandoned because their mothers could not support the lives of the children and their own. And then in Sumatra we visited a leper colony, where the Salvation Army had a church and ministered to those living there. Some of the families had been there for thirty or forty years. To enter we drove down a long road built through a swamp, passed through a locked gate, and here was an ugly, flat island surrounded by the swamp, the tide flowing in and out each day. Often outer darkness will trigger the presence of inner darkness, which has caused the outer horror, and we must confront the reality of evil and then move through it to the redeeming centre. I wrote the following dialogue a day later.

The thunderous, murderous voices are at it again and again. They must be confronted. . . . The feeling of utter worthlessness, helplessness, valuelessness in the face of this evil, and then feeling like the crud, the scum at the bottom of the barrel . . . the pounding of lostness my inner being receiving lashes, being punished just for existing.

What is it like?

Being captured again by the enemy? While I was asleep they came and seized me, bound me, and carried me away to their cave. I lie in their secret lair on the hard rock with the stones eating into my flesh.

They have dropped me there. I'm gagged and bound. They laugh and joke. They will roast me alive and consume me.

In the back of the cavern stands the dark and ugly one, the leader, the concentration of evil and darkness, envy and hatred, violence and terror. Finally he notices that they have brought me in. He strides over and kicks me in the side and sneers:

DARKNESS: Why do you try to avoid us and seek help. We always bring you back. You belong to us, fool; you belong here with us, with the forces of hell and deception, of hate and vileness, of corruption and power. Join with us or the torture begins. Take the gag off him. I want to hear him scream when he can't stand the pain. It won't take much. He's a coward and weakling with delicate sensibilities . . . *and he bursts out laughing.*

ME: Why do you bother with me, dark one. I know I am nothing. What good does it do you to make me suffer and scream. Why do you pursue me and try to break me?

DARKNESS: Because I hate you with an eternal hate, you vile fraud, deceiver, monster, ugly misshapen thing.

ME: What have I done? Who am I that you attack me again and again? What good does it do you? What are you trying to prove? why do you hate me?

DARKNESS: Because you remind me of love and goodness and I can't stand it. I can't be comfortable while you are free and speaking lies, while you are free to try to be conscious and to care. I hate you because you try to follow one who has defeated me, and I can get back at him through you . . . swine, stinking, rotten one . . . *and then he kicks my face again and again and cries out:*

DARKNESS: I've said too much. Heat the fire ten times hotter, and we'll roast him and listen to him howl. Then he'll know the power and delights of hell.

ME: *(even though my face is smashed I cry out:)* Lord, come and deliver me from the pit of darkness from this monstrousness. I don't know how I've fallen here. Come. . . .

DARKNESS: So you weasel out and call in the big supernatural guns, can't deal with me yourself . . . weakling. This time no one will save you. There is no one to save. No one would want anything to do with you vile animal, but to destroy you, step on you.

They bring a long pole to which they bind me, but within my heart and as much as I can outwardly, I continue to call out:

ME: Lord, come. How or why I got here, I don't know. Come, Abba; come, Abba; Saviour, Love Divine.

The cave is glowing with the blazing fire. It is a cruel, dark crimson light. And then into the dark light comes another light — white and pure, a light of pure love. It radiates through the place. The Dark Lord screams and lashes out at the light, and turning to me he screams out:

DARKNESS: This is why I hate you; you bring the light that torments me. I always think I can destroy you and it does not happen. *The light throbs though the dark pit and becomes a glowing ball that encircles me. I close my eyes and feel all the evil and futility and hurt within me, my sins and ignorance and pride and lack of love, my comfort in the midst of this miserable world. This is pain, but a clean pain, a pain of birth and new life and healing, the pain of a limb that has fallen asleep and is coming back to life. How different from the binding and the beatings and the kicks and the fire of their furnace. Then I feel a hand on mine, and another behind my head and there is someone who would lift me to a sitting position . . . gentle, loving healing hands. I open my eyes and see him there, the Lord of Life. I look him full in the face, and there is love in his eyes and in his smile. He bends over and kisses me on the forehead, and my head glows; its pain is assuaged. Out of the deepest gratitude I whisper:*

ME: Lord, I thank you, but why do you bother with me where there are so many starving and frightened and broken people in the world? I feel so unworthy, almost as though I should not have your comfort and your saving help when there are so many who live and die in misery.

RISEN CHRIST: I love you, silly child. My love is not limited, and I can love you all. Perhaps you can let others know that there is hope, saving power.

ME: But why am I again and again and again dragged back into the depth, captured, beaten, defiled, played with, blinded, tortured?

RISEN CHRIST: You have been exposed to the misery of the world; you do not have very high defences against it and it seeps through. It is good for you to see this poverty and misery and pain. This is the way of the world; this is why I died on the cross. But you absorb it, and this opens the door for the Dark One.

ME: Should I have written before this?

RISEN CHRIST: The important thing is to deal with the inner darkness and its attack when it arises as soon as you recognize it, and this you have done.

ME: I don't understand, but my heart is bursting with gratitude.

RISEN CHRIST: It is more than you can understand, the misery of the world, but you can help assuage it. The love of God is also more than you can understand.

ME: There is so little I can do. It seems hopeless . . . futile. What can be done? After two thousand years Christians are less than a third of the world's population, and most of them lukewarm in their practice or fighting among themselves.

RISEN CHRIST: Remember that you were not called to be successful, but faithful. You have looked into the outer darkness, and into its source within. It captured you, you are saved again, and you are trying to explain to others that there is hope.

ME: And sometimes I don't believe it myself and doubt.

RISEN CHRIST: But you keep on trying in spite of your failures and faults and doubts, and you get rescued again. This is all that mortals can do.

ME: Lord, hold me, that the wounds may be healed and the pain and fear may subside.

He picks me up like a weaned child and holds me close to the heart of caring, compassionate, self-giving love. Hours go by, and I sleep and awake and sleep again. Gradually the pain diminishes and the fear begins to fade away. Finally I speak again:

ME: Lord, it is painful to live in the midst of this aching, hurting world and to be able to do so little. And then when we become somewhat conscious of our own inner confusions and conflicts and contradictions we are so vulnerable.

RISEN CHRIST: All this is true. There is great evil and destructiveness, but there is also hope and love, and you are trying to side with them in spite of your vacillations and faults.

ME: I wish I might have this kind of time with you when I didn't need it, when I was just coming because of desire for you, as Bonhoeffer suggested.

RISEN CHRIST: You expect too much of yourself. You are a broken human being living among other damaged humans. Keep on trying. Use these times for coming close. Survive and share your survival with others. Enough of this, let's up and out of this dungeon, out into the fresh air.

He sets me down, and then we are of the same stature and size. We walk up the tortuous pathway from this den of darkness. We come to the light which blinds me for a while. He has his arm around my shoulder. I feel supported and cared for. As my eyes become accustomed to the light I see before us the secret valley in which we have walked before. The great spring breaks forth from the rock and falls into the pool, surrounded by a meadow filled with fruit trees, which are always in bloom and still carry the ripe fruit. It is the garden. And yet so close is this place to where the Dark One dwells.

The pool flows out into a stream and moves down toward the sea. I am very quiet and I can hear the distant breakers pounding against the great cliffs. And perched on the rock above the sea is the cabin where we have been before. Slowly we walk towards the cabin, down along the river bank, down to the sea with its great sandbar, and then ascend the steps chiselled into the stone up to the cabin. The cabin is warm from the setting sun. My friend and master lights a fire and sets the table and we sup. The healing darkness falls, and we lie down to sleep listening to the pounding of the waves in the sea caves below.

Within a few hours the heaviness has passed and I go about my work again, refreshed and with new hope and conviction!

Many people in our society are suffering breakdown because they have lost touch with the saving power of Christianity and the risen Christ. The kind of imaginative opening to spiritual reality that we have been describing can help many people pass through breakdown and come to a new level of spiritual creativity and effective functioning. Only those who have experienced this kind of desperation and have found a religious meaning to overcome it will be able to understand others in that condition and help them through it. There are few people more needed in the Church than professional religious guides who are trained to deal with the men and women around us who are suffering existential crises.

This requires more than good intentions. Such spiritual companions or guides need a well-articulated christian world view that has a place for this specialized practice of helping people through the religious dimensions of breakdown. In my book *Companions on the inner way* I have outlined five elements necessary for those who wish to serve these sufferers. Von Hügel suggested the first three. We need to be deeply aware of the full tradition of the institutional Church. We must have a place in theology and practice for the continuing experience of the spiritual dimension and the risen Christ in particular. We need to keep our critical capacities keen so that we do not fall into deadly formalism or superstition. We also need a knowledge of the depth of the human psyche which has been developed during the last century. We need to be able to discern when breakdown is a sign of physiological and psychological problems which need to be treated as well as when the collapse is largely a crisis of meaning and interior lostness. Sometimes these elements are all mixed together and need to be treated by spiritual guides. And last of all it is nearly impossible for anyone but the genuinely caring, loving person to facilitate an experience for another person with the God of love. The further we go on the

religious journey the more likely we may have to deal with darkness and evil which can result in breakdown. Learning to deal with this kind of breakdown can bring us to a new creative growing experience of God and enable us to help others who need aid in this crucial area of their inner lives.²

NOTES

¹ These encounters with darkness were not written for publication, but to rescue my own inner being from the darkness. The reader can find other examples in my books *Adventure inward* (Augsburg, Minneapolis, 1980), pp 119-22, 158-76; *The other side of silence* (Paulist Press, New York, 1976; also published in Great Britain), pp 209-36, 289-97, 302, 305.

² Much of this article has already been published in *Companions on the inner way and the art of spiritual guidance* (Crossroad/Continuum, New York, 1983). We are grateful to the author for permission to reproduce it here and for expanding it.