

# CRISIS AND TRANSFORMATION

## Turning Over the Compost Heap

*Vilma Seelaus*

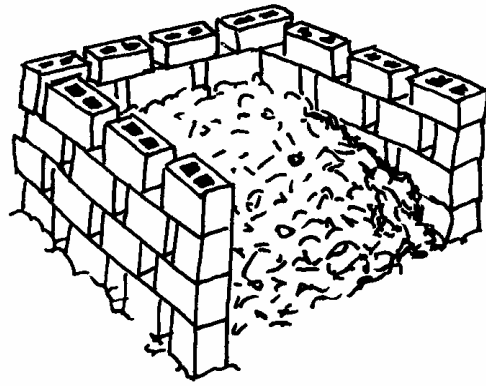
THE COMPOST HEAP HAS A MYSTERIOUS INNER LIFE. It can offer deepened understanding, fresh meaning for our present dark times. This article explores the marvels of composting and the writings of Teresa of Avila. It reflects too on the profound significance of our own daily struggles, and shows how our individual lives can contribute towards global transformation.

### ***Compost as Symbol of Transformation***

Since I can find no better image than that of the compost heap to symbolize the potential for transformation contained within life's struggles and dark times, I shall take up my pitchfork and begin turning over the compost, with special attention to its message for us today. How can compost, seemingly so full of disintegration and decay, speak to our lives and to our prayer? Ripe compost waits to be spread around the garden. It finds its fulfilment in nourishing the soil, in enriching new plant life, and in sustaining and strengthening growth in our garden. Should contemplation likewise always issue in meaningful action? This question demands an answer, but first we need to ask a simpler question. How does one make compost? Why is compost such a convincing image for God's transforming energy present within the very things that trouble us?

Many years ago I became fascinated with the concept of organic gardening. As I studied it, I learned that integral to organic gardening is dark, rich compost. So, at my monastery, a special container was designated for vegetable and fruit peelings and other such appropriate matter. I learned to see weeds in a new light, as having a higher destiny when they landed on the compost heap. Raking leaves also took on new meaning as I tossed them onto the pile. For this rich, dark conglomeration

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of organic ingredients, heaped up with layers of soil, begins a mysterious process of transformation.

I learned that compost contains bacteria that effect an incredible change without my doing anything apart from gathering the right ingredients. Before long, steam begins to rise from the unappealing

heap of refuse. The bacteria generate heat, and gradually the contents of the heap begin to break down. The banana skins turn dark; distinctive weeds become unrecognisable; and everything seems to become part of everything else. Gradually the pile settles; and after a few months, before my amazed eyes, it turns into pure organic soil, waiting to be distributed to the vegetable garden or to enhance the bloom of roses. The banana skins, weeds, and all the stuff of the compost, in dying to themselves and becoming one with things different from themselves, become a source of enrichment for other plant life. The excellent taste of our organically grown vegetables keeps us faithful year after year to this process.

The compost heap shows us that the other side of breakdown, of the dark times when life seems to be falling apart, is energy for transformation. Just as the disparate elements of the compost eventually become one reality, so our dark times can issue in a deepened solidarity and compassionate communion with others, especially with those who might seem different from us. The example of the compost also invites us to a deepened sense of oneness with the universe itself.

Nature is pregnant with the glory of God, and therefore working in the garden is always a contemplative experience for me. Being attentive to nature's mysteries attunes me anew to the creating God ever present in our midst. We are conditioned to think of God as somehow located outside the universe. Yet at the heart of the Christian message is the vision of a God whose very life is invested in the creation. Thus a theologian such as Sallie McFague can envision the universe as the body of God with the Spirit of God animating all of

matter.<sup>1</sup> This same Divine Spirit marvellously dwells within the human heart, and creates a radical interconnectedness not only among human beings but also between us and our planet earth. The one Spirit of God that flows through us flows through every part of God's incredible, ever expanding universe.

At present, we humans are nature's finest achievement. Nature now contemplates itself and reflects back on itself through human eyes. Physicists tell us that the same elements that make up the farthest star are also in the human body. We always remain connected to the world of nature that brought us forth. Attentiveness to God and attentiveness to nature's mysteries are integral to each other. Everything around us is pregnant with God and with meaning for our lives—full of potential for growth and transformation, like a compost heap!

Nature actually makes its own compost through the changes of the seasons. In autumn trees drop their leaves on to the ground where they decay, so that they can enrich the earth with another layer of pure organic soil. When I walk through woods, I like to dig the toe of my shoe into the earth, knowing that many an autumn's yield of leaves is beneath my feet. The philosopher Mircea Eliade claims that the cycle of life, death and re-birth is the deepest myth of all of reality. Nature itself announces the good news that new life can be found within diminishment and decay. The paschal mystery of Christ's death and resurrection points to nature's own paschal mystery. A seed buried in the ground sprouts into a tree; a caterpillar becomes a butterfly; a tiny fertilised egg becomes a human being. Something must always give way for new life to emerge. So as I meditate anew on the compost heap, I find myself asking what, in our troubled times, needs to change, to be let go of, for new life to appear?

### ***Compost, as Lived Out in Teresa's Life***

Our Carmelite mystics lived the mystery of compost. Instinctively I turn to Teresa, whose life and writings, like those of John of the Cross, clearly illustrate the spiritual growth that comes through trials and dark times.

<sup>1</sup> Sallie McFague, *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993).

**God was  
transforming  
Teresa**

*The Book of Her Life* is about God transforming Teresa. Teresa repeatedly writes of having changed, of having become a different person: ‘my soul was completely changed’; ‘my soul became another’; ‘I saw that I was another person’.<sup>2</sup> God was working in Teresa through events unique to her. Everything that constituted life for Teresa provided material for her spiritual compost heap—for change and transformation. God, whom Teresa experienced as both fire and water, was the energy that generated the heat and moisture necessary for the process to begin. The warmth of God’s indwelling Spirit rose in the heart of Teresa; transformation was under way. Often, she just had to go on, surrendering to the darkness and pain of not understanding, yet remaining faithful. We recall her struggles with being a woman at a time in history when women were not considered to be worth much, and her anguish at having her relationship with God judged to be illusory. She writes:

I believe there were five or six of them, all great servants of God; and my confessor told me that they all came to the decision that my experience was from the devil, that I shouldn’t receive communion so often, and that I should try to distract myself in such a way that I would not be alone. (25.14)

We know now that she also carried the secret of her Jewish ancestry.

When Teresa felt that she was held in the palm of God’s hand, nothing in life was troublesome. But as the transformation process continued, and Teresa again experienced darkness and pain, she prayed for deliverance. Finally, as the compost heap of her life settled into a pile of rich, productive earth, Teresa, fully sensitised to the generative value of suffering, no longer prayed for deliverance but for the gift to serve the Crucified. Her entire being was now one with the living energy of God, and became a life-giving spirit enriching others. The cycle had completed itself.

Teresa’s writings bear this out. Notice the progression in the endings of her three major works. At the end of *The Book of Her Life* she describes her life in the house of the reform as follows:

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, chapter 20, nn. 23, 25, 26, 28; chapter 21, nn. 8, 9; chapter 25, nn. 18, 19.

... the Lord has been pleased that all my desires converge upon this one desire. And He has given me a kind of sleep in life, or it almost always seems to me that I am dreaming what I see. I am aware in myself of neither happiness nor pain, however great. If certain things do give me either of these, the happiness or pain passes so quickly I marvel, and the feeling left me is that it was like a dream. This is the complete truth; for even though afterward I may want to rejoice over that happiness or be sad about that pain, it is not in my power to do so; just as a prudent person is unable to delight in or grieve over a dream that was had. (40.22)

In this same chapter Teresa also recounts two visions in which she sees the Divinity in her soul to be like a very clear diamond in which everything is visible.<sup>3</sup> Teresa writes that, within this brilliantly polished diamond mirror, she sees herself, her Lord, and all that is fragile in life. From this perspective, happiness and pain seem relative. Everything is viewed through the prism of life beyond this mortal life, and she longs for the vision of God. But this is not the end of Teresa's story.

*The Way of Perfection*, written only a year later, immediately shows Teresa enmeshed in conflicts and difficulties as she founds other monasteries of the reform. So great are her trials that *The Way of Perfection* concludes with a lengthy, impassioned prayer for deliverance. I quote just a small section:

Deliver me, Lord, from this shadow of death, deliver me from so many trials, deliver me from so many sufferings, deliver me from so many changes, from so many compliments that we are forced to receive while still living, from so many, many, many things that tire and weary me, and that would tire anyone reading this if I mentioned them all. (42.2)

In the midst of all her trials, Christ is still present as her intimate friend. Christ is both fire, which enkindles love, and living water, the flow of which mysteriously enkindles the fire. Together these elements enrich even as they seem to destroy, just as compost breaks down only to nurture new life.

When we turn to Teresa's masterpiece, *Interior Castle*, she is in the last stages of her life journey. The soil of her soul has become rich

<sup>3</sup> *The Book of Her Life*, 40.5, 10.

earth. Christ's presence is so real to her that Teresa experiences her soul as a reliquary that Christ opens at will in order to show it clearly 'His most sacred humanity in the way He desires'. (VI.9.2-3)

The brilliance of this inner vision is like that of an infused light coming from a sun covered by something as transparent as a properly cut diamond. (VI.9.4)

Teresa's inner being reflects the divine Sun. Her transformation is fully realised. Using the image of a cocoon and a butterfly, she says:

Now then, we are saying that this little butterfly has already died with supreme happiness for having found repose and because Christ lives in it. (VII.3.1)

She no longer seems to live more in heaven than on earth. Instead,

... everything is such that this soul doesn't know or recall that there will be heaven or life or honour for it, because it employs all it has in procuring the honour of God. (VII.3.2)

Teresa now looks after what is Christ's, just as Christ looks after what is Teresa's. She no longer prays for deliverance; trials now have a new meaning. She tells us:

You have already seen the trials and afflictions these souls have experienced in order to die so as to enjoy our Lord. What surprises me most of all is that they have just as great a desire to serve Him and that through them He be praised and that they may benefit some soul if they can. For not only do they not desire to die but they desire to live very many years suffering the greatest trials if through these they can help that the Lord be praised, even though in something very small.... They do not desire at that time to be in glory. Their glory lies in being able some way to help the Crucified, especially when they see He is so offended and that few there are who ... really look after His honour. (VII.3.6)

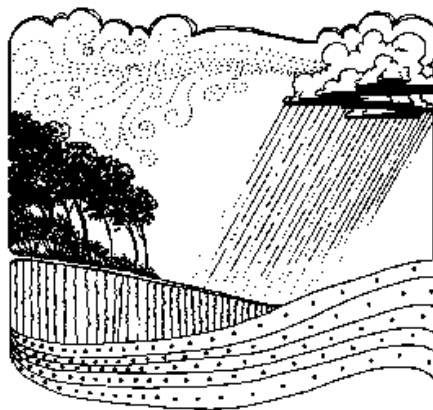
Teresa's life has been so transformed that the inner and outer life are now at one with the divine presence. She no longer feels ambivalent about conflicting values. Her ongoing struggle with honour is put to rest. God is the central focus of her heart's desire, and she sees everything through the eyes of God's all-absorbing love. The honour of Christ, not concern for her own honour, now motivates her. Teresa no

longer desires the glory of heaven; her glory is in helping her Beloved, the crucified Christ. The richness of her life continues through time to fertilise the spiritual lives of people—including those with beliefs different from her own—who sincerely seek God.

### ***Teresa's Life and Our Life***

The lives of mystics such as Teresa connect with ours. Christ, who transformed Teresa, is present and active in us, and in all the tragic events of these dark days. In the Gospels, Jesus shows the kingdom of God to be fashioned like the mysteries of the universe; it encompasses both life and death, dying and rising to new life. It is like a tiny mustard seed that falls to the ground and dies, but then sprouts forth the largest of the shrubs; it is like the yeast which leavens the entire mass of the dough; it is a search for something of value which involves the pain of loss and the joy of discovery, as when the woman finds her lost coin. The breaking down of our lives, whatever shapes their reality, reminds us that they are integrally connected both with the mysteries of nature and with the mysteries of Christ. Like the Eucharist, our daily dying and rising proclaim the death of the Lord until he comes.

When we are suffering or troubled, we easily lose hope. At such times, our preoccupations tend to reduce our awareness of Christ's abiding presence and of the Christ-life that is ours. As our prayer deepens, and God's self-communication becomes stronger, we begin to experience pain and suffering. The intensity of the divine light blinds the eyes of the soul so that the soul feels plunged into darkness. Some years ago I attended a meeting at a monastery in the mountains of Pennsylvania. Early in the morning, before dawn, I would venture out to watch the sunrise. As the darkness lifted, the trees, meadows and surrounding mountains gradually came into view. However, as soon as the sun's fire appeared over the mountain-top directly before my eyes, a remarkable phenomenon occurred. The sky was brilliant with colour, yet the slope directly beneath the



place where the sun appeared became shrouded in darkness again. The few houses, the trees and the sharp rise of the land were no longer visible. I saw only darkness and heavy mist. Only as the sun mounted higher in the sky did the mist rise and the darkness gradually give way, so that the trees and houses on the mountain slope again became visible.

Something similar happens in the domain of the spirit. Our inner being is unprepared for the brilliance of the divine presence. The light of God blinds the soul as God increasingly reveals Godself to us. And yet the presence of God is as vital to us as the sun is vital to our planet earth. We cannot escape the presence of God, because as Karl Rahner puts it, 'God is the horizon of human consciousness, and is intimately present to all of human knowing and loving'.<sup>4</sup>

Think about this awesome reality: God is present in all of our knowing and our loving. At the same time, God is the God of incomprehensible mystery; it seems we cannot take too much of God so that God has to prepare us for God. Trials are a way in which this can happen, since only through a deepened faith can we find meaning in our dark times. John of the Cross gives poignant descriptions of what happens when the rays of the Divine Sun penetrate the horizon of finite consciousness. We become blinded by the intensity of the light; the very nearness of the Divine Presence blinds the soul with its brilliance. The immediate experience is one of darkness, until the soul's inner eye is transformed and its vision is cleared by the development of pure faith.

Faith, transformed through love, enables the soul to see itself, others and all things through the eyes of God. Just as it takes faith to believe that the unsightly pile of blackened banana skins and the other half-rotted ingredients of the compost heap will eventually be rich soil, so it takes faith to strengthen love in our souls, and to maintain the daring hope and belief that the piled up ingredients of struggles, failures, losses, sufferings and even sins in our lives can actually be transformed by God into something life-giving for others.

The interaction of God with human finitude necessitates a faith response. While God is infinitely near and 'always present as abiding

<sup>4</sup> Karl Rahner, 'Experience of Self and Experience of God' (1971), in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 13, translated by David Bourke (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1975), 124.

offer' (Rahner), God is at the same time infinitely beyond our human capacity for encounter, except through faith. Through faith, hope and love, God empowers us to stretch courageously beyond the horizon of our limited finitude into communion with One who is mother, father, beloved and friend. Just as the rising sun darkens the mountain slope below, the Divine Sun becomes at times like night to the soul. But as faith increasingly enlightens the inner eye, and as God increasingly becomes the transcendent centre of one's life, love born of hope gives new sight and confident speech to the heart, leading to ever deeper communion with God. All of human experience, its feelings, activities and encounters, ultimately becomes one in Christ. As John of the Cross puts it,

... the soul united and transformed in God, breathes out in God to God the very divine spiration that God—she being transformed in Him—breathes out in Himself to her.<sup>5</sup>

The mysticism of the heart has found its realisation.

At the same time, as Teresa in particular makes clear in her seventh dwelling places, the experience of union with God is never ours as a private possession. Ripe compost needs to be spread around. With intense enthusiasm, Teresa insists:

All its concern is taken up with how to please Him more and how or where it will show Him the love it bears Him. This is the reason for prayer, my daughters, the purpose of this spiritual marriage: the birth always of good works, good works. (VII.4.6)

As if to be sure she will be understood, she repeats:

This is what I want us to strive for, my sisters; and let us desire and be occupied in prayer not for the sake of our enjoyment but so as to have this strength to serve. (VII.4.12)

Hers is no introverted mysticism. Martha and Mary have joined together in showing hospitality to the Lord.

<sup>5</sup> *Spiritual Canticle*, 39.3.

### ***Contemplation and Today's Crisis***

Contemplation necessarily calls forth a response to the crisis of our times. As I ponder what Teresa might have to say to us today, she leads me to her *Way of Perfection*. The words 'be mindful' demand attention. In her reflection on the Our Father, Teresa insists that to pray well, we must 'be mindful' of the one with whom we are speaking. The importance of having a recollected heart in order to pray well repeats itself throughout the text of her chapters on prayer. In her challenging book, *The Silent Cry: Mysticism and Resistance*, Dorothee Sölle echoes Teresa:

There is no experience of God that can be so privatised that it becomes and remains the property of one owner, the privilege of a person of leisure, the esoteric domain of the initiated.<sup>6</sup>

Sölle refuses to separate prayer and politics. She argues for the importance of mysticism in countering the destructive aspects of ego, group bias, materialism and violence. Like Rahner before her, Sölle believes that religion in the third millennium will either be mystical or it will be dead. Moreover, attentiveness to God in prayer inevitably makes us more attentive to the concerns of our world.

The media constantly bring before us the serious conflicts within both church and world. The question is: how do we integrate these disturbing realities into our prayer and into our life with God? The dictionary defines awareness as being watchful, vigilant, guarded, knowing, cognisant, informed, conscious. All of these qualities, in varying degrees, play themselves out in our prayer-relationship with God, as we live God's presence in everyday life. We need to be watchful, attentive, vigilant and guarded in the face of the overwhelming potential for distraction in our media-saturated society. If we are to live mindfully the Carmelite Elijan motto, *the Lord God lives in whose sight I stand*, we need to be knowing, cognisant, and conscious of the inner movements of the heart. Inordinate desires and dishonest thinking cannot withstand the gaze of the divine presence.

<sup>6</sup> (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 3.

Attachments lessen our capacity for God by shrinking the soul. Fortunately for us, our attachments, the things we cling to, are the very stuff of God's transforming action, like the leaves and weeds in a compost heap. The riches of a transformed heart are hidden within the darkness, the sufferings and the constriction of the soul's unfreedom. This may be either the darkness of despair, or the darkness before dawn. Energy for transformation is deep within the darkness and chaos itself, whatever its name or cause. Within the soul is new life, like an unborn child awaiting birth. An inner space is being cleared for God, so that the womb of our life may carry Christ to full term. Christ becomes, as it were, the soul of our soul, the life of our life, the eye of our mind, and the strength of our patience. Human consciousness is thus transformed in Christ. Such transformation allows us to look at personal and world events through the prism of Christ's compassionate, merciful love. Harsh judgments loose their grip, because the soul sees beneath the surface of things. Its attentiveness has reached a deeper, divine level of awareness. Inevitably, suffering will present itself in various ways, but now, suffering no longer has the last word. As Sölle puts it,

***The riches  
of a  
transformed  
heart are  
hidden  
within the  
darkness***

It is not patience with or acquiescence in suffering that is taught, but an active, self-determined acceptance of reality that cannot destroy one's being lost-in-God.<sup>7</sup>

### ***How Does Teresa Respond to the Ills of Society?***

In 1571, while in the process of founding monasteries of her reformed Carmels, Teresa was called back to the monastery of the Incarnation as prioress. During her years there, she received the grace of spiritual marriage, which gave birth to good works in her own life. Though remaining lost-in-God, she showed self-determination in the face of suffering and an active interest in the events of her day. Along with concerns over the affairs of her foundations, her letters reveal her broad interest in current affairs. In a letter to Gracian, dated 19 August 1578, she laments the death of the King of Portugal, and her

<sup>7</sup> Sölle, *The Silent Cry*, 179.

dissatisfaction with the country's potential annexation. In other letters she expresses her concern over religious wars in France, and over the suspected rebellion of the Moriscos of Seville. She shows anxiety about the spiralling inflation which created extreme hardship and threatened the financial survival of some of her monasteries.<sup>8</sup>

Teresa often grieved over events, but she did not stop there. Where possible, she entered into active resistance. Social protest was behind many of the characteristics of her monasteries—small, unpretentious buildings, and a disregard, even a disdain, for the overwhelming class distinctions in the Spain of her day. She allowed people of so-called 'impure blood'—Jewish Christians or *conversas*—to enter her monasteries. And amid great furore, she allowed a *converso* benefactor to be buried in one of her churches (although only after a stern admonition from Our Lord).

These examples show a few of the ways in which Teresa actively resisted the overriding system of honour that determined social life throughout Spain. Her writings reveal her lifetime struggle to be personally free, and then to resist within her foundations the harmful expectations of an honour-bound society.<sup>9</sup>

From Teresa's life experience, and from turning over the compost heap, two things become clear. First, everything, absolutely everything, that constitutes our individual, personal lives, contains within itself potential for transformation in Christ. Even our sins and failings, no matter how great these may appear in our own eyes, or how great they may actually be, are not an obstacle, but instead are integral to the process of transformation. In a profound and thought-provoking Easter reflection, Karl Rahner writes of Christ as the victor over sin and death:

He is not one who ascended into heaven in order to disappear from world history as if he had never been in it. He ascended into heaven after he had descended into the depth of sin, death, and the lost world, and came out of this abyss, which contained everything, alive. More: there in the ultimate lostness, where all viciousness springs and where all streams of tears have their origin and where the last source of all hatred and self-seeking abides—

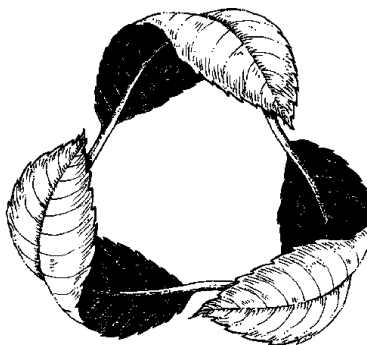
<sup>8</sup> See letters 22 July 1579; 4 July 1580; 31 October 1575—to list but a few such references.

<sup>9</sup> See Teofanes Egido, 'The Historical Setting of St Teresa's Life', *Carmelite Studies*, 1 (1980), 122-182.

that is where he has won the victory. He won it not by shoving the world from himself and by heaving it away, but by the fact that by losing himself, he forced his way into the innermost centre whence its entire destiny springs forth, seized this centre, and accepted it for all eternity.<sup>10</sup>

The risen Christ is the energy that has already transformed the compost of our lives into rich soil. Can we dare to believe that He who has entered into the place where all tears have their origin, from where all viciousness springs, has also entered into the darkness in our personal lives? Is this what it means when we say that we have been redeemed in Christ and our sins have been taken away? That every dark event is now a privileged place of encounter with the risen Christ? If so, the compost heap can become a genuine symbol of resurrection, reminding us that Christ is indeed the heart of the world, whether of spirit or of matter. The risen Christ permeates the entire universe, as its ultimate finality and its most secret strength. Dare we believe in the redemptive possibilities of every human situation, even the most desperate one?

Teresa's mystical awareness of all things taking place in God—powerfully described in chapter ten of the sixth dwelling places—reminds us that presence to God is inseparable from presence to one another, and also from presence to both the beauty and the evils of our postmodern world. Teresa has a vision in which no longer the soul, but God's own self is 'like an immense and beautiful dwelling or palace'. When we commit sin we do not leave the palace—'no, certainly not'. It is rather 'within the palace itself, that is with God Himself' that 'the abominations, indecent actions and evil deeds committed by us sinners take place' (VI.10.3). Rahner is only echoing Teresa. With Christ's descent into the very heart of the earth, into the deepest depth of both good and evil, all things are now in God through the risen Christ.



<sup>10</sup> 'Our Easter Faith', in Karl Rahner, *The Great Church Year*, edited by Albert Raffelt, translation edited by Harvey D. Egan (New York: Crossroad, 1993), 178.

What might this profound reality mean for people like us? If mysticism is indeed crucial in countering the destructive forces of violence and all the other ways in which gospel living may break down, how do we connect attentiveness to God in prayer with everyday life? What is being asked of us? Does resistance mean that we have to stand on picket lines or offer up our bodies as human shields before powerful weapons of war, as some have felt called to do?

Again I turn to Teresa. She begins her *Way of Perfection* by grieving over the serious problems of her time, and especially over the havoc created by religious wars. She recognises that human forces are not sufficient to stop these evils. Teresa's recommendations might seem simplistic, but what they demand is the stuff of holiness:

All my longing was and still is that since He has so many enemies and so few friends that these few friends be good ones. (1.2)

... I shall enlarge on only three things ... [that help us] to possess inwardly and outwardly the peace Our Lord recommended so highly to us. The first of these is love for one another; the second is detachment from all created things; the third is true humility, which even though I speak of it last, is the main practice, and embraces all the others. (4.4)

Teresa did not abandon her intense desire to resist the evils of her day and to be of service to her Lord; instead she re-fashioned it into what was realistic for her as a woman in her culture. Each one of us is similarly faced with inevitable limitations, not necessarily because our culture limits us, but because none of us has unlimited potential. Every choice in life, every 'yes' to something, necessitates a 'no' to something else. Yet Teresa's invitation to mindfulness in prayer and mindfulness of God's abiding presence, along with the living-out of love, detachment and humility, provide an agenda of resistance to the dark side of our postmodern world—an agenda that can lead to both personal and societal transformation.

We live in a consumer society. While many people throughout the world are starving, the ego of the consumer in the West is constantly being bombarded with propaganda. We must have it; have it now; have it more often; have it faster. Nature itself has become like a global



shopping mall. Its resources are being consumed by technology without regard for the consequences to future generations. Our complicity, to the extent that we are imprisoned within the demand always to be having more, creates a crisis of the heart that threatens the very presence of God in our lives. How can we be attentive to God if we are consumed by consumerism itself? Throwing our need for over-consumption on the compost heap necessitates a growth in detachment, in genuine humility grounded in truth and reality, and in love for others and for our planet earth (which inevitably suffers from human exploitation).

### ***The Need for Attentiveness***

Some years ago I read a fascinating book by the biochemist Rupert Sheldrake, entitled *The Presence of the Past*. Sheldrake explores the possibility that memory is inherent in all of nature through what he calls 'morphic resonance'. Previous structures of activity influence subsequent, similar ones, providing a kind of memory for nature's present state.<sup>11</sup> If we apply Sheldrake's theory to human life, we can see how significant the quality of our attentiveness to God is, and we can also see the significance of living out the three virtues (love, detachment and humility) that Teresa proposes as most important for spiritual growth.

Sheldrake's theory of morphic resonance suggests that the evolution of a deepened God-consciousness for future generations depends on how far we live in a way deliberately attentive to God's abiding presence. Such attentiveness will often be lived out in bare faith. When the brilliance of the Divine Sun casts its shadow of darkness, the resulting pain demands of us a spirit of profound detachment and an unconditional commitment to love. This profound

<sup>11</sup> Rupert Sheldrake, *The Presence of the Past: Morphic Resonance and the Habits of Nature* (New York: Times Books, 1988).

detachment can only be sustained by a humility which makes no demands on God, and which abandons all distinction between oppressed and oppressor, between the prodigal and the one who appears faithful. Mystical love, a sun that is shining on the horizon of our darkness, expands the heart in such a way that the heart can love the sinner and the saint, both within itself and in others, and ‘possess inwardly and outwardly the peace Our Lord recommended so highly to us’.<sup>12</sup> This peace generates a divine, universal energy that is like steam rising from the compost heap of the world toward its ultimate transformation.

Teresa concludes her *Interior Castle* by grounding the mystical life in firm reality. The journey ends where it began—in the first dwelling places. Teresa reminds us that God’s life is incarnate in fragile humanity:

In sum, my sisters, what I conclude with is that we shouldn’t build castles in the air. The Lord doesn’t look so much at the greatness of our works as at the love with which they are done.... Thus even though our works are small they will have the value our love for Him would have merited had they been great. (VII.4.15)

Attentiveness to Christ, who is intimately present to all that is human; resistance through love to everything that dehumanises; detachment; humility—all these enable a daring trust that our participation, whether great or small, in the sufferings of the crucified Christ will not destroy us. Instead, the energies of the risen Christ, like the bacteria in the compost heap, will transform the apparent mess of our lives into ripe compost, enriching the lives of others and thus bringing our world closer to the final realisation of what eye has not yet seen or ear heard.

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<sup>12</sup> *The Way of Perfection*, 4. 4.