

# NAVIGATING THE DARK NIGHT

## A Companion for Spiritual Crisis

*A free guide from Dr. Sandra Biltz, OD, MATSJ, Spiritual Director*

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### Welcome to Sacred Ground

If you've downloaded this guide, you're likely in one of the most challenging spiritual experiences of your life. Everything that once brought you comfort and connection feels hollow. The Divine seems absent. Your spiritual practices feel empty.

**I want you to know three things:**

1. **You're not alone.** Mystics, saints, and seekers across centuries and traditions have walked this path before you.
2. **You're not doing anything wrong.** The dark night isn't punishment or failure—it's profound transformation.
3. **You will get through this.** The darkness doesn't last forever, and what emerges on the other side is worth the journey.

This guide is your companion through the darkness. Use it to:

- Understand what's happening to you
- Distinguish the dark night from depression or burnout
- Find practices that support (not "fix") your journey
- Navigate difficult moments
- Trust the process

Let's walk this path together.

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## PART ONE: Understanding the Dark Night

### What Is the Dark Night of the Soul?

The term comes from 16th-century Spanish mystic **St. John of the Cross**, who described a profound spiritual crisis where:

- All familiar spiritual consolations disappear
- The sense of Divine presence vanishes

- Previous practices that brought peace now feel empty
- Everything you relied on spiritually seems to evaporate

But St. John understood something crucial: **this isn't abandonment—it's transformation.**

## Why It Happens

The dark night serves several purposes:

**1. Purification of Attachment** You're being freed from dependence on spiritual feelings and experiences so you can encounter the Divine directly, not through the filter of what you get from it.

**2. Maturation** Moving from spiritual childhood (dependent on experiences and feelings) to spiritual maturity (based on trust and depth).

**3. Death of the False Self** The ego's need to control and manage spiritual life is dissolving, making room for authentic connection.

**4. Preparation for Union** You can't unite with what you're trying to control. The dark night clears away everything preventing genuine union with the Divine.

## What the Experts Say

**Gerald May** (psychiatrist and spiritual director):

"The dark night is the transformation of attachment into love. It purifies our desire by causing it to go far beyond the objects it was once attached to."

**Evelyn Underhill** (scholar of mysticism):

"The Dark Night is an aspect of the transition from the Illuminative to the Unitive Life... a period of utter blankness and stagnation, so far as mystical activity is concerned."

**Thomas Merton** (Trappist monk):

"The 'dark night' is nothing else than the death of the imagination and of language, which amounts to a kind of death of the superficial self."

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## PART TWO: Is This a Dark Night or Something Else?

### Dark Night vs. Depression

It's crucial to distinguish between the dark night and clinical depression. Both are serious, but they require different responses.

<b>Dark Night of the Soul</b>	<b>Clinical Depression</b>
Specifically spiritual emptiness	Loss of interest in everything
Can function normally in daily life	Difficulty with basic functioning
Moving forward into unknown territory	Feeling stuck with no way out
Underlying sense this is somehow "right"	Persistent hopelessness about life
Life continues relatively normally	Physical symptoms (sleep, appetite, fatigue)
No thoughts of self-harm	May include thoughts of self-harm

**Important:** These can co-occur. If you're experiencing symptoms of depression, please seek support from a therapist or doctor. You can have both spiritual direction AND mental health support.

## **Dark Night vs. Spiritual Dryness**

### **Spiritual Dryness:**

- Temporary (days to weeks)
- Often has an identifiable cause (stress, busyness, burnout)
- Returns to normal with rest and renewed practice
- Feels like you need a break

### **Dark Night:**

- Extended (months to years)
- No identifiable external cause
- Doesn't improve with rest or trying harder
- Feels like profound transformation, not just fatigue

## **Dark Night vs. Faith Crisis/Deconstruction**

### **Faith Crisis/Deconstruction:**

- Questioning beliefs and theological concepts
- Often triggered by new information or experiences
- Intellectual and theological in nature
- May lead to leaving or changing religious affiliation

### **Dark Night:**

- Not primarily about beliefs or doctrine
- Comes unbidden, not triggered by external factors

- Experiential and relational in nature
- Your beliefs may not change, but your experience does

**Note:** These can also overlap. You might be in both a dark night AND deconstruction simultaneously.

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## **PART THREE: The Five Core Signs**

### **SIGN #1: Spiritual Practices That Used to Work... Don't**

#### **What you're experiencing:**

- Meditation feels pointless
- Prayer feels like talking to a wall
- Reading spiritual texts feels hollow
- Practices that once fed you now feel mechanical

**What's actually happening:** You're being weaned from attachment to spiritual experiences. The question is: Can you seek the Divine for its own sake, not for what you get from it?

**How to respond:** ✓ Keep practicing anyway, without expecting results

✓ Notice any attachment to spiritual "success"

✓ Let the practices be empty—that's the point right now

✓ Trust something deeper is happening beneath the surface

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### **SIGN #2: You Feel Abandoned by God/Source/Universe**

#### **What you're experiencing:**

- The sense of Divine presence has vanished
- You feel spiritually alone
- Connection you once felt is gone
- Silence instead of response

**What's actually happening:** When the sense of presence is withdrawn, you discover whether your spiritual life was about authentic connection or about getting something that made you feel good.

**How to respond:** ✓ Don't try to manufacture feelings or force connection

✓ Practice trust even in absence

- ✓ Remember feelings aren't the measure of spiritual reality
  - ✓ Consider that silence might be invitation to go deeper
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### **SIGN #3: Everything You Thought You Knew Feels Uncertain**

#### **What you're experiencing:**

- Beliefs that felt solid now seem questionable
- You're questioning things you never thought you'd question
- You don't know what you believe anymore
- Mental frameworks are collapsing

**What's actually happening:** Your conceptual understanding is dissolving. You're being invited beyond concepts into direct experience, beyond theology into mystery.

**How to respond:** ✓ Let yourself not know

- ✓ Resist the urge to quickly rebuild certainty
  - ✓ Practice saying "I don't know" as spiritual discipline
  - ✓ Embrace mystery as sacred, not something to solve
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### **SIGN #4: You're Trying Everything to "Fix" It, But Nothing Works**

#### **What you're experiencing:**

- Reading more books, trying new practices
- Switching techniques, finding new teachers
- Doing ALL THE THINGS
- But nothing works—the emptiness remains

**What's actually happening:** The dark night can't be fixed. You can't effort your way out. This teaches you that you're not in control of your spiritual transformation.

**How to respond:** ✓ Stop trying to fix it

- ✓ Notice the anxiety of not being in control
  - ✓ Practice surrender instead of striving
  - ✓ Trust the process you can't control
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### **SIGN #5: Despite Everything, You Can't Walk Away**

**What you're experiencing:**

- Even though your spiritual life feels dead
- Even though practices don't work
- Even though you feel abandoned
- You can't quit—you keep showing up

**What's actually happening:** This is the clearest sign you're in a dark night rather than losing faith. You're learning love without attachment to outcomes—the deepest form of love.

**How to respond:** ✓ Honor that you're still showing up

✓ See persistence as evidence of depth

✓ Let yourself be held by what you can't feel

✓ Trust that fidelity in darkness is transformation

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## **PART FOUR: Practical Practices for the Journey**

### **Daily Practices**

#### **1. The Practice of Showing Up**

Even when you feel nothing, maintain your spiritual practices. Not to achieve anything, but as an act of fidelity.

**How:**

- Set aside the same time each day
- Sit in meditation or prayer for your regular duration
- Release all expectation of feeling anything
- Simply be present

#### **2. Breath Prayer for the Dark Night**

When everything feels too much, return to breath.

**How:**

- Inhale: "I trust"
- Exhale: "the darkness"

Or:

- Inhale: "I am held"

- Exhale: "even here"

Or simply:

- Inhale: "Yes"
- Exhale: "Yes"

### **3. The Examen Adapted for Darkness**

A daily reflection practice that honors where you are.

#### **Evening questions:**

1. Where did I notice emptiness today?
2. Where did I show up despite the emptiness?
3. What tiny moment held a glimmer of something?
4. What am I grateful for, even in darkness?
5. What do I need tomorrow?

### **4. Journaling Prompts**

Write without censoring. These aren't meant to solve anything—just to witness your experience.

- "Today the darkness feels like..."
- "What I miss most is..."
- "If I could tell the Divine one thing right now..."
- "The hardest part is..."
- "What I'm learning is..."
- "A tiny moment of grace today was..."

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## **Weekly Practices**

### **5. Sacred Reading (Lectio Divina)**

Even if words feel empty, keep reading. Try texts about the dark night itself.

#### **Recommended readings:**

- St. John of the Cross, *Dark Night of the Soul* (especially Books I and II)
- Gerald May, *The Dark Night of the Soul*
- Psalms of lament (Psalm 13, 22, 42, 88)
- Rumi's poems about absence and longing

#### **How to practice:**

1. Read slowly, a small section
2. Notice what word or phrase catches your attention
3. Sit with that word in silence
4. Let it be, without analysis

## **6. Walk in Nature Without Agenda**

The natural world continues its cycles regardless of your spiritual state. Let this teach you.

### **How:**

- Walk slowly, noticing everything
- Don't try to feel spiritual about it
- Just observe: light, shadow, growth, decay
- Let nature be what it is, as you are what you are

## **7. Create Without Purpose**

Sometimes words fail. Let your hands express what you can't say.

### **Ideas:**

- Paint or draw your interior landscape
- Play music (even random notes)
- Move your body freely
- Write poetry without trying to make it good
- Work with clay or dough

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## **Monthly Practices**

### **8. Meet with a Spiritual Director or Companion**

Do not walk this alone. Find someone who can witness without fixing.

#### **What to look for:**

- Someone who knows about the dark night
- Who won't try to rush you through it
- Who can sit with you in darkness without panicking
- Who respects your language and framework

### **9. Full Moon Ritual: Honoring the Darkness**

Once a month, create a simple ritual that honors where you are.



### **Example ritual:**

1. Light a candle in darkness
2. Sit in silence for 10 minutes
3. Read a passage about the dark night
4. Write one thing you're releasing, one thing you're trusting
5. Sit in silence again
6. Blow out the candle, rest in darkness

### **10. Review Your Journey**

Once a month, look back at your journal entries. You might notice:

- Subtle shifts you couldn't see day-to-day
  - Patterns in the darkness
  - Small moments of grace
  - Your own growing capacity to be with what is
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## **PART FIVE: Emergency Toolkit**

### **When It Feels Unbearable**

Some days will be harder than others. Keep these in your back pocket:

#### **Immediate Grounding Practice**

When you feel like you're drowning:

1. **5-4-3-2-1 Sensory Grounding**
  - Name 5 things you can see
  - 4 things you can touch
  - 3 things you can hear
  - 2 things you can smell
  - 1 thing you can taste
2. **Body Scan**
  - Feel your feet on the floor
  - Notice your breath
  - Place hand on heart
  - Say: "I am here. I am breathing. This moment is enough."
3. **The Held Practice**
  - Wrap yourself in a blanket
  - Hug yourself
  - Rock gently
  - Imagine being held by something greater

- Even if you can't feel it, trust you are

### **Statements to Remember**

When you forget everything else, remember these:

- ✓ "This is temporary, even though it doesn't feel like it."
- ✓ "I am not doing anything wrong."
- ✓ "Darkness is not the absence of God—it's a different kind of presence."
- ✓ "I don't have to understand this. I just have to endure it."
- ✓ "I am not alone. Mystics across centuries have walked this path."
- ✓ "Transformation is happening even when I can't feel it."
- ✓ "I am allowed to rest. I don't have to figure this out."

### **Who to Call**

Keep these numbers readily available:

- Your spiritual director: \_\_\_\_\_
- Your therapist: \_\_\_\_\_
- A trusted friend: \_\_\_\_\_
- Crisis hotline: 988 (U.S. Suicide & Crisis Lifeline)
- **If you're in danger, call 911 or go to emergency room**

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## **PART SIX: What NOT to Do**

### **Don't Try to Fix It Quickly**

The dark night has its own timeline. Attempting to speed through it usually just prolongs it.

#### **Avoid:**

- Spiritual bypassing ("Just think positive!")
- Forcing gratitude or joy you don't feel
- Numbing with substances, shopping, busyness
- Jumping from practice to practice seeking a "cure"

- Comparing your timeline to others

### **Don't Isolate Completely**

While solitude can be healing, total isolation can become dangerous.

#### **Instead:**

- Maintain contact with at least one trusted person
- Keep appointments with director/therapist
- Allow others to care for you practically
- Be honest about your struggle

### **Don't Make Major Life Decisions**

The dark night affects your perception and judgment. This isn't the time to:

- Quit your job
- End relationships
- Move across the country
- Make irreversible choices

**Wait.** Let the darkness settle before making big changes.

### **Don't Believe Everything You Think**

In the dark night, your thoughts can be unreliable:

- "I've failed spiritually"
- "God has abandoned me"
- "I'll never feel connection again"
- "This means I'm not meant for spiritual life"

**These are thoughts, not truth.** Notice them, but don't believe them.

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## **PART SEVEN: For Different Belief Systems**

### **If You're Christian**

The dark night has deep roots in Christian mysticism. You're walking the path of:

- St. John of the Cross
- St. Teresa of Avila

- Mother Teresa (yes, she experienced decades of darkness)
- Countless saints and mystics

### **Remember:**

- Christ experienced abandonment on the cross: "My God, why have you forsaken me?"
- The darkness is participation in Christ's death, preceding resurrection
- The "cloud of unknowing" is honored in Christian contemplative tradition
- You're being invited into apophatic (negative) theology

### **Practices:**

- Centering prayer
- Reading the Psalms of lament
- Stations of the Cross as metaphor for your journey
- Silent retreats

## **If You're Spiritual But Not Religious**

You might not have the Christian framework, but the dark night is universal. You're walking the path of:

- Buddhist practitioners facing the "dark night of the soul" in meditation
- Yogis experiencing "the void"
- Indigenous wisdom keepers honoring the underworld journey
- Mystics across all traditions

### **Remember:**

- This isn't punishment from the universe
- Mystery doesn't require religious language
- Your experience is valid without Christian framework
- Source/Universe/Mystery is present even in absence

### **Practices:**

- Vipassana or insight meditation
- Sitting with emptiness as teacher
- Nature as spiritual companion
- Body-based practices (yoga, breathwork)

## **If You're in Deconstruction**

You might be experiencing BOTH dark night AND faith transition. This is particularly challenging.

**Remember:**

- You can question beliefs AND be in a dark night
- Deconstruction isn't the same as dark night, but they can overlap
- Your intellectual questions AND spiritual emptiness are both valid
- You don't have to figure out theology while in darkness

**Practices:**

- Journal both theological questions and spiritual experience separately
  - Find community with others deconstructing
  - Read widely across traditions
  - Be patient with the "not knowing"
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## **PART EIGHT: Signs of Emergence**

Eventually—and you won't know when—the darkness will begin to lift. Watch for:

**Subtle Shifts**

- Practices feel different (not like before, but new)
- Tiny moments of something like peace or presence
- Interest returning in things that had felt dead
- Ability to feel small joys again
- Less anxiety about the darkness
- Growing trust in the process

**Deeper Changes**

- Peace that doesn't depend on feeling good
- Connection to Divine that's steadier, less dramatic but more real
- Greater capacity to be with mystery and uncertainty
- Compassion for yourself and others
- Freedom from needing spiritual life to look or feel a certain way
- Wisdom you didn't have before

**Integration**

- Your practice continues, but from different ground
- You can hold both absence and presence
- You're less attached to spiritual experiences
- You trust more deeply
- You've become someone new

**Note:** Emergence isn't sudden. It's gradual, like dawn breaking. And you won't return to who you were before—you'll be transformed.

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## **PART NINE: Resources for Further Support**

### **Books**

#### **Essential Reading:**

- Gerald May, *The Dark Night of the Soul*
- St. John of the Cross, *Dark Night of the Soul*
- Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism*
- Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*

#### **Additional Support:**

- Barbara Brown Taylor, *Learning to Walk in the Dark*
- Sue Monk Kidd, *When the Heart Waits*
- Ruth Haley Barton, *Sacred Rhythms*
- David Benner, *The Gift of Being Yourself*

### **Finding a Spiritual Director**

**Spiritual Directors International** [www.sdiworld.org](http://www.sdiworld.org)

- Directory of spiritual directors worldwide
- Search by location, tradition, specialties

#### **What to Ask Potential Directors:**

- Are you familiar with the dark night of the soul?
- What's your approach when someone is in spiritual crisis?
- What's your own spiritual background/tradition?
- How do you work with people who are [Christian/SBNR/deconstructing]?
- What are your fees and session frequency?

### **Online Communities**

**Caution:** Online spaces can be helpful but also overwhelming. Take breaks as needed.

- Spiritual Directors International forums
- Contemplative practice groups
- Faith transition/deconstruction communities

- Meditation communities

## **Professional Support**

**When to Seek Therapy:** If you're experiencing:

- Thoughts of self-harm
- Inability to function in daily life
- Severe depression symptoms
- Trauma needing professional processing

**Find therapists at:**

- Psychology Today directory
  - GoodTherapy.org
  - Open Path Collective (affordable therapy)
  - Local spiritual direction training programs (often offer affordable sessions)
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## **PART TEN: A Blessing for Your Journey**

You who walk in darkness, who cannot find your way, who question everything you once knew:

You are not lost. You are being found.

The ground falling away beneath you is not destruction. It is the false floor giving way to depth you couldn't reach before.

The silence you hear is not absence. It is the sound of your own becoming, too deep for words.

The practices that no longer work have served their purpose. They were scaffolding. Now the building stands alone.

The certainty you've lost was never yours to keep. Mystery is your inheritance. Unknowing is your teacher.

Trust the darkness. It knows where it's going even when you don't.

Trust your showing up even when you feel nothing. This is the deepest fidelity.

Trust the transformation you cannot see or feel. It is happening. You are being remade.

One day—and you won't know when—you will wake to find the darkness has become light of a different kind.

Not the light you lost but the light you've become.

Until then: Breathe. Show up. Trust. Rest.

You are held even in the void.

Especially in the void.

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## Ready for Companionship?

**You don't have to walk through the dark night alone.**

As a spiritual director with over a decade of experience, I offer compassionate companionship through spiritual transitions and transformations—including the dark night of the soul.

I work with Christians, spiritual-but-not-religious seekers, and those in deconstruction, using language and practices that honor your unique path.

### [Book a Free Discovery Call](#)

Let's explore whether spiritual direction might support your journey through this sacred darkness.

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## Stay Connected

**Join my email community** for:

- Monthly reflections on spiritual transformation
- Practical practices for the journey
- Resources and recommendations
- Invitations to workshops and retreats

### [\[Sign Up Here\]](#)

**Follow on Instagram:** dr.saundra\_biltz

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## A Final Word



If you're in a dark night right now, please hear this:

**What you're experiencing is real, it's valid, and it's sacred.**

You're not failing. You're transforming.

Keep this guide with you. Return to it when you need reminding. Share it with others who might be in darkness.

And remember: the night is long, but dawn always comes.

*In companionship on the path,  
Dr. Saundra*

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*This guide is for informational and spiritual support purposes. It is not a substitute for professional mental health care. If you're experiencing symptoms of depression or thoughts of self-harm, please seek immediate support from a qualified mental health professional.*