

# Eídon

A Newsletter on Christian Spirituality for Church Leaders

November 2008

## The Dark Night in Groups

To mark the release of my new book, *The Dark Night: A Gift of God*, this issue explores how the dark night may appear in group life.

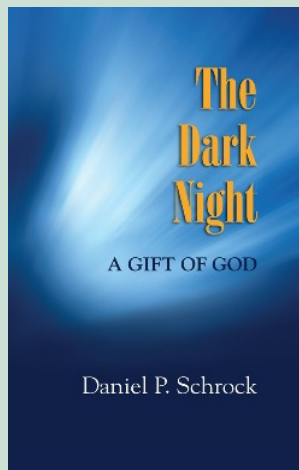
When people write about the dark night, they usually talk about it happening in the life of an individual person, and almost never about how it happens in groups. On my shelf I have about 40 books that mention the dark night in some way, but only 3 of them ask how the dark night might unfold in the life of groups.<sup>6</sup> Even then, these 3 books, including mine, have only one chapter on the dark night in groups. Yet I'm convinced that God sometimes leads groups—churches, denominations, and other organizations—through a dark night.

It's easy to understand why most books focus on the dark night in individuals. The idea of the dark night arose within Christian theology during an era when the individual's relationship with God was thought to be primary, rather than the whole group's relationship.

What about the soul of groups? After 26 years of helping to lead congregations and other organizations, it's obvious to me that groups also have a "soul." For example, a congregation is not just a collection of individuals, but is also its own unique organism. The soul of each group is often a little different than that of other groups.

When a dark night happens in a group, the individuals in that organization will not necessarily be in a dark night too (though some may be). Rather, the organization itself,

### New Book!



I'm happy to announce the publication of my book, *The Dark Night: A Gift of God* (Herald Press, 2009), scheduled for re-release in late November. For the right person, it could make an excellent Christmas gift.

I did not write this book for scholars, but for ordinary Christians who have a hard time understanding why prayer is sometimes so unrewarding and why God sometimes seems so far away. Order your copy from Herald Press by calling 1-800-245-7894 or by visiting <http://heraldpress.com>. They'll ship it to you as soon as it's printed.

If you live near my home in Goshen, Indiana, you can also buy a copy directly from me **at the reduced price of \$14.00** (sales tax included). If you're interested, email me at [dan@danschrock.org](mailto:dan@danschrock.org).

as an organism, undergoes a dark night. This can happen in congregations, committees, youth groups, church agencies, businesses, nonprofits, ethnic groups, and so on.

### Possible Examples

Some examples of the dark night in groups could include:

- A congregation discovers its pastor has slept with several women. The news leaves members feeling betrayed by God. They can barely worship.
- A once popular and politically influential congregation declines to 20 people over the age of 70. Their architectural jewel of a building crumbles around them. Members wonder why God has seemingly abandoned them.

- A church institution lays off employees because of declining income. Gloom and foreboding descend on those who are left.
- After a denominational merger, many congregations decide to leave. Those that remain do not yet feel as loyal to the new organizational structures as they did to the ones in the predecessor denominations. Some wonder if God was really in this merger after all.
- A city is pummeled by a hurricane. People wonder why God allowed all this devastation to happen.
- During slavery, African-Americans persistently felt that God had walked away from them as a people.

[continued on the next page]

### Eídon

A Greek verb meaning to see or to perceive, frequently found in the New Testament

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## Organizational Dark Nights (continued)

### Three Signs

John of the Cross (d. 1591) said the dark night in individuals has 3 signs, which together signal a transition from meditation to contemplation (see the May 2008 issue for more on this):

- You cannot pray (meditate) using your rational mind.
- Your life in general is dry, empty, and dissatisfying.
- First you analyze what seems to have gone wrong; but as time passes, you gradually shift to just paying attention to God, quietly and lovingly.

In group life, these 3 signs might look like the following. Each sign, however, bears new possibility.

**First**, the group cannot “pray” using its normal rational processes. In a congregation, well-planned worship services could fail to connect. In any group, rational ways of solving problems may no longer work. Approaches that functioned well in the past now appear ineffective. Communication unravels.

When rational ways of doing things hit a brick wall, a group may find itself willing to consider other approaches that seem

crazy but turn out to be highly refreshing.

When the old ways die, God creates room for new, invigorating options to emerge.

**Second**, the group’s “spiritual life” is dry and empty. The activities the group uses to deepen its

life and extend its mission no longer provide satisfaction. Energy and enthusiasm drain away. Relationships are flat. People go through the motions, but without finding meaning. Members or employees are tempted to quit and leave. People may wonder, “Has God forsaken us?”



In this dryness, however, God is actually purifying the organization’s desires that until now have been muddled with misguided quests for power and control, status and esteem, security and survival. God is transforming the group’s inner motivations to help it become more centered in God.

**The third sign** has two parts. In part A, the group agonizes over “what went wrong.” It may feel angry, betrayed, confused, or deeply broken. It introspectively examines decisions and decision-making processes. Here lies perhaps the severest pain and anguish of the dark night.

Yet God ultimately reorients the group away from its own pain

and draws it toward new and loving initiatives from God. This is part B. Over a period of months, perhaps years, the group gradually shifts to devoting its attention to God in quietness and love—to an attitude of watchful wait-

ing before God. A certain humility takes hold, and the transformed group becomes more aware of God’s faithful love being poured out.

### Benefits of the Dark Night

As a result of the dark night, God shucks off some of the organization’s unsav-

ory motives that formerly compromised its mission. This makes the organization more centered and integrated into God. When a group of people emerges from a dark night, its goals will often be clearer, its mission more refined, and its vision more compelling.

As the dark night passes, people in the group are energized to collaborate with each other in fresh ways. Some of the most fruitful years in a group’s history frequently follow a dark night. People itch to find ways of expressing their gratitude and service to God. The group’s ministry takes on new vitality as participants are inspired to serve the organization’s “clients” in more radical ways. In essence, the group becomes something of a new creation, prepared for fresh mission.

### Note

\* I know of no book in the English language that focuses entirely on the dark night in groups. For briefer treatments, see Constance Fitzgerald, “Impasse and Dark Night,” in *Living with Apocalypse: Spiritual Resources for Social Compassion*, ed. Tilden H. Edwards (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1984), 93-116; Gerald G. May, *The Dark Night of the Soul: A Psychiatrist Explores the Connection Between Darkness and Spiritual Growth* (HarperSanFrancisco, 2004), 153-180; and chapter 10 of my book.

### A Revised Web Site

My website ([www.danschrock.org](http://www.danschrock.org)) now has a new look and a significant amount of fresh content. You’ll find:

- **Information about my new service that offers spiritual direction via webcam** to church leaders in the U.S. who can’t find a qualified director in their own community.
- A collection of resources on the dark night and contemplation.
- A series of sermons on various topics, including a quirky one on “The Medical Meaning of the Head Covering.”