



INTRODUCTION (expanded edition)

by Santoshan (Stephen Wollaston)

Through their own hardships, many people feel a deeper connection with the suffering of others.

~ Christina and Stanislav Grof¹

Without a true awareness of the depths of brokenness, we will not find our way towards wholeness.

~ John Philip Newell²

Tibetan Buddhist master Chogyam Trungpa was known to tell people attending his talks that if they hadn't already started on spiritual paths, it was best to not bother as it was too difficult! However, he would then add, no doubt after allowing for an effective pregnant pause, that if they had started, it was best to continue.

What Trungpa's words remind us of is that authentic spiritual unfoldment isn't about *escaping* into enlightened and mystical realms and simply blissing out. In the process of awakening there is work to be done and levels of awareness and wholesome actions that may not always be easy to embrace or implement.

American psychologist John Welwood coined the phrase 'spiritual by-passing' to also warn us against *avoiding* essential shadow work by consciously or unconsciously distracting ourselves with what might appear to be more attractive spiritual pursuits, but in the long-run, would in fact be less beneficial.

The title of this book is based on John of the Cross's poem Dark Night of the Soul but with the word 'green' deliberately added and 'night' changed to a plural. The reasons for this are because the following articles aren't just about a single category of traditional mystical experience or just human-centred spirituality.

In the Christian tradition, a dark night of the soul experience is invariably seen as a positive thing. Yet suffering of different kinds are also part of life and need to be included as part of the spiritual journey. For "All life is Yoga", Sri Aurobindo reminds us.³ The adapted title of this book gives room for various stories of darkness to be told: either individual ones that Gaia-centred travellers have experienced or are still facing and how green spirituality has profoundly helped them, or ones about the Earth and the deep concerns many of us share about her current wellbeing.

Keeping this in mind, readers will notice that this book's four main parts present various perspectives about facing and working with darkness and ways in which we can creatively move forward. The first section considers different types of darkness as well as its benefits. The second and largest section includes further wisdom, along with personal stories about times of difficulty people encountered, and how each of the storytellers found new meaning and growth by either connecting with an animal friend or in Earth-centred spiritual awakenings and teachings. The seven articles in the third and final sections reflect upon the state of the planet and offer practical views for the times in which we live and "the great work",⁴ as Thomas Berry called it, we need to embrace. For like us, the natural world of which we are all wondrously interrelated has its own spiritual journey to make.

Although Nature can of course be violent and destructive herself, we humans obviously need to consider ways in which to live in harmony with her. Pretty much everyone now accepts that Earth is going through heightened times of darkness due to a lack of wisdom we humans have had, and the damage we have collectively caused to important ecosystems and inflicted upon numerous species. The night photo of the beautiful European tree frog (*Hyla arborea*) on the cover of this book is just one example of an endangered species – though at least protected.

Nonetheless, if all of what I have mentioned gives the impression that the following pages are going to make for negative reading, it would in fact be a wrong one. What comes across the loudest in every article is an encouraging, hopeful, transformative, pragmatic and active form of spirituality for troubled times.

Spiritual and religious traditions' teachings about transformation frequently draw upon the symbolism of death and dying to one's previous self, which is invariably seen as a necessary stage of change and growth to go through in order to awaken to new ways of being.

Creation Spirituality and the *Via Negativa*

Before completing this introduction, I should perhaps mention something about the *revival* of Creation-Centred Spirituality,* which in recent decades the activist, radical theologian and Episcopal priest Matthew Fox has done much to promote as an essential fourfold path:⁵

1. The *Via Positiva*: the way of awe, delight and amazement.
2. The *Via Negativa*: the way of uncertainty, darkness, suffering and letting go.
3. The *Via Creativa*: the way of birthing, creativity and passion.
4. The *Via Transformativa*: the way of justice, healing and celebration.

Within GreenSpirit, many members will already be familiar with Fox's insights. Although the articles in this book predominantly connect with the *Via Negativa* (number two above), they also intertwine with the other three ways.

Conclusion

In the process of putting this title together, with the excellent and always supportive help of Ian Mowll, the coordinator of GreenSpirit, what was especially encouraging was how all contributors responded positively about it when contacting them about their articles being included, and many of them mentioned how beneficial and important a book of this kind would be. Both Ian and I can only hope that it may offer some reassurance, encouragement and inspiration in troubled times, for the benefit of both human and the more-than-human realms of life.

*Unlike Creationism, Creation Spirituality embraces the discoveries of contemporary science.

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References

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