

Introduction

❧ Transfigured by Tears ❧

La Madre Teresa was rushing through the convent on some errand she could scarcely remember. She was distracted. There was a festival coming up, and since she was prioress, she found herself, as usual, responsible for all the administrative details. Oh, that was it: the statue! The Poor Clares had loaned the Sisters of St. Joseph's a statue of Christ scourged at the pillar. Teresa needed to find it and get it properly situated in the chapel.

There it was—propped against a wall in the hallway like a common broom. Irritated, Teresa bent to pick it up.

And then, as she was leaning down toward the image of her Lord, he was suddenly leaning upward toward her.

She stepped back, struck by the animation in his expression. His face was simultaneously wrenched by the anguish of injustice and radiant

with compassion for all living beings. The sweet suffering mouth! The rivulets of blood! The love-longing in his eyes!

Before she realized what had struck her, Teresa was prostrate on the floor, gasping for breath. "Oh, my Beloved," she moaned. "I am so sorry I have neglected you all these years. Look at all you have endured for love of me, and I have never really loved you back."

She began to cry. "I do love you, my Lord! I will never stop loving you. Please give me the strength and courage to devote myself entirely to you." The tears came in a mighty flood. She wept and gasped for air, and wept again. She, who, for almost twenty years, had watched the other nuns with a mixture of envy and contempt as they wept their way through their prayers while she was "incapable of squeezing out a single holy tear," now could not stop crying.

"I will not move from this spot until you give me what I want, Lord!" she demanded. The first of many demands. The first of many direct encounters with her difficult, devoted, long-suffering, good-humored Beloved.

When at last she rose from her immovable spot, her own face was radiant with satisfaction. The hollow vessel her tears had carved in her heart was overflowing with love. More abundant love than she could have asked for, more enlivening and intoxicating and unshakable love.

As the floodgates flew open, the visions, too, began pouring through. And the divine voices. And the unrelenting, inconvenient, all-too-public raptures and ecstasies. These mystical states did not go unnoticed by the Spanish Inquisition, and, although Teresa was repeatedly denounced, they never managed to prove her a heretic. In fact, almost every man who investigated the unconventional nun ended up falling at her feet.

🌀 A Wild Child 🌀

Saint Teresa of Avila was born Teresa de Cepeda y Ahumada in 1515, during the height of the Inquisition in Spain. She was the granddaughter of a *converso*, a Jew forced to convert to Christianity on pain of death. These thinly disguised Jewish roots,

combined with the fact that she was a woman, made Teresa an unlikely candidate for a saint, let alone a reformer of an entire branch of the Catholic Church.

Yet Saint Teresa was the architect of the *Discalced*, or Barefoot Carmelite order, and she dedicated her life to reconnecting this ancient sect with its contemplative origins of solitude, silence, and interior prayer. Even in her own lifetime, Teresa was revered as *la santa*, which she found endlessly amusing, given her radically humble opinion of herself as an incorrigible "sinner."

Teresa of Avila was infused with a quiet flame that set all boundaries on fire and ignited every heart she touched. She was physically beautiful—voluptuous and sultry—with luxurious dark hair and sparkling black eyes. She was a musician and a dancer, a poet and a theologian. She was such a prolific writer that it earned her the distinction of first female "Doctor of the Church," meaning her theological contributions had permanent impact on the development of Roman Catholic thought.

Teresa's exceptional intellect was balanced by her passionate emotions. She was gregarious and impatient, alternately inclined toward radical solitude and intimate connection with community.

As with most of us on a spiritual path, Teresa's devotional inclinations began showing up at an early age. She had learned to read by the time she was five years old. When she read in *Lives of the Saints* about certain women martyrs whose sacrifices bought them a ticket straight to heaven, she decided to enlist her brother Rodrigo to join her on a quest: they would travel to the country of the Moors and beg them to cut off their heads for God. But, to Teresa's dismay, an uncle spotted the children just outside the gates of Avila and brought them home.

Whenever the bossy Teresa played with other little girls, she made everybody pretend they were nuns in a convent. She built hermitages out of stones in the orchard behind her parents' house, determined to live alone there with her God. She would latch on to certain religious concepts and repeat them like a mantra, catapulting herself into a mystical trance. "Forever," she would chant. "Forever, forever, forever . . ."

Teresa's mother was beautiful, too, and wise. She instilled a deep love of books in her small daughter—a love that would not only define the rest of Teresa's life, but actually save it. While this passion for the written word first manifested as “a raging addiction to romance novels,” Teresa eventually came to relate to books as authentic tools for spiritual transformation and claimed that she never went to prayer without a book close beside her. Even if she didn't open it, she said, knowing it was there was enough to bring her into a state of focused spiritual recollection. When the Inquisition banned books on contemplative practice written in the vernacular, she felt as if her best friends had been condemned to death.

Teresa's mother, Beatriz, was the second wife of her father, Alonso, and the younger cousin of his first wife, who had died of the plague. Beatriz was barely thirteen when they married. By fourteen, she had given birth to her first son and was raising Alonso's two daughters from his first marriage as her own. Beatriz died in childbirth with her ninth baby, at the age of thirty-three. Teresa was thirteen. Bereft and unfettered, Teresa spun

out of control. All her early religious impulses faded into the dazzling allure of teenage rebellion.

Teresa liked to be liked. Ultimately, this psychological fact was to serve as both the single greatest obstacle and the most effective political weapon of her life. No one knows for sure what particular escapade finally resulted in Teresa's being carted off to the convent at age sixteen.

Was she discovered walking unchaperoned in the garden with a boy? Or did she lose her virginity?

What we do know is that Teresa's father so unconditionally adored her that, in his mind, she was incapable of doing anything seriously unscrupulous. He concluded that a year in an Augustinian convent, called the Incarnation, would be just the right amount of time for his lively daughter to calm down. Meanwhile, she would receive a little education (too much learning was considered unseemly in a girl), and the fire of scandal in the community would have time to die down and blow away.

But Teresa's social nature followed her to the convent of the Incarnation. There she convinced the nuns, as she had persuaded her father and her brothers all her life, that she was eminently

trustworthy and deserving of far more freedom than they granted the other girls. Even as Teresa habitually bristled against authority and the confines of any imposed structure, she began to enjoy the long hours of prayer, during which she would slip into a state of deep quietude and forget all about the earthly attachments that had plagued her. She still didn't want to be a nun, but she *wanted* to want to be a nun, and she begged the older sisters to pray on her behalf that her religious vocation would become clear.

Teresa found herself in a bind. The prospect of marriage repulsed her. Having witnessed the ravages suffered by her own mother, Teresa, who freely admitted she couldn't bear the thought of any man telling her what to do, could not imagine taking the path of matrimony. Yet her draw to monastic life did not arise out of any "holy inclinations," but rather from a sense of impending danger. She was afraid that her tendency to lose herself in the world would eventually mean forfeiting heaven.

Added to her own inner ambiguity was the problem of her father: he did not want Teresa

to become a nun. He had worked hard, as his father had before him, to climb to the top rungs of the social ladder and distance himself from his *converso* origins. Alonso's father, Juan Sanchez, had succeeded in acquiring the title of *hidalgo*, an honor traditionally bestowed only on those of pure Christian blood, but one that, in this corrupt age, could be purchased at a price. Juan had passed the rank of knighthood on to his son. Alonso had plans for his favorite daughter to marry well and uphold the family honor.

Alonso was nine years old when his father was denounced as Crypto-Jew and accused of secretly practicing his ancestral religion. In punishment, and to serve as an example, the family had been draped in bright yellow costumes emblazoned with snakes and flaming crosses, and marched through the streets of Toledo for seven consecutive Fridays. They were forced to kneel at every chapel and shrine along the way, while the citizens spat at them, threw rocks, and hurled verbal abuses. The humiliation of this early experience caused Alonso to hold on as tightly as he possibly could to the aristocratic

standing he had won. But his daughter would not cooperate.

Like Clare of Assisi before her, Teresa slipped away in the middle of the night and, against the wishes of her beloved father, returned to the convent of the Incarnation in secrecy. Defying the person she loved most in the world wrenched her heart so severely that she felt as if all her “bones were being dislocated.” But because she feared for her soul more than she dreaded her father’s disapproval, she endured the agony of forsaking him. After warning that he would die before granting his permission, Alonso eventually relented and gave Teresa his blessing, as well as a generous dowry. She professed vows, and was given the name Teresa of Jesus.

Convents at that time were overcrowded with girls whose families didn’t know what else to do with them. Women from wealthy homes brought their servants with them and lived more like nobility than nuns. Monastic life had little to do with the practice of prayer. Because food was scarce, visitors were encouraged, since they almost always brought treats for the

convent kitchen. On weekends, the parlor was filled with townspeople who were supposedly there to discuss the state of their souls with the sisters, but these spiritual counseling sessions easily degenerated into an excuse for flirtation and gossip.

Teresa was the center of attention. She was attractive, witty, and vivacious. She was also brilliant, and she tempered her frivolous impulses with a genuine insightfulness about human psychology and its connection to the spiritual path. Men of all ages found her irresistible and began to clamor for time with the remarkable young nun. In spite of herself, Teresa responded to their affections by falling in love again and again, living for the days when she got to see her devotees and speak with them.

Teresa's confessors considered this pastime to be harmless, but Teresa tormented herself with harsh judgments about her addiction to these relationships and the ease with which she manipulated everyone into liking her. The tension this created inside her finally made Teresa sick. She began developing mysterious fevers and suffering

headaches and fainting spells. She became so ill that her father had to come take her home.

The physicians of Avila were mystified. They could not come up with a diagnosis and failed to prescribe a cure. At last, they gave up on Teresa altogether. Desperate, Alonso set out to the village where his oldest daughter, Maria, lived with her husband. They were hoping to find a certain *curandera* (a medicine woman) who was said to have miraculous healing powers. Along the way, they spent a couple of nights with Alonso's newly widowed brother, Pedro.

Moved by a deep sense of sanctity underlying his niece's poor health, Uncle Pedro asked Teresa to read aloud to him from a book he had recently acquired on the practice of contemplative prayer. This book had such a profound effect on Pedro that he had begun to cultivate a serious discipline of silent meditation. His intuition was that Teresa might find all her troubles falling away if she followed this simple yet powerful method.

Teresa was captivated by these teachings, and they ended up forming the foundation of spiritual practice for the rest of her life. The minute she

turned her attention within, she found herself in intimate friendship with the Divine. She savored these moments, amazed by how effortlessly she slipped into the presence of her divine Beloved and how graciously he received her.

In the meantime, however, she was still very sick. The old woman in Maria's village employed radical remedies. She gave Teresa so many purgatives that her digestion was permanently compromised. She attached leeches to Teresa's abdomen and bled her till she was anemic. She prescribed liquid fasts, performed hypnotic incantations, and conducted exorcisms. Nothing worked.

Convinced that her problems were spiritual rather than physical, Teresa sought a confessor. The only priest in the village was a young man who was known to have spent the past seven years sexually involved with a local woman who had used her feminine tricks to bewitch him. He was continuing to celebrate Mass and give confession even as he was carrying on this affair.

Not long after Teresa began to confess to this priest, he unburdened his heart and confessed to her. He admitted that the woman had given

him a copper amulet and made him promise that he would wear it around his neck forever as a symbol of their love. Teresa identified this as the problem. She convinced him to take it off, and she threw it into the river. After that, she said, "the priest was like a man awakening from a dream." His affection for the woman flowed away with the amulet.

But it seems it then reversed course and transferred to Teresa. Her confessor fell in love with her. And it seems Teresa returned his affections. In light of her newfound zeal for religion, Teresa steered their conversations again and again away from the personal and back toward the Divine. She admitted that there were numerous occasions when, had she not been so diligent about this, they easily might have fallen into sin.

The aggressive treatments Teresa had undergone had only succeeded in intensifying her symptoms. In despair of finding a cure, her father finally took her back home to die. Not long after their return, Teresa slipped into a coma. Days went by and she showed no signs of waking up.

Her breath grew so shallow and her heartbeat so faint that the family finally concluded she was dead. They sent word to the convent to dig Teresa's grave, and they placed wax on her eyelids in preparation for burial.

But as he leaned over his daughter's body, Teresa's grieving father thought he detected signs of life. "The child is not dead!" he insisted. "She still lives!" As if in response to Alonso's expression of faith, Teresa returned to consciousness and peeled open her eyes.

Her recovery was arduous. When Teresa awakened, she was paralyzed. At first, all she could do was blink her eyes and wiggle one finger on her right hand. It took her eight months to be able to move her limbs of her own volition and another two years before she could crawl. She still suffered a constant buzzing in her head, daily bouts of dizziness and nausea, and pains that constricted her heart. These symptoms intermittently plagued Teresa until the day she died four decades later.

❧ Shattering the Shell ❧

As soon as she was well enough to travel, Teresa returned to the convent to take up her religious life where she had left off. Even though she had discovered the power and pleasure of contemplative prayer, she did not continue this discipline. She used the excuse of ill health to justify her failure to practice silent prayer. A more hidden reason was that she did not feel worthy to engage in such intimate dialogue with the Friend. She was convinced that she was a hopeless sinner. Perhaps even deeper lay the sense that if she truly surrendered to the inner void, she might never return to ordinary consciousness.

Teresa's self-condemnation was due, at least in part, to her continued attraction to the convent parlor. It did not take long for Teresa to renew her patterns of frivolous conversation and superficial interpersonal dynamics. Her father, on the other hand, inspired by what Teresa had taught him about contemplative prayer, began to seriously cultivate his own practice. The more deeply

devoted he grew to the path of prayer, the less he visited Teresa in the convent. She began to feel that she was losing everything that had ever meant anything to her, but she felt incapable of delving within and rediscovering true connection.

When her father became ill with what was probably bone cancer, Teresa left the convent to tend him. She wanted to reciprocate the gift of care he had always so generously lavished on her. But, although she loved her father more than she had ever loved another human being, she kept herself aloof from his dying. She perceived feelings as dangerous things and avoided opening her heart for fear of the overwhelming power that lurked there. When he died, Teresa felt as if part of her had been killed, yet she returned to her life at the convent as if nothing was the matter. Teresa spent nearly two decades this way, in self-imposed spiritual and emotional exile.

Until one day, when she happened to encounter the statue of the crucified Christ in the convent hallway, and the shell she had built around her heart suddenly shattered. In the wake of the ensuing flood of holy tears, Teresa was washed

with wave after wave of rapture. Soon she began to feel the presence of her Beloved all around her, day and night. Then she heard his voice speaking to her, and finally his entire glorified body appeared before her.

Enflamed by love-longing, Teresa began to practice contemplative prayer again. All she wanted was to be alone with her Beloved. Her practice was not always fruitful. Sometimes her prayer was unbearably dry. Sometimes she was overcome by such unnameable sadness as she approached the chapel that she could hardly walk through the door. She spent entire sessions waiting for the clock to strike the hour so she could get up and *do* something.

One day, as she sat in silence, a feeling of sublime ecstasy rushed through her body, sweeping her into a trance. She felt her Beloved lifting her to himself, and she realized that he longed for her as passionately as she yearned for him. Then she heard his voice. "Now I no longer want you to speak with men," he said, "but with angels."

After that, the lure of parlor drama evaporated. The only language Teresa was interested

in speaking was the language of love, and, to her surprise, hardly anyone else seemed to speak it. When she shared the details of her visions and voices with the men in charge of her soul, they were overcome with either reverence or suspicion. Word of the forty-year-old nun's unorthodox experiences began to spread throughout Spain, finally capturing the attention of the Inquisition.

But no one was capable of investigating Teresa more thoroughly than she was already investigating herself. True to her Jewish roots, Teresa wrestled with the Divine all her life. She subjected every one of her mystical favors to rigorous self-inquiry. She was determined to discern whether her visions came from God, were delusions of the devil, or were artifacts of mental imbalance. Was she divinely illuminated, or was she crazy? She had to be willing to face whatever the truth might turn out to be.

Various religious directors, confessors, and inquisitors periodically concluded that Teresa's visions and voices were tricks of the spirit of evil and that the ensuing raptures were symptoms of a

weak character. These conclusions broke Teresa's heart, mostly because she wanted so badly to please these men. But the truth was, after meticulous analysis, Teresa herself had concluded that her experiences were divine in origin. The primary proof: they left life-changing peace in her soul and an irrevocable increase of love in her heart.

Service

After years of grappling with powerful visions, writing endless accounts to document her experiences and prove her innocence to the Church, and fielding constant persecution and slander, Teresa finally began to integrate her altered states. She no longer had the urge to levitate in church, and she didn't have to beg her sisters to sit on her so that she wouldn't float away and make a spectacle of herself. She didn't freeze in the middle of frying eggs in the convent kitchen anymore, paralyzed by an unexpected wave of ecstasy.

As Teresa's inner life began to come into balance, she turned her attention outward once more.

By this time, however, she had lost her obsession with what other people thought of her. Now she was determined to take the spiritual gifts she had been given and use them in service to humanity. She would emulate the desert fathers and mothers and found a new order of Carmelites, dedicated to living out the contemplative values of silence, stillness, and radical simplicity. The sisters would take off the metaphorical shoes that had bound their Church to materialism and empty ritual. They would enter the chamber of their Beloved barefoot. Barefoot and naked.

One of the primary fruits of Teresa's powerful inner experiences was the realization that no intermediaries were needed for the soul to achieve union with God. A person was not required to ask permission to be with her Beloved. All one had to do was to go within, and she would find him there waiting for her. God, Teresa saw, chose the center of the human soul as his dwelling place because that is exactly the most beautiful place in all creation.

Such self-reliance was not popular with the Church, and the mainstream Carmelites did everything in their power to thwart the reform. Teresa

had too many stains on her reputation: she was a woman, overly educated, with known Jewish blood, subject to flashy visions and voices, and insistent on carrying on a private relationship with God, independent of his ordained representatives. But Teresa did not consider herself to be a revolutionary. Far from it. She was a devout daughter of the Church. All she wanted was to inspire others to devote themselves utterly to unceasing praise of God.

The first house she founded was the convent of St. Joseph's, and she was compelled to do so in secret. The community quickly became so popular that Teresa began to think beyond the confines of Avila. It became clear that she could no longer lead this movement alone. When she was in her early fifties, Teresa heard about an unusual young Carmelite priest named John of the Cross, who had only just professed his vows and had already decided to leave the order and go off to the mountains to live as a hermit. The priorities of the contemporary Church disappointed him. No one seemed to care about the spiritual path anymore.

No one except Teresa. She sent for John and, mildly curious, he agreed to meet with her. The moment these two souls encountered one another, it was clear that they had each met their true mirror. Teresa's flamboyant exterior matched John's fiery inner passion. John's stark personality and calm demeanor reflected the deep inner quietude Teresa had accessed in contemplative practice. Both wanted more than anything to build a community based on inner prayer and unconditional love of God. Teresa named John as confessor to her nuns, and later appointed him to head the first foundation for men.

These two lovers of God spent many hours lost in rapturous conversation, sometimes all through the night. One nun reported that when she entered the convent kitchen at dawn to stir the coals for morning tea, she found Friar John and Mother Teresa leaning toward one another in silence, their chairs hovering a few inches off the ground. Toward the end of his life, John determined that there was only one thing in this world to which he was still attached: Teresa. As a result of this realization, he tore off the pouch

of her letters that he kept tied around his neck and burned every single one.

When he was almost thirty, John was arrested for his involvement in Teresa's reform. Imprisoned and tortured for nine months in a tiny, fetid cell, John began to doubt the existence of God. He cried out for his Beloved, but was met with pure silence. Then gradually, into the darkness of his spiritual night, John discovered an infusion of divine love he never could have imagined. Following his miraculous escape from prison, John wrote his famous poem and prose treatise, *Dark Night of the Soul*. From then on, a dazzling stream of mystical writing poured from his pen.

Teresa of Avila founded seventeen convents and monasteries throughout Spain. She traveled by donkey cart over rugged terrain, spending nights in squalid inns, enduring sweltering heat and bone-chilling cold. She exhibited a natural talent for administration, and her youthful magic for charming everyone she met matured into an ability to convert doubters to her cause. From priests to kings, Teresa met each challenger with calm assurance and won them over. She mediated

internal disputes, sidestepped fabricated scandals, and skillfully guided human relations, even as she wrote volumes on contemplative prayer and corresponded prolifically with everyone she knew.

In addition to being a visionary, Teresa was an exceedingly practical woman. She was an excellent cook and she loved to eat. She was a talented spinner, preferring time at the spindle to negotiating the endless business deals that demanded her attention. When her daughters would get carried away with penitential practices or be overcome by religious emotion, Mother Teresa would order them to get a good night's sleep or prescribe a moonlight walk in the garden.

After twenty years as an activist and reformer, Teresa's health, never robust to begin with, began to decline dramatically. Her ailments were so numerous that no one could isolate them anymore. She suffered from headaches and rheumatoid arthritis, a weak heart and malaria, a broken shoulder that had mended all wrong, and finally, a condition that probably turned out to be uterine cancer. This ravaging disease ultimately resulted in the hemorrhage that took her life at age sixty-seven.

❧ A Mystic for Our Times ❧



What does Teresa of Avila have to offer us five hundred years after her death? Teresa models the living balance between action and contemplation, between serving others and developing an interior life, between engaging in passionate human relationships and surrendering to the divine mystery. She was an ecstatic mystic and a skillful administrator, a fool of God and an insightful psychotherapist, a penitent when she needed to be and an epicurian when she could be.

Teresa of Avila was fully, deeply, unapologetically *herself*. If she had written a letter to which her correspondent had not replied, she did not hesitate to write again, demanding, “Why haven’t you answered my letter? Don’t you love me? Do you have any idea of the pain your silence is causing me?”

Nor was she reluctant to talk back to God. In the midst of harrowing external trials, Teresa’s first response was to withdraw to a quiet place and go within. There, she would confront her

Beloved: “What’s going on, here, Lord?” One day, the divine voice answered, “This is how I treat my friends.” To which Teresa responded, “Well then, no wonder you have so few!”

She was keenly discriminating about spiritual phenomena. When her nuns prayed so fervently they gave themselves nosebleeds, she would send them to bed with a sweet cup of tea and a soft blanket and forbid them from entering the chapel for a few days. “God save us from sour-faced saints!” she would say about the self-important clerics who felt it was their job to uphold orthodoxy while never having held the Holy One in their arms and rocked him all through the night, as she regularly did.

Teresa challenged every vision and replayed every spiritual voice until she could be certain it was real. Once, when she was about to bustle down the steps on some administrative errand, she saw a small boy standing at the bottom of the stairway. “Who are you?” he asked her. “I am Teresa of Jesus,” she answered, rather imperiously. “And who are you?” “I am Jesus of Teresa,” he said, and vanished.

Through her many writings, Teresa of Avila openly shares her humanity with the world. There were times when she was paralyzed by fear of rejection and others when she was so courageous in the face of what she knew to be her sacred destiny that she risked being executed as a heretic. She made mistakes, as we all do. Some she apologized profusely for; others she refused to admit to until years later. Like us, she was petty or generous, irritable or unconditionally loving, attributing everything to her progress along the path of contemplative prayer. But she never ceased showing up for the spiritual work.

Teresa celebrated form and accepted formlessness. When her beloved friend, John of the Cross, chided her about her attachment to images, she stripped the walls of her cell, tearing down her cherished pictures of Christ, his Blessed Mother, and the saints. Miserable, she knelt in the oratory and tried to connect with the transcendent God. Silence. Then a voice spoke to her and said, "Anything that reminds you of me is good, my daughter." Relieved, she rushed to her room and put all the images back up.

She used form and imagery as a doorway to the ultimate reality that transcends all form. She would meditate on Christ's anguish in the Garden of Gethsemene, and this would break down the walls of her heart, allowing her to slip into that place where the boundaries of self and God melt. And she would remain in that sacred emptiness until it was time to cook dinner.

