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On Thursday, August 4, the day after "Debt Ceiling D-Day", the Dow Jones industrial average fell 500 points. On Friday, August 5, Standard & Poor's downgraded the United States' credit rating from AAA to AA+. By the closing bell on Monday, August 8, the Dow Jones industrial average had fallen another 634 points. The markets rallied on Tuesday and closed 430 points up, then fell again on Wednesday, closing 520 points down. On Thursday, they rallied again, up 423 points, and then on Friday, August 12, they closed up 126 points. Thank God it was finally Friday.

St. John of the Cross, the 16th century Carmelite priest, wrote that at some point in our lives, or perhaps at several points, almost everyone of us experiences a "dark night of the soul," a period in life when your feet, knees, and face scrape and stick to the proverbial bottom. It is a time when even your soul feels forsaken. Ultimately, the dark night is not about the suffering that is inflicted from outside oneself, even though that could trigger it. It is about the existential suffering rooted from within. St. John of the Cross described it as a confrontation, a process of purification and healing of what lies within, on the journey toward union with God.

The market struggle on Wall Street, after weeks of wrangling over the debt ceiling, has left me wondering if God might be moving us into a national dark night.

This kind of thinking, of course, would be seen as incredibly anachronistic by the media, if it even registers at all. Indeed, one of the markers of a culture in decline is looking externally for reasons... or problems... or blame, rather than looking internally at what my part...or our part in all of this might be.

I'm talking about ownership here... owning responsibility for our own lives. When you don't have that, you have what we see a lot of today... a victim-hood of blaming other people, and non-ownership of responsibility. It's always somebody else's fault. You can tell we're a massively unreflective culture, because if you read the papers, it's mostly a blame game.

Once we begin to frame things in terms of what might be going on within our souls, or the soul of the nation, then we have to become reflective... A spirituality that does not keep us honest or compel us to become honest is no spirituality at all.

Did Joseph go through a dark night of the soul? Almost certainly. Joseph was the favorite child of Jacob, the child of Rachel, Jacob's favorite wife. Joseph was the son Jacob loved more than all his other eleven sons; which is only one reason his brothers hated him. Another was that he had dreams... dreams, which at his young age, he didn't quite know what to do with yet, and the meanings of which he sometimes misinterpreted, but nevertheless, dreams which were clearly gifts from God.

Joseph's brothers had to suffer this sibling with his dreams and pontifications about the future. As we heard last week, first, they were going to kill him; they did throw him into a deep pit, but finally decided rather than having his blood on their hands, they would sell him into slavery. Joseph was taken to Egypt, then the most powerful empire in the known world, where he was a slave...

And where he encountered Potiphar's wife. Potiphar was an officer of the Pharaoh and his wife tried and tried to seduce Joseph... unsuccessfully. Which, of course, so enraged her, that she accused him of trying to rape her and Joseph is thrown into prison.

If being thrown into a pit, and sold into slavery, and daily living with no power to change his situation hadn't produced a dark night of the soul for Joseph, I expect the two years he spent in prison did.

One of the ways almost all traditional cultures insured that their young men would go through some dark night of the soul experience, some journey of powerlessness, was through their respective rites of male initiation. You know: the elders go in an snatch the adolescent boys (13/14 years old) away from their mommies in the middle of the night, shuttle them out into the forest or desert, strip them naked, and leave them for several days to figure it out... It was a kind of a culturally programmed dark night of the soul.

Richard Rohr, one of the co-leaders of the conference Beverley and I attended in Albuquerque, is a Franciscan Roman Catholic priest and founder of the Center for Contemplation and Action there. He has been deeply involved in work around male initiation rites for over fifteen years now, and believes that when the custom of male initiation was lost in the West about 1000 years ago, we lost something very important.

The initiation of the boy into manhood was apparently deemed necessary for cultural survival, and personal spirituality... and we don't do it. Fr. Rohr says that the assumption behind the universal phenomenon of initiation young men---the reason

they did it---is that the male would always abuse power if first, he was not led on journeys of powerlessness. Then and only then, could they be entrusted with power, or they would abuse it.

Does that need much proof??

Perhaps we thought we had the Christian sacraments, and the core is still there, but in many ways they became so "prettified" and so "churchified" that the average male stopped respecting them.

If, as teenagers, says Fr. Rohr, boys are not presented with some big vision, aren't introduced to true greatness (like the notion of the Reign of God that Jesus talks so much about and is almost universally mis-understood these days) the typical male just tries to be a part of something loud.... A big marching army... a gang... a rock concert... a stadium filled with 100,000 people... some form of pseudo-transcendence.

When great vision and true heroes are not presented, what sets in is intense cynicism that there is nothing great... and there are no great people. And cynicism quickly moves to violence, which we saw so brutally demonstrated earlier this week in the rioting in England.

I wonder... How much difference is there between *that* mob psychology and the mob psychology of financial markets? Or the mob psychology of name calling and blaming on both sides of the aisle in Congress?

As far as I know, scripture does not use the term, "mob psychology," but the gospel writers do talk a lot about "the crowd."

[It was the crowd that kept demanding of Jesus to tell them if he was the long-awaited military messiah who was to restore Israel to its former greatness. It was the hometown crowd--- folks who'd known him as a boy--- that Jesus told that day in Nazareth, that when they were looking at him they were looking at the fulfillment of scripture, and they got so mad they almost ran him off a cliff... And it was the crowd that kept shouting to Pilate, "Crucify him!"]

In the gospels, the crowd is almost always code language for getting it wrong. The crowd gets swept up in mob psychology and is always interested in protecting the status quo. That's the way the unconverted ego works.

Jesus was about something else entirely. He was not interested in following the crowd; he was all about converting a person... transforming a person from the inside out. That's why he said things like, "Listen and understand: it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles." I believe author G.K. Chesterton was right when he quipped, "It's not that Christianity has been tried and failed... it's that it's never really yet been tried."

It seems the Christianity we've mostly seen for the last 100 years or so in this country has been mainly concerned with belonging systems and maintaining your group identity, your club, your group definition, over against other groups...

... Where we get all worked up over what's more correct: infant baptism or "believer's baptism"... or whether the virgin birth is really true. Or whether we're "conservative" or "progressive..." "We are the orthodox Episcopalians!" No, *We* are the orthodox Episcopalians!!"

When you stop and think about it, it's kind of a luxury to debate questions like these, highly ideological questions left over from the Reformation, that have nothing to do with the fate of the earth, the fate of the poor, the fate of women, the fate of anyone suffering any kind of debilitating problem.

Frances McNutt, another Roman Catholic priest, speaks to the issue of "identity religion" in a book called "The Almost Perfect Crime." In it, he describes the obsession in American Christianity with right belief: the taking of the ministry of Jesus---the starting place which was *always* human suffering---not human sin--- and replacing it with purity codes and protecting purity codes and protecting of identities.

And so we end up with identity religion, and its companion, identity politics. Because when you haven't had for yourself any kind of authentic inner experience, when you haven't come to know something to be true because you've gone there.. You've been there yourself ...

... then all you can do is ride on the coattails of the group. And your group... your crowd... becomes the substitute for your lack of the inner experience you don't know.

Which is where a lot of people are satisfied, because the price of the *inner experience* is almost always the unveiling of the heart, the dark night of the soul, an initiation into journeys of powerlessness, ego deflation at depth, some kind of trip involving pain.

Because what else---tell me please---what else is going to make the human ego give up its control, unless somehow, your game, as you've constructed it, your salvation project as you've assembled it, has to fall apart.

It is when we find ourselves in some situation, some dilemma, some failure... that we can't fix, that we can't control, that we can't even understand... that is when we are uniquely in what is sometimes called liminal space... or as the saints would say, the hands of God. Like Joseph was. A situation when all your props have been exposed for what they are and taken away, and you have to draw your resources from a different place. That is when the participatory life begins.

It has nothing to do with worthiness... nothing to do with identity... nothing to do with righteousness. Authentic religion is always an experience of participation, the knowledge that I'm not doing this alone... or making it up... and I'm not making this happen. It's a kind of knowing that is unlike any other kind of knowing. It's the opposite of religion that is concerned with belonging systems and believing systems and all else that seems to operate by external power.

The only way we give up external power is when we have internal authority; that condition of knowing something quietly, lovingly, powerfully, to be true. That is the character of Biblical faith. It comes from an internal knowing that creates a very grounded person. Such a faith inoculates us from becoming just another member of the crowd.

I like the way the author of the Epistle of James puts it: "Whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy, because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance; and let endurance have its full effect, so that you may be mature and complete, lacking in nothing." (James 1:2-4) Amen.