

WALKING WITH TERESA OF AVILA

The road to Avila is one of ascent. Mountains and valleys pass by with unique walls of rock creating a solid foundation for your journey. Light beckons and then is gone, only to reappear through chasms unseen. Occasional glimpses of rivers and their beds fall away and become specks of blue and white. This is a land that is serious in its intent. It prepares you as you climb towards the home of Teresa, the great mystic of Avila.

There it is, the walled city. My breath draws back into itself with a strange gasp. Even though I have visited before, I am paused in sheer wonder. In that moment I understand why Teresa referred to God as Majesty, for that is what these walls are, majestic, in both sight and size. And there is the gateway, the entry. I approach with trepidation. I know you do not remain who you are once you enter. I close my eyes for a simple second. I pass through and something happens, though I am not sure what. Everything within me becomes alert.

I take myself, or so I think, through the streets, stepping on cobblestones and feeling stonewalls. I climb towers circling the city, and view mountains peaked with snow. There is strength and solidity. This is the castle that Teresa entered. This is her Interior Castle that was transformed from solid stone into luminous light and crystal. And what a journey that was for her. And still is for her. She remains here in all her fire and determination, her soul and energy radiating a presence through the city. She is alive and well and as fiery as ever, waiting to escort us into our own mansions.

I hear her habit rustling. I feel her deliberate nature next to me. It is not urgent, more like striding into life, focused, listening, thinking. Sometimes too much thinking,

and then an exasperated release back into silence. I thought she was journeying with me, but I realize that it is I who am journeying with her. She smiles and strides ahead. No wonder she caused much distress to her fellow nuns and priests – she moves quickly, very quickly. And once she captures God she does not let go.

*This divine prison,
of love in which I'm living,
has made God my captive,
and my heart free;
causing in me such passion,
to see God, my prisoner,
That I die because I do not die.*

- Teresa of Avila (translated by Megan Don)

We walk to the Encarnacion, the monastery where she spent almost thirty years of her life. The whole building is on fire with her love. I stop in the small garden opposite and breathe in her passion. Even from here it is strong. My eye moves slightly to the left. Someone knows her well. A statue, in proportion to her soul, reveals all. She is striding forward with a force that is deliberate, determined. It is a wonder the artist could contain her on the foundation stone. She is walking out as we are walking in.

God knew Teresa was too large to be contained by monastery walls and even the walls of Avila. Her intellect, charisma, mysticism, and continual lesson in surrender had to be spread beyond the normal feminine boundaries, and spread she did. Divinely plotting a new Carmelite Order, for both women and men within these Encarnacion walls, she secretly, yet boldly defected and went to another part of town. It was a political

affair with those for and against. She herself straddled from side to side, but finally she leapt. This was a beginning for many more monasteries to come, and many more instances where her self-trust was placed before the large mirror of doubt.

There are many memories in these Encarnacion stones and none more divinely vital than her Chapel of the Transverberation. At the gateway to the city my breath withdrew; at this chapel my breath stopped. It was as if my own heart had been pierced with the arrow of love and no longer needed air and blood and circulation – only love. My body did not move, my mind and heart on fire. There was nothing in this moment that made any sense of our worldly life. It seemed so far from truth, so distant from love. Teresa's ecstatic face was on the wall; again, the artist dipping deep inside and releasing her soul. I sat in silence, and gratitude, for a very long time.

*When the gentle hunter shot me
and left me in all my weakness,
in the arms of love
my soul fell
and being charged with new life
I have changed in such a way
That My Beloved is for me
and I am for my Beloved.*

*He pierced me with an arrow
laced with the herbs of love
and my soul became one
with her Creator;
I no longer want another love,*

*since I have given myself to my God,
That My Beloved is for me
and I am for my Beloved*

– Teresa of Avila (translated by Megan Don)

The river called me. It was time to bathe in a different kind of love – soft, gentle, slow. I was breathing in the soon-to-arrive spring air; feeling the pregnant sun waiting to give birth to warmth; hearing the trees breathing out the last of their winter breath. And that is when I met him, San Juan de la Cruz, or to some, Saint John of the Cross. He joined me on my walk, or was I joining him? He showed me trees praising God, the river singing with the birds in joy, the grass growing for love, the stones solid in their commitment to be. There was great excitement as we approached. The stones began shouting over one another, all asking for him to come and sit on them. He chose the highest. And he showed me the secret of his joy. It was here, with all of nature celebrating and singing and growing that he understood the nature of our soul. We are born to be joyfully alive, no matter what is occurring in our inner or outer world. We *are* a joyful life, which cannot be destroyed, even in the darkest and smallest of prison cells. What a glorious afternoon.

Alba de Tormes, Teresa's place of death. It is here that her heart is exposed. Literally. It is a strange brown-gray color and somewhat misshapen, but after four hundred and twenty-six years of material manifestation, it is understandable. For one who is visually sensitive I am not easily attuned to body parts in various stages of decay, however, I found myself outside the glass cabinet that Teresa's heart is contained in.

Standing there was a young woman - I could hear the richness of her prayer in my mind. I let myself sink into the silence, and I heard, "ask for the miracle of healing." I listened to Teresa's heart, I listened to mine, I joined with the heart of the young woman next to me, and what leapt from my soul was a prayer asking for self-forgiveness. In that instant, I saw image after image tumbling before me, and felt the greatest release and relief in my soul. Not only was I forgiving myself but also all others I had not been able to forgive. The miracle of healing had occurred. There was freedom. I bowed in thanks, to God, to Teresa, to the woman next to me, and to my own soul. We were all needed in this little miracle of love.

That old brown-gray heart now has a very special place in my young pink one. I now know that the timelessness of love lives on in all our hearts, no matter where in the universe we are traveling. The young woman I was standing next to was called Teresa. She was from Prague. She had been re-baptized back into her Christian tradition just five years before. Her Buddhist training in meditation she still employs, and now accompanies it with a new-old message of love, forgiveness, and prayer. Our souls understood one another, so did our minds and hearts.

Avila. Teresa. The two cannot be separated, just as the rain from heaven cannot be separated from the river on earth. Teresa's love of love and love of truth is what incited her passionate soul. It made her lie awake at night in despair, it made her have many deep and intimate relationships with both men and women, and it finally made her turn within. The truths and love on the outside were too many and too varied. She needed to find her own. And that is her message to us. Find your own love and pathway to God,

go within, deep within your Interior Castle and ask to be shown the way. Then listen and follow. Do not argue or doubt.

Teresa asks, “Do you want liberation?” And she replies, “If I can do it, so can you.”

©Megan Don 2009

BIO: Megan Don, from New Zealand, is the award-winning author of *Falling Into the Arms of God: Meditations with Teresa of Avila* and *Sacred Companions Sacred Community: Reflections with Clare of Assisi*. She is a Retreat Presenter, Spiritual Director, and leads pilgrimages to Avila, Spain and Assisi, Italy, Ireland and Glastonbury. Her work focuses on the joining of the masculine and feminine through Centering Prayer meditation, mystical poetry, sacred movement, and chant. Her website: www.mysticpeace.com