

The Mystical Pathway to Peace  
by Megan Don

*“It is in your power to live and to die  
with this peace.”*

- Teresa of Avila

Our society is fraught with conflict, be it political, religious or personal. It might even be said that we, as a human race, thrive on conflict, as it seems to be a precursor to our growth and change. It provides a stimulus for disintegration of old thoughts and ways of being and regeneration for new modalities and paradigms. From the rebel teenager, to the warring couple, to international peacekeeping efforts or the political terrorist, their aim is the same – to overthrow, or keep at bay, what they perceive as a hindering force to their right to freedom (whatever that may be). But what is the real freedom we all seek? And can we not find another more peaceful method of change?

The word freedom has become a mascot to our 21<sup>st</sup> century living. But we have limited our perception to the external freedom, that is, the outer manifestation of how we are able to live in this world, which is essential and honorable. However, that is a limited view only. What of the interior person? What of the place of peace that resides in each and every one of us? This has not been given its full attention as our focus in life has been mostly on our exterior lives – our jobs, our homes and mortgages, our cars, and more. And as many are discovering, we either keep ourselves in a constant state of stress keeping up with all these essentials, or when we do finally possess these things we are still agitated and craving for more. It is time to correctly define the word freedom. And it is time to find a new methodology of change. But first we need to look at the nature of conflict and to see how and where it arises.

Teresa of Avila (1515-1582), Spanish mystic and Carmelite nun, was very familiar with conflict. It dominated the first half of her life and she spent the remainder of her time on earth coming to understand that there was another way of living. From a young age Teresa experienced a dichotomous inner relationship with herself. She developed a deep respect for the spiritual life through her father's influence, but she also cultivated a great taste for the materialistic life of the nobility through her mother. She was ultimately split into two different modes of being and was unable to reconcile these two influences until late in her life. This split caused her much consternation and continual inner conflict and turmoil as she sided first with one, then the other (even while in the monastery).

Conflict became as a personal paradigm for Teresa. She was incredibly strong-willed and began the battle with her own ego that she clearly perceived as constantly rallying against the greater will of God. This caused her much internal pain and a sense of division, as she was unable to surrender her own thoughts and will. In her resistance, she felt the ego struggling to remain in control, and yet, she distinctly felt the pull of her inner spirit. This spirit was inviting her to another place – the place of freedom and peace. She was unable to accept this invitation for twenty years. She was at war with herself and with God.

Separation from God was the cause of Teresa's conflict, and only when she was able to join her soul with the divine spirit did she find peace. It was through surrendering the ego, not annihilating it, that enabled this to occur. It was not an immediate release, but a gradual remembering and relearning by her soul. At the end of her life she was able to state that she had reached the place of complete detachment. It no longer mattered to

her what was given or what was taken away, whether she experienced pain or pleasure.

*“Give me wealth or want, delight or distress, happiness or gloominess, heaven or hell.”*

She had found freedom in being able to accept whatever life offered her. In this acceptance there was peace.

Teresa had also ceased demanding from God what she wanted and what she thought should happen. She had entered into that ineffable place of surrender where she knew everything to be God. And herein lies the secret of the mystical pathway – coming to know that all beings, and all *states* of being are of God. In resisting or coming into conflict with others, or our own being, is tantamount to coming into direct conflict with God. In this there is no peace and no freedom.

Teresa’s lifelong quest, though lived over four centuries ago, is still an example and inspiration for us to follow today. We can carry placards in the street demanding peace not war, but of what use is that if we are still warring within our own selves. We each have the responsibility to look deeply within and to be honest about the state of our own being. We each need to see how we are in conflict with the natural state of our soul. We need to look and see where we are split in our lives. Do we have a distinct public and private life? If the answer is yes, we are in conflict. Do we not speak our deepest thoughts for fear of ridicule? If so, we are in conflict. What are we not communicating to our partners or friends? If there are secrets, we are in conflict.

As with Teresa, I believe that the paradigm of conflict is paramount in our society. It is an accepted personal and societal framework, but now it needs to be dismantled. This regenerative process can be affected in a loving way, as can any change. The great beauty about Jesus was that he brought the message of truth and love.

Truth without love is harsh. Love without truth can become sentimental. The two together can bring about long-lasting and effective change, both in a personal and societal context. The truth can revolutionize the way we love and the way we love can revolutionize the way we live.

Acting in a loving and compassionate way was very important to Teresa and became the foundation for the success of her communal monasteries. When change was to be instituted, it was not carried out with an autocratic coldness, but with a loving concern for all. Let us take this same concern into our workplace, into our homes, and into any situation that requires a breaking down of the old ways. Above all, let us be kind to one another.

The mystical pathway has long been misunderstood to be only for a few chosen elite. This is not so. We all have the capability to know the unity of our soul, that is, being free from division, and to know the unity with God. Teresa was adamant about this, and implored lay people and religious alike to persevere towards this joyful state of being. Where we find conflict in our lives let us look deeply for the origin, and surrender it to God. Where we find places of unrest and lack of peace, let us surrender this too. In turning to our interior life we can lovingly heal any splits that may have occurred throughout our lifetime. We can release ourselves from the dichotomous relationship that so many of us have become accustomed to.

The definition then, of real freedom is inner peace, known through acceptance and surrender. And the way of truth and love is the way of change. Like Teresa, we can become examples of what it means to live a wholesome life, surrendered to the divine will, and living in peace on this planet.

