

Saint Teresa of Avila
edited by Mirabai Starr

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Praise to you, Saint Teresa of Avila, whose wisdom, courage and humor flows so abundantly through the centuries, bringing vibrant life to the garden of our souls. With passion and grace you transcended the limits imposed upon you and became a timeless teacher of the Way of Love.

You lived that beautiful balance between active service and quiet contemplation. Teach us to be of use in this troubled world at the same time that we cultivate joyous intimacy with the Beloved who lives inside us.

Thank you.

Amen.

Devotion, Prayers, and Living Wisdom

Saint Teresa of Avila

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 a 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?"

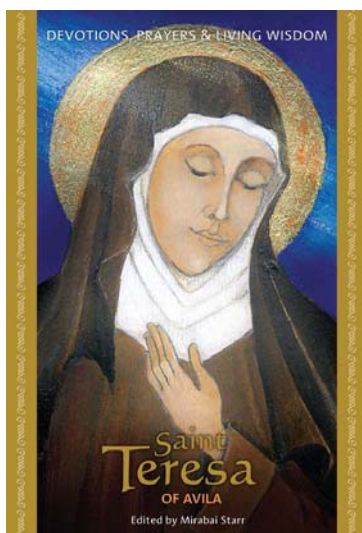
Nor was she reluctant to talk back to God. In the midst of harrowing external trials, Teresa's first response was to withdraw to a quiet place and go within. There, she would confront her Beloved. "What's going on, here, Lord?" she would ask. One day, the divine voice answered, "This is how I treat my 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, as she regularly did, and rocked him all through the night.

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,



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"Teresa of Avila had that mysterious quality the Spanish call *duende*, which is characteristic of gypsies, flamenco guitarists, and dancers.

Duende is raw, primitive, tempestuous energy, a vulnerability to inspiration burning in the blood. Fiery, wild, and utterly original, *duende* cannot tolerate neat, tidy categories; cramped forms; or human limitations of any kind.

Duende makes us ready to be devoured in the human struggle for individuation and genuine freedom."

Tessa Bielecki, from the Foreword to *The Book of My Life* by Mirabai Starr

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"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 Gethsemane 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.

"You must have heard about the incredible way that silk comes into being. What a marvelous example of his wonders in creation! Only God could have invented something like this.

It all begins with little grains, something like peppercorns... As the weather gets warmer and the mulberry tree starts to leaf out, the seeds are quickened with new life. It had seemed that these nuggets were dead, but now they stir and begin to nourish themselves on the sustenance of the mulberry leaves.

Soon they grow to full size. That's when they settle down onto some twigs and begin to spin silk with their tiny mouths. They weave these little silken cocoons and trap themselves inside them. After a while, the plump and homely worm emerges as a graceful white butterfly...

The silkworm is like the soul. She comes alive with the heat of the Holy Spirit and begins to accept the help God is offering. She starts to make use of the remedies available in spiritual community, things like ritual, sacred literature, inspiring talks...

And so when the silkworm is fully developed, it begins to build the house in which it will die [and become a butterfly]... So let's get on with it, my friends! Let's do the work quickly and spin the silken cocoon, relinquishing our self-centeredness and personal willfulness and giving up our attachment to worldly things.

We have learned exactly what to do. Let's do it! Let it die. Let the silkworm die. This is the natural outcome once it has done what it was created to do. Then we will see God, and see ourselves nestled inside his greatness like the silkworm in her cocoon."

From *The Interior Castle*
Theresa of Avila
Trans. Mirabai Starr

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