

Contemplations & Living Wisdom

Saint
Teresa
of Avila

Passionate
Mystic

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Foreword by Caroline Myss



SOUNDS TRUE
BOULDER, COLORADO

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Saint Teresa Unfolding

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 Saint 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. 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. "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 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 obsession with 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 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.