

Mystic traditions and modern psychology

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When I was in seminary, one of my favorite classes was Mysticism. I didn't think I would like it. I was 24 and a starving student, arriving late to class in jeans and a t-shirt, juggling four jobs in order to keep my student loan debts down, while killing myself to keep my grades up. I was in a constant state of exhaustion. When I settled

in my seat with my brain buzzing, I looked around at my classmates.

The women were at least thirty years older than me. The age difference didn't bother me, but the fact that they occupied a different space in life did. They seemed so financially and physically comfortable, like they had "arrived." Everything was settled (at least, that's what it seemed from the outside)—their kids were grown, their mortgage was paid off, and they were looking forward to their spouse's retirement. They wore Stevie Nicksish flowing skirts, lived with their husbands' ample salaries, and took seminary courses as a hobby. They spent time between class comparing the amenities at different monasteries—the food, the view, the wine tours, and the liturgy. I had no idea that this world of retreat-tourism existed until then. And yet, they had first-class seats as they participated in other people's asceticism, which made me feel queasy and jealous all at the same time.

Then we studied the texts. The professor encouraged us to pick one particular mystic and spend the most time with him or her, as we surveyed the others. I chose Meister Eckhart with Dr. [Ellen Babinsky's](#) encouragement, because she knew me well and she was a genius when it came to mystic match-making. Babinsky said that our mystic would become foundational to our thought and that we would end up reading and rereading them for the rest of our lives. It was true. Two decades later, my textbook is worn and dog-eared, with years of underlining, highlighting, and marginalia. And my passions for Eckhart has expanded to an appreciation for mysticism in general.

Since that semester, I have also begun reading about the science of the brain as new discoveries arise. I love pop psychology pieces that try to make sense of those Christmas tree colored splotches that appear on brain scans. One of the most fascinating things that I've found is **how much mystical writing and practices correspond with modern psychology and neurology**. There are, of course, many contradictions as well, but on the whole, both the current psychology and the ancient wisdom teach us how to look beyond the details of our lives and use a different lens to understand our existence.

In neurology, we recognize that **if we practice mindful meditation, then we can reduce anxiety**. Or, as [this study](#) says:

[M]editation-related anxiety relief is associated with activation of the anterior cingulate cortex and ventromedial prefrontal cortex, areas of the

brain involved with executive-level function. During meditation, there was more activity in the ventromedial prefrontal cortex, the area of the brain that controls worrying. In addition, when activity increased in the anterior cingulate cortex – the area that governs thinking and emotion – anxiety decreased.

In psychology, we also learn **cognitive behavioral therapy, which teaches us to identify our negative thoughts, compare them with reality, and then reframe them.** If we are becoming anxious with the thought that “everyone hates me” before we go to work, then we can compare that with the reality of actually going to work, smiling and laughing with our co-workers. Then we can understand that thought is a lie and learn new mantras.

Similarly, in *Dark Night of the Soul*, [St. John of the Cross](#) describes negative thoughts: the lack of sweetness (a sensual dullness), a sense of abandonment, and feelings of isolation. Then he encourages contemplation in our desperate state and reframes that feeling of God’s abandonment, by pointing us to the reality that we are like toddlers who need to be weaned from our mother’s breast and set down to walk. Without that isolation, we cannot spiritually grow and develop. Likewise, in our ancient liturgies and worship, we create new mantras and new neural pathways with the reminders that we are made in God’s image and loved by God.

As I have grown older and I’m nearing the age of the women in that classroom, I’m still jealous, but I definitely appreciate them more. They had learned the extraordinary art of savoring life, even in settled contentment. They had everything they could materially want, and they still longed for unity with God.