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Reference: Nixon, L. (1996a). Factors Predispositional of Creativity and Mysticism :: A Comparative Study of Charles Darwin and Therese of Lisieux. *Advanced Development*, 7:81-100.

Factors Predispositional of Creativity and Mysticism: A Comparative Study of Charles Darwin and Therese of Lisieux

Laurence Nixon

Abstract

*Several investigations have suggested that mystics and creative persons are alike in various ways. In this article I introduce a model of temperamental and environmental factors which I believe to be predispositional of a mystical or creative vocation, and apply it to the lives of the discoverer of the theory of evolution, Charles Darwin, and a nineteenth-century French mystic, Thérèse of Lisieux. The purpose of such a comparison is to identify some of the similarities and differences in the temperamental characteristics and environmental circumstances of mystics and creative persons.*

In 1920, Evelyn Underhill, a pioneer in the study of mystical lives, argued that mystics often express their insights through art and that creative artists are in

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...the mystic's personal encounter with Infinite Reality represents only one of the two movements which constitute his completed life. He must turn back to pass on the revelation he has received...He is, in fact, called to be a creative artist of the highest kind...

It is [also] coming to be realized more and more clearly that it is the business of the artist not only to delight us, but to enlighten us: in Blake's words, to "Cleanse the doors of perception, so that everything may appear as it is—infinite." (Underhill, 1920/1960, p. 65)

Underhill was also of the opinion that the respective disciplines of mystics and creative artists entail a common method:

...when the mystics declare to us that the first conditions of spiritual illumination are self-simplification, humility and detachment, they are demanding just those qualities which control the artist's power of seeing things in their beauty and truth. (p. 65)

The last few decades have seen a rise in the number of comparisons between mysticism and creativity, some of which are general and popular surveys, while others focus on more specific aspects of the subject. Examples of the former are the chapter-length discussions on mysticism and creativity in Scharfstein (1974) and Greely (1974). Examples of more focused studies are Roland Fischer's comparison of creative and mystical states of consciousness (Fischer, 1972); an article by Kubose and Umemoto (1980) in which they argue for a correspondence between the stages of the creative process and those undergone by Zen practitioners as they struggle with a *koan* to experience a breakthrough in *satori*, or mystical experience; and the work of Batson and Ventis (1982) who support the argument of Kubose and Umemoto, using cases of religious experience from the western world (many of them mystical).

Mystics and creative persons also seem to share similar temperamental characteristics as well as early childhood and adolescent circumstances. Elsewhere (Nixon, 1990) I have reviewed a number of empirical studies which lend support for an overall model of common and unique factors, both temperamental and environmental, that predispose persons to become mystical, creative or mentally ill. Although it is not possible here to reproduce, or even summarize, this review of supporting evidence, before proceeding with an analysis of two case studies, it is necessary to provide a brief description of the model itself.

#### Predispositional Factors in Mystical and Creative Lives

The temperamental factors that are predispositional of mystical and creative lives

are derived from three of five "psychic overexcitabilities" identified by the clinical psychologist and psychiatrist, Kazimierz Dabrowski (Dabrowski & Piechowski, 1977). They consist of: (1) emotional sensitivity; (2) a heightened capacity for imaginative involvement; and (3) intellectual curiosity. The predisposing environmental factors are: (1) affection, attention or encouragement in childhood; (2) modeling and training in childhood; (3) access to a formative institution in adolescence or early adulthood; and (4) stress or loss in childhood. Stress or loss in childhood—such as separation from the mother, death of a parent or sibling, serious illness, war, migration or extreme poverty—tend to induce a state of insecurity.

Persons characterized by emotional hypersensitivity, such as potential mystics and creative persons, are apt to experience loss in a most intense, or even disordered, way ( Bowlby, 1981). Further, when children who are emotionally sensitive and given to living in the world of their imagination sustain serious losses they are all the more vulnerable to subsequent losses, such as those that arise in adolescence ( Bowlby, 1981). The result is that they may well come to regard the world in which these events occur as hostile or unreliable. At the same time such persons still have needs and so they often search elsewhere for their fulfillment.

In some cases the search meets with frustration and results in dysfunctional behavior, but in those cases where it does not, the nature of the search will vary. Creative persons may seek to compensate for their losses and fulfill their needs by engaging in projects which have as their result an idea, a service or a product that is valued by society. When mystics seek to compensate for their losses and fulfill their needs, it is by engaging in a process of spiritual growth which can be interpreted in secular terms as personality development.

Three environmental factors that seem to facilitate successful searching for a lost object are emotional support, family training and modeling, and institutional support (Nixon, 1990). All three are frequently found in the lives of mystics and creatives. Emotional support, attention or encouragement from family members or close friends provides children with the necessary sense of self-worth and self-confidence to proceed with a search. As a result of emotional support children are able to express, and discipline, their intense feelings of grief, which arise as a consequence of their sensitivity to loss.

Most future mystics and creatives receive childhood and adolescent training and modeling in a system of meaning (e.g., science, the arts, the humanities or religion). This training enables them to deal with their insecurity or sense of loss by means of a quest or program of action. In the lives of incipient mystics there is often found a caregiver who is intrinsically religious and from an early age future mystics have been told religious stories and encouraged to engage in devotions. Hence the stage

is set for a mystical struggle (between the ideal and the actual).

In the homes of future creatives one finds that science, the humanities or the arts are valued; that there is frequently encouragement to engage in a process of discovery through reading or experimentation; that lessons may be provided; and that one or more senior members of the extended family may themselves be creative persons and thus act as role models (Nixon, 1990). In this way the search for security may be shaped into a quest for truth or for a better understanding of the natural world or the human condition.

The final factor is institutional support. Creatives and mystics often have access to institutions (e.g., universities or convents) that provide continued emotional support or encouragement, and a further development of the meaning system acquired in childhood and adolescence through family training and modeling. In addition, in these institutions future creatives and mystics are provided with mentors and peer support which help them to sustain their motivation and to acquire the skills (through modeling and critical feedback) needed for pursuing their respective goals. I would like to illustrate some of the similarities and differences between mystics and creative persons by applying the model of predispositional factors just described to the life of a mystic, Thérèse Martin, better known as Thérèse of Lisieux, and to the life of a creative person, Charles Darwin, formulator of the theory of evolution.

#### Thérèse of Lisieux and Charles Darwin

Thérèse of Lisieux (1873-1897) was the youngest in a family of five surviving children born to Louis and Zélie Martin in Normandy, France. As a baby she was seriously ill and had to be boarded with a wet nurse (i.e., away from her mother) for the first year of her life. She grew up in an atmosphere of intense Catholic piety, fostered by parents whose first ambition had been to enter religious orders. When Thérèse was four years old her mother died. At the age of fifteen, some time after her two older sisters Pauline and Marie, entered the local Carmelite convent, Thérèse followed them engaging in a life of devotion and self-sacrifice. She died of tuberculosis, at the age of 24; before her death Thérèse was "ordered" by her sister, who was then prioress of the convent, to write an autobiography.

For the purposes of this paper the criteria used for identifying someone as a mystic are two: (1) that there is evidence that the individual made a conscious effort to practice what Evelyn Underhill (1920/1960) refers to as the "purification of the self"; and (2) that there is at least some record of personal transformation following a mystical state of consciousness. By these criteria, Thérèse qualifies as a mystic. Not only did she draw inspiration from such mystical authors as John of the Cross (Thérèse of Lisieux, 1898/1957), and made persistent efforts, ultimately successful,

to enter the mystical (i.e., the reformed Carmelite) order founded by the 16th-century Spanish mystic, Teresa of Avila, but her time in the convent was spent in the practice of mortification and the cultivation of virtues (1957:99). Although Thérèse lived for only 24 years, she had a number of intense devotional, even ecstatic, experiences, which appear to have been of a mystical kind. And at the age of twenty-two, she had an experience which was unquestionably mystical and transformative, as she indicates in her autobiography: "...since that day, I have been soaked and engulfed in love. There is not a second when this merciful love does not renew and cleanse me, sweeping every trace of sin from my heart" ( Thérèse of Lisieux, 1898/1957, p. 111).

Charles Darwin (1809-1882), the fifth in a family of six children, grew up in Shropshire, England, in the home of parents who shared a keen interest in botany and zoology. When he was eight, his mother died, a loss young Charles was not permitted to adequately mourn ( Bowlby, 1990). His father, a physician, sent him to the University of Edinburgh and then to Cambridge , where he was encouraged by various mentor figures in his growing interest in natural science. One of these recommended him for the position of naturalist on board the *Beagle*. His voyage to South America and the Pacific exposed him to geological and paleontological data as well as to the differentiation of life forms that eventually led to his formulation of the theory of the evolution of species, and ultimately to fame as one of the most important thinkers of the modern world. Toward the end of his life Darwin wrote an autobiography for his wife and children. I will begin my analysis of the childhood, adolescent and early adulthood years of Thérèse of Lisieux and Charles Darwin with a comparison of their temperaments.

### Emotional Sensitivity

Emotional sensitivity is the most outstanding temperamental feature in the life of Thérèse of Lisieux. Some of the best indicators of this trait can be found in passages about her in letters of her mother which Thérèse cites in her autobiography:

...I loved Daddy and Mummy very much...as you can see from this extract from one of Mummy's letters: "...She always keeps near me and loves to go into the garden, but if I'm not there she won't stay and cries so much that she has to be brought to me." ( Thérèse of Lisieux, 1898/1957, p. 22)

Another quotation from one of her mother's letters reveals how scrupulous she was in matters of conscience,

Here is a passage from another letter: "Everyone has to know the moment she has

done the slightest thing wrong. Yesterday she accidentally tore a bit of the wallpaper and she was really terribly upset and wanted to tell her father about it as soon as possible." (p. 23)

The intensity of emotional sensitivity possessed by Thérèse can be found in numerous other passages in her autobiography, two examples of which are as follows:

...I trembled at the very idea that Daddy could die. He was once standing at the top of a ladder and when he saw me standing right below it, he shouted down, "Move away, darling. If I fall, I shall crush you." But I went closer to the ladder. I thought: "Well, at least if Daddy does fall, I shan't suffer by seeing him die, as I shall be killed with him." (p. 37)

[A girl in my class] was jealous of me and she paid me out in a thousand ways for my small triumphs [Thérèse was a favourite of her teachers]. I was so timid and easily upset that I didn't know how to look after myself. All I did was cry and say nothing. (p. 39)

Although Darwin has left posterity with far fewer details of his early life than has Thérèse of Lisieux, it is clear that he possessed the characteristic of emotional sensitivity. In his autobiography, Darwin provides the following account of a sensitive conscience in childhood:

Once as a very little boy whilst at the day school, or before that time, I acted cruelly, for I beat a puppy, I believe simply from enjoying the sense of power; but the beating could not have been severe, for the puppy did not howl, of which I feel sure, as the spot was near the house. This act lay heavily on my conscience, as is shown by my remembering the exact spot where the crime was committed. It probably lay all the heavier from my love of dogs being then, and for a long time afterwards, a passion. (Darwin, 1891/1961, p. 23)

While the presence of emotional sensitivity in the childhood of Charles Darwin is revealed in the above passage, it is worth noting that the degree of remorse is less intense than that expressed by Thérèse of Lisieux.

It can be seen that Darwin and Thérèse of Lisieux possessed the temperamental characteristic of emotional sensitivity. Although the examples cited were of childhood incidents, in both cases, this sensitivity persisted into adulthood. At the same time, on the basis of the number of incidents recounted, and the degree of their intensity, it is possible to say that Thérèse of Lisieux exhibited this trait to a greater extent than did Charles Darwin.

## Heightened Capacity for Imaginative Involvement

Evidence of an active imagination can be found in the early lives of both persons under consideration. From her careful study of Darwin's scientific works, his notebooks, his autobiography and other personal documents, Browne (1995) concludes that "he pursued natural history in its widest possible sense with total absorption" (p. 3). This capacity for absorption, or heightened imaginative involvement, is illustrated by the following passage from the autobiography:

With respect to diversified tastes, independently of science, I was fond of reading various books, and I used to sit for hours reading the historical plays of Shakespeare, generally in an old window in the thick walls of the school. (Darwin, 1891/1961, p. 25)

The above lines also provide evidence of intellectual curiosity, a characteristic which will be treated below.

Thérèse reports a similar tendency to become engrossed in reading material:

So far I've said nothing about my love of books and pictures. And yet, darling Mother [i.e., her sister Pauline, who was at the time prioress of the convent], it is to the lovely pictures you showed me that I owe some of my greatest happiness and the strongest incentives to goodness. I lost all sense of time as I looked at them. The one, for example, called "The Little Flower of the Divine Prisoner" held such meaning for me that I entered into a kind of ecstasy and I offered myself to Jesus as His little flower. (Thérèse of Lisieux, 1898/1957, p. 48)

While from the Darwin quotation we can reasonably infer some capacity for absorption, in the case of Thérèse, we are confronted with a much greater intensity of that characteristic. There are numerous passages demonstrating this:

...one day God showed me, in a remarkable vision, a living picture of these trials [trials her father was to suffer] as if to prepare us for them.

Daddy had gone away for several days...I was standing alone by a window...I saw a man in front of the wash house. He was dressed exactly like Daddy...but he was very bent and aged. His head was covered by a kind of thick veil...I was suddenly gripped by a supernatural fear...I shouted: "Daddy! Daddy!" in a trembling voice. But the mysterious figure...walked on towards a group of fir trees...I expected to see him appear at the other side of these trees, but this prophetic vision disappeared. All this lasted only a moment, but it impressed itself so deeply on my soul that even today, after fifteen years, the memory of it is as vivid as was the vision itself. (Thérèse of Lisieux, 1898/1957, p. 36)

I also liked telling stories which I made up and then I got quite a crowd round me, including some of the big girls. The same story would continue for several days, for I liked to make it more and more exciting as I saw, from the faces of my audience, what kind of impression it was making. ( Thérèse of Lisieux, 1898/1957, p. 55)

While both Thérèse of Lisieux and Charles Darwin possessed an ability to become absorbed in books, it was Thérèse who had the more active imagination.

### Intellectual Curiosity

It is clear from the following quotation from her autobiography that Thérèse of Lisieux was intellectually gifted:

I was more advanced than any child of my age, and I was put in a class of older pupils...Though I was so young, I was nearly always at the top of the class... ( Thérèse of Lisieux, 1898/1957, p. 38)

But I have been able to find only one passage showing clear evidence of intellectual curiosity:

As I was no good at games, I would have been happy to spend all my time reading. Fortunately I was guided in my reading and given books which entertained me and also strengthened my mind and character...This love of reading lasted until I entered Carmel. I read innumerable books, but God never allowed me to read one which might have harmed me. ( Thérèse of Lisieux, 1898/1957, p. 48)

Although the phrase, "I read innumerable books," suggests intellectual curiosity, whatever degree of this characteristic she possessed was clearly circumscribed by her excessive scrupulosity.

In Darwin's autobiography there is a striking passage that provides evidence for a strong presence of intellectual curiosity:

Looking back as well as I can at my character during my school life, the only qualities which at this period promised well for the future were, that I had strong and diversified tastes, much zeal for whatever interested me, and a keen pleasure in understanding any complex subject or thing. I was taught Euclid by a private tutor, and I can distinctly remember the intense satisfaction which the clear geometrical proofs gave me. I remember, with equal distinctness, the delight which my uncle gave me...by explaining the principle of the vernier of a barometer. (Darwin, 1891/1961, p. 25)

Here Darwin reveals his wide-ranging curiosity and the "satisfaction" and "delight"



he received whenever his understanding was increased.

It appears as if both Charles Darwin and Thérèse of Lisieux possessed emotional sensitivity and a heightened capacity for imaginative involvement, but the evidence suggests that these two traits were stronger, richer and more pervasive in the life of Thérèse. On the other hand what evidence there is for intellectual curiosity indicates that it was stronger in Darwin than it was in Thérèse. Having examined the predisposing temperamental factors in the lives of these two nineteenth-century figures, I will now turn to the environmental factors that assisted them in realizing their respective vocations.

### Emotional Support in Childhood and Adolescence

Thérèse of Lisieux is quite explicit regarding the affection she received as a child:

Throughout the whole of my life God has been pleased to surround me with love. My first memories are of smiles and loving caresses... ( Thérèse of Lisieux, 1898/1957, p. 22)

Darling Leonie [one of her older sisters] was also very dear to me and she loved me greatly. In the evenings she used to look after me when the rest of the family went out for a walk, and I can still hear her sweet voice singing the little songs that sent me off to sleep. ( Thérèse of Lisieux, 1898/1957, p. 23)

And although she sustained the loss of her mother at four years of age, that loss was compensated for by the attention and affection lavished upon her by her father and older sisters:

...[ when] Mummy died...Daddy's affection seemed enriched by a real motherly love, and I felt both you [i.e., Pauline] and Marie were the most tender and self-sacrificing of mothers. ( Thérèse of Lisieux, 1898/1957, p. 29)

After our [Sunday afternoon] walk we went home and I prepared my next day's lessons. For the rest of the day I played in the garden with Daddy...I got most fun out of soaking seeds and bits of bark in water and then offering the liquid to Daddy in a pretty little cup. He'd take it and smile and pretend to drink it. ( Thérèse of Lisieux, 1898/1957, p. 30)

Not only was Thérèse the recipient of the overall concern of her immediate family, but attention and affection were used, from an early age, to encourage various manifestations of religious interest or devotion:

I loved growing flowers in the bit of garden given me by Daddy, and I enjoyed decorating little altars I made in a niche in the wall. When I'd finished, I'd run and

fetch Daddy. He went into raptures of admiration to please me... ( Thérèse of Lisieux, 1898/1957, p. 30)

Like Thérèse of Lisieux, Darwin lost his mother when he was a boy; however, he seems not to have received the same degree of compensatory affection as did Thérèse. Although in his autobiography, Darwin's estimate of his father was that he "was the kindest man I ever knew" (Darwin, 1891/1961, p. 25), his daughter Henrietta remembers him having said, "I think my father was a little unjust to me when I was young..." ( Bowlby, 1990, p. 70). In a recent biography of Darwin, Bowlby provides the following estimate of Robert Darwin:

Throughout the years of Charles' boyhood Dr Robert seems to have shown his special combination of great kindness and generosity coupled with an overbearing manner and an occasional outburst of sharp criticism. ( Bowlby, 1990, p. 70)

Bowlby suggests that, as a result, Charles was somewhat intimidated by his father:

Inevitably Charles stood in awe of this formidable man. Recognising that it did not pay to cross him, he seems early to have developed ways of placating him. One of these ways, which became ingrained in his character, was to accept all his father's pronouncements as ultimate truths that were never to be questioned. ( Bowlby, 1990, p. 69)

In spite of his "overbearing manner and an occasional outburst of sharp criticism," Robert seems to have displayed a certain sensitivity to his son's educational needs and allowed him a large degree of autonomy in choosing a career. When Charles was dissatisfied with the local school, his father made arrangements for him to go with his brother to study medicine at Edinburgh University even though he was younger than usual (Darwin, 1891/1961). Charles eventually realized that he did not want to be a physician like his father; at that point, Robert Darwin arranged for him to attend Cambridge in order to prepare for a career as a clergyman ( Darwin, 1961). Although Robert initially objected to Charles going on his historic voyage aboard the Beagle, he allowed his mind to be changed by Charles' maternal uncle.

As well as being given a measure of autonomy by his father, Darwin was appreciated by older accomplished men and this certainly would have reinforced his self-esteem, as we may infer from the following:

One of my autumnal visits [during the university break] to Maer [where his uncle lived] in 1827 was memorable from meeting there Sir J. Mackintosh, who was the best converser I ever listened to. I heard afterwards with a glow of pride that he had said, "There is something in that young man that interests me"...To hear of praise from an eminent person, though no doubt apt or certain to excite vanity, is, I think,

good for a young man, as it helps to keep him in the right course. (Darwin, 1891/1961, p. 32)

The environmental factor of emotional support or encouragement is critical in terms of influencing the development of the emotionally sensitive person. In a study of 25 mystics Spangler (1961) found that elements of personal nurturance played an important role in the early environments of most mystics—if one or both parents were unable to provide affection, the lack tended to be compensated for by a sibling, uncle, aunt or some other caretaker. On the other hand, Spangler also found that most were not allowed freedom in their childhood environments, and he speculates that their spiritual quest was in part a struggle to gain some measure of autonomy. This was certainly the case for Thérèse of Lisieux. In spite of the loss of her mother, Thérèse received an abundance of personal affection. On the other hand, the family standards were strict, and it is clear that all the children were being groomed for the convent.

A great deal of the research on creative persons shows that while they receive attention and encouragement, they tend to receive less emotional nurturing than do mystics. In fact, Ochse (1990), in a review of recent literature, emphasizes the *lack* of emotional nurturance in a large number of homes of creative persons. For example in his study of 40 creative American architects, MacKinnon (1962) found that they tended to come from families that were not characterized by emotional warmth, but that they did offer emotional stability and a great deal of autonomy—the children were free to make choices. The picture described by Ochse and MacKinnon seems to fit Charles Darwin almost perfectly. On the one hand, he sustained the loss of his mother and had to contend with an overbearing father who was prone to sharp criticism. On the other hand, his father was supportive of his educational needs and left him free to discover his own career and to find the encouragement he needed in his studies from other older men of distinction.

### Training and Modeling

Thérèse of Lisieux was surrounded by parents, sisters and other relatives who provided her with religious instruction and models of Catholic piety. Her sister Pauline served as her role model:

...it was you, Pauline, who were my ideal...I used to hear it said that you were certain to become a nun and, though I wasn't too sure what this meant, I thought: "And I too will be a nun." This is one of the first things I remember, and I never wavered in my resolution. It was your example which drew me to the Spouse of Virgins [Jesus] from the time I was two. ( Thérèse of Lisieux, 1898/1957, p. 23)

Childhood reading material served as a source of inspiration for Thérèse of Lisieux. The same was true for Charles Darwin:

Early in my school days a boy had a copy of the Wonders of the World, which I often read, and disputed with other boys about the veracity of some of the statements; and I believe that this book first gave me a wish to travel in remote countries, which was ultimately fulfilled by the voyage of the Beagle. (Darwin, 1891/1961, p. 26)

Darwin also received training and modeling from an older sibling, his brother, Erasmus:

Towards the close of my school life, my brother worked hard at chemistry, and made a fair laboratory with proper apparatus in the tool-house in the garden, and I was allowed to aid him as a servant in most of his experiments. He made all the gasses and many compounds, and I read with great care several books on chemistry... The subject interested me greatly, and we used to go on working till rather late at night. This was the best part of my education...for it showed me practically the meaning of experimental science. (Darwin, 1891/1961, p. 27)

Subsequent to the childhood training and modeling they received, Thérèse of Lisieux and Charles Darwin gained access to supportive institutions in their mid-adolescence which further prepared them for their respective careers.

### Institutional Support

On entering the convent, Thérèse experienced a profound peace. At the same time her new life was not, as she explains in her autobiography, a withdrawal from confrontation with her own immaturity:

I knew a deep and serene peace beyond description. For eight and a half years this peace has been mine and it has never left me even in the midst of the most severe trials.... I suffered from grievous spiritual dryness. And, in addition, Our Lord allowed the prioress [not her sister Pauline] to treat me with great severity, though she didn't always realize it. I never met her without being reprimanded for something. I remember once, when I had overlooked a cobweb in the cloister, she said to me in front of all the other nuns: "It's easy to see our cloister is swept by a child of fifteen! Go and sweep the cobweb away and be more careful in future." I was scolded nearly all the time during the hour I spent with her whenever—which was not often—she gave me spiritual direction.... How I thank God for such firm and valuable training. It was a priceless favour, for what should have I become if I had been the pet of the community...

I can truthfully say that, as soon as I entered Carmel , suffering stretched out her arms to me and I embraced her lovingly... I welcomed the Cross and my love of suffering grew steadily... ( Thérèse of Lisieux, 1898/1957, pp. 90-91)

The critical feedback received by Thérèse was balanced by emotional support, as she indicates:

Father Pichon, only two months after my entrance, was astonished at God's dealings with my soul. He trusted my

childlike fervour and thought my spiritual way a good and gentle one. I was greatly comforted by my talk with this good priest... I had been suffering a lot from the fear of having stained my white gown of my baptism, and Father Pichon's assurance seemed to come from God Himself. For he was a spiritual director such as our foundress, St. Teresa, would have approved—he was both learned and holy...

The novice mistress was a true saint, a perfect model of the first Carmelites. I spent most of my time with her, as it was her job to teach me to work. Her kindness was beyond words...

One of the old nuns seemed to understand what I was going through. At recreation one day she said: "It strikes me, my child, that you cannot have much to say to your superiors."

"Why do you think that, Mother?"

"Because your soul is very simple, but when you are perfect, you will be more simple still. The nearer one gets to God, the simpler one becomes." (pp. 91-92)

Another feature of mystical institutions is that they provide cognitive maps that describe the meaning and purpose of life in terms of mystical growth. Thérèse explicitly refers to reading the writings of John of the Cross in addition to *The Imitation of Christ* and the Bible. Her references to the sixteenth-century mystic, Teresa of Avila, reveal that she was familiar with her autobiography as well.

The supportive institutions in the life of Charles Darwin were the universities he attended. Here he met peers and mentors who encouraged him in the pursuit of scientific knowledge. At Edinburgh University he became

...acquainted with several young men fond of natural science. One of these...when we were walking together, burst forth in high admiration of Lamarck and his views on evolution. I listened in astonishment, and as far as I can judge without any effect on my mind... Nevertheless it is probable that hearing rather early in life such views maintained and praised may have favoured my upholding them under a different

form in my *Origin of Species*. (Darwin, 1891/1961, p. 28-29)

Through his friendship with still other students he became involved in a scientific society, the meetings of which Darwin says, "had a good effect on me in stimulating my zeal and giving me new congenial acquaintances" (p. 29). At one of these meetings Darwin had the opportunity to present a paper on a discovery he had made.

It was at Cambridge, however, that Darwin received the greatest amount of stimulation, encouragement and critical feedback. Here Darwin enjoyed the companionship of fellow science students many of whom went on to achieve eminence in their fields. But, by Darwin's own admission, the greatest influence upon him was a professor named John Stevens Henslow:

...I became well acquainted with Henslow, and during the latter half of my time at Cambridge took long walks with him on most days...and in the evening I was very often asked to join his family for dinner. His knowledge was great in botany, entomology, chemistry, mineralogy, and geology. His strongest taste was to draw conclusions from long-continued minute observations. (pp. 37-38)

The last line of the above quotation should be emphasized, because Darwin adopted this method in his own research and it was precisely such "long-continued minute observations" that gave him the necessary confidence to eventually present his theory of evolution to the scientific community.

Just as Thérèse of Lisieux received critical evaluation in the convent, so also did Darwin at Cambridge ---although clearly Henslow was more gracious than was the prioress of the Carmelite convent:

Whilst examining some pollen-grains on a damp surface, I saw the tubes exerted, and instantly rushed off to communicate my surprising discovery to [ Henslow]. Now I do not suppose any other professor of botany could have helped laughing at my coming in such a hurry to make such a communication. But he agreed how interesting the phenomenon was, and explained its meaning, but made me clearly understand how well it was known; so I left him not in the least mortified, but well pleased at having discovered for myself so remarkable a fact, but determined not to be in such a hurry again to communicate my discoveries. (Darwin, 1891/1961, p.39)

Another function performed by Henslow was to arrange for Charles to participate in field trips that would provide him with valuable experience for his future career. One such opportunity was an expedition to North Wales with Adam Sedgewick, who trained Darwin in geological fieldwork. And again it was Henslow who arranged for Darwin to be taken on board the *Beagle*, for a voyage that would shape his scientific

destiny, as Darwin clearly acknowledges: "The voyage of the *Beagle* has been by far the most important event in my life, and has determined my whole career..." (Darwin, 1891/1961, pp. 42-44).

Having examined the temperamental and most of the environmental factors that predisposed Thérèse of Lisieux and Charles Darwin to their respective vocations, there remains but one task, and that is to describe the role played by loss in both lives.

### The Spiritual Quest as a Search for a Lost Caregiver

The short life of the nineteenth century French Carmelite nun, Thérèse of Lisieux, was marked by a succession of major losses. At two weeks she suffered from an intestinal disorder that was almost fatal and from another serious illness at three months. Then she was sent to a woman in the country to be nursed by her for an entire year. At four and a half years old she lost her mother and the profound impact this had upon her is recorded in her autobiography:

The moment Mummy died my happy disposition changed completely. I had been lively and cheerful, but I became timid and quiet and a bundle of nerves. A glance was often enough to make me burst into tears. I was only happy if no one took notice of me, and I couldn't endure being with strangers. I was never cheerful except within the family circle... ( Thérèse of Lisieux, 1898/1957, p.29)

The trauma of her mother's death at such a young age had the effect of turning Thérèse into someone who was extremely withdrawn, or as she put it herself: "I felt like an exile on earth and yearned for the peace of heaven and the eternal Sabbath of our true Fatherland" ( Thérèse of Lisieux, 1898/1957, p. 34).

Throughout her childhood and adolescence, subsequent to her mother's death, Thérèse was reluctant to associate with other children except her older sisters. One of these, Pauline, became a surrogate mother to her, but then when Thérèse was nine years old, Pauline entered the local Carmelite convent, and so Thérèse suffered the loss of her "second mother":

I didn't know what Carmel was, but I realised that you were leaving me to go into a convent and I knew that you would not wait for me and that I was going to lose my second mother.

How can I express the agony I suffered. In a flash I understood what life was. Until then I had not seen it [i.e., life] as too sad a business, but now I saw it as it really was—a thing of suffering and continual partings. I cried bitterly, for I knew nothing then of the joy of sacrifice. ( Thérèse of Lisieux, 1898/1957, p. 41)

It is therefore not surprising that Thérèse saw life as "nothing but a continual suffering and separation." Nor is it surprising that Thérèse would long for another realm—one in which she believed her mother to be present. Bowlby (1981) reports that when mourning is incomplete (as for example in the case of someone like Thérèse who suffered a series of acute losses) there is an increased likelihood of the phenomenon of "mislocation" (p. 16). The lost person may be relocated in another human being, in the grave or within the bereaved herself. At other times the deceased person may be relocated in the form of a presence.

In the case of Thérèse, we read in her autobiography that on the occasion of her first communion, she experienced the presence of her mother:

How could my mother's absence hurt me on the day of my first Communion? Heaven dwelt in my soul and mummy had been there for a long time, and when Jesus visited me [i.e., in the communion bread] so did my beloved mother. She blessed me as she rejoiced at my happiness. Nor did I weep at your [i.e., Pauline's] absence. On that day nothing but joy filled my heart... (Thérèse of Lisieux, 1898/1957, p. 52)

Through her religious devotion Thérèse was able to recover her departed mother.

Thus we have at least a partial explanation for her commitment to the mystical life. On the one hand the grieving process initiated on the occasion of the mother's death resulted in social withdrawal from all but family members, and on the other hand, the refusal to accept the mother's death provided a basis for a continued search. Given her strong formation in religion, Thérèse's search for her lost mother took the form of a spiritual quest. In this way she could satisfy both the demands of her religious conscience as well as her desire to be comforted by her mother.

This is not to say that her life in the convent represented a state of psychological regression. On the contrary, the strict discipline required of the Carmelite nuns was deliberately designed to counter any such tendencies and to promote the sublimation of self-centered desire into a selfless concern for others and an intense yearning for the absolute. Her autobiography and letters provide ample evidence that Thérèse went a long way toward achieving those ends in her short life.

### The Creative Quest as a Search for a Lost Caregiver

In his autobiography, Darwin does no more than make a reference to the loss of his mother, which occurred when he was eight years old. But immediately after he informs the reader how odd it was that he could "remember hardly anything about her except her death-bed, her black velvet gown, and her curiously constructed



work-table" (Darwin, 1891/1961, p. 21), he relates the following:

By the time I went to...day-school my taste for natural history, and more especially for collecting, was well developed. I tried to make out the names [my emphasis] of plants, and collected all sorts of things, shells, seals, franks, coins, and minerals. The passion for collecting which leads a man to be a systematic naturalist, a virtuoso, or a miser, was very strong in me, and was clearly innate, as none of my sisters or brother ever had this taste. (Darwin, 1961:22)

Although Darwin considers his interest in natural history as something inborn, there is reason to suspect that it was fostered by his mother, Susannah, but that the awareness of her influence was suppressed along with most of the other memories of his mother. It is known, for example, that Susannah Darwin

...entered zealously into all her husband's pursuits; and as he took almost as much interest in botany and zoology as his father, Erasmus Darwin, their gardens and grounds became noted for the choicest shrubs and flowers. (cited in Bowlby, 1990, p. 46)

Evidence of a direct influence from his mother comes from one of his schoolmates who recalled Darwin "bringing a flower to school and saying that his mother had taught him by looking at the inside of the blossom the *name* [my emphasis] of the plant could be discovered" (Darwin, 1891/1961, p. 22, footnote). A fascination with identifying or naming different species was to remain with Darwin into adulthood and must have played some role in predisposing him to a career as a natural scientist:

...no pursuit at Cambridge was followed with nearly so much earnestness or gave me so much pleasure as collecting beetles. It was the mere passion for collecting, for I did not dissect them, and rarely compared their external characters with published descriptions, but got them *named* [my emphasis] anyhow. (Darwin, 1891/1961, p. 36-37)

It is not impossible that this activity gave Darwin pleasure because it enabled him to recapture something of the presence of his mother as his first teacher of the variety of biological species.

Bowlby (1990) argues that Darwin's failure to remember much about his mother was a result of his older sisters' silence. He suggests that their silence was due to their inability to deal with their own grief, and that this in turn prevented the completion of the mourning process in young Charles. Bowlby finds further evidence for incomplete mourning in Darwin's custom of taking long solitary walks:

I have heard my father and elder sister say that I had as a very young boy, a strong

taste for long solitary walks; but what I thought about I know not. I often became quite absorbed, and once, whilst returning to school on the summit of the old fortifications round Shrewsbury...I walked off and fell to the ground, but it was only seven or eight feet. (Darwin, 1891/1961, p. 24)

While these words indicate the presence of the temperamental trait of a heightened capacity for imaginative involvement, according to Bowlby (1990, p. 62), they also describe the condition of a fugue state.

Elsewhere Bowlby (1981, p. 343) associates fugue states of this kind with children suffering from incomplete bereavement, and with the attempt of the bereaved child to recover a lost caregiver. My suggestion is that Darwin eventually found his mother, or at least, something of the solacing once provided by her, in his study of the natural world, in various mentor figures, most particularly that of one of his Cambridge professors, John Stevens Henslow, and in the care he received from his wife Emma, which provided him with the conditions necessary for the writing of the *Origin of Species*, and his many other works.

It was the observation of Francis Darwin, that his father, Charles, took great pleasure in the natural world, and even more, his perception of it was in very personal terms, all of which one would expect to be the case if that world was associated with the consolation provided by the presence of his mother. Francis Darwin's description is as follows:

...he had great delight in the beauty of flowers...I think he sometimes fused together his admiration of the structure of a flower and of its natural beauty... I used to like to hear him admire the beauty of a flower; it was a kind of gratitude to the flower itself, and a personal love for its delicate form and colour. I seem to remember him gently touching a flower he delighted in; it was the same simple admiration that a child might have.

He could not help personifying natural things... (Darwin, 1891/1961, pp. 83-84)

Darwin also sought consolation and took delight in the company of older men:

Dr. Whewell was one of the older and distinguished men who sometimes visited Henslow, and on several occasions I sometimes walked home with him at night...Leonard Jenyns, who afterwards published some good essays in Natural History, often stayed with Henslow... I visited him at his parsonage...and had many a good walk and talk with him about Natural History. I became also acquainted with several of her men older than me... These...together with Henslow, used sometimes to take distant excursions into the country, which I was allowed to join, and they were most agreeable. Looking back, I infer that there must have been

something in me a little superior to the common run of youths, otherwise the above-mentioned men, so much older than me and higher in academical position, would never have allowed me to associate with them. (pp. 39-40)

Darwin offers an explanation as to why he was accepted in such exalted company. Perhaps more relevant for our purposes is the fact that these older men, in whose company he took clearly pleasure, provided him with intellectual stimulation and encouragement. However the mentor figure to whom he felt closest was Henslow. In a letter to a friend, Darwin provides an indication of Henslow's emotional importance in his life when he says, " Henslow is my tutor and a most *admirable* one he makes, the hour with him is the pleasantest in the whole day. I think he is quite the most perfect man I ever met with.." (Cited in Bowlby,1990, p. 103).

Darwin returned from his voyage on the *Beagle* in 1836 and in 1839 he married his cousin, Emma Wedgwood. Subsequent to the marriage, Darwin became a semi-invalid and recluse. One of the factors responsible for this condition, according to Pickering (1974), was the fact that Emma seemed to take great pleasure in nursing invalids:

His marriage to Emma Wedgwood formed a watershed in Darwin's life. Before that he had occasional illnesses. After it he became an invalid, unable to live in London, unable to attend scientific meetings, to go to entertainments at other people's houses, or to have more than occasional visitors in his own, and then only briefly. The routine of the household became laid down, and its central purpose was to allow Darwin to collect...the relevant scientific facts, and his mind to become 'a kind of machine for grinding general laws out of large collections of facts'. (Pickering, 1974, pp. 87-88)

Pickering's point is that Darwin 's seclusion, although motivated by health concerns, was convenient for his creative work, inasmuch as it kept him free from distractions.

In support of the thesis that Emma Darwin enjoyed looking after invalids, Pickering cites a passage from the recollections of Darwin 's granddaughter, Gwen Raverat:

...in my grandparents' house it was a distinctive and mournful pleasure to be ill. This was partly because my grandfather was always ill...and partly because it was so delightful to be pitied and nursed by my grandmother.... I sometimes thought she must have been rather too sorry for her family when they were unwell.... The attitude of the whole Darwin family to sickness was most unwholesome...ill health was considered normal. (cited in Pickering, 1974, p. 88)

The following quotation from one of Emma Darwin's letters expresses, in her own words, her evident satisfaction at being able to care for her ill husband:

It is a great happiness to me when Charles is most unwell that he continues just as sociable as ever, and is not like the rest of the Darwins, who will not say how they really are; but he always tells me how he feels and never wants to be alone, but continues just as warmly affectionate as ever so that I feel I am a comfort to him. ( cited in Pickering , 1974, p. 78)

This passage also shows that Charles found Emma's nurturing agreeable.

Emma's observation that Charles "never wants to be alone," may indicate a measure of what Bowlby (1981) refers to as "anxious attachment," the cause of which can be a childhood bereavement (pp. 218-219). When conditions for mourning are ideal, this sensitivity will resolve itself, but when the mourning process is not allowed to follow its natural course, as was true in Darwin 's case, a degree of anxiety over separation from a surrogate caregiver may be expected to persist. Bowlby is of the opinion that,

...it is all too clear that after his mother's death he received little or no help in mourning her. Instead, an iron curtain descended [i.e., the refusal of his older sisters to refer to their dead mother]. That, I believe, caused all his thoughts and feelings about her to go unexpressed and instead to be banished from his consciousness, but nevertheless to live on to haunt him. ( Bowlby, 1990, p. 78)

My argument is that the way in which Darwin 's unexpressed thoughts and feelings regarding his mother lived on to haunt him was in the form of a disguised quest. Darwin 's search for his lost mother took the form of a continued interest in the natural world, a need for acceptance by older male mentors and a willingness to be protected and cared for by his wife. The first two inclinations influenced his choice of career; the third made it possible for him to retreat from the world in order to produce his pioneering studies on the origin of species.

## Conclusion

A comparison of the early lives of Thérèse of Lisieux and Charles Darwin, from the perspective of a model of predisposing temperamental and environmental factors, makes it possible to better understand how these factors worked together to shape a mystical vocation and a creative scientific career. While both Thérèse and Darwin possessed the three temperamental factors, it appears that emotional sensitivity and a heightened capacity for imaginative involvement were greater in the former and that intellectual curiosity was stronger in the latter.

There were both similarities and differences with respect to the environmental factors as well. Thérèse of Lisieux was clearly the recipient of a great deal of

affection, but was allowed very little freedom in the choice of her vocation. Darwin did not receive the same degree of affection, although he was far from neglected, but he was given a large measure of autonomy in the choice of his career. Both of the persons whose lives were examined received training and modeling in childhood, but these were different in nature. Thérèse was subject to a regime of catechetical lessons and religious devotions while Darwin was exposed to the world of natural science. These influences continued for both in the convent and university respectively. Finally, both Thérèse of Lisieux and Charles Darwin sustained the loss of a mother at an early age, and it was argued that this loss provided some of the motivation for their respective mystical and scientific quests.

It should not, however, be inferred that the value of the two lives is in any way diminished by the fact that their careers were determined, at least in part, by factors that they themselves would not have recognized. *Evaluation* is based on consequences or effects—not on origins. The significance of Charles Darwin's research is universally acknowledged, and the worth of mystical development is gaining in recognition, as for example, in the discipline of transpersonal psychology. The need for *explanations* in terms of predispositional factors is precisely because of the value of both creative and mystical lives. And a better understanding of such lives, including explanations of favorable temperamental and environmental conditions, should be of interest to those involved in nurturing creativity and mystical growth or its secular equivalent.

#### Endnotes

1. See Nixon (1989) for an analysis of a mystical life, i.e., that of the sixteenth-century Spanish mystic, Teresa of Avila, in terms of personality development.

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