

Insomnia and the Coronavirus: On Getting through the Night

By Belden C. Lane

With the world on lockdown, insomnia is bothering a lot of us now. It isn't easy to let go of each day's news reports about the heightened number of deaths, worries over loved ones at a distance, fear of supplies running out. Emily Dickinson spoke of the "larger darknesses of the night—the Evenings of the Brain" when—unable to sleep—our thoughts run wild. We're given to dread. What does one do at 2:00 in the morning?

I have a set of Muslim prayer beads that I bought from a man on the streets of the Old City of Jerusalem thirty years ago. It has 99 beads for the 99 names of God and I use it often. These days I find myself employing a number of different "mantras" as I lie in bed, thumbing my way through the beads. Richard Rohr, in the Illuman men's work of which I'm a part, has taught us to pray "in all the holy names of God." So, I thought it might be a good idea to join the others who use different names from what I do—praying their own prayers along with them.

I see it as an effort to reach across old boundaries now eclipsed by the starker boundaries of "social distancing" that keep us separate. Isn't it strange how this new barrier suddenly makes all our previous barriers seem so insignificant? What we've never been able to confess together in creed, we're now able to pray together in need.

Muslims put special emphasis on the first two of the 99 names of God, praying "in the name of Allah, the compassionate, the merciful." (*Bismillah-ir-Rahman-ir-Raheem*) So I'll begin with that phrase, saying it over and over to myself—honoring the most important things that can be said about God in the Islamic tradition. Then I'll move on to the holy *Shema* used by Jews as they pray each day: "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One." (*Sh'ma, Yisrael, Adonai Eloheinu, Adonai Ehad.*) From my own Christian tradition, I then turn to the Jesus Prayer: "Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me." (*Kyrie Iesou Christe, eleison me*, in Greek).

An uncanny calm comes over me in continually repeating these phrases in the dark. Tears often come to my eyes as I put myself in the place of others, feeling the intensity of their prayers. I'm aware of my own frailty as I

struggle to pronounce (so very poorly) the words in other languages. But over time they become familiar, even natural—as I share in the cries that pour from so many hearts.

I discover a vast company of others lying awake in the dark, murmuring along with me. Our practice summons us across the languages and traditions that divide us. We become a *single family*—caring for the entire planet, yearning for a new peace and solidarity. What better way can we occupy ourselves in the wolf-like hours of the night than to say our prayers together?

Christians, who ask Mary to “pray for us in the hour of our death,” can share in Sri Ramakrishna’s prayer to Kali, “O Mother, I throw myself on thy mercy.” Jews, who pray with the Psalmist, “O God, come to my assistance; O Lord, make haste to help me,” can welcome the Buddhist’s prayer to Kwan Yin, the Bodhisattva of Compassion: “Beloved Mother, Jewel of the Divine Lotus, have mercy on us.”

People around the world on these nights are uttering such words. They call on God to be who God already is: Merciful and Compassionate. How, then, might our joining in that vast, hidden community of the night—mumbling each other’s prayers—finally make a difference? Will it allay the virus? I have no idea. But might it bind us into a more closely knit human family, knowing that we aren’t alone? Might it remind us that the Holy One—beyond all the names we may use for the divine—is a God of compassion and love? Absolutely! And that’s more important than ever right now.

We need to hear that wild and isolated poet in nineteenth-century Amherst, humming in the middle of the night:

“Hope” is the thing with feathers –
That perches in the soul –
And sings the tune without the words –
And never stops – at all.