

God the insomniac: Boundless grace

by [Rodney Clapp](#) in the [May 4, 2010](#) issue

My favorite theological joke is the old chestnut that asks: What do you call an agnostic dyslexic insomniac?

Answer: Someone who lies awake at night wondering if there is a dog.

In retelling this joke, I mean no disrespect to those who struggle with dyslexia—or to agnostics, for that matter. As for insomniacs, I am one. Apparently insomnia is a family trait. My mother often lies awake at night. Her father (my grandfather) was a man of immense energy who routinely read until 1 or 2 a.m. even though he had to get up for work at 6:30.

I recall lying awake as a child, listening to murmurs of the television shows my parents were watching. As an adult I developed the sometime and uneasy rhythm of one night of wakefulness until 3 or 4 in the morning, followed by a night of a full eight hours' sleep. I decided long ago not to lie awake in the dark. Instead I read or listen to music.

My copies of Karl Barth's *Church Dogmatics* bear many marks and marginal notes that were made in what Frank Sinatra called the "wee, small hours." Magazines, with their discrete articles and mix of subjects, are excellent for late-night reading. My preferred late-night music is instrumental jazz. I can't begin to count the number of night hours I've spent with John Coltrane.

An insomniac learns to make careful musical choices. For deep night listening, the object is not only to enjoy the music but to float and ride with it into a dozing state. Accordingly, the first, third and last parts of Coltrane's *A Love Supreme* are excellent. But the second part ("Resolution") begins with a lulling acoustic bass line—until Coltrane jumps in with one of his squawking, zero-to-60-in-seconds saxophone starts. If you have begun to doze, that jars you wide awake.

It is not always insecurity that keeps me awake some nights, but I would be lying if I pretended that anxiety were not ever an accompaniment of my insomnia. The wee hours are haunting and radically solitary. If I am obsessing about something, the

obsession can intensify late in the night. The postmidnight darkness makes for an implacable blackboard that begs to be inscribed by worry.

It is in this context that it recently occurred to me: God is an insomniac. Israel's Elijah imagined an ever-wakeful God, in contrast to another deity, Baal. When Baal was summoned to a showdown of the gods but made "no answer," Elijah mocked the prophetic followers of Baal. Maybe their god was asleep and needed to be awakened, he gibed (1 Kings 18:20-40). Clearly Elijah assumed that the Creator-Redeemer God would never be caught napping. He and the psalmist were of one mind on this count: "He who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep" (Ps. 121:4).

If the Jewish and Christian tradition of sabbath teaches us anything, it is that we can rest because God never really rests. What Dante called the love that moves the sun and the other stars is ever wakeful. In the cosmic Christ, we know him in whom all things were created and "hold together," moment by moment and hour by hour (Col. 1:13-30).

We insomniacs can also take heart that, more often than not, scripture urges wakefulness rather than sleep on the followers of a sleepless God. Because salvation has drawn near and Christ may return at any time, we are exhorted to wake up (Rom. 13:11 and Mark 13:32-35). Occasions of untimely sleep bring followers of the living God embarrassment and humiliation, as when Jonah dozes during a life-threatening storm at sea and a slumbering Eutychus falls out a window (Acts 20:9).

Then there is the odd instance of the Transfiguration. In Luke's account, Peter, John and James follow Jesus up the mount. Jesus' glory shines a dazzling white as he prays, and an appearance is made by Moses and the same Elijah who heckled the sleepy Baal. Next comes the amusing note that the three disciples were "weighed down with sleep; but since they had stayed awake, they saw his glory and the two men who stood with him" (Luke 9:28-36). Not so amusingly, Peter, John and James in their sleepiness apparently rehearse what will be their condition during Jesus' prayerful agony at Gethsemane.

Of course, it's not at all clear that most Americans, Christians included, are prone to oversleeping. In boom times or bust, we Americans tend toward workaholic and busyness. Occasionally, amid all the bustle, you hear the disclaimer that "you can sleep when you're dead." Then there is the couplet, "You snooze, you lose." There is even what one author has called "sleep machismo"—we boast about how little sleep

we need.

But for most insomniacs, sleeplessness is nothing to brag about. Too often, in the deep night stillness, we face our personal demons, unable to let go and attain the “sweet sleep” that God promises his beloved (Prov. 3:24).

Yet whether or not our sleeplessness correlates to our degree of faith, we can trust that God’s grace is not bounded by the amount—large or small—of our faith. As the apostle Paul puts it (in 1 Thess. 5:9–10), we can trust in “our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep we may live in him.”