

The pandemic has deepened my insomnia—and my prayers

As I lie awake, it seems right to join those who address God with different names than I use.

by [Belden C. Lane](#) in the [July 1, 2020](#) issue



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Insomnia is bothering a lot of us now. It isn't easy to let go of the day's news reports, worries, and fears. Emily Dickinson writes of the "larger—Darknesses— / Those Evenings of the Brain" when we're unable to sleep, our thoughts running wild. "The Bravest," she says, "grope a little," until "they learn to see" and

Either the Darkness alters—
Or something in the sight

Adjusts itself to Midnight—
And Life steps almost straight.

But what allows this glimpse of light in the darkest hour of the night? What do we do as we struggle at 2 a.m. to fall asleep again?

Thirty years ago, I bought a set of Muslim prayer beads from a man in the Old City of Jerusalem. It has 99 beads for the 99 names of God. There are nights now when I find myself thumbing my way through those beads as I lie in bed. I use a number of different mantras, following Richard Rohr's counsel to pray "in all the holy names of God."

It seems right in this time of insomnia to join those who address God with different names than I use, praying their own prayers along with them. I see it as an effort to reach across old boundaries, boundaries now eclipsed by the starker separation of social distancing. 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*). I 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 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*). I then move to a prayer from my own Christian tradition, the Jesus Prayer: "Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me" (*Kyrie Iesou Christe, eleison me*).

An uncanny calm comes over me as I repeat these three 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 of other languages. But over time they become familiar, even natural—as I share in the cries that are pouring from so many hearts.

I visited southern Spain just before the coronavirus hit. I was intentional about reciting these three prayers in every mosque, cathedral, and synagogue I entered. In the Middle Ages—in that land of bullfighting, flamenco music, and passionate poetry—Muslims, Jews, and Christians were often divided by a violent hatred. Yet they also learned to live together in an amazing harmony. My discipline of praying each of their prayers in each of their holy places grew out of a longing to recover

that sense of unity.

Spain has been hit hard by the coronavirus. Now I pray those three prayers out of a longing for unity amid a tragedy that reveals our common suffering. *Bismillah ir-Rahman ir-Raheem. Sh'ma, Yisrael, Adonai Eloheinu, Adonai Ehad. Kyrie Iesou Christe, eleison me.*

There's harmony in the sundry ways we cry from the depths during these sleepless nights, each from our own bed. I discover a vast company of others lying awake in the dark, murmuring along with me. The practice carries us across the languages and traditions that have long divided us. We become a single family—caring now for the entire planet, yearning for a new peace and solidarity. What better way can we occupy ourselves in the wolflike hours of the night than to say our prayers together?

As I pray through the night, I imagine Christians, many of whom ask Mary to “pray for us in the hour of our death,” sharing in Sri Ramakrishna’s prayer to Kali, “O Mother, I throw myself on thy mercy.” I think of Jews, who pray with the psalmist, “O God, come to my assistance; O Lord, make haste to help me,” welcoming the Buddhist prayer to Guanyin, the bodhisattva of compassion: “Beloved Mother, Jewel of the Divine Lotus, have mercy on us.” During these long nights, people around the world are surely uttering such words.

How might our joining in that vast, hidden community of the night—mumbling each other’s prayers—make a difference? After all, we’re calling on God to be who God already is: merciful and compassionate. Will our prayers allay the virus? I have no idea.

But they will surely bind us into a more closely knit human family, helping us know that we aren’t alone. They will remind us that the Holy One—beyond all the names we may use for the divine—is a God of compassion and love. They might even help us hear the voice of that wild and isolated poet in 19th-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.