

Advent: A Portal into the Nighttime of Hope

Ken Wilson First Sunday in Advent, 2020

Fauci, or someone who lives on the planet earth of facts, told us to be ready for a long, dark winter ahead. We all knew it, but hearing it, brought on the dread. Entering any new season with dread, or only dread, or predominantly dread, is a bummer. Spiritually, there has to be a way through this. Enter Advent, which conveys an alternative understanding of time. Maybe it doesn't erase the dread entirely but adds a layer of hope to mute or lighten the load. Spiritual practice is not a panacea, it's a series of nudges toward growth. Tending your soul is like tending a plant. Set of things you do on a recurring basis: notice how the plant is doing, you appreciate the plant, you desire its well-being, you water it periodically, move it into the sunlight (direct or indirect) that it can thrive in, you might add some plant food, you might ask around for advice on how to care for this plant. Just a series of nudges over time.

Advent, four weeks before X-Mas, is about entering a spiritual nighttime. Our lives all began in the nighttime darkness of a mother's womb. This holy or positive view of darkness is fundamental to the Jewish conception of time. In our common view, the day begins at sunrise. We go to sleep, and some hours later, it's a new day. But in Jewish time, the new day *begins* with sunset: "*It was evening, it was morning, first day*" is the recurring refrain of time in Scripture's first poem, which introduces time, God's way of keeping everything from happening at once. The Jewish celebration of a seventh day Sabbath, our Saturday, begins on sundown Friday night. So the onset of darkness is an inflection point in time, when we let go of the day gone by, and enter a new day, already begun.

This same pattern marks that alternate reckoning of the year called the liturgical year or church calendar. Just as Rosh Hoshana, the Jewish New Year, begins in the Fall, the first Sunday of Advent begins a new year in the church calendar. Today is our Happy New Year day. The New Day, the New Year begins in darkness. And darkness is a holy thing, blessed of God.

Advent means "coming" or, better, "appearing." Nighttime is preparation for divine appearances. Those who walked in deep darkness have seen a great light, says Isaiah.

I underwent a baptism into the spiritual meaning of Advent 6 years ago. The Sunday before Advent that year was my last Sunday at a church that I served in for 39 years. I was in that early time of loss where the loss is in your body, but you haven't yet reckoned with it, felt it even, let alone expressed or metabolized it. Pandemic has brought many losses--I think especially of younger people losing precious in-person time with friends, missing school athletics, dance recitals, practicing with the band. Many of us are feeling the weight of as yet unmetabolized grief—we're still in the middle of it, we're still mobilizing to cope with. Often, we only process the emotions of stress (the chemicals of fear-fight-freeze response) *after* the stressor is done.

On first Sunday of Advent that year I went to church with my then new spouse, Julia for her first Sunday as priest in her new parish. It was weird being a pastor between churches for the first time in 4 decades, in a new role as clergy spouse, in a tradition I grew up in, and left as a disillusioned young teenager. A mixture of feelings wrapped in numbness that Sunday. Blue Ocean, this church I now love, was an as yet unrealized hope. We had an organizational meeting that night, but everything was iffy. Emotionally I was living in the land of iffy hope. Iggy Pop, Iffy hope. I was in a spiritual nighttime. Six years later, it's hard to access the anxious uncertainty of that time. Now the memories that linger are of a holy time, a blessed time, swaddled in darkness, in the uncertainty that cradles hope ...

Suggest if you're new to advent practices you playfully explore small ways of observing Advent. Maybe try out an Advent Wreath, light the candles each night for dinner. (Susan Shaffer made one kids friendly "Christmas Bingo") Emily's prepared Advent Podcasts 5–7 minutes each day, with some prayers and reading from our Advent Book, featuring how the animals around us cope with winter. Hosting Advent Night Prayers, Wednesday @ 9pm. Available through a Zoom meeting which is simultaneously shared on FB Live. If you access thru Zoom link, Diane and Paul Sonda will be there to welcome you. Julia and I will conduct the prayers: Taize, hymn, BCP

Any sleep clinic will recommend that we develop a consistent bedtime ritual, doing the same things in the same sequence to signal our bodies that it's time to wind down for sleep. Whatever your ritual is you might just note it down to realize you have one. If the idea is appealing to you (and I'd say only if it's appealing to you because spirituality is a desire driven enterprise) you could include a spiritual element to your bedtime ritual.

Maybe something as simple as lighting a candle and taking a minute or two to ask yourself, “What did you appreciate most today?” For me, asking myself “What did you appreciate most today?” and then waiting for my answer whatever feels better than “What am I thankful for?” because my brain goes into should mode. Nighttime is also a fine time to listen to Emily’s Advent prayer podcast. If you’re trying out a little spiritual practice to add to your existing bedtime ritual, by all means come up with something that is really appealing to you.

Maybe there’s a lovely prayer that appeals to you and you could keep it at your bedside. This is one of my favorites: **“Keep watch dear Lord, with those who work, or watch, or weep this night, and give your angels charge over those who sleep. Then the sick, Lord Christ; give rest to the weary, bless the dying, soothe the suffering, pity the afflicted, shield the joyous; all for your love’s sake. Amen.”**

Or there might be a Psalm or a portion from a Psalm that appeals to you. There’s a phrase in Job, part of the wisdom literature of Hebrew Bible that refers to God, “who gives songs in the night.” (The Psalms were originally songs) Psalm 77 includes a line, **“I call to mind my song in the night”** [Robert Alter says the Hebrew refers to a heartfelt chanted prayer.]

There are more Psalms composed for nighttime than any other time, I think. From these nighttime psalms we can infer a **spirituality of the nighttime.**

Psalm 4 ends with this: **“In peace, all whole, let me lie down and sleep. For you Lord, alone, do set me down safely.”** [Better than “I lie down in peace and sleep comes at once.”]

Spirituality of the nighttime has a Brené Brown ring to it because it’s about embracing our vulnerability. It’s the most vulnerable thing we do every day isn’t, go to sleep?

Psalm 31, another nighttime psalm has this line: **“In your hand I commend my spirit”** [spirit here is ruah, life-breath] It’s like, *Well Lord I’m going to sleep now, keep me breathing.* Rabbi Josh Whinston says in Jewish tradition, we leave our spirit in God’s hands for the night, and then he gives it back to us in the morning.

The Psalms recognize our emotional vulnerability during the nighttime. There's a recognition that nighttime can be a time of intense emotion. Psalm 77 (the one that says, "I call to mind my song in the night") has another line, "My eyes flows at night, it will not stop."

Psalm 91 is a cry for protection from the "the terror of the night...Ron Howard recommended *The Human Body*, by Bill Bryson who says in there the part of the brain that conveys fear, the amygdala, is more active when we sleep. That explains a lot! Sensory input to the brain from the outer world is muted while we sleep, so the amygdala is more active when we sleep so that whatever danger signals do get through, also get amplified...But it also means our worries might be amplified when we wake up in the middle of the night, or upon waking in the morning] Vulnerability again.

Psalm 121 has this nighttime spirituality all through it. [Robert Alter translation again]

***I lift up my eyes to the mountains:
From where will my help come?
My help is from the Lord,
Maker of heaven and earth.
He does not let your foot stumble,
Your guard does not slumber.
Look, he does not slumber nor does he sleep,
Israel's guard.
The Lord is your guard.
The Lord is your shade at your right hand.
By day the sun does not strike you,
Nor the moon by night***

[I always wondered about that: sunburn makes sense, but moon burn—do we need moon screen now? Then I learned that in antiquity many cultures imagined madness [disturbed-irrational thinking-perceiving] as caused by the moon, the term for madness was "moonstruck"]

We've all experienced that—how our thoughts can go haywire in the nighttime sometimes.]

***The Lord guards you from all harm,
He guards your life.
The Lord guards your going and your coming,
Now and forevermore.***

So this spirituality of nighttime revolves around our human vulnerability.

As Brené Brown's research shows embracing our vulnerability rather than masking it, or running away from it is--counter-intuitively--a key to resilience and strength. These "songs in the night" are nudging us in that direction.

Summing up: if it appeals to you, maybe for Advent pay a little extra attention to your bedtime ritual, and if it appeals to you, see if your heart is drawn to adding any of these prayers, Psalms, lines from Psalms to take with you to bed.

And that brings us to our last practice, something Cassie taught us called a Resourcing Meditation. In this practice you visualize yourself in a physical space that is safe and appealing, where it's easy to imagine being at peace, content, happy. The meditation is used to build resilience and it can be practiced at bedtime before sleep or if you wake up in the middle of the night. So: Something you could include in your nighttime ritual if wanted to.

This visualization practice is a stock and trade of the Psalms. The Psalms are filled with happy place images like this—in fact Psalm 23 has five discreet images of such a place.

Or in the book of Exodus, we find the newly liberated Hebrews in the wilderness. They feel even more vulnerable than they did in Egypt and want to return. Then they adopt the resilience practice of picturing themselves in a promised land flowing with milk and honey, with fig trees and olive groves and vineyards and orchards with sheep and goats dotting the hillsides. This is a place none of them has ever seen before, though there were stories told of such a place. This place they accessed first in the imagination is what

kept them going in their wilderness wanderings. Handy practice. Let's try it, I'll guide it. Thing about visualization practice, don't need to be vivid, it's more about the feeling. Usually with repetition, a visualization will gradually become more vivid. So don't worry about High Definition quality for now.

Let's get comfortable wherever we're sitting (if you're not occupied or driving). Close your eyes and place your hands in your lap. Take a deep breath in through the nose and slowly exhale through the mouth.

Keep up that nice slow inhale and exhale and feel free to go at a natural pace for you.

Now imagine yourself in a place where you feel at peace. It could be a physical place like the ocean, or in a hammock between two beautiful trees. An actual place you recall in memory or one you imagine from scratch or some combination. If it helps you feel safe and at ease, picture a person or a pet you love or some other creatures there in the scene with you.

As you settle on a scene to imagine, engage your senses. Fill out some details in the scene. Notice how you feel in this place. The beginning sense of peace, of calm, a sense of security and safety. Stay with that feeling and the scene as keep breathing deeply and naturally in that nice slow pace that's comfortable to you. Where does that sense of peace reside in your body? How do you experience it? What does that peace feel like physically? Emotionally? Spiritually?

As you breathe, continue to hold onto that feeling. Focus on keeping your breath nice and slow. Remember you're in your happy place. For the next half minute, sit with it.