

Sermon for August 24, 2003.

***“Thoughts at three o’clock in the morning.” by Lone Jensen***

There may well be two kinds of people in this world: those who fall asleep at a drop of a hat and those who toss and turn in the vain hope of finding at last peaceful slumber. The sheer number of silly mattress commercials on television, with or without counting sheep, suggests that the insomniacs have the edge. Who but insomniacs and night workers even think at three o’clock in the morning ? For those of you who are blessed with easy sleep this sermon may require a good dose of empathy. Fellow night owls however this one’s for you ! We are the restless ones who because of our work or our disposition or occasionally because of some an illness or maybe a tragedy, we are those folks who are actually wide awake at three o’clock in the morning. But everyone has, if they live long enough, at least an occasional sleepless night.

Well, I certainly do, in fact I am something of an expert on this topic. I have seen many a three o’clock come and go. Sometimes it is because of my work. Like other people in the helping profession, I too may be called out of bed to go to the hospital for someone who is very ill or dying. And when I come back after such a sad late night journey through empty streets my heart is still over there, still crying and won’t let me fall into that

blessed oblivion: sleep. Other times it is just my mind that races, because I finished a sermon way too late and can't turn my brain off or because the day has been way too full of events. Other times it is just me. Maybe some of you recognize this scenario. Worries that I can easily push aside during the day multiply like sex crazed rabbits late at night. Like the Star Trek episode, *The Trouble with Tribbles*, where the space ship is overrun by fuzzy white formless creatures everywhere, multiplying at the speed of light, my worries too begin to do frantic dances on the ceiling after the lights are out. I just get rid of one pesky, insistent worry and here comes another. Oh, do give me some sheep to count. Of course sometimes real worries can keep us up. When my mother died some years ago I had trouble sleeping. If you are in a similar place know that such soul searching is both natural and necessary. This spring has been wonderful for this congregation but also very challenging, a roller coaster ride of high and low expectations and late meetings. Yes, I did have quite a few late nights. But I know I am not alone in this. I have heard our congregation's leadership talk about waking up in the middle of the night exclaiming: St. Benedicts!

At three o'clock in the morning whatever thoughts we have seem to grow huge in the darkness and whatever pain one might have, physical or mental, is greatly magnified. It is a time when

we are thrown back entirely upon our inner resources unless we have really, really good and very, very understanding friends whom we might call on the phone and wake up from their own good sleep. But for most of us that is a very last resource to be saved for dire emergencies. Usually on such nights, after the distractions of a book, late night TV, BBC world radio or hot milk fail us, after we realize that it is impossible to escape this encounter with ourselves, with what I call the dark side of our souls, usually we are thrown back upon our own resources. Things come to the fore, crisis becomes as the Chinese say opportunity and we are forced to encounter where we find our strength and our hope. Where is our faith at such times, our religion? If there ever was this is the time to throw a lifeline, a spiritual life preserver! In *Prayers at 3 AM* Phil Cousineau writes: *Night, the dark bridge across the chasm of our days, can be an exhilarating or anxious crossing. Whether watching the sun set, slumbering in bed, burning the midnight oil, squirming from insomnia, howling from full moon lunacy, praying for divine guidance, or dreaming of gothic castles, we slip across the hours of darkness as into another world.*

*Out of the vast night descends a 'precarious power over our souls that inspires us to ask the most vital questions and challenges us to look within and seek without. For night is the time, as*

*Pawnee Indians sing, when visions travel better. The hour  
Benedictine monks believe the world need prayers more than ever.  
The moment Buddhist monks experience the lowest flame of  
Kundalini. The dark night of the soul The dark wall. The  
midpoint of our nightly soul journey. The black ink from God's  
pen.*

I love that last line he writes. The black ink from God's pen. Night certainly gives you that feeling of being on a journey, one in which you must let the current take you. Where you must give up even the illusion of control. Which may be why some of us have a hard time going to sleep. Night is a good time for prayer. That old childhood idea of kneeling by the side of the bed, asking for protection on the dream journey we are about to undertake is not a bad idea even if the words we once used, for some of us, no longer resonate. How many of you learned this bed time prayer? *Now I lay me down to sleep, pray the Lord my soul to keep, if I should die before I wake I pray the Lord my soul to take.* Now I must admit it is not a prayer I would choose for a young child. *If I should die before I wake* indeed! Children around four and five still don't know the difference between reality and fantasy, dreams and real life and are often confused about the difference between sleeping and dying. This may carry on late into adulthood as in this confession by Loren Eisely: *Strangely I, who frequently grow*

*round eyed and alert as an owl at the stroke of midnight, find it pleasant to nap in daytime among friends. I can roll up on a couch and sleep peacefully while my wife and friends chatter and keep the daytime universe safely under control...Deep seated in my subconscious, is perhaps the idea that the black bedroom door is the gateway to the tomb. At night one has to sustain reality without help.*

Eiseley has a good point. Maybe that is why some of us sleep so soundly on car journeys, on trains or ,on planes. There are movements around us and voices to calm us. We shall wake again. Reminders of our own morality is not what we need at bedtime. No, what is needed is another kind of prayer something simpler, to help little children feel secure and such prayers are not just for children. Simple wishes like: may I stay safe through the night, may my dreams be peaceful and happy, may I rest well. Like this Sudanese evening prayer that many insomniacs can relate to:

*Now that the sun has set,  
I sit and rest and think of you.  
Give my weary body peace.  
Let my legs and arms stop aching.  
Let my nose stop sneezing,  
Let my heart stop thinking.  
Let me sleep in your arms.*

Prayer means many things to different people. For the Muslims, prayer is a like a ladder, a journey reaching to heaven. In the words of William James, prayer is “the soul and essence of religion,” and to August Sabbatier prayer is simply religion in action. The Dakota, Sioux, Ohiyesa said: In the life of an Indian there is only one inevitable duty, - the duty of prayer- the daily recognition of the Unseen and the Eternal. Mahatma Gandhi practiced a form of daily prayer that needed no speech. For Shintos of Japan, sunset is the moment to speak reverently in the presence of the great parent God. For Rumi, the Sufi ecstatic, when the sun slides down, a route to the invisible opens to us.

What does prayer mean to you? Or if you say prayer means nothing to you what does meditation or reflection mean to you? Frankly what you call it matters less than being in that state of mind. It is admitting first of all that you are not in control of this moment, and then finding what you *can* hold onto, what will give you hope at three o'clock in the morning. May Sarton found a way. She writes: *This morning I awoke at four and lay awake for an hour or so in a bad state. It is raining again. I got up finally and went about the daily chores, waiting for the sense of doom to lift- and what did it was watering the houseplants. Suddenly joy came back because I was fulfilling a simple need, a living one. Dusting never has this effect ( and that may be why I am such a*

*lousy housekeeper! ) but feeding the cats when they are hungry, giving punch clean water, makes me suddenly feel calm and happy. Whatever peace I know rests in the natural world, in feeling myself a part of it, even in a small way. To go with, not against the elements...*

As Sartre suggests, to go *with* and not *against* the body's need for rest, is surely good advice. But in our anxious age, where rest seems to be a four letter word and sleep often only means wasted time, how do we relearn the ancient art of sleeping? What are the great sleep tonics? Reading mystery novels? Listening to late night ball games? Drinking hot toddies? If we are lucky enough to have a loving spouse is the answer to drift away on a sea of love's gentle currents?

Letting go is the key to good sleep and to peace of mind. It means allowing our body or our soul to tell us what it is we need. Maybe it is to cry when we feel sad, maybe it is to face ourselves and our fears, admitting that we have them. Maybe it is looking at night as a blessing, and our dreams as gifts. Maybe even sleeplessness can be a gift . For it can force us to get to know a stranger, our own self. As the pilot Beryl Markham discovered on a night flight:

*You can live a lifetime and, at the end of it, know more about other people than you do about yourself. You learn to watch other*

*people, but you never watch yourself because you strive against loneliness.....( But) being alone in an airplane for even so short a time as a night and a day, irrevocably alone, with nothing to observe but your instruments and your own hands in semi-darkness, nothing to contemplate but the size of your small courage, nothing to wonder about but the beliefs, the faces and the hopes rooted in your mind- such an experience can be as startling as the first awareness of a stranger walking by your side at night. You are the stranger.* For those of us whose goal is sleep, however, rituals, preparations are important. Here is a prayer from the sixteenth century:

*On going to bed*

*As my head rests on my pillow*

*Let my soul rest in your mercy.*

*As my limbs relax on my mattress,*

*Let my soul relax in your peace.*

*As my body finds warmth beneath the blankets*

*Let my soul find warmth in your love.*

*As my mind is filled with dreams,*

*Let my soul be filled with visions of Heaven.*

(Johann Freylinghausen 1670-1739 )

Night visions, dreams can be both fearful and delightful.

Lewis Thomas suggest in his book *Late Night Thoughts on Listening to Mahler's Ninth Symphony* that our brains are not unlike old fashioned attic, the kind our grandparents used to have, reachable only through step ladders and filled with articles too important to throw out but no longer suitable to have at hand. *This mysterious space was the memory of the place. After many years all the things deposited in it became one by one lost to memory. But they were still there, we knew safely and comfortably stored in the tissues of the house. Dreams are perhaps like visits to the soul's attic. For some night is a blessing and for others a haunting. The dark powers that inspire us can also conspire it seems against us.* Not so many generations ago it was believed that an oppressive feeling during sleep was caused by something sitting on one's chest. It was a monster variously called night hag, a wild horse, a demented mare...a nightmare. Which is why we talk about getting something off our chest when we need unburden ourselves. Maybe that is one way to look at recurrent nightmares. Is there some old guilt, some old anger, some old fear of which we need to unburden ourselves? Or was it just too many jalapeno peppers? But dreams can also be a delight. As in this ancient Chinese poem:

Chuang Tzu's dream.

*Once upon a time,*

*I, Chuang Tzu,  
dreamt I was a butterfly,  
fluttering hither and thither,  
to all intents and purposes a butterfly.*

*I was conscious only of following my fancies as  
a butterfly,  
and was unconscious of my individuality as a man.*

*Suddenly I awakened,  
and there I lay, myself again.*

*Now I do not know*

*Whether I was then a man  
dreaming I was a butterfly,*

*or whether I am now  
a butterfly dreaming*

*I am a man. ( Chuang Tzu 369-286 BCE)*

Do we know that we are not dreaming right now ? To the aboriginal Australians dreams were a higher reality. But what of nightmares? Let me tell you I have Technicolor, full surround sound, action packed and very vivid dreams. Sometimes my dreams are wonderful like the one where our whole congregation

and this sanctuary turned into a ship and we went sailing away together exploring new worlds. Other times however they are like Hitchcock movies where I am being pursued by evil dark figures with shiny sharp daggers. What can we do about those sleepless nights that are like descending into despair?

To me one of the main tasks of any religion is to learn to trust the darkness, to trust what we cannot know, to rest peacefully within the great mystery we call human life and death. It is not easy and it takes faith. It also takes humility. But is it at the darkest moment of the night when we are caught in the whirlpool of our own pain that our faith is put to the test. Listen to your own soul then, let go, admit this is where you are and yes, if you can pray! In whatever manner you find to be helpful. Maybe you, like May Sarton, need to water your plants, feed your cat and touch living things. Or maybe you need to write down those clutters of thoughts left over from the day's work. Perhaps you need to grieve a loss. But when you are there in the darkest time of night do remember that you are not, even though it may seem so, you are not alone in this world. Sometimes a mantra helps: *May I be well, may I be free from harm, may I be surrounded by loving kindness.*

Night can open the door for us but it is up to us to choose to walk through it or not. This is not a sermon with answers as much as questions. We each make our nightly journeys alone and only

we can ultimately steer our boat in the desired direction. Let me close with one more poem for you to ponder by Antonio Machado:

*Last Night I had a Dream*

*Last night I had a dream-  
a blessed illusion it was-  
I dreamt of a hive at work  
deep down in my heart.  
Within were the golden bees  
straining out the bitter past  
to make sweet-tasting honey,  
and white honeycomb.*

*Last night I had a dream-  
a blessed illusion it was-  
I dreamt of a hot sun shining  
deep down in my heart.  
The heat was in the scorching  
as from a fiery hearth;  
the sun, the light it shed  
and the tears it brought to the eyes.*

*Last night I had a dream-  
a blessed illusion it was-  
I dreamed it was God I'd found  
deep down in my heart.*

