Opinion
Spirituality



(Unsplash/Alejandro Cartagena)

by Rebecca Collins Jordan

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

August 20, 2020

Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

How do we do the work of God in a world starved for mercy? In a recent episode of "The Argument," a podcast hosted by The New York Times opinion writers Ross Douthat, Michelle Goldberg and Frank Bruni, guest commentator and fellow Times opinion writer Elizabeth Bruenig ended the episode with a recommendation:

> I would recommend logging off. ... I don't think we're actually particularly well-designed to cope with getting news of the entire world updated every 10 minutes on a live stream. I think it's extremely stressful. It's too much true information. And I think that it can lead to a real sort of spiritual darkness. It used to be the sole province of God to know a full accounting of all the human evil that was happening at any given time. Now it's the province of any Twitter user, and it's a heavy burden. So log off.

I took that to heart, remembering the many times I have seen my despair over the world's suffering grow to an unproductive place within me these last four years, and even before. But two hours later, midway through a Hulu TV show, I saw a new update on my phone: a new report from The New York Times on the breadth of internments of unaccompanied migrant children in hotels around the country.

Immediately, my short news fast ended, and new despair built up. The same questions came again: What can I do? There are always marches and vigils and rallies and donations to the American Civil Liberties Union and work aiding other undocumented neighbors locally and calls or letters to Congress members — all of which I or loved ones have partaken in many times.

Advertisement

There are boycotts and prayers and social media status updates, if nothing else. But each time, I and others alarmed by injustice come up against the same realization: We are not God.

The injustice stands despite many people's best efforts, seemingly powerless against an increasingly autocratic wall of policies and institutions shielded by eroding federal transparency. The human toll of tragedies, domestic and worldwide, in the last few years has gone beyond a lesson in humility: It is a lesson in despair, desolation and a paucity of mercy.

By now it is pretty clear to a majority of Americans, though not a large enough majority to my liking, that a human leader is not God. President Donald Trump, however, has not seemed to have come to this realization. He continues to govern in a perverted image of a god — that is, with full assumption of omnipotence. With a flick of his thumb, he types out warnings, calling to unleash violence on protesters or defund time-honored institutions like the U.S. Postal Service. He eschews rules on immigration that constitute a bare and often inexcusable minimum of human rights for undocumented citizens. Trump and Homeland Security no longer worry (if they ever have) about disclosure or transparency. With the power of a demigod, they lack the compassion of any god, and certainly the mercy as well.

In my years in divinity school, I heard many times from scholars like St. Joseph Sr. Elizabeth Johnson and others that God is an ear or a shoulder to cry on or the presence in the life of a created being that plunges through the feeling of forsakenness in moments of greatest suffering.

In reflecting on Bruenig's recommendation, I have come to realize another difference between God and humanity. While knowledge of the world's suffering is the province of us all right now, the ability to infuse mercy is a skill we must build — a skill that God has. God, the great comforter, mends the gaps between us, tearing down the walls that separate and closing the crevasses of inequity and avarice. God ensures that no one is ever truly *unaccompanied* or *minor*.

Many times recently, I have found myself praying that I can send mercy or comfort or relief in the same way that I might send an envelope or donation to those children locked in hotel rooms, and still held in appalling conditions in border camps. In this time of social and physical distancing, I feel so palpably the existential separateness, the remoteness, of my human self from others.

And yet, I know that to lean into this separateness is to lean into avarice and hard-heartedness. All the world's great religious teachers, in every religion, ask people to view their humanity as fundamentally focused on our connection to each other. All truly helpful religion binds us together again, with mercy and compassion our connecting spaces.

Gerard Manley Hopkins once wrote:

> I say móre: the just man justices;

Keeps grace: thát keeps all his goings graces;

Acts in God's eye what in God's eye he is —

Chríst — for Christ plays in ten thousand places,

Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his

To the Father through the features of men's faces.

We have been assigned the province of God — awareness of suffering and to action because of it. As long as Christ (or any vision of divine compassion) plays in 10,000 places, through the feature of human faces, the bonds of mercy cannot be truly severed. No walls can truly take away our connection, in the same way that a momentary "logging off" can help us build our compassion for days ahead. As long as the keepers of God's work for justice keep their hearts intact, the work will always continue.

[Rebecca Collins Jordan is an educator in New York City. Originally from Oregon, she is a graduate of Union Theological Seminary and the University of Montana.]

Editor's note: *Sign up here and we can send you a note every time a Young Voices column is posted to NCRonline.org so you won't miss any.*