



# LUMUNOS

FAITH & LIGHT FOR THE JOURNEY

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## *Relationship Paradoxes: Self-Care and Self-Sacrifice*



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Doug Wysockey-Johnson

*The world hungers for the generosity of well-rested people.*

—Wayne Muller

The above quote is one of my favorites. It speaks to the importance of self-care and our ability to care about people and causes beyond ourselves. But I want to say this as well: The world also hungers for the generosity of people even when they aren't well-rested. Where would we be as a society and in our interpersonal relationships if we always waited to extend ourselves until we were well-rested? To give just one example, our hospitals would be empty of health care workers who have extended themselves above and beyond during COVID-19. Well-rested they are not.

### Self-Care and Self-Sacrifice

This is the third in our series of relationship paradoxes we have been exploring in 2020. Previously we have looked at relationships through the paradoxes of joy/pain and engagement/letting go. The self-care/self-sacrifice paradox may be the hardest contradiction, or at least the one that comes up most frequently. Anyone who has ever been in a relationship of any kind has had to wrestle with this dynamic. The tricky part is knowing when and where and how to live with this tension, since there is never a perfect balance. For instance: **Parenting** children is mostly self-sacrifice until it isn't and the roles reverse. **Friendship** doesn't work well if both people are keeping score of who has given more. But it also

## Self-Care and Self-Sacrifice: When To Do What?

fails if (over the long run) there isn't some equanimity. **Marriage and other committed relationships** navigate the tension of self-care and self-sacrifice every day. In every relationship, too much self-care and you have a one-sided relationship; all self-sacrifice and no self-care and you end up with a boatload of resentment.

### The Advent Story

Since Christmas is around the corner, I turn to one of the sacred stories of this season. Mary was not only the mother of Jesus, she was also a model of self-sacrifice. When she says "yes" to the angel Gabriel, Mary sets in motion one sacrifice after another. She sacrifices her relationship to Joseph (potentially). She sacrifices her own reputation in town (pregnant but not married!). She sacrifices the opportunity to give birth in the comfort of her own home. And that is just the first year.

But thank God the story includes another twist. Mary also went to stay with her older cousin Elizabeth. What a wise act of self-care! She removed herself from the judgmental voices in her hometown to spend time with a trusted family member and friend. She chooses to be with one who also was pregnant, further along and older—the person who could understand, answer questions, and laugh. Elizabeth seemed to be the perfect combination of family member, friend, mentor, and labor coach. My hope is that this story of Mary's visit with Elizabeth is not a one-time event, but rather an example of other ways Mary practiced self-care throughout her life. Honestly, I'm not sure how she could endure the years to come without this capacity for self-care.

### When Do We Do What?

First of all, we rarely get it exactly right. I suspect it is more about learning the skills of self-awareness followed by course correction and adjustment. For instance, I'm not big on outward confrontation. So, for me the self-awareness usually begins with a subtle sense of either restlessness or resentment. When I get angry and impatient with small things, something

isn't right. That is a sign, an invitation to step back and evaluate: What is going on in this relationship? Is this a situation where I need to give less? Or is this one of those times when, in spite of the imbalance, I need to sacrifice more, at least in the short run? There is no template or set equation. Each situation requires self-awareness, reflection, and prayer followed by action. Rarely is any relationship in perfect balance. Rather, we pay attention, listen to ourselves and others, discern, and make necessary adjustments.

Again, I find a model in Mary and Joseph. Both of them were deeply spiritual people, listening to angels, dreams and inner promptings. They connected those internal messages to very bold, radical, and courageous outer actions. None of the difficult things they did—traveling to Bethlehem, birth in a stable, escaping to Egypt—would have happened without their spiritual practices. Discerning whether it is time for self-care or self-sacrifice requires just this kind of listening.

### Looking Toward 2021

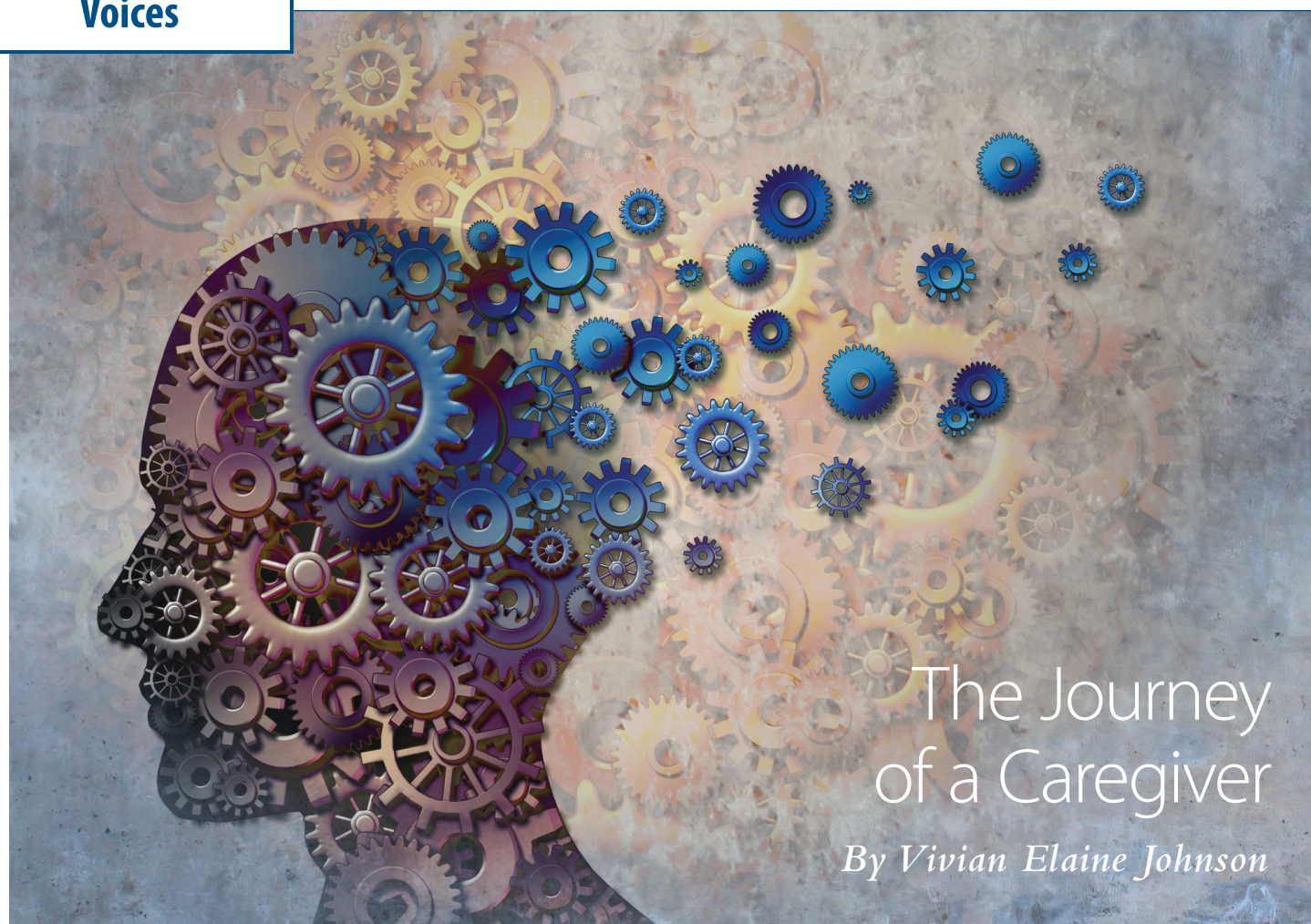
As I write, 2021 looks to be another challenging year. The pandemic and societal polarization are not going to magically disappear. So, there will be no shortage of needs that require our self-sacrifice. I hope that you and I will be willing to engage those concerns, each of us listening for how we can best address needs beyond ourselves.

And for that same reason, we will also need the capacity for self-care. Indeed, the world hungers for the generosity of people who give themselves to others and who know how to take care of themselves at the same time. To paraphrase Reinhold Niebuhr's famous prayer: *God grant me the serenity of self-care; the courage to sacrifice myself for the good of others; and the wisdom to know when and how much to do each.*

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## The Journey of a Caregiver

*By Vivian Elaine Johnson*

### Part 1: The News

The neurologist in her starched white coat says, “We have the results of your extensive neurological test.” She looks with a steady gaze into George’s eyes. “It concludes that you have dementia.” A long pause as she waits for this to sink in. “We suspected so, but now we have the proof.”

“Do I have Alzheimer’s?” George asks in a small, husky voice.

“Yes,” she replies. The kindness expressed in her face comforts us. At least the bearer of bad news does so with gentleness. I hear it. I don’t hear it. I believe it. I don’t believe it.

“What should I do?” George asks, appearing somewhat perplexed.

“Nothing,” she responds with a smile. “Keep enjoying your life by being active socially, physically, and mentally.”

“Enjoy each moment? Each day?” I inquire, my throat dry.

“Yes,” the neurologist affirms, “do as your wife suggests, George, enjoy each day.”

George sits quietly, and then asks, “What will happen?”

“Your memory will gradually get worse,” she responds in an even, unemotional tone.

“Will I die from it?”

“You will not die from Alzheimer’s. It doesn’t kill people, but complications can.”

★ ★ ★

In the car on our way home, I want to discuss the news without being intrusive. I want to respect George’s need to process. I venture, “How is this for you?”

My question hangs in the air. George, looking straight ahead, says, “She didn’t beat around the bush. She was very frank.”

“Yes,” I say. “I’m glad she had the courage to tell us the truth. Now we know what we’re dealing with.”

George nods, his face blank, free of emotion. My heartbeat is rapid. I remind myself to be calm, to drive carefully. “I’m here for you, sweetheart,” I say, as I reach for his hand. “I’ll be with you all the way.”

“Thank you,” he says. George is quiet, quiet, quiet, finally asking, “When did this start?”

“About four years ago I observed some beginning signs,” I respond. “As the neurologist said, it’s more evident to the person closest to you than it is to you yourself. I noticed several behavior issues as well as memory loss. Two years ago you were diagnosed with Mild Cognitive Impairment. Now that diagnosis has changed to Alzheimer’s.” (I notice that I don’t like to say the word.)

George says, “Dementia sounds better.”

I recall the words of author Faith Baldwin, “Time is a tailor,

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## Voices: Continued from page 3

specializing in alterations.” We have been altered, all right, both the man I married and his wife.

★ ★ ★

We arrive home. George goes immediately to lie down in the bedroom. I look at the description of his new medication:

*Memantine is used to treat moderate to severe confusion (dementia) related to Alzheimer’s disease. It does not cure Alzheimer’s disease, but it may improve memory, awareness, and the ability to perform daily functions. This medicine works by blocking the action of a certain natural substance in the brain (glutamate) that is believed to be linked to symptoms of Alzheimer’s disease.*

Tears come easily. My strongest response is sadness. Sad for George. Sad for our children and grandchildren. Sad for extended family and friends. And, yes, sad for myself.

My apprehension rises: What next? Am I able to cope with this? Am I capable of being his daily caregiver? How many years do we have left? Will I live long enough to care for him? I’m reminded of something I read, “Always carry a dream in your heart. It will keep you warm on cold days.” On this emotionally chilly day, my dream is that we become other-focused as opposed to self-focused. With bad news it is easy to become self-absorbed. Also, my dream is that we intentionally look for the beauty in little things so our souls will be blessed with inner peace. Is that too positive a spin? I need it. That is how I cope.

In the midst of sadness and apprehensions, life goes on. I glance at our patio. A single yellow rose stands tall and gorgeous as it reaches for the sun. Thank you, rose, for reminding me to look for the beauty in each day.

## Part 2: The Last Picture Show

“Would you like to go to a movie today?” I asked George, hoping for a fun outing.

“I guess so. Which one?”

“*Harriet*. I’ve heard that it’s very good.”

“Who’s Harriet?”

“Harriet Tubman. She helped her family and many other people out of slavery.”

“Oh. Okay.”

Off we went. George didn’t want to use his walker, choosing his cane instead. I dropped him off in front of the theater and requested that he wait for me to assist him up the stairs. I parked the car and returned to George. He wasn’t there. I ran around and finally found him in the lobby, comfortable in a green chair. “I wish you would have waited for me. I worry that you might fall.” “Oh,” he said with nonchalance.

I left to buy our tickets and get a hearing device for him to wear over his hearing aids: clumsy headphones and a contraption about the size of two decks of cards. Back to George. “Let’s go find the right theater,” I said.

He wasn’t ready to go. “I want some popcorn.”

Off I went, this time for popcorn. I returned to George, helped

him get up, and with the popcorn in one hand, the hearing devices in the other, and George holding on to my shoulder with one hand and the cane in his other, we shuffled toward the correct theater. It was a balancing act.

“I need some water,” George said. Neither of us had a third hand. “Sorry, George, we can’t get water.” I used my authoritative voice.

The theater lights were off and previews were on the screen. With baby steps we searched for our assigned seats (a new wrinkle concocted by the theater), and after stumbling into and out of incorrect rows, George refused to go any further. I coaxed him to sit relatively near our assigned spot.

We settled in, George chomped on the popcorn, the headphones were in place, and the main feature was soon to begin. Now I could relax.

“These things don’t work,” George said as he yanked the headphones off and plopped them in my lap. I tried them and I could hear just fine. He tried again. Off they came. I juggled them on my lap along with his cane.

The movie started. “One of my hearing aids needs a new battery. I can’t find the battery bag.” Oh great! I reached over and checked his pockets. Nope. Better check the floor. As distasteful as it was, I kneeled down and scuttled my hands across the sticky floor. Found it.

“I can’t get the battery in. Can you do it?” he said. I took the hearing aid and the teeny-weeny battery. In the pitch-dark theater, I tried to join them. It wasn’t easy. Done. Happy day. George was set. He had his hearing aids and popcorn. He could sit back and enjoy the show.

Wrong! The questions started:

“Which one is Harriet?” he asked in his be-sure-they-can-hear-you voice.

“Who is he?”

“Are they married?”

“I can’t see them. What are they doing?”

“What did she say?”

Our running dialogue continued throughout the show, me shushing him and trying to answer his questions with elevated whispers into his hearing aid. I felt bad that he had such difficulties, but I must admit that it was a relief when the movie ended. We got up, gathered our stuff, crunched our way over dropped popcorn and stumbled and bumbled to the aisle. By the time we made it to the car I was worn out.

“What did you think about the movie?” I asked.

“It was good, but I couldn’t hear or see very well.”

The next day he told everyone we met, “*Harriet* is a great movie. You should see it.”

I nodded, and with an inaudible sigh reminded myself that it was the last movie I would take him to. Ever.

## Part 3: Space

In serving as a primary caregiver, some days are frustrating as well as exhausting. Others are calm though I still wrestle with

conflicting thoughts. It was suggested that I take an occasional respite.

As I opened the door of the hotel room, I felt a catch in my throat and wetness on my cheeks. Tears burst like they were finally escaping a great holding place behind my eyeballs. Why tears? Awareness dawned: I have this clean, quiet, lovely room all to myself for two full days. The feeling of relief, I admitted to myself, turned on the faucet of tears.

I was there because George said, "I've got an idea. I think you should go away for a couple days, have some time to yourself." I suspected that my recent diagnosis of hives and rash precipitated this thought. Whatever the genesis, it was an appreciated suggestion.

But I debated. Should I, could I? I hesitated.

Okay, I didn't hesitate long; it was just like my response to "Would you like some ice cream?" One day later, I had hotel reservations and made arrangements with our daughter to provide care for George.

People and articles tell me that caregivers need a respite, a time apart. My friends say, "Be sure to take care of yourself, Vivian." My daughters caution, "Mom, you need some time away." Members of my support group are equally compassionate, "How are you holding up? Plan time for yourself." I've said the same thing to others.

So, here I was in a hotel doing just that. My unexpected tears told me a truth so deeply hidden that I didn't allow it to surface: I needed this escape. Why? I love my husband. I want to help care for him. He's frail. He needs me.

But, if truth be told, caregiving is not easy. Caring for an adult's daily needs, making sure that correct medications are given at the correct time, cleaning up after toileting and upset stomach, doing

laundry, sleep-interrupted nights, financial aspects such as bill paying and income tax preparation. Yes these, plus being chauffeur and a listening ear at 16 medical appointments in 8 weeks. (Lest you think I exaggerate, I counted.) No matter how much one wants to do these things, no matter how appreciative the receiver is, it's not easy.

On the other hand, it's not easy to let go, to take time away, to retreat. Even though it's temporary, it feels selfish, this focus on one's self, this neglect of duty. Then, I read the words of writer Henri Nouwen, "*A life without a quiet center, becomes destructive.*" Hmmm. Sounds wise. So, in my hotel room, I read, I wrote, reflected, napped, ate when and what I wanted. Best of all, I was quiet.

Two days later it was time to return home. I was ready. Just as the space key is important in typing, we need space in life. The last two days were my space keys. Space that allowed me to relax, to analyze, to bring clarity to my life. Not only is space important, it's imperative. Once again, words from Henri Nouwen rested in my heart: "... *when we spend quiet time away from the places where we interact with each other, we are opened for a deeper intimacy with each other.*"

Home I went. I felt restored, invigorated, refreshed. I kissed George, then I had some ice cream.

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**Vivian Elaine Johnson** lives in Irvine CA surrounded by blossoms and foliage that never fail to brighten her day. Her academic and professional work was in the Behavioral Sciences with a specialty in dealing with life's losses. She was married sixty years to George, a Lutheran pastor, and has two adult daughters and a son who died from cancer at age 15.



## Please consider becoming a monthly donor.

Regular monthly donations are very helpful since they make it much easier to plan our activities over the year. It's very easy to set-up - go to the "Donate Now" button on our website, or give us a call at 802.860.1936. Thank You!

## Lumunos Retreats

**Update:** Because of COVID-19, we've decided to cancel in-person retreats for the rest of the year. Instead, we'll have a full lineup of online "LumZoom" events. You'll see more information about this via email, or you can find out more at [www.lumunos.org](http://www.lumunos.org) (If you're not on our email list, you can sign up on the Lumunos website.) We hope to see you on-line!





# Reflections During Advent

*By Angier Brock*

## Advent I

November 29, 2020.

**Isaiah 64:1.** *O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence—...*

**Mark 13:24–25, 37.** [Jesus said to them....] “But in those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken....And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.”

The year 2020 has been a year of dislocation. For people who have lost loved ones, homes, livelihoods, or their health, the year has been unimaginably devastating. I am one of the lucky ones; thus far, I have had to endure only the inconveniences of social distancing and mask wearing. But even for people like me, 2020 has been physically and emotionally exhausting. Everyone is tired of the barrage of bad news, of having to stand by at a distance as both friends and strangers suffer, of feeling powerless to help in any substantial way. We are all tired of racial, ecological, and economic injustices. We are tired of the hatred, lies, threats, and sheer vitriol that tear the fabric of our society. We are tired of being afraid—afraid for our own health and the health of loved ones, afraid for the stability of our democracy and our planet, afraid for the future of our children and grandchildren. Will they

have clean water and air? Will they live in a free and fair society? As we enter this season of Advent, we bring with us our grief, our anger, our fatigue, our fears, and our uncertainty.

Oddly, the first Sunday in Advent turns out to be a good match for all that. I tend to think of Advent as a season of expectant joy—which it can be, of course. But joy is not where Advent begins—at least not in liturgical churches that follow a common lectionary. Instead, each year the season opens with the “little apocalypse” passage of Matthew, Mark, or Luke. In that portion of those gospels, disaster figures prominently. This year, Mark shows us Jesus as he speaks in cataclysmic celestial images: the sun and moon go dark, the stars fall, and even “the powers in the heavens will be shaken.” For most of my life, when the world has seemed relatively stable, I have not dwelled on those images. I thought talk of dislocation and destruction on such an epic scale belonged to another place and time.

This year, however, the apocalyptic words of Jesus seem fitting. I don’t know whether “the powers in heaven” have been shaken, but something in me has been shaken. Scorching wildfires, flooding shores, twisting winds, disintegrating icebergs. Children taken from their mothers’ arms. Cities racked with violence and people dying in the street, or alone in a hospital room. Peoples’ breath stolen by callous indifference. Or by a virus. Not knowing if the next person I see is contagious with that virus—or whether

I could get it and infect others. Glimpsing the possible erosion of democracy and wondering if its walls could tumble down.

Advent this year looks different because the world looks different, especially when seen through slightly-fogged up glasses above the mask I now wear whenever I leave home. This year, I find myself paying more attention to the apocalyptic words of Jesus, and oddly, I take some comfort in them, for they make me feel that he at least understands. They also suggest that life will not always be this way. The story is not over. Keep awake, Jesus says, at the end of this passage. By which I think he means: Yes, 2020 has been rough. The world has changed—and is changing still. Now comes Advent. Bring your grief, your anger, your fears, your fatigue, your uncertainty. Don't give up. Stay present: Something new is coming. You don't want to miss it.

## Advent II

December 6, 2020

**Isaiah 40:3.** *A voice cries out: "...make straight in the desert a highway for our God."*

**Mark 1:2–3.** As it is written by the prophet Isaiah, "See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way: the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths [in the desert] straight.'"

In some ways, my life in 2020 changed very little. Group activities—Master Naturalist meetings, Education for Ministry, Sunday worship—all simply moved to Zoom rooms. I still walk daily with my dog, sometimes stopping to chat (masked, socially distanced) with neighbors; monitor meadowlarks on the nearby NPS battlefield; and keep a watchful eye on the news. If someone asks how I am, I say, "Fine." And I am, mostly. I am grateful for good health, a home, internet access, and safe ways to get food and other necessities. Aware of the enormous suffering many endure, I feel guilty complaining.

But about six months into this long, murky season I call "Coronatide," I could no longer deny that something was wrong. Beneath the visible daily routine, I felt empty and distracted. My imagination had dried up. Writing, even in my journal, seemed impossibly hard. My prayers had turned lifeless and brittle. I finally admitted to being in an emotional and spiritual desert. I needed a John the Baptist-type figure, a voice to call out to me in my inner desert to "make straight a highway"—or at least construct a modest channel—that would re-connect me to the holy, the creative, the fruitful. In other words, to God.

That voice arrived in mid-September. It belonged not to the biblical John who dressed in camel skins and ate locusts and wild honey in the Judean desert but rather to a contemporary Franciscan Friar, Richard Rohr, who lives in Albuquerque—an oasis in the Chihuahuan Desert. Rohr's voice came to me via a newsletter in which he offered a simple, soul-nourishing plan. His counsel was, first, to limit one's consumption of news, preferably to no more than an hour a day; and second, to invest the time thereby gained in "some form of public service, volunteerism, mystical reading..., prayer—or, preferably, all of the above."

Throughout much of 2020, my habit was to turn on the news at lunchtime. And again in the evening when I was fixing dinner, to see what more had developed. Many times the news stayed on, whether

I was watching or not, until I went to bed. Meanwhile, I also received, via email or text, headlines from three major news outlets plus NPR. My consumption of news was nearly an addiction. Could I turn my curiosity in other directions? I would try.

I have not been perfect in adhering to Rohr's regimen, but when I do, life improves. I go to bed earlier, sleep better, and wake without an alarm, usually before dawn, ready to write and pray while the world is still quiet. Moreover, this practice does seem to have opened an inner channel through which God can squeeze. I still have fears, worries, distractions. But I feel my imagination beginning to stir, and with it, the possibility of refreshment and hope.

Most people I know report the same: being "okay" on the surface; but being plagued below the surface by a pervasive malaise, a kind of soul-suffering characterized by anxiety, exhaustion, and uncertainty. If this is your story, too, I hope you will give some thought this second week of Advent to how you might begin opening a path through your own inner desert so that a bit more of the Holy can come in. Turn off the news. Call someone who lives alone. Give some money, or time, to a soup kitchen. Let loose your tears. Send a holiday card. Revive—or begin—a journaling practice. Listen to beautiful music. Take up drawing. Dance in your kitchen. Read a good book. But whatever you do, do this: Keep awake—and watch, and pray.

## Advent III

December 13, 2020.

**Psalms 126:5.** *Restore our fortunes, O Lord, like the watercourses in the Negeb.*

**John 1:22–23.** Then they [the priests and Levite] said to him [John the Baptist], "Who are you? Let us have an answer for those [the other Jews, including the Pharisees] who sent us. What do you say about yourself?" He [John] said, I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, "Make straight the way of the Lord," as the prophet Isaiah said.

In *Daily Prayer with the Corrymeela Community*, Pádraig Ó Tuama describes a succinct form of prayer known as a "collect" (pronounced COLlect). Collects open with a name for God and a few words that state a characteristic or action of God. They then name a request, or desire, and give a reason for making that request. Usually collects end with thanksgiving or praise and an "Amen." Here is an example from the Book of Common Prayer, a collect "For Those who Influence Public Opinion": *Almighty God, you proclaim your truth in every age by many voices; Direct, in our time, we pray, those who speak where many listen and write what many read; that they may do their part in making the heart of this people wise, its mind sound, and its will righteous; to the honor of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*

That's a formal one, written for corporate use in public Christian worship. Out of my new habit of waking early to write and pray, I have begun writing my own collect nearly every morning—and sometimes in the evening, too. Definitely NOT meant for public worship, my collects often draw from a singular moment of a particular day. For example, early one morning in

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## Advent: Continued from page 7

October, my back was bothering me, so I spent my prayer time lying flat on the floor in a dark room. The window blinds were open, and light from the setting harvest moon shone in my eyes. The bright moon contrasted so much with the dark sky and dark room that it was hard to look directly at it. But it was very beautiful. When I got up to write, I began my collect for that day, “O God of the moon in my eyes...” I doubt those words would have meaning for anyone else, but they capture for me a moment when I could feel the presence of something Holy.

The gospel reading for the Advent III raises questions about identity, relationship, and purpose. In it, figures from the religious establishment are trying to understand the man known today as John the Baptist—an influencer of public opinion. *Who are you?* they ask. *Are you Elijah? Why are you baptizing people?* For the gospel writer, however, there is a deeper unspoken question here: Who is John the Baptist *in relation to Jesus*? That’s not a bad question for each of us to ask of ourselves during Advent: *Who am I in relation to Jesus*?

There have been times in 2020 when my faith has been shaken. Like the Psalmist, I have cried out to God, “Restore our fortunes”—and have been met with silence. I have wondered who I am to God, and who God is to me. I have felt chastened to realize that it is easy for me to be a woman of faith when the ground beneath my feet is, for the most part, stable. But when everything around me is under threat? That’s hard. The scale and scope of parts of 2020 have challenged both my faith and my image of myself as a woman of faith.

But through the act of writing simple collects, something inside me is shifting. Ó Tuama writes, *“To pray is to imagine. And in imagining, we may imagine that we are imagined by something Bigger.”* I think he’s right. If your own faith has been shaken in 2020, I invite you to join me this third week in Advent in asking, “Who am I in relation to the Child soon to be born at Bethlehem? Who am I in relation to God’s Word made flesh?” Journal about it if you can. Maybe you also will write a collect or two expressing *your* current grief or joy, fear or hope, anger or gratitude. Maybe you too will imagine new ways of being a person of faith.

## ADVENT IV

December 30, 2020.

**Luke 1:35a, 37–38.** *The angel said to her.... “For nothing will be impossible with God.” Then Mary said, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.”*

Here is a confession. Back in October, there came a moment in our national experience when everyone—and by “everyone” I mean people as unlikely as news anchors and as expected as church leaders—was talking about how we as Americans should pray in response to a particular thing that had happened. And so I tried to pray the “right” way, the Christian way, the way everybody said Jesus would have prayed. My prayer, however, felt thin and false. Figuratively speaking, even as I had fallen to my knees, I was crossing my fingers behind my back. How silly and

insincere that must have looked to God, who knew full well what I truly wanted to happen. Once that insight registered with me (and relying on precedent set by the Psalmist in some of those “impolite” verses we don’t read in church), I minced no words with God. I started my prayer anew, giving full voice to my vitriolic, despairing, and angry desire for revenge and retribution.

What happened next was that, again figuratively speaking, God took me into those great, warm, godly arms, held me the way a grandmother holds a tantrum-throwing toddler close to her body, and let me flail about, shout my imprecations, and sob. Once I grew exhausted and quiet, still holding me close, God whispered into my ear, “I know you are upset. I understand why. But let me handle this my way, okay?” Well—okay. *Let it be with me according to your word.*

Today is the last Sunday of Advent in a December that, for most of us, has differed radically from past Decembers. We have not been in our churches for the lighting of Advent wreaths or the singing of “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel.” Perhaps we ordered gifts online rather than shopping in person, and mailed presents rather than delivering them ourselves. We may have foregone an annual tradition of attending a Christmas concert, play, or ballet. Perhaps we are not decorating a tree. “Why bother,” we may think, “with no neighbors dropping by?” Perhaps there will be empty chairs at our tables this year, either because of social distancing or because a loved one is no longer with us in this world. Christmas is often a lonely season, especially when our lives do not compare favorably with images on Christmas cards or in our memories. Collectively, this may be the loneliest season we Americans have had in decades.

And maybe that’s okay. Maybe that empowers us to re-imagine Christmas, and our relationship to it, and to make it somehow new. But it’s also okay to feel our feelings, whatever they are, and to tell them to God, speaking honestly about our grief, our frustrations, our losses, our desires. The angel Gabriel said to Mary, “Nothing is impossible with God.” That makes my headstrong toddler self want to bellow, “Oh yeah? So why doesn’t God fix things?” Meaning, “Why doesn’t God fix things the way I want them fixed? Why doesn’t God make our world more civil and just? And quiet storms, and put out forest fires? Why doesn’t God give me back the people I love?” Those are some of my desires. I ask God those questions a lot.

In *Daily Prayer with the Corrymeela Community*, Pádraig Ó Tuama writes, “Naming things is part of the creative impulse. Naming the deep desires of our heart is a good thing, even if those desires are never satisfied.” The honest naming of our deep desires reminds us who we are—and who we can yet become. Perhaps once we have named them, and maybe let some of them go, we can begin imagining new ways God can work in us, new ways in which we can be made new.

## Christmas Eve/Day

December 24/25.

**Luke 2:18-19:** *And all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart.*



Years ago, facing a divorce, one of my greatest worries was not being able to “do Christmas” the way I had before. I was already sharing my grown sons and their families with their in-laws. What would a further sharing of them mean? Hearing me fret (obsess, really) about such matters, a friend, who is also a priest, sat me down and reminded me that Christmas is a day on a calendar. We do not know when Jesus was born. December 24 and 25 have no intrinsic value, only the value we give them. There would be other days, he said, that I could make just as special with my family. Doing so would require only a little imagination.

Though it took a while to sink in, his wise counsel has helped me learn to celebrate Christmas more creatively and maybe more honestly. What his words did, I think, was remove sentimentality and nostalgia from my thinking about this holy season. Doing that is not always easy in a world saturated by idealized images of coziness found in advertisements, cards, catalogues, and magazines. Becoming less sentimental about Christmas goes against the grain of our culture. But doing so is possible, and it can be freeing.

No matter how or with whom you are marking Christmas of 2020, Mary may be a good companion on your journey. We see her in Luke’s gospel amid the noise of angels and sheep herders. Despite all cacophony around her, she is still and quiet, pondering things. She leaves no record of the contents of her musings, but it would not be far-fetched to imagine that she was reviewing the previous nine months of her life, recalling, among other things her own words—*Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word*. Almost assuredly, she was wondering what would come next. As we do, too.

It is good at Christmas to remember that something new is happening: God is shaking things up, coming into our world in a new way, inviting us to live in that newness. It is good to re-examine our relationship to the Holy Child born in Bethlehem, to think about new ways to seek and serve him. It is good to bring our whole selves to the enterprise of Christmas—our exhausted, wounded, fearful, and grieving selves as well as our hopeful selves that know the goodness and joy of life and love. It is good to remember that Christmas is not limited to one day. It is good to bring our desires and our imaginations. It is good to continue to keep awake, to watch, and to pray.

INVENTIVE AND IMAGINATIVE GOD, arranger of the elements into stars and deserts, lambs and evergreens, beeswax and music: you yourself became vulnerable, born as Mary’s baby, to live in a world that is both bitter and sweet, messy and holy. Help us this Christmas season to re-imagine an earth where all can breathe freely, where children are safe, where justice prevails, where leaders are wise, where nations are friendly, where love erases hate; then strengthen us to do your will to make it so, to the glory of your name. AMEN.

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**Angier Brock** is a former long-time Board member of Lumunos, songwriter for retreats, and women’s ministry leader. These days she is doing some freelance writing and editing, birding, being a Virginia Master Naturalist, and grandmothering.

## First Snow

The snow  
began here  
this morning and all day  
continued, its white  
rhetoric everywhere  
calling us back to *why, how,*  
*whence* such beauty and *what*  
the meaning; such  
an oracular fever! flowing  
past windows, an energy it seemed  
would never ebb, never settle  
less than lovely! and only now,  
deep into night,  
it has finally ended.  
The silence  
is immense,  
and the heavens still hold  
a million candles; nowhere  
the familiar things:  
stars, the moon,  
the darkness we expect  
and nightly turn from. Trees  
glitter like castles  
of ribbons, the broad fields  
smolder with light, a passing  
creekbed lies  
heaped with shining hills;  
and though the questions  
that have assailed us all day  
remain — not a single  
answer has been found —  
walking out now  
into the silence and the light  
under the trees,  
and through the fields,  
feels like one.

~Mary Oliver~  
*excerpted from American Primitive*



Doug Wiley, his wife Kristen and their four children

*Through the years, Faith at Work/Lumunos has remained vibrant in an ever-changing world because of the community of people who have been part of our work. We have been blessed by these “Lumunaries”. Lumunaries are people who embody the values of Lumunos – people who are using their gifts and living their call; people who value authentic relationships and continue to grow spiritually. Lumunaries are also people who have supported Lumunos and advanced our mission in one way or the other. In this issue, we’re featuring current board member, Doug Wiley.*

**T**hough a native Texan, Doug Wiley has resided in Denver with his wife Kristen since 2004. They have three daughters, ranging in age from 15 to 18, and one son who is 13. Doug met his future wife Kristen (also a native Texan) while working in Amsterdam and knew right away that he connected with her adventurous spirit. With six strong personalities in their immediate family, even the most basic decisions become a kind of negotiation. However, they all look forward to opportunities to play tennis and eat Mexican food together. Doug says his greatest joy is being a father.

**Becca:** How did you become involved with Lumunos?

**Doug:** I was fortunate to be asked to join the Lumunos Board in the fall of 2017. I was in what I’ve now learned was probably one of my “Lumunos moments” where I was searching for my next calling. I had left a job of 12 years in commercial real estate and was truly open to whatever was next for me. A dear friend of mine from my church, Montview Boulevard Presbyterian, extended an invitation to join Lumunos’ Board, and the stars aligned for me.

I had no idea what I was getting into, nor did the “Hedgehog” metaphor<sup>1</sup> that Doug Wysocky-Johnson explained to me as part of the essence of what Lumunos is, make all that much sense to me at the time; however, leaning into this unknown undertaking without perfect definition felt right to me. After a bit of praying and asking my wife if she was okay with me taking on a new commitment before I had secured my next job, I jumped in the river that has become the Lumunos chapter of my life journey.

**Becca:** How have you continued your involvement with Lumunos?

**Doug:** I am big believer in creating chapters in one’s life. For me, this imagery helps me to chronicle with some clarity the beginning and end of certain challenges and successes of my journey. Not knowing how my book will end, while holding the perspective of a book whose conclusion is unwritten and unread, is comforting to me. Recognizing new chapters of my book, and sharing these chapters, has helped me reflect on my growth, failures, and the factors that contribute to both. Through my board work with Lumunos, I’ve been encouraged to listen and share chapters as our board seeks to establish authentic relationships where we all “show up” exactly where we are in life.

Even better than these moments have been my weekend-long men’s retreat experiences. Initially it was a daunting idea for me to trek into the foreign territory of a group of relatively unknown-to-me men, out of the usual routine of being a busy dad, and be challenged to share what’s on my heart and mind and to empathize with others stepping into this same uncharted space. I can’t put into words how transformational these weekends



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have been for me. All I know is that I'm a better person after each Lumunos men's retreat, and I'm passionate to invite others to join when they are ready, and frankly when they are not ready! I've also been fortunate to have led a few retreats, which presented its own challenges, and yet, these tests for me were equally refreshing and rewarding at their conclusion.

**Becca:** Has Lumunos helped to shape your sense of "calling"? Does it influence the work or service you do? If yes, how so?

**Doug:** When I joined Lumunos' Board, I joked that I was in the midst of figuring out what I was going to be when I grew up. I was in between jobs, and I was frankly in between chapters of my life where my family responsibilities were shifting. Our kids were approaching high school and their needs were evolving quickly. As I felt them requiring less daily input from me, I recognized that I was getting older, and maybe less essential to a role I had come to cherish as a much-needed father.

I found myself desperate to prove "Father Time" wrong by staying as active as I had always been. In accepting how much of my life was even more out of my control than I had previously believed, I was more open to my next "calling". My Lumunos involvement, a new job, new duties as a husband of 17 years to my dear wife, and being a father to four nearly grown teenagers (and three teenage daughters no less) presented me opportunities to explore the next chapters of my "calling." I'm still not entirely sure what my calling is. However, through deeper connections in all of my relationships, and slowing down to try to connect with others at a less superficial level, I'm certain that I was meant to help others through the Lumunos approach—creating a safe space for vulnerability by simply giving attention to one another with BIG ears and open hearts, and ensuring each person knows they matter.

**Becca:** What inspires you to give to Lumunos (both financially and with your time)?

**Doug:** Given how much richer my life has become through my work with Lumunos and Lumunos' willingness to work with me, I am extremely motivated to share its mission with others. At times, I have to prioritize my time elsewhere, which means that making a financial commitment is easier for me to consider. Whenever I manage to spend time at a Lumunos event, I'm always amazed at how refreshed I am, even after what is usually a draining experience of going deeper into my feelings and being part of a circle of people who are equally endeavoring to share their purest, unfiltered emotions.

**Becca:** The theme of this edition of the newsletter is the paradox of self-sacrifice and self-care in our relationships. What have you learned about balancing your energy and resources between the people in your life and caring for yourself?

**Doug:** I've learned that it is much easier to say that we want to have balance or believe that we already have balance in our lives than it is to really achieve and maintain balance. What I am learning though is that at the end of the day, if you are not energized and recharged by however you are filling your 24 hours a day, then you need to experiment with a new balance. Tinkering with different activities, which for me may include a deeper appreciation for "watching the paint dry" every now and then, doesn't imply that I'm broken in any way. What it

requires, though, is an honest assessment of what is working and not working, and what relationships may be exhausting in their current form.

Being accountable for what you bring to a relationship, and what you don't bring to a relationship, and owning your actions, your history, and your hopes are, in my opinion, the most fundamental building blocks of finding sustainable balance. At the end of the day, I'm not really in control of who lets me in their life, but I am in control of how I come to that relationship once invited in. I wish I had a reset button for many of my closest relationships—a way to wipe the slate clean for the many things I've said that I wish I could take back—but I know these are fool's errands. Being fully human, my hope is that I'm continually given chances to repair my relationship ruptures through honesty and humility, and in turn, I will earn chances to return the favor of forgiveness and accept what I cannot change.

**Becca:** Have recent events affected the balance in your relationships?

**Doug:** Fortunately, the pandemic has not adversely affected any of my loved ones. I feel for all who have suffered loss of life, loss of contact with loved ones, and loss of their basic routine. What I will take away from the pandemic is how I have taken for granted the ability to be connected with others in the most fundamental ways. Because I cannot hop on a plane to see my family in Texas without risking infection, I want to be more intentional about making time to be with my family. For too long, I have been willing to push a family dinner to tomorrow night, or have been slow to get an event on the calendar with friends or family, because I thought we'd always be able to do these activities another time. There really isn't a lot of time for us on this planet, which isn't to say I relish filling up every minute of every day with an activity, but it does mean that making time for others, for ourselves, and for the things that we hold sacred cannot be taken for granted.

As George Bernard Shaw coined, *"I want to be thoroughly used up when I die, for the harder I work the more I live. I rejoice in life for its own sake. Life is no 'brief candle' to me. It is sort of a splendid torch which I have a hold of for the moment, and I want to make it burn as brightly as possible before handing it on to future generations."*

Making a game out of most of life's challenges is my instinct. To me, "being used up" means that I left it all on the field and had the grandest time playing all the games I was invited to, while hopefully considered a good and fair teammate. My prayer is that my kids find their passions, strive to be intentional about protecting their boundaries, find sustainable balance, write many chapters in their lives, and are good and decent teammates to those who need them. May we all dig a bit deeper to be used up by the time we're needed in heaven.

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<sup>1</sup> The Hedgehog Concept, developed by Jim Collins in the book *Good to Great*, refers to the idea that a hedgehog is great at one thing, while the fox lacks clarity and tries to do many things. Whether in reference to an individual, organization, or business, the hedgehog is at the intersection of what you're deeply passionate about, what you're best at in the world, and what drives your economic engine.



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*Solitude is the very ground from which  
community grows. Whenever we pray alone,  
study, read, write, or simply spend quiet time  
away from the places where we interact with  
each other directly, we are potentially opened  
for a deeper intimacy with each other.*

—Henry Nouwen

