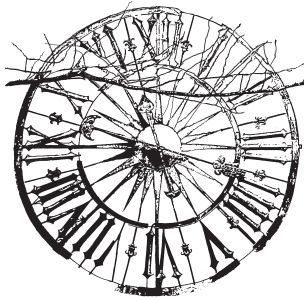


one



the night watch

Themes for the hour:
vigilance and deep listening
mystery and silence
surrender and trust

Midnight Until Dawn

Rising from sleep in the heart of the night, I keep vigil with eternal questions. These eternal questions are infinite longings that have taken root in the ground of my being. Holding vigil with the Guardian of Life, whose eye shines down upon all who live in terror of the night, I become quiet. In the middle of the night I hold hands with trust and surrender to the One who sees without a light. I, too, see without a light. I welcome my night eyes. My soul is my night light. Night vigil is a time for deep listening. My prayer travels deep into my soul space, into the essence of my being. I go “down under” where the eternal One waits. I wait with the One who waits for me. Like Jesus, keeping watch the night before he died, I keep vigil with those who wait alone. The darkness has a special kind of soul. I lean into the darkness and grow wise.

I rise before dawn and cry for help;
I put my hope in your words.
My eyes are awake before each watch of
the night,
that I may meditate on your promise.

—Psalm 119:147–148

During two transitional seasons in my spiritual life, I had the joy of being able to make a retreat at Gethsemane Abbey in Trappist, Kentucky. The deep silence I experienced was good medicine for me. It was a time in my life when “wordless words” were the only words I trusted; thus the silence was healing. It was a season of deep listening in my life.

During my retreats at Gethsemane I chose to attend Vigils with the monks. Getting up in the middle of the night can be a moving experience in the course of a retreat. The night watches cut into my soul with a terrible sweetness. I am certain beyond doubt that if I had to get up every night at two or three in the morning the sweetness would soon wear off. I suspect this is also true for the monks. Thus upon leaving the retreat and returning home, the gift I carried with me was the memory of the faithfulness of these monks rising to pray in the middle of the night. This monastery has become famous because it was the monastery of Thomas Merton. However, as I left the monastery, it was not Thomas Merton I was enamored of; it was remembrance of those present-day monks and their faithful night watch.

Although the practice of rising for prayer in the middle of the night is not observed in my community, there are times

when I choose to rise for the night watch. These are usually times of national disaster or community crisis, although I am also fond of rising on the vigils of major feasts of the saints and Christ, and on the vigil of my birth.

At these special times when I rise from my sleep for prayer, I keep vigil with Christ, who is always keeping vigil. I keep vigil with my heart's eternal questions and deep longings and with those places in my being where the light has grown dim. I keep vigil with those whose tired hearts have lost hope. The angel of night embraces my prayer and lights a candle in my soul. Keeping watch at my side, she listens to my dreams for the world and my prayers for all who suffer. In the middle of night I pray for those who sleep and those who cannot sleep. I pray for those with fearful hearts, for those whose courage is waning. I pray for those who have lost vision of what could be. When I rise in the middle of the night, my prayer is simply one of waiting in silence, waiting in darkness, listening with love. It is a prayer of surrender. In my night watch I do not ordinarily use words. My prayer is a prayer of intent. I make my intention and I wait. I become a deep yearning. The silence and the darkness are healing. My prayer is now a prayer of trust. I keep vigil with the mystery.

There is something lovely about the darkness. When I say the angel of night lights a candle in my soul, I am not talking about the kind of candle that takes the darkness away. Rather, in the darkness and in the great silence I discover that my soul has an eye that can see in the dark and an ear that can hear in the silence. With my soul's eye, what needs to be seen is revealed in a new way; with my soul's ear, what needs to be

heard is felt in a new way. It is a way of seeing with the heart and of listening from the soul, a way of understanding.

We know there are stars so far away that their light has not yet reached the earth. Could the same be said about the bright ideas, virtues, creativity, and dreams of our own lives? Perhaps some night when you get up to pray, something will turn over in someone's heart and find its voice all because of your small prayer. Never underestimate what little acts of love can accomplish. Do not take lightly the sacred connections that are possible in daily life. Perhaps our very waiting in the darkness gives some struggling unknown pilgrim of the hours hope.

In view of the fact that this meditation book is written with those of you who are in the workaday world in mind, you may wonder why I have included Vigils as one of your sacred hours of prayer. It is highly unlikely that you will be able to rise in the middle of the night for prayer. Many of you have families with children of various ages and activities, as well as demanding jobs already requiring more time than you can find.

Still, I see Vigils as a valuable part of this book. Vigils is a time of exquisite beauty. It is a time for waiting and watching under the mantle of mystery. It can be a prayer of waiting without agenda, without urgency. We often wait for things we cannot change. Waiting in itself has the potential of being a prayer of faith. Sometimes we wait for growth. Like a seed resting in the ground, we wait for who we can become. The darkness that surrounds us can be an ointment for our restless spirit. If we do not turn away from this darkness, it has the potential of becoming a nurturing womb for us. Often it is

in the dark times of our lives that our eyes are opened, and we see things in new ways.

More than likely, there are times in your life when you celebrate Vigils without realizing you are praying. Search your life for moments of prayerful waiting and watching. Name some of your special hours of vigilance. Some of these moments may have come in the middle of the night, others may have been during the day. Keeping vigil is a natural part of our lives.

Do you recall times when you sat up with a sick child? That is a vigil. Karen, who often comes to our retreat center at St. Scholastica for quiet time, describes how her colicky baby led her into mysticism: “To quiet the cries, we would walk up and down our long driveway in the middle of the night, sometimes for over an hour, until comfort and sleep would come. The silence of our sojourn led me into a sacred union—with my son, the Divine, and the suffering of the whole world. In these treasured moments I felt connected to all of creation. I began to call this ‘Colic Mysticism.’” Karen’s experience is a good example of keeping vigil.

Have you waited for teenage children to come home safely at night? That, too, is a vigil. Or perhaps there have been times when you were awakened in the middle of the night for seemingly no reason at all. Perhaps you have lain awake with anxiety and worry. Maybe you have quarreled with a loved one and you cannot sleep out of concern over how to be reconciled. All of these moments and more can become natural vigils. These painful experiences can be transformed into creative waiting. You can rise out of your sleep or

non-sleep at these moments, curl up in a favorite old chair, and keep vigil with your anxious heart.

We wait for the diagnosis after a series of medical tests, whether for ourselves or for a family member or friend. We wait for news after the surgery of a loved one. We wait for our children, and sometimes for our parents, to come home from war. We wait to hear if we got the job we applied for, or if our test scores will make it possible for us to attend the university of our choice. We wait for reconciliation and forgiveness. We wait for death.

Most of us do not like to wait. There is anxiety in waiting—whether we are waiting in a supermarket line, in the doctor's office, the I.R.S. office, at the bank, in a restaurant, at the stoplight, or any of the hundreds of places we have to wait each week. Waiting is not high on our list of priorities.

Not all vigils are anxiety-ridden. There is the joyful waiting for someone dear to come for a visit, or the waiting for an important event such as a marriage or the birth of a child. We wait for the seasons to come round again, for gardens to grow and flowers to bloom. Just as the gardener keeps vigil with the seed in the ground we, too, if we are alert to the goodness of spiritual waiting, can keep vigil with the seed that wants to sprout in our lives. We wait for who we will become.

There is a difference between waiting and keeping vigil. Anxious, fretful, impatient waiting is nothing more than waiting. Waiting with purpose, patience, hope, and love is *vigilant* waiting. Would that all of our waiting could be a vigil—a watch in the night or in the day hours. So by all means, find a way to make your vigils sacred. Learn the art of holy waiting. Whether you choose, on occasion, to get up

in the middle of the night, or whether you make an effort to turn your everyday moments of waiting into sacred vigils rather than impatient pacing, you will be blessed through this spiritual practice.

In ancient times vigils were often connected with keeping watch on the eve of a great feast. The antiphons and prayers for the night vigil centered around the approaching feast. I love feasts because they suggest that there is always something in the midst of ordinary life to celebrate. We celebrate moments and memories of the lives of saints, of the heroes and heroines of our lives. We can also celebrate moments of our personal life journeys. There are milestones along the way: births and deaths, weddings, and anniversaries. Look for ways to keep vigil with these memorable events. Learn to create your own feast days. Every birthday is a little feast. I know a person who keeps vigil on the eve of her birth. With candle lit she waits in the darkness, keeping company with the miracle of her birth—that bittersweet journey from the darkness of the womb into a land of light.

In her book *A Candle at Midnight*, Marcy Heidish writes perceptively about the power of personal vigils. “Whether your vigil-keeping is centered around chronic illness, depression, personal crisis, national disaster, or simply the heart’s yearning for a deepening relationship with God, self, and others, vigilance is a spiritual discipline and a special kind of prayer.”

May you learn to live with a vigilant heart.

Prayers, Poetry, and Antiphons to Help You Celebrate the Night Watch

A Prayer Guide

Opening

My soul yearns for you, O God.

✠ I keep vigil with you through the night.

Sacred Song

In this sacred darkness I sit in silence.

Open in this moment, I trust in the darkness.

Waiting in trust, growing in trust.

Waiting and trusting the sacred darkness.

I surrender.

I surrender.

I surrender.

—Macrina Wiederkehr

(This song can be found on the CD *Seven Sacred Pauses: Singing Mindfully Dawn Through Dark.*)

Contemporary Psalm

Antiphon: My eyes are awake before each watch of the night, that I may meditate on your promise.
(Psalm 119:148)

O Sentinel of the night skies,
Attendant of my soul's deep yearning.
Drawn into the night silence,
I keep vigil with eternal questions.

All through the night watch
I seek you without words.
Listening to the sound of silence,
I lean into the song of darkness
with infinite patience I wait for you.

Keeping vigil with eternal questions,
I do not look for answers; it is enough
to wait in the darkness of love's yearning.
My soul is my night light; I am not afraid.

Repeat Antiphon.

Biblical Psalm Suggestions for the Night Watch

Psalm 42

Psalm 63

Psalm 119:145–152

Closing Prayer

Select the Prayer of the Hour below or another prayer in this section.

Prayer of the Hour

O Love Divine and Mysterious . . .

Take me down deep to the holy darkness of Love's roots. Let me become one with the One I love. Draw me into the depths. Night prayer is deep prayer. Let me go deep. Teach me the art of waiting with patience that I may grow strong, loving, and wise.

Let me borrow your eyes O Beloved. Then I shall see in the dark.

Additional Prayers and Poems for the Night Watch

O Vigilant One . . .

You stand alert at the gate of our hearts. Tutor us in the fine art of keeping vigil that we may lovingly watch over the family of the earth with your own eyes of compassionate awareness. With you as our guide, perhaps our loving vigilance will enable us to become healers in a world of violence. Be present in the lives of those whose darkness is not a holy darkness. Be with those who never get to experience the therapeutic healing of the Great Silence. We surrender our own plans and enter your great plan for peace upon the earth. Give us attentive, peaceful hearts as we watch with you through the long dark night. We Bless You O Sacred Darkness.

O Guardian of our Lives . . .

Through our joys and our sorrows, you keep watch. Through our days and our nights, you keep watch. Through the passing of our years, you keep watch. In our youth and our aging, you keep watch. In our destruction of the earth, you keep watch. In our caring for the earth, you keep watch. In the midst of the violence on our earth, you keep watch. In our peaceful times, you keep watch. In the seasons of our hearts, you keep watch. Through the seasons of the years,

you keep watch. Teach us, like you, to keep watch. Give us vigilant hearts.

Night Meditation to Help You Sleep

In the age in which we are living it is more than likely that there will be those among you who will be retiring when the monks are rising for the night vigil. Your body and mind have toiled throughout the day and need the gift of rest. If you are just retiring at the time of the night vigil, let the moment of lying down to rest be a prayer as you wait to fall asleep. The psalmist prays, "As soon as I lie down I fall peacefully asleep" (Ps 4:9). Even if this may not always be true in your case, it is a good prayer to close your day. Use it as an antiphon of trust, and let sleep become a prayer carrying you to a new world of dreams and hopes attained.

The Angel of Night

Summoned from sleep
in the heart of night
my name is called
and, like Samuel,
I rise from my bed
seeking the caller.

Summoned from sleep
I am drawn into
the beating heart
of the One
who called me.

The angel of night
lights a candle in my soul
inviting me to listen
to the wordless song
of Divine Union.

Deep healing.
Deep listening.
Deep waiting.
Deep watching.
All of these become
a part of my night watch.

In the heart of the night
you prepare me to be
your deep healing
for all who watch
through the night
of their fears.

—Macrina Wiederkehr

Antiphons for the Night Watch

I rise before dawn and cry for help; I put my hope in your words.

—Psalm 119:147

My eyes are awake before each watch of the night that I may meditate on your promise.

—Psalm 119:148

A light to you in the darkness; a light when all other lights go out.

—J.R.R. Tolkien

Those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.

—Isaiah 40:31

And I said to the one who stood at the gate of the year, “Give me a light that I may tread safely into the Unknown.” And he replied, “Go out into the darkness and put your hand into the hand of God. That shall be to you better than light and safer than a known way.”

—Minnie Haskins

I have seen too many stars to let the darkness overwhelm me.

—Macrina Wiederkehr

. . . that which sings and contemplates in you is still dwelling within the bounds of that first moment which scattered the stars into space.

—Kahlil Gibran

Prayer goes deep at night. Images dissolve. There's only God,
and silence, kindness, and grace.

—Coleman Barks

The darker the night, the lovelier the dawn she carries in her
womb.

—Dom Helder Camara

One may not reach the dawn save by the path of the night.

—Germaine Greer

What in me is dark, illumine.

—John Milton

You will be very poor all the while you don't discover: It's not
with your eyes open that you see the clearest.

—Dom Helder Camara

Though my soul may set in darkness,
it will rise in perfect light.

I have loved the stars too profoundly
to be fearful of the night.

—An Astronomer's Prayer

They also serve who only stand and wait.

—John Milton

For God alone my soul waits in silence.

—Psalm 62:1

O God, you are my God, I seek you, my soul thirsts for you.

—Psalm 63:1