Columns
Coronavirus
Spirituality



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by Jane Marie Bradish

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On Sunday, March 8, 2020, I found a sign on some generic Facebook site, warning us that the week was going to start by changing the clocks; it included a full moon; and it was going to end with Friday the 13th! I lightheartedly posted it on my own FB page.

By the following Sunday the part of the world I reside in had been completely shut down. The optimists thought it would be a couple of weeks and life would resume "as normal." The pessimists thought for sure the world was coming to an end. The conspiracy theorists looked to place blame and put forward as many scary theories as I've ever seen. I was somewhere in the middle of all of them.

It's a year later now. Daily news reports continue to begin with local, national and global COVID-19 updates. It is clear this is far from over. These days reports also include remembering the "firsts" of a year ago: the first case in the United States, the first case in my state, the first U.S. death, the closing of schools and sporting events, unemployment and the like.

At the risk of stating the obvious, the year has been hard for everyone. The reasons may vary but it's been hard. There is no one anywhere that hasn't been affected in some way. While the global family shares the experience of the pandemic, not one of us has had the same experience.

Maybe it's all the retrospectives happening now or maybe it's the coming Holy Week liturgies, but my prayer has brought this insight: This pandemic time has been a year of vigil. *Vigil*, as I understand and have experienced it, is a time of keeping watch and of waiting and being extra attentive. All the while, life continues happening around those keeping vigil.

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We've all kept vigil: staying up late or all night with a sick friend or family member, accompanying a laboring woman, or keeping the phone close waiting for medical test results. I personally kept vigil with both of my parents as they transitioned from

this life to eternal life — sadly for my family those were very short vigils. Regardless of the circumstance, I've found keeping vigil to be a profound experience and sometimes I keep vigil while also going about the day-to-day demands of life.

Thinking of COVID-19 and all it has meant in terms of vigil has been insightful. For me it's changed the prevailing attitude of seeing the changes we've been forced to make as "giving up" and instead see the gift and potential in all of it.

Yes, I miss visiting family and friends and community members. Through my vigil I've learned how to reach out and connect more intentionally through calls and texts and online applications that allow for face-to-face interactions. I've gotten really good at packing and mailing boxes, little surprises for those dearest to me. Is it the same as being together? Of course not, but it keeps all of us from being isolated and is connecting us in new and deeper ways.

My shopping trips have moved from spontaneous wandering and sometimes unnecessary purchasing to need-based trips. My vigil asks the question: What do I already have available to me, and what do I need? I know I am much more in solidarity with the global human family who do not have the same abundance I find daily. My eating has become simpler and healthier, and I'm happy to say I've not joined colleagues and friends in gaining "pandemic pounds."

Not sharing the togetherness and prayer of my parish and religious community through liturgy has been hard. Virtual options fill the void for me — sort of. Some parishes record and post their liturgies while others broadcast "live." The live liturgies have been most life-giving. The virtual congregations seem to have become "communities," even though more than likely we don't know each other. One of the online groups gathers mid-week just to connect with each other — no agenda, just random sharing for about half an hour. There is some safety in being able to comment or respond somewhat anonymously, and the sharing has been deeply profound.

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Cultural experiences have been the hardest for me to incorporate into my vigil. I live in a metropolitan area that had different cultural festivals and fairs most weekends, even during winter months. I always enjoyed wandering through those gatherings

and always came away with insights and learnings. The cultural arts communities struggled to create an online presence early on. Cultural events are beginning to reappear, returning in limited ways as the world moves from Year One into Year Two of the pandemic. My vigil has involved rebroadcasts.

I think everyone will agree, pandemic life remains complicated. Because of safety protocols, every part of daily life has changed. I've remained in full-time ministry and have been stretched in more ways than I could have ever imagined.

With predictions that the pandemic will wane within the next months, I wonder if my vigil- keeping will also wane. I hope not. The watching and waiting and being attentive have been good for me. My vigil-keeping has allowed me to maintain balance in life.