



Calm Amidst the Storm of COVID-19: A Neuroscience Perspective of Being Grounded in Faith

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Isaiah 40:28-31 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

²⁸ Have you not known? Have you not heard?

The Lord is the everlasting God,
the Creator of the ends of the earth.

He does not faint or grow weary;
his understanding is unsearchable.

²⁹ He gives power to the faint,
and strengthens the powerless.

³⁰ Even youths will faint and be weary,
and the young will fall exhausted;

³¹ but 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.

When we hurt or face people who hurt, we often feel many emotions and make swift decisions or act, relying on the skills and the knowledge of a plan or protocol in a split second of an intense moment. This is what happens when the amygdala sends a surge of stress hormones out to other systems of the body after receiving information from stimuli. This stimulus can even be a triggered memory where we learned something that was either useful or intrusive for functioning. In a split second, there is a “fight-flight-freeze” response and those surging levels of cortisol must find a directed action to take to avoid flooding the rational brain and depleting the body of energy reserves.

In a crisis, it’s easy to get exhausted; it’s easy to feel helpless and hopeless, too. Here is where it’s useful to have some supports in place for the longer run. Now is the time to commit to memory or to sing or say what shores you up from the inside out.

As I sit in my apartment in my community here in the United States (Georgia), I am largely safe from becoming infected with COVID-19. However, that doesn’t necessarily keep my mind from being flooded with worry and feelings of helplessness. Nor does it stop my concerns for how others I love continue to be at risk: on the frontlines; processing food deliveries; leading services of worship and attending to parishioners; or taking direct care of COVID-positive patients in clinics, hospitals, and surgery rooms. No one is immune to times of severe doubt, fear, or intense flashes of loneliness and grief.

What supports do we have to calm and to soothe, to protect the mind and the heart? Here are some I am turning to:



- “The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want...” (Psalm 23)
- “Consider the lilies of the field, they neither toil nor spin...” (Matthew 6)
- “May all beings be free from suffering and the causes of suffering...” (Loving Kindness Meditation)
- “Do not let the difficulties fill you with anxiety. After all, it is only in the darkest nights, that the stars shine more brilliantly.” (Imam Ali)
- “The whole world is a narrow bridge, but the most important thing is not to fear.” (Hasidic Rabbi Nachum of Breslau)

Faith is essential in times of high anxiety and stress. Being moved by the memories of sacred or inspiring words can calm the mind and guide the heart, creating a pace that is manageable while fulfilling the priorities each person in a household or a community is tasked to perform. So here are some steps I encourage you to consider:

- Find meaningful texts and commit them to memory.
- Determine your priorities ahead of time to keep you focused.
- Your task—above all tasks—is to stay in your “wise mind” so that fear and anxiety or being flooded with grief does not incapacitate you for the longer run.

Attending to the longer run—this marathon of counter-acting the very real havoc created by COVID-19—is a race we are all running now. But, it’s a relay race one doesn’t have to run alone if you can be part of a team and be attuned to directing how the amygdala fires for action and presence of mind.