



ESSAY

# Small Shrines

By Jennifer L. Holberg | April 1, 2020 | 6 Comments

So, March was 749 days long. I'm not sure if I'm ready for the month billed by T.S. Eliot as "the cruelest." The picture painted by the news suggests that the month is horrifyingly likely to more than live up to that billing. Lord, have mercy.

Author  
**J. Holberg**

This semester was to have been a full one for me: a surgery, the Festival of Faith and Writing, teaching, a number of other big work projects, a trip to Italy. These losses are miniscule compared to those who are losing jobs, losing health, losing lives.

Still, when I met virtually with my students before our spring break (after my institution wisely announced the move to all online classes), we took time to name our sadnesses in leaving friends and plans behind. We named the ways in which we would miss each other and the experience of the class and our larger university community. We spoke of tremendous losses to our country and to our world. And we prayed. In an already widely shared piece from this week's [Time](#), N.T. Wright powerfully articulates why this was (and is) so necessary:

It is no part of the Christian vocation, then, to be able to explain what's happening and why. In fact, it *is* part of the Christian vocation *not to be able* to explain—and to lament instead. As the Spirit laments within us, so we become, even in our self-isolation, small shrines where the presence and healing love of God can dwell. And out of that there can emerge new possibilities, new acts of kindness, new scientific understanding, new hope.

I've been thinking a great deal about that phrase, “even in our self-isolation,” as I've been sheltering in place alone for many days now. Of course, I live alone—and I've always loved it. Indeed, I have a

friend who has long joked that I'd "make a good shut-in." And I certainly acknowledge that my experience has a very different contour than everyone struggling with the many demands of family life in quarantine. My experience is exactly the opposite: I never see anyone, except online or from a distance when I walk.

Our pastor has been reminding us that Lent parallels Jesus's forty days in the wilderness. I've only done half of that so far, but already I wonder how Jesus felt in *his* self-isolation? Or I think of the Desert Mothers and Fathers who sought refuge alone? Or Julian of Norwich who, as a medieval anchorite, had herself walled into the church so she could practice solitude and spiritual contemplation. (For the most part. She also had a window from which she could give advice and another through which she could observe the Mass). Julian had lived through the plague and a severe illness and still wrote of the radical love of God, the way in which "all shall be well." I've thought (and prayed) more for prisoners, both those in solitary confinement and those who have no privacy, as well as for all those wherever they are in the trap of loneliness.

What, then, will come from my own time of isolation? As privileged as I am to have this time—when so many others do not—I want to be attentive. Right now lament is enough, but what other gifts may follow, I want to watch for.

What has helped me pay attention is partly words. I became an

English professor, in part, because I love finding other people who can say things better than I ever could.

So, I wanted to offer some words for you today: a prayer, a song, and two blessings (because I couldn't choose between them, and I decided a double blessing is never bad). Some have been shared widely—and they're worth sharing again.

May you feel God's presence today in whatever way you most need it, in whatever place of aloneness you inhabit.

## Prayer for a Pandemic

By Cameron Bellm

May we who are merely inconvenienced  
Remember those whose lives are at stake.

May we who have no risk factors  
Remember those most vulnerable.

May we who have the luxury of working from home  
Remember those who must choose between preserving their health or making their rent.

May we who have the flexibility to care for our children when their schools close  
Remember those who have no options.

May we who have to cancel our trips  
Remember those that have no safe place to go.

May we who are losing our margin money in the tumult of the economic market

Remember those who have no margin at all.

May we who settle in for a quarantine at home

Remember those who have no home.

As fear grips our country,

let us choose love.

During this time when we cannot physically wrap our arms around each other,

Let us yet find ways to be the loving embrace of God to our neighbors.

Amen.

**Steffany Gretzinger: Christ The Lord is With Me**

**Two Blessings** from John O'Donohue, *To Bless the Space Between Us: A Book of Blessing*

**"For One Who is Exhausted"**

When the rhythm of the heart becomes hectic,

Time takes on the strain until it breaks;

Then all the unattended stress falls in

On the mind like an endless, increasing weight.

The light in the mind becomes dim.

Things you could take in your stride before

Now become laborsome events of will.

Weariness invades your spirit.

Gravity begins falling inside you,

Dragging down every bone.

The tide you never valued has gone out.

And you are marooned on unsure ground.

Something within you has closed down;

And you cannot push yourself back to life.

You have been forced to enter empty time.

The desire that drove you has relinquished.

There is nothing else to do now but rest

And patiently learn to receive the self

You have forsaken in the race of days.

At first your thinking will darken

And sadness take over like listless weather.

The flow of unwept tears will frighten you.

You have traveled too fast over false ground;

Now your soul has come to take you back.

Take refuge in your senses, open up  
To all the small miracles you rushed through.

Become inclined to watch the way of rain  
When it falls slow and free.

Imitate the habit of twilight,  
Taking time to open the well of color  
That fostered the brightness of day.

Draw alongside the silence of stone  
Until its calmness can claim you.  
Be excessively gentle with yourself.

Stay clear of those vexed in spirit.  
Learn to linger around someone of ease  
Who feels they have all the time in the world.

Gradually, you will return to yourself,  
Having learned a new respect for your heart  
And the joy that dwells far within slow time.

### **“For the Interim Time”**

When near the end of day, life has drained  
Out of light, and it is too soon

For the mind of night to have darkened things,

No place looks like itself, loss of outline

Makes everything look strangely in-between,

Unsure of what has been, or what might come.

In this wan light, even trees seem groundless.

In a while it will be night, but nothing

Here seems to believe the relief of dark.

You are in this time of the interim

Where everything seems with withheld.

The path you took to get here has washed out;

The way forward is still concealed from you.

“The old is not old enough to have died away;

The new is still too young to be born.”

You cannot lay claim to anything;

In this place of dusk,

Your eyes are blurred;

And there is no mirror.

Everyone else has lost sight of your heart

And you can see nowhere to put your trust;



You know you have to make your own way through.

As far as you can, hold your confidence.

Do not allow your confusion to squander

This call which is loosening

Your roots in false ground,

That you might come free

From all you have outgrown.

What is being transfigured here is your mind,

And it is difficult and slow to become new.

The more faithfully you can endure here,

The more refined your heart will become

For your arrival in the new dawn.

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## Jennifer L. Holberg

I've taught English at Calvin College since 1998—where I get to read books and talk about them for a living. What could be better? Along with my wonderful colleague, Jane Zwart, I am the co-director of the Calvin Center for Faith and Writing, which is the home of the Festival of Faith and Writing as well as a number of other exciting endeavors. Given my interest in teaching, I'm the founding co-editor of the Duke University Press journal *Pedagogy: Critical Approaches to Teaching Literature, Language, Composition and Culture* (and yes, I realize that that is a very long subtitle). As an Army brat, I've never lived anywhere as long as I've now lived in Grand Rapids, a city I've come to love. I count myself rich in friends and family. I collect cookbooks (and also like to cook), listen to all kinds of music, and watch all manner of movies and tv shows. I love George Eliot, Jane Austen, Marilynne Robinson, Dante, E.M. Delafield, Tennyson, Hopkins, and Charlotte Bronte (among others). And I used to have a bumper sticker on my car that said: "I'd rather be reading Flannery O'Connor." I don't have the car anymore, but the sentiment is still true.

## 6 Comments

**Daniel J Meeter**

April 1, 2020 at 5:45 am

Thank you for speaking from your place of isolation.

 Reply

**Ruth Vis**

April 1, 2020 at 7:41 am

Poignant, beautiful. Thank you.

 Reply

**Helen P**

April 1, 2020 at 8:22 am

As someone who also lives alone and is an introvert I find it curious that, while normally I enjoy my own company, in this time of forced alone-ness I “enjoy” it far less and have the constant urge to run outdoors find another human and hug them – all the while thanking them for their presence on this planet. Thank you for this and for the poetic reminders.

↳ Reply

### **Nancy Bonnema**

April 1, 2020 at 9:28 am

Thank you. You have a wonderful talent of putting your thoughts, feelings, and spirit into words.

↳ Reply

### **Harvey Kiekoover**

April 1, 2020 at 10:12 am

Thank you for this blog with its lonesome beauty. I pray I/we won't allow our “confusion to squander this call which is loosening (y)our roots from false ground.” Thank you, Jennifer.

↳ Reply

### **Henry Baron**

April 1, 2020 at 2:04 pm

Thank you, Jennifer! Your words and the words you chose by others spoke eloquently and poignantly.

This is a time that tries our soul, to paraphrase Paine, and none of us will emerge the same.

Will we, will the world be the better for it?

 Reply

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