

## Spiritual Bread to Hold By Greta DeLonghi, M.A.



I can remember driving home from Southdown earlier in March and listening to the news about the Covid-19 pandemic on the radio, hearing the president of France say bluntly, “Nous sommes en guerre.” We are at war.

We are, indeed. And not simply against a virus, though it is a formidable foe in itself. Spiritual warfare as well, certainly against despair in a time of darkness and uncertainty. Where is God in all this?

The image of warfare brought to mind a story from the book, “Sleeping with Bread: Holding What Gives You Life” by Dennis Linn, Matthew Linn and Sheila Fabricant Linn. It is a book that interprets and explains the ancient practice of the daily awareness examen as a prayerful reflection on the events of the day in order to detect God’s presence.

The story explains the title of the book and its connection to the examen – and war. I heard the story in a new way, in the context of the pandemic as our war. It reads as follows:

“During the bombing raids of World War II, thousands of children were orphaned and left to starve. The fortunate ones were rescued and placed in refugee camps where they received food and good care. But many of these children who had lost so much could not sleep at night. They feared waking up to find themselves once again homeless and without food. Nothing seemed to reassure them. Finally someone hit on the idea of giving each child a piece of bread to hold at bedtime. Holding their bread, these children could finally sleep in peace. All through the night the bread reminded them, ‘Today I ate and I will eat again tomorrow.’”<sup>1</sup>

The fruits of the awareness examen serve as “bread” to hold through the night and reassurance of God’s faithful hand at work in our lives. St. Ignatius of Loyola considered it the most important of his spiritual exercises for this reason. In a time of physical and social distancing, receiving a sense of God’s closeness has never seemed more relevant.

The authors of *Sleeping With Bread* pare the examen down to a few essential movements which include the following:

- Relax, light a candle if you wish – do whatever helps you to experience unconditional love. Imagine yourself in a favourite place with someone whose love you trust.
- Ask for God’s light and help in reviewing this day.

---

<sup>1</sup> Dennis Linn, Matthew Linn, Sheila Fabricant Linn. (1995). *Sleeping with Bread: Holding What Gives You Life*, p 1. Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press.

- Ask God bring to your heart the moment or moments today for which you are most grateful. If you could relive one moment, which one would it be?
- Ask yourself what was said and done in that moment that made it so special?
- Breathe in the gratitude and receive again from that moment.
- Ask God to bring to your heart the moment or moments today for which you are least grateful.
- Ask yourself what was said and done in that moment that made it so difficult. Be with whatever you feel without trying to change or fix it in any way.
- You may wish to take deep breaths and let God's love fill you just as you are.
- Give thanks for whatever you experienced.<sup>2</sup>

The authors identify two questions to ask in the process of the examen:

- For what moment today am I most grateful?
- For what moment today am I least grateful?<sup>3</sup>

And they note that there are "many other ways to ask the same questions:

- When did I give and receive the most love today?  
When did I give and receive the least love today?
- When did I feel most alive today?  
When did I most feel life draining out of me?
- When today did I have the greatest sense of belonging to myself, others, God and the universe?  
When did I have the least sense of belonging?
- When was I happiest today?  
When was I saddest?
- What was today's high point?  
What was today's low point?"<sup>4</sup>

Let the spiritual bread of the awareness examine nourish and sustain you through this lived and surreal experience of Lent. Trust that we are constantly being led to new life and light. The exercise is not about cheap optimism or looking on the bright side. It is about attending to the fullness of life. This approach is congruent with findings in narrative care. Attending to our concrete and specific experiences helps counter the tendency to generalize that often characterizes depression and anxiety.

---

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 30.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 6.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 7.

The scripture passage that comes to mind for me is Lamentations, as we see and perhaps personally experience the affliction of this virus and feel driven into darkness:

“But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope: the steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.”  
(Lam. 3.21-23).

Practicing the awareness examen will help us notice and name those mercies, new every day, so that we might call them to mind and have hope.

---

Reference:

Dennis Linn, Sheila Fabricant Linn, Matthew Linn; Francisco Miranda (Illustrator). (1995) *Sleeping with Bread: Holding What Gives You Life*. Paulist Press.

*Greta DeLonghi is a part-time spiritual director at the Southdown Institute. She holds a Master of Arts degree in Ministry and Spirituality and Diploma in Spiritual Direction from Regis College, University of Toronto.*