Blog
Spirituality



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by Sr. Michele Morek

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My cousin Eddie was very superstitious. In the sleepy little northern New Mexico town of Española, most of his buddies were like him.

His best friend, Juan, would hang around their house a lot, especially as it got later in the evening, when it was really hard to get him to go home. My aunt would coax, "Well, Juan, your mother will be worried about you. Better go home!" But he would dawdle, making one excuse after another. She finally decided he was afraid to go home and asked him what he was afraid of.

In a very soft voice and with big round eyes, he admitted: "The witches. The witches in the stable."

There was an old livery stable down the street, and the neighborhood kids had convinced themselves that it was haunted.

Aunt Ann sat him down and explained in great detail why there were no witches or why, even if there were any in Española, they would certainly not hang out in that rickety old stable. Congratulating herself on the good job, she tried to shoo him home again. But Juan was not having any of it.

Ann: "Repeat after me, Juan: There are no witches in the stable."

Juan: "There are no witches in the stable."

After they repeated this several times, Juan finally admitted, with a dramatic eye roll:

"Señora, there are no witches in the stable, but there *is* something in the stable."

For the rest of our days, instead of saying, "There is no smoke without fire," my family would say, "But there *is* something in the stable."

But sometimes, the monster under the bed can be useful. When my rambunctious brothers' tiny nanny would get tired of their misbehaving, she would threaten to let out the "Koko" that lived under the bed. (The Cucuy is a version of the northern New Mexico boogeyman who may assume different forms and is often used to scare kids).

Usually, they would roll their eyes and say, "Oooooooweeeee! Koko!" and usually behave for a while. But if the threat alone did not work, she would pull Koko out from

under the bed. Koko was a 6-foot-long "snake" in a can, a huge spring covered with fabric. The kids would scream and run and behave for the rest of the day.

Fast-forward to 2020, when we have a real monster: a tiny, invisible one, but very, very effective in filling us with fear, not only of disease or death, but of human-induced side effects.



(Unsplash/Neon Brand)

Call me masochistic, but I am rereading Stephen King's *The Stand,* a chilling account of a pandemic; I thought it would be interesting to compare King's vision with the real thing. Sure enough, the scariest part is the breakdown of trust and societal norms that occurred in that worldwide trauma, including the evil released into the world in the person of Randall Flagg.

Add to that the political tension and division we are presently experiencing in the United States, and I have the ingredients for a really scary Halloween.

Like the little child who eventually has to look under the bed, figuring that just imagining the monster is worse than anything she could possibly see, I find that the scariest monster is one you can't see. Once the Koko pops out of the can and you can see the shape and length and even touch the fabric, it loses some of its power.

After experiencing sheer terror earlier this year, as we have learned more about COVID-19, there is less fear. Some people are beginning to show indifference, fatigue and an attitude of "familiarity breeds contempt" — except for health care workers.

So no silver bullets, no wooden stake, no string of garlic. Ultimately, the way to deal with this particular monster is information, sure; a vaccine, for sure; but mostly, a healthy dose of concern for the common good, an old-fashioned love of and care for our neighbor.

[Ursuline Sr. Michele Morek is Global Sisters Report's liaison to sisters in North America. Her email address is mmorek@ncronline.org.]

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