

Hearing beyond the white noise of our souls

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(RNS) We cannot be expected to make an informed, soulful decision about the general election when the very process of sharing information drowns out the thing we most need to hear: the voice of God.

Welcome to the general election in the time of social media. It's been four years since we've done this and the noise level is even greater now. Mindfulness, it seems, has become more and more difficult. There is a social buzz, a media frenzy, a constant barrage of information, sound bites and video that automatically plays on Twitter, Facebook or Instagram.

It doesn't matter that the sound is turned off; the captions hit you just as hard. The cognitive white noise is too much. How are we supposed to hear anything when we're constantly asked to hear everything or everyone?

This week it's Rudy Giuliani's turn to drown out everything else. The former mayor of New York's gaffe — his claim that there were no successful Islamic extremist attacks on American soil before President Obama's administration — is all I hear. He apparently forgot about the attacks on the World Trade Center when he was mayor of New York and others well before Obama was president. This is all I see. This is all I know.

The gaffe, as ridiculous as it is, as embarrassing and enraging as it is, becomes the context for everything else. It's a bullhorn in my ear and I cannot hear the still small voice that might help me sort out a right response. All I hear is your rage and mine. All I hear is your shame and mine. All I hear is Rudy's voice ... over and over and over again.

And there's so much I do not hear as a result. I do not hear the cries for help from Louisiana or Senegal. I do not hear the cries for help from Sudan or Indiana. I cannot even hear my young son as he calls out to me from the other end of our apartment.

Everything else is blotted out. The dark night of the soul, that walk through life into the mysterious unknown of God's future, is a classic Christian image. Penned by John of the Cross, the 16th-century image of the psychic oblivion of God's perceived absence is powerful. Today, we don't so much have a dark night as we have white noise. We experience a white noise of the soul that renders prayer and mindfulness virtually impossible.

You see, we aren't bereft of knowing. We know everything all the time and all at once. And as such, God is just as absent to us now as God seemed to be to John of the Cross those many years ago. Oblivion comes with the noise rather than the absence of it. Oblivion comes with knowing too much or too often.

Donald Trump depends on this kind of oblivion. He depends on our sharing the gaffes. He depends on our outrage. This is fundamental to his campaign. This is the politics of fear in 140 characters. He barely has to lift a finger and we scream. Listening is abandoned. Mindfulness is abandoned for the cacophony of social media and the ideological cul-de-sacs of our timelines and feeds. We only hear one thing: him.

There is something we can do about this, of course. We don't have to tune him out. We simply need to cease from our own outraged bellowing. We need to be actively listening for something else. We need to be listening through the noise. We need to be listening for God.

The wisdom of St. John's poem does not end with the careful crafting of what a perception of God's absence brings forth. No, it ends with the author exhorting us to walk into darkness. Or for our purposes, we are exhorted to listen through the white noise.

For hidden within that noise is the mystery of God itself. And within that mystery we will find one another.